Manuscripts

The day will see if you’re gonna get some.
-Nelly Furtado

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**Photography by:**
Megan Eley and Grant Gooding

**Drawing by:**
Mara Keller
Bean

Nestled deep within a paper
Dixie cup dotted with blue and yellow waxy flowers
and filled with black potting soil flecked
with white stars like a pur
dream night sky,
is a bean seed. Cradled and curved
in dynamic rest while a long green shoot
like jade smoke sends its message through
the thick silent dark.

Like this we sleep.
A fragile promise arched in busy
repose. Pink transparent knee caps
bundled tightly in blue flannel
while light hot breath presses against my
unaccustomed
body like steam condensing on a mirror.
We dream
and our faith rises in a cloud of green hope.

-Melissa Warner
Mother, mother

She liked working
in the kitchen. She liked it
as much as criminals like pounding
out license plates. A long
hard, drab line of like.
It blinded her,
in that house, in her work.
She made cookies and cakes
and built walls. Walls
that she liked building.
I didn’t like tearing them down,
I had to. I had to go
into that house, through that kitchen,
in that bathroom, her shrine
to perfect womanhood and show her.
I entered it. He entered me.
She did not notice. She knelt by the tub
that pink, porcelain altar. She was my
priest.
“Forgive me father for I have sinned.”
Water ran from the font in a loud silence.
It was not like the sanctuary. It
would not cleanse me. Nothing
would cleanse me. I did it, mother.
He forced me and now I force you to see.
“Let the children come to me.”
I never came – to you. I came
to him. I did not like it. She did not
like seeing it. I gave her my weight,
my burden to carry like a cross
across her back. I did not like the truth and the noisy silence as the water gurgled down the drain, and flushed into the pipes, hidden in the walls of our house.

-Alicia LaMagdeleine
A New Jacket

I just bought this jacket
Doesn’t it look like something from the army
Like Tom Hanks in that movie
Yeah, I got it Saturday
But I crossed out OLD NAVY on the tag
And wrote “real army”
This hombre is no corporate tool

-Brad Latino

My eyelids deceive me when I look at them,
darkness at first and then reflection of flesh,
images of bony bodies,
dark red lips,
and mysterious violet eyes.

-Liz Sidley
Moon will take you

This night rolls by
like lead
in your womb.

(I will wait for morning. The waves
draw your music from the moon.)

The night is blood. The light
on the sea is milk
My eyes are drunk.

The stone in the womb keeps
sinking like blood through a chasm
of the earth. I love you
in the morning, I wave
you back across our body.

The stars sink into the waves.

-Jake Walsh
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Calm Before Our Storm

Muddled night sky above our lives
Straining grass below

Two shining stars shine alone
A hidden cricket cries aloud

City lights dull star’s splendor
Minute movement mutes his chirp

Dual-stars blink in sadness
Our path a rift with time’s long trial

Artificial horizon glows like a dying light
Cement steps leading to expansive nothing

Stretching to the stars with all they have
Only to end up where they began

Our stars now couched by clouds
A frustrated shadow is cast

Clouds encircle the beacons in the sky
Like sickly weeds choking out a flower

Lightning’s flash counter city lights
Zeus’s anger with our fire

Dual-stars blackened in a thunderous fight
Green serpents pervade sidewalk cracks

Like tempers, irregular lightening riots
Night-city’s iridescent sky mumbles storm
Like pleading arms, tall weeds sway with pain
The ground opens up and prepares for rain

-Mark Pommer

Finn

The baby is contented.
His toothless
Gums gleam with the sun’s early light.
The squiggling earthworm
Crawls in the grass blades of the carpet,
His bare
Buttocks seem to be saying:
The peas came and went so fast.
Each soiled diaper discarded, a dirtied cloud,
Dozens stacked in the
Willing receptacle, now full.

-Megan Eley
All in the Mind

The golden petals have faded, curled, and drooped, and, although Charlotte hasn’t touched them since the day they were given to her, she knows that they are brittle and will break at the slightest touch. The once-fresh water has turned green and the blue vase has collected so much dust, it is barely translucent. They sit at one end of the windowsill in her bedroom, looking out onto the silent street on the hot day. (At the other end of the windowsill sits a star-shaped candle that she won at the annual carnival last summer. Although those are the only two items on the sill, they take up the length of the window.) The residents of Maroon County stay in on days like these, sipping at lemonade while watching the teenage lawnmower slave and cut the grass.

Charlotte sits nearby the window in a mahogany armchair, looking out into the pure blue sky. A summer breeze rustles the trees’ leaves outside. Marmalade winds her way through and around Charlotte’s bare feet then jumps on her lap and curls up. Charlotte stops twirling a strand of her shoulder-length brown hair and starts stroking the cat when there is a clink! clink! at the window. Carefully laying the cat down upon the floor, she stands, walks over to the window, and opens it, making sure not to bump the vase over. She leans out, arms tucked under her, looks down and smiles.
“Charlotte!” he whispers up at her. “Come on, let’s get out of here!”

“Kevin, you know that my parents are just across the hall. I can’t sneak past them, especially with you. Especially after what happened last time.”

“Yeah, wasn’t that a great time?” Though two stories above him, Charlotte could see Kevin wink at her, a smile touching the corner of his mouth before his face grows serious. “Fuck them. Don’t you want to have some fun?”

“I do.”

“Stick up for yourself, Charlotte. You’re not a child anymore. Next year you’ll be a senior and soon you’ll be going to college. You have to show them now that you’re ready to be on your own, that you can take care of yourself, that you can make your own decisions. You have to stick up for yourself, Charlotte. You have to stick up for us. They can’t keep us apart and it’s time that they knew that.” Kevin smiles again, but this time it’s a full smile, wide across his face, showing his teeth, and Charlotte’s heart melts. “I’ve missed you, Charlotte.”

His voice is deep and soothing and as he calls her name, something inside of her flutters and she cannot help but smile.

“Okay. Let me just change and then I’ll be right down.”

“Charlotte.” His voice is higher as he says her name again. “Charlotte!” He
nearly yells it, the pitch even higher this time.

Charlotte stops her monotonous stroking and turns her head to look at her bedroom door from the mahogany armchair.

"Charlotte!" her mother calls again, this time opening up the door and staring at her daughter. "What is wrong with you? I've been calling you for awhile now."

Shrugging, Charlotte looks at her mother, nearing fifty, with a blank face. "I guess I just got lost in thought. What did you want?"

"There's a phone call for you."

"I'll get it in here, thanks." As her mother closes the door, Charlotte gets up from the chair, carrying the cat in one hand, and walks over to her nightstand where her black cordless phone sits. Setting the cat down on the navy-blue comforter on her bed, she then picks up the base and looks at its side. Sure enough, the ringer is off. After setting the base back down, she picks up the receiver, takes a breath and says, "Hello?"

"Charlotte?" The voice on the other end sounds both excited and nervous.

"Yeah, Attica, it's me. What's going on? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Listen, Charlotte. Tat and I have the best idea. Are you ready for this?"
“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Road trip to Colorado, starting tonight. We can switch drivers throughout the trip and the passengers can sleep so we can drive all night without stopping. Once there we can stay with my cousin Vince, you know, the one who works at the ranch and I’m pretty sure he can get us a reduced price for all the activities. Do you remember last summer when he came up to visit me and he couldn’t take his eyes off of you? I’m sure he wouldn’t mind seeing you again.”

“What about work?”

“Fuck work and before you even ask, fuck your parents. You’re a senior in high school. You should be able to just get up and leave without having to answer to anyone. So are you coming or not?”

Silence. Charlotte doesn’t know what to say.

“Charlotte? You there? Didn’t you hear what I said?”

Shaking her head to clear her mind, Charlotte realizes she hasn’t heard a word her friend has said. “I’m sorry. Marmalade’s distracting me,” she quickly lied, looking at the cat who lay sleeping on her bed. “Damn cat is getting in my closet again. What were you saying?”

“Tat and I thought we could go out to the bookstore and grab a cup of coffee and roam around.”
“Gee, that’s original,” Charlotte says sarcastically.
“Well, it gets us out of this dinky little town on a Friday, anyway.”
“Gina isn’t much bigger.”
“No, but there are at least places to go in Gina.”
“Fine. You driving?”
“Yeah, I’ll be by in about forty-five minutes. Tat’s still at work.”
“See you then.” Charlotte carefully places the receiver back on the hook and walks across the room to her closet. Flinging open the doors, she flips through the t-shirts and tank tops, unsatisfied by every one that comes within her view. After a few minutes, she finally closes her eyes and holds out her hand until she grabs hold of a piece of cloth. Taking it off the hanger, she looks at the old tank top, lime green with a thin white ribbon weaved in and out of the material, creating an empire waist. She shrugs, figuring that it was the best she could do.

Charlotte is just finishing brushing her hair when Attica pulls up, Tat in the front passenger seat. Charlotte grabs her crochet purse and car keys, even though she isn’t driving, and starts to head out the front door.
“Where are you going?” her mother inquires from the living room.
“Barnes and Noble,” Charlotte calls back, irritated for having to stop.
“It’s nine o’clock already.”
“Yeah, so?”
“You have work in the morning.”
Charlotte rolls her eyes since she knows her mother cannot see her. “I’ll be fine, Mom. I’ve worked longer days with less sleep.”
“Who’s driving?”
Charlotte’s face flushes red. “Why are you interrogating me?” she says to her mother, her voice rising in anger. “For God’s sake! I’m seventeen years old! I don’t need to be questioned like this. I can live my life and suffer whatever consequences. Just get off my back.”
“Charlotte, I –” her mother starts but is interrupted.
“I’m going out and that’s all you need to know.”
“Charlotte...”
“What?!”

Her mother walks into the entrance hall and looks at Charlotte. “I said have a fun time.”
“Oh,” Charlotte says, a bit confused at first, but then she realizes that her mother hadn’t been interrogating her so intensely. “Thanks.” She opens the door and steps out from the cool house into the warm, damp air. She breaths deeply, enjoying the scent of blooming flowers and cut grass, still clinging in the air from that afternoon.
Jogging up to the Buick, she gets in behind Tat and says hello to her friends. "Let's get the hell out of here," she says.

They reach the parking lot of Barnes and Noble fifteen minutes later and creep around the lot for another ten, trying to find someplace to park. "I guess this is the place to be on a Friday night," Tat says as she ties up her long black hair on their way inside. Charlotte's friend looks at her over the rim of her thick black rim glasses and stretches her lips, which are caked in dark red lipstick, into a straight line. Charlotte always thought that Tat looked like a poet and had the kind of life that she could write about and people would be interested in reading. Just her name Charlotte found interesting. Short for Tatalina, the name came from her parents visiting Catalina in their prime in the sixties. Stoned and high the entire vacation, they kept calling the island Tatalina. The word stuck with them since and thought it would be funny to name their first born it.

Charlotte had a less interesting reason behind her name. Simply, her mother's favorite book was *Charlotte's Web*. When she was young, Charlotte even had a stuffed pig that she slept with, but being too young to say much without a lisp, his name was "Wibah" instead of Wilbur. Her mother used to read from the book every night, even when she was a newborn, until about age thirteen, when Charlotte started thinking like
she was too old to be read to anymore. But she always kept Wibah on top of her bed by the pillows as part of the arrangement and slept with him in her arms at night.

The three girls walk through the entrance doors together and then instantly split up to go to their favorite sections of the store. Watching Tat, Charlotte knows her friend will grab a mocha before heading over to the poetry section. Attica will browse the music section, looking for new songbooks she can memorize for the acoustic guitar. Charlotte first heads over to the recommendations – she usually bought one book from there and most every time, she liked the book. The one time she didn’t was when it turned out to be basically porn – no plot, little character development and too much sex.

After reading the book, she went back to the store to see if she could hunt down the disgusting pig that had recommended it. As she stood by the book trying to read the name on the small description, a cashier came up to her. Picking up a copy of the book, the cashier asked Charlotte if she read her recommendation. Charlotte wanted to rage at the woman. How could she pick such a disgusting book that didn’t even have good descriptions of the sex? It was worse than most porn! She wanted to yell for her money back. But she just smiled, said a meager yes, and left.
Charlotte walks slowly through the store, looking more at the people there than the books. *I’ll never be able to find Tat and Attica when it’s time to go*, she thinks sullenly. Turning down a random aisle, she finds herself in the travel section. As she scans the books, she notices a guy dressed in jeans and a Beatles T-shirt standing by her. Charlotte glances at him a couple of times. Dark roots are showing under his blond hair. He is about half a foot taller than Charlotte and she imagines that his muscles are well-defined under his T-shirt.

Charlotte glances one last time and this time, she catches his eye. She looks away quickly, embarrassed.

“Hi,” he says, turning his entire body towards her. “I’m Joshua.”

“Hi,” she says back, wanting to be polite. “I’m Charlotte.”

“What a beautiful name,” Joshua says, smiling and showing his straight teeth.

Charlotte wants to say something brilliant to impress him but all she can think to say is, “So, do you like the Beatles?”

He laughs, not too short to be snobby, but not too long to be rude. “Yeah. They’re decent. What about you?”

“Yeah, I like them, but my parents can’t know. You would think that growing up in the sixties they would have been with the hippie movement but they were – and still are – very conservative.”
"Thought the long hair and tight jeans were the devil’s doing?"

"Exactly. They’ve loosened up some since then, though. They let me wear what I want."

Joshua leans in. He smells of musk. "Do they let you date who you want?"

Not knowing what to say, Charlotte just stands there, blushing and smiling. "Well," she finally stammers out, "I guess they’re fine with it as long as they meet the guy first."

"So what time shall I come by tomorrow?" Joshua asks.

"Tomorrow? That’s awfully soon."

"Sunday then?"

"On a school night?"

Joshua’s eyes grow wide and puppy-dog like. "Please don’t refuse me."

"I’m sorry, what?" Charlotte asks, snapping out of her day-dream.

The guy with the Beatles T-shirt looks at her strangely and says, "I said ‘Excuse me.’ You’re in my way."

"Oh," says Charlotte. "Sorry." She steps back and he pulls a book from the shelf and leaves. Great impression, she thinks, mentally slapping herself on the forehead.

Looking closer at the books, Charlotte spots one on Colorado. She picks it up and flips through it.
“Whatcha got there?”
Charlotte jumps, gripping the book. “Attica!” she says harshly, turning around. “Don’t sneak up on me!”
“Sorry. I thought you knew I was behind you.”
“It’s okay,” Charlotte says, calming down. She shows her friend the book. “Ever think about going to Colorado?”
“Nope, never. Always wanted to go to California, though.”
“Do you have a cousin named Vince?” The question is out of Charlotte’s mouth before she realizes what she’s asking.
“Nope. Why do you ask?”
“I thought I heard you mention one before.”
Attica looks at Charlotte questioningly. “Are you feeling alright?”
“Yeah, fine.”
“Okay, I’m heading over to the fiction. I’ll catch up with you later.”
“Okay.” Charlotte takes the book and puts it back on the shelf, trying to decide where to spend the rest of her time.
Forty-five minutes later, the three girls meet up by the discounted books. “So how many guys did you pick up this time?” Attica teases Tat, who usually gets asked out by several guys when the girls go out somewhere.
“Just one, actually,” Tat replies, pointing towards the checkout. “The blonde. His name’s David.”

“Looks more like a Joshua to me,” Charlotte mumbles, but the other two don’t hear.

“Cute,” comments Attica.

“He’s got potential. What do you think, Char?”

Charlotte shrugs, “He’s okay I guess. Can we go now? I’m not feeling well.”

Once inside her room back home, Charlotte takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. She smells the smoke of the cigarette before she sees the smoker leaning partly out of the window. “Kevin,” she says, not bothering to turn on the lights as she walks over to him, “you’re still letting the smoke in the room.”

“So?”

“If my parents smell it, I’ll be in deep shit.”

He flicks the rest of the cigarette to the street below and ducks back in. They stand facing each other, silence vibrating the house. Kevin’s about half a foot taller than she is so he smiles down at her as she looks up at him.

“I’m glad you came,” Charlotte whispers. “How did you get in?”

“I climbed up to the window. You left it open. I think you were expecting me.”
"If I had been expecting you I would have moved that junk on the windowsill."

"Are you calling those flowers I gave you junk?"

They both look over at the withered flowers and laugh softly. "Yeah, I am," Charlotte answers.

"I told you. You should have watered them."

"I remember the day you gave them to me," Charlotte says, catching Kevin's eyes and holding him there with her look.

He laughs. "Valentine’s day."

"I had no idea you were even going to do anything. I didn’t even know you had been watching me. Who would have thought that the quarterback of the football team was interested in little ol’ me."

"I would watch you from the back row in Pre-calc, listening to your conversations with Tat about how you can change the world, help the environment, help other people, be a better person as a whole, and such. It just amazed me that someone could be so passionate in this dreary town that drowns people and their dreams. You are something special and I noticed it. I wanted you to notice it too."

Charlotte smiles and, leaning even closer to Kevin, whispers, "I do now." He grins, showing his teeth again and she closes her eyes and puckers her lips.
“Charlotte,” her mother whispers, sticking her head through the crack of the open door. “I just wanted to make sure you got back okay, that’s all.”

Charlotte turns around towards her mother, squinting at the light coming in from the hallway into her dark room. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight.”

After removing her bra from under her tank top and pulling off her pants, Charlotte shuffles across her room to her bed, past the closed window and the sill, where her star candle sat and Marmalade lay sleeping. She pets the cat softly, not wanting to wake it up, and then crawls under her navy-blue sheets.

She lies on her side, turning her back to the wall, and hugs Wibah closely to her chest. She closes her eyes.

“I love being so close to you,” he whispers in her ears, hugging her from behind. She can feel his chest moving up and down against her arched back. She explores his thin, hairy arms with her hands while his bare feet find hers and intertwine them. “I’m going to miss you when we go away to college in a year.” He kisses her lightly on the cheek and she smiles.

Slowly, Charlotte opens her eyes when the soft wisp of something on her cheek won’t go away. When she realizes that it’s only Marmalade’s tail, she lets out a sigh,
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gives Wubah a squeeze and says, “I’ll miss you, too.”

-Liz Sidley
A Year In Your Web

I remember your skin
tawny and strangely smooth
and your long, dark
watery gaze across the table.
How you looked up at me,
a willing and delighted
prisoner in your web,
spun with dizzying flattery
‘til my hot skin was pressed
against the cool wall of calm obsession.
Your limbs wrapped me,
and whispered lies into my pores
‘til the gluey threads of your game
were my world, and I
choked on your kiss.

-Melissa Warner

In the mist and haze
The chatter of insects rolls across the
landscape
Bright shadowed light
Hovers over delicate flower petals

-Christine Hardy
College

Even though the sign on the door reads Studying: Please Do Not Disturb, I was asleep and she knocked loudly anyway. Even after she saw she had woken me, she sits at my desk chair facing my bed and starts telling me about her day (even though it is only 9:30 in the morning) as I lay, covered head to toe in blankets, my eyes growing heavy every time I blink. I'll let you get back to bed she says as she stands, glancing in the mirror above my desk and smiling. But one more thing. She continues to glance at the reflection and I secretly plan to cover the glass with magazine photos, quotes, colorful drawings so that the only thing I will see of myself is my eyes when sitting and my mouth when standing. She finishes, leaves, and closes the door as I close my eyes to sleep but I can’t get comfortable and after twenty minutes of tossing, throwing sheets off, on, off again, I get up and go to work.

Later, when I am actually studying
and realizing that I won’t be done in time for class,
she walks through the office door,
whispering because that’s not interrupting me so much.

*How’s the studying coming?*

Rather slowly...

And she proceeds about her day again.

*But I’ll let you get back to reading*

‘cause I’m going to lunch.

She glances around the office but only white walls stare back.

*But I have to tell you a really funny story first.*

My sister calls an hour and seventy pages until class.

*Guess what concert I’m going to tonight.*

Only my favorite band, on their last leg of their tour.

Outside, it rains heavily and doesn’t subside when class-time arrives.

So I don’t get my pre-class cigarette, but that’s okay because I’m a bit nauseous as it is.

I’ve been thinking of dropping a class since yesterday afternoon, when I broke down on the benches outside of the library.

Taking off my glasses, I sobbed openly, trying to recall the last time I was happy, and coming up short.

I saw her that night.
How was work?
Fine, I say, not letting myself tell her of my afternoon.
If she really cares, she’ll ask.

Now, less than an hour later,
she is openly ignoring me as a joke because she’s hyper
(and she does that when she’s on a sugar high)
and probably thinks I am, too.
I turn up my music,
even though I know some people are in bed,
and play with my new free pocketknife.
Too dull to cut anything stronger than paper,
the miniature blade doesn’t gleam or twinkle.
I look at my forearm and run the dull blade over my protruding purple veins,
over and over again – no dents or scratches, only numbness.
Even though the sign on the door reads Go Away Bitch
(and I know she’ll think I’m only joking around)
she knocks loudly,
over the rain pouring outside my open window,
as I continue to numb myself, trying to ignore the wetness on my cheeks.

-Anonymous
As We Know It

“Do it now, do it now, Johnnie.”
I pressed the button marked “Gilligan’s Island” and a muzak version of the television theme song began its crackling ascent from the speakers. A woman in a business suit and heels stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and turned around, squinting toward the rusted out recycled squad care we rode in.

“A three hour tour …” Benjamin leaned out the window, half singing, half screaming to the music.

Samuel and Alexander were rolling around in the back seat, laughter fits bringing tears to their eyes.

I grabbed the wheel for Benjamin as he thrust the rest of his upper body out the window, now hanging by his thighs and blowing kisses to the confused woman on the sidewalk.

Benjamin was the only guy I knew who would think of attaching a musical doorbell system to his car – he’s really a nut. He added speakers on the roof and everything. He did that right after he stenciled “Goonie-mobile” on the car’s primer-colored doors.

“Push it again,” he called to me, pounding his fist on the windshield. I opened the glove box, pressed another button, and tinny notes from the “Love
Boat” theme blared around us as the Goonie-mobile coasted down Harvey Street. Samuel and Alex were in hysterics. The woman stared after us.

“Ask her if she’d like to join the Goonies for lunch,” I said to Benjamin. “Goonies” was the name of our pseudo-band – well, actually it was “Chunk and the Goonies” ’cause Samuel, our lead singer, used to be fat.

“Care to join a gaggle of handsome lads for lunch at Archie’s miss?” he called.

She looked away and began walking again quickly.

“Eh, maybe she’ll meet us there. Onward, boys, to the temple of nicoffeine,” Benjamin slid back into the seat, grabbing a cigarette off the dash before taking the wheel.

We rounded the corner and pulled into Archie’s restaurant, second on our list of favorite places to drink coffee, smoke GPCs, and discuss the psychological trials of teen life in Knox, Indiana.

According to the town’s welcome sign, Knox is “where opportunity knocks,” but that’s only at the doors of those who pine for the opportunity to join the assembly line at the American Rubber factory or bus tables at Archie’s.

Archie greeted us with a greasy grin, and we headed to our regular table to get down to business.
“So, you got the goods, Alexander?” Benjamin asked, pouring a sixth packet of sugar into his cup.

“Yeah, I cleaned out our whole snack cupboard. Hop my mom doesn’t get pissy.” Samuel mentioned his mom’s pissiness at least ten times a day.

“Cool, then we’re all set for tonight,” said Benjamin in between sips.

What he meant by “tonight” was our plot—well, actually it was more like a goal, to spend the entire night at Buz-Mart.

Buz-Mart (pronounced like “booze-mart” despite the fact that it sold no liquor, and despite the dogged efforts of K.R.A.B.S. – Knox Republicans Against Beer and Smoking) had become a 24-hour amusement park for the Goonies that winter. We spent countless weekend hours wandering around Buz-Mart, searching, with nearly empty pockets, for a scarf for Samuel’s mic or a how-to book on home tattooing, testing out the sit-n’-spins, watching 27 TVs.

“Hey, you know that corner back by the knitting supplies? I was thinking that might be a good spot to camp. No one knits much anymore.”

Of course, it had been Benjamin’s idea to see how long we could stay in the store without getting kicked out. Of course, we all thought it was a fantastic idea. Some people just always have fantastic ideas.
“Yeah-yeah,” I chipped in, “it’s close to the furniture section too so we won’t have to drag the bean bags far.”

“Do you think it’d be stealing to use a radio for the evening?” Alexander asked. “I mean if we box it back up and all?”

“Nah, man,” said Benjamin. “It’s all about sharing, man. Mr. Buzaboli is a generous guy.”

We sipped in silence for a while, the smoke settling in the glow of the pink, wok-shaped lamp above our table. Then, without anyone really saying anything, we decided it was time to embark on our evening’s adventures. We each dropped a buck on the table and headed out to the Goonie-mobile. I drove while Benjamin smoked in the front seat. In the back, Alexander bit his nails, and Samuel sang along to some Genesis tune on the radio.

I felt a sense of coming home, as I pulled past the glowing green sign.

“Hello, and welcome to Buz-Mart,” the old lady in the motorized shopping cart greeted us as we strolled though the electric doors, feeling a little like royalty on the red, slush-soaked mats.

Benjamin tipped his hat, like a crown, to her, and we headed to the CD aisle, Alexander lugging a duffel bag of Twizzlers, Fango, and Funyons.

Silence ensued as we became lost in our own musical tastes, sifting through the
shelves of music for albums we didn’t have the money to buy. Benjamin drooled over Marvin Gaye and Squirrel Nut Zippers. I pulled out Miles Davis’ Greatest Hits and stroked the cool, plastic case. Samuel and Alexander hovered in the L’s scoping out Jerry Lee Lewis and L7.

Benjamin considered pocketing Gaye. I saw him slipping the CD in and out of his jacket. And then, as if it burned his fingers, back onto the rack. Benjamin said he had nothing against stealing as long as it was from monstrous corporations but he’d never been able to bring himself to gank anything.

We trudged over to the pharmaceuticals sections for a game of Prophylactic Predictions.

A guy entered the aisle with his head down and his hands in his pockets. He scratched his nose, looked around, and stealthily grabbed a box before sauntering away, the Lifestyles label hidden in his palm.

“A 16-year-old name Lindsay, her parents’ bed when they’re on vacation,” whispered Benjamin.

Next a 30-ish woman in a black, stretchy skirt. She squatted down to read the labels, “Extra thin,” “Lubricated,” “Strawberry-flavored.” Her tight calves rippled under the hem of her skirt as she reached for a box of Trojans marked “Ribbed for mutual sensation.”
“Forty-five-year-old married stockbroker boyfriend, the back seat of his 7-day-old Saab,” I guessed.

We went on like that for a while, peaking out from behind bottles of vitamins, until we didn’t want to anymore.

“Read to play dress-up, goils?” Benjamin began skipping like the Easter Bunny into the wracks of clothing. We loaded our arms and disappeared into dressing rooms. Benjamin emerged in a pair of old men’s checkered plaid pants, flip flops, and an undershirt, looking exactly like his uncle Frank. Alexander emerged in a pair of faux Dickie jeans and a big red T-shirt, looking exactly like Alexander. Samuel and I just looked like fools.

We headed over to the candy buffet aisle and nibbled for a while before deciding to set up camp under the yarn and needles. Benjamin and I lay on beanbags, Alexander and Samuel on their coats. The Funyons and Fango kept us in quiet complacency for a while.

Conversation started.

“Have you heard the new Voodoo Daddies CD?” I volunteered. “Cool, real cool.”

“I don’t know. It sounded too much like their first one,” Benjamin said, sucking a Twizzler as if it were a cigar.

“Yeah, it has some hip songs I think we could cover though,” Samuel hopped in.
Samuel’s evaluations of music always included an assessment of whether we could play it or not.

“Man, why do you always wanna do cover shit?” Benjamin whined. “I’ve written like ten songs, and all you ever wanna sing is Mighty Mighty Bosstones and Violent Femmes.”

“Cause the Femmes and Bosstones songs are good,” I said, whipping a Twizzler at Benjamin’s head. Benjamin could whip us all at guitar but for some reason he wanted to be a songwriter instead. Unfortunately, his lyrics were for shit.

“Fuck you,” Benjamin tried to sound angry. “I’m getting some good stuff these days.”

“Which days are those?” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Benjamin shrugged me off.

Then he said, “What are you afraid of?”

“Who me?” Alexander started a bit.

“Yeah, you, all of you. What really scares the shit out of you?”

“Fuck if I know,” Alexander played with a knitting needle, stabbing it through the paper sleeve of the yarn to make rows of small holes.

“I do,” said Samuel. “You’re scared shit your mom’s going to find out you smoke.”

“Yeah, well, you’re scared of pitting out your shirt,” Alexander countered. “I see how much freaking deodorant you put on.
You carry it around with you like chapstick.”

“Ick” was the last sound we heard as she came around the corner, the letters of Buz-Mart stretching over her protruding paunch.

“Hello, there, Donna,” Benjamin read her name off her nametag, turning on the charm. This wasn’t the first time he’d finagled with authority; he was in his element.

“Hello, little boys,” Donna said with exaggerated cheeriness. She seemed to struggle under the weight of her pregnant belly, arching her back onto her hands. “Enjoying your little campout?”

“Indeed we are,” Benjamin offered her a drink of Fango.

“Yeah, well, Mr. Buzaboli wouldn’t appreciate you stealing his radio, I don’t think.”

“Correction, please,” Benjamin raised his index finger in the air. “We’re merely test-playing it. We’ll box it back up when we’re through.”

Benjamin’s placidity made angry, red splotches appear on her cheeks. “Think you’ve got it all figured out, don’t you? Well, let me tell you something, little boy, you haven’t got a clue what real life is.”

“Huh?” Benjamin suddenly had no come-back.

“I mean,” she blinked spastically, “you guys sit here, 18 years old, eating Funyons
and talking shit around your little pretend campground in a department store.”

Alexander’s and Samuel’s heads jerked up at the mention of Funyons, as if they’d just then noticed the woman.

“Look, lady,” Benjamin began, “we’ll move so you can stock the yarn, alright?”

“You’re scared of mothers and pit stains. You’re babies, just babies pretending to be men.”

“So, what are you scared of?” I came to life, wondering who this chick thought she was, eavesdropping on us.

“What am I scared of? What am I scared of?” her eyes bulged, and I thought she might try to choke me. “I’m scared I’ll sign the papers and then not be able to do it. I’m scared I’ll work this fucking peon job and carry this stupid load for nine nauseating months, and then when it finally comes time to give it to the rich, desperate Darrelsons in Arlington Heights, I’ll find something I like about the little chigger.”

The word “chigger” reverberated in the cotton around our ears. Donna’s chest heaved, quick, short, furious breaths. Benjamin looked at the floor.

“Look, could you please just not add this shit to my already shit-filled day?” she choked. “Leave.”

Benjamin turned the radio a few notches louder. “It’s the End of the World As We Know It” spewed from the plastic speakers.
She closed her eyes, blinking back tears, and her sneakers squeaked away through the automotive aisle.

Benjamin sighed. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Alexander and Samuel crinkled the bag of Twizzlers open.

"Just cause the condom broke doesn't give her a right to be all ugly to us," I said. "We know what real life is."

I leaned back on my bean bag, crossing my hands behind my head. The foam beans settled as I wiggled deeper into the hot pink pleather. There's really nothing more satisfying than finding just the right spot in a bean bag chair. It can take a while but when you get it, it's like everything just sort of clicks, and life feels flawless. I wondered if Donna knew what that was like. As I found the right spot, a voice crackled through the store, "Security to crafts, security to crafts."

-Amy Vaerewyck
On the Surface of the Glass

As a child,
I used to take
long showers,
letting the water
rinse over my young body.
It dripped down
over soft button nipple
and the new fuzz
on my legs.
Outside the curtain
steam permeated the room
and clung to the mirror.

Even now, after toweling off,
I write my name
on the surface of the glass.
My eyes still stare back at me,
locked inside the lines
of the letters. I want
to run from the bathroom,
the foreign sight of my body
clinging to my name.

-Alicia LaMagdeleine
Rite of Passage

In the morning I make coffee. The foil package with the pre-measured, prepackaged grounds always resist my fingers clumsy with sleep until finally it tears open and the coffee tumbles into the filter like black snow falling in some photographer’s negative of winter. It sounds like rain falling too fast or sand from a paper cup when a child is making a sandcastle in a backyard sandbox wishing it was the beach. The water waits to soak the coffee in a hot tidal wave leaving it steaming and spent. Dimly in the periphery there are dishes stacked. Too many colors and last night’s spaghetti sauce clinging savagely to the sides of a 1970’s orange pan like a child to her mother. I press the button and the slow drip begins as the coffee rains down transformed and I wait and watch uncomfortably adult.

-Melissa Warner
A Polite Invitation

Hey man we should party
I got some beers in the room
And a little vodka in a coke bottle
(The stuff leftover from last weekend)
Dude, forget about your girlfriend
Two-month anniversary?
Man, that really sucks
Well
Later

-Brad Latino

Saint Fiacre’s Brain Farm

St. Fiacre proudly surveyed the Fruit Grove before him. He was expecting a reporter from the Pearly Gates Monitor-Courier to show up in exactly two minutes. Reporters were usually late. St. Fiacre was always as prompt and punctual as the morning suns.

Heaven’s suns were particularly punctual considering that the small temperate planet had zero tilt to its axis – unlike Earth, the birthplace of many citizens of Heaven, which was decidedly crooked and had an orbit decidedly elliptical around its sun. Heaven was a perfect planet, St.
Fiacre was fond to remind himself, with a perfect axis and a perfectly circular orbit around three perfectly blue, white, and orange suns, which were at the perfect center of the universe.

It had to be the center as God, the largest of the three suns of Heaven, had to make Himself the center when, three hundred billion and-God-knows-how-many-more-human-years ago, he grew sick of quiet and yelled.

"Bang!"

St. Fiacre loved the order of the Universe, loved its Creator, and loved the Fruit Grove, the farm he had apprenticed in for several human centuries and finally inherited from the previous supervisor.

And so was the business of the Pearly Gates Monitor-Courier, to interview the new keeper and administrator of the Fruit Grove and take an exclusive tour. It wasn’t a huge story for the newspaper, but St. Fiacre was nevertheless excited to be back in the white hot heavenly spot light of publicity.

Sure as shooting, three minutes late, a pearl-white Rolls Royce (everybody had a Rolls on Heaven) pulled into the Grove’s modest gravel parking lot. Out stepped an unknown, but not unkempt reporter, complete with pen, note pad, and press badge in the brown derby. That was how reporters were supposed to look, and on
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Heaven things were as they were supposed to be.

St. Fiacre jogged to meet him with the zeal of a straight-A schoolboy coming home to tell mom the good news. "Hello, hello! I'm Mr. Fiacre! Pleasure to meet you mister—"

The reporter, who always concealed the name part of his press badge in the ribbon of his derby (force of habit), spoke on queue: "Adlai Stevenson, Monitor-Courier." Handshaking was practiced.

"Well, we don't have to waste too much time. I'll take you into the greenhouse so we can start our tour and you can be on with your busy day," said the sugary polite Fiacre.

"I have nothing to do," Adlai mumbled, not intending to be comforting. "Take your sweet time." He was busy trying not to seem as awed by the bloated green silkworm shape the three-miles-long-by-two-miles-wide greenhouse as he truly felt. "I've been meaning to take a look around this place since I arrived here."

"Arrived where?" Fiacre was confused by the reporter's absent-minded word mangling.

"I'm sorry, ascended," Adlai corrected himself. "I'm still not quite used to the lingo on this ... planet."

Fiacre issued him a compassionate smile as he opened the thick bamboo-looking
door, nodding to the security guard immediately behind.

Adlai pushed the clicker atop his pen, unsheathing the potent ink from its aluminum prophylactic. He wasted no time in jotting his first impression on a blank page of the note pad in a wickedly abbreviated shorthand, a hodgepodge of English, Latin prepositions (they need only be one letter), and acronyms.

"I’ll fill you in on the history of the place first," St. Fiacre said, licking his lips at the chance to didactically eject facts at a captive audience. Just like the old days. "The original care-takers of the Grover were, of course, angels. But after the first humans started ascending, and the angels – of course – began disappearing, the ownership fell to—"

"We can skip the history," interrupted the reporter in his most business-like tone. Like some of the newly ascended, Adlai didn’t believe one drop about the angels, beings of light predating humans. Nobody had ever actually seen one. Methuselah, the oldest of the Old Ascended that had not yet shut himself in or walked off, said he had seen no trace of them, or any use for them, since the day he arrived in Heaven. Adlai saw that as testimony enough to the nonexistence of the angels. He saw a lot of testimony, everywhere, that this wasn’t the exactly the paradise he expected. “I’m sure
I can find all the history I need in the Almanac.”

“Right, right, of course.” The saint was caught hopelessly off guard, his fantasy somewhat deflated. “So- uh- what, uh, where do we start?”

Adlai glanced about and noticed a long conveyor belt made of aluminum rollers which snaked around the grove in an L shape, finally leading to what he supposed was a truck garage. Standing on either side of the conveyor belt were grey-uniformed employees, working on various tasks in accordance to their place on the shoe boxes filled with Styrofoam packing kernels onto the conveyor belt and shove them along to the next group of employees. This next group would stand about three or four feet from the boxes, pick up a human brain from a large basket beside them, and toss it into a show box. Some of the employees would shoot the brains into the shoe boxes like they were basketballs, doing tricks like fade away jump shots and behind-the-back grannies.

“Are they supposed to be doing that?” he asked, again trying to hide the shock in his voice.

“Yes, of course! It is our way of ensuring that nobody gets a brain completely devoid of faults.” Fiacre’s eyebrow raised, playfully. “We prefer our fruit to arrive a bit bruised, if you can forgive the analogy.”
“So these faults are simply randomly applied, with no thought given to whose skull they may end up inside?”

“Well, sort of. We give the brains the bruises they need, and as you can see down the line here, have our experts mark them according to what part of the brain has been flattened.” A smile. “The trucks drop them off to Mr. Mendel’s office. He makes sure they get paired up with parents of the necessary dominant or recessive genes.”

Adlai wrote a bit slower, not completely sure that he was hearing everything correctly.

“Hey, why don’t you give it a shot? Just grab a brain from that basket over there and huck it into a shoe box for me.”

Adlai just looked at the crate of grey matter. Fiacre noticed: “Oh yes, you can put on some rubber gloves if you wish.”

The reporter thought for a moment, snapped a pair of rubber gloves on, and picked up a brain from the basket to his left. “I used to play baseball in college, you know,” he reminisced out loud. He cupped the squishily large baseball between both his hands, stretching them as if he was on the pitcher’s mound and hiding his finger arrangements from the batter. He pulled back with his right arm and threw a sinker hard and low into a shoe box, making the basket but also knocking the completed unit to the floor. Adlai blushed.
“Oh, don’t worry about that,” smiled the patron saint of gardeners, looking over the damage done to the gray blob. “This fellow never needed to be good at- ummmm-intermediate algebra, anyway.” He looked at Adlai again, as he placed the box back on the belt. “He’ll just have to get a tutor, eh?”

The reporter, remember the reason he was here, did an about face and looked up, noticed the motor-driven sun lamps and shower heads which slowly hovered in straight paths over the vast grove of brain trees on an X and Y axis. “What are those for?”

Fiacre was surprised by the childlike simplicity of his interviewer, but the questions were adequate nonetheless. “Well, they are watering and sunning the trees, of course.”

“But why on tracks? Why not just water the whole place at once and then crank on some sun lamps?”

“Well, Mr. Stevenson,” Fiacre was almost laughing at himself for not minding how illogical his farm must seem to outside eyes, “growing brains is like no other gardening in the Universe. We may allude to them as fruit, but there is very little similarity, aside from our growing the things on trees.”

“Do brains ripe differently than, say, apples?”
“Um, no; but our goal here is not to produce three hundred million perfectly equal brains. On the contrary, we want three hundred million perfectly unequal brains.”

“I don’t follow.”

Fiacre paused, cooking up an analogy in his saintly idea sponge. “Before you ascended, did you ever notice how, on Earth, the average person had an IQ somewhere between 90 and 120?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“Of course, being the average, there was a smaller group of people between 80 and 90 and then another between 120 and 130.”

Adlai’s patience was nearing a boil. “Yup.”

“And a very small number below 80. And getting much lower is clinically retarded, which is a whole other department.

“But the brainies,” Fiacre waved a finger as if to the melody of a swooning symphony, “the sky is the limit!”

“So what does this have to do with the grid of sun lamps?” said the reporter, accentuating the annoyance in his voice in efforts to speed the old windbag up.

Oblivious, however, to Adlai’s distaste for head games, Fiacre goaded further: “So a good, botanical explanation might be that some brains are a bit malnourished, the vast majority are ripened to ideal specifications, and very select few are—well—a bit over-ripe.”
The flow of shorthand halted abruptly. Adlai looked into the saint’s eyes like an angry boar. “You mean you control this?”
“Uh, yeah.”
Adlai’s glare narrowed fiercely.
“That’s why the sprinklers and sun lamps travel about like they do. By the way they go back and forth, up and down, they make sure that 80% of the trees get just the right amount of sun and water. There are some trees on the edges that don’t get as much – those are the simple folk. And the trees in the center, thanks to the shape of the lamp grid, get almost twice as much nourishment as the other trees.” His smile and excitement grew more intense. “There is one tree in the middle – whoo! – that’s where you get all the Einsteins and DaVincis and Newtons! That’s where the smartest of the smarties are really born.”

Adlai Stevenson was deathly still.
“Quite a startle, isn’t it?”
“Yes,” said the reporter, barely present. “Yes. I think I want to pay my respects. Thanks for the tour, Mr. Fiacre.”
“The pleasure was all mine!” Blind pride did not allow him to notice how short the tour turned out to be.
“I, uh, gotta go to the car and get my camera.”
Fiacre walked away on his usual, ceremonial rounds through the orchard, not thinking much one way or the other of the
somewhat odd, but typical journalist, Mr. Stevenson. More important thoughts to think. More important just to soak in the satisfaction of a job well done and be happy.

But yelling! Maniacal screaming in the distance.

What was going on?

Fiacre made a wild sprint toward the shrieks. Stevenson clutching a Louisville Slugger, madly swinging at dangling gray matter, smashing them to pulpy pieces like bloody, organic piñatas.

“What are you doing!?”

“What does it look like,” screamed Adlai, “I’m killing geniuses!” He found a plump brain fruit, bulging with bright ideas and clobbered it off the branch so hard that a piece of the *medulla oblongata* flew off and hit St. Fiacre in the eye. “You try to stuff these into baby skulls and they’ll pop out as vegetables!”

“Oh dear!”

“I’m doing them a favor.” Another spongy impact. “They’ll never know the isolation and humiliation of being smarter than the rest! Different! Gifted! Ha!”

Fiacre ducked for cover as another explosion of brain cell clumps showered him with blood.

“See this one?” Adlai pointed to a random brain on the branch in front of him. “This guy may hold the secret for the cure of skin cancer. But he won’t be able to laugh
when he and his buddies gather around the bar and tell fart jokes!"

_Thud!_

“This gal here will be the world’s most talented concert pianist. Yet she can never enjoy a movie on Saturday night because she finds the plots too predictable and falls asleep!”

_Whack!_

Adlai clamored up the tree, shouting more stories about not fitting in at parties, getting funny looks for using unconventional words, moping around book stores and libraries looking for some random conversation, and so forth. Before St. Fiacre could even regain his composure, he found himself in a pile of mangled, hamburger-textured reddish-gray blobs. The tree in front of him, decimated, possessed maybe a third of its original produce.

Adlai Stevenson was standing with both feet on branches, holding a particularly healthy looking brain. “Take a good look, my friend – you don’t see one like this every day.

“This man could be President of the United States. _Should_ be President of the United States. He has experience, intelligence, but mostly just a level head.” The brain was melodramatically offered to the heavens like it was Yorich’s skull in a high school production of _Hamlet_. Like a ham actor, he evoked it: “But the people will
not vote for him. No, he is too much of an egghead. He says funny words in his speeches. He pronounces all his T’s and accents the right syllables in the word *President*. What is *wrong* with him? Who does he think he *is*?”

Adlai pointed to an imaginary center field. The brain was tossed into the air, and cam down to meet the hard reality of the Louisville Slugger. It didn’t go sailing over any grandstands. It wasn’t caught by a crippled orphan, attending his first ball game. I just combusted, spraying juices and flecks of tissue all over Adlai Stevenson’s face.

By now, the police had located the commotion and forced a dripping we reporter to dismount his last stand.

St. Fiacre’s eyes were tearing up from the havoc he just witnessed. The wasted smarts were in lumpy puddles at his feet. “So many blessings, wasted. Murdered.”

The shiny-badge, Irish-accented, flawless blue-uniformed Pearly Gates Police Department kicked Adlai Stevenson to the ground, handcuffing him behind his back.

He was crying, tearing chunks of grass up with his teeth. Mad as the Hatter.

“I got blessed *good! Real* good!”

-Brad Latino
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Victim

Sometimes I feel, as dead as a rabbit, who has been lying for days in the grass along the highway.

When men approach her, she is calm, her eye is steady, even her snow white tail lays intact, untouched.

Her muscles and tissues exposed, rotting, in the hot sun.

-Alicia LaMagdeleine

The Cardinal Obscenity

I took these photos yesterday
Developed them sepiatoned
Yeah, it was hard to get her to do that
But the nudity, it was a part of my vision
I call them, all together, “The Cardinal Obscenity”
You know, with the upside-down cross, The raped Virgin, About the Lie$ of Religion (see, the S is a dollar sign)

Rebellion, man: Live it.

-Brad Latino
Liquid Sunshine

The sky is spitting on me.

Even though the clouds are white against the sky and the sun is shining...
It continues to spit on me.

This liquid sunshine that is falling from the heavens,
It’s smudging up my glasses.

It’s teasing the trees and goading the grasses.
It’s spotting the sidewalk.
And yet, there are just enough droplets to smudge up my glasses.

The leaves quiver with excited expectation,
Waiting for the moment when the rain will pound down on the ground.

But the sun is still shining,
The bugs are still buzzing,
And the sky is still spitting on me...
Smudging up my glasses.

-Renee Burdulis
Skinny

One hundred and ninety-seven pounds was what the scale read. Minus a few pounds for waist-length black hair and another few for work clothes, which consisted of a knee-length skirt, matching top and jacket, and panty hose, no shoes. At best that left Danielle five pounds lighter – 192. According to the physician, she was supposed to be 180 pounds, max.

Dan scrunched her shoulders as she stepped off the scale and let her jacket fall off of her. She knew that it was best to weigh herself in the morning, right before her shower, naked. But that meant also coming in contact of the full-length mirror on the back of her bathroom door. It wasn’t that she couldn’t stand her image or hated her weight (both of which were true to an extent) but that she couldn’t handle them both at the same time.

The roundness of her belly under her small breasts got to her the most. Especially when she was sitting in front of the television, watching models walk down the runway, she could feel her stomach growing, see it protruding, and (if she laughed) feel it jiggle. She wished she could cut the fat off with a carving knife in one big slice, although the smell of blood made her nauseous.
She walked into her adjoining bedroom where she tossed her jacket onto her blue quilted bedspread. Her grandmother had given it to her when she believed she was quickly dying. But Dan’s grandmother was still alive today. *I should call her*, Dan thought. *It’s been awhile.*

She turned on the radio and unzipped her skirt. Friday night was approaching quickly, although her only plans were to wear her loosest sweatpants and tank top (no bra) and curl up in the armchair in her room with a book. Her roommate would be gone all night, out at the bars with friends from work, not even bothering to see if Dan wanted to come.

When Dan and Veronica had started living together the fall before, Veronica had always asked if Dan had wanted to join the crowd. The first few times she went and mainly had fun but felt more like a tag-along younger sister than part of the group. She stopped saying yes and slowly over the next couple of months Veronica stopped asking altogether.

Dan never actually saw Veronica come home drunk or with a guy. She always fell asleep in the middle of paragraphs, of sentences, her table lamp still glowing gently and her wire-rimmed glasses still perched on her nose.

Sometimes she woke in the middle of the night to get a drink or a snack to find her
book bent and sprawled on the floor, her place lost. Sometimes she woke and the light would be off, her glasses folded carefully and sitting on her small table by the armchair. Her book would be turned upside down, the spine bent and opened to the page she had been reading when she fell asleep. One time she even found a sticky-note in her book that read, “I think you’re on this page, but I’m not sure.” The handwriting wasn’t Veronica’s and when questioned, she didn’t know whose it was but guessed it was the guy – Mike or Marc or something – who had followed her home the night before.

“Don’t let your ‘guests’ come into my room when I’m sleeping; it’s creepy.” Although Veronica promised to keep an eye on the guys she brought home, Dan started locking her bedroom door before picking up her book.

Dan laughed at herself as she tried to pull her shirt over her head with her glasses still on. As she struggled to take off her glasses with her arm length shortened by the tangle of her shirt, the phone rang. She gave up and pulled the shirt over her head in a hurry, letting her glasses be flung to the floor.

“Hello?” She crossed her arms over her small chest incase it was a man calling. Even though whoever was on the other end
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couldn’t see her, Dan sometimes felt that her privacy was being invaded.

"Hey. It’s me." Veronica.

“What’s going on?”

“The girls and I are going out for drinks to celebrate – well, life. Wanna come?”

Dan was too shocked to say anything. It had been at least two months since the last time Veronica had even asked her to go out on a Friday night. It took Dan a little bit to process the thought.

“Yeah, that would be great. Where do you want me to meet you?”

“Martin’s at 9:45. Wear something sexy – it’s lady’s night.” Dial tone.

Something sexy. Dan wasn’t sure if she had anything sexy in her closet. Mainly her wardrobe consisted of work clothes – nice but nothing she would wear to a bar – and tie-dye t-shirts she usually wore with baggy jeans. There were black pants she could wear with a white tank, though it started clinging to body parts she didn’t want the public noticing.

It wasn’t difficult to hide the fat, except in her face and thighs. As a result, she usually ended up wearing nothing that wouldn’t reach at least her knees and a shirt with a low neckline to make her neck stretch and her face appear longer and less round.

She pulled the black pants over her nylons, too lazy to correct the mistake once she noticed it. She was well aware that she
didn’t need to leave for at least another hour; she wanted to give herself plenty of time so she could change her outfit several times.

The last time such an event happened was the night of her freshman Homecoming Dance (“Hog Heaven” was the theme since the mascot was the hogs. Inside the gym was decorated with pink pigs wearing white-feathered wings, flying through a baby blue sky with cotton clouds). The dress she picked out two weeks in advance suddenly wasn’t good enough an hour and a half before her date, Kyle, was due to arrive. She got out every dress she owned, trying each one on frantically and then called her girlfriends to bring over all of their extra dresses (everyone was meeting at her house anyway before going out to dinner as a group and then onto the dance).

But none of her friends’ dresses fit and so Dan ended up wearing what she started out in – a teal color dress with silver sparkles on the straps and empire waist. Everyone said she looked great, especially with her hair curled and dotted with tiny teal flowers. When Kyle didn’t arrive and the group absolutely could not wait any longer before missing the reservation at the restaurant, they convinced Dan to go anyway, promising they wouldn’t exclude her from the group.

She went and was content with the situation until she arrived at the dance and
saw Kyle getting his picture taken with Kristi, Dan’s stick-thin next door neighbor. Dan quickly separated from her group of friends (and since no one came looking for her later, she assumed no one noticed or cared) and went outside. She only wanted some fresh air, some room and privacy to cry, but instead was met with a cloud of cigarette smoke coming from a group of seniors. That night Dan had her first, second, and third cigarette before she got sick in the backseat on the car ride home.

She pulled the tight white tank, made of cotton and spandex, over her head and sucked in her stomach. She didn’t know why she was so nervous. Picking her glasses from the floor, she went to the bathroom to check her reflection in the full-length mirror. “One ninety-seven,” it taunted her. “I’m only 192,” she told the mirror. It shut up.

Letting her stomach out, Dan looked at her sideways reflection. She would wear clunky black shoes, she decided, and the pants were a good choice. Not so tight, but not too loose. She walked back to her bedroom and, after pulling on her shoes, slumped into her armchair and picked up her book of essays. *I can get a few essays in before I have to leave,* she thought, right before the phone rang again.

“Hello?”
“Damn! Sorry, Dan. Me again. I dialed the wrong number. I don’t know what’s wrong with me tonight.”

“It’s okay. Martin’s at a quarter ‘til ten, right?”

“Right. See you then.”

“Bye.”

Dan turned the cordless phone off, giving it a questioning look. That was a bit odd. She shrugged and returned to her book.

Less than an hour later, Dan stepped out of her ’92 navy Honda Civic, right into a puddle of old rainwater and oil. “Shit.” Her left foot was soaked, as well as the bottom of her pant leg. She looked at the puddle, which was slowly swirling around from being disturbed by her now-wet foot. “It’s a bad omen,” the reflection said. “Turn back now.”

“Shush. It’s my first night out in months. So what if I have a slip up now and then?”

“Well, at least put your glasses on straight and brush your hair.”

The reflection disappeared as Dan stamped her right foot down in the puddle. Drops of water flung up and hit above her knee. “That ought to shut you up.” She looked up and noticed a few people on the sidewalk across the street were looking at her, shocked. Pushing up her glasses, she chose to ignore them and walked a block down the busy strip of bars, restaurants, and
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shops until she came upon Martin’s. The line was short and the entrance fee was minimal and Dan saw this as a good sign.

Stepping through the entranceway from the tiny vestibule to the bar, Dan was not awed at the sight before her. The bars she had been to before were pretty much like this one. There was a dance floor to her right, filled with people jumping up and down, swaying back and forth. In front of the dance floor, in the back of the bar, was the stage, where the band was playing. Directly in front of her were high tables and stools for people to sit, stand, talk, and drink. To her left was the bar, as crowded as the dance floor.

Dan waded through the congestion of bodies towards the tables, where she spotted Veronica. She was still about ten feet away from the table when the band ended their set and the room quieted down, although the sound of chattering people still vibrated off the walls. The dance floor started to empty as people went to the bar and tables.

“I dialed the wrong number.”

Dan stopped. Veronica was shouting to her friends at the table, unaware that the music had stopped and she didn’t need to shout as loudly as before.

“I didn’t realize until I had already asked her to come.” Veronica looked upset.
“But she isn’t coming – is she?” a friend of Veronica’s asked, her drink half-way to her mouth.

Veronica’s chin dropped to her chest. Shaking her head, she looked back up at her friend. “She accepted the offer.”

“God, I don’t want to have to be nice to her,” complained a second friend. “I’ve had a stressful week and I just want to unwind.”

“Nobody’s asking you to be nice to her,” Veronica said. “Just do what we used to do – ignore her a little and she’ll take the hint she’s unwanted.”

Veronica kept talking, but Dan had heard enough. Before the table full of girls could spot her, she turned and quickly walked out of the bar and back to her car. Her hands were shaking as she tried to unlock the driver’s door.

“I told you it was a bad omen.”

Once in the car she didn’t start it right away. She placed her hands on the steering wheel and took a few deep breaths. “Don’t cry, Danielle. Don’t cry,” she whispered out loud. “They could have been talking about someone else.”

“They weren’t talking about someone else.”

Dan glared at her rear-view mirror. “Nobody asked you.”

“Can you blame them? I mean, look at you. Your hair is split-end city.”

“Shut up,” hissed Dan.
"Your glasses are always sliding down to the end of your nose."

"Shut up," she said through clenched teeth.

"And you must be twenty pounds overweight."

"I SAID SHUT UP!" Dan thrust her fist into the mirror, cracking it. She was breathing too hard to notice the blood trickling down her clenched hand.

"Now look what you’ve done," seven Dans scolded her.

With an angry cry, Dan grabbed the mirror with both hands and tore it from its place, opened her door, and threw it in the puddle. She started the car and drove off in a fit of rage.

Back home, she went straight to the bathroom and, picking up the scale, started smashing the full-length mirror. Glass showered her and collected at her feet. "No one cares what you have to say!" she shouted at the remaining pieces of the mirror. "No one notices when you’re sick or missing! They don’t bother to call you to tell you they aren’t taking you to the dance! They will taunt and tease and not think twice about what you’re feeling inside because they are skinny and have never felt that ache – that burn – before!"

Dan stopped, panting as she looked over what she had done. Only the corners of the mirror were left; everything else was in
shards on the floor. She looked at the scale in her hands. Undamaged. After throwing it down, shattering the pieces even more, she stormed to the kitchen and back, carrying a large garbage bag and broom. She swept the mirror and scale into the bag, tied it shut, and took it out to the dumpster.

Once she was in her sweatpants and tank top (no bra) and sitting in the armchair, Dan felt calmer. She had bandaged her hand and cleaned the small cuts on her arm from the flying shards. She fell asleep in the armchair, wire-rimmed glasses still on, her book on the floor and her place lost. The next morning at breakfast when Veronica casually asked what had happened to her last night, Dan didn’t flinch when she said she simply forgot where they were supposed to meet and decided to stay home instead.

-Liz Sidley
Why We Don’t Play Stickball Anymore

When we played stickball
in the dust of the back lot,
we only had two gloves. One
for the pitcher, and sometimes
one for the catcher.
The other boys used their mother’s oven
mitts
to guard against the sting of the hit.

Some say, that the worst sting
came from Mickey Spinelli’s fastball,
which,
in its nascent form, wasn’t so much hard
as it was off-center.

And on days when the sun was hot,
and our mitts stuck to our skin,
a young hitter would connect
with one of the fastballs that Mickey threw
in a beeline to the fat tip of the bat,
not the sweet spot, not the strike zone.

And the whole game became off-center.

The ball ricocheted to the outfielder’s glove;
so when little Johnny looked down into his
mother’s mitt,
he thought he saw roses, in the off-center hit
that stings a burning hole into his hand.

-Alicia LaMagdeleine