



This

Building

Is An

Aquarium

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When I was seventeen, my friends and I got drunk on my best friend Jenny's parents'

sailboat in Lake Michigan, and when we jumped off to swim we forgot to put down the ladder. I'd lost my virginity an hour earlier with Rob Bennett, on the hard cramped bunk below decks. It was only the third time I'd been drunk. Once we were in the water and realized we couldn't climb back up without the ladder, I started swimming. Rob and his older brother and Jenny called after me, but they didn't follow. I made it to shore somewhere between Evanston and the City an hour after dark. I flagged down a car and used the woman's phone to call the police and then the Coast Guard. I was unable to give them the exact location of the boat. They didn't find it until just before dawn. I rode in the search and rescue chopper that circled around the boat and didn't see any sign of my friends. They found Rob's brother's body a week later, and they never found Jenny or Rob.

You don't come back from that. Not easy, anyway.

These days I'm on my last leg. I've lost my apartment, and my family, and most

of my friends. I still have a job at the Shedd Aquarium, and I live here, too. I work at the gift shop, and I sleep in the Oceanarium. I'm writing this on Shedd stationary with faint orange outlines of starfish against a light blue field that I swiped from the gift shop yesterday afternoon. I'm in a grove of fiberglass and plastic spruce and cedar trees atop paper-machete granite bluffs. In front of me, there's a wide-open window out to the Lake, daring me to believe that it's not actually the ocean. Dolphins and belugas and otters chirp and leap and tumble below me.

I sleep with the night guard to keep my secret. He's a piece of shit, but he's

harmless. He comes to me once a week and leaves me alone the rest of the time. He cheated on his wife, and she caught him a year or so ago. Tonight was his night, and after we were finished on our blanket above the Lake, he got weird on me.

"Five years come to nothing," Dean said.

I puffed on a cigarette and slid my panties back on.

He said, "I went to the mall before my shift started. It's her birthday tonight. I didn't catch myself in time. I found this. I want you to have it instead."

I didn't want to know what he had behind his back. I didn't want it, whatever it was, but I wouldn't stop him.

It was a little wood carving of a fox staring down a hawk perched on a branch. He presented it to me balanced precariously upon his open palms.

"We saw this scene," he said, "on a vacation to Wyoming years ago. The fox's

den was behind her. The hawk wanted the babies. We thought it was vicious and

beautiful. We didn't stay to see the outcome. We thought it was better to not know."

I said nothing. I stubbed my cigarette out on the rocks, but it melted through the paper mache. I dropped the butt inside, and pressed the melted edges together to seal it in.

I had to be careful to distribute my weight properly up here. I'd already punched in two holes with my feet when I stood in one place too long. I stared at the statue for a moment, and then I outstretched my arm. He dropped it into my hand.

He stood up, and gazed out at the lake, and the blinking skyline. He hiked up his Carharts and cleared his throat.

"It's her birthday," he said to the city and the water. "I'll send her an e-mail."

"You better get on that,"

I said. I placed the statue at the base of the birch tree to my left.

He talked some more, but I didn't hear him. If I listen to everything that poor bastard says I'll go crazy or fall for him or beat the shit out of him and I don't have time for any of that.

"Goodnight," I said, when it felt right.

"You be careful," he said.

I grunted as unsexily as I could. He turned and headed back down the path to the main museum.

I waited a while before climbing down the bluffs. I dropped into the bleachers where the tourists watched the dolphin show every hour every day. I walked down to the edge of the tank and stripped to my bra and panties. I wish I didn't have the big tattoo of a dolphin leaping beneath a crescent moon on my shoulder. Its presence makes what I do here every night feel cheesier than it already is. I got it on my nineteenth birthday the year I went to school in Seattle. I don't believe anymore what I believed then; and even then I didn't believe in the nostalgic magic it was supposed to represent. The tattoo simply served as a reminder that I used to believe in such wonders. I don't anymore.

They're just animals. I just live here. But still I come to them.

I climbed the railing and splashed onto the ledge on the other side. They heard me, and they were deciding if they wanted to make the effort tonight. They always do.

The overhead lights were dimmed, but a smooth green light illuminated the water.

Out the window I could see the dark outlines of skyscrapers and the moon hovering above the lake. I rounded the perimeter and walked out to the barely submerged platform that stretched out to the middle.

Two of them came to me. They broke the surface and leaped high into the air,

tails pumping, their bodies twisting and glistening in the reflected moonlight. They splashed back

down with a satisfying smack. I dove in. They circled around me and I ran my hand across their rubbery sides. I can't tell the difference between the adults. The trainers claim they can, but I don't believe them. One of the dolphins nudged me with its beak and I caressed it. It clicked happily at me. The other one hovered near me and tilted on its side, indicating that it wanted me to grab on to its fin. I held on tight as it rocketed around the tank. The baby came out to join in. I closed my eyes and repeated my mantras over and over in my head.

There is nothing more than this. Nothing can match this. You've dreamed this.

Relax.

But still...

I've been here for a month, up in the fake plastic trees. I've found a routine I can live with. Every morning I rise with the sun. I roll up my blanket and change into some fresh clothes from my camo duffel bag. Usually by this time the door to the rest of the museum is unlocked. I must get out of here before the trainers come to start the morning exercises.

I walk through the steamy Amazon Hall, past the Caribbean Reef, and into the gray unmarked door that leads to the employee lounge. There I wash up and brush my teeth and pull some breakfast from the fridge. If anyone's there, they assume that I've gotten my shit together, that I'm taking my job seriously and getting here plenty early.

My shift starts at 8:30. There's not much set-up. We check the shelves to make

sure everything's in order, unlock all the display cases, and get out the register drawer from the safe. I work with a cute high school dropout stupidly named Ken, and a pregnant twenty-something chick named Cassie. And then there's our manager, Bev—of course her name's Bev—who stops in a couple times a day. Some college kids take over our shifts on the weekend.

The shop's pretty shitty, if you ask me. We've got a handful of books, and lots of really ridiculous Shedd shirts and hats perfect for any tourist dad. You know the kind. He wears Acadia National Park baseball hats and embossed Dallas Zoo t-shirts when he visits other parks and museums. We get lots of those guys in here. They love this freaking shop.

And we've got the cute little plush toys and the Shedd coffee mugs and Christmas ornaments and picture frames and beluga jewelry and some fucked up little blue-glass thingy that's called a "Shell Crystal Helix." I don't know what the hell that thing is, but it costs 75 bucks. I've yet to actually see anyone buy one, but I constantly restock them.

One day I really want to get a good look at the type of person who feels it's necessary to own a shell crystal helix.

There's also a section devoted to little carvings and figurines of various animals sort of like the one Dean gave me last night. They... Sorry, I got a little carried away with the shop. Sometimes it's hard to separate yourself from the shitty little trinkets that surround you.

I have an hour-long lunch break. Some days I have to use this time to rush up to the Loop, and grab

supplies—food or toothpaste or tampons. Other times I just chill out by the lake or wander the aquarium and try not to think too much about the events that brought me here. The rest of the time I challenge my co-workers to Foosball in the lounge. I always kick ass.

I can usually hang out in the lounge for an hour or so after the museum closes, and no one cares. Then I have to disappear for the night. It's not that hard. I know all the hidden hallways and passages in here. Sometimes it's kind of fun. I remember the book I read when I was young about some kids who camped out in a museum for a week to

solve a mystery. Some nights I look for a mystery to solve. Other nights Dean comes to me. I never find anything.

Weekends are trouble. I only work Monday through Friday so I can't linger

around the aquarium or someone might know something's up. My options are limited. I try to avoid my old friends because they left me here. I wander the city. I can sleep on the El, pull my hoodie over my head, slump in the cubby and ride the red or orange line back and forth. But there are a lot of creeps with the same idea as me hanging around at four in the morning. The second time I did this was also the last time. I had to pull out my knife.

I'm afraid next time I'll have to use it.

I can go to a shelter, but if they're not already full by the time I get there after work, then there's the same creep problem. They make you have a roommate and it's usually a tweaker or some crazy bitch who thinks God's after her because she aborted the reincarnated baby Jesus last week at the clinic.

Speaking of Christ, three weeks ago I slept at St. Paul's downtown. I slipped

underneath one of the wooden pews and curled up against the kneeler to hide from God and the priests. In the morning when I was leaving, one of the priests caught me by the arm. Before I shook loose and ran out to the street, he whispered Latin in my ear and told me God had already forgiven me. I told him I sincerely doubt it. My other choice on the weekends is to go out to a club or a bar and find some dude who'll take me home with him for the night.

I dominated Jerry Johnson at Foosball on my lunch break today. I won two games to one, but I let him win the second one because his girlfriend was watching and I didn't want to totally embarrass the poor sucker in front of his better half. I have a pretty much unstoppable move, where I pass from midfield to forward in the first second or two of play. The ball sinks right in the goal before he can get his hand on his goalie. It's so freaking sweet, and it pisses off everyone I play.

Jerry and his fiancée Mary are the lead dolphin trainers. People here think they're superstars, like some golden gods. They're both tall and beautiful in a boring Northern European way. They're smooth and graceful in the water, and the dolphins respond reliably to them. Jerry proposed to Mary at the end of a show a couple months ago, in front of three hundred Nascar dads and soccer moms and shrieking babies. The dolphins were still doing their final tricks to the soundtrack of "Walkin' On Sunshine." Jerry got down on his knee on the platform and they made out, and the crowd cheered. Soooo romantic. Bleh. Anyway, I kicked his ass at the table.

I started talking trash during the third game, to throw him off. Not the normal kind of trash talking. My kind. I said, "What if we could celebrate deathdays instead of birthdays?"

"What's a deathday?" he said, as I sank a Duker into his goal from my goalie. I racked the point. 8-2. He dropped the ball back into play.

The word "deathday" had popped randomly into my head, so I had to think for a second to finish it. "Like if you knew the day you're gonna die, like you know the day you were born. Would you celebrate it?"

"What the hell? How would you know that?" he said, and he shot a goal I easily blocked. I smacked it back down across the table. He scrambled to his defense, and shot a weak emo-slap shot, which I stuffed right back into his goal. 9-2.

"Doesn't matter how. You don't know what year it's gonna be, but you know the day. So every year on that day you have a party. In case it's the one. That way everyone you love can be there to send you off in style. Just in case."

He stared at me across the table, and shook his head. He dropped the ball in and I did my signature move and it was game over. He shook his head again and his clump of blond hair, still wet from the last show, dripped with disappointment.

"Who is this girl?" he proclaimed.

All the cowards looked down at their feet.

"Claire," I said.

I extended my hand across the table. He took it.

"You work here?" he said.

"I do."

I refused to elaborate.

He tried to stare me down, but I'd have none of it. He looked around the room, and waited for the others to make eye contact.

"We need to organize a tournament," he said when a penguin-keeper finally looked up. "Nothing means anything till then."

Mary moved in, touched my lower back lightly with two of her fingers.

"Admit it, baby," she said to Jerry, "She beat you fair and square."

She smelled like the sea. I've met her a few times before. We had a card game the other night, and then there was that corporate party two weeks ago. She's nice enough.

"Fuckin A," I said.

I don't like the words I use anymore than the next person, but the next person had something to say, too.

"I'll organize it," the penguin-keeper said.

I turned and I almost laughed out loud at his silly ass. He was still wet from the waist down, and he wore big black rubber boots that stretched up past his knees. I'd seen him in action before, with a high-powered hose, squirting the penguin shit off the fake rocks, giggling stonedly.

"Do it," Jerry said. "I'm in."

He stepped back from the table, pretending his loss never happened. He twisted his shoulders and began to maneuver back into his wet suit.

Mary said to me, "A bunch of us are going out tomorrow after work. Wanna come?"

I glanced down at a non-existent watch. Tomorrow's Friday. I have to be out of here anyway. I let out a breath.

"Sure. When and where?"

Fridays are generally the busiest day of my workweek. Saturdays and Sundays are probably more intense, but I've never worked either. On Fridays the tourists arrive, towing along bratty kids who've demanded to make the aquarium the first stop on their modest three-day holidays. Kids run the show even more than usual on Fridays. Most of the field trips from local schools show up—a reward for the kids and an added stress before the weekend for the young teachers who accompany them. I'm good with kids, even the shitty, punky ones. They seem to like me. Today I successfully deflected a little girl from a glass porpoise figurine by diverting her to the bin of stuffed animals.

I like kids, but I don't want one yet. I'm not ready. I haven't changed that much since last October.

After I closed the shop when my shift ended, I got my bag from the lounge and

changed in the employee bathroom. I looked around for Mary or Jerry or anyone else who looked ready to party, but the only person around was Rosie, the elderly, slightly demented front gate greeter. She sat at a table, her hands folded, her hair purplish under the fluorescence. I nodded at her.

"Lovely day, isn't it," she said.

"I haven't been outside in a while," I said.

“It’s eel mating season,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said.

Now I had to get that disgusting picture out of my head. I hurried out to the hall. I found Craig Oliver leaning against the wall next to the river otters in the Great Lakes room. I asked if he was going out and if he knew where we were going. He said he was, but he was waiting for his penguin-keeper buddies to finish up whatever weird last job they had to do. He said everyone was supposed to meet out front at the bottom of the steps.

I left him and rounded the corner. The last of the visitors were being shepherded outside by security. And then there was Dean. He hadn’t yet started his shift so he wasn’t in uniform. He wore jeans and a short-sleeved Western shirt. He pressed his hand against the glass of one of the displays. I stepped back to see what it was. *California Two-Spot Octopus*.

The alien-looking creature usually stayed hidden under its rocks and fake coral overhangs. But now it was out, in full view, mere inches from Dean’s hand. I had no choice but to step closer for a better look. Dean had one finger on the glass, and the octopus lifted a brown wavering tentacle, and suctioned against Dean’s finger. Dean put up another finger and the octopus followed with another tentacle. He flattened his whole palm against the glass, and the creature stretched out three more tentacles and secured them to each of Dean’s remaining fingertips.

I’d never seen anything like it, not with the fish anyway. Sometimes the otters and cetaceans mess with you, but never fish or whatever the hell octopi are. Dean closed his eyes. What the hell?

He jerked his head around. His eyes registered me. I should have bolted before he saw me. He offered that sad little smile of his.

He said, “Octopuses have virtually infinite freedom of movement in their arms.

But they make their arms move like a three-jointed vertebrate limb when they perform point-to-point movements. Like us.”

I stared at him for a moment.

What I ended up saying was, “Isn’t it octopi?”

He shook his head and scratched at his beard.

“That’s a misnomer.”

So my mom was wrong about something else, big surprise. He withdrew his hand

from the glass and the octopus released its suckers. It retreated a few inches. It regarded him. Dean gestured at the glass, and the octopus raised a tentative tentacle.

“His name is Bobby Farentino,” Dean said.

“Right,” I said. “Yep.”

“He remembers,” Dean said, and bowed his head. The octopus floated backwards

and pressed itself under a rock. God, those things are weird. So’s Dean. I should rethink letting him come to me.

“I really have to be going,” I said.

I have too many ghosts following me to worry about odd horny security guards

and octopi, excuse me, I mean octopuses.

I wore my black skirt and my blue and white-striped shirt. It was my only going-out outfit I had with me. I smoothed out the wrinkles as best I could by running the sink as hot as it could go and pressing the creases with my hand. I had my hair done up in a twirly pony-tail, and I’d even dabbed on some lipstick and eye shadow in one of the stalls—gave myself a little Goth look.

I nodded at Bess, the jolly front-door guard, and I stepped out among the big

stone pillars. The City and this uncertain night lay before me.

The air outside was crisp but the clouds rolling in over the lake predicted a

grimmer future. I should have brought a jacket. It’s still May, for Christ’s sake, and this is Chicago. It’s a hard row to till all myself.

Five of them stood at the edge of the sidewalk beneath the stairs. Jerry and Mary were out there, she wrapped in his jacket. Well, duh. I really wanted to see if it had his football number on the back. I had exchanged some trifles with the other dude; I think his name was Brian. The others two girls I didn’t recognize. I’ve been working here for three months. I’ve kept to myself until recently for obvious reasons. You can’t allow yourself much of a social life when you’re living in an aquarium. But this is a big city, and I’ve been feeling the itch lately.

“Hey there,” Mary said when she spotted me.

“What’s up,” I said, and finished up the last couple stairs.

“Look at you,” she said, “All dressed up.

I let loose a light little fluttering laugh.

“I brought a change of clothes with me this morning,” I said. “My Shedd shirt

feels like crinkly cardboard.”

Like she could talk. She wore Britney Spears hip-huggers and a tank top. Not

exactly Shedd regulation. Good thing she had that boyfriend of hers ready at her beck and call with a warm jacket.

I decided then I wouldn't like her. People used to call me harsh. I wonder about the words they use now, and who *they* are.

We waited for the others and then headed toward the City. We crossed Lakeshore

and Michigan and the bridge over the rail yards. We kept in a tight bunch as we entered the beginnings of the Southside around Roosevelt Street. The guys looked around warily, pretending to stare off any potential attackers. Chicago's so fucked up. I took note of the fact no black people were in our group, yet we worked with dozens of them. We all went our separate ways at the end of the day. Whites to the North, Hispanics to the West, Blacks to the South. There were exceptions, but Jesus.

I'm totally ready to fall in love every time I go out. Every time I make myself up and zip up my bar boots I'm ready for him, or her, whoever. I don't go home with just anybody. They have to feel right, like they have potential. If I don't find someone that's when I ride the El all night or look for a church.

The problem is honesty. I don't lie about anything other than where I sleep, but that's a pretty big thing to lie about. I imagine it's an even bigger hurdle for a suitor to get past. No one wants to date a homeless girl. So I lie, and none of them have quite measured up, and I leave and never see them again. Someday that will change. Maybe tonight.

We rode the red line into downtown and switched to the blue line to get to Wicker Park. Jerry and Mary live there. All the *cool kids* do. Bleh. I'm not impressed. Maybe it's just me, but as I'm concerned, hipsters and hippies and Hoosiers and Hispanics and leather freaks and yuppies should never ever live together. They especially shouldn't take over a traditional Ukrainian neighborhood and drive up the prices so high the original occupants can't afford to live there anymore, all in the name of cool. Maybe that's just me. I used to live here, too. I worked in the coffee shop we passed on the way to Gold Star.

Karaoke night. Luckily, I had a secret weapon tucked inside my left boot, just in case. We drank pitchers of PBR, and gossiped about work, and talked about politics and music and everything else in the script. Hours passed. I got drunk. Mary got up and did a respectable but boring version of "Silver Springs". Jerry nauseatingly followed after her with "The Chain." The others did Guns n' Roses and Bon Jovi and other ironic crap.

They started in at me at around midnight. I hemmed and hawed and raised

protests, though I knew what the eventual outcome would be. I stalked up to the annoying DJ and flipped through his binder. I watched a boy watch me turn the pages. He sat with a couple friends at a table halfway across the room. He wore a beat-up Cubs cap and a black North Face pullover. He was cute, but he had too much gel in his hair. His bangs stood up at attention like some sort of science-fiction starship-shield atop his forehead. I might have to fix those. We'll see. Shields holding at 97%, Captain. I smiled at him, and he smiled back and raised his glass. I picked a song and wrote it down on the piece of paper for the DJ.

The DJ called me up about twenty minutes later, after I had two more drinks in

my system. Good to go. I pranced up there to the opening strains. I winked and pointed at Shields. It would be him or no one tonight. I'd have to gauge Shields' reaction to my song. He better be

goddamn blown away. I belted out the first two verses and the chorus. I know I have a good voice. I won little tiny blue medals in high school choir.

Cigarettes and booze have roughed up the edges just enough to be nightclub sexy and not glee club dorky. The boots helped, too.

After I conquered the second chorus, I put that sex boot up onto the DJ's stool, and I reached inside for the secret weapon. I pressed it to my lips, and held the microphone beneath it, and I blew like heaven and hell on that harmonica. I rose up and over the MOR synth beats. Everyone in the room clapped their hands and stomped their feet. I didn't quit, not for another minute and a half after the song ended. I'd do this on my accord, with a little blues coda, my hand wavering back and forth over the holes.

Applause filled the room. I slipped the harmonica back into its home, and slid back into my chair against the wall and mumbled thanks to my elated coworkers.

"Where do you come from, girl?" Jerry said.

"Louisiana," I lied.

Why not?

"You don't have an accent. Really?"

"Sure."

"When'd you move here?" a stoned penguin keeper asked.

North Face approached, saving me from any more elaborate lies.

"Wow," he said. He almost set his drink down on the table next to mine. He wavered, and pulled it back at the last second. "So where do you come from?"

His Shields glistened and sparkled under the weary disco lights.

I sighed and said, "Shields are down, Captain, 78%. Should I return fire?"

"What?" he said.

He looked so dumb and adorable I wanted to kiss him right there.

A girl in boots four inches higher than mine launched into The Cure. Brian, who was sitting next to me, excused himself and offered his chair to Shields. He slid in, and more successfully set his drink next to mine this time. He told me his name, but I dismissed it. He would be Shields or North Face until I fell in love.

"Claire," I said, and lightly shook his outstretched hand.

“You were incredible up there,” he said.

“Thanks.”

Damn straight.

He took a long drink.

I watched the girl singing. She wasn't bad.

I said to Shields, “Do you think if we listen to a lot of Cure, then the disease will go away?”

He stared at me for a moment like I was the strangest creature he'd ever seen.

Wait till he sees that octopus. Then he laughed.

“Let's hope,” he said.

He raised his glass. I clinked mine to his.

He proved himself to be funny and charming and everything I could have hoped

for in a one-night suitor at a seedy karaoke bar. He ingratiated himself with the others, found out we all worked at the Shedd, and was delighted. He told us about all the trips he took there growing up with his family from the Burbs, and his class trips. He loved it.

We'd heard this all before, but it was cute all the same.

After an hour or so the others came to the consensus to hit up Club Foot down the street. I opted out. I said I'd hang out here for a while, and maybe catch up with them later. A few minutes after they left, Shields went over to his friends and talked in low tones, and within ten minutes they too were gone. So there it was.

Karaoke ended at two, and the DJ took over. He spun exclusively 80s music. No

Cure, though. Shields and I made out. He invited me back to his apartment. I couldn't believe he lived in this neighborhood. He looked like he belonged in preppy Wrigleyville.

“Which frat were you in?” I asked him on the walk back to his place.

I had my arm looped in his only for his own sense of self-worth. I was fine.

Maybe a little wobbly, but fine.

“How'd you know,” he said.

“Please,” I said. “What are you doing living in this neighborhood?”

“You shouldn't judge who someone is by what they used to pretend to be.”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll let that go. I’ll pretend it was profound. I’m drunk.”

He pushed his bicycle with his other arm. He and his friends had all biked here.

He told me they biked everywhere on Friday nights, all over the city, like some deranged Goonies gang who’d ignored the constant reminders to grow up.

He grabbed hold of my cheek and kissed me, and said, “This is it.”

He lived above one of the best music stores in Chicago. Another point for him.

“Sometimes when I’m studying during the day, I hear some bass and hints of

chords coming up through the floorboards, and I have to go downstairs and ask one of the clerks who it is, and then I usually buy it. I think I must be one of their best customers by now. I bet they own this property.”

We sort of stumbled into the apartment, and he flipped on the lights, and I spun him around and pushed him down onto the couch. I didn’t pay close attention to any of the surroundings, especially not the feminine pictures hanging around the room. He picked up a remote from the coffee table and switched on the stereo.

“I got this one yesterday,” he said.

Drums kicked in, followed by an unexpected sax. We made out on the couch, and

undressed, and went down on each other. His shields tickled. Then we went into the bedroom. We kept the lights out in there.

Afterwards, I passed out for what couldn’t have been more than a few minutes.

He shook me awake. He stood above me, fully dressed. His Cubs hat shielded his shields.

“What?” I groaned.

I raised my hand to touch him. He grabbed it firmly and tugged at me.

“You have to leave,” he said. “I’m sorry. But you have to. Here’s your clothes.”

He tossed a wadded up ball of my shirt and skirt onto my belly.

I was wide awake now. I propped myself up. I blinked deliberately.

“Are you serious?”

“You’re great. This was fun. But my girlfriend’s coming home in the morning.”

I fucking raged.

I leapt off the bed like a wildcat and rammed him backwards with my shoulder. I slapped him over

and over. I swept all the crap off his nightstand. He recovered and grabbed at me, but I bounced across the bed and knocked everything off the other nightstand—his girlfriend's. I unplugged a lamp and hurled it at the wall. I would leave a trail of destruction he couldn't explain away. I rounded the front and he came at me. I tried to push by him, but he got hold of my wrists and wrapped his arms around my whole body. He picked me up and carried me out to the living room. I snarled and scratched at his thighs through his jeans. I wanted to leave a mark he couldn't explain, either. He pushed me against the wall while he opened the door. I bit him right on the collarbone. He shrieked and shoved me out into the hall. I collapsed in a heap. A few seconds later, my clothes and boots followed.

His stupid face hovered in the doorway and he held up my purple thong.

"I'm keeping this," he said. "Goodnight."

I heard three bolts latch.

I pounded on the door a couple times, and spit at it, and then I calmed myself, gathered up my clothes, and descended the stairs.

This goddamn City.

I rode the blue line back to the Loop and got off. I wasn't going to ride it all night tonight. I didn't have my knife.

I know downtown. This is my City. I found a building near State and Lake with a garden courtyard. I sat down on a wrought-iron bench and took some deep breaths. Pulled myself back together. Two dudes across the street stood waiting for a bus. I nodded at them. A garbage truck rumbled past, between us. In that moment, I flipped over behind the bench, and disappeared from their sight.

I imagined their dumb frat boy expressions when they saw I was gone. Maybe

they'd think I was a ghost. I wished I was. This garden would do for now. I lay among a bed of real, un-plastic bushes and flowers. I pulled them around and over me, so I couldn't be seen. I smelled the sweetness of bloom and decay. I closed my eyes.

I should probably tell you what went wrong, shouldn't I? How I ended up here in the Oceanarium, why I have to save every penny, why I'm on my last leg. It's not what you think. It wasn't drugs or alcohol or laziness that brought me to this point. It's hard to explain. I'll try. I make no promises that you'll understand.

I told you I went to school for a year in Seattle, right? That was right after the accident on the Lake, and my head still wasn't right. It was as if my entire civilization had been wiped off the face of the planet by nuclear bombs or giant asteroids or alien spaceships. I was left all alone to wander the ruins and the scorched earth. Two of my best friends and my first lover disappeared, swept away, in one night. My parents were gone, too. My dad died from overworking when I was fifteen, seven years after we moved here from the East Coast. My mom became a desperate, pill-popping, bitchy, selfish North Shore widow in no time flat. One of my sisters was in college, and the other was working in New York City. I hated them then anyway.

My head wasn't right.

I had zero interest in my classes. I always daydreamed of the end of the world—of legions of weary ghosts, of apocalyptic lighthouses, of war, and famine. I drew pictures of my dreams instead of taking notes. I sank deeper and deeper. I ran around with Goths and Punks and the last sad remnants of the old grunge scene. I snorted coke and accepted Ecstasy on my tongue like the body of Christ. Instead of going out to clubs, I sat in chairs and spun around and saw visions of tattered, tired armies marching across burnt landscapes. I slept with whoever had the balls to ask me. So okay, drugs did have a little to do with it at first.

My mind never slipped back to the boat or to Jenny or Rob. I focused instead on the apocalypse. Sometimes I could even smell the burning ozone and hear the screams and shrieks and war cries. Fire and explosions. Anything but water. The end of the future, not the end of my past.

Then one day I snapped myself out of it, or at least realized that I would soon have to. I remembered that afternoon. I was lying on some dude's couch whose name I don't remember, spun out on some drug I don't remember either. Fiona Apple was on the stereo, a Batman movie on the TV.

I had a vision. A little girl with bloodshot eyes, tattered rags barely clinging to her stretched skin, touched my shoulder. She whispered profound words into my ear, giving me a substantiality I had never before felt in that shadow world in which I spent my days.

She looked into my eyes. I opened my eyes for real. Batman stood on a precipice, surveyed his City. I knew what I had to do.

Seattle was still unfamiliar to me. The few months I had spent here had been in a drug haze, so I still didn't know my way around. I wandered aimlessly around downtown, with my head in the air, studying the tops of the buildings. I finally found a hotel that looked about right. My mom had given me a credit card when I left for school. I withdrew \$500 against it, and then used the card to rent the penthouse floor of the Astoria. I bought a portable stereo and a couple CDs from Ultimate Electronics. I went into the leather store in the University district, and I bought a suitable costume.

That night I checked into my room carrying only a backpack and the stereo. I

ignored the strange looks flashed my way. I imagined they thought I was some rock star or an heiress. The penthouse obviously was a palace, but I wasn't interested in the room.

I settled in, and called down to the front desk to send up a maintenance man to fix the toilet. When he arrived, he quickly discovered nothing was wrong with the toilet. I stood in the bathroom doorway, and I told him I needed access to the roof. He said that was impossible. I flashed a \$100 bill. He changed his tune. He said he'd open up the access door for me, but I told him I would need the keys for the evening. That cost me another \$50.

I ordered room service and the newest Batman movie on the TV. At ten o'clock I

changed clothes. I inspected myself in the mirror. My outfit was less Batman and more Matrix, but it would work. I wore a tight vinyl catsuit and boots with four-inch heels. I stared at my reflection, and slipped on the mask.

I slipped out into the hallway and found the access door to the roof. I climbed the stairs, unlocked the final door and stepped out into the wet night air. A sea of air conditioners, humming with an unnatural energy, lay before me. I set the stereo atop a pipe, and switched it on. Ominous symphonic music spilled out. I had listened to this music twenty times in the past 24 hours, and I knew it would transmute from ominous to urgent to triumphant. I was sober and wide-eyed as a baby.

I touched the rim of one of the air conditioners, tugged at it, and tested its

durability. Then I leaped off the ground and landed on top of it. My feet wobbled a bit in the heels, but I regained my equilibrium. The vibrations coursed through my body. I practiced keeping my balance by leaping and dancing from one AC unit to the next.

Finally, I came to the end. I stepped lightly to the crunchy roof, and I climbed the rim wall. The city rose up as I stood. Miles of blinking lights and antennas, Puget Sound, all the invisible people. A hunter's moon hung above me. I breathed deeply. The music behind me began to rise. A driving, march-like drumbeat announced itself. I walked along the wall and stepped onto a gargoyle's stone feathers. I put one foot up on its gnarled head and kept my other secure on its lower rear. A gentle wind swirled around me, held me there in the moment.

Here I was.

A year ago I was shipwrecked, and I swam to shore, and my friends didn't. Then I had seen visions of the apocalypse. Now I stood above a strange city, alone with my thoughts but connected to the universe in a grand, cinematic sense. These three waypoints, these life markers, were visceral and real. What happened between them mattered little. Context was meaningless. Between these points I said terrible things to my family, had done terrible drugs, had fucked terrible people. I hadn't been busy hunting criminals, or avenging my friends, or trying to save the world from its coming end. That mattered not. Only the images mattered—the memories, the waypoints. The plot meant nothing. These moments were all that mattered. Some day when I was old and gray and finally happy, I would remember that I had surveyed a cityscape perched upon a skyscraper's gargoyle with a John Williams soundtrack behind me. I would remember that I had seen the apocalypse that I had swam for my life one long-ago night at my childhood's end. I would leave a long trail of these flaming images; I'd make sure they burned more brightly than any of my fuck-ups or failures. Soon I would navigate a maze of underground city tunnels, and cross-electrified El tracks. No villain would chase me, but my past would—and when I'd cross safely to the other side, I'd be free. Every time.

I'd bicycle in the full moonlight, I'd climb a fire tower and wait for UFOs, I'd make love on cliffs above the sea, I'd spend the night in a haunted house and churches and in an urban flower garden, and once I'd even save a kid from getting hit by a bus by happy accident. And I'd spend so much time, money, and effort on creating these scenes that one day I would be broke and nearly broken, and I would find myself living in a glass aquarium overlooking the place where my childhood died, and at night I would swim with dolphins.

I stood up. I dusted the pollen from my clothes and stepped out of the garden. I ignored the Sunday morning city tourists. This was one of those in-between times. The scene had already happened. I'd slept in a garden. It didn't matter that I had been thrown out of some cheating asshole's apartment to get there. If I kept telling that to myself over and over, maybe some day when I'm old and gray, I'll believe it.

My Shedd employee card got me into the Field Museum for free. I walked into the great Hall and passed Africa and Sue the Tyrannosaur. I climbed the marble stairs at the far end, and pushed open a brown door that warned: *Employees Only*. As I entered, a woman looked up sharply at me.

“I’m here to see Jimmy,” I said without pausing or addressing her directly.

I did stop at the end of the narrow hallway, at the last door on the right. I knocked.

“Yes?”

“It’s Claire.”

“Come on in.”

Jimmy Fitzpatrick, former Honorary Glencoe Gumshoe, sat behind his desk. For

my benefit, he pretended to be relaxed, like he hadn’t been hard at work. The worst thing people my age can be is serious about their job. But his chair creaked, and his hands were splayed unnaturally behind his head. His computer monitor was switched off, but it still gave off that electrical buzz. His desk was covered with papers and his pen was still rolling across them. Former child detective sleuths must think the rest of us are retards.

“How’s it goin?” he said.

He wore a crisp, ugly yellow shirt with the sleeves rolled only one revolution, resting just above his wrist. He was as usual, impeccably shaven, his thin, light blue tie tight and perfect. His hair was one thing he couldn’t control, and it flopped across his forehead like a schoolboy’s. Like always.

“Good,” I said.

Jimmy’s three years older than me. For many formative years, beginning when I

was eight and he was eleven, his family lived across the street from mine in the house they used for the exterior shots in *Ferris Buehler*. He had managed to make a bit of a name for himself in the North Shore papers for assisting local security and police forces solve a handful of minor crimes. Jimmy was the one who discovered it was old man Connors who had been stealing our neighbor’s credit card bills from their mailboxes. He fingered Phil Gordon as the murderer of the Rashans’ cat. He caught a gang of junior high kids red-handed pouring bleach on Mrs. Garrison’s garden—which earned him a good ass kicking after the cops left. I remember attending the party the Glencoe Police threw him after he solved his tenth case. They presented him with a plaque that presently sat atop the filing cabinet behind him.

“How’s your sister?” he asked.

I shrugged.

“Right,” he said.

My middle sister Katie was his age. She accompanied him on several adventures.

I tagged along a couple times, but I never saw him actually find a clue or solve a case. I remember he always wore a tattered brown blazer that must have once belonged to his grandfather whenever he was out sleuthing. Once he got to high school he lost interest in detecting and started listening to weird music. My sister told me that for a good year he drove around with his friends and went trashcan bowling, and shot couples and

businessmen with paintball guns. He covered his tracks well, and no gumshoe other than my sister, junior or otherwise, found him out. His senior year he came out of the closet.

He went out publicly with a punk dude and a Goth guy, and I started seeing him wear that brown blazer again.

I sat down in the leather chair in front of his desk.

“How’s the case going?” I asked.

It was Jimmy’s turn to shrug.

“I had a couple leads,” he said, “but they turned out to be dead ends. Nothing yet.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

“Me too,” he said forlornly.

He had recently taken up sleuthing again. Several museum pieces had gone

missing over the past six months or so, and he had taken it upon himself to find the culprit. Nothing overly valuable had been taken—a Native American jade necklace here, a New Guinean medicine bag there. A geode from Tropicalia, a tiny slab of a Roman temple—nothing big or expensive enough to alert outside authorities. He had become obsessed with solving these crimes. He knew that the burglaries occurred after-hours, so several nights a week he set up a tent in one of the exhibits, and stalked through the glass halls of stuffed animals, through Egyptian pyramids and ziggurats searching futilely for clues.

He figured it must be an inside job, perhaps one of the security guards—but he

didn’t rule out a tourist who somehow hid themselves away after closing. He told me he didn’t want the perpetrator punished. He simply wanted the thefts to stop, and for the antiquities to be returned. He wanted balance to be restored. I went out searching with him one night two weeks ago.

“Are you planning on sleuthing tonight?” I asked.

He picked up his pen and placed it between his teeth.

“I think so,” he said. “I brown-bagged it.”

He reached into his desk drawer and showed me the bag, believing for a moment

that I'm like him—which I need to see the evidence in order to believe anything.

“Care for some company?” I asked. “I didn't bring food, though.”

“Sure. I can share.”

I'd begun to suspect that Jimmy wasn't planning on ever catching the thief—

which he was content to camp out in the halls of the museum indefinitely. After all, he told me he had started this business a couple weeks after his longtime boyfriend left him.

He was aware of this connection. His powers of detection weren't lost on himself.

How Jimmy was able to camp out in one of the nation's most prestigious

museums was not because he slept with the night guard. Jimmy's father was a longtime friend of J. Pierce Halloran, the current Director of the Field. The two men had secured Jimmy an administrative job here as soon as he graduated from college. Jimmy could do pretty much whatever he wanted as long as he got his job done, and Jimmy was nothing if not meticulous. That's the way things work among North Shore families. I suspect that's how it works most places, too. A few years ago, Jimmy being gay would have caused his dad to disown him. These days, it was nothing. Practically a fashion statement.

He and I made plans to meet in the main hall thirty minutes after closing. I

wandered the museum for the remaining hour and a half. I went down to the basement and studied the stuffed Lions of Tsavo for a while. These two mane-less males had killed over a hundred people during the construction of an important railroad bridge in Africa around the turn of the last century. The natives called them The Ghost and The Darkness.

A famous white hunter, played by Michael Douglas in a movie, was hired to kill them.

Eventually he succeeded. This afternoon, in the near-deserted basement one hundred years later, the lions looked bloated and harmless, across the hall from the Field McDonalds. I closed my eyes and imagined them coming to life. Jimmy and me running for and through our lives through dark hallways, stalked by supernatural predators. The Kid Gumshoe and the Dolphin Swimmer, relying on our wits and our courage to get us out of this mess.

I opened my eyes, killed the notion. Those epic, cinematic thoughts were

dangerous for me. Soon I'd get an idea, and the idea would take over my brain, and I'd have to act out, and my months as an aquarium monk would be for naught. No, this was enough—camping with a former child detective in a museum, sleeping in an aquarium.

That was enough. It would have to be. I went upstairs.

If I wanted, I could hang out here every weekend with Jimmy. But he reminds me

too much of my old life on the North Shore. He's friends with my sister. Maybe he still talks to my

mom, I don't know. And honestly, he's a bit depressing. Melancholic, and he doesn't even know what he's sad about anymore. At least *I* know what brought me here.

But there he was. He wore his detecting blazer. He led me into an employee break room. I got a bag of chips and a Diet Coke from the machine, and I took a few bites from his sandwich. He's such a nice goddamn guy, I feel bad writing bad about him.

I helped him set up his tent in the Pacific Spirits exhibit. Ghostly wooden masks stared at us while we worked. He unrolled the sleeping bags, and I read a little description of war on New Guinea. Turns out their "wars" involved little actual violence. Armies met on battlefields and rattled their weapons and hurled insults at each other, but if someone was injured the battle usually ended right then and there.

Jimmy inspected the exhibits to make sure nothing had gone missing. I followed

him through primal jungles and ancient rituals into a depressing modern Philippines street scene. We emerged into a large room. On one side was a bizarrely placed collection of Holocaust pictures. On the other was a complete, hand-carved, 55-foot long Maori meetinghouse named Ruatēpūpūke, after the ancestor whose spirits supposedly still dwelled inside. We stepped inside and sat opposite each other on flat wooden benches. I tried to slow my metabolism enough to allow any roaming spirits free passage through my system.

Okay, so here's the truth. The first thing we talked about inside that sacred town hall was *Beverly Hills 90210*. I don't remember what triggered it exactly, but soon enough we were discussing Donna's real life soap opera with her mom withholding her dead dad's fortune from her. Then Jason Priestley somehow got thrown into the mix.

Then there was a silence.

Then Jimmy said, "Sometimes I think I didn't really crack those cases when I was a kid."

"What do you mean?" I said.

I tugged on the wood, tried to determine what family it was. Some sort of

hardwood, obviously, but that's as far as I got.

"I don't know," he said. "I've been thinking. Ten cases. In a row. None of them went unsolved. Someone must have been helping me. The cops, maybe. Maybe my parents."

"Why do you say that?"

He cocked his head.

"In real life, in adult life, clues aren't lying around for you to find. There's no trail to follow."

"Duh," I said, maybe a little insensitively. "That's why they call it reality. It's really freaking hard. You have to find your own path. You don't follow anything."

“Hmm,” he said. His head dropped to his hands.

“It’s not a big tragedy,” I said, trying to be consoling. “It’s just how it is.”

“Yep,” he said. “I’m just stuck.”

“I know the feeling.”

Jimmy knew where I lived. Of course he did. He picked up those clues pretty

damn quick. That’s why I took his expressions of self-doubt for a grain of salt. He was still good. I’m pretty sure one time he smelled saltwater on me after dismissing my cover story, and then after that he started asking me questions about what it was like at the Shedd after dark. He wanted to compare notes. He stayed out of my business for the most part. He rarely asked me anything uncomfortable. If he did, he’d tell by my tone, and he wouldn’t pursue it for long.

He wouldn’t let this one go.

He said, “When I remember the clues, they’re so goddamn obvious. Anyone could have figured out the stuff I did.”

“But anyone didn’t,” I said. “You did. No one else.”

He smiled weakly.

“What about right now? The trail is cold. Whoever this is, they don’t leave a trace.”

“Maybe you’re dealing with a higher class of criminal.”

His smile strengthened, and his game-face returned.

“Maybe.”

We inspected a few more exhibits. Nothing was missing. None of the security

guards seemed particularly suspicious. I opted not to go into the Pacific Northwest section with him. I was afraid the totem poles and outriggers would be too real for me to handle. I preferred my plaster bluffs and my plastic trees.

I waited for him back at the tent. When he returned, he dimmed the overhead

lights. He climbed inside the tent, and pulled a flashlight from his bag, and set it up in the netting up in the canvas ceiling. We shared a pillow and an iPod, and let the tribal masks and angry displaced ghosts swirl around us and influence our dreams.

Sunday blew by without incident. I slipped up into my grove during the last dolphin show of the

afternoon, while the crowd was entranced by a particularly spectacular trick. Jerry and Mary weren't working today. Most of the aquarists were on a ten-hour, four day a week schedule. I read a novel up there until the last of the crowd dissipated, and the divers had cleaned and inspected the tanks, and the overhead lights were dimmed. I climbed down for my night swim, and then went to sleep.

Monday wasn't so smooth.

Let me tell you how a typical day at the Shedd goes. We're divided between the

aquarists and the facilities people. The aquarists arrive at seven in the morning. They do their rounds to check the health and well being of every animal. They monitor the water levels and other environmental systems. The unlucky ones clean shit out of the mammals and birds' cages. Then they prepare the animals' meals for the day, and move the next day's food from the freezer to the fridge. Some of the mammals and the penguins receive their first meal of the day.

Most of us on the facilities day shift arrive a half-hour before opening at 9. We sell the tickets and merchandise and tell kids not to lean over the rails or bang on the glass. Pretty simple. We're usually done by 6 or 6:30.

Between 9 and 10, the aquarists prepare more meals. The belugas and dolphins

have their first training session at 9:30. At 11, the first dolphin show begins. The trainers change the order of behaviors and the roster of participating animals each day, to keep the shows interesting for the dolphins.

A handful of aquarists are veterinarians. There's a full animal hospital at the east end of the building, fully staffed and equipped to handle any type of emergency that might arise. They can perform surgery there if necessary. A little while ago, there was a big splash in the Chicago papers about Bubba, an ugly Queensland Grouper that was diagnosed with malignant tumors around its head. The Shedd doctors successfully performed chemotherapy treatments on Bubba, in a tub filled with anesthetic-treated water. Bubba died of natural causes a couple months before I was hired here. I read a eulogy on the front page of the *Tribune* written by an inspired cancer survivor.

The goddamn penguin windows have to be cleaned like five times a day. Yes, it's because they shit all over them. All the animals except the otters are fed by 2:30. Those otters are hungry little buggers. They eat all day long.

Water pumps, heaters, chillers, and filtration systems run twenty-four hours a day.

They're generally monitored and regulated by a computer. The facilities people watch the computer at night. That's why I can get away with what I get away with. They only send a human guard through the Oceanarium every couple hours, and only to make sure the animals are okay. Privacy is important for dolphins. I suppose I intrude on that privacy, but you couldn't tell by looking at them, or riding them, that they mind.

Lots of times the Shedd hosts corporate events and private parties in the evening, after the aquarium closes to the public. There's a another facilities crew that works these things, but sometimes we in the day shift are asked to work them, for overtime pay of course. I'm working one on Wednesday.

There's a whole other community of workers that I rarely see. The Scientists use a different entrance from the rest of us. They spend most of their time sequestered in the narrow maze of labs and offices behind and above and below the exhibits. Every once in a while I'll glimpse a white lab coat fluttering along a catwalk, or see a woman with serious glasses and a clipboard supervising the removal of an animal from a tank. But other than that, they're the ghosts of the aquarium. They have no need to mix with us proles. They have Important Work to do. What that work or research is, I have absolutely no idea, and neither does anyone else I ask.

Monday was a little warmer, but it was still raining outside. I believe it's rained for at least part of the day every single day for the past two weeks. I was getting tired of it, and I was a little cranky to begin. I didn't talk to Ken or Cassie at all. They're nice people.

They've never done or said anything to piss me off, which is more than I can say for some other people in this building. I didn't want to snap at them, so I didn't speak for most of the morning.

Mondays are usually the slowest day, thank God. I had maybe ten customers who

bought anything all morning. Bev was AWOL so I took a ninety-minute lunch break; half of it spent humiliating four different challengers at the Foos table. That cheered me up a bit.

Toward the end, Jerry and Mary came in. Mary was curious about Friday night. I

told her I found out that I wasn't interested in Shields (she liked my nickname for him), and I was tired, so I went home. She asked me where I live, and I said up in Ravenswood, around Damen. I told her it was a quiet neighborhood, and I liked the feeling of working in the busy city and going home to what felt like a small town. I dread the day when someone tells me they live near me, and I must improvise beyond my ability. Mary changed the subject and started talking about how the weekend trainers had messed something up in the dolphin roster. Sunshine and Tulip were skittish today as a result.

The dolphins' names are as cheesy as their show, which is another reason I refuse to acknowledge them by name when I swim with them. There is no language for what their true names should be. At least not a language we can understand.

I half-listened to Mary for another five minutes, and then I excused myself. I'm so done with Mary.

I don't know why I write all this boring stuff, the in-between stuff, and the stuff I want to forget as soon as it happens. I think maybe something's changing inside of me. I think that's why I'm writing any of this at all. I'm afraid soon I won't be able to pass over all these boring details of life. I'm afraid they will become too numerous and they will start to burn as brightly and more urgently as the moments I design. They're becoming less and less trivial. They're building to something, leading me somewhere. Something has to give. Something big and dark is rising to the surface. So many metaphors. I walk around half the time these days with my teeth clenched, determined not to let it out.

She flowed in with the rest of the 4 o'clock rush. A long line of tourists twisted around the counter, arms full of trinkets and t-shirts. I've given up on finding rhyme or reason for most of these purchases. Cassie had left for the day for a doctor's visit. Ken was restocking. I could call him over, but I thought I could handle it myself.

A tree frog picture frame slid across the counter toward me. I picked it up and scanned the bar code.

“\$16.74,” I said, and looked up.

There she was. My sister Kate. I hadn’t seen her in three years. She lived in

Chicago, I knew that much. The City could be both pleasantly small, and conveniently huge, depending on the circles you ran in. I had no circles to speak of at all these days. I thought I’d seen her on the El a year ago, but I’d quickly lowered my head and got off on the next stop, so I’d never been sure. I switched lines after that.

She was lightly made-up, her blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a

white blouse under a gray business jacket, and a knee-length skirt. She stared at me. I had no choice. I stared back.

“Hi, Claire,” she said flatly.

“Hi, Katie. That’ll be \$16.74.”

She tightened and twisted her lips, and pulled her purse around and set it on the counter.

“Jimmy?” I said, watching her fumble for her wallet.

That bastard. He’d ratted me out. I deduced from her business clothes and the

time of day that she had left work and come here on the spur of the moment. I didn’t even know what she did for a living. I’m sure she didn’t come here to satisfy an urgent need for a tree frog frame. He must have talked to her. Why today, and not anytime in the last few months, I didn’t know.

“He told me you worked here.”

I didn’t say anything. She handed me a twenty. I noticed an engagement ring.

“And?” I said cruelly.

I took her money. I looked down at the register, counted out her change. I handed her the bills and coins and her receipt without making eye contact.

“Would you like a bag?”

“No thanks,” she said.

A pause, and then, “How are you doing, Claire?”

“There are other people in line,” I said. “You’ll have to step aside.”

She stared at me for a couple seconds, shook her head slightly, and then stepped aside. She didn’t leave.

“What’s wrong with you? What’s between us? What did I do to you?” she asked,

as I rang up a stuffed iguana.

I rolled my eyes and scoffed. But honestly, at that moment I couldn’t remember a single reason. I had no choice but to soften.

I turned to her and asked as genuinely as I could, “Who’s the lucky guy?”

I pointed at her ring.

She touched it lightly with her other thumb and forefinger and a smile came and went.

“We want to invite you over for dinner,” she said.

“Thank you,” I said to the mom and kid with the plush toy. “Have a good day.”

Katie threw her wallet back in her purse and zipped it angrily.

“Fine,” she said. “I can see—“

“When?” I said.

She slung her purse over her shoulder. It was a Gucci.

“Wednesday?”

“I can’t. I’m working an event here.”

“How about tomorrow then?”

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay?”

I nodded, and rang up another customer.

“Good,” she said. She grabbed a shark pen from the plastic holder marked \$4.99

and scribbled down her address on the back of her receipt. She handed it to me.

“It’s four blocks from the Addison red line stop,” she said.

“Got it,” I said.

“It’s good to see you again,” she said.

She left before I could even think if I wanted to reply to that or not.

I rode the brown line up to Ravenswood after work on Tuesday. This was where I believe I’d live if I

was happy and well adjusted. I like walking past the neat rows of two and three-flats. I like watching the couples out on there sundecks and wide porches. I like the tiny well-kept yards and gardens, especially the one on Leland with the little pond and the waterfalls and rocks and goldfish and the bullfrog on a rope-swing hanging from a tree branch. I like walking past the golf club factory because seriously, who puts one of those in a neighborhood like this? I like the big mural on the side of the Lincoln Square store depicting an idyllic Bavarian village. I like the quaint shops, and the little movie theater and the Book Cellar. And the Square itself where the families bring their kids to run around like wild animals. I used to come up here a lot before I moved into the

Oceanarium. This was the other option. I wasn't ready. Not last October.

I showed up to their condo further south an hour later with a Dominick's

cheesecake. That's what you're supposed to bring when you've been invited to dinner at your long-lost sister's condo, right?

She and her fiancée lived up on the twenty-second floor of one of the Lake Shore Drive condos. I signed in at the front desk. The concierge checked my name off a list and pointed me to the elevator.

Katie's fiancée answered the door. The smell of roasting red sauce wafted out into the hall.

"Welcome," he said. "I'm Mark."

"Claire," I said. "Hi. Here."

I handed him the cake.

"Thank you. Katie's in the kitchen."

He looked like a Mark. I'm sure he used to play football back in the day. He stood about six foot, had a pair of guns on him, and short brown curly hair, dark brown eyes.

He was quite handsome, I'll give Katie that much. He looked at least five years older than her.

I stepped inside. He swept his arm across the living room.

"Here it is," he said.

I wondered how many times he'd introduced his home, and how proud he was

each time. Was there a sense of diminishing returns, or did he love it more each and every time? And what about my sister? I couldn't help thinking this man, this stranger must have met my mother.

The place wasn't huge, but it was as nice as you could expect from a pair of

wealthy young yuppies. There were a couple leather couches, and a big-screen TV above a fake fireplace. A sliding glass door led out to the balcony, which overlooked the lake. I saw two doors, which presumably led to the bedroom and the bathroom. My sister leaned out from the kitchen.

“Hi Claire,” she said. “Just a second. I just have to put some garlic bread in, and then we’re just about ready.”

I heard the creaking of the oven door. Mark and I stood awkwardly a few feet apart.

“So you work at the Shedd?” he said.

“Yep.”

“Cool. You going to school?”

I shook my head.

“What do you do?”

“I’m a trader.”

“Down in the Loop?”

“Yep. Madison and Dearborn.”

“You like it?”

“I love it.”

“That’s good,” I said.

“Have a seat,” he said, and crossed the room. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Sure,” I said.

I sank down into a couch.

Blah, blah.

He went into the kitchen, and Katie came out. They kissed each other on the

cheek as they passed. She wore tight little Aguilera jeans and a plain blue tank top and flats. Her hair was down.

She stood awkwardly in front of me for a minute. Then I stood up, and she

wrapped her arms around me.

“Hi, little sister,” she said.

I mumbled something into her shoulder. Mark clinked some glasses around in the

kitchen.

“Hey Katie,” he called, “do you want to use the good silverware?”

“Yeah baby,” she said, pulling away from me.

She lowered her voice.

“He’s a great guy.”

“I’m happy for you,” I said.

Katie sat down on the couch. I followed her lead. Mark returned from the kitchen with two glasses of cold white wine. He handed them off and returned to the kitchen.

“He can only stay for dinner. It’s his best friend Danny’s birthday. They’re going over to Barleycorn up in Wrigleyville.”

“I see.”

“Mark, honey,” she called, “when you’re done with the table could you check on the bread and pull it out if it’s ready?”

“For sure,” he said jovially.

“How long have you been living here?” I asked.

“In Chicago or in the condo?”

“Both.”

“Let’s see. I moved back to Chicago the fall after I graduated, so that’d be um... a year and a half ago. Mark and I got this place like eight months ago. We got a pretty decent deal.”

“Where did you guys meet?”

“At a bar,” she said. “We had some mutual friends. Real glamorous, I know. That was almost two years ago.”

“It’s so good to see you,” she added, effectively killing my deflective small-talk routine.

I took what you might call a serious gulp of wine. “It’s good to see you, too,” I said when I came up for air.

She sat her glass down on a sandstone coaster on the coffee table. She tucked one leg beneath her body. Her toenails were flawlessly painted.

“I’ve missed you,” she said. “I’ve felt like a huge chunk of my life has been gone.”

I want to be your sister again. I tried looking you up a few times. You're a hard one to track down. Between you and Liz, I swear..."

"You don't see her much?"

My oldest sister Liz stayed behind in New York to go to school when we moved

out here to the North Shore. She took some boring job in Manhattan made a little less boring by the fact she worked in the Building That Disappeared. A couple years after the Disappearance she came out to Chicago. That's the last I'd heard from her.

Katie shook her head.

"She moved out to Colorado a couple months ago, I think," she said.

"Oh, that sucks."

"I never saw her when she was here, anyway. She and Mom apparently got into it and she split soon after. Anyway, how have *you* been?"

"I've been in some weird places," I said.

"What have you been doing? Where have you been?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but Mark cut me off. Good thing, too. I didn't

know what I would have said, but it probably would have been a rude wisecrack along the lines of "certainly not shacking up off Lakeshore with a day trader." Or maybe I did say it. I can't remember for sure.

"Looks like everything's ready," was what Mark said.

Katie was frowning so I probably did say it after all.

At dinner I learned everything I did and didn't want to know about their

relationship. Katie was a CPA at Monroe and Adams, LLC at Monroe and Adams Ave. in the Loop. So cute. Mark grew up in small town Ohio. He moved here five years ago. He knew the guys from The Black Keys in high school, and he and Katie's first official date was one of their shows. They went backstage together. Their wedding was tentatively scheduled for December. They were considering a Mexican beach ceremony.

"We'd really like you to be there," Katie said.

"Yeah," Mark added helpfully, like a lost but eager puppy dog.

"We'll see," I said. "It's a long way off."

“Not too long,” Mark said.

Katie squeezed his hand. They pecked lightly.

They asked me a lot of questions about my life. I was as vague and evasive as

possible without being overtly rude. I told them I’d found that college wasn’t for me, but that I planned to go back to the Northwest someday. I wasn’t sure if this was true or not, but it sounded okay. I told them I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life yet.

“Nothing wrong with that,” Mark said. “A little wandering, a little soul-searching never hurt anybody. It’s good for you.”

I let the cliché slide. He was my sister’s fiancée. He seemed like a nice guy. I could let a stupid comment or five go.

The lasagna was delicious. Katie apologized for the lack of a salad.

“I had to throw out all our spinach,” she said. “You heard about the latest e. coli outbreak on the news, right?”

I nodded.

“You can’t be too careful, that’s what I always say,” Mark said.

He was up to three clichés already.

He asked if we were ready for dessert. Neither of us were. He asked if we minded if he dug in. The cheesecake, he said, looked too delicious to pass up. He ate while Katie and I sipped our wine. When he was finished, he set down his fork and stretched.

“Well it was very nice to meet you, Claire, but I have to get going. I’m sorry.”

He stood up and shook my hand. He disappeared into the bathroom for a few

minutes, then came out to kiss Katie goodbye and apologized for not being able to stay to help clean up. Then he was gone.

Katie crossed the kitchen and turned on her stereo. A few guitar licks snarled out of the speakers, followed by a growly female voice.

“Is that Patti Smith?” I asked.

“Hell yeah,” Katie said.

She tossed her head back and forth a couple times like a dork.

“Come on,” I said, “you’re not *that* old.”

She smiled and waltzed across the room. I helped her load the dishes into the dishwasher, and put the pots and pans in the sink to soak. We went back to the living room.

Would this whole night be an image that would force itself into my memory without my consent?

I heard the CD tray rotate in the stereo. I couldn't believe she didn't rely solely on her iPod. Old holdout. Even I had a Shuffle. Bob Dylan started croaking.

"There we go," I said.

Katie sat down at the couch, and reached under the coffee table. She pulled out an Aladdin jewelry box. She bought that with her lifeguarding money during our family's last trip to Disney World. Dad died the following spring.

"I bet you don't use that for what you used to," I snickered.

She cocked her head and opened it up. She pulled out a perfectly rolled joint.

"I stand corrected," I said. "What are you still doing smoking pot in a place like this?"

"I'm not *that* old," she said and giggled like the old Katie, which was a good thing since I didn't know the new Katie.

She lit it, took two girly puffs, and passed it to me. I studied it for a second.

Someone told me you stop smoking bowls when you get your first real job. You can afford joints. I hit it, and passed it back to her.

"Your hair's still all curly and frizzy. I love it," she said. "I wish I could make mine do that."

"What album is this?" I asked through the smoke.

"*Street Legal*, I think."

"Isn't that one of his shitty ones?"

"Does this sound shitty to you?" she said in a high-pitched stoner voice.

I didn't answer yet. I'd wait and see. You had to be careful with Dylan. He's a trickster. He was Katie's favorite. I went to one of his concerts with Katie when I was sixteen. She was really into the Dead then, and she was immaculately stoned. Old man Dylan took the stage, and she shouted into my ear.

"God, just look at him. I want to run up there and just rape him!"

I laughed.

“What?” she said.

She tapped the ashes into a tray also pulled out from some hidden recess beneath the table.

“Nothing,” I said. “How’s Mom?”

She looked surprised.

“She’s okay,” she said. “She’s seeing some new guy. He teaches tennis lessons. I know, I know. I haven’t met him yet. She’s pretty much given up on seeing you again.

You broke her heart, you know.”

She stubbed out the roach.

“Mine too,” she added.

“That’s her fault,” I said. I crossed my arms against my chest.

“Do you really believe that?”

“Let’s not do this tonight, Katie.”

“Is there going to be another night? Or do I have to wait another four years?”

“Yes,” I said firmly. “Yes, I believe it.”

“Well what about me? What did I do to you? Why did you stop talking to me? We used to be so close.”

I just shook my head.

“I’m sorry, okay?” she said.

She leaned forward, started using her hands to emote.

She continued, “I’m sorry I wasn’t there when your friends died. I was in

Massachusetts. I’d started a new internship. I couldn’t leave. I’m sorry. I should have.

I’m sorry, okay? I should have come home. I should have been there for you. You’re my baby sister.”

I stared down at my drink.

“Thank you,” I said.

I wasn’t quite ready to hug, but I could tell she wanted it—one deeper than our greeting hug, one that meant reconciliation. I was almost there, but not yet. Warning lights went off in the corners of my eyes.

“Mom knew,” Katie said. “I talked to her on the phone after it happened. She told me that what happened was terrible and she felt so bad because it would damage you forever and she couldn’t do anything about it. She felt helpless. She said no matter what she said, no matter what she did, you’d become someone else. That night had changed who you were, and she couldn’t do anything about it.”

“Yeah well she never even tried,” I said.

There was a trace of venom in my voice. I couldn’t muster any more than that little bit. Not anymore.

“It was only a year since Dad died.”

“Neither did you.”

“I *did* fucking try, but you wouldn’t talk to me. Then you went off to college and I didn’t hear from you again.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’m sorry then.”

“Oh Claire, you don’t have to be sorry. I understand. I’m happy you’ve made it here. I’m happy I still recognize you. You don’t have to be sorry.”

“I should be sorry about lots of things,” I said.

I was ready now. I even made the first move, and she followed through. We wrapped our arms around each other. Tears filled my eyes for the first time in years. We stayed like that a while.

Eventually I pulled away. I wiped my eyes. I didn’t know what to say.

“Is Mom working?” was what I came up with.

“No,” Claire said.

She was crying harder than me.

“She should,” I said. “It makes you feel better.”

“She’s still zonked out on pills most of the time. She says she has headaches.”

My chest seized and I let out one more sob. That would be all. Done. I wiped the tears once more.

Katie picked up the wine bottle and refilled her glass.

“Do you want any more?”

“No thanks,” I said. “I have to get going soon.”

“To where? Back to the aquarium? Don’t. Stay here.”

My mouth dropped open.

“He told you that?”

“What? That you’re staying at the Shedd?”

“That asshole,” I muttered.

“Jimmy’s worried about you. I am, too. You can stay with us as long as you want.

I talked to Mark about it. You don’t have to go back there. You can stay here and figure things—”

“No no,” I said. “Seriously. I’m fine. You don’t understand. I don’t want to be a yuppie. I don’t want a football boyfriend and a high-rise condo. I’m exactly where I want to be.”

Which was true, and also not.

“Okay okay,” she said. “Calm down.”

“I have to go,” I said.

I stood up, set my glass down on the table.

“Thank you for dinner. It was great.”

“Claire, don’t. I’m just—”

“Good night, Katie,” I said. I picked up my bag, slung it over my shoulder, and headed for the door.

“It was good to see you,” I said. “I have to go. You know where to find me now.”

I would not cry again.

I kept Dean’s number folded up in my bag. I got off the El at Roosevelt and called him from the only pay phone around. It wouldn’t be long before pay phones disappeared completely in this portable age. People like me would be lost in the shuffle.

He let me in through a service entrance. I kept my head down and stormed past

him. He asked what was wrong. I told him to leave me alone. He backed off and followed at a safe distance to make sure I went back to my room. The dolphins were out in the big pool waiting for me, but I wasn’t in the mood. I climbed up to my perch, stared out at the lake a while, and yes, despite my promise to myself, I cried myself to sleep.

Turns out the after-hours event I signed up for was a major donor dinner. Lots of rich North Shorers. If I’d originally noticed this fact, I never would have signed up. If I saw someone I recognized, I’d be

out of there in a flash.

I had an hour between the end of my first shift and the beginning of the night

activities. I changed clothes in a bathroom and went into the lounge. I sat down at a table, and took out a piece of Shedd stationary. I composed a thank you/ apology note to my sister. I stared at the words for a minute, and then crumpled it up. I walked over to the trashcan. I hesitated. Then I laid it out on another table, flattened it, and folded it into quarters. I slid it into my back pocket.

I wore my uniform shirt, black slacks, and heels. Bad choice, considering I had to help set up the extra tables and chairs outside on the deck. Once people started arriving, I guided them to their seats. After dinner was served, but before the keynote speeches, I wandered around and answered any questions the donors might have about the exhibits.

I'd been told to direct them to one of the three aquarists on duty if they asked something I couldn't answer. Yeah, like that would happen.

There were probably two hundred guests. I'd say the average age was about 65.

Lots of pearls and gowns and suits.

During my break, I stood out on the balcony. I rested my elbows on the rails. I could only see the very edges of the easternmost buildings from my Oceanarium nest, but right here, a hundred yards west, is my favorite view of the Chicago skyline. During the daytime, the City is a grand, imposing monument to human accomplishment. You see the hard outlines of the skyscrapers, you hear the rumble of the trains, you feel the bustle of its inhabitants, and everything seems imbued with this tangible sense of mightiness and purpose. You feel that maybe this will be the one place still standing thousands of years from now. How can this fortress of concrete and steel ever fall?

But at night the City's different. It's sleek, sexy. Yet more vulnerable. From the museum campus, your eyes drift over the white sails of the boats in the Lake St. Harbor, past the rushing white lights on Lakeshore, to cascading towers of even more lights. The trains sound more distant than in the daytime. They hum instead of rumble. The people are non-existent. It's only the lights, and the dark shapes between them. I think about how many people live there, and yet how many hidden, dark spaces there are. Empty

churches, dark alleyways, abandoned warehouses. The thought of these unfilled spaces gets me excited. At the right hour, even the skyscrapers are vacant, their shadowy edges outlined by blinking red and green, waiting, ready to blast off into the stars. I will always have a home here somewhere.

Someone approached. She breathed smoke into the spring air. I glanced over. The first thing I noticed was her long platinum blond hair, which couldn't possibly be real.

She was thin, with a perky, also definitely unnatural chest. She wore a short purple dress that made her look like an upside-down tulip.

"Beautiful, huh," she said.

She waved her cigarette out over the impossibly perfect collection of shapes that some call the City.

I nodded. An inconsequential jazz band played quietly behind us.

“I used to work in one of those buildings years ago,” she said.

She took a long drag.

“But one night it disappeared. No one knows where it went. No one could

remember it, except those of us left behind. No one would listen to us. They said we were crazy. Ever heard anything like that before?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But not here in this City. This city is safe. You sure you’re not confused?”

I shook my head vigorously, subtly side-stepped a foot back from her.

“I’m Alena,” she said.

She stuck her hand out.

I was on duty, and I was here to please, so I had no choice but to take it. Her hand was surprisingly warm. Soft. She lingered there for a moment. I saw her face, beneath either the moonlight or the deck-lights, it was impossible to tell. I guessed she was in her forties, but she had clearly taken great pains to conceal that fact—between the boob job, and the hairstyle, and the generous amount of makeup. She was still quite pretty though, I could tell. She wore purple lipstick to match her dress.

“Claire,” I said, and pulled away, back to my original position.

“Thought so,” she said inexplicably. “That’s a beautiful name.”

“Thanks. I didn’t come up with it.”

She laughed. She flicked her cigarette out into the grass below. I frowned. She reached into her purse, pulled out her pack, and offered it to me.

“No thanks. I don’t smoke.”

“Good girl,” she said and took one for herself.

“You work here, right?”

She lit her smoke, and inhaled.

“Yep.”

“Thought so. Do you like it? I’d imagine it’d be wonderful. I love coming here.”

“It’s pretty fun,” I said.

“I simply adore the sea. I lived in Miami for five years. That’s where I met my husband, oh, fifteen years ago it must be now.”

She consciously or unconsciously wriggled her ring finger. An obscenely fat diamond sat atop it.

“He travels an awful lot. He’s gone now for the next three weeks. He’s a diplomat, to China, of all places. He’s from there originally, but he speaks perfect English. I wouldn’t have married him otherwise. I simply can’t stand accents. I don’t have the patience.”

“I see,” I said.

I waited for an opportunity to edge away. Break time’s over.

“I’ve never been there. He’s asked me to go a few times, but I say if he wants to send me on a vacation, buy me a ticket back to Miami, or Jamaica. Now *those* accents I can handle quite well, if you get my drift.”

“Right,” I said.

I laughed uncomfortably.

She studied her cigarette for a moment. Then she turned and faced me fully.

“You can touch me if you like,” she said. “Anywhere you want.”

I let go of the railing.

“What?”

She laughed.

“I’m kidding, honey. I know you’re on duty. I can wait.”

It was pretty safe to drop my professionalism at this point.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I said.

She reached out to touch my hair. I swiped her hand off.

She laughed again.

“Come on now,” she said. “You don’t have to be coy. My friend Sandy told me all about you. She said I might find you here. I’d like you to come up to my house in Glencoe. Like I said, my husband’s gone for three weeks, and he wouldn’t mind anyway.

How about this weekend? Tomorrow maybe? You could stay the whole weekend.”

“Lady—” I began.

“Alena.”

“Lady, I think you’ve got the wrong idea.”

“Oh, I don’t believe I do. You don’t have to answer now. You have to be a

professional, I realize that. But I know you want this. I’m twice as pretty as Sandra. You know it, I know it, and she knows it if she has any sense at all. But if you want, I could invite her over, too. We could make a party of it.”

I couldn’t bring myself to say anything at all. So this is what I’d become. She flicked her second cigarette away and dug into her purse. She produced a pen and a post-it note pad. She scribbled something down and handed it to me.

“Here’s my number,” she said. “Call me sometime tomorrow afternoon and let me

know what time you’ll be coming. If money’s what you’re holding out for, I’m sure that won’t be a problem.”

She leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. I didn’t resist. She spun around in her heels and pranced back to the party. I stood there a long time before deciding that I should probably get back to work.

I stationed myself as far away as possible, down in the basement at the Wild Reef exhibit. I’d been told to stay up around the Amazon Rising area, but fuck it. I needed distance, and the sound of waves.

My favorite exhibit in the entire aquarium is the wave pool. I could hear it as soon as I stepped off the elevator. It’s a 15x5’ open-air tank, filled with twisty rock formations.

A series of pumps propel waves over and across and through the rocks. The fish get thrashed around, probably wondering why they can’t get a calmer, more reasonable tank like their cousins. Or maybe they like it; maybe it makes them feel right at home. I can’t get myself too worked up about the feelings of fish. They have a three-second memory, for Christ’s sake, and barely any pain receptors. I’m more concerned with the waves.

Only two donors rode the elevator down with me. The speeches were scheduled to

start in a few minutes. These two were too mesmerized by the fake sky on the elevator ceiling to ask me anything stupid. The doors opened. I followed them out. The hallway curved right into the wave pool.

A dude whose nametag said “Marcus” was stationed there already. I clicked my tongue and strode up to him.

“Hey,” I said, “someone upstairs needs you upstairs. They need some help getting ready for the speeches. I’ll take over for you.”

He shrugged.

“Who am I supposed to go see?”

“Um, I don’t know her name. Heavy lady, real curly hair...”

“Oh, Deb,” he said. “Gotcha.”

I positioned myself in front of the wave tank. I gripped the sides of the tank and closed my eyes for a minute. The sounds of crashes, suction, and retreat almost made me forget that a rich middle-aged woman had asked me to go down on her for money.

Yes, I remembered Sandra. She was a month ago, at another one of these

functions. At the time, a weekend at a North Shore mansion sounded more appealing than a shelter or an El car.

I’d been fooling myself that any of my weekends out were about looking for love.

Alena up there had made sure that fact was perfectly clear. That dark something was still rising, and getting more and more massive as it approached the surface. I still had her number in my back pocket next to my apology.

I broke away from the tank, and entered the darkened tunnel of fake rubber coral that signified the start of the “Wild Reef,” Shedd’s own “diverse marine metropolis.” I passed orange and white king snappers, ugly-ass frogfish, beautiful but overexposed angelfish. Little Nemos, clownfish, tangs, butterfly fish. I rounded the bend and stepped into the twilight cove, which held the mid-sized predators like groupers, triggerfish, puffer fish, and those disgusting eels. I stopped to examine the dragon moray. As usual, just its polka-dotted head was peeking out from its lair. It had a pair of bumps on top of its head that looked like horns, thus its name. I stared past the eel, past the rocks, and through the other side of the tank I could see the menacing outlines of sharks.

Dean stood around the next corner, up against the glass again, in front of another freaking octopus display.

“Okay,” I said, “Seriously, what is it with you and the octo...puses? You’re starting to creep me out.”

He looked up, and smiled weakly. It was quite clear he had been crying recently.

“They possess an extraordinary intelligence,” he said. “But it’s a strange, alien intelligence we have little hope of ever understanding. It’s so frustrating.”

“Why?”

“For one thing, their life spans are usually only about three years, in captivity sometimes just a few months. Any progress we make in training or teaching them is lost so quickly. And reproduction is a cause of death. The males die a couple months after mating, and the females die shortly after giving birth because they refuse to eat while caring for their eggs. This one here is new. I don’t know him yet.”

I stood in front of the display, next to Dean. The octopus, like the eel, was peeking out from under a rock. It was covered with brown and white stripes.

“Him? You know he’s a him?”

“I can tell by the size. This one’s a mimic. The species was only discovered ten years ago. Before that, divers thought they were seeing other common animals the octopus was actually mimicking. See, it’s able to copy the movements and physical likeness such as flounders, sea snakes, and lionfish by twisting, flattening, and puffing up its body and tentacles. It’s really quite remarkable. I’ve seen footage of these guys in action.”

“Wow,” I said genuinely.

The octopus opened his beak. Dean tugged on his beard.

I asked, “Does this one have a name?”

“Probably, but I wouldn’t know. He’s new. Their beaks are the only solid part of their whole body. Did you know they have three hearts? If you ask me, that’s too many.”

“How do you know so much about them?” I asked.

“I studied them.”

“In school?”

“Well,” he said, “yes, but also here.”

“At the Shedd?”

“A long time ago,” he said.

He touched his right knuckle to the glass. The octopus inched forward. It opened and closed its beak. I wondered if it was trying to communicate, or something simpler, or more complex.

“You were a Scientist here?”

He straightened up. His face hardened.

“I *really* have to be going,” he said, echoing my words from Friday.

His words dripped with animosity and hurt. He turned on his heels and headed toward the shark tank.

“I’m sorry,” I said, once he was safely out of range.

The thing is, Dean never asked to sleep with me, or threatened me, or even flirted or came on to me. I initiated it. I did feel cornered, but he was just doing his job.

My second night in the aquarium, he spotted me. I heard him climbing up the

rocks, so I ducked behind a plastic tree on the opposite end of the little bluff. But all my stuff was out there, and he had heard me scrambling. He called out. I peeked my head around. I explained myself as best I could, and he listened and nodded, but I knew he was going to tell me I had to clear out. So I wrapped my arms around him, kissed him, and slept with him. Afterwards, he instructed me what I needed to do in order to keep a low profile. The next few days, he ignored me as he did his rounds. The following week, he called up to me, said he was here to check on me. I told him to come on up, and I did it again. This has been our arrangement ever since.

Back upstairs at the party, the speeches were going on. I'd missed the first one, given by the Shedd's president. Now a small Asian man stood behind the podium set up in the front of the entrance hall. A white video screen was set up behind him. The audience sat in folding chairs, stretching back along both sides of the Caribbean Reef.

Four additional rows of mostly empty chairs lined up in front of Amazon Rising. My cursory estimation told me that half of the donors had left after the dinner. I stood near the back. I leaned against the curved glass of the reef.

Thomas the Sea Turtle said, "What's up."

I picked up a flyer from an empty chair. I read the speaker's bio. He was Izumi Ishii, former head of dolphin hunting at Futo, Japan, the site of infamous, grisly mass slaughters of dolphins. I remember seeing a video on the Internet a couple years ago. The dolphins would cluster in this bay, and the fishermen would jump in the water and slice them open with knives. I remember the blood-red water, and the thrashing. Apparently, Mr. Ishii had since become an internationally famous spokesman for dolphin protection.

He had appeared on PBS's *Nature* program. His English wasn't too bad, but he read from a script. I felt safe up here, because I knew that Alena bitch wouldn't tolerate his accent for five minutes.

I'd arrived in the middle of a story about his transition to dolphin preservation.

"The screams of the dolphins pierced my soul, and invaded my dreams," was

actually the first sentence I heard upon entering the hall.

As if I deserved any less intense words.

Mr. Ishii had decided to re-commission his hunting vessel as a dolphin and whale watching boat. Dolphin hunting is a big deal in Japan, and his conversion attracted a lot of media attention on the day of his first dolphin-spotting cruise.

"The wind turned devilish and the sky turned lead gray," he read. "The hours

went by and by and we saw no dolphins. I had taken the boat out eight times over the past two weeks to decide on my route, and every single time, the dolphins had been all around. But today, on my big day, they had disappeared. I felt as if they were punishing me—as if they knew who I had been, and they spread the word to lay low to ensure my ruin. At three o'clock in the afternoon, I decided to turn

around. It was beginning to rain.

The passengers were grumbling and cold. I was tired, and saddened. The media on board were the only ones who were happy, as they now had an appealing tragedy to write. And then.... I'll let the image speak for itself.”

He pointed a clicker at a projector and smiled over his shoulder at the screen. I saw a shaky video shot of a wooden deck. The camera panned up and I saw a choppy blue sea against a gray sky. People chattered and pointed excitedly in the foreground. The cameraman walked to the edge of the bow, and lifted the lens above a woman's shoulder.

At that moment a big dark something rose to the surface. A colossal leviathan heaved itself out of the water and crashed down in an exultant fountain of froth. Its body disappeared, but its forked tail remained upright for one more majestic moment.

Ishii stepped back to the microphone.

“It was a sperm whale, straight out of the pages of Moby Dick. Sperm whales

were not normally found in those waters, especially not that time of year. Instead of bringing vengeance and doom like its literary counterpart brought Captain Ahab, this great beast brought me redemption. I could not help but wonder if it would have brought a different fortune if I had encountered it while I was still a hunter. Though I realize now it was a foolish thought, I also wondered if the dolphins had sent this gentle giant as an emissary or a sentry. They had a right to be wary around me. When the whale surfaced on the starboard side, I looked into its eye for the briefest of moments. I hoped it would recognize the joy in my own eye, and see the truth in my smile.”

On screen the camera jumped from port to starboard, bow to stern, to track the

whale. Ishii's passengers were applauding. I studied the boat. I admired its contours and smooth edges. When I was younger, I loved boats. I wondered if I would again. After all, the boat hadn't been what caused the accident. The authorities found the boat right away, in tip-top shape.

I wondered if Ishii's boat would be strong enough to protect me from my own

leviathan slowly rising up from the depths. Ishii was lucky. I, on the other hand, had no idea of my monster's intentions.

“So that was the miraculous story of my first voyage as a protector instead of a hunter. As I have already informed you, it was merely the first remarkable step in the long journey to end all these senseless slaughters. I thank you very much. You can find further information and donation boxes for my Foundation on the tables beside me. I will be pleased to speak with you individually. Have a good night, and remember—One day we might learn to communicate with dolphins, but until that day we must be their voice.

Thank you.”

On my way out, I left ten bucks and a quarter of a tear. I still refused to shed a full one.

The dolphins in my Oceanarium sensed my rediscovered love of them. They chattered away, their heads bobbing on the surface, waiting for me. I indulged. I wrapped my arms around their rubbery bodies and I pressed my head to their skin. I finally indulged my childhood dreams, this time without any forced mantras or pretense or reservation. I let them swim me around and around and around in a slow whirlpool I knew would bring me closer to my own leviathan. Let it come. I'm almost ready.

Dean didn't visit me the next night. He always came on Thursdays. So I went looking for him.

I found him down where I left him the night before, in Shark Alley. Most of the already dim lights were turned off. A sense of chilly foreboding crept up my spine as I made my way through the coral tunnel. I kept my eyes straight ahead. Sometimes when all the tourists and other stimuli were gone, the fish would stare at you. I don't care if they have loose wads of wires for brains, it's still creepy.

Finding Dean didn't help my nerves, either. He sat on the wooden bench in the center of the shark observation room. The only illumination came from inside the shark tank. Watery shadows and reflections crawled up and down Dean's bowed body.

"Hi," I said.

He sat up with a start, looked first at the sharks, and then turned toward me.

"Hi," he said hesitantly.

"You want some company?"

He shrugged.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," he said.

Shapes moved beneath me. I was standing atop the clear floor above the stingrays.

I jumped and scurried to the side. Hovering over stingrays had lost a lot of its appeal after the Crocodile Hunter's death. There were plans in the works to move them.

I crossed the room and sat down next to him. I gathered up my courage to look up at the monsters swimming in front of and above us.

"Tell me," I said. "Tell me what's wrong."

He shook his head.

"I'm sad, that's all. I'll get over it soon."

"Okay."

I considered putting my hand on his shoulder but thought better of it. I could feel for him to an extent,

and I would try to cheer him up, but he had brought this on himself.

He'd made that quite clear.

“So what you said the other day, about being a scientist here, was that true?”

He tugged at a bunch of gristly hairs on his jaw.

“I never said that,” he said.

“But is it true?”

He nodded slowly.

“Yeah, it's true.”

“When was this?”

“I tendered my resignation about eleven months ago. I'd been working there for five years. I loved it.”

“Then why'd you quit?”

He stood up, cracked his knuckles and walked to the glass. If I was to look at him, I'd also be forced to watch the sharks.

He said, “My wife is a scientist here, too. She specializes in mammalian research.

The otters were her babies, the cephalopods mine. Then we had our kids. Then I did what I did. One of us had to leave, and it was obvious who it should be.”

“And now you guard this place at night.”

He didn't respond. He knew what it looked like. He knew what it was.

The nine-foot sawfish swam past him—hands down the weirdest animal in this

aquarium, probably in the whole world. No creature outside of nightmares should have a chainsaw attached to its mouth.

Dean pulled a cigarette from his front pocket and lit it up right there in front of the shark tank. He put it to his lips and exhaled directly into the glass.

“How'd you get the job?” I asked. “Like, where'd you go to school?”

He twitched his head slightly, not quite believing I was continuing to pursue this line of questioning. Then he answered. I knew he would. He needed for someone to catch the words that were overflowing inside him.

“Seattle for undergrad, like you. What can I say, I was way into grunge in the

dishonest way lots of North Shore kids are. But I stuck it out. I crossed the country to Yale for grad school. After graduation, I applied for a six-month position on the *Coral Reef II*, the Shedd’s research vessel in the Caribbean. I got it. So there’s your answer.

Well, not all of it. My mom’s maiden name was Shedd—John Shedd’s granddaughter.”

“No shit?” I said.

I wasn’t surprised. Patronage is the name of the game in Chicago.

“I met her early on at Yale. She was in my Invertebrate Physiology class, the one that made me want to study cephalopods. The first time I saw her she wore boots and a plaid skirt and adorable red glasses. She was there on scholarship. She worked for everything she got. She thought I was a spoiled rich kid, and of course I was, and it took a year to convince her I could be more. You know the story. I fended off other more worthy suitors. Somehow I convinced her to fall in love with me. Through my family’s connections, I secured for her the other spot on the *Coral Reef*. I didn’t tell her this. She would have never forgiven me. She had a strong sense of honor. They’d already accepted me because of my family, and they wouldn’t have considered another Yalee. I shouldn’t have done it. It was my first lie to her. But I thought I might lose her if we were separated for that long. I proposed to her during our last month on board. We were married the following May. Our first five years were wonderful. I was in heaven, I couldn’t have asked for anything more, but I did.”

He had forgotten about the cigarette. He held it limply at his side. A chunk of ash dropped to the floor.

“Why?” is all I said.

He dropped down to a squatting position. He finally glanced at his cig, and took a last drag. He squeezed out the ash and pushed it into the crack between the carpeting and the glass with his foot.

“I have no fucking clue,” he said. “Because I’m a spoiled rich kid. Because I

believed I’d never get caught. Because I was a horny asshole. Because I was impatient.

None of those reasons are true, except maybe the third one. Because I was an idiot. I have no fucking clue.”

“Who was she?”

“My wife was out on maternity leave with our daughter. I’d been working late

hours. We’d just gotten Bobby Farentino from Baja the month before Elizabeth was born.

He was different than the other octopuses I’d studied here. He passed all the standard intelligence tests in no time flat. He solved food puzzles and mazes. He opened a specially designed safe within ten minutes. And he was more personable and friendly than any octopus could be expected to be. The thing was, he’d only respond to me. He ignored the other scientists and the research assistants.

“The night it happened, I was working on a paper with Ann Marie, an intern from Northwestern. We heard a noise from the direction of Bobby’s tank. You’ve heard those stories about octopuses figuring out how to unlatch their tanks, and crawling across the floor to get into another tank? I’d been terrified of that happening, considering how intelligent he appeared to me. So we dashed over to his tank, and there he was, his eye peeking over the edge of his open lid. The floor was covered with wet pebbles. He stared right at us, and he lifted an arm out of the tank and tossed out some more pebbles. It was like he was saying, ‘Yeah, what’s next?’

“And then I kissed her, Ann Marie. I didn’t stop kissing her for three weeks.

Predictably enough, I called it off the week before my wife was supposed to return. Ann Marie left a note for my wife her last day before going back to school. And that was that.

See, I don’t have any explanations. Nothing makes any sense. I threw it all away. For nothing. I don’t have any excuses, or even any reasons. I did it because an octopus proved himself smarter than I could have expected? And then I got lecherous and fucked my assistant? What the hell is that? It doesn’t make any goddamned sense. In a million years it still won’t make any sense.”

He ran his hand up and down the back of his neck. He bit his lip.

“It was for the best, I suppose. It pointed clearly to deep-seeded issues I still haven’t explored. They would have come out later in even more painful and destructive ways. I wish it would have happened earlier, before I had a happy marriage and two kids.

Before I destroyed three other lives in addition to my own.”

I let him talk and talk and talk without interruption. Confessors don’t need prodding.

“I’m sorry I slept with you,” he said.

“*I* slept with *you*,” I said.

“Come on,” he said. “We both know what was implied. I’ll leave you be for now on. I’ll guard you and protect you, but that’s all. That’s what I’m supposed to be doing here, anyway.”

“I’m fine,” I said.

The sharks swam in brainless circles, killing machines robbed of their only purpose.

“What are you doing here?” Dean asked.

“Jesus,” I said. “I just wanted to see what’s wrong.”

“Sorry, no, I meant what are you doing living here? You’re a smart, pretty girl.

You shouldn't be here."

"Everyone's telling me that," I said.

He better not turn this around on me.

"What if I like it here?"

"Did you dream about this place when you were a kid? Did you dream of swimming with dolphins?"

"Shut up please."

"I've watched you with them. They respond to you, they even seem to like you, like Bobby used to respond to me. You have a gift. You should do more with that gift."

"What? Be like *you*?" I said, beginning to seethe.

"No," he said, and then he wouldn't say anything more.

"Is it getting any better?" I asked, after a while. "Is it getting any easier?"

"Ha. Let me tell you what I did yesterday. You tell *me*. I got home from work at eight in the morning, which is usually dinnertime for me. I closed all the blinds, and I downed two white Russians in ten minutes. Then I sat in front of the TV for two hours and watched Regis and Kelly and Judge Judy. And then you know what I did? I watched The People's Court and Judge Joe Brown. Then I had another white Russian. While I was up, I switched channels. A rerun of that reality TV show 'Hell's Kitchen' was on. I watched that cranky British asshole yell at his cooks for fifteen minutes until he challenged them to make a chicken, spinach, and shrimp dish. They had half an hour to do it. That was the only motivation I had to make myself something to eat. So I raced against the TV to see if I could make noodles and Ragu in the time allotted. I lost by 5

minutes. I ate, had another drink, and passed out on the couch with my contacts still in."

"So you're like every other American then," I said.

I had expected a smile, or at least an acknowledgement of my awesome joke.

Instead, he tugged on the hairs on his head with one hand and the hairs on his beard with the other, as if he were trying to pull his face apart.

"The nights I make it to my bedroom, I still sleep all the way over on the left side of my twin bed. Sometimes I wake up and a leg and an arm are hanging off into empty air. I still feel the weight of her pressing against my back when I'm asleep. I'm naturally disorganized and messy, but even in my drunken despair, I still try to put all my glasses in the sink before I go to bed so her cats won't knock them over. These old habits of mine are dying hard, kicking and screaming."

He was practically laying against the glass now. His arms spread out above his

head, his body slumped. There was no intimacy like there had been with the octopus. He looked like he wanted the glass and its inhabitants to swallow him whole. I thought a change of subject might help him. Also, I wanted an answer.

“What am I supposed to do with this gift of mine?” I asked.

I heard the back of his head clink against the glass as he turned his head.

“I don’t know. Go back to school. Apply for an aquarist job here. Anything. Or maybe you’re happy doing what you’re doing. If so, more power to you.”

He turned his head back to the glass. His nose was squished up.

“I’m going back upstairs,” I said.

Enough words had been exchanged for me to walk up to him and finally set my hand on his shoulder. He tensed, and then let out a breath that fogged around the glass.

“I’m not going to have sex with you anymore,” I whispered, “but if you need someone to lie down next to, I’ll be there. I like to sleep on the right side.”

“I just don’t want my son to turn out like me. My soul is tiny.”

“Goodnight,” I said. “You can’t let your past beat up on you forever.”

Right?

They only sent the calf out to swim with me tonight. I suppose I should be honored for the amount of trust they place in me. I babysat, while the adults fought or mated in the private tank. The baby’s name was Willy, which was one reason I refused to learn the rest of their names. I’m certain Jerry and Mary were behind that name. They thought it was both clever and cute. It was neither.

But the baby sure was, separate from its name. Energetic, too. He wore me out

within fifteen minutes. The first time I tried to climb out, he clamped his jaws gently but firmly on my foot. I indulged him five more minutes of a cetacean version of tag. It involved lots of whistling and jumping and nudging with his snout on his part, and a lot of hopeless flailing around on mine. He thought it was hilarious. I told him in a low, firm whisper that I had to leave. He let me go this time, but he chattered away behind me.

Dean stood in the bleachers, watching me. When I spotted him, he waved and

attempted a smile. He was soaked. I ran a towel through my hair and wrapped it around my waist. I rounded the pool.

“What’s up,” I said when I got close.

He clicked his tongue, but didn’t say anything.

I climbed a few steps and stood two rows beneath him.

“Why are you all wet?”

He sat down.

I was in a relatively good mood. I shared my pride.

“I just swam with dolphins. What’s your excuse?”

I shifted on the sides of my feet. I can’t stand the feel of wet feet slapping on concrete or linoleum. I balance on the sides and heels until I’m dry.

“I just swam with the sharks,” he said.

His eyes were glassy, lifeless.

“What?”

I’d done a bad job wrapping the towel before. I caught it before it fell, tried again.

“I broke in there, and I jumped in, but they ignored me. They weren’t interested. I offered myself to them, but they wouldn’t have me. Not a one. They were full.”

His eyes burst. Tears poured freely down his face.

I let the towel fall.

“Dean,” I said, using his name for the first time.

I pulled his head into my stomach. I ran my fingers through his wet hair.

“Dean, Dean, Dean...”

I was at a loss. What else can you do for a broken man who tries to let sharks tear the flesh from his bones? He’s a marine scientist. He knew they wouldn’t have attacked him—not being so well fed. But he’d still tried. What to do with a man like this.

“Come on,” I said.

I tugged at his elbows, made him stand up.

“Come with me.”

He followed me up to the rocks. He walked to the east edge and cried quietly. He watched the otters sleep in their cage below.

I pulled the blanket and pillow from their hiding place behind a tree. I unrolled the blanket and set the pillow on top. I took his hand, and pulled him down to the blanket. He laid on his side. I spooned him with one arm, and ran my fingers up and down his back.

He trembled.

“Shhh,” I whispered in his ear. “Shhh. Pretend I’m who you want me to be. I

forgive you, I love you, and you’re home again. I forgive you, I love you, and you’re home. I forgive you, I love you, you’re home...”

I repeated this lullaby until he stopped shaking, and I was sure he was asleep. I followed soon after.

During my lunch break, I borrowed Ken’s cell phone and called the number Alena gave me. I told her I’d come up there tonight, but I needed her to pay for a cab ride. She asked if I wanted to invite Sandra. I said no, I want to keep it personal. I told her I’d be there around 7:00.

The mercury had steadily climbed all week. The high today was 75, and the sun

was out most of the day. I noticed today the reappearance of a multitude of shorts and skirts and flip-flops. The small talk at the gift shop counter had revolved around the weather even more than usual.

Cabs always line up on the boulevard in front of the Field throughout the

afternoon. There was one left when I got off. I read the driver the address Alena told me.

Traffic was smooth for a Friday evening. I tried to enjoy the cab ride along

Lakeshore. North Avenue Beach was pretty crowded, but only a few brave and stupid souls had ventured into the freezing water. The volleyball courts were set up and the concession stand had opened. Most of the people stood around, looking slightly dazed.

They didn’t remember what to do with themselves out here. This winter had been a particularly long one, even by Chicago standards.

Lakeshore ended and we followed the twisting course of Sheridan Road up

through Roscoe Village and into Evanston, toward Ferris Buehler and Breakfast Club Land. I knew this route intimately. My absolute favorite part of the drive came right after the sign for Evanston. The road curved as we rounded the point. On my left was an immense cemetery, and to my right a wide, limitless view of the lake. I closed my eyes and imagined the souls rising from their graves, soaring out above the waters, into the great unknown.

The Northwestern campus wasn’t as deserted as I would have expected. The

spring semester had ended last week. Still, students lined the sidewalk along Sheridan, carrying books and bags but very few troubles. I felt a tinge of jealousy for a moment, along with a small but

unexpected dose of longing and nostalgia for a life of which I'd deprived myself.

We passed Kenilworth and Wilmette, and drove through the Ravines between

Winnetka and Glencoe. My heart thumped as we passed the house that marked the hidden entrance to Pretty Beach. A bunch of old memories rushed at me, and then shot right on past.

The trees began to outnumber buildings. The vehicles on the road became bigger

and newer. The homes too were larger but older, and made only of the cleanest cut stone, the most premium lumber, and the smoothest glass. They revealed their grandeur

cautiously, peeking out between spindly branches, at the end of long gravel driveways; afraid of being called out.

Alena lived in Glencoe, half a mile past the Ravines, four blocks off of Sheridan.

Her, or should I say her husband's, house was unsurprisingly massive. Its exterior was constructed entirely of a blue wood which didn't look painted or stained, but as if a whole new species had been grown solely for the purpose of creating this rich suburban Chicago home. The driver pulled into the driveway. I told him to wait a minute while I ran inside.

I rang the doorbell. I heard footsteps. The door swung open. Alena stood there in a yellow t-shirt, short-shorts and heels. She managed to look both ridiculous, and a little hot in a kinky milf way, I'll give her that much.

"Hi," I said.

"Well hello there," she said.

I cleared my throat and pointed at the cab.

"Don't you worry," she said.

She stepped down to the porch and brushed by me. She dragged her freshly

manicured nails across my side as she passed. She clicked down the sidewalk carrying a fat wallet between her fingers.

I crossed the threshold and stepped inside. I didn't linger in the foyer. I walked all the way into the kitchen at the end of the hall. I rounded the table, and slid open the patio door. I stepped onto the deck made of that same blue wood. I paused for a moment, bent down, and felt its texture. It was rough, barely polished, indeed unstained. I stood and jogged down the stairs to the yard. A forest and a dirt path leading into it lay before me.

I heard clicking above me, followed shouting.

"Where are you going?" Alena shouted.

“Thank you for the cab!” I called over my shoulder.

I didn’t slow down. But I grinned.

“Get back here, you bitch!” she screamed.

She wasn’t about to run after me, not in those ridiculous heels.

I ducked beneath two low-hanging pines and entered the woods. The path sloped

into a shallow gully through which ran a small creek. Birds chirped above me, tree branches bent, and shook, and whipped up and down as squirrels chased each other across the canopy. This strip of forest was narrow; I could see the tips of houses beyond the trees on the other side of the creek. It was familiar. I knew this area. I stepped lightly across the creek. I followed it west. Abdicating sunlight sent shafts of its last-chance rays through the cracks between the trees, into the forest, across my face and chest, looking for a place to hide till morning. I tried to grasp one. I shoved it in my pocket.

I followed the creek past backyards, patios, and fences. Dogs barked as I passed. I came to a steel drainage pipe, which I knew ran beneath Warrington Road. I heard a car rumble across. The sound echoed through the pipe, poured down with the water, and splashed onto a pile of rocks. I wondered if they were the same rocks Katie and I piled up there to create a proper setting for the wedding uniting our two royal families of She-Ra and He-Man.

I gripped the edge of the pipe and stood there for a moment. Then I climbed out of the gully, out of the woods, onto the road. I shielded my eyes from the sun. It had turned mean—honing all its last beams precisely at my face, in these last desperate moments before it disappeared. I was no longer interested in saving it. I scooped my hand into my pocket and, just in case, flung out the sunlight I captured earlier.

I veered off Warrington to cut through backyards and driveways, and back across Sheridan. *No Outlet*, said the sign marking my old street. No kidding. I followed the road up above the Ravines. I passed the Johnsons’ place, and the house the Indian family moved into right before I went away to Seattle, and the Fitzpatricks’. My mom’s house dwarfed them all. It was only right then that I realized I had no idea if she still lived here.

I’d never asked my sister if she’d moved. Only one way to find out.

This was one house that had not surrendered to the trees. It rose above the highest of them. Ostensibly, it was a Cape Cod, but it stretched so far, the windows repeated so many times, that you were tired and disinterested by the time you looked from one end to the other. It was almost a hundred years old. Supposedly, some mob boss lived here in the sixties and seventies. My father had paid for it in cash, the year I was in second grade and he made all those acquisitions. I never truly knew exactly what he did for a living, besides the blanket title of *businessman*. I don’t think he was “connected” per se, except in a general sense to the elite who lived in this neighborhood. He came from a long North Shore line. The prodigal son had returned from the East.

The gutters were clogged with leaves from the preceding fall. The formerly bright red paint on the shutters was faded and peeling. Most of the gravel along the sidewalk had disappeared, leaving spots

of bare dirt. Yep, she was here.

My breath was gone. I hadn't even been running. I cut across the half-moon

driveway. I climbed up on the porch, doubled over, and took six deep breaths. My head swirled. I thought I might tip all the way over. I gripped the marble column, steadied myself, and stood up. I rang the doorbell.

The neighbor across the street came out her front door and unlocked her car with a remote. She saw me, stared and frowned.

Mrs. Fitzpatrick.

Shit. I quickly looked away.

"Is that you, Claire?" she asked.

I bit my lip and turned around with a smile.

"Hi, Mrs. Fitzpatrick!" I shouted enthusiastically.

"My my, I haven't seen you in years," she exclaimed.

She opened her car and grabbed a pack of smokes.

I heard no sounds inside the house. So I stepped off the porch, crossed the front yard and the street. There was a *For Sale* sign on the front lawn. I noticed Jimmy's car parked on the road.

"Hi," I said cheerily.

"All grown up," she said, shaking her head. Even in the fading twilight, she was so much older than I remembered.

"It appears that way," I said. "How have you been?"

"Oh you know, pretty good. Are you visiting?"

"Yep."

"What have you been up to?"

"This and that. I was in school in Seattle. I live in Chicago now."

I needed to switch subjects fast. I pointed at the sign.

"Are you guys moving?"

"Oh, yes. We put the house up last week. Howard wants to take a job in Maine."

"That's exciting," I said. "Jimmy's here?"

She nodded. Her necklace jingled. I leaned in for a better look.

Hoooooolllly shit.

It was a silver Egyptian scarab pendant on a gold chain.

“He came out for dinner tonight. Howard’s grilling steaks out back. If you want, I could tell him to throw on some more, and you can come on over.... Your mom, too. We haven’t seen her in a while, either.”

“Hmm,” I said. Then again, “Hmmm. Um, maybe. That might be nice. Did Jimmy give you that necklace, Mrs. Fitzpatrick?”

“Oh yes, isn’t it beautiful? He bought it from an Egyptologist who spoke at the Field. We’re so proud of him. After dinner, we’re going to bury some upside-down St.

Joseph statues in the yard underneath the *For Sale* sign. Jimmy’s idea, but I think it’s wonderful.”

“Quite wonderful,” I said. “Say, Mrs. Fitzpatrick, would you mind if I had a word with Jimmy real quick? Could you ask him to come out for a second?”

“Oh sure, sweetie. No problem at all. Can these,” she shook her cigarette pack,

“be our little secret?”

“Of course, Mrs. Fitzpatrick.”

I placed my finger on my lips and smiled.

“Wonderful, wonderful,” she said.

She pranced inside to get Jimmy.

She called over her shoulder, “Come on over if you’d like. Ring the bell. I should be able to hear it out back. It was good to see you, dear.”

“Same here.”

I stood there and shook my head a few times, kicked some pebbles. I opened and closed their mailbox.

That bastard.

Jimmy came out a minute later. He was all smiles.

I made sure I had my hands on my hips.

“Are you kidding me right now?”

“What,” he said.

“Don’t bullshit me,” I said. “Your mom’s necklace.”

His face literally fell. All of it drooped all at once. He stopped about eight feet from me.

“Oh,” he said.

“Yeah. Oh.”

“It’s not what you think.”

I had to laugh.

“It’s exactly what I think.”

“Well, maybe,” he said.

“What the hell, Jimmy?”

He chewed on his fingernail.

“I don’t really have an answer for you,” he said. “I got tired of trying to solve impossible crimes, trying to find impossible answers. So I created one myself, so I’d know the answer. That’s all I’ve got for you. I don’t really understand it myself.”

“What are you doing? Where are you at right now?”

He shrugged.

“You should probably ask yourself that first. And if you don’t come up with an answer, get back to me. Then you might understand.”

“You’re a mess, Jimmy,” I said. “You need to pull yourself together.”

He stared at me.

“Yeah, you’re doing pretty good, too.”

“Don’t get mean.”

“I’m sorry . *I am*. Let me give you some advice. You go into your house over there, you make nice with your mom, and you accept all the money and privilege you’re due to inherit. Use your family’s connections, use me. Take it all, use it all. This world’s too hard otherwise. There’s no trail of clues to follow”

“Thanks,” I said bitterly. “Tell your mom I like her necklace. Take care, Jimmy.

Goodnight.”

“Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not,” I said. “I’m not. I’ll see you soon. Goodnight.”

I turned back to my- to the house. The cicadas were out already, and their buzzing filled the twilight air. I rang the doorbell once more. I heard nothing inside. She must not be home. I tried the door, anyway. It swung open.

“Hello?” I called into the dark hallway. “Hello? It’s Claire!”

Nothing. I stepped inside, closed the door behind me. The grandfather clock with the cow and the moon loomed above me in the foyer, unwound and silent. One of my first memories is helping my dad down in the basement at our big house on Long Island piece together the clock from a kit he’d sent away for.

I entered the living room. My feet sank into the plush carpet. I pressed a couple notes on the piano. I crossed through the primary dining room (yes, there were two) into the kitchen. We had huge bay windows overlooking the bay.

Sitting in here years ago, sipping Kool-Aid, I’d made the decision that this wasn’t a lake at all. It couldn’t be, not if it had waves and tides and beaches and seagulls and you couldn’t see the other side. It was the sea.

I skipped the workout room and my dad’s office and the mudroom and laundry

room and the other dining room and all the other rooms I couldn’t recall now. I came to one of the three sets of stairs.

“Mom?” I called.

My voice echoed through the hall.

“Katie?” I heard faintly from somewhere upstairs.

I didn’t answer. I climbed the stairs. They still creaked in the same spots. She’d lived alone in this house for four years after most of her family became ghosts. I couldn’t imagine what she’d become.

The master bedroom was at the end of the hall. I flipped on the hall light. My

mom started talking before I got there.

“I haven’t gotten a chance to go over your invitation list yet. I’ve had a migraine the past two days. I needed rest. I’ve been in bed all day, and it won’t go away....”

I opened the linen closet for a second, just so I could get a whiff to see if it still smelled the same. It did. I came to her doorway. The TV was flickering, but silent. I leaned in around the corner.

“Hi, Mom.”

A pile of covers rustled. My mom's head peeked out. She stared at me a good ten seconds before I registered enough for her to respond with a simple, "Claire."

"It's me," I said. "I'm home."

But I knew I wasn't, and I never would be again. Not here, not with her. It was too late for any of that. I knew this, but I was still willing to go through the motions, give it the ole college try, see what would happen.

Leaves slapped against the window. The sun was down. I approached the foot of the bed, and I sat down on the edge.

"Look at you," she said.

"Look at me." I smiled.

She pushed herself up on her elbows and then propped herself against the headboard. Her blankets bunched up around her knees. Her hair was messy, but I couldn't see her very clearly in this darkness punctuated only by dim TV light.

"But I can't really," she said.

"Can't what?"

"I can't look at you very well. I have red spots swimming around in my eyes. A migraine."

"Did you take anything?" I asked.

She'd had problems with migraine drugs in the past. She got headaches once or twice a week. The migraines adapted to each new drug after only a few doses.

"Just a Xanax and Tylenol," she said. "Nothing works anymore."

I would have cried if I hadn't used up all my allotted tears already the past couple days. Instead, I reached over and patted the top of her foot through the covers.

"I came here to tell you I'm in the City, and I'm sorry I disappeared for so long. I know you must have been worried about me. I don't hold anything against you. Those days were hard on everyone. I'm sorry I left you here."

"You're a good girl," she said, her voice wavering.

She cleared her throat.

“A strong girl.”

I didn't say anything, and neither did she. I couldn't tell if she was looking at me, or beyond me. She rested her head against the backboard.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “It's just this headache. I can't concentrate. Maybe you could come back tomorrow? That would be nice, huh? Maybe I can make you a nice

meal, like before. Maybe tomorrow? Or maybe the next day? I should be feeling well by Monday for sure...”

I don't know if she kept talking. I stopped listening. I sighed. I stood up. I

rounded the bed, and I leaned in over her, and I pulled her away from the headboard, brought her to my chest, and wrapped myself around her. I buried my head in her shoulder. Whichever tears managed to escape, I'd bury into her nightgown. She hugged me back.

“I'm sorry,” I whispered. “Katie knows how to reach me.”

I pulled away. She sank back down into her pillows.

“Maybe you'll come back on Wednesday? You could meet Ed then...”

“I love you, Mom,” I said. “Can I get you anything before I go?”

“Just turn the hall light off, please.”

She pulled the covers up to her chin.

“I wish I could see you better.”

“I do too, mom. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Claire.”

I thought about my father the whole way out of the house. I tried to remember the way he walked, the sound of his laugh, the way his hand felt on mine. It wasn't as hard as I expected. He still wandered this house. He'd been to Vietnam. In war he was a lion, and at home he was a lamb. But from what I hear he considered his work a form of war.

Absurdly, he loved Disney World. That's where he and mom got engaged. He was a good man, and now he's gone.

I went out the back door. I leaned on the rail of the deck for a moment. I

pretended to smell the salty sea air I knew must be there. The stars were beginning to come out. I looked up and down the coast. So freaking beautiful. The city, though less than ten miles away, was nowhere in sight. There was the jagged coast, the trees, the bluffs and ravines, and the tops of houses like this one peeking out tentatively.

I went down to the yard. I passed my dad's work shed, and the long-empty dog

pen. Even in the dark, I could find the trail down to the beach. I emerged onto the soft sand a thousand feet north of Tower Road Beach. The moon wasn't out yet. A wind had picked up since the sun went down. The waves came rolling in almost as loudly as in the tank at the Shedd. I could see far more stars than anywhere in the city. A cargo ship cruised across the horizon.

I removed my clothes and slipped into the surf. I only went waist-deep. This was the first time I'd touched the water since the accident. It wasn't so bad. Freezing cold, but not so bad. I could see no monsters, nor feel any evil. I turned back to shore, shook myself dry, and put my clothes back on. I curled up in the sand, drawing my knees to my chest to warm up.

I'd only been to three beach parties, not counting family barbecues and reunions.

None of the parties were here, or at the public Tower. They'd been down at Pretty Beach, but Pretty Beach was so secluded I didn't think I'd be able to find it in the dark after so many years. I'd have to be content with my reverie here. I'd gotten drunk for the first time, at the last beach party, mere weeks before the accident. That's where I met Rob. I never knew him all that well. His family was friends with Jenny's family—Jewish doctors and lawyers, the lot of them. He was tall and handsome with black curly hair. He didn't talk much, but when he did it was always funny or profound or sweet, at least always during the three weeks I knew him. The Bennetts and Jenny's family co-owned the boat we took out that night. The tragedy was doubled and tripled for them. I was a remainder. No one was emotionally available to carry me. I'd spent the last few years carrying myself, looking vaguely for a number willing to be rounded up.

I only went to three beach parties because until I turned seventeen I was quite happy to spend weekends with my family, or in my room reading fantasy novels about sorceresses and talking dolphins, listening to Disney soundtracks. I had a small case of arrested development there for a while. These last few foolish years should have come during high school.

I got to my feet and got to walking. Nowhere to go but South, and the City.

Walking with and without a purpose. Walking down the sand and in the surf and up on rocks and grass and concrete. Walking down the road, and around the bend. Walking till I was out of sight. Walking through my past and in the present, and toward my future.

A deep thumping drumbeat reverberated up the shore from the east Loop. I wondered if the apocalypse had come early. Right before I recognized the rhythm, and remembered the melody, and began to sing, I saw the throngs of people congregating in Grant Park. I saw the stages and the video screens, and then I did sing along.

A group of college kids walked toward me. They'd come from the park. The girls

in the group ignored me and chattered away. A couple of the guys craned their heads to look at me. All the guys were clad in summer bro uniforms—bare-chested, their shirts hanging on their belt loops, backwards baseball caps representing the team from each of their city of origin, hemp and shark-tooth necklaces given to them by their high-school hippy girlfriend they'd never forget, or purchased on a sweet spring break trip to Panama City, man.

“Who’s playing?” I asked.

I knew if they turned around, I’d see little frat-tats on their shoulders.

Two of the Bros stopped.

One of them, distinguishable from his friend only by the symbol on his hat, said,

“Uh, I think Secret Machines are up on one stage, and Arcade Fire’s coming up on another. I don’t know, we just saw Fallout Boy.”

“Whoa,” I said, “Who’s headlining?”

KC shrugged. His eyes were as red as his neck. Real men don’t wear sunscreen.

“There’s a bunch, I don’t know, it’s Lollapalooza. You going?”

“Wow, really? I thought that was later in the summer.”

“Nah girl, it’s now,” Cardinals said. “Where you been? You want to go?”

I wondered how long I’d walked. It was much hotter now.

KC offered me his wrist. He tugged at his shiny plastic bracelet.

“Fuckin’ Mandy drove us, and she *has to get back tonight*. She *has to study*.”

We’re gonna miss Pavement tonight.”

“You don’t give a shit about Pavement, bro, you don’t know anything about them.

They broke up when we were like ten.”

Cardinals slapped KC on the chest. His fingers left red marks.

“Ah, you fucker, I’m burnt!” KC said.

He withdrew his wrist and punched Cardinals in the shoulder. Their girls were all the way down at the corner. The other Dudes hovered somewhere between the two

groups. Cardinals howled and laughed in pain.

I waited patiently to see if I’d get anything out of this. KC tugged at his wristband again and ripped it off.

“Here,” he said, handing it to me. “Enjoy.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I took it.

“Wait up, guys!” Cardinals said.

He jogged after his friends.

“Yep, see ya,” KC said, and followed Cardinals.

He stopped in his tracks. He cocked his head. He turned around.

“Lookin’ fine, girl,” he added, as if he felt he hadn’t lived up to the honor of his bro-uniform. In the process, he revealed the presence of a frat tattoo on his upper shoulder.

“Thanks, honey,” I said, and put my hand on my hips.

He’d given me a free ticket, after all. I couldn’t be rude.

He ran off.

Damn, I thought. All right, sweet.

I spit out my gum and used it to secure the bracelet around my wrist. They let me walk right through the front gates along Congress Expressway. The crowd was thickly knotted all around Buckingham Fountain. I pushed through and made it to the concession stand.

I’d been walking all night or for months. I needed a drink. Two in fact. You gotta do concerts right.

Following the sound of music, double-fisting beers, I descended the stairs leading to the south end of the park. The Field and the planetarium dome blocked the Shedd from view. Fair enough. Deal.

The crowd parted for me not because I was a wrathful deity, but because I

balanced two beers and they all empathized. Thus I was able to wedge through the tight cluster of fans and secure a spot up front. Before I knew what hit me, the three stoner brothers from Texas up on stage rocked my damn face off. Seriously. You know the feeling, when the music hits you so hard you have no choice but to pound your drinks, and shake your body in weird unnatural ways, and smoke, and sing even though you don’t know the lyrics. You feel vibrations in your chest that rattle to a rhythm you know is more ancient than words. That’s what happened in there.

I came out of there a wild, primal beast. I ordered two more beers, chugged one of them, and tore across the park to get to the next big act. Who it was, I didn’t know, but that’s where everyone else who’d been at the last show was going, and that’s where I’d go too, because I was one of them now. I bummed a cigarette and smoked it on the run. I didn’t care I’d been in these clothes since yesterday morning or for months, and come to think of it I hadn’t slept since then, either. I didn’t care about Dean or Jimmy, or my sister or my mom, or my dad or Jenny or Rob, and I’d already forgotten about Jerry and Mary. I cared only for more chords to find my heart, and twist around it, make it beat to that ancient rhythm, using new words and instruments to get me there.

I found it again and again. At My Morning Jacket, and Cake, and freaking Ani,

Damnit! I’d seen her with Katie when I was fifteen. I flirted with boys, and smoked joints with girls. I

kept dancing, kept singing, kept drinking until the sun went down on this, my second straight day of consciousness.

I collapsed on a bed of woodchips beneath a grove of ginkgo trees for a breather. I had about ten beers and a whole lot of UV in me. After talking shit about that Dude who got me in here, I was burnt to a crisp. There was no escape from sound or sun anywhere in this park. At least the hip-hop beats coming from the side stage kept me steady while I spun.

It was there, staring up at the branches and listening to couples fighting, that I realized playtime was over. With my head full of chemicals and poisons, big events behind and before me, I knew tonight it could only get darker. Then I let out a spasm of giggles when I thought about that... *tonight it could only get darker*. Of course it could only get darker, that's what night's for. Damn. I pushed myself up, still chuckling. I headed to another beer stand

That's the last of any sort of cohesive narrative I can give you for that night. I don't remember buying that next beer. I remember another mildly hellish trip to the port-o-potty, but I can't tell you exactly when, or how many similar trips I made. Not that you'd care. I know the Red Hot Chili Peppers were involved, and I think Kanye West, too. I don't want to be disingenuous here, or make you think I thought more than I did think. Or whatever.

I do remember leaning over the rail of Buckingham fountain, staring at the carved angels and soldiers and horses, deciding whether or not to puke. Then I must have decided, what the hell. Because apparently I vaulted over the railing, splashed into the water, and proceeded to climb to the top of the fountain.

I do remember standing up there, and trying so goddamn hard to make this one

more Image stick. The only part of the image I still remember is the buildings rising up above the Grant Park trees, wrapping around me, protecting and holding me like a cradle.

I waited to feel something more, something deeper. Cops screamed at me to get out of there. I didn't. I waited for them to come get me, because I didn't want to bear the climb down. So I stayed a while, and I must have felt something. I really must have.

Not over yet. Next thing I knew, I was stumbling down the wharf on the museum

campus, my hands cuffed behind my back. I came to the Oceanarium windows. I tried to see through the glass, but it was dark inside and out, and it was tinted anyway. I knew the dolphins could see me. They wanted me back. They'd protect me. I tried knocking on the glass with my shoulders. Then I knocked harder, and I started jumping, and yelling, and kicking. The cops found me again.

"This is my home!" I screamed. "I need to get inside!"

"Settle down, Ms. Troy," I heard.

Then I fell backwards. Someone caught me. And that was that.

I woke up for the final time on my sister's couch sometime in the evening. I heard Katie and my mom in the dining room. I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. My head still spun a little bit from the

Vicodin. My bruised shoulder and bloody, bandaged knee would have hurt otherwise. It was a fair trade.

I stood up and stretched. I was deeply embarrassed. The last few days had been a blur, some of it intentional. I was awake for a few hours in the police station on Sunday morning. I had to pay a \$900 fine for drunken disorderly, so there went half the money I saved over the past couple months. No other charges were filed. Money and my father's name fixes everything. Someone from the Shedd confirmed I was an employee. I knew I'd be fired. My sister picked me up. I never called her. I don't know who did, but I went willingly.

They'd given me a sedative at some point during the night after I allegedly freaked out in the cell. I was groggy, so I slept during the car ride to her condo. I fell back asleep as soon as I got there and didn't wake up until she and Mark were at work the next morning. I laid on the couch and watched Ellen and People's Court and Kids in the Hall all day long. I'd caught a cold at some point during the weekend, so that was fun, too. I filled a trashcan with Kleenex. My sister came home. I said thanks and told her I was sorry. I asked if she had any painkillers. I just wanted to sleep. I wasn't ready to face reality yet.

So now it was Tuesday or maybe Wednesday, I don't know. My mom was here, and she peeked around the corner at me. I caught her eye. I smiled.

"Hi there, sleepyhead," she said.

She was a different person than the creature I saw on Friday. She was clear-eyed and close to perky. I could actually see her face. Her hair was done up. She came over and asked if I needed anything, if I was feeling all right. She was my mom again, for the first time in forever.

Katie brought me a bowl of soup and a glass of Sprite. I slurped it down between sniffles. The game was up. I was done. I'd ridden it out as far as I could go, and here's where it deposited me. Home, more or less. I had no choice but to repair broken bridges, offer apologies and thank-yous, and figure out if I had any options left.

Honestly, I was screwed. I had no job and no place to stay. I couldn't even let myself dwell for long on the actual act which precipitated all of this—a stupid drunken moment that wouldn't even make the final cut of my trail of memories. I fucked up, and that was that.

I didn't let on that I was fired. I told my mom and Katie I called in sick the past couple days. I told them I had an apartment all lined up. I told them I'd be okay. Of course they knew I was spewing complete bullshit, but to their credit, they didn't call me out. They let me be. They were happy to see me again. Likewise.

Katie put on The Police, continuing her dual trends of listening to music too old for her to claim while subtly messing with me. I didn't mind. It was a pleasant soundtrack to such a weird reunion.

My mom told me all about Ed, her newest wonder-guy. I didn't believe any more of her stories than she believed of mine. I'd seen the state of her house. But I didn't care.

Tonight was a free pass for everyone. She asked if I was seeing anyone.

“No one serious,” I said.

“Well you had a very handsome visitor earlier today while you were sleeping,” she said.

“Who?”

I coughed up a little phlegm, and swallowed it back down. It was gross.

“I can’t recall his name. He said he works with you. Handsome devil. His beard drove me absolutely wild.”

My mom cackled. She swallowed some wine.

I rolled my eyes, took a cautious sip of water.

Dean.

“How’d he find me here?”

“Oh he said he talked to Jimmy Fitzpatrick, you know, that strange little kid who used to live across the street?”

“He’s not so strange, mom,” Katie said.

“Well....” I began.

Never mind.

“Goddamn North Shore,” I said.

Mark came home from a late night at work. He sat with us for a few minutes

before excusing himself. He said he’d recently picked up a big client, and he’d have to go in early tomorrow. Yeah, more bullshit. Who cares. We all had our own hidden realities.

How we chose to dress them up was our own business.

My mom left a little while later. She told me I could come stay with her for as long as I liked. I told her we’ll see, but thanks. She said to be careful, and to try to stay out of any more trouble. I said I would. She dumped a few more Vicodin into the bottle on the coffee table. She told me to drink plenty of tea. She hugged me, and went out the door.

“I’ll be out of your hair soon,” I said to Katie.

She locked the door behind my mom.

“Stop it,” she said.

I lowered my eyes. I stared at the Glamour magazine on the coffee table.

What could I say, what could I do?

“Hey,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said.

If I had pockets, I would have thrust my hands inside them.

“I don’t know what to say, either,” she said, Thank God.

She pressed on my shoulder, so I’d sit down. She stayed standing.

She said, “You’re my sister. We found each other again just in time. I have my own problems, too. I need you as much as you need me right now.”

I didn’t protest. What she said might actually be true.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ll be here.”

I even hoped that part was true.

We hugged goodnight. She left me a door key, and the 400-pound gorilla. I

ignored his tantrums, and let Jon Stewart and David Letterman usher me into sleep, in place of the splashes and cries of otters and dolphins.

The telephone woke me. It must have rung ten times before I finally dragged myself off the couch into the kitchen. I didn’t even know people had landlines anymore. I picked up the receiver on the counter.

“Yes?”

“Hi ma’am, this is the concierge. I have a Dean McDow asking to see you. Shall I send him up? He’s not on the list, ma’am.”

I glanced at the clock. 8:30 in the morning. He must have just gotten off work.

“Send him up,” I said.

I didn’t bother freshening up. I slipped back into my jeans, and flattened my hair, but that was all. I opened the blinds at the screen door. Sunlight flooded the living room. I blinked a few times. Nothing registered yet.

Knock knock.

I crossed the room and opened the door.

“Hi,” Dean said.

He was still in his work uniform. He carried my camo duffel bag.

“What’s the word?” I said.

I swept my arm around, indicating he should come in.

“I won’t stay long,” he said.

He handed me the bag.

“This is all your stuff I could find,” he said.

After he got rid of the bag, he had a blue folder tucked in the crook of his arm. He stepped inside.

“Thank you,” I said.

I set the bag by the door.

“So that clinches it, I guess. I’m fired?”

“Looks that way,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

I shrugged.

“Whatever.”

But really, I wouldn’t admit it was much more than *whatever*.

I said, “Have a seat.”

“For a minute.”

He sat down on one end of the couch, and I on the other. He looked better than

how I’d left him. He looked like he had a purpose. I waited to see if he’d reveal what it was.

“I wanted to thank you,” he said.

“For what?” I said coyly.

“I think you know.”

“Hmm.”

“I saw my kids on Sunday. I had them for five hours. I took them up in the Sears Tower, and on a boat cruise down the Chicago River, and out for dinner. I saw Shelly, too. It went okay. Turns out she can actually stand the sight of my face, for short periods at least.”

“Did you tell them you jumped in a shark tank?” I said.

I immediately regretted it. Before he could answer or even produce a physical reaction, I scooted across the couch and touched his arm.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He shook it off politely. I grabbed the remote from the coffee table and turned on whatever was in the stereo. Dean opened the folder on his lap. He handed me a sheet of paper.

He said, “*The Coral Reef III* is set to embark on her maiden voyage out of Seattle on July 1st. She’ll cruise around the San Juan Islands and head up to the Alaskan Aleutians for August. The crew will be studying the migratory habits of Pacific Bottlenose dolphins. One of the interns had to drop out due to a family emergency. I’ve secured you an internship on board through the University of Seattle.”

I studied the paper, which said more or less what he just told me. I pretended to keep reading long after I’d finished.

He continued, “I told them about your gift. I doubt you’ll get a chance to use it on a research expedition, but you never know. They were curious. They trust me, or my family, or whatever. I used to be good. Point is, you’re in, if you want it. Fifteen credit hours, \$4000 for the trip.”

He shoved the rest of the folder onto my lap. He stood up.

“I have to go. I have a phone interview with Northwestern in an hour. I’m almost ready to get back in the science game. I’m going to take Bobby Farentino with me. I see my kids again on Saturday. I’ve got so much to do, I’ve gotta go. Think about it. Take it.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I said.

A part of me wanted to be offended, but the rest of me was so entirely grateful.

He was already at the door. He placed his hand on the knob.

“You saved my life,” he said. “I’ll tell you what. Let’s make a deal. From this point on, I’ll stop believing in you, if you’ll stop believing in me. From here on in, we’re even. No expectations.”

Seemed to be a fair, harmless transaction. I kept reading the keywords on the

paper in my hand. *Chair. Credit Hours. \$3940. Cetacean Research. And the implied ones, too. Standing on the bow, at twilight, dolphins in the wake, arms outspread.*

“Deal,” I said.

We locked eyes for a moment. We’d both be fine.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Ditto.”

He shut the door behind him.

Damn North Shore.

I went out to the balcony. The invitation letter froze in my hand, my eyes locked on the City and the Lake. I was ready for real water.

I could go on. I could relate every detail, every emotion, and every Image from then on. But why not just leave it be.

Ever After

Do you remember, back in the beginning, when I told you I was writing this on Shedd stationary in my Oceanarium nest? At that point, it was true. I really did scribble out a few woeful, desperate pages when I was still there. I saved them through the long years. I still have them. You could safely say I'm old and gray now. And yes, I'm quite happy.

The images I burned into my memory did light a bright trail that led all the way here.

Eventually, the memories became less intentional—and more numerous and meaningful to stifle or deny. I became a real human being again. I lost nothing. I know, can you believe it?

The trail guided me here to my island off the North coast. Outside the windows of my study, I see the cormorants coming home to roost. My husband died three years ago, but I've learned how to grieve reasonably. I will see him soon. My two youngest sons have left the island to see what they can make of themselves in what's left of the world.

My daughter and my oldest son are still here, along with my five grandchildren. We are primarily fisher-people now, but we've learned over the years how to tend vegetables in this rocky soil.

It's warmer on the island than it was when my husband and I first moved here.

But sometimes, at sunset and daybreak, a cold, pleasant wind looses itself from the cracks in the rocks and envelopes me. I think of the old days. I'm reminded of the great lost City. The apocalypse I foresaw came and went. I'm still here. It wasn't as bad as it could have been, I suppose. From what I gather from scattered reports from the mainland, the people who've started over have managed to find happiness, and they're beginning to thrive again. Maybe this time around, we'll take it more slowly.

I still write with a young voice and I curse like a sailor. Turns out I was wrong.

Whales do speak. We have quite the conversations these days.

I don't know who I've written this for. If any printing presses are up and running, I'm sure they have more productive things to publish than the vulgar memories of an old naturalist. They have other things to worry about now. There's a legend on this island that stretches back a hundred and fifty years. Seamus McManus, the keeper of this lighthouse at the time, encountered and eventually captained a ghost ship that had lodged itself against these rocks. This ship was filled not with the ghosts of the recently departed, but ghosts from the future—a chorus of lost souls from the final days before the apocalypse, before the Fall. Seamus became overwhelmed, and he piloted the boat out to sea, never to be seen again. I hope to see that ship some day soon. I hope these words become one of those ghosts. I hope we find our way back there. I'd like to compare stories, see what they have to say.

You know what? I wouldn't share with them this whole story. I'd break free the

pieces that mattered. I'd make my old self proud. Even though I tried to appreciate the Details, the Gray Areas, I'd still throw them out at the end.

So here it is, my Big Picture I'll send back in hopes of finding that ship. Forget about everything else

you've read. This is me. I hope it finds you well. I put a lot of love and effort into it, so please handle with care.

Disney World. A living legend spouts musical prophecies on a stage. A funeral. A shipwreck, a long swim, a disappearance. More funerals. Apocalyptic visions. A

superhero's reverie above a city. A desperate chase through subway tunnels and across train tracks. A moonlit bicycle ride. A night in a fire tower. A haunted house, grand cathedrals, frightened priests. A saved life. A life taken. A tent in a museum. A nest in an aquarium. Night swims with dolphins. Dean. A long lakeshore. My mother, my sister. A boat in the Caribbean. My husband, the first mate. Making love on the cliffs above the sea. Whales, pirates, and a Samoan wedding. A book with my name on the spine. A new theory of ecology. A new language. An awards banquet. My children, one after the other.

Our island. A bedtime story. The apocalypse, faraway and inconsequential. My children's children. A farewell. Another funeral. Creaking bones. Love and love and love. There it is, there I am.