

The University of Southern Mississippi
The Aquila Digital Community

Dissertations

Spring 5-2009

Room

Vallie Lynn Watson
University of Southern Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Watson, Vallie Lynn, "Room" (2009). *Dissertations*. 1015.
<https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/1015>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact aquilastaff@usm.edu.

The University of Southern Mississippi

ROOM

by

Vallie Lynn Watson

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2009

COPYRIGHT BY
VALLIE LYNN WATSON
2009

The University of Southern Mississippi

ROOM

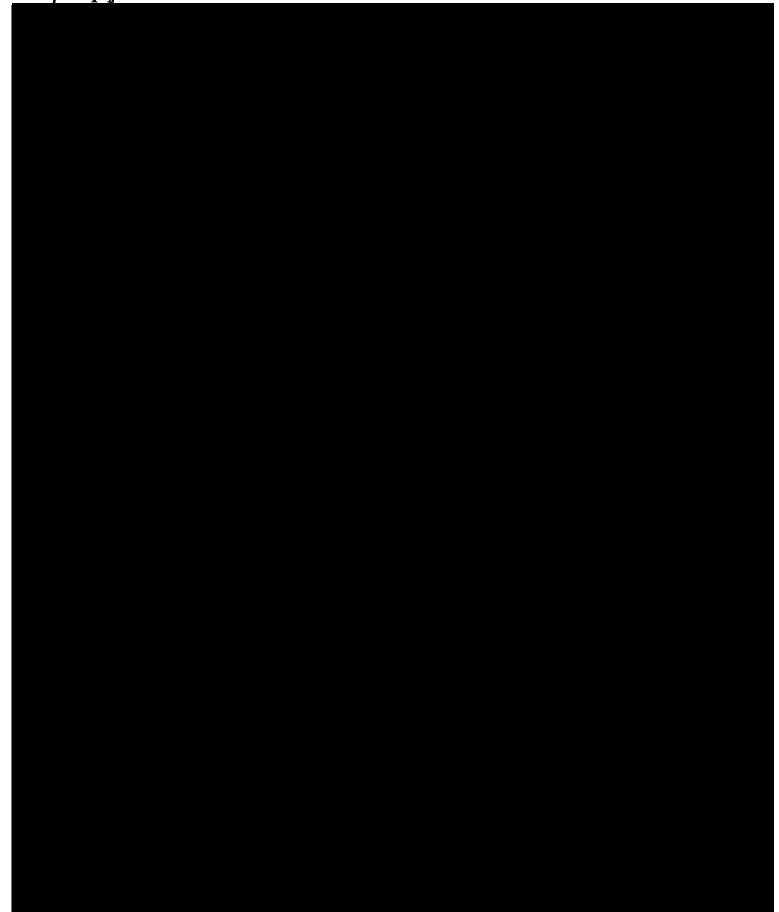
by

Vallie Lynn Watson

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:



May 2009

ABSTRACT

ROOM

by Vallie Lynn Watson

May 2009

Room is a short novel written at The University of Southern Mississippi. It is accompanied by a critical preface.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Angela Ball, Frederick Barthelme, Melanie Barthelme, Steven Barthelme, Beverly Ciko, Rie Fortenberry, Julia Johnson, and Ken Watson for their guidance and patience throughout the duration of this project and my four years at the Center for Writers. A special thanks goes to Rie for her never-ending kindness, and to Rick for making me want to write.

I would also like to thank my peers at the Center for Writers—especially Gregory Napp, Sam Ruddick, and Lindsay Walker—for helping me become a better writer.

Portions of this work have appeared in the following magazines: *971 Menu*, *Ghoti*, *Journal of Truth and Consequence*, *Pindeldyboz*, and *Product*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	vii
NOVEL	
<i>ROOM</i>	1

INTRODUCTION

Why I (Don't) Write

I read an article about how a certain parenting skill in the 1970s and 1980s has backfired: the way to assure one's child had a healthy self-esteem, many felt, was to emphasize to the child that he is brilliant, a genius, can do or be anything he wants to. President of the United States, an astronaut. Doctor, lawyer. I was surprised that was a trend; I assumed it's how all children were—and should be—raised. But the result of this phenomenon, the article explained, was that these children, intelligent as they may be, began to feel that if they had to put forth effort, if they had to work for something, it felt like they were failing. Because if they were such geniuses, nothing should be too challenging.

This resonated with me because I seem to have an aversion to work. I call myself lazy, a term my social worker best friend disapproves of. She catalogs the many opportunities I've been given and concludes they must be based on effort, and I easily rebut each one, explaining that luck and timing have mostly paved my way. She points out that I'm about to finish a Ph.D. program and says that wouldn't be possible if I were lazy. I explain to her that the reason I'm in this program—or the reason I'm supposed to be in this program—is to be a writer, and until recently, I barely wrote at all.

The consensus among my peers is that our writing should come first, our teaching should come second, and our literature classes, last. The reality, or at least my reality, is this: teaching is what I get paid to do. For three years, as a teaching assistant, I was

responsible for twenty-five students a semester, and now, a full-time instructor, over a hundred. If I don't do the job, I don't get paid, if I don't get paid, I don't eat, and so on. I also enjoy it: it's not difficult, the hours are a lazy person's dream, I'm a good teacher and getting better, I like the students, they like me, and it makes me feel like I've accomplished something concrete and positive that day. I could be almost satisfied to do nothing but teach college for the remainder of my career.

My literature classes were different than my writing classes: more rigorous, more challenging (if challenging is defined as work you don't enjoy, because I have little interest in doing academic research), and less fun. Literature teachers have exacting demands, and often are tough graders, so the literature classes came second, behind teaching, for me.

I adore writing classes. I get a natural high from being in workshops, the sitting around, dissecting each others' works, suggesting new ideas, helping each other to create art. A bonus is that it, like teaching, provides that end-of-the-day feeling of concrete accomplishment. I would stay in school forever and just take workshops, if I could. The trouble is, I've never gotten much writing done. Once I got a story going, I usually enjoy the process. I always enjoy the end result, the sheer completion of a story, and I've enjoyed even more the few times I'd gotten a story published. But often the only thing that pushes me to start a story is the twice-a-semester deadlines, and then I usually start something a few days before it's due. This seems like a lack of willpower, but Dr. Phil and my social-worker best friend agree that there is no such thing as willpower.

I'd considered that the reason I wasn't more inspired to write was a fear of failure. Failure is a certainty in writing. A first draft will always be a failure of sorts, otherwise

there would be no need to revise. Still, I'm not sure how much I really care when I do fail at something. In trying to recollect things I've failed at so that I can measure how much it bothered me, I come up blank. Either I haven't failed at much, or if so, it mattered little. Sometimes I joke about having failed at marriage, but really, I believe my ex-husband is the one who failed. So this article I read, explaining that having to work hard can feel like a failure of sorts, complicates the matter. I think there's something to it. Perhaps it's the notion that I won't be able to produce art on the first, second, tenth, or twentieth try. But if I don't mind failing, why do I mind the work? I don't know if I'm good writer. I think I could be, with time.

I've been this way—lazy?—since I was a teenager. I remember once carrying laundry up the stairs, and I dropped a sock. I was so resentful that I had to exert any extra effort, any work, to pick up that sock. Maybe this is normal teenage attitude, but I'm not sure I've entirely grown out of it.

It's true that my parents raised me repeating how intelligent I was. Teachers and standardized tests indicated the same, which forever frustrated my mother, because from junior high until my junior year of college, my grades were poor. Most of the time I think I'm okay-smart, but perhaps because I keep surrounding myself with highly educated people, in academic settings, I'm constantly reminded of how smart I'm *not*.

A couple of years ago the writing process sped up perhaps 10%. The increase was inspired by hotel rooms. I went to New York—mostly on someone else's dime, for a conference—and had a corner hotel room with two completely different views: one of Times Square and one of Central Park. An old high school/college friend who I hadn't seen in a decade lives in the city. Fifteen years before we'd had a complicated friendship

that just skirted romance and I—who rarely get nervous—was terrified to see him. It was storming the night I got in so he brought a couple of bottles of wine to my room and soon everything was fine. We picked right up, as they say. After he left I drank more wine and I moved back and forth between the two windows with my black and white Mead Composition notebook and took notes which I later developed into a short story that I'm so glad I wrote, just to have those memories committed to paper.

There's something about writing by hand (which I hadn't done in awhile) that I've discovered, or re-discovered, feels good. In a way it feels less like work, because in my warped-from-too-much-school mind, work is done at a computer. In another way it feels productive (which would seem to mean that it is work) because it's there, in hard copy, in my handwriting. It can't be erased by highlighting it with a cursor and hitting the delete button.

A month or so after New York, I went to New Orleans for a conference, on my dime, and through Priceline, bid on and got a \$250/night hotel room for \$60. It was the weekend of what would have been my tenth wedding anniversary, so I decided to treat myself. The view from the twentieth floor spanned the entire French Quarter, with spots of the winding river visible through closer, taller hotels. I stayed in the room much of the time, ordered lots of room service and liberated the mini-bar, and took notes in my Mead Composition book on a short-short story that I thought might make a nice companion for the one I wrote in New York.

But after I got back, I didn't continue to work on it. I didn't write again until my next workshop deadline. I linked those shorts with some I'd written the semester before, trying to weave a narrative about a women who avoids relationship troubles by hotel-

jumping. Procrastination had won again—my efforts were sloppy—but I was starting to feel more curious.

* * *

I remember the day, as an undergraduate, that I decided to become a double major, in English and Psychology. I was proud to tell people. Perhaps impressive sounding academic feats interest me more than the actual learning. It's true that one draw to a Ph.D. program was that one day I could be Dr. Watson. The first couple of years of my undergraduate education were poor; I was more interested in frat boys and kamikaze shots than studying. Once I moved onto the upper division English classes (and onto long-haired, pot-smoking, guitar-playing boys), I became a little more interested.

The first fiction writing workshop I took was mostly by accident. I had no idea what a writing workshop was besides that it was called English 445 (or whatever), and I stumbled into the classroom of someone I didn't realize was a well-known writer of literary fiction. I didn't know what "literary fiction" meant. By the end of the second week of class, I was sort of in love with this thing called a workshop. The teacher was pure charisma, and I'd never had a class so exciting.

We turned in four stories a semester and had the choice of having them workshopped by class or not. Mr. Charisma assigned grades (A, B, C) grades to our stories. We did not submit portfolios at the end of the semester, and I guess I didn't realize that his suggestions were in the context of revision. I don't know if the others just automatically kept working on their stories, but I thought that was it, I was done. I didn't think I was a good writer or had any future at it, but I was hooked on the atmosphere, the

community: I took two undergrad workshops with him, and when working at the same university after I graduated, took two graduate workshops with him.

During the four years after I graduated with my undergraduate degree, I worked in various secretarial positions on campus. I was bored and miserable. It took me maybe twenty minutes out of the eight-hour workday to do the work assigned to me. I didn't ask for extra work, I didn't care about impressing anyone. I started joining different discussion groups online and eventually made a group of six "friends" who I emailed with every day. Over those four years, we exchanged upwards of 100,000 emails. I beat myself up then, as I do now, about not spending that time writing. It didn't occur to me until very recently I was, in fact, writing. Those messages are archived and sometimes I go back to September of 2001, or May of 1999, or whenever, and it's just like reading a journal, with others' feedback thrown in.

I finally got fed up with my life and my marriage and thought an escape would be graduate school. I wasn't accepted into the English department of that university, so I applied to places within five or so hours and was accepted to a few.

The creative writing teacher at the school I chose was primarily a poet but taught all the classes. Her fiction workshops were a mix of twenty-five graduates and undergraduates, and we workshopped eight stories a week. While in the MA program I enjoyed writing, or enjoyed the finished product anyway, but only wrote when I had a deadline, though beat myself up for not writing more. I never considered sending anything out for publication. I rarely read a literary magazine, figuring that it would be above my head. I had no interest in the publishing world; it sounded like a lot of office work and that's what I'd just run away from. I was numb from divorce and the only day

of the week I looked forward to was Wednesday. Workshop. There was an ice storm in early December of my first semester, and our last workshop was cancelled. I was devastated.

In a workshop a year or so later, she assigned us to write a review of a recent book of poetry. I'd just ordered a collection from Amazon, written by a (different) guy I dated in high school who I hadn't talked to in years, and wrote my review on that. When the next issue of *Big Muddy*, the school's literary magazine, came out a few months later I was shocked to find that she had included my review. I read that issue cover to cover, over and over, and ordered copies for everyone, my dad, my high school English teacher, of course the old boyfriend. It was the first time I felt the itch of, okay, maybe there's something here, maybe I can do "this" even though I wasn't sure what "this" was, or could be.

As I was finishing my masters I applied for some community college teaching jobs, and applied to a few Ph.D. creative writing programs, not really expecting to get into any. (My friends teased me, asking if a doctorate in writing stories was even a degree, and I wondered the same, if going on with graduate school wasn't just a way of putting off real life a little longer.) I applied to the University of Southern Mississippi only because I was technically still a Mississippi resident and didn't have to pay the application fee. I was accepted to USM and one other school, and wanted to visit both before I made my decision. I drove to Hattiesburg first and met with the director of the program. My department funding wasn't finalized yet and I didn't know if I'd be teaching, which I wanted to do. He asked me what my career goals were and I said I wanted to someday have a position like his, to teach creative writing, and he asked what I

thought was the best way to get there. I said—angling to be assigned classes to teach—getting more teaching experience. He said my thinking was flawed, and looked pleased. He said that I needed to immerse myself in writing and publishing, that if I decided to enter the program I would be pushed, hard, to write publishable material, that it wouldn't be easy. I wondered if he was trying to scare me off. I went back to Motel 8, thought, “you're on, buddy,” and decided not to visit the second school. If this place couldn't get me writing, nowhere could.

But, intimidated most of my first year and busy balancing my literature courses and teaching two classes, I again only wrote the bare minimum. The workshops still produced the natural high, though were far more intense. Workshops were riotous, hilarious often, but I was surrounded by people who were better-read than I. Many had published in magazines, a couple had published books. It took me about half a semester to realize how bad my writing was compared to some of my classmates.

I attribute the many great things that have come my way in life to good luck and timing. Not, as noted, effort. *Mississippi Review* needed someone to work in their office my first summer there. The work was typical office work but a joy to do—busy work (which, in my mind, equates somehow to concrete accomplishment) in an area I was interested in. My past life as a secretary paid off, perhaps, as I was asked to stay at the magazine as the graduate assistant.

As mentioned, I knew very little about literary magazines or publishing; I'd only sent one other thing out since my *Big Muddy* review, and it was rejected. From day one, everything about working in the office was a learning experience. As I'd shelve other literary magazines I started to recognize and read emerging authors. My first week I got

to send an email to an author I'd once I'd studied, and that was exciting. When I started reading for the Prize issue that first fall and realized the variety of work out there, I began to feel like it was a world I could navigate some small corner of. I started sending out the little I'd written, and got a few things published. This should have inspired me to write more! all the time! but I didn't.

Another lucky break: a couple years later, around the time I discovered my love of writing in hotels, I injured myself and had shoulder surgery. Not only did I have a valid excuse not to write, I had a valid excuse to stay in school an extra semester. But in the months I was unable to use my right arm, these little hotels stories tapped around my head and wanted to be put to paper. When I could write again, I got them written. At the last minute, for a workshop, always.

The little stories started out as traditional flash fiction, each one striving to stand alone. Flash fiction felt manageable to me, something to be written quickly and perhaps revised, but ultimately a story that could come to completion and be more or less disposed of. Initially the dozen or so stories I cobbled together featured a nameless woman and a variety of nameless men, written in a somewhat evasive, ghostly tone, and I began to think about how I could connect them to form a longer work.

Before these hotel shorts, I'd only written traditional short stories of ten to twenty pages, and I was never satisfied with any of them and only revised them and sent them out halfheartedly. The flash fiction, however, interested me, possibly another indication of my inherent laziness: piece by piece, they certainly required less work than a more traditional short story.

Once I'd aimlessly written about thirty pages of the shorts I started to think about writing on to novella or novel length. Most fiction writers dream of publishing a novel one day, and I was no different, but never had seriously thought I would do so. The idea of writing a hundred or two hundred or three hundred pages, then having to revise and re-navigate the same story over and over sounded not only daunting, but plain miserable. Compiling and linking a group of flash fiction to form a larger work seemed far more controllable. Through the shorts I created a not-entirely-linear, hazy sense of time and place, which allowed me to move the shorts around in the larger piece without as much concern had they not been fragmented. Mostly though, as mentioned, it was the feeling of completion that each short provided that inspired me to want to keep adding on. I hardly noticed when I stopped writing shorts that could standalone and was writing pieces that only worked in context of the larger story—not much different than writing a traditional novel/novella. Like I was tricking the lazy part of my brain into thinking it wasn't as much work.

I also played mind games about where I could write. My obsession with hotels long predates my collection, but because of the initial inspiration and the repeating hotel rooms in the work, I believed I could only write at hotels. Travel is of course hard to come by for a graduate student, so I had another built in excuse to limit my writing.

Good timing strikes again: Had I not injured myself I wouldn't have been around to fill a last-minute, full-time instructor position in the department, and be able to put off graduation yet another semester. Since September I've been driving to USM's Gulf Coast campus several times a week and teaching four classes a semester, a fantastic

experience: I know for sure now that teaching full-time was something I can do and want to do.

I also know for sure that writing is something I can do and want to do. As my first semester of full-time teaching turned into Christmas, I started studying for my long-avoided Ph.D. comprehensive exams. Rather, I tried, but I kept going back to my series of hotel stories. Now that something more important was threatening my writing time, I couldn't get enough of it. Even though I knew I wouldn't graduate if I didn't pass my exams (but wait, wouldn't *that* be a shame, if I didn't graduate, and had to stay in school even longer . . .), it was more important that I finish my collection. I knew if I had to grab one thing in a mental fire, it would be my ability to write that sucker, not a Ph.D. title.

I would not have been led to that state of mind without just the combination of writing teachers I've had over the years. I include *Mississippi Review* itself among my teachers. Without that exposure, I'm not sure I would have found the confidence to be a writer. What the program director had said at our first meeting was, after all, correct. My thinking was flawed. The teaching develops over time, it was the writing that needed immediate attention. And I didn't write enough over the last four years, by far, but have poked at so many areas—fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and newspaper publications and presentations—that I am not dissatisfied.

* * *

A girl I went to elementary school with just found me on the internet and emailed. We updated each other on the last few decades. When I told her I was in school for creative writing and had published a couple of things she replied, "That's perfect. You

always wanted to be a writer, growing up.” I was stunned that she remembered, because I’d forgotten. I was also pleased; it made me feel like a real writer, however little I wrote. And it didn’t please me because I liked the title “writer”; I was pleased that I was defined by an interest in work that I do, in fact, enjoy.

ROOM

Naming the Giraffe

They bought the five-foot wooden giraffe on the last day of their honeymoon in Ocho Rios. They'd visited him every day at the end of the beach, where a Jamaican lady sold carved chairs and animals, and they had fun haggling over the price. The giraffe had to be checked as luggage. Two Jamaicans at the airport boxed him up for ten dollars, and Veronica was worried the giraffe would break. On the plane ride home they drank champagne and decided to name him Arnold. She watched with relief as Arnold circled around the luggage belt, his ear sticking from the top of the box.

A year after they bought their first home, where Arnold kept watch from behind a ficus in the living room corner, she got an unexpected check for \$2400 from their mortgage company. She'd overpaid into their escrow account. It came to their Post Office box, to which she had the only key. He wouldn't notice the extra money in their banking account, because he was no longer allowed access to that, either.

That evening, after he passed out sitting up on the sofa, she logged onto the internet and made travel arrangements for herself to Ocho Rios. She closed her laptop and looked at Arnold. He needed dusting.

She bought Arnold's companion, a three-foot wooden giraffe, on that second trip. She'd boarded the plane in Arizona around the same time her husband checked himself into rehab in California. She put Arnold's companion in the overhead bin on the flight back. Her husband came home six months later and met Arnold's companion. Neither of them mentioned naming this one.

The Jamaican who sold her Arnold's companion had asked for two-hundred. She offered twenty, and on their last night together, the Jamaican accepted.

Husbands and Wives

She took her husband to Van's going-away party. Veronica and Van worked for a commercial realtor in Phoenix and Van was transferring to the New Orleans branch. It was the first time she met Trinh, the Vietnamese woman Van had referred to as his partner. They were both probably twenty years older than Veronica.

Her husband avoided the bar, and she avoided Van. For the last year she and Van had lunch together almost every Thursday, with two others, but they'd never seen each other at night.

She went to wash her hands before she got a plate of food, and when she came back saw her husband talking to a blonde lady in blue jeans, stood and watched them for a moment. He hadn't been that animated since before she'd made him go to rehab, and she almost was happy for him. She was not jealous.

Trinh was next to her at the buffet, filling her plate, and taller than Veronica had realized. She watched the smooth tan skin move over thin wrists as Trinh added chocolate-covered strawberries to her plate. They smiled at each other.

Veronica and her husband sat with another couple and shared a plate of black bean cakes and baked brie. When Van was toasting, her husband held her hand under the

table, and after they clapped, tried to put his arm around her. She pulled away, and noticed the woman across the table watching them.

Van hugged her as she was leaving and said he'd see her in New Orleans soon. Trinh leaned over and gave her a quick kiss on the lips, and asked if the two could have their picture taken. Someone got a camera, and they angled their heads together, touching, Van's partner's bent slightly over hers.

Casino Night

Veronica and her husband spent the night at a casino. They couldn't stay at their house. When she had returned from three days at the Indianapolis office, she could smell what he'd let happen to the house even before she opened the side door. He was passed out on the couch, the dogs on it with him, shaking and afraid to jump down. The septic tank had backed up and flooded the house. She took one step inside and felt the sopping carpet envelop her foot, and stepped back out.

They dropped their dogs off at the vet and drove for a few hours. Crossing the state line, he touched the windshield first, their old game. Once there, they got a room, then she gave him some money and he went to play craps, she, to video poker and the bar.

After a few drinks, and doubling her money, she found a pay phone and used quarters to call the old Boston phone number for Klein, her college boyfriend. She was surprised when he answered, and that he didn't think it was odd to hear from her. She

said she was sorry for what they'd done with Maggie, his sister, back then, that she thought about it all the time. He laughed.

Her husband was at the bar when she returned. They wandered and found a fifteen dollar buffet, and sat and ate for hours. In their room, she finally asked him what he wanted to do. It took him a long time to answer, that he was ready for it to be over. She made him repeat it, probably a hundred times, over the next few hours. She wanted to be sure. Finally he broke, and said maybe he wasn't ready.

Two Doubles

They unpacked with the television on. They looked at each other, then the television, when the lady from the entertainment news show said Maggie's name. The program cut to a clip of Maggie, who said she'd just found out she was adopted. Veronica wondered if Klein had known, then realized he had to.

When the program moved to the next story, Veronica sat on the bed. Her husband turned off the set and sat down on the other bed. He knew a little about Klein and Klein's sister the television star but knew the subject was taboo. After a minute she told him most of the story.

She'd been at Klein's house, his parents out of town. He was supposed to be watching his fourteen-year-old sister, Maggie. The three of them had a great deal to drink, and around midnight, it became sexual. The next morning, Maggie had accused

them of drugging her and raping her, though the incident was never mentioned again.

Veronica had thought it was consensual, but wondered about Klein and his pills.

Her husband went to the bathroom. She heard the water run, and he came back with a fluffy, white, wet washcloth. He spread her knees and kneeled in front of her, eased the warm cloth over her face, slowly removing her makeup. They made love, for the first time in three years. She was surprised he was still able. After he was asleep she flipped through the television until she found the weather. There were ice storms along I-40.

At nine-thirty she got out of bed, grabbed her bag, got \$500 out of her wallet and left it on the table for her husband to find. She pointed her car south, heading to take I-10 east. She got an eyeliner from her purse, and colored over the green digits on the clock in the car. She was going to drive all night and didn't want to know what time it was.

Twenty-one Hours

The First Seven Hours

Veronica drove with the radio on, and thought about how to start. Had to be funny, both familiar and distant. It had been a week since Jacob, her childhood friend from Birmingham, emailed his phone number. A month since they'd started exchanging emails. Ten years since she'd seen him, and almost twenty since they'd been close. She punched in the New York number she'd memorized, and right before she hit the button to call, she passed a plane graveyard to her left, and felt dizzy.

The Second Seven Hours

It was 1:47 his time. It took him a second, then he laughed. After thirty minutes she started to feel comfortable, and turned the speaker on the phone, lay it on the leather passenger seat. Two hours in, he asked how long they'd been talking, and she didn't want to answer, didn't want him to be ready to go. He said something about how they'd talk hours on the phone at night in high school, but wouldn't look at each other in the hallways. Four hours in, he acknowledged that hadn't shown up to her parents' funeral, but didn't apologize. She changed the subject, asked if he ever talked to Wes, a guy they'd been friends with in high school. Five hours in, she crossed the Texas state line and leaned forward to touch the windshield, then shook her head and said never mind out loud. He asked what she'd said. She saw a giant white cross lit up ahead of her, and for the twenty minutes it took to reach it, she told him about her husband's problems, their problems. Jacob said he was sort of shocked. They got off the phone when the sun was coming up in New York.

The Third Seven Hours

She stopped for coffee but didn't need it. He'd suggested she visit, but she couldn't let him see her. As the sun was coming up she called her hotel to see if she could check in early.

Water Landing

The first time she'd gone to the Boston branch she'd traveled with another lady from Phoenix, but this time she went by herself. The man who sat next to her on the second leg would not say a word to her. She'd been on dozens, perhaps hundreds, of planes but this time repeated The Lord's Prayer to herself both legs of the flight, and at the airport in between. Had even written out a short will on Crane stationary and left it in her safe deposit box. Jewelry to so-and-so, dogs to so-and-so, journals to Jacob. She wanted him to know her. She'd spent every day for almost two decades talking to him in her head, pretending he was always with her.

Landing, it looked like they were still in the water as the plane skidded to the ground. Her hotel was nearby, and plain, on the curve of a highway with only a gas station. An hourly airport shuttle took her right back to the airport after she'd unpacked, where the subway took a seven-minute shot to the city.

She walked through the Markets, didn't go in any stores, and then into Boston Common. Most of the trees were still green, a couple turning gold. At a restaurant on the other edge, she had soup and wine and read.

After her early meeting, she spent all afternoon walking around Cambridge, hoping she might run into Klein. She used to visit him there often; almost moved there. About six-thirty, she walked down the steps to the dark bar where they'd once gone, and drank beer, the only beverage served. She heard male Italian voices get into a fight in the kitchen, a couple of fuck yous thrown about. Klein didn't show up.

She took the train back to Boston, and went looking for the street of Italian restaurants. She found a small one without too many people, sat at a tiny, low table near

the bar, and ordered a pitcher of wine. The waiter said he couldn't serve a pitcher to one person, that it had to be by the glass.

An older, heavy guy sitting at the bar turned a little and told the waiter the pitcher was on him, and turned back. She called "thank you," but he didn't acknowledge it. The waiter soon returned with the pitcher and one glass, and she ordered the carbonara.

Veronica watched the man. She thought she probably knew his situation and was afraid he'd know hers if she sat with him. Sitting alone, being alone was fine, preferable, though she'd wondered what might have happened had Van been along on this trip. She and her husband were spending more and more time apart but Veronica wasn't sure if she had the energy to divorce him.

The pasta was rich. She had most of it boxed up after she finished the wine, then tipped the waiter almost \$30, and left without thanking the man again. She found a bar a few streets over, and bought beer from a cocky bartender. He mostly ignored her and she thought about having sex with him, making him pay attention to her, but she regretted the Jamaican and didn't want to cheat on her husband again. Veronica took the subway and shuttle back to the hotel. She had a few more bites of her dinner, and didn't set the radio/alarm, knowing she'd be miserable in the morning.

At about two the next afternoon, she found a place still serving brunch in the city, and had eggs Benedict over sirloin, and three glasses of champagne. After brunch she walked off the last trace of hangover. It was sunny and cool. From an observation platform on top of a skyscraper she studied the airport. Its tiny peninsula was almost symmetrical, curved like a genie's lamp, two long runways creating a tall X across the bottom half, the ends at the water.

When she got back to the hotel an attractive man about her age was sitting in the lobby. She got into the elevator and they stared at each other as the doors shut. On the fourth floor, the keycard didn't work in her door, and she took the elevator back down. She didn't look at him when she went to the front desk, said her room number and that her key wasn't working. Back in the elevator, she looked at him, and he was still looking at her. He knocked on her door a few minutes after she got back into the room, and she let him in for a little while. She was only able to come by imagining she was having sex with Van. She hadn't with the Jamaican, never had been able with her husband. After the stranger left she got her pasta from the night before out from the mini-fridge, finished it, and went to bed.

The plane left at six the next morning, and she slept on the first leg. On the second leg, she talked most of the flight to the man next to her. She hadn't showered, and her eyes were bloodshot, she knew. She was surprised when he said his age; he looked much younger. He had family in Phoenix, his daughter had just had a baby, he said, and he suggested coffee, or a drink. Towards the end of the flight he nodded off in airplane sleep for a few minutes, accidentally leaning on her.

As they got off the plane she walked away from him, though saw him again, standing with a girl and a baby, as they all waited for their bags to circle.

Wallpaper for a Funeral

She was looking at a New Orleans hotel website when her husband called. He rarely did. Her aunt had died. She'd never thought about her aunt dying.

He asked if she was going to go home and she was surprised he considered Birmingham her home. She told him that he shouldn't go. He offered to make plane and hotel arrangements for her. When she landed two days later, she got a rental car and circled the interstate to get to her hotel, avoiding the parts of town she was most familiar with. She passed a new outdoor mall, full of expensive, trendy stores, on the east side of town.

The hotel was two stories, a chain. She put her bag on one of the two beds and went to brush her teeth. The bathroom didn't seem clean. She walked across the service road to the gas station, and bought some Lysol and a four-pack of mini-Chardonnay.

After the funeral she went to a house gathering, assorted family and friends. It took an hour or so for her to realize she'd forgotten she'd cared about some of them. A few people who'd been friends with her parents showed up. An old lady they'd gone to church with sat down next to her. "Your father used to worry that your mother wasn't saved," she said.

On the way back to the hotel she drove past Jacob's parents' house. There was a Volvo and a Volkswagen in the driveway but Veronica didn't stop. Last time she'd been home to Birmingham, ten years before, she saw Jacob and his parents, and found out that her mother and Jacob's father had had an affair. Veronica pulled up to the new mall and bought a two-hundred dollar gift set of acrylics. In her room she stripped the plastic from the box, opened it, unfolded trays—paints, brushes, pencils, palettes, more, each piece

nestled in a plastic cavity shaped just for it—up and out, like a tackle box. She got an unused yellow legal pad out of her bag, and painted on each of the sheets. First she drew single images—things in the room: the television, the corner of the dresser—with two or three colors, each drawing filling maybe half a page. Then she slowed down, using as many colors as she could on each page, filling up every corner with graffiti, words and shapes whose colors bled together. As she worked, she pulled off pages from the pad, and over the course of the evening covered every surface in the room with right-angled pieces of paper, one by one: the tables, the chair seats, the bathtub, parts of the floor, all of one bed and half of the other. She left them all in place, her art supplies on the floor, the next morning.

Veronica and Her Husband

How They Met

Ten years earlier, when Veronica had visited Birmingham for the first time since she left, the day she arrived she went for lunch at the mall restaurant where she used to waitress. She wanted to sit and have a mug of beer and decide who, if anyone, she was going to contact while she was there.

Jacob and his parents were in a booth by the front door. He saw her and half-stood, pausing like he was making sure it was her. “You used to work here.” He put his index finger on his temple.

“Yes, I did,” she said and looked at his parents. “Hi. It’s been a long time.”

“Last we heard you disappeared after the funeral,” his mother said.

Veronica felt anger for the first time in years but didn't let it show. “You didn't come. Any of you.” She smiled.

“To the funeral of a whore and her poor husband? No, we didn't,” Jacob's mother said.

Jacob's father said, “Stop it,” and stood up, took Veronica's forearm in his hand, and walked with her outside. “I'm sorry dear. This is my fault. Your mother was precious to me. She'd be so proud of you.”

Veronica left, went to the airport, arranged for the next flight. She found the airport bar and sat down next to a man she would marry six months later. He was reading *Gone With the Wind*. He said he was from Phoenix. She later found out he'd never read the book, just carried it around.

Their Wedding

They married alone, at a resort in Jamaica. Veronica's mother would have had the wedding at their historic Birmingham church, reception at the country club, guests invited on 100% cotton rag.

His Family

Her husband was the only child of an only child. The parents and the grandparents lived together in a huge modern Phoenix home. He called Veronica from his parents' house one afternoon to tell her about the little blonde mutt he'd found, and when the conversation ended he didn't replace the receiver properly, and Veronica heard his mother begin screaming obscenities at him, calling him a no-good cocksucker, worthless son-of-a-bitch, and so on. She listened for almost five minutes. Veronica

didn't hear her husband respond. When her mother-in-law finally stopped, Veronica heard a steady snap that sounded like someone beating out a carpet.

First Time

It was her first time to be sent to New Orleans. She wasn't supposed to see Van until the next morning but she had a voicemail when she landed, asking about drinks at her hotel. He didn't mention his partner.

She caught a taxi. The city looked like any other until a few blocks before her hotel. In her room, she unscrewed the silver top from a jasmine-scented candle she'd brought from home. The hotel was over a hundred years old, but her room felt generic. No crown molding, no antique furniture. The curtains were fancy, tasseled, but worn.

Across the narrow street, the sun was glowing off of a taller, grey stucco building, upscale, another hotel, maybe condos. A man on a balcony was looking at her, and she turned her head, pretended to talk to someone, so the man wouldn't think she was alone.

In the lobby, over wine, Van asked about her room. She said it was lovely but he suggested, next time she came, that she ask to be booked in one of the newer, big hotels with a view so she could see the city, the river. He told her that some rooms are so high you feel like you're floating. She was pleased he thought she'd be asked back.

When she spoke the next morning, she avoided looking at him, though his white linen shirt was just to the right of her vision. He was more casual than he'd been in Arizona, his graying hair a little longer. After she sat, and he agreed with her ideas, she

kept her expression steady. She could smell candle-jasmine on her dress, from being packed together.

Back in her hotel, she called the front desk and arranged to move rooms. Hers was across from the elevator, and she hadn't slept well. First she changed her heels for sandals, then changed back—the height made her feel in control—and looked out the window. To the right of the new, stucco building was an abandoned three-story with a black peaked roof. The top floor was half open to the air, the blue-grey painted bricks exposed at a jag.

Her new room was a suite so she asked him up; she wouldn't have been comfortable sitting with him in a room with a bed. She was leaving in the morning so didn't unpack. He walked to the window when he got there. The view was mostly mirrored offices, the nearest reflecting a fading white hotel. He looked at the wine list and asked if she knew the Chateau Talbot. She was embarrassed that she wasn't, and said something about how cold they keep New Orleans hotel rooms.

When he asked her if there had been anyone, she told him about Jamaica, then Boston. She didn't want to lie to Van. He said he and his partner were open, but he didn't think Trinh had ever done anything.

They each drank two glasses of wine, and talked about people they knew, cities they'd been sent to. They made no movement towards each other. There was a little wine still in the bottle when he left.

She scheduled a wake-up call for five-thirty, but didn't sleep, just watched television. At six, she drank the rest of the wine then called down for a cab. She had a

window seat on the plane and leaned against the side, hair draped over her face so no one could see her sleep.

Easter Basket

Veronica hadn't looked in a while but one afternoon, while her husband had a job, she searched for bottles. It was a hit, a high if she found something, like finding Easter eggs. His hiding had become as creative as her looking, though she rarely said anything. The toilet tank, the air intake vent, a spare tire. It was how they'd come to communicate.

She pulled a couple of folded magazine pages from the back of her husband's bathroom cabinet. She figured it was porn and was surprised that he masturbated, or even looked at it. Her blood pounded in her ears when she realized it was from People magazine. A recent article about Maggie.

New Year's Day

Veronica had to work the last week of December in Memphis. In Arizona her husband was not at home. Her cousin Kate and Kate's husband Sonny, who lived close to Memphis, joined her Christmas night and brought a man named Phil, their next-door neighbor. They had a fourth-floor suite, a new hotel that faced the lights and music of Beale.

Other people dropped by the hotel room over the course of the evening, some deciding to rest. That evening she slept on the fold-out bed, Phil was on the floor, groupings of people between them. Their friends took the bedroom.

She asked Phil to meet her back there, New Year's Eve. He was single and not her type, but she thought maybe he could be a boyfriend or something, a stable relationship of sorts. He'd worked at the same company for twenty years, selling fuel plans to trucking businesses. She got dressed at sunset. In the living room, she opened and shut the curtains, turned on lamps. There was a mirror by the front door and she kept checking her appearance, running her fingers through her hair, rubbing her eyes, then looking through the peephole on the door.

He brought her three red roses, gas station roses. She found a tall drinking glass in the suite's small kitchen cabinets, filled it up with water, propped the roses in. He set the arrangement on a table beside the couch. They decided it was too cold to venture outside, so they ordered room service and stayed up until daylight. Veronica was charmed that he'd brought travel Scrabble, and let him win the first game.

Waking around noon, they called Kate and Sonny to drive to Memphis and join them. That evening, the four of them huddled under coats and moved up and down Beale Street. He held her hand and mentioned a double-date. After a moment, she let go of his hand.

Wood Grave

Jacob didn't call again for two months, though she'd looked at her phone dozens of times every day, waiting. She was at home. Her husband wasn't. She pulled the ottoman up to her shelf of wooden boxes, got wood polish and a new, white cotton rag. She rubbed the rag across the back of her hand, then sat down Indian-style, phone on shoulder. She didn't want Jacob's voice to fill her house, didn't want to feel like he was there with her, because then she'd never want him to leave.

His uncle finally died, and left him the tiny Manhattan hotel, but he didn't want to talk about it. He brought up their previous epic conversation while she cleaned the insides of two navy, flower painted boxes that her mother had kept on her dresser. She almost compared it to a date. He said he'd told his parents they'd talked. She didn't ask what his mother's reaction was.

Veronica slid each of the twelve tiny drawers out of the oak medicine chest and poured the contents in front of her, her crossed calves stopping everything from spilling onto the floor. Mostly change, receipts, pills. A silver ring she thought she'd lost. He'd started dating someone, he said, a teacher from the south. The teacher was in the Hamptons for the weekend.

Disappointed and challenged by this news, feeling defensive, Veronica told him about Van as she circled the rag over a double card holder she'd bought in England. The four suits were carved on the outside, each stained a different color. Inside were two decks of her parents' cards, green and white, from a resort in Palm Beach. She shook out a deck to make sure they still smelled the same. He asked if Van had been the only other

man she'd been with since she'd gotten married. She said yes, too embarrassed to mention the Jamaican.

After they hung up, she pushed a corner of the rag through the carved whorls of the last box, the size of a squared shoebox. It held ashes but there was room for more.

A River So Long

The night before, she'd met Van in New Orleans, in a double-bedded Marriott room, thirty-two floors above the winds of the Mississippi. He went to sleep around three. Naked, she rolled the desk chair up to the window, sat and pulled the drapes around her, a full wall of cape.

From the other side of the river, a steamboat pushed across, landed on the near side. After a few minutes it took off again, went under the bridge a few hundred yards downstream and stopped again on the same side. She thought she was still watching but soon realized it was back at point A, on the other side. It made the triangular trip again and again, then the sun started to come up.

At 5:12, the river turned silver, as if it were frozen. She traced the river's curves on the window with her finger, wishing it were her. The river narrowed out of view.

The sun stung her eyes, so she came out from behind the curtains, dressed, and went to the lobby for coffee. When she came back up she asked him to leave, even though they'd planned for two nights. She watched him dress.

After he left she took off her clothes again and sat at the window all day, until the sun started to go down. Then she stood and pushed her forehead, her breasts, her belly against the cold window. The boat on the other side of the river started toward her.

Two-story Bars

When she dreams of London, it's of the inside of a hotel room. In the dream her trip will end the next day but she has not left the room yet. She reads, and orders in, becoming more panicked about what she's not doing.

The last time she was in London was more than a decade before, a year or so after her parents died, when she spent half a semester in a study abroad program, about forty miles west of the city. She left early. In her dream, she repeatedly looks up the phone number of a friend she'd made at the school, but she doesn't call him.

During her half-semester abroad, she went to London most weekends, and always got a hotel room though her dorm was only a thirty minute train ride. She didn't want to get comfortable; there was a bar in the dorm, and she made friends too easily. One weekend, at a restaurant near her hotel, she got drunk with an older man who said he was Didi Conn's ex-husband.

While in the program, she did not visit Walton-on-Thames, where she'd once spent Christmas with Jacob and his family. Every night they ate and drank at the two-story bar down the street from their hostel. The bartender created a drink for her—Santa's Kiss—a minty, frothy Rum drink with whipped cream. On the way home, she

and Jacob would walk through public garden paths, huddled under their coats, and smoke some hash his cousin had given him. They never touched each before but Christmas Eve Jacob gave her a hug.

One night, early in their marriage, she told her husband about Santa's Kiss, and they tried to make it from the ingredients she could remember. It tasted terrible, and they laughed, went to bed.

Girl in Costume

When Veronica arrived at their hotel in Memphis, Phil had just brewed a pot of coffee. He pulled a plate of evenly cut lines of cocaine from hiding in the microwave. Veronica hid her surprise and inhaled the lines with ease, though she'd never done cocaine. Later they walked to a nearby Russian restaurant. She sat with her back to the window, but after the waitress brought their first bottle of Shiraz, he suggested she move and sit next to him so she could watch all the costumes walk by outside, headed to Beale.

They shared potato pancakes topped with cream cheese and smoked salmon, then another bottle of Shiraz. She couldn't finish her steak.

After he paid the bill and they were leaving the restaurant, he stopped her and pointed out a young, thin Asian girl, in tight black that was not quite a costume, walking slowly down the other side of the street. He raised his eyebrows in question. She shook her head no.

Phil went home the next morning, though he and Kate and Sonny were going to come back that weekend. Friday night before they arrived she called her husband, said she'd be home Monday. After the rest got there, they went out to a famous New Orleans-style bar, and paid twenty dollars to have a group picture taken.

Their friends left the next day but Veronica and Phil, hungover and exhausted, decided to stay an extra night. They went to bed early, and when she woke up at midnight, he wasn't there. She thought she knew where he'd gone. She got up and packed her bags so she wouldn't have to waste any time the next morning.

Wonderful, Tonight

Veronica had been at her parents' house in Birmingham for a few weeks, her junior year of college between the summer and fall terms. On August ninth she and Jacob went out, drank a lot, went back to his apartment. Veronica sat in his beanbag and scanned his shelves of cds; he sat on the floor nearby. She didn't say much, nervous. He'd never made her nervous before.

When she got to the bottom shelf she started back at the top again, and he asked if she hadn't just seen them all. "I keep seeing new ones," she said.

"I do that too," he said, and leaned forward on his knees and kissed her.

A little later they heard Jacob's roommate drive up. Jacob pulled on jeans and met him at the door. He came back laughing, said his roommate said he smelled like sex.

Hours after that they were still under the covers in his single bed, chronicling everything they'd just done. His phone rang and went to the answering machine. It was his mother, wondering if he knew where Veronica was, that her parents had been in a car accident.

The Family Luggage

Twenty-six Inch Pullman

Veronica pulled down the small suitcase from her high closet shelf. She hadn't used it in a while. In it she found a letter her husband had stuck in there before some trip. She'd carried it around in the suitcase's loose pocket ever since.

Thirty-two Inch Pullman

The luggage, tweed fastened with straps of soft, tan belting leather, had been her parents. They'd let her start using it in high school. None of the pieces had wheels, and the bigger ones could be cumbersome. The insides were lined with cream and beige toile, and initials had been monogrammed underneath the leather, only for the family to see.

Train Case

She dialed the brass lock to 809, the number she'd reset it to after they died, and opened the small rectangle, pushed its long leather strap to the side. The miniature bottle of her perfume, L'Heure Bleue, she always left in there had finally overpowered her mother's scent: powder and soap and cigarettes.

Leather-flap Tote

She'd considered buying her husband a matching piece for their second anniversary, but it was too late. She filled the tweed tote with books, laptop, makeup, flipped over the leather and locked it in place. Everything was ready to go.

The Other Window

The view from the window looked south, down to the brightness of Times Square, and if she leaned out far enough, to a glimpse of Central Park in the other direction. Veronica could see down all thirty stories, straight to the street and sidewalk below.

The first thing she saw when she looked out the other window, discovered behind white plantation shutters that she'd thought to be decoration, were the rooftops stacked at dozens of levels below, lined up from the north side of the hotel. A few spots looked like they might dive down into tiny, dark courtyards. Looking up, she found more of the park, a long slice stretching up to the northwest corner.

When Jacob got up to her room that first night, she showed him both windows, and he pointed to the northwest corner of the park. He lived in that direction, though she did not visit his apartment.

They walked the blocks south of the hotel and then sat for drinks, which he didn't offer to pay for. Veronica hoped the omission was on purpose, that he was uncomfortable or trying to make a point, and not just cheap and ungentlemanly. She made sure to maintain eye contact, and a smile. They went different directions at the

corner, and on the way back to the hotel, she went into the drugstore that would become her nightly stop in her seven-day neighborhood. Walking under the marquee of the historic theatre next to the drugstore, she called Phil, who would have paid for drinks.

The fourth night, Jacob brought over a tiny bag of pot, better than the stuff they used to buy from Wes in Birmingham. It was storming outside and she wore soft, blue pajamas. They still laughed a lot, though it was more subdued now. More subdued than their phone calls. She sat on the bed and he, in the room's only chair.

The weather had cleared when he left a few hours later, and she opened the window, letting in the cold, and propped her socked feet up on the sill. The radiator, which kept her from pulling the chair all the way up to the window, warmed her legs from underneath.

Beyond the wild layers of buildings—new, old, tall, short—she could make out lower-lying patches of the city, residential areas, perhaps. She was frustrated not to be familiar enough to know what she was looking at. She wanted to call and ask Jacob, but she didn't.

After awhile she moved to the other window, sliding the chair up to it through the narrow space left between the desk and the bed, sat and folded her arms on the seven-inch marble ledge. The worst was over, she figured. When he'd left, he said, "goodnight my baby," and she'd looked away. It wasn't something Jacob would ever say, and Veronica thought it might be the pot. He'd said he didn't smoke much anymore.

The darkness of the corner of the park was outlined by columns of light. Closing her eyes, she listened to the traffic. The steady sound of cars sounded like the ocean,

garbage trucks slamming like waves crashing. Veronica found this window more satisfying.

She finally got up, and without turning off any lights, curled on the bed in sleep, waking a few hours later. It was almost four in the morning; the high of the evening had worn off. Her mouth was dry and didn't like the tap water, so she put on jeans and a coat and walked to her drugstore. Some young guys smoking in front of a bar tried to hassle her. On the way back, she circled the block to avoid them, staying a bit behind a young, well-dressed couple. She watched as the couple, giggling and tipsy, leaned their heads together, kissing, as they walked across the street against the traffic light.

A taxi slowed as not to hit them, and sat there as the couple stood in the middle of the street and kissed. Finally they moved and as Veronica approached the curb, she caught the taxi driver's eye. They looked at each other for a moment, and shared a shrug at the couple's behavior.

Busy with work, she didn't see Jacob the fifth day. Home early, about ten, she turned off most of the lights and opened the window, and sat. It was a weekend night and there were limos everywhere. She watched couples walk, so close together that from twenty stories up, their dark silhouettes looked like some animal running in slow-motion along the sidewalk, their legs moving in tandem to form the bottom half.

She was aware that if he wanted to, he could pass on a near sidewalk and see up to her room, to see if lights were on or windows open, to see that she was up there alone. He'd left his old pipe and the marijuana with her, and she smoked what was left.

They spent most of the sixth day together, Jacob introducing her to the city. They said goodbye before dark.

The next morning, her last, she sat at the other window, trying to memorize details of the community of rooftops below her. Some had gardens of potted plants, some had tables and chairs, some boxes and tools. What looked like thousands of closed umbrellas were strewn across one low roof. She rolled the bench backwards to the desk, took the hotel stationary and pen out, and rolled back. She wrote Jacob a short, pointed note, tore off the sheet of paper and balanced it on the ledge, a couple inches hanging out. She stood and turned to face the giant mirror on the opposite wall, and in its reflection, watched the note float away. When she shut the window, ready to check out, she didn't look to see if it landed on the roof below, or disappeared out to the street.

Dead Mall

The Restaurant

In New York, Jacob told Veronica that the last time he'd gone home to Birmingham, he'd driven past the old mall and it was creepy, deserted in the middle of the day, busy traffic on three sides, most but not all of the parking lots chained. Her last job at that mall was waiting tables at its chain restaurant, a job that made her aware that her income was based on selling herself, and she kind of liked that. Her mother thought the job to be tacky.

The Card Store

Her first job, to pay for gas. Jacob would call and, in fake voices, ask extensive questions about cards. She had to be polite in case it wasn't him.

The Luggage Store

A college guy worked at the luggage store directly across from her card shop, and they'd wave, separated by benches and fake trees. She worked at the luggage store one Christmas wrapping presents, giant suitcases, wallets. The guy didn't have much to say.

That Thing That You're Hearing

The power went out the night before Veronica and her husband left for Los Angeles. She sat and listened to music coming from the tiny earphones laying in front of a lopsided group of candles on the dining room table, which they never used. A car had crashed into a pole two houses down, about midnight. It didn't wake her husband, who remained out, on the sofa. She could see only his legs from where she sat. She felt safe. The dogs were sleeping at her feet, and from outside Veronica heard people talking and occasionally an order being yelled by the cops or someone from the power company. For those few hours, she felt like she wasn't in her home, but in a new community, with just the basics for survival. A little light, a bottle of water, some macadamia nuts. Dogs for company.

She hadn't slept much when they left at nine in the morning, but insisted on driving. They got there about six, stuck in traffic on the way to their hotel, slightly out of the city. After they checked in, they drove back and walked around, ate at a pizza place. She fell down once, on the sidewalk.

The next day at noon, he dropped her off at the coliseum. Maggie was performing in a celebrity variety show that was being filmed for television. Veronica's husband said he was going to drive around some, maybe go back to the hotel for a bit. She walked down the steps to her second row seat and didn't move for a few hours, taking in the constant movement. Her eyes started to hurt.

When Klein sat down in the empty seat next to her, she didn't look at him at first. He had two concession stand cups and put one at her feet. After a moment she picked it up and took a sip. Diet Coke and rum. She finally turned to him. He didn't look any different than he had in college; his hair was still blond and shaggy, his face tan. She wondered if he still carried the same worn silver flask.

"When's the last time you saw her," Veronica asked.

"Six months ago. She's fine. You?" Klein said.

Veronica shook her head no. "Just on t.v."

He tapped his fingers on her knee while they watched, keeping beat to the music. A few minutes before Maggie came out, he asked Veronica how her husband was, and she told him to shut the fuck up. They laughed.

Everyone around them stood up when Maggie came out, but they stayed seated. Klein leaned over to say something to her, but she shook her head, a quick no. She watched Maggie go to the center of the stage, arch back, her small breasts pointing up. She wanted to run her hand down the curve of Maggie's back, touch her slim, muscular thighs. After Maggie was gone, Veronica looked at Klein and shrugged. He said she needed to eat something, and pulled a package of crackers out of his bag,

They sat under the bright lights for a few minutes after it was over, then she left. He was going to sit there longer. She saw her husband turning the corner when she exited at the side doors. It was cool, and dark. She walked carefully. As she got in the car, he asked how Maggie was. She told him it was good. He said he'd gone back to the hotel. She could see his eyes were bloodshot, and believed him.

She turned off the light soon after they got back to the room, but lay awake most of the night, jittery from whatever pill Klein had given her.

Veronica and Klein talked about skipping the exhibition altogether, but when she got there late the next morning, Klein was already at their seats. Soon the lights lowered and they watched as many-colored spotlights traced the stage.

They sat in the dark with their forearms against each other. It was cold, and she wasn't sure if she'd ever see him again. She stood as soon as it was over, but he stayed seated, and asked if she needed anything. She said no, and left. They'd not discussed Maggie further.

It had warmed up some outside, and she shielded her eyes against the sun, looking for the car. When her husband pulled up, she got into the backseat and found the blanket. She put on her earphones, and pretended to sleep the whole drive home.

Away from Beale

She called Phil from the lobby when she arrived, but he didn't offer to come down and help her with her luggage. She stood and looked around the lobby, undecided. They

hadn't seen each other in a few months. An enormous flower arrangement was blocking the view of the elevators. It was gorgeous, full of fresh spring flowers that she thought she could smell. She smiled at a bellman, who came to help. As they walked past the arrangement, she realized the flowers were fake.

After she knocked at the door, she and the bellman stood for a moment, not hearing anything. The bellman asked if she was sure. Finally the door opened, and Phil looked surprised to see the bellman, quickly passing a ten dollar bill.

This was the first time they'd had a balcony at this hotel, and she went straight out to it, breathing in the warmth, the humidity. She could see an inch of the Mississippi. He called out, asking what she wanted from room service. She wanted to eat on the balcony, but he wanted to watch television.

Later they moved to the bedroom. She undressed while he ordered porn through the hotel television. Afterwards he turned from her to sleep, though she wasn't convinced he actually was. She went to the living room, pulling the bedroom door closed behind her. His wallet was on the coffee table. She went out to the balcony for a minute, came back inside, took a hundred dollar bill from his wallet, and put the plastic card key in her purse.

Downstairs, she headed away from Beale, found a dive bar where the crowd was thinning. She ordered a beer and on her cell phone, called Jacob. His voicemail picked up right away, and she didn't leave a message.

Garden Party

Veronica wasn't clear why Klein wanted to meet her in Memphis. She explained to Phil that Klein was just an old friend, but Phil insisted on getting them a suite, at a small historic hotel edging downtown. She got there first and opened the door with a real key, not a plastic card. Inside was like being outside. The floor was flagstone, and a rocked-in garden of two-story banana trees lined one side of the room. A waterfall fountain in the middle soaked in all the noise. Sun fed the room from skylights and windows that arched to the ceiling.

She climbed the spiral staircase. A loft made up the other upper quadrant of the space, just a bed and tiny bathroom, balconied by elaborate ironwork. There was a glass-topped patio table in the kitchen under the loft, and a chair and fold-out sofa in the living area. It felt like New Orleans, but newer. She set her bags behind the chair.

Phil wanted to buy them dinner the second night, and shook Klein's hand hard when Veronica introduced them. They had a corner booth in the dark bar, away from everyone. Phil left for the bathroom after they got their appetizer and Klein asked her what she saw in Phil. Veronica was embarrassed. About thirty minutes later she heard her cell phone vibrate, saw it was a Memphis area code, and answered. A man asked for Klein. She raised her eyebrows and handed him the phone.

Klein said he'd be back but she sat by herself for almost an hour. She paid the bill and walked six blocks to the hotel. The two men were sitting on the couch, Phil holding a bloody washcloth to his chin. She sat down in the chair but couldn't hear them over the rush of the fountain, so moved to the couch.

Phil thought that his jaw was broken. He said someone had drugged him. Maybe one of them. He didn't want to go to the hospital yet. She didn't ask why he called Klein to help.

The three moved upstairs to the bed. Klein got a clean washcloth and dabbed at Phil's open flesh. Phil wouldn't speak to either of them. He reached into the side of his mouth and pulled out something, handed it to her. It took her a second to realize it was part of his tooth. It was yellow, not white; it didn't look like tooth. She put it on the dresser, sat down between them and started to rub Klein's back. His skin felt young, smooth. Soon she felt Phil's hand slide under her, between her legs. After a few minutes she went downstairs and lay on the sofa, without folding out the bed. She couldn't hear anything except the fountain.

The next morning she kept her eyes shut while she heard one man leave, then the other. She called the front desk and arranged for a late afternoon checkout. Had them charge the fifty-dollar fee to Phil's credit card. She walked around the room, up the stairs. All of the furniture was slightly damp. Upstairs smelled like blood. Downstairs she found a switch by the garden wall, and turned off the fountain.

Days Uncounted

She decided to drive instead of fly from Memphis to New Orleans, wished she could take a riverboat, snake down the Mississippi. She turned off her phone but after an

hour turned it back on. There was a voicemail from Jacob. He was in Birmingham at his parents, and spoke the number as she mumbled it from memory.

For the next few miles she looked between the road and the clouds. They were fluffy and white on top, flat and gray across the bottom. When he answered she didn't tell him where she was, on an interstate only a few hours west of him.

He asked if, while he was home, he could take flowers to the cemetery for her. For a moment she went dizzy, her car rocking like a boat, a stranger onboard with his hands tightening around her throat. She hadn't been in her home, her car, her bed in weeks.

The Music There

She was in New Orleans for her sixth wedding anniversary. She didn't tell Van she was coming two days early. It hadn't been long enough since they'd been together, and she didn't want him to sense her eagerness. In the room, she immediately took off all her clothes and put on the hotel bathrobe. Found the thick hotel information binder and got on the fluffy, white bed. She looked through room service, noted that an in-room massage required an hours' notice. At the back of the binder was a list of their hotels in other cities.

She'd never stayed in this hotel, and it took her a minute when she opened the curtains to figure out the lay of the Quarter, which spread out, all the roofs almost level, to the left. Taller hotels to the right blocked most of the Mississippi.

It was early Saturday afternoon, and lightning outside. At nineteenth-floor level, the rain looked light, misty, but she could see people on the street getting blown and drenched. She looked down the half-mile or so angle of Bourbon Street lit by red, and decided to stay in. She'd asked for a river view and was a little frustrated. She could only see two slices of water, one on top of the other, curves between two hotels. The nearer bend, the bottom, was a rectangle, slightly wider than tall. The farther bend, on top, was at a slight diagonal compared to the other, the same width but only about one-tenth the height. She sat down and watched a barge cross the top stretch, right to left. It disappeared, and about ten minutes later, crossed the bottom stretch, left to right.

A tinkling noise sounded like a windchime right outside the window. Maybe a boat call blowing up from the river. She wished she was in New York, where the windows opened all the way. A man started yelling in the room next door, and she thought he must be angry with someone on the phone, but after a few minutes she heard a soft female voice. She ordered dinner, ate, put in the complimentary ear plugs, and stretched out on the bed.

About midnight she woke up and moved to the window without turning on the light. She noticed a lower building, across the street, probably ten stories, with a giant neon HOTEL sign on top. By its size and location she knew it must be someplace nice, but she saw no name, just a lit sign floating below in the sky. The streets were so narrow between the buildings that she didn't think the sign would be visible from below.

She looked towards the river, at the tall hotel in front of hers. They sat at angles, the two hotels' nearest points maybe fifty yards apart. She saw, in a room about level to

hers, a couple standing at the window, the man behind the woman. They stood there a long time but she didn't see them move.

Veronica didn't think that a massage would be available that time of night but she called guest services anyway. Male or female was all they wanted to know. Male, she answered, then called right back and asked to change it to female.

Forty-five minutes later, after the table was set up and she was stretched out face-down under the sheet, she asked about additional services. The girl—young, attractive, pleasant, professional—didn't say anything. Veronica lifted her head and met the girl's eyes. They nodded and agreed on two-hundred extra.

Afterwards, she put on her bathrobe, turned on the radio, opened the curtains, and sat down. The light was on and she knew she had an audience if she wanted one. About three a.m. the radio caught, and played the lead-in minute or so of a classic rock song, just instrumental, over and over for an hour. She couldn't think what song it was. When the radio finally paused it sounded like someone was in the room behind her, breathing.

Looking at the middle of the window, she realized there was another view of the river, far away beyond the Quarter. She could tell it was water by the reflections it mirrored. Closer, she noticed a large-screen television, maybe theater-sized, in the top floor of a building. It looked like golf on the television, blue on top of green.

It started storming again around five. There was no sign of the sun. The river was slate but lightning turned it silver. Slowly over the hour the river turned to cement, like a smooth road, and she started to see the pinks and yellows and balconies in the Quarter.

Up again only a few hours later, she opened the curtains, stood there, looking to make sure there was nothing she'd missed. Down on the sidewalk were families, people dressed for brunch or church. Then she found a green square, flattened by the distance, the tops of trees lining Jackson Square. A red helicopter, a tour maybe, circled the Quarter then headed out to the river.

Other People

Kenny Stern

Kenny Stern, one of the theater kids, took Veronica on her first real date. They saw a sappy movie and he cried. He didn't ask her out again but she wanted him to. Decades later she heard Kenny Stern had a role in an off-Broadway play opposite the star of that sappy movie.

Teacher

Environmental Science, junior year; he started a recycling program, and on the last day of school spread the years' soda cans in his backyard, and had the students in Veronica's class drive back and forth across to flatten them, kids piled in the back of pickups. He once told the class a beautiful story about a man fucking his retarded daughter, and the class cried.

Sister Christian

Much older, like an aunt. Nice, a full-time pediatrician, married with kids almost as old as Veronica.

Swung Way Down Low

Next time she went to Memphis she didn't call Phil, but the second night she was there, her cousin Kate called her. Said they needed her to come up, and handed the phone to Sonny, who said the same. There had been a fire at Phil's house, next door, and he was staying with them.

She drove an hour-and-a-half north in her rental car, thought she could smell smoke miles before she arrived. Phil was sitting on their front porch swing but before she could say anything, Kate ran out of the house and jumped on her. They fell.

It was almost dark but Veronica could see the upper corner of the house next door was gone, black, crumpled. Sonny came out, hugged her, his hand brushing against her ass, and took her bags inside. Phil followed him. He still hadn't spoken to her.

Inside was as she'd remembered: piles of dog hair, glasses, clothes everywhere. Sonny had taken her bags into the guest room and was walking out, pillow and quilt in arms. He handed them to Phil, without a word. Phil stretched out on the couch, turned to face the back of it, and pulled the quilt over him. The quilt was splotted with coffee stains.

The three sat and drank a couple bottles of wine, then Kate went to bed. Veronica and Sonny split a third bottle, their voices lowering. Phil's back was to them. He'd barely moved. Sonny asked, for old time's sake? She smiled and shook her head. Before she went to bed, Sonny took her hand and walked her into the bathroom. He ran his thumb in circles over her wrist, and showed her where they kept the gun now.

She slept for a few hours then woke, hearing someone moving in the living room. Then there was quiet, then a dog's nails clicking on hardwood. She was almost back to sleep when Phil came into her room. He locked the door behind him. She stayed in there until the sun came up, then left the room, the house. On the drive back to Memphis she could smell smoke in her hair.

Up on Your Feet

She spent most of her time in Jamaica in the hammock. It was only about twenty yards from her patio, but so enclosed by trees she wasn't sure anyone else knew about it. No one was ever there. The second night, after drinking, she slept there for a few hours.

In the day, clips of the ocean were visible over the cliff, and occasional blasts of sun would discover the hammock, but it was mostly shady. She switched sides constantly; the view of the ocean was better, but from that side she couldn't see anyone who might come up behind her.

The fourth day, the last, she lay in the hammock for about ten minutes, before she left. She meant to grab a little sand, to remind her. Instead she dug, buried the weed she hadn't been able to finish smoking and the pipe, both bought off her Jamaican, inside the plastic. She was boarding the shuttle when she remembered the sand, and pulled a hibiscus off of a nearby bush instead.

Here Comes the Twister

She shouldn't have brought her husband, hadn't known Van was going to be in Indianapolis. The two colleagues sat opposite each other at the conference table and mostly watched each other. She wished she were dressed better. Her lips were chapped.

During a break they sat at a table by the coffee kiosk. Van had been behind her in line and paid for her latte. She dreaded telling him that her husband was there. He suggested dinner and she said no, but maybe the two could meet for a drink in the lobby, later.

Her husband was fine with room service. She didn't eat much of her beef burgundy, said she didn't want to be sleepy for her last meeting, and left him with the television on.

Downstairs, she and Van found an empty corner with a chair and a loveseat. A waiter in black and white kept gin and tonics in supply, and soon they were both tipsy, laughing. It was the first time she'd seen him not in rigid control.

When the bar closed at one, they went to a stairwell and walked up a few floors, holding hands, and sat on a stair. They leaned together and finished talking.

Love and Marriage

One night at work in her Phoenix office, she called Jacob, asked him about his trip home. The building was almost empty but she shut her door and put him on speaker, set low, and watered her snake plant from the bottle she'd filled in the bathroom. His

sister had had a baby boy, named after him. With the bottom inside edge of her shirt she polished the two pictures on her desk. He asked her why she hadn't had children, and she told him about her husband's parents, first cousins.

For the first time they discussed her trip to New York, the night they stayed in, and she wanted to ask him why he'd said, "Goodnight my baby." She thought about it every day. He asked her when she'd be in New York next, said that he'd never have any reason to be in Arizona, and she finally found the courage to tell him she'd be there in a week. They didn't talk for as long as usual, but she was tired when they hung up, put her head down on the desk for an hour, eyes closed, replaying the conversation, what she should have said differently.

Four-room Hotel

The Lavender Room

On her second trip to New York she toured Jacob's hotel. Veronica met him in the tiny marble lobby. Jacob told her they served peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and hot chocolate at ten every night in the lobby. He said he hadn't changed much at the hotel.

In the first room she thought she could even smell lavender, and he pointed to the bundle in a cylinder glass vase on the desk. It added an unexpected masculinity to the room, like the linger of cologne.

Pink Prison

They could only get to the room through its green-tiled bathroom. It was large, a porcelain built-in tub, a glassed in shower. Fluffy mauve bathmats:

The bedroom was papered around with cream and mauve vertical stripes, the pattern broken only by tiny-slatted plantation shutters. Behind the glass windows was brick. He showed her the inside of the closet, its walls signed by hundreds of guests over the years.

Butterfly Room

The room was peach and yellow, some heather blue and soft green. Butterflies everywhere. The bed, peach-painted wrought iron. He said his aunt and uncle had fought about the cost of having butterflies painted on the claw-foot tub.

He took a big brass key from his pocket and opened a door. She climbed behind him to the attic. Dusty furniture was piled in the middle and books were stacked along the walls.

Wood Room

The first thing she noticed was the green flowered chaise lounge angled from the corner. Then she felt claustrophobic. Newer oversized furniture and smaller antique pieces, all similarly-colored wood, took all wall space.

His aunt and uncle had lived in this room for almost twenty years, he told her, and he almost never came in here. They left quickly.

Stabbing the Rat

Veronica didn't visit Kate and Sonny again until Phil moved out. Husband and wife were in the kitchen, chopping bell peppers and onions, when she got there. Sonny hugged her. Kate turned to say something, knife in hand, but then stood still, looking at the microwave. A large grey rat ran across the blue-tiled counter, and she stabbed it right through. She held the knife in place, looking at the rat stuck on the blade.

Veronica walked outside, managed not to get sick, and threw sticks to the dogs. The burned house next door hadn't been fixed, and there was a red and white "for sale by owner" sign in the front yard. Kate came out with a trash bag that she ran to the cans on the street. Then she left in her car, waving, smiling.

Sonny was on the porch swing, said Kate was going for groceries. Veronica sat down next to him and looked back and forth between the lantana in Kate's garden to the blond hairs on the back of Sonny's hand, catching the sunlight. He kept putting his hand on her thigh as he talked and she kept putting it back in his own lap.

She was leaning against his shoulder when they heard breaks and looked up at the street. A small black car was headed at them, but the sun blinded them from seeing the driver. The car started towards them and they jumped up, were halfway across the porch when the car hit the bricks. The swing swung sideways, hitting the house then the car, the house then the car. Phil came out of the crumbled door, and one of the dogs growled, bit him.

Kate drove up, and everyone went inside. Kate took Phil to the guest bedroom. Veronica and Sonny watched them through the open door. Kate put her hand on Phil's

shoulder and pushed him to sit on the bed. She stood in front of him and put her arms around his head, pulling Phil's face to her breasts, and ran her fingers through his hair.

Veronica and Sonny went outside and looked silently at the car, the house. Finally she said she had to go. Before she pulled away, Sonny checked her tires, and leaned into the window for a hug.

Coffee Break

Klein again asked Veronica to meet him in Memphis next time she had to go. He was in his room, diagonaled from hers, when she arrived. He hugged her, said she felt different, and that they needed to talk about what had happened. She didn't ask if he meant Maggie or Phil.

She crossed to her room and put her bag down, found the room service menu, then sat at the window while she waited. The hotel was at the poor edge of downtown, and she was surprised when a trolley rolled down the line, and surprised again when it rolled back a few minutes later. She could just see a children's hospital a few blocks north, a three-story Teddy bear painted on the side of the building. There were only a few cars in the parking lot.

After she ate she stretched out on top of the itchy bedspread, pulled a pillow out. The pillow smelled like the cologne her husband used to wear. She fell asleep. When the phone woke her up at four in the morning Klein asked her to come to his room. She brushed her teeth and ran a wet washcloth under her eyes, then stood in the hallway for a

moment. Coffee was brewing in his room, and Veronica thought that they were probably the only people on the floor. His room was exactly the same as hers. The curtains were open to black.

They each sat on a bed, Indian-style, drinking coffee, and for four hours talked. The sun gradually lit the buildings outside, a slow-motion opening to a movie. Klein was concerned about Veronica, said she didn't need to worry about Maggie. It was no big deal, he said, especially now that everyone knew she was adopted. He promised that Maggie had never brought up the incident.

"I think about it, though. It was hot," Klein said, and leaned over to brush his finger across Veronica's nipple. She slapped his hand away. Veronica said she wasn't a stalker, and told him about the fire. When she got up to make more coffee on the desk by the window, she noticed the red letters on top of the Peabody, and for a moment only saw the hotel, as if it were a century earlier, the view from a riverboat a mile upstream. She sat down on his bed, with him. They sat and stared at a church right next to the hotel. After a few moments she realized that dozens of people were sitting on the low wall around the church in groups that were almost completely still.

Her Dress Now

She met Van and Trinh at a five-table restaurant on Toulouse. A family with older, maybe college-aged children, filled two tables pushed together against the back wall. Van ordered a bottle of wine, and steamed crab claws. Open French doors spanned

the front of the restaurant. Breeze from the street and the overhead fans made the table candles flicker.

Trinh asked about Memphis. Veronica hesitated, looked down at the table, and for a moment felt ill, thought they already knew what had happened. The need to tell someone, another woman, was overwhelming, so she did. She only mentioned Phil by name once, promising it was over, and didn't look at Van while she spoke. She didn't mind that he knew she was sleeping with other people—in fact, she hoped he felt something like jealousy—but she wanted to impress him with her choice of partners. Phil was not impressive.

Humidity dampened her hairline and the jeans she was wearing were hot, tight, heavy. Van's partner was wearing a halter-style sundress, black and white, and Veronica flashed to a picture of her mother, from the sixties, wearing a similar dress. Van didn't say anything, just watched the women talk.

Going to Bed

Finally home to Phoenix and in her own bedroom, Veronica tossed the purple and magenta raw silk pillows from her bed, folded down the deep green, velvet-edged bedspread. The horizontal stripes of the sheets still surprised her.

She got her laptop, patted her hip for the black dog to join her, and they went to bed. The dog turned a few times and pushed down beside her, back curled. Her forearm on the dog, she logged in and saw she had an email from Van. Her husband knocked on

the cracked door, came in and sat down on the bed. He asked if it was okay that he slept there a few times while she was gone.

After he left, she read her email. Van wanted her to go to New York with him for the next meeting, and their boss agreed. She closed the computer, put it on the floor, listened to the dog breathe next to her. Annoyance at Van's intrusion was overwhelmed by his approval. She turned off the bedside lamp and stretched out, facing the bedroom door. The black dog uncurled against her, and they fell asleep, their spines aligned.

Tuesday and Wednesday

On her third trip to New York, the butterfly room was available for the nights she'd be there. Jacob didn't offer to handle it for her, just said to call the hotel for a reservation. The day before she flew out, he emailed that he wouldn't be in town.

The plane was late so she had to take a taxi straight to the conference hotel, where almost everyone else was staying. For nine hours she talked, numbed by the fluorescent lighting in the windowless room. The heat was set ten degrees too high and the small of her back was sweaty.

Jacob's hotel wasn't far but she was too tired to carry her luggage. The girl at the hotel took her bags from the taxi driver, led Veronica up two turns of stairs, and unlocked the left door. She said that the owner, Jacob Cassidy, had been staying in this room for the past few weeks while his apartment was being renovated, that he'd been fixing up this room, too.

Veronica could smell fresh paint, and wanted the girl to leave. She wondered if Jacob was friends with the girl, interested in her. As soon as she heard footsteps going down the stairs, she started to look. She opened every drawer, bending over to see in back of each, all corners of the closet, in the bathroom. All empty, pristine.

Then she took her clothes off, and unpacked, putting a few items in every drawer, wanting to fill the room. A clear glass bowl filled with pink and green bath beads sat on the tub, and she put the chained plug in place and filled the tub with hot water. She took six beads out of the bowl, dropped in five, put one back. As they burst, the water swirled iridescent.

In the water, the oil from the beads soaked into her skin, and she leaned her head against the rounded tub edge. She closed her eyes and imagined him sitting there on the bathroom floor, his back against the wall. She arched her neck to give him the best angle. Her lips moved in pretend conversation. Under the water she moved her hand between her thighs.

Out of the tub she toweled off, turned on the lamp by the bed, and turned off the overhead light. She got in bed, naked, with her briefcase, and got out her glasses and a file. She worked with deliberate seriousness, as though he might be sidling glances at her. The soft white scalloped-edged sheet was folded down at her waist.

The next morning, she nodded to a middle-aged man coming out of the room across from hers, the wood room. They started down the stairs at the same time and at the first turn, she asked him if he was alone. When he said yes she stood on her tiptoes and they started to kiss. With his body, he leaned her up against the wall, and she suddenly felt trapped, in danger.

Metal and Stone

Hannah's watch

Her husband called her in New York; their house had been burgled. She was supposed to compile a detailed list for the police and insurance company, but didn't bother with the smaller pieces. Hannah had been her mother's final friend, had left Veronica an antique Hamilton diamond watch, delicate 18K white gold. She remembered that two large diamonds were set at the top and bottom of the curved face, but not much else. She hadn't worn it since her wedding.

Sapphire link bracelet

The Family had been in Africa for her parents' twentieth wedding anniversary. Veronica was six. It was a grown-up party, so she sat in the family room with the houseboy until nine o'clock, and then, like she and her father had practiced, slipped the bracelet over her wrist and took it to her mother at the head of the table.

Oval-cut amethyst ring

The ring was taken but her amethyst pendant wasn't, was still at her throat. She wore it almost everywhere, but a few months before, she'd put away the matching ring she used to have on her left hand, because it had been mistaken for a wedding ring.

Pearl studs/diamond jackets

She'd lost the earrings the year before but wrote them down anyway. Her husband gave them to her on their wedding night and hadn't asked when she stopped wearing them. She hadn't missed the earrings, but she wanted him to know they mattered.

Phantom Memory

Before they celebrated over dinner, she and Van walked around Times Square, past a toy store with a regular-sized Ferris-wheel inside, then she took him some blocks west, gave him the same tour Jacob had given her, but got lost. When they passed three streets over from Jacob's hotel she realized where they were. They found a small Turkish restaurant on the way back.

After dinner, she went back to her own hotel, knew Van was surprised. At their breakfast meeting the next morning he said he was going to leave early, that afternoon. He wanted to watch the election results on television with his partner.

She went to the west Village for dinner with a woman, younger, from work, Van's new hire. They found an almost empty pub on a triangled corner, took three steps down from the sidewalk into the dark. There were no televisions. They ate and then Veronica paid for the girl's drinks.

The city outside suddenly cheered, and wouldn't stop for hours. Soon the pub was full and there was laughter, toasts, strangers kissing strangers.

Jamaica

No one had come in her Phoenix office all day, though they had to have seen her carrying everything in. She'd set up a hammock chair in the corner, was arranging tall foliage around it when Van walked in. The two wooden giraffes, propped, leaned their

heads into the wall. It was Van's first Arizona return since transferring to New Orleans, and she hadn't expected him to come for the meeting that afternoon.

He shut the door and said he was worried about her. She told him she wanted her office feel like Jamaica, and showed him the picture. He said the Phil situation seemed dangerous, suggested that perhaps her husband might help. She laughed.

Dream

A few weeks after her first trip to New York she'd dreamt about leaving the city, driving north of Manhattan, as though it weren't an island. In the dream she found a dark, empty section of interstate, took an exit with just a gas station and huge, budget motel. She checked into the motel and from the window, had an exaggerated, magnified view of the city, could even make out the hotel she'd stayed in. Dream-distance was marked by trees, unlit earth, separating her.

Months after the dream, watching a morning show at home in Phoenix, she saw the hosts visit a new hot-air balloon ride near the middle of Central Park. They went up, with the cameras, about thirty stories, an unobstructed, 360-degree angle of the city islanding the park. Veronica's knees jolted as she stared at the view from her dream.

I Live by the River

Veronica and Van stayed together in Memphis for the three-day meeting. He waited for her at the airport. She later realized he'd waited over three hours for her. They took a taxi downtown.

The décor surprised her; the hotel was right off the interstate, the lobby plain, hot. But the room felt new and clean, a modern take on retro, graphic-patterns on the bed and chairs. A flat-screen television spanned a black dresser with brushed silver hardware. The walls were faux-finished a beige that turned light mustard when Van opened the curtains. Out the window was a huge four-sided pyramid, covered in mirror glass.

The Pyramid filled the sky to the left, blocking all but a jag of the river's far side. The late-afternoon sun fired off the south side of the building. The east side was already dark gray. She laughed when he unpacked sheets from home.

Van commented how close the pyramid seemed. An eight-lane curve of interstate separated them, like a river bend. The rising building didn't look close to her at all. It reminded her of the space shuttles grounded right outside a hotel room window a long time ago, Huntsville, with her parents. She turned and started to unpack, told him that before she'd started traveling, she kept a bag packed all the time, under the bed, like an expectant mother. When she looked out the window a few minutes later the glare was gone from the south side of the pyramid.

Make-up

Veronica was cross-legged on the king-sized hotel bed in Boston when Kate called. Veronica answered by saying hold on, and pushed the button to put Kate on speaker phone. She hadn't told Kate or Sonny about Phil's email, the pictures. Didn't want them to feel responsible.

She put the phone face down on the beige micro-suede bedspread and picked up her small magnifying mirror and mascara before she said hello. The mirror magnified 8X; Veronica didn't travel without it. Kate said that Sonny had been in a car accident, that it was bad. Veronica pushed the skinny wand of black into the base of her eyelashes, wiggled it up, and repeated several times on each eye while Kate told her the details. She blinked her eyes wide after she capped the mascara, looked across the room, and noticed a previous guest's eye mask that housekeeping had overlooked under the chair. She stood up and distanced her eyes in the mirror on the other side of the room.

When Kate called that evening and said Sonny had made it through surgery, Veronica felt something like disappointed. She'd been prepared to grieve.

Packing

Pink Plaid Blazer

Veronica thumbed past the delicate tweed jacket that she'd only worn once. She had searched all night for the \$700 jacket on the internet after Maggie wore the same one

on an episode of her television show. Veronica wore it to a party, thrilled, but left early, scared someone would comment on the dress.

Black Velvet Opera Coat

Knowing little about the city, she and Jacob's mother had found themselves in the basement of an antique shop in London. Veronica couldn't afford anything, but moving from the crowded aisle, her forearm brushed velvet, and she pulled out a long coat, held it up to her.

Jacob's mother watched her slip it on. It cocooned her almost to the ankle. Much of the inside was the same velvet, the rest, heavy silk softened with age. She felt like she was wearing sable.

It would cost the rest of the money she had for the trip, but she bought it anyway. As she was counting twenty pound notes into the shop-owner's wrinkled hand, Jacob's mother added a few of her own. She'd never bought Veronica anything before.

Minidress

Veronica found what she was looking for next to the tiny beige and cream checked dress she would never get rid of. She didn't get rid of anything. The dress, sleeveless, ended in small pleats mid-thigh. She'd bought it her first year off at college, the most bare clothing she'd ever had. The summer after freshman year, back at home, she wore it to a gay bar in the next town, with Jacob. They sat close together so no one would think they were available. Jacob didn't say anything about the dress.

The Sky Too

When Veronica landed in New Orleans and turned on her phone she had a message that the boss's mother had died and all meetings, cancelled. She collected her bags and sat down in a vinyl airport chair, trying to decide what to do. The hotel was paid for through the weekend, and she didn't have to be back at work in Arizona until Wednesday. She took out her laptop and checked her email, hoping for something from Jacob. They hadn't been in contact in months, purposefully Veronica hoped, but the night before she'd forwarded him some information that needed no response. And there was none. A headline on her homepage said New Orleans was expecting bad weather, and she thought about catching a plane back to Arizona right away.

Her hotel was the Marriott, where she'd first stayed with Van more than a year before. She hadn't been at the Marriott since, wondered if the view of the river was the same, and decided to go see.

It almost was. There were a few barges in the center stretch, warehouses in the middle of the water, and a giant flat gray ship, probably military, in the curve to the left. It frightened her and she closed the curtains, checked her email again, then called Van. He said Trinh was out of town, that she would have wanted to see Veronica. They made plans for dinner.

At dinner he said he thought the weather would miss the city, but offered to let her stay with him if she would feel safer. She said she felt safe, but would like to see his house.

The house was big, only feet from other big houses, but dark. The streetlights weren't on. It felt like the power was out in that small stretch.

Inside she went to his huge, built-in bookshelves and angled her head, studying titles so she wouldn't have to talk. A repousse silver frame shone by itself on a middle shelf, a few feet to her right, but she avoided looking over at it until she'd scanned everything in front of her. Van mixed drinks at a bar that opened to the living room, brought her one, and sat down on a leather sofa.

The picture was Van and his partner, much younger, in wedding clothes. Veronica crunched an ice cube from her drink, and looked at Van after a minute. We don't tell people, he said, not even you. She felt sick and swallowed more ice, then asked if she could use his computer. There was no email from Jacob, but she stared at the screen until Van moved behind her, put his hands in her hair.

She told him she didn't think she could, now, but he said Trinh knew, that she felt Veronica was like a daughter. Veronica said maybe they should see what happened with the weather, first, and he drove her back to her hotel.

Alone in her room she parted the curtains an inch or so; the military ship was gone so she opened the drapes all the way. The city looked like a jewel box from that high up, like it could crumble and scatter with just a shake. Buildings that she knew were square appeared skewed and stretched, trapezoids instead. There were so many rooftops that, at first, her eyes couldn't rest on one, but then she started noticing tiny houses and sheds on top of roofs, and thought it would be fun to ride out a storm in one, hunker down. On the small hotel notepad she sketched a narrow, rounded two-story, added a tower to the top, then looked back out the window for the building to place it on.

Van called and said there was something at his house she needed to see, asked her to take a cab back over right away. At the front door he took her hand and lead her to the

computer, where her email was still open. He placed her hand on the mouse and scrolled down to a message Phil had sent a half-hour before, and they clicked it open. Pictures of Veronica, naked and sleeping, slowly opened down the screen. In the last one, Phil's hand held an open pocketknife to the inside of her elbow.

Veronica shook her head back and forth for a minute, and told Van she hadn't talked to Phil since the fire. He let go of her hand and reached down to the computer tower, held in a button, and in a few seconds the screen went dark. He sat down on the leather couch and patted the space next to him. When she finally sat, he pulled a blanket around them, and with the remote, turned on the television and found the weather.

The storm would miss them, was hitting far to the east. Wind slanted the newscaster, and the sound went out. The camera cut to a trembling street sign that soon lifted from the pole, and silently floated out of range.

Little Dog

Veronica went home several days earlier than she'd planned. Her husband's car wasn't in the driveway. She heard the two dogs barking before she got out of her car. It was already raining.

Inside, clothes, bottles, books, plates of dried food filled every surface. She thought she should be surprised, but she had to pee. In the bathroom the lid was up for the dogs, and powder Clorox spilled from a bottle across the floor. One of her dresses

was wadded in the sink. She pulled up her dress, sat down on the toilet and saw an open box of condoms in the bathtub. Veronica counted seven remaining.

She checked the kitchen to see if there was food or water in the dogs' bowls—there wasn't—and when she turned around she realized she'd walked over a dead mouse. She stopped, pushed her shoulders back, and looked at the ceiling, trying to catch her breath. After a minute she walked around the tiny corpse, saw another one in the corner of the kitchen, and ran to the couch. The dogs joined her. The three of them looked at each other.

A full roll of masking tape was wedged in the cushions, and she took it to the kitchen, pulled the plywood folding doors shut, not looking at the mice. She taped a huge X across the door, from corner to corner, and used the rest of the tape on the door, horizontal stripes from top to bottom, to keep the dogs from going in the kitchen.

She turned off all the lights and put in a CD, removed her bra and panties from under her long, loose airplane dress. She stood on the couch and danced to the music, the dogs watching her, until a storm cut the power. She finally lay down, and the bigger dog, scared of thunder and lightning, lay directly on top of her, framing Veronica's torso with all four legs. Neither of them fell asleep, nor did the little dog, who watched them from the door.

Airplane

Four days later, her husband wasn't back for her birthday. She'd only left the couch for water and the bathroom. At three in the afternoon, she walked to the bedroom for the first time since the night she'd gotten home, and found an old pair of tennis shoes. She still wore the clothes she'd flown in. The dogs jumped and tangled when they saw her wearing the tennis shoes.

They went out and Veronica walked as slowly as the dogs would let her, past the white-brick Methodist church next door, then two blocks north to a tiny old business district, an unused courthouse square. They circled the building twice, the dogs picking at the grass, then moved out a block. At the leather shop they started over. One block south, one block east, one block north, one block west. They passed the leather shop four times.

Back in front of the house, the dogs panted, but she didn't want to go inside, or walk the same route. They started the three blocks squaring the area they'd already traveled. About halfway down the second side, the north, they passed a reflective window, and she watched the three of them move as if in slow motion, connected by the thin black stretch of leash, then halted in front of the open door of a garage. Inside the concrete room was a small two-seater airplane, filling the space from sides to ceiling. It seemed to block all light, and a black man in overalls walked out from behind the plane. Both dogs began howling. Veronica turned fast and headed for home, and the dogs first resisted, then ran with her and past her, pulling her forward.

Maggie

Veronica didn't want to be home, she didn't want to go to New Orleans or New York or Boston or anywhere she'd ever been. She didn't want more time off. She didn't want to work, or sleep, or stay awake, or eat, or stop eating, or have sex, or talk.

She got on her laptop and Googled Maggie, a normally avoided activity. Maggie was still filming the show for the season, in Wilmington, NC. Veronica called the airline and booked a flight for the next week, using frequent flier miles. She wouldn't be able to get close to Maggie, but the idea of being in the same small town, even for three days, made her feel better.

Birthday Feast

She left her husband a credit card and a note that said to meet her at the casino they'd been to before, in Vegas. She boarded the dogs at a vet they had never used, the suburbs, a place he would never think to look. If the marriage was over he was not getting the dogs, Veronica determined. She didn't always think about them when she traveled but at the moment, they seemed like her only friends.

At the hotel she dropped her bags in the room and headed straight for the \$20 buffet. The first plate was from the Italian station, pizza and red and white pastas. Then the Southern station, macaroni and cheese and not-from-scratch mashed potatoes and green beans and roast beef. Third, the Asian station, a plate of vegetable fried rice. It all tasted like it had been cooked in the same grease.

At the dessert station she filled bowls with different cobblers, walked towards her table, then turned back to get some cookies. At the table she wrapped the cookies in a napkin, looked around, then dropped the bundle in her bag. After the waitress came and took her empty plates and empty bowls, she took some crackers and butter from the table, and added them to the stash in her purse.

In the room she was sick, and used all of the miniature bottle of hotel mouthwash. She took the cookies out of her purse and fanned them out on the dresser, on the napkin, then ate the top cookie. It was peanut butter, and was the first thing that had tasted good. She ate the rest, then got into bed, and fell asleep.

She was dreaming when there was a knock at the door, and it was a minute before she realized the knock wasn't part of her dream. The blackout curtains were shut; the clock shined 9:45. Her husband was outside the door and she stood there, asked him if it was night or morning. He looked at her, and she asked again. Night, he said. She asked how he got there so quickly, if he'd been following her, and didn't move to let him in the room.

First Grown-up Job

Jenny

Aggressive and emotional. Great sales records. Veronica once saw her stamp her foot. Jenny was something like forty-five and pinched Veronica so hard on St. Patrick's day that she bruised.

Lucas

Veronica's boss had started just days before she did. Six months later, both were asked to leave, also within days of each other.

Bryan

She rarely saw him, in a different building, but he called her one night and asked if she could pick him up from jail. The police told Veronica, when she got there, that he was drunk and had defecated in the cell. She sucked in her cheeks, pretend horror, to hold from laughing.

Two Bridges

White rocking chairs sat in place of bench seats at the Wilmington airport, and Veronica couldn't figure out why everything looked so familiar. She got a map from the rental car station and within ten minutes, parked on cobblestone at the Cape Fear river. Leaning against the riverwalk rail, she took a picture of the battleship on the other side of the water, next to a small basketball court.

Bridges bookended downtown, and she got back in her car and found the southern one, followed signs to the docked military ship, the park next to it. On the basketball court, the silver bleachers cooled the underneath of her legs and she closed her eyes until a car crunched gravel. A heavysset couple introduced themselves, and without hesitation she told them her name was Sophie. They all sat together and looked at the writing on the court, the poles without nets.

The couple said they'd been up all night before, watching the show film scenes, 1940s flashbacks, outside a church downtown, and that there would be filming again that night. Veronica had also been up all the night before, so took the northern bridge to her hotel to nap before the evening. First she drove by the church, took a picture of the row of old timey cars.

Through the Rain

After her nap she called Jacob from her hotel room phone, and didn't leave a message. It was raining, so she went to Wal-Mart and bought the largest men's hooded jacket she could find, then went back downtown. She could see the lights from blocks away and had to reverse at a barricade. A few blocks over from the lights, she slowed in front of a tiny bridge, a stoplight halting the car for no apparent reason. After it greened, she turned off the windshield wipers and watched the bridge through the water for a moment, then crossed.

It was midnight when she approached the tents, the lights. The cast had just broken for lunch, the PA told her, and he showed her the line that slanted across the street. She sat down on the curb, right at the line, pulled the hood over her head even though the rain had slowed, and wrote in her notebook until damp air curled the pages, spread her ink.

She didn't see Maggie with the other cast members when they started rehearsing a scene. The actors were dressed in black and white and the mist grayed the set, a neon

blue nightclub sign above the church doors the only respite from one-dimension. She checked her phone to see if Jacob had called, then remembered that she called from the hotel, that he wouldn't recognize the number, and she put the phone in her pocket.

Garage Sale

Crown Moldings

A few months after her parents died, Jacob had helped her with the garage sale. They started in the Tudor attic. He suggested she keep all the leftover stretches of heavy crown molding, that she could use them in her own house someday.

Wedgwood Bowl

She tripped on the fringe of the rug in the guest bedroom and knocked over the bedside table. The blue and white Wedgwood bowl her parents had bought in Barbados for her grandmother crashed to the faded hardwood, half of it shattering. Jacob said it could be glued back together but probably not to satisfaction.

Plasticware

In the kitchen, Jacob held open a giant black trash bag to her. She looked inside and pulled out a crinkly cellophane packet of plastic flatware and a Steak-Out napkin. There were hundreds of packets. Neither of them said anything. He put the bag in the garage sale pile, but later, she threw it away. She was embarrassed for her mother.

Can't Have a Swim

It took a long time for Veronica to move her eyes from the neon blue sign to the red dress that had appeared, blowing on the sidewalk beneath it. It was Maggie, leaning against the curves of a black antique car and watching her cast mates begin to film.

When the rain thickened, a tall man stood over Maggie with an umbrella. After a few minutes Veronica pulled her phone from her pocket to check again for Jacob, and when she looked back up Maggie was gone. Veronica's jeans were becoming heavy from the rain.

The couple she'd met at the basketball court said, "Sophie," and sat down beside her, and she realized after a moment that they were brother and sister. The crew took almost a half hour to prepare for a new scene, and Veronica didn't look away until Maggie's red surfaced just to the side. Her dark hair and pale skin blended with the weather, her dress and red lips seeming to be the only thing that moved.

Maggie rehearsed falling, an actor in a tux catching her on the way to the ground. Veronica couldn't hear what they were saying through the hum of rain. When the cameras started, a gunshot startled her and the couple sitting next to her, and the three leaned together for a second. Half a block away Maggie fell, the man caught her and gently laid her down, someone yelled cut, and Maggie started to laugh. Veronica wanted to feel relief that Maggie seemed happy.

They did the scene twice more, the gunshot surprising Veronica each time, then Maggie disappeared into a building across the street from the church, the same side of the street Veronica was sitting. She took her phone from her jeans pocket again. The metal-like plastic was damp, and she couldn't make any of the buttons work. At 2:13 a.m. it lit

up with Jacob's name and she tried the answer button, but it still didn't work. It was the first time he'd called her in almost a year.

Red Bedroom

Around four in the morning, the sister of the couple left, said she couldn't do the rain and cold anymore. Veronica and the brother scooted together but didn't talk, just watched the set. He pulled a flask out from under his coat and handed it to her. The liquor was sweet, peach maybe, and warmed her.

She hadn't seen Maggie in a few hours. The PA pointed to crew on the roof of the church holding straight metal hoses, said they needed rain that looked real for the next scene. Veronica and the brother were still watching the roof when a figure stepped in front of them.

"How did you know I was here," Veronica asked her husband. He didn't answer. "Are you following me? Are we done?" she asked, and her husband just looked at her. She pointed at the brother and said they were together, and her husband moved back down the street. Veronica apologized to the brother, and he took her hand.

The hoses came on and someone called rolling. Maggie and a female cast member ran through the hard rain, holding hands, screaming, under the neon blue into the church. A few minutes later a long white van pulled up and Maggie, wrapped in a large towel, maybe a blanket, walked quickly out of the church and got in. Veronica could see just the bottom of her red dress as the van door shut.

She and the brother watched for a few more hours, but Maggie didn't return. They left as the sun was coming up. After they were together in her hotel bed, and he breathed heavy sleep, she wandered her fingers up to the soft spot of his throat between his collarbones, then higher, counted to his steady pulse. The sheets were damp beneath them.

All Three

Little Dog

Neither of them had real jobs when they married, and one night, two months in, her husband called the restaurant where she waited tables and said he had surprise for her at home. She knew, without him telling her, that it was a dog, their first together.

He'd been at a gas station up the road, saw two kids kicking a skinny blonde mutt, asked inside. The guy at the register said to take her. Veronica and her husband put her in the kitchen the first night, where she cried like a human, and sometime after midnight moved her to their bed. She wouldn't lie down, just sat and watched them sleep.

Big Dog

A year and a half in, he surprised her with the big dog, the seventy pound hound that the shelter people said wouldn't grow to be more than twenty pounds. Veronica and her husband had just started counseling. The big dog smiled only at Veronica, and turned her back when Veronica paid attention to anyone else.

When the big dog was about six months old, Veronica and her husband had separated but took the dog to surgery together. She had two extra claws on each of her back feet that kept getting caught on blankets and such. After the surgery, the vet told them that he'd found several more miniature claws behind the two visible extras, that he removed seven in all. Veronica and her husband couldn't stop laughing, and went home together.

Bad Dog

She got him the day before her parents died, before she met her husband, and put him to sleep when her husband was in rehab the first time. She'd spent the morning stretched out on the kitchen floor next to his crate, patting his head until he finally growled feebly at her. She knew that was the last bit of spirit he had. It was the only day she missed her husband, and she gave the cremator a picture of her husband holding the dog, to be burned.

The Stranger

She couldn't sleep and woke the brother at nine, asked him to leave. He kissed her on the forehead and said she was tough. She could smell herself in his beard, and almost changed her mind. He picked his jacket up off the floor, handed her the flask of peach stuff, and left.

The studio offered set tours at noon and Veronica wasn't sure if she should go, but she didn't want to be in her room. She told the guard at the lot entrance that she was

there for the tour, and he pointed to a small office, dwarfed by the dozen or so white buildings behind it, to the left. She joined about fifty people in the crowded room and saw the brother and sister whispering in the corner. The sister smiled; the brother saluted Veronica with two fingers.

The group followed the guides to the building that housed Maggie's character's condo. It was laid out like a real home, except the stairs stopped after they turned a corner. Maggie's bedroom looked just like it did on television. Notes in lipstick lined the right side of her dresser mirror, and Veronica leaned over and touched the red. It came off on her finger and she held her hand to her mouth, watching herself in the mirror. She didn't lower her hand when she saw the brother enter the bedroom behind her.

The entertainment center in Maggie's living room was stacked with vintage records. Veronica bent down and thumbed through them, breathing in the old smell, and felt so dizzy she had to crouch over her knees.

Later, leaving the studio, the sister found Veronica and slipped her a folded yellow piece of paper, said it was Maggie's address in downtown Wilmington, to look for the big white house with the red front door. She and the brother walked to their car, but the brother turned back and said he wished she'd asked him to stay.

Veronica pointed her rental car out of the city, drove until she found some land crossed with creeks and piers. She pulled to the side of the road, shaking, and turned off the engine. She opened the car door and vomited onto the gravel until her chest burned.

Brunch

Veronica drove to downtown, avoiding Maggie's street, and bought an ice cream cone to eat by the river. She sat on a smooth bench, licked around the base of the cold chocolate. The chocolate dripped on her hand, and she pushed the scoop into the river and threw away the cone. She'd thought looking at the water would calm her down, but it was so black and still that it scared her, and she wondered if the ocean would be better.

It only took ten minutes to cross town and find the Atlantic. She rolled up her pants legs and, shoes in hand, skirted the water. With the edge of a shell, she wrote some words in the sand, took a picture of it, and rubbed it out with her foot, and thought she should try the river again.

Back at the riverwalk, she avoided looking at the water, found a restaurant that served brunch until five. She sat outside with her back to the water and ordered an omelet, and mimosas. When a black fly landed on her barely eaten omelet she pushed the plate away.

Knife

She was scheduled to fly home the next morning but slept through her alarm. She wasn't ready to leave Wilmington anyway, scared to fly over the water that surrounded the city. At noon she ordered a room service petite sirloin, ate it quickly and put the tray down outside her room. The steak knife fell off onto the carpet, and she grabbed it, looked down the hall, and put the privacy sign in place. She opened the bathroom door

so that it was parallel to the room door, then opened the closet door across parallel to that, creating a little maze.

Her pillow from home had fallen to the floor, and she removed the pillowcase, and carefully cut it into soft, uneven strips. She pulled all her clothes from her tweed suitcase and did the same, then took off the t-shirt she'd slept in and cut it up, too. The washcloths wouldn't cut through the sides, so she just knifed jags in them and then the towels.

Exhausted, she lay across the bed, but couldn't sleep, so cut up all the sheets. She sawed through the hotel binder and made confetti of the stationary. The curtains she carefully fringed, just the bottom half. She cried, without the noise, when she cut squares into the sofa, and pulled out the foam in lumps.

She called the front desk and arranged for another night, said she would not need her room serviced. Finally she slept for a few hours.

Her cell phone buttons still were not working, so she called Van from the room phone when she woke up. He didn't answer, but she left a voicemail, asked him to come get her.

After Leaving New Orleans

Van bought her some clothes and took her first to New Orleans. On the plane, he taught her how to play Spades again. She took a short nap and when she woke up, he was putting the pieces of her phone back together, and handed it to her.

On the second plane, rising from New Orleans, they flew just above scattered white clouds. The corresponding cloud-shaped shadows on the ground below appeared miles to the west. When they landed she checked her voicemail, started to listen to a message from Jacob, but deleted it after she heard him say her name.

Van went into the side door of her house, first. Nothing had been cleaned up, though the taped-up kitchen doors had been opened. The dead mouse was there, white, almost translucent. Van closed the doors and they started picking up her clothes, carrying loads to the laundry room. Veronica found some small women's clothes that weren't hers, but she didn't tell Van that her husband was cheating. She didn't want him to pity her any more. After washing, the clothes still smelled like the house, so they left them behind, just carried a few boxes to her car.

Flowers on the Wall

Three Dozen Long-stemmed Red Roses

Veronica worked from New Orleans for a few weeks, stayed with Van and mostly Trinh. He flew back and forth to Phoenix, filling in for her at work. She went home on a Saturday morning, walked around the house and considered packing, only the things she'd brought into the marriage. Her parents' things.

She stared up at the wrought-iron rod hanging dried flowers spanned the wall above her desk. The longest bunches were the roses, dusty and almost black, from her husband after their first fight. When he'd said he expected baby's breath to be in the

bouquet, instead of the mod gold spiral decorations, she knew she had to marry him. That was something her father would say. The parched flowers crumbled with a light tightening of her palm.

Bridesmaid Bouquet

She couldn't identify any of the browned white flowers in her bouquet from Kate and Sonny's wedding. The men had worn magnolias at their lapels, she remembered. After the rehearsal party, she'd stayed with Kate until she slept, then joined the groomsmen in Sonny's room on the floor above. The men filtered out over the night. Sonny's nephew, a teenager who looked just like him, passed out on the suite's sofa. Sonny closed the door between the bedroom and the living room and they watched the sun rise from his bedroom window.

Funeral

Mostly pink, the flowers had kept their color better than any of the rest, even though they were the oldest. She was untying the twine that hung them when the doorbell rang. It was her husband, and she walked back to her office, picking up an empty Waterford vase from the living room on the way. The heavy crystal had been one of their few wedding presents. He followed her a few feet behind, perhaps afraid she was going to hit him with the vase.

He sat down on the floor next to her as she spread the pink flowers across the carpet, telling him who'd sent what. There were none from Jacob or his family. He asked how she remembered, and she shrugged, arranged most of the flowers in the vase.

Bride's Bouquet

When he asked about the dogs she leaned over to kiss him, pushed him back onto the floor. He said he didn't have any protection, and she didn't tell him she was on the pill. He left for the drugstore. She looked in the bathtub and the condoms were gone. When he hadn't returned the next morning, she drove to the lake and threw her bridal bouquet in the water, left the vase of funeral flowers on the dock.

Where We Used to Live

On the way home from picking up the dogs, she called Kate, asked for help packing the house. Kate said she and Sonny would drive, should be there in about twenty-four hours.

Twenty hours later she was still packing when Jacob called. She didn't tell him what she was doing, but finally sat down.

The little dog was her husband's and Veronica decided to leave her. She took the Sharpie she'd been using to label boxes, removed the little dog's collar, and wrote I love you inside the collar, replaced it.

Jacob asked, again, why she had no children, if she didn't want any. She told him that she had dogs, and also her father had suggested she not. He told her that his mother once said to him that Veronica would not repeat her parents' mistakes.

They finished when Kate and Sonny arrived. Sonny's neck was scarred red, from his car accident. The three started the first of four drives to the storage room she'd

rented. The little dog rode with them. Veronica wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. Kate pointed out the white mask around little dog's eyes, said it hadn't been there before.

Kindness, I Suppose

She stayed at Van's place again while she looked for a rental house in New Orleans. Over early coffee the third morning, Veronica told Van's partner about her husband's affair. Trinh tried to hug Veronica, who pulled away, said it was okay, that she was grateful the decision had been made for her.

The women leaned against the counter when Van came downstairs in a blue button-down and pajama bottoms. Veronica handed him a plate, and he sat, both the little dog and the big dog sniffing around him.

Once Veronica was alone in the house she went into their bedroom for the first time, and stretched out on their crimson velvet bedspread. She saw that they'd moved their wedding picture to the bedroom, and shut her eyes. When she woke up, Trinh was propped on pillows next to her, glasses on, reading a book.

Food

Nikki T.'s Mom's Kentucky Derby Pie

Senior dinner. Best dessert she'd tasted, before or since. Veronica never got along with Nikki T. Sophomore year Nikki and the other Nikki, Nikki O., wrote "Veronica is a Slut" with shoe polish on dozens of stop signs in the neighborhood.

Mashed Potatoes

Veronica's mother hand-mixed them in the big yellow glass bowl. Veronica still used the bowl, but couldn't make the potatoes taste the same, even though her mother had sworn it was just milk, butter, salt and pepper.

Sour Cream and Onion Pringles

On the weeknights during her study abroad program in England Veronica stayed in her dorm room, skipped the cafeteria, and ate cans of chips. On the weekends she went to the train station and there decided where she'd spend the weekend.

Kate and Van

Kate drove down to New Orleans to help Veronica decorate her rental house, a 110-year-old narrow two-story with a six-month lease. In the morning they shopped up and down Magazine Street, ate a sidewalk café soup and sandwich. The afternoon, they painted the living room a light slate. Van came with a house-warming bottle of wine early evening, and to meet Kate.

The house was tilted, the doorways slanted at cartoon angles. Van told Kate he was glad that she and Veronica lived closer together now. Veronica went up the steep stairs to change clothes. She had to walk back down backwards, holding the rail— forwards she felt like she was going to fall—and Kate and Van laughed, toasted when she made it to the bottom.

Postures

Van set her temporary office two doors down from his. On her first day he gave her a plant and a six-inch wooden giraffe he'd bought in the Quarter with Trinh, to remind her of her office in Phoenix, he said.

She showed him the email her husband had sent, the only contact, asking how his dog was. Van closed the office door and sat in her chair, behind the desk, said she was drifting. Not trying hard enough. Veronica excused herself for the ladies room, could feel her heart beating hot in her ears, and washed her hands with scalding water until they were swollen red.

She couldn't find Van when she came back out, and didn't have much work to do, but opened her computer and left her office door open. The email from her husband she deleted. She spent an hour composing a four-sentence email to Jacob, asked him about visiting the city, said she hoped to see him.

Veronica and Van's Partner

Trinh came by her rental house a few weeks after she moved, brought a heavy fig and sandalwood candle, said she missed Veronica. They sat in the living room, the older woman Indian-style on the oriental rug, touching Veronica's calf every now and then while she spoke. Before they got up, she asked if Veronica knew that Kate and Van had been talking. Veronica wanted to ask Trinh if she felt threatened.

Heart Attack

Van put her in charge of the Boston meeting. Afterwards, she saw Klein for drinks, didn't tell him about Wilmington. He gave her two pills, amphetamines he said, swallowed two himself. A skinny blonde girl joined them and then Klein told Veronica he was getting married to the girl.

Veronica stood, said they were making a farce of marriage, they barely knew each other, that Klein was just searching for stability and direction. He looked stunned. Veronica walked to the bar, sat next to a bald man in a suit, about the age her father would have been. She bought him a scotch.

On the way to the dance floor with the old man she stopped at the table, didn't look at the blonde, asked Klein if his new fiancé knew what he'd done with his own sister. The old man tried to steer her to the dance floor, and she fisted his forearm away. The girl kissed Klein on top of his head, put on her jacket, and left.

Veronica took her chair and stared at Klein as he twisted up his face. His chest hurt a little, he said. He took a sip of beer and wondered if he should go to a hospital. Veronica went back to the bar, put her arms around the old man, and kissed him.

Perhaps, Perhaps

Kate didn't bring Sonny the next time she drove down to New Orleans, either. Veronica wished she had. In the evening, the girls sat with Van on Veronica's rental porch. Through the screen door she could see the big dog asleep with her head up, nodded off like an old man.

Van asked Kate how she and Sonny had met Phil, if they were still friends with him, and said he wanted Kate to stay away from him. Not to be as careless as Veronica. Veronica mumbled something about Van being married, and went inside. She fed the dogs, listened to Van and Kate on the porch.

Back outside, she stood in front of them, said she could handle Phil, it was over anyway, that she'd just needed some excitement. Van and Kate looked at each other. Kate said she would stay in Veronica's house, watch the dogs, while she was in New York.

In the office the week before her trip, Veronica made lists of her clothes, various combinations of what to pack, what she should wear for what. She was careful and embarrassed. She didn't want to look like she dressed with Jacob in mind.

Veronica's Fantasy

Jacob spent the day before Veronica arrived searching antique shops all over the city, looking for a Wedgwood bowl like Veronica's parents'. He carried some of the pieces that he'd kept for years wrapped in tissue, hoping for an exact match, and found one.

He put her in the butterfly room, the same she'd stayed in the year before, the trip when he lied and said he'd be out of town. They sat in the lounge and he asked her to tell him about her marriage. He was pretty sure she told him the truth this time, and when she finished he said she was a trooper, and they both laughed at the word. When she went up for bed, he went to the hotel's small kitchen and poured the Wedgwood shards into the trash can, took the packed box with the new bowl home to his apartment, and didn't see her again.

Veronica wasn't sure why this ending surfaced. It's not a happy ending, but it's what she imagined.

A Swan

On the flight from Boston, Veronica felt good, felt finished with Klein. She wanted to get rid of anything extraneous, and decided she wouldn't contact Jacob again either, even if she returned to New York. She thought maybe she should have a baby. The only stable man she knew were Jacob and Van.

First in the morning she went to Van's office, handed him the pages of notes she'd made on the plane, a detailed outline on how she and Van might proceed. He pulled down his reading glasses and she told him she wanted a baby, he was the ideal candidate, and asked if he'd ever wanted a child. He stopped her and said absolutely not, left the office.

Back in her office Veronica rolled the desk chair to the side of her desk, sat and checked her email. Her breathing changed for a moment when she saw a message from Jacob, sent two hours earlier. She read that his father had died, a car wreck on business in Montgomery, and looked up and saw that he'd sent the email to at least a dozen people, and she cried, hurt that he hadn't sent a personal email, or called.

Leaving her jacket behind, she drove to a car dealership and a few hours later had traded her old car for a black convertible. She drove it with the top down to Van's. Trinh wanted to go for a ride. Veronica told Van she was going to Birmingham in a few days for a funeral. He suggested she take a leave of absence, and to return the car. Trinh told them to stop it, it was Christmas, said they'd talk about the baby when Veronica got back.

South Cross Land

Veronica left around noon on Christmas Eve and got lost. At three she found a gas station and realized she'd driven almost all the way back to New Orleans. She asked the clerk behind the counter what she should do, if she should just go on home or turn

back and go to the funeral in Birmingham. The clerk asked if she loved the friend whose father had died. She bought an Alabama/Mississippi map and plotted eastward back roads.

A few miles before Mississippi ended, a massive dirt path ran along the right of the two-lane highway. It was probably the beginnings of a bigger road but felt like a ghost highway, something that had been around decades before. The dirt path stopped abruptly into grass at the Alabama state line.

About twenty miles out of Birmingham she cut over to the neighborhood where Wes, a guy they'd gone to high school with, probably still lived above his parents' garage. He kissed Veronica on the mouth, didn't seem surprised to see her. At midnight he told her to go explore the city, and gave her a big bag of weed and a beautiful, used glass pipe and said Merry Christmas.

She drove out the front of Wes's neighborhood and turned right on the county road that drove straight into and through town, past both schools she'd attended, and ended two blocks before the house she grew up in. Over the thirty-minute drive Veronica's joints felt like they were slowly freezing, immobile, but fluid.

The block before her corner house was the triangled-park that she used to see from her bedroom, and Veronica turned there and parked, and looked over to her house, and didn't see anything but black. She looked around, wondering if she was confused, and looked back, and the house wasn't there. She knew instantly that the house had been torn down and no one had told her. She pulled around the corner and it wasn't until she was right next to her house could she see its outline, completely without light.

In-Between

These Things Are Good

When she'd traded for the convertible, they gave her a box and a trash bag in which to empty her vehicle, the salesman phrased it. In the box Veronica put a portable wine bottle opener, three tire-pressure gauges (Sonny gave her one every time she visited), a blanket, several pairs of shoes, an audio book, a twenty she'd kept under the passenger side visor, a container of unopened Christmas ornaments, a retractable dog leash.

These Things Are a Drag

She'd thrown away a badly-folded map of Mississippi and two of Arizona, several pairs of shoes, an Arizona phone book, at least a dozen pens, then stopped. She decided to let the dealership handle it, and left the trash bag in the back seat, all doors open, and drove away in her new convertible.

Christmas

Worried they might have given her room away, Veronica checked into her hotel at three in the morning and slept in her clothes for a few hours. When the sun came through the half-opened drapes she got up and brushed her teeth. Her car was parked right outside the sliding glass back-door, which she didn't bother to lock. Everything was still in the car.

The Shell station next to the hotel was open and she filled up the tank, bought coffee, then started to drive, first through the cemetery, without stopping. Then up and down neighborhood streets, remembering houses where people she'd known, or their parents, used to and might still live. She neighborhood-jumped clockwise around the city until she got back to hers, and pulled into the cobblestone driveway that curved, behind her old house, from one street to the other. The house was for sale, and she could tell it was empty even before she got out of her new car. All of the doors were locked. The flat metal cover, hidden behind bushes on the side of the house, didn't appear to be locked but she didn't try to lift it. Jacob used to call it the slave entrance, a crude set of stairs that led down into the ground, ending in a closet off of the unfinished basement.

The ache in her joints returned when she approached the dead mall. She felt its emptiness from a distance, even though it would have been deserted on Christmas Day anyway. She pulled into the lot and up to a department store, could see the fade of its name above the door. There was a for sale sign in the grass, as though the mall were a house, and she took a picture of the sign, and continued to drive.

There was almost no traffic, but she could see families, Christmas trees, through windows and in driveways. Her gas tank was emptying, and she drove back to the open Shellstation next to her hotel. Next to the checkout were stacks of plastic containers filled with fresh pink rose petals, and she pointed. The clerk said they weren't for sale, something about a wedding, but handed her one.

Veronica drove back to the cemetery, parked at the family plot, lowered the convertible's top. It was cloudy and warm and she stayed for the next few hours, until the sun started to lower. She walked through dozens of graves, walked across the path

and around the small lake, sat in her car, sat on the ground by her parents' stones, sat on the stark, modern bench her dead uncle had designed. She stared at the backs of stones on the other side of the lake; the water made the marble sparkle, like rectangle disco balls. She promised her mother she'd go to church.

Before she left, she dropped the petals around the stones, sometimes like the petals were rosary beads, penance, though the family wasn't Catholic. Sometimes with thanks. The last few reciting a silly childhood chant. She didn't want to end on "he loves me not" so she put the final petal in her car console.

Veronica Is Not a Slut

Van

Veronica hadn't had sex with Van in quite some time now, she realized. It was kind of boring anyway.

Klein

She hadn't seen that man naked since college and didn't want to. She should check on him, she knew, see if the heart thing was okay.

Phil

Her throat tightened, a gag reflex, at the thought of him.

Her Husband

Poor guy, he hadn't been able in years, from the alcohol. Except for Vegas. Veronica decided she should return the attorney's call, put the wilted marriage out of its misery.

Jacob

It hadn't occurred to Veronica that she had never thought about him sexually. Kissing him, yes. The thought of sex with him was terrifying.

Freedom of Speech

Jacob called at ten Christmas evening, said Wes had found him, that they'd like to come to her hotel room. She had unpacked and the room was neat. She lit the candle—Christmas Wreath—and brushed her teeth, put on chapstick.

They hugged at the door and Jacob said polite things about her coming for the funeral and that he needed to get out of the house, and Veronica said that she was living in New Orleans now anyway, so close, taking a road trip, new car, perfect timing.

Wes said, "Bullshit. You're his friend," and opened the mini-fridge to unload beer into. He handed them each one and sat down, Indian-style, on the bed. Jacob pulled out the orange desk chair and Veronica sat in the corner of the little orange couch.

Jacob smiled, his eyes folding at the corners, said, "Or maybe you're a Southern Girl after all, wanted an excuse to come home."

She worked to steady her voice and said, “No, I’m back and forth from New Orleans and Memphis all the time, but I’ve only been over here once in the last decade. Last year, in and out, for that funeral. My aunt.”

“Yes,” he said. “Exactly.” He took the joint Wes had shaken from a cigarette pack and was holding out to him. “Thank you for coming. Lighter?”

She pointed behind him to the lighter on the desk, next to the candle.

“It was heart attack, did I tell you that?” Jacob asked her. “The accident itself was minor. Dad’s car is in Montgomery, getting repaired at the Volvo dealership.” He pulled on the joint and handed it to her.

Wes said, “Remember junior years when Tanya Woods found that Polaroid of an erect cock, in her locker? Did I ever tell y’all that was me? I was the Polaroid Playboy.”

Veronica said, “You were impressive for sixteen. I ended up with that picture. My mother found it and showed it to my dad.”

Jacob said, “That probably hastened her parents’ death, you know,” and shook his finger at Wes. They all laughed.

“That was a beautiful funeral,” Wes said. “A beautiful day. It was sort of a reunion. And the last time everyone was together.”

Jacob waited, then said, “I wasn’t there.” Veronica looked at Wes and thought he probably remembered that, wondered if that’s why he said it.

Wes laughed and shook out another joint. “You’re here now. It’s another reunion. And it’s not over. We’ll see each other again tomorrow at the visitation and the next day at the funeral. You’re sticking around?” he asked Veronica.

“How many joints do you have in there?” Jacob asked.

“All.” Wes held up the full pack. “I’ve never smoked a cigarette in my life. Guess what I found in my room the other night?”

“Do you still live in the garage apartment?” Jacob asked.

“Yeah,” Wes said. “One of the cartoons we used to draw in class, what we imagined all the girls’ panties to look like. Black and lacy for Stephanie Siddons. Stained for Nikki O. Pink for Shelley Marks. This was before everyone wore thongs.”

“What were Veronica’s?” Jacob asked.

“I think we did a separate cartoon for Veronica, panties by days of the week,” Wes said.

“You guys loved me,” Veronica said.

“Yes. How long are you staying?” Wes asked. He leaned to open her dresser drawer. “May I? How many pairs did you bring?”

Veronica put her palms up and shrugged. He grabbed a handful, snapped a pair of polka-dotted cotton at Jacob. They landed on Jacob’s boot and he tossed them toward the open drawer.

“Who sings this?” Jacob asked, circling his finger at the clock radio.

“Falco,” Veronica said.

“Not After the Fire?” Jacob asked.

“Falco did it and After the Fire covered it,” Wes said. “You’re both right.”

“That’s usually the case,” Veronica said, then feared she was being too familiar.

Jacob looked at her and said, “Cheers to that,” leaned over to tap her beer bottle. He saw that it was almost empty and pulled new ones from the fridge.

The room was quiet while the song finished, then without thinking about it, Veronica said, “This has been the best Christmas. I got to spend the day with my parents and the night with you guys.”

Wes said, “I’m glad you’re both home,” and walked to the bathroom.

Jacob said to Veronica, “I’m sorry I didn’t go to your parents’ funeral.” Veronica nodded, looked at the floor, thought he was probably sincere. They listened to Wes pee.

At the Cemetery Where

Veronica wasn’t sure if she should go to the funeral, didn’t want to remind Jacob’s mother of Veronica’s mother’s affair. But Jacob nodded a few times when he saw her come in the room, his expression staying the same, and she felt better for a moment.

Veronica took a step back when she noticed the casket, open. His mother said that the car wasn’t badly damaged, but they had to leave it in Montgomery for repairs, it was still under warranty. Then she hugged Veronica and holding her forearms, said it was nice that Jacob’s father would be buried in a plot near Veronica’s mother and hugged her again.

Her face hot, Veronica stood on the side of the room for a few moment, looking at everyone but Jacob, trading furrowed-brow slight smiles with a few she recognized, then left. She drove by her parents’ grave on the way back to the hotel. Wind from the night had blown away most of the pink rose petals.

Though they hadn't made plans, back at the hotel Wes was waiting in the lobby, and Jacob knocked on the patio door about an hour later. He noted that they were sitting in the same places from the night before, as he took the desk chair. Wes said it does feel like home. The boys hadn't left until six, earlier that morning

Jacob asked Veronica if she'd been by her old house, and she told them about thinking it was gone at night, and walking around it the next day. What she could see inside looked different, she said. She showed them the picture she took of the dining room windows, long, tall windows made entirely of two-inch beveled glass circles, hundreds of bottoms of champagne glasses from her parents' wedding.

Three Cars

The First Car

Even though she knew her parents had lost a lot of money, she wasn't surprised, but pretended to be, when they gave her a new car three days before her sixteenth birthday. It was parked in the country club parking lot, and her friends jumped out of it.

The Second Car

She didn't want to give up the first car but it was falling apart, so she gave it to her husband as a wedding present and bought herself an identical model a decade newer.

The Third Car

In the morning Veronica packed and loaded her suitcase into the tiny trunk, thought she might drive to Atlanta later, maybe Memphis, be alone. She wanted to stay in Birmingham but didn't want Jacob to think she was staying for him. The funeral was graveside, and Veronica arrived late and tried to leave early but the same old woman her parents knew from church stopped her to talk. Jacob's mother walked over and said she should come to the house. Veronica looked at Jacob and he cupped his hand on the side of his neck and shrugged.

At his house, Jacob's mother and aunt were fighting in the dining room about getting to Montgomery to bring home Jacob's father's repaired Volvo. Veronica stood in the blue-tiled kitchen. Jacob told her that he couldn't sleep, then called to the older women that the car could wait. They came to the kitchen and Veronica offered to drop someone off in Montgomery on her way to Atlanta. Jacob said he would go. His mother stared at him and Veronica told him to bring a pillow if he wanted.

In her car, Jacob asked if she had any weed left from Wes. Plenty, she said, and they smoked, then Jacob leaned the seat back a little and turned the radio up. He had sunglasses on and Veronica was aware he could be looking at her, and she tried to relax her face. She didn't forget, but after a few minutes eased into the high and the music and the trees flying by, comfortable silence. She wondered if he was asleep, and thought about the things she could say if he was awake: that 102.7 hadn't updated their playlist in decades, tell him about a book he would like, point to the peeling billboard twenty miles out of town that had been there since she was a child: "Go To Church or the Devil Will Get You."

Outside of Montgomery she stopped for gas and they bought large watery coffees. He directed her through the city to the car lot and when they pulled up, told her not to get out, put his forearm around her neck, and left the car. His forgotten coffee was in the cupholder, but she drove away.

Two Cars

Veronica was just on the interstate when Jacob called and said he didn't want to drive his father's car, asked if she would trade cars and drive it back to Birmingham for him, caravan. She said of course, hung up, turned around. At the dealership he asked her to put the convertible top down on her car, and she did and pointed to his coffee. They traded keys and Veronica got in the driver's seat of his father's Volvo, pulled the seat forward to reach the pedals.

After a few blocks of city streets her phone rang. It was Jacob and she couldn't understand him until he yelled thank you. She saw that he was looking at her in the rearview mirror and she gave him a thumbs up, then felt stupid, childish. He pulled into a fast food restaurant and before she could roll to a stop behind him, he'd put the car's top back up and was driving off. She followed.

When the two cars were on the interstate her phone rang and he said it had been too loud to talk with the top down. He told her to turn the radio to 102.7; she did and laughed at the song. He called a few minutes later and said that her new car drove well. She hadn't had a chance to drive it fast, and ahead of her he started to speed up, asked if

he may. She hung up and sped up to him, tried to pass him, but he pulled just ahead. She tried again. They were going over one-hundred.

After they slowed he called again and asked what her plans were. They talked the hour back to Birmingham. A few times she forgot that his father had died, days before, in the car she was driving. At the exit to his home, Jacob pulled into a gas station, told her to park and lock the Volvo and get in the convertible. He lowered the top as she got in her passenger seat, and they drove to the cemetery, wound through its roads without stopping, and drove back, the loud, warm wind doing the talking.

Streets I Used to Own

Kate

Veronica turned her phone on and looked between the road and the screen, waiting for voicemails to come in. Kate said that Van told her he didn't know how much longer he could cover for Veronica at work.

The Attorney

The attorney her husband hired ha been calling once a week for the last month. He left his number again, an Arizona area code. Veronica erased the message.

Van

He asked Veronica to call, asked if she knew Kate was pregnant, asked if that's what the baby stuff was about.

Boys You Sent Away

Veronica told Jacob she was leaving, but didn't, just pulled her car to the back of the same hotel, in case he drove by. The next day she went out to Wes's.

"Want to take a few hits of acid?" Wes hugged, asked.

"There's still acid? I was probably with you the last time I saw acid. And it's noon."

"The night after your parents' funeral, remember?"

She didn't remember, and asked him how he did.

"Right here," he said, and pointed to the wall across the room, "but the bed was over there. You were so pretty then, lying across it. I was tripping my ass off and wanted you. Bad. I hadn't seen you since that night."

She laughed. "Did you have me that night?"

"I felt sorry for you. Wouldn't have done that."

Veronica rolled her eyes. "I'll take some. I'm not going anywhere for awhile, though."

"My parents don't bother me," Wes said.

Later they sat on the bed, held hands, listened to his music. "You found a way to not change a thing," she said. "Even your room. I like that. One room. You've got a special way of rising above the bullshit."

"I crawl beneath it." He was quiet, his eyes shut. "Plus I moved the bed, remember?" He waved towards the wall.

At some point Wes asked, "You don't want to have sex, do you? I can take care of you if you want." He leaned over, licked her cheek, said, "But I've done too many

drugs,” and gestured at his crotch. They laughed until the bones in the back of their heads seemed to protrude, and they talked about those bones for the next four hours.

They were stretched out under the covers when Jacob knocked and walked in, pointed down out the door and said to Veronica, “Your car.”

Wes said to Jacob, “And she wants you. Is in love with you.”

“My car?” Veronica said.

“You’re back?” Jacob said.

“She left?” Wes said.

Veronica turned to Wes and said, “I forgot you. I’m sorry. I did.”

When the sun started up, he took her back to the hotel and made her shower. She smelled coffee, toweled dry, dressed. He asked if she was okay and she said sure, she just wasn’t going to sleep for awhile and he said neither would he, now. They went to her car and he drove to the cemetery, to her parents’, asked her to stay in the car. He disappeared over the hill behind the stones and came back a few minutes later, nearly hidden behind as many flower arrangements as his arms could hold. Veronica got out of the car and he said his mom would never notice. He sat on the ground and dismantled the arrangements, spread the loose flowers around and across the two flat stones.

Dénouement

Veronica slept the day, woke around eight p.m., but her body hurt too badly to move. On her back, she stared up hours until the ceiling was lit from her cell phone.

Jacob asked how she felt, if she was leaving in the morning. She said she had to leave.

“You’re time’s up here?” he asked.

“I think my time’s up here,” she said.

House of Crosses

First

Her aunt had given Veronica a brightly hand-painted enamel wall cross for Christmas the year her parents died. Other people saw it hanging on her bathroom wall and started giving her crosses for birthdays, Christmases, graduation.

Silver

The two boxes had been stacked in the kitchen corner since she’d moved in the rental. The night she returned from Birmingham, Veronica found her drill and started with the two largest crosses, silver and intricate, gifts from her husband before he was her husband. She hung one in the middle of wall on either side of the hallway door. They could only be seen when leaving the bathroom.

Third to last

Veronica graduated outward, large crosses to small, and had to get a ladder when she got to the two brass ankhs inscribed with Egyptian symbols. One had been her parents, the other an exact match she found in an antique shop the year before. Reaching with the drill, she fell to the floor, pulled her arm from its socket.

Telephone

Veronica called Van, who called Trinh, who took Veronica to the Emergency Room and back home after a shot, a prescription, and the shoulder's return to position which caused Veronica to vomit on Trinh. That night after a drugged nap Veronica called Sonny and asked him about the baby. Sonny told Kate, who called Van. Van yelled for Trinh from downstairs and asked her to handle the situation.

Presents

Kate

Veronica mailed belated Christmas gifts when she got back. She'd found Kate's in Boston the summer before: a windchime, its base an antique silver gravy boat hung by one handle from a string of beads. The chimes clinking below were a half dozen mismatched, long handled teaspoons. It sounded like a dinner party when Veronica carried it to the sales counter.

Van and Trinh

Baby book for non-traditional families.

Niece and Nephew

Yearly check, \$500 each.

Jacob

She'd bought the book for Van and Trinh when she went to get Jacob's book, the one she'd wanted to tell him about on their ride to Montgomery. She wrote a short note on the second page. After she put her sling back on she realized she'd spelled Christmas without the T, and filled it in with her left hand. The letter was too large and looked like a child wrote it.

Straight until Night

Veronica noticed the thin ruby and diamond band when they were at the New Orleans airport. She didn't say anything. She'd seen Trinh wear it before, but never on her left hand. The Phoenix office was closing and the three of them flew out. Veronica stayed close to Van and Trinh, didn't drive by her house, for sale.

At dinner the second night, Trinh extended her small, ringed hand and held Veronica's for a moment. "It's because of you," Trinh said.

Veronica smiled and said, "That's probably true. My pleasure."

A few minutes later Van did the same, leaned over the restaurant table and took her hand. "Veronica. Don't break eye contact with me," he said. "Your husband just sat

down with a woman, about six tables behind you.” Trinh arched to look and Van stopped her with a noise in his throat. He didn’t let go of Veronica’s hand, asked, “What to do?”

Veronica said it was fine but didn’t let go either. The three sat for a moment, smiling at each other, a little nervous.

“Oh! Here,” Trinh said, slid off her ring and passed it to Van. “Make a scene, darling.”

Van let go, stood and walked to the bar. Veronica and Trinh stared at each other until he returned, a bottle of champagne crooked in his arm, then the women turned blank faces up to him. He bent over and put the bottle on the floor, straightened up, and looked back and forth between the women for a moment. “I don’t know how to do this,” he murmured only for them, his lips barely moving.

“Veronica,” he said, too loud, and stuck the ring out at her. He started to kneel but instead angled over and kissed her quickly on the lips. She said yes and several customers clapped. The bartender whistled.

Once everything calmed and Van sat down, this time next to Veronica, Trinh noticed that Veronica’s husband had left. The restaurant manager arrived to congratulate them, and comped them dinner and unlimited house wine. He sat down with them several times over the night, hitting on Trinh.

Thank You

The dogs rode with Veronica to visit Kate and Sonny. She wasn't sure how happy the meeting would be and the dogs made her feel like she'd had friends on her side. But she was worried for nothing; Kate walked out the front door smiling, rubbing her still-flat belly.

"Your arm," Kate said when she saw Veronica's sling. "I forgot. How did you drive?"

"Not well," Veronica said, then Sonny came out and put his arm around Veronica, reached to his wife and rubbed his knuckles, like he was shining them, on Kate's stomach.

"You're tickling," she said. "We have an idea, Veronica. Let's go inside." The women sat down but didn't talk. Sonny poured two lasses of wine and brought Kate a Sprite.

"We want you to have a baby, too," Kate said. "Sonny's. Too."

A knock and the opening front door made the three turn to see. It was Phil, carrying Veronica's little dog, who was licking Phil's beard.

"She was down the road," Phil said. "Cars." He looked at Veronica as though for permission, then kissed the dog right on the mouth and set her down, and left.

"He's back," Sonny told Veronica.

"He's alright," Kate said.

"I don't need a baby," Veronica said and flapped her slinged arm like a bird. "I can't even take care of myself."

"Yes you can," Kate said. "Well, Sonny's here if you need him."

“Both of us,” Sonny said.

Bound to Roam

Jacob came to New Orleans for a convention, something to do with small hotels, he said, though Veronica couldn't find anything about the convention on the internet. She met him for drinks at the top of the Marriott. As soon as they sat, he told her he'd won a door prize, a trip for two upriver on the Mississippi Queen. Five days, from New Orleans to Memphis. He wouldn't have time for a couple months, he said, but wondered if she'd like to join him on the cruise. Veronica said she didn't have any personal leave, and forced her laugh.

He said he understood and talked about hotels while she watched a barge on the river below. It wasn't moving. A few minutes later he asked, “Is that really the reason? Work?”

Veronica looked at him, then her wine glass, rotated the stem between her thumb and forefinger, and smiled for a moment. “Remember Klein, from college?” she said and swallowed some wine, then ran her tongue over her top teeth. She told him about Maggie, everything. “That's been almost twenty years and I haven't been able to get my shit together since then.”

Jacob nodded his head a few times, then looked over to the bar, held up two fingers. “Two more, please?”

“She’s on that cheesy teen primetime soap?” Jacob asked. “I watched part of that in my room last night. They were talking about Flaubert. It made me laugh. The brunette—is that Maggie? Isn’t she too old to play a college student?—she was flirting with her professor, asked him what was the best ending in all of literature, and he said *Sentimental Education*.”

“And she asked what happened,” Veronica said.

“Yeah,” Jacob said. “So he answers, ‘nothing, really, just two old friends sitting around, remembering the best thing that never happened.’ Then explains Flaubert thought anticipation was the purest form of pleasure. Reality always disappoints, yadda yadda, Anticipated experiences can’t dim. ‘Always engraved in your heart with a sort of sweet sadness.’ Something like that,” Jacob said.

“And Maggie says that’s cowardly,” Veronica said. The waiter bought their second glasses of wine but left their first, empty ones on the table.

“So when did the thing happen, with Maggie,” Jacob asked.

“After my parents died,” she said. “Couple weeks.”

“Veronica,” he said.

Veronica said, “I know.”

“You were grieving. Not the Maggie thing, but maybe I can help, with the other. I was there,” Jacob said. “Sort of.”

“Doesn’t that seem too easy?” Veronica said, picking up the new glass. “Have you read *Sentimental Education*?”

“No,” Jacob said.

“Me neither,” Veronica said.

When It All Cracks Up

Van told Veronica he wanted her to open the North Carolina branch by herself. He was friendly, but distant. She figured it was harder for him. She drove thirteen straight hours the next day. Though the office was two hours from the coast, Veronica booked a room in Wilmington, the same hotel chain she'd stayed at in Birmingham over Christmas, so she shouldn't have been surprised when she opened the heavy door to an identical room. The same furniture in the same places. The first thing Veronica thought was: Where's Jacob? Where's Wes?

She pulled back the curtain to find the sliding glass door, and pulled it open enough to squeeze out. Just outside, she looked back in at the room and shook her head, making sure she wasn't imagining this identical-ness. The convertible was a hundred feet away. Veronica checked for her keys, then walked to the car and got the bottle of white wine from her trunk, and re-entered her room through the back door. She couldn't open the mini-fridge, then realized it opened from the opposite side as the fridge in Birmingham.

Jacob hadn't contacted her since she turned down the riverboat trip. Veronica lay across the bed on her stomach and tried to think of a reason to invite him to Wilmington. She stared at the door on the wall that she assumed led to the next room, then got up, tried the handle. When the door opened easily she stepped back, nervous, but then opened it all the way and knocked on the door behind it. No one answered so she tried that handle and peered into the dark room. The first door shut and locked behind her. She laughed and turned on a lamp to find the reversed, mirror image of her room.

She went out the front door, and down to the desk and told the clerk she'd locked herself out of her room, then asked if the room next to hers was booked. No, the clerk said, so later Veronica called with her credit card number and reserved the adjoining room. She'd tell Jacob that her co-worker was meant to be on the trip but had gotten sick, that the room was paid for and that she'd already called everyone she could think of to see if they were interested in a Wilmington vacation.

This is the End

The next morning Veronica drove from Wilmington to the new office in Raleigh with the car's top down, noise an excuse to avoid calling Jacob. The wind was cold and she had a lightsunburn when she arrived. Back in Wilmington that night, she checked the internet to see if Maggie's show was filming on location; it was, downtown, the next day.

Maggie's character on the show worked part time at a real estate office, which was filmed inside an old realty shop in the historic downtown district. Early the next morning Veronica joined the group of mostly young girls crowded on the sidewalk across the street from the fake office. She talked one of the girls out of her seat at a café table, and ordered coffee. The office windows were covered with blue tarp and three coffees later Veronica decided she'd only stay another hour. The PA had said Maggie was filming a scene with her character's fiancé.

The hour was almost up when Maggie walked out of the front door in jeans and a green t-shirt, her brunette hair slicked back into a tight chignon. An older man walked by

with a huge dark Airedale and Maggie leaned over and put her arms around the dog.

Veronica heard her say, “Oh, you!” when the dog licked her face.

Maggie straightened, walked across the small street, and the crowd of girls started moving and making noise. Veronica stayed seated. Maggie smiled big as she approached, patted the back of her head and said, “Wedding hair.” She posed for pictures and signed the t-shirts and DVD covers and pieces of paper that were passed to her. A girl in a wheelchair rolled past Veronica. Maggie seemed to know her, leaned down to hug. As she stood up she noticed Veronica, looked at her for a moment as if to make sure, then held up a hand and said, “Hey, buddy.”

And I Feel Fine

Maggie asked if Veronica could give her a ride home after the day’s shoot.

“Won’t be too long,” she said. But it was too long. At nine Maggie came out carrying a box of doughnuts, eating one, and poked the box at Veronica and the PA.

The women walked to Veronica’s convertible, trailed by the PA. At the car he waved to Maggie and started back the way they’d come. “You look great,” Veronica said, climbing into the car. “You exactly the same.”

“It’s the makeup. You look great too,” Maggie said. “But different.” They drove in silence for a few minutes, until Maggie asked, “And you’re because of Klein?”

“Not exactly Klein.”

“He’s sick,” Maggie said. “In the hospital. We’ve kept it quiet.”

“I’m sorry,” Veronica said.

“He’s sorry, too. For being sick, for everything.”

“Me, too,” Veronica said, turning the car on Maggie’s street, pulling to the curb in front of Maggie’s house.

“Yeah, I figured you’d know where I lived,” Maggie said. “It was a long time ago, doll. It’s not like TV. Stuff wears off.”

“Maybe,” Veronica said. “I guess.”

Maggie said, “We’re shooting at the river on Monday. Come.” She touched Veronica’s shoulder, got out and jogged up the sidewalk to her red front door, turned and waved. She went inside but a second later opened the door and yelled something.

Veronica rolled her window down and cupped her ear to indicate she hadn’t heard.

“I like your car!” Maggie shouted, waving again.

An Unkindness

In men’s plaid pajama bottoms, a white t-shirt, and no makeup, Veronica settled onto the loveseat and looked over to Jacob’s desk chair, empty, where he would have been sitting had he been there. She pulled the blanket around her, slouched and buried the lower half of her face in it, shut her eyes.

“I wish I could look at you when you talk,” he said. She sat back up, relieved he was responding, taking some control.

When she finally told him that her attachment to him was damaging, that she had to stop living in the past, her eyes moved to the spot where Wes would have been sitting, for comfort, reassurance. She had to force herself to look back. She wanted Jacob to convince her that she was wrong.

Her cell phone interrupted and Veronica came from her cocoon of blanket and grabbed it from the desk. It was Jacob, and she set the phone back down, and spun it around like a top. She leaned to pick the blanket off the floor and the phone stopped ringing.

The Last to Leave

Veronica was back and forth between Wilmington and Raleigh over the next few days and got everything finished by Sunday night. She was leaving Tuesday. Monday morning she left her car a few blocks up from the river, got a soft blue blanket from the tiny trunk, and walked past the show's craft services truck a street down. Its back was open; a chalkboard hung just inside. Veronica recognized Maggie's still childish handwriting: "No chips for Miss Maggie."

There were only three other fans there, females of varying ages. Veronica spread her blanket out on the grass a few yards from them. They all silently watched the crew set up what was clearly a wedding scene: arches of huge white flowers that looked fake, big white tents, a white cloth aisle. One of the women next to Veronica introduced herself, then her niece and her daughter. Vacation, she said, and told Veronica that her

brother—the niece’s father—had died a few week before. The niece was in her senior year of college, the daughter in junior high.

The cast began to arrive in vans. Maggie came out of the second one, a man’s plaid bathrobe covering all but the ends of a white lace dress. A few people went into one of the tents, and a hard rock song started up, loud, and startled the four of them. They laughed and Veronica relaxed. Later she told the niece, “I’m sorry about your dad. Deal with it now,” then, “I’m glad you’re here.”

The family left for lunch and brought her back a sack of fast food and some bottled water, wouldn’t let Veronica pay them for it. Early in the afternoon, Maggie and the six-year-old boy who played her nephew filmed a scene walking next to the water, their shoes off. In between takes Maggie taught the child to do the Running Man.

The cast started to leave at five. Maggie was in the bathrobe again, this time with the six-year-old, each using one of the arms. All the cast waved at the four females but no one approached. The family finally left; they didn’t exchange email addresses or phone numbers with Veronica.

Veronica walked down to the set but a PA stopped her and said she couldn’t, for safety reasons. He pulled a white rose out of one of the wedding arrangements and handed it to her. She placed the stem in her water bottle, an impromptu vase. He pulled out another rose, snapped off half the stem, and carefully placed it behind her ear.

Veronica walked back up to the sidewalk and spread her blanket, stretched out and watched the water. On the near side it appeared that the water was flowing upstream, but on the opposite side it seemed to be flowing downstream. She sat back up when a

long rowboat from UNCW jerked past, a woman at the front yelling calls to the men facing her.