

Labor Day

I'm not the kind of woman who would participate in a threesome, which is exactly why I went. I'm lately trying to be a different sort of woman, one who can pull off an edgy haircut. A sort of Brooklyn-blond pageboy kind of haircut. I'm Jean Seberg from *Breathless* in my mind.

My hair is really long and black and curly and every hairstylist I've ever been to has said that I don't have the bone structure for short hair and refuses to do it.

They say, "Why don't you think about this for six months and come back and we'll reevaluate this decision together."

Or, "I think you're going through a lot of major transitions already right now."

Or, "I feel like the familiar weight of it is a sort of security blanket to you and you'll feel like something's missing if it's gone. Look, see how you're nervously stroking it right now?"

And, "It would look like a mistake on you."

I take all this to mean that my cheeks are too chubby, but there's no way of fixing something like that. I've asked.

I'd also heard—from a friend more reckless than me—that threesomes are the new rebound. This friend said that her threesome hookups with a coworker and his partner made her feel so loved and accepted and taken care of, and I wanted to be taken care of. My friend honestly did seem better after the whole thing, too. She met a guy who makes gourmet corndogs and when I go to the market where he sells them he'll always give me one for free. Only if I'm alone though. He's a really nice guy.

Not that I'm rebounding from anything, except for maybe the death of my grandmother, which hasn't happened yet, but could, at any time.

But all this wasn't the only reason I was driving from Portland to Los Angeles for a threesome on Labor Day Weekend. Cliff, the male in the equation, had my *Drive* jacket.

Cliff and I used to take improv classes together back when I lived in LA and was still trying to pretend I wanted to live there. Once, he asked to borrow my *Drive* jacket for a sketch so I let him, even though it was the only article of clothing I wore every single day and was serving as a sort of comfort object for me. After the show, Cliff kept the jacket on and we all went to the bar we always went to and drank as much as we normally did. Before we all left I asked Cliff if he could give me back the jacket. I had waited to ask until my Uberpool pulled up, and was standing next to the car with the back door open shivering in the nighttime breeze that shook all the tall palms in the Scientology courtyard. Cliff pouted and zipped up the jacket and said, "But I look so much like Ryan Gosling in it. Can't I keep it?"

Cliff didn't, and doesn't, look that much like Ryan Gosling. But this doesn't change the fact that he is of above-average attractiveness. You can tell he's used to people wanting to hear him talk, to people asking him lots of questions about himself. You can tell he has been this way for a long time—an adorable child who slipped effortlessly into adolescence and adulthood—his body parts always proportional, his jawline always masculine, his skin and teeth always white and clear of imperfections, his hair still furiously thick late into his thirties. He's so good looking that at first all you want is for him to like you. Until you know him, then you want him to be distracted by someone else. There was something about the way he smelled after a show. Like fifth of July garbage—coleslaw and macaroni salad gone bad.

But this incident with the jacket was back before I really knew him, before I really smelled him. And so I said ok and got in the car and hated myself all the way home. Another passenger asked, “Did you know that guy?” and for some reason I shook my head. *No*.

I figured if I ended up at Cliff’s house at some point I could get the jacket back, but it turned out I never wanted to end up there and then I moved.

Then a month ago, three and a half weeks after my 26th birthday, Cliff messaged me on Instagram saying this: “Hey Bianca! Happy birthday! So cool about the clothing line and the launch! I checked out the website—I see there’s no stuff for men. Yet, I hope! haha. I showed Ilsa and she wants a dress. That black tent-like one, I think? Can we get one? Be in touch!”

Because of all the reasons listed above about the place I was in life, and because Cliff is the way he is, this conversation led quickly to me maybe coming down for a visit soon, because I’d already been planning to visit at some point anyway, and fitting Ilsa while I was there (*and rubbing my hands on her body as I did it*). I could stay with them (*in their bed*), even though they knew I had other friends I could stay with, because it would be more fun (*potentially sexy*), and they’d provide everything (*drugs*). All I needed to do was bring the fabric and supplies.

Nothing was ever explicitly said, of course, but everyone knew Cliff and Ilsa were swingers—or no. That’s not right. Not *swingers* so much as that they were into inviting younger girls into their relationship dynamic. In fact their friend group consisted almost solely of younger women and I’d never seen them hang out with any guys, ever. And improv was mostly guys so I don’t know how they managed it.

I don’t need to tell you Cliff’s an “actor.” Of course he is. He often said, “I really see myself as a leading man.” He was bad at improv because he wasn’t funny at all, but he still

insisted on inserting himself into every scene. He was constantly tapping you out right before you reached the climax, and then scrapping everything and reassembling his own thing. The places where he'd tap me would tingle in an almost painful way—sometimes for the rest of the show—and I'd always feel my ears turning red under the bright lights.

For his real money-making job he worked at the Jones in Hollywood, with the pleather aprons and all the pictures in the bathroom of women in the early 2000s flashing and mooning a film camera, sometimes at the table you were just sitting at. I'd never been able to spot any dick pics, but I always looked. I really liked going to Jones because you could order spaghetti and calamari there at all hours and it was great, and Cliff normally gave you a huge discount to display his power as a waiter.

Ilsa sells crystals. Or at least that's what I think she does based off of her Instagram stories. I think she might also nanny sometimes, because she posts pictures of babies who don't look anything like her or anyone she could possibly be related to. She's northern European in the six-foot tall white-blond kind of way. She ended an eight-year relationship when she met Cliff one night at a bar when he was "backpacking" through Europe on inheritance money that was definitely bestowed upon him too soon. (Cliff's possessions were a weird mix of expensive things he'd bought in his twenties that were now wearing out, and cheap things he filled in the gaps with in his thirties.)

I never figured out how old Ilsa was, and it didn't seem to matter at some point. She could be thirty-one or forty-five. There was just no way of knowing. But I always used to bet on her being much older, since I believe humans in northern Europe age at a much slower rate. She

doesn't have a single crease anywhere on her neck or face, but she carries her weight in her hips like a woman who birthed three athletic boys.

I arrived late Saturday night, around 10:30 pm, and told Ilsa that I'd already eaten "on the road," even though I'd only had a family sized bag of cheezits with malt balls dumped in—a combination I'd conceived of at a gas station eight hours before.

The place was filthy. A twenty-pound cat named Raisin was sprawled out on a pile of Easter grass that littered patches of the carpet, even though Easter was six months ago, was six months away. I heard the pug, Pancho, wheezing and snorting from the hallway before I saw him. He ambled around the corner to investigate me, deemed me an intruder, and snarled maliciously through congested nostrils.

"Pancho! Practice niceness!" Ilsa motioned for me to crouch down. She said in a softer voice to me, "You see you need to get down on his level. Lower, lower. Ok now lay all the way down and let him come be friendly with you."

I hesitated and she said, "It's the only way."

So I sank back on my haunches and then lowered myself onto to back. Pancho tramped all over my hair and poked me in the eye hard with his gunky snout.

"There! Look! Friends!"

I sat up and wiped at my eye with the back of my hand and it came back smeared with mascara. "Where's Cliff?"

"He's finishing up his shift. He'll be home in a couple hours. Do you need help bringing anything in?"

“No that’s ok. I can wait to bring the rest in when we start the fitting process tomorrow. But would you mind if I showered?”

Of course I didn’t expect people who don’t vacuum their floors to deep clean their bathroom, but it was worse than I could have imagined. I’d been in the car since dawn and had dog snot mixed with black mascara caked on my face and there was no choice but to go through with it. I turned on the shower and then went through all of their cabinets and drawers, because it was a habit of mine when left alone in people’s bathrooms. I noted that there was only one severely depleted roll of toilet paper left.

“Hey Ilsa? Ilsa? I don’t think the shower is getting hot...” I said with just my face sticking out from behind the door, even though I hadn’t even undressed yet.

“Oh yeah. Not hot today. They’re doing something to the pipes. Sorry!”

So this is what it would be.

I suffered, greatly, but lived, and changed into my pajamas while still soaking wet so everything clung to my body. I hadn’t thought to pack my own towel.

“What are you watching?” I combed my hair out standing next to the couch, not sure if I should sit down or not.

“It’s called *Grizzly Man*. This man, he really loves those bears.”

Eventually I sat down on the chaise next to the couch, and woke up the next morning to Cliff following along to aerobic exercises he’d casted from YouTube onto the television.

For some reason I didn’t let him know I was awake for a long time. I just stayed motionless, my eyes open, watching him scissor his arms and legs in a boat pose. Eventually Pancho started making his loud guttural noises by the window.

“Is that damn stray here again?” Ilsa walked in holding a bundle of lit sage. “Away! Away!” She made figure eight movements with the sage by the window.

“What’s going on?” I said, pretending to yawn through it.

“You’re awake!” Cliff turned his head to me but continued expanding and contracting the angle of his boat pose.

“Yeah, sorry. I must have fallen asleep before you got home. What happened to the Grizzly Man?”

“They ate him.” Ilsa kicked at the glass a couple times with a Birkenstocked foot. “Shoo!”

“They ate him?”

“Yeah the bears ate him.”

Pancho was starting to really have an episode.

The YouTube Abs Plus video finally concluded and Cliff crawled over to Pancho, flipped him over on his back and covered his face with his hand. “Pancho! Relax, man!”

Because this was the current activity of the household, I walked over and feigned polite curiosity over the disturbance. There was a skinny little black cat propped up with its paws on the window sill, head tilted at an angle, tail whipping back and forth, taking in the scene of us all.

“This cat is trying to seduce Raisin.” Ilsa pointed down at it with her sage.

At the sound of his name, Raisin mewed from under a dirty pile of designer athletic wear on the floor.

“She’s trying to lure him outside! Do you understand?”

It may have been judgemental of me, some toxic form of cat shaming, but I didn't buy that the stray had any interest at all in twenty-pound Raisin.

"Aw, I don't know. She's probably just hungry..." I said, crossing my arms over my braless chest.

Pancho put up a fight for a bit, then relented, and his breathing slowed. When he was mostly quiet, Cliff finally took his hand off and Pancho rolled over onto his side, recovered, then got up and slowly walked back to the bedroom. But I didn't follow so I don't know what he did after that.

"I swear to god I'm going to drop that cat off at a kill shelter. She's a bad influence on Raisin!" Ilsa then turned to the cat and said to its face, "That's right. I'll tell them you're trying to infect my cat with feline AIDS. Then that'll be it for you."

"Alright enough of this." Cliff got up from the floor and held his arms wide open. He was much taller than I'd remembered. "Bianca! Baby! How are you?" He threw his arms around me and scrunched me up to him and kissed my head and I knew that he was trying already to get us going in the direction we'd need to go in order to make the threesome happen and I knew then that it wasn't going to.

"I know it's been forever, but nothing could ever get between us. We've known each other for years. We've been in the pits together!" He brought me into the kitchen still latched to his body and sat me down at the table, fashionably set with mismatched china.

"You hungry? Ilsa and I made breakfast!"

Ilsa was still playing with her sage by the sink and Cliff came up behind her and said, “Ilsa, will you please get the mugs out and pour the coffee?” but he said it like it was something she was supposed to know to do, something she should have already done.

After the coffee I hadn’t asked for was poured, the big flourish came. Cliff pulled a large pan out of the oven with a grin on his face like a bad metaphor for delivering a baby.

“Shakshuka!” Cliff said.

“Shakshuka!” Ilsa said.

“Wow!” I tried.

I’d only had shakshuka a couple of times but I knew for sure the eggs weren’t supposed to be overhard. The sauce had brown pieces of mystery meat buried in it. Like a wonder ball of failed bougie brunch attempts. I stirred mine around with a piece of stale bread to soak up as much as I could. The pan was very large.

Ilsa said, “This was so easy. Last week I cracked all the eggs and mixed it all together and set it in the fridge and today it’s so easy. Right into the oven! Easy! Bam! And done.”

I said, “I didn’t know you could do that with eggs.”

“Oh yes, of course. Eggs are eggs.”

Cliff got right into it. “So I was thinking that maybe we could do a little bit of role playing tonight. After we do all the dress business. Like a sketch! For old times’ sake. Like at improv, you know.”

Around Cliff, around everyone, I pretended to be more naive than I was, and this is what I did. “Oh yeah? What were you thinking?”

Ilsa slammed her hands on the table and said, “Ooo, ooo, how about Princess Diana? And Charles and Camilla? I’ve been practicing my accent after the *Bake Off*.”

She did her British accent and it was hard to tell if it was any good or not, because she already had an accent to me, and I didn’t know what she was doing differently besides saying, “*That’s a good bake.*”

Cliff suggested *Three’s Company*, which I thought was obvious and lame, and then I found my strategy. “What about *Rebel Without a Cause*?”

“That doesn’t make sense. That’s two guys and a girl.” Cliff brushed his hair back with his hand, and I knew I’d sway him if I gave him a good part.

“I think it still makes sense, or it would be fun that way. You can be James Dean and I’ll be Plato and Ilsa can be Judy. It will be funny. You can wear the *Drive* jacket. Hey! And maybe we could even go up to the Observatory tonight.”

“So I’m Natalie Wood? The one who drowned? I don’t want to be the one who drowned.” Ilsa kicked her feet under the table and one of her clogs skidded over to my side. I kicked it back.

“She didn’t drown, actually. She was murdered. By Robert Wagner. Christopher Walken was there.”

“Oh, you Americans. Always with the conspiracies. Sometimes a woman just drowns.”

I’d started plowing the shakshuka into tight crop circles on my plate. “What if we did the night of Natalie Wood’s murder? You can be Walken, Cliff will be R.J., and I’ll be Natalie.”

Cliff had a tennis ball sized glob of egg yolk rolling around in his mouth. “Yeah come on, Bianca. Not everyone is out to murder ladies all the time. My mom told me about that Dr. Phil

special and I listened to some of that podcast too, but bottom line she was wasted out of her mind on like eight or nine glasses of champagne and she fell in and drowned. That's it."

"Maybe I should start drinking now to prepare for the role, then."

That's about when it started happening. Cliff got this scared look in his eye and got all still like something was taking hold of him, then he excused himself. Ilsa was ok for a moment, then she gripped the table with both hands, said, "*Oh dear now, here comes a bit of trouble*" in what I think was her British accent, and left to lock herself in the half bath in the hallway, because Cliff was already in the main bathroom connected to the bedroom.

It didn't take very long to figure out they both had a bad case of Monty's.

I sat at the table for a few silent minutes, wondering what I should be doing. Then I thought that maybe I could run out and pick them up something for their stomachs, and get food while I was out, but not tell them about the food part.

I grabbed my keys and for some reason all of my stuff—my entire bag of everything I'd brought into their house, even taking the time to unplug my phone charger from the wall and wrap it up and replace it in the outer zipper pocket—and headed out to my car. But when I got there someone was parked behind me, blocking me in, trapping me there. I walked around our cars twice in both directions to understand the situation. Finally, I bent down, dumped out my bag on the street, found the cheezits and malt balls receipt and a pen and wrote, "You're blocking me in—Kindly text me when you plan to leave?" and my number.

I repacked all of my things into my bag and brought it back inside, then made three trips back and forth to my car bringing in everything I would need for the dress fitting. I piled everything by the front door at first, but then realized that I'd need to make some space on the

kitchen table to work. I started by just clearing off the table of the shakshuka breakfast disaster and washing all the dishes—then I couldn't stop. I cleaned the whole kitchen, wiping down all the surfaces and reorganizing their pantries and shelves. When I was done there I moved on to the living room. I found a vacuum by the washing machine and sucked up all the Easter grass and rearranged the couch pillows, fluffing as I went. Cliff had left the door to their bedroom open before bolting the door to the connecting master bath, so it only made sense for me to continue on into their bedroom. I made the bed, reorganized their closet and drawers in the Mari Kondo method, and collected all the dirty clothes on the floor all over the house and started multiple loads of laundry.

This is how I found the jacket. It was balled up in a corner of their closet, and even though it smelled like Cliff hadn't washed it since it came into his possession that night after the show, I held it in my palms and nestled my face in it, sitting in prayer position. After I washed it it would be as good as new, and I added it to the load of their delicates.

I fed both Pancho and Raisin and even left some of Raisin's food out for the stray after I swept the porch. I organized Ilsa's rock collection into categories based off of size, shape and color.

It was really starting to bother me that the only two rooms I couldn't get to were the bathrooms and I was hoping they would hurry up and clear out and give me space to work in there.

As I was setting my supplies out on the kitchen table, I noticed a trail of ants making its way along the baseboards, up to the sink, and into the cupboards. This wouldn't do. Because I'd gone through their whole house, I knew that Cliff and Ilsa didn't have what I'd need to combat

the ants. I looked up the nearest convenient store—a seventeen minute walk away, which was certainly manageable, so I finished arranging my supplies and did one more round through the house to make sure I was leaving everything as orderly as possible. The jacket was still in the washer—it would be done by the time I got back, and then I could hang dry it. I waited until I was on the porch to pull my shoes on, noting that the stray hadn't touched the food yet, then I headed out. I was already too far from the house when I realized I'd never changed out of my pajamas.

They were filming something on the next street and it was a police shootout sort of thing. I'd mistaken real police being interviewed for the news while standing in front of a real crime scene with just a regular cop scene being filmed for T.V. before, so this time I knew to check for the reporters. I'd thought this neighborhood was quaint, and back when I lived in Los Angeles I used to sometimes drive through here on the weekends to imagine a life of domestic bliss. I didn't understand why someone thought it would make a good backdrop for this shootout. As I made my way down the hill fake gunshots rattled off. I'd be caught in the crossfire, if it was real. I paused to take a pictures of some flowers dipping over a fence.

An old woman with a messy bun piled on top of her head stepped out of a trailer and I knew her. Or I knew who she was. I recognized her. Maybe many people wouldn't recognize her. She plays a crotchety old lady in the type of sitcoms you watch when you're in the company of more than one generation of family. She's a sort of mean/funny grandma character. Not someone they'd pay to be in a full season, but who they'd bring in for a Thanksgiving special, or something.

I thought to wave, but instead said “hello” in the high-pitched voice of an elementary schooler as I passed. She said “hello” back, sweetly, and it was nothing like her characters and that startled me and made me want to cry a little bit. That everyone thought she was one way, when she was really another, but this was her job and there was nothing she could do about it. It didn’t make sense that she’d be involved in a police shootout. Or maybe it would make sense in a year or two, when the movie came out.

I took a different way back from the convenient store, because I wanted to relax and not be shot at, and on the way I passed an open house event. I was so obviously not in the market for a house—I was holding two bags of groceries. But I went in anyways, and scoped out the rooms. I wondered what it would be like for Cliff and Ilsa and me to come look at this house together. I planned out where all of their furniture would go in this new house, and which pieces we would get rid of. I assigned everyone places to sleep. I found a good place for Raisin’s litter box. I didn’t consider bringing any of my things from Portland.

When I got home Cliff was lying on the couch watching an animated show and smoking weed out of some sort of wall plug-in contraption I’d never seen before. It looked like a power tool. All he said was “hey” and I didn’t know if he still wasn’t feeling well, if he was embarrassed about having diarrhea, or if he was mad at me for touching all of his stuff. I agonized over this as I sprinkled baking soda and cinnamon strategically around the house in the little swirling paths of the ants.

I checked on the laundry and it wasn’t in the washer and it wasn’t in the dryer and I felt a surge of panic. I acted like I was going back into the bedroom to use the bathroom—I flushed and ran the sink and everything—and while in there I saw that Cliff must have put the clothes in

the dryer (which would shrink the jacket) and then tossed them on the top shelf in the closet when they were done. His effort at a chore stuck out glaringly now next to the articles of their clothing I had tightly folded and stacked. The sleeve of the jacket hung limply over the side (*help me*) and I stroked it, but now was no time for a rescue mission with Cliff sitting right out there on the couch.

I heard Pancho wheezing and hacking and then the half bath door open and slam.

Ilsa shouted, “What’s wrong? What’s wrong with him? What is this stuff!”

I slinked out of the closet like a kid who doesn’t want to get caught fondling his father’s rifle.

Cliff had Pancho on the porch and was spraying his face with a garden hose. Ilsa was dragging the vacuum out to start sucking up the trail I’d made.

I’d frozen in the hallway and she saw me and said, “Look at this! Look at the mess you made!”

“I’m sorry Ilsa—I’m so sorry. It’s just there were ants and I didn’t think about Pancho and I’m just—”

“It’s fine. It’s fine.”

“Please let me clean it up. Here.” I motioned to take the vacuum.

“No! Let me. I want to do it.”

I sat at the kitchen table quietly, not wanting to do anything else unless I was told. Ilsa sloppily dragged the vacuum over the trail, effectively scattering the baking soda and cinnamon everywhere and grinding them further into the carpets. Cliff sat on the porch holding Pancho

under his left arm and the hose in the other and kept spraying the dog's face with the water, long after he needed to.

Eventually Ilsa and Cliff both tired of their activities and they went to shower. They must have had a talk in the process because when they returned to the kitchen they both acted like everything was normal. Or that everything was as it had been before, at some point before.

"Sorry about this afternoon," Ilsa started.

"Yeah, we got shakshuka-ed!" Cliff said. It was planned. They both laughed.

"That's ok. Do you guys want to start on the dress?"

"Yes, of course." At this Ilsa untied her robe and let it fall into a messy pile on the floor. She was naked underneath. I pretended not to notice, as I slipped the dress over her head. Cliff watched, and I pretended not to notice him, either.

"Cliff, why don't you light some candles? It's starting to get dark," Ilsa said, which I knew was also a part of the plan. Cliff obeyed and lit them all, then retrieved more from where I knew they were under the kitchen sink. He and Ilsa then got into an involved argument over how many candles were too many to light, and where they should all be placed. I stayed out of it as I worked away on the dress, even though many times they asked me to weigh in.

I knew I was good at what I was doing. I'm good at draping fabrics over people. I'm good at determining whether people want to hide or stand out, or what parts of themselves they want to hide and what parts of themselves they want to stand out. I started off by trying to conceal Ilsa's hips, the hips that gave away her age, but then by the way her stance shifted I could tell she felt uncomfortable with the way the dress was falling on her, and I understood that

she liked this part about herself, even loved it, and I switched gears and bunched up a fistful of fabric, pinned it, and marked it for removal. After the adjustment, she straightened her posture, and I felt her power in that moment coursing through me. I always wanted softer angles, but Ilsa wanted everything sharp, in focus. I subtracted large swathes of fabric until it was an entirely different dress altogether.

After Cliff finished with the candles he decided to make us all drinks, even though I told him I wouldn't be able to drink while I was working. He spent a long time measuring and mixing ingredients and dumping them into a huge pitcher. The final touch would be pineapple wedges, apparently, and from where I was on my knees next to Ilsa I could see him assaulting a whole pineapple with a rusty butcher knife. He obviously had no idea what he was doing, but Ilsa and I seemed to be in silent agreement that we were going to allow him to be the man of the house when it came to the pineapple.

Neither of us were surprised when he cut himself, but I was surprised at the amount of blood spilling out over the mutilated fruit. I knew the juices would be stinging his wound, but he shrieked and held his hand like it was engulfed in flames.

I told Ilsa not to move, or all progress would be lost, and I brought him over to the sink to put the fire out and requested him an Uber to take him to the nearest emergency room. Since there were no paper products left in the house, I butterflied a maxipad over his cut, which was in the soft place between his thumb and index finger on his left hand, like he chopped right into it. I secured the pad with packaging tape, then double bagged his hand in the shopping bags from my solo adventure earlier, and tied them tight around his wrist.

I got him settled in the back of the car and before it pulled away he grabbed me with his right hand and said, “You’re not coming with me?”

I said, “Sorry, bud. You’re on your own with this one. I can’t leave Ilsa just standing there. And if we stop now there won’t be a dress.”

I knew he didn’t care much about the dress at all, but I was eager to get back to it, so I thrashed free of his grasp and shut the door on him. He started sobbing really loud before the car pulled away.

Once I’d altered the dress to perfection, and Ilsa agreed that everything about it was right and exact, I carefully removed Ilsa from the dress and went to work on it. I worked silently, and while I was working Ilsa got dressed and picked up a Korean sweet potato pizza for us.

“Do you think I should check on Cliff?” she said.

“I think he’ll be ok.”

“Was it bad?”

“No, it wasn’t really all that bad.”

“Do you want some of the drink he made from the pitcher?”

“Is there blood in it?”

“Only a little.”

“I think I’m good.”

“Alright. I’m going to have some. I think if we rinse the pineapple off it should still be good, too.”

She plopped the bloodied pineapple directly into the sink and started hosing it off. Pancho hobbled in, finally awake from the long siesta he took after the waterboarding on the porch. Ilsa tossed chunks of pineapple for him onto the floor and when he'd swallow them there'd be wet, little red stains left behind, which he would lap up. I hadn't seen Raisin for awhile, but I'd also cleaned up all of his favorite hangouts, so maybe he was avoiding me.

Ilsa and Pancho ate most of the pineapple as she was rinsing it off, then she sat at the table and drank most of the pitcher as she watched me work.

"Would you like a free tarot reading?" Ilsa said.

"Right now?"

"It won't take long."

"Ok, sure. I've never done one before."

"Oh, this will be such fun, then." She left and returned with her deck, which she fanned out on the table to make sure all the cards were facing in the same direction. Then she stacked the deck back together and handed it to me and said, "Here, now shuffle and think of your question."

"My question?"

"Yes, a question. You have to ask the deck a question. How else will it know what to do?"

I didn't know what I wanted to know. A chilly feeling started to seep outward from a point in the middle of my chest, like a blue-black blot of watercolor on white copy paper. This needed to be contained, so I decided to go with a smaller question: *Will I ever get my jacket back?*

I shuffled for a long time, because Ilsa didn't tell me to stop, then I finally made eye contact with her and she said, "Now spread your cards out on the table."

I had to stand and lean over to spread the cards on the half of the table where the dress and my supplies were not taking up the space.

"We're going to do a Celtic spread. That means now you pick nine cards and hand them to me one at a time."

I did as she said and as I handed them to her she arranged them on her side of the table in a diagram, every so often making a "hmmm" sound or saying "that's interesting." It was infuriating.

When I was done she studied the diagram for a couple of minutes.

"So? What does it mean?"

"This is a very thorny reading. Very spiky. Lots of swords. Very rare to draw this many swords from a deck."

She walked me through my past (*what lies behind*), my hopes and goals, my central issue, my near future, my current self image, how others see me, my warning, my environment, my fears, and my overall outcome (*what lies ahead*).

"You see, you end up in this really guarded place. Look, see. This little man is running off with all the swords. But he's looking back at camp, back to the past. He has no friends, no family. Nobody. Just swords. Are you generally a defensive person?"

I didn't know what to say, but Cliff came home and broke the spell of the reading and then it didn't matter. He was angry at us for not coming to the hospital with him, you could tell, so instead of responding when we asked him how he was, he dumped out a jigsaw puzzle in the

middle of floor and started working on it with his good hand. He sat on his stomach in front of it, kicking his feet like a child.

We spent the rest of the night like this. I worked on the dress, Cliff worked on his puzzle. Ilsa studied her Celtic cross deck for awhile, then joined Cliff on the floor. She worked on the corner pieces and the border while he impatiently went after the central image, tossing tiny pieces aside haphazardly, which Ilsa would retrieve from under the couch.

At some point Cliff went to bed, complaining under his breath about his hand and popping too many of some sort of pill that would surely knock him out for a day and a half.

Ilsa finished what she could of the puzzle, but there were a lot of pieces missing, so I tried my best not to look at it because I found this incompleteness incredibly disturbing and I worried that I'd spend the rest of the night searching the house for the missing pieces instead of finishing the dress.

Ilsa tiptoed around the house, blowing out each candle that had been lit during a more hopeful time of the day. She brought one of the larger candles over near me, as though I would need its light to work, even though the overhead light in the kitchen was still on. The gesture made my head and neck and spine tingle, though. Then she went to bed, too.

I don't know what time I finished the dress. Sometimes it's hard for me to even know exactly when I'm done. It's like all of a sudden I'm shimmying the finished product onto a hanger and displaying it before I even know what's happened. But I didn't have a hanger in the kitchen, so when I was done I went to Cliff and Ilsa's bedroom closet for one.

When I got to their room, dress slung over my arm, their bedroom door was open. Both of them were sleeping, ravishingly. They looked like mythical gods, there next to each other like

that. There was space between them, and without thinking about it too much, I climbed in and scooted my feet up to their pillows and my head down to their feet. I curled the dress around me.

I thought about the sitcom grandma I'd seen today, and how she'd be dead soon, and my own grandma and how she'd be dead soon, too. Then I thought about how my father would be dead after that, then my mother.

I used to sleep between my parents like this sometimes when I was younger. But now I never would again. There would never be a reason to.

If I was willing to admit it to myself, *this* had been the most exciting thing to me about the whole weekend. That I could be a child to someone again. That I would be doted on like a helpless dependent. That I would be taken care of. I so often felt that I was bad at taking care of myself.

And I thought it would be fun to try out having bohemian parents for a weekend. Mine had been so controlled and restrained and undramatic. Everything had always been handled with the least amount of fuss possible.

But Cliff and Ilsa made for bad parents, I'd decided.

In the morning it was Labor Day. I woke up to Pancho biting a strand of my hair that was hanging off the end of the bed. Cliff and Ilsa were still asleep, like really knocked out. Ilsa was snoring; Cliff had his bloody hand thrown over his face.

I crawled from the bed onto the floor, then slowly pulled the dress out from the covers and hung it up in the closet.

In the kitchen as I was packing up all of my stuff I received a text message from an unknown number saying, “So sorry about that! My b.! Pulling out now!”

I finished packing everything up as quickly and quietly as I could, and by the time I started taking the loads out, the car behind me that had been blocking me in was already gone. I made four or five trips, triple-checking the house that I hadn’t forgotten anything. Once I was sure that I’d packed everything I’d brought with me into my car, I went back into their bedroom and into their closet. I pulled the jacket down by the sleeve and the rest of the pile came with it, crashing down on top of me. Everything made multiple thumps as it toppled to the carpet below, but no one woke up. I checked. I zipped the jacket over the pajamas I’d been wearing since Saturday night, since the last time I showered. The jacket was a bit smaller from Cliff putting it in the dryer, but it fit me even better than it had before. And it would never fit Cliff again.

I fled. On my way out the door I accidentally ran over the jigsaw puzzle, forgetting it was there. On impulse I turned around and destroyed the rest of the thing, tossing pieces all over the couch where they would surely be lost in the cushions for eternity. Pancho watched from the chaise, but let me get away with it.

I didn’t lock the door behind me because I didn’t know how. Raisin was on the porch and so was the stray. I didn’t know how Raisin got out there, but I knew he wouldn’t get very far. I knelt down and picked up the small black cat and brought her to my chest. I held her there for a moment and knew that, yes, she wanted to come with me. I unzipped the jacket and zipped her up inside, then got in the car and made for the highway.

When we were far enough away the cat climbed out over my shoulder and into the back seat. She could have torn up all my fabrics if she'd wanted to, or peed on them, but she didn't. She looked out the window, not knowing she'd just evaded death.