

The Mourners (*excerpt*)

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April, 2011. St. John.

At the beginning of April, St. John sealed six photographs in a large manila envelope – two from each photo shoot, each captioned with his name and the name of the author represented – and dropped them in the slot for on-campus mail delivery. By now, he knew the lines and colors of each one by heart, and imagining them was just as good as looking at them. Lidia as Sylvia Plath, who had stood in a closed-off kitchen at number 23, Fitzroy Road, London, with wet towels underneath the doors until carbon monoxide from the oven had filled the room; Kennedy as Virginia Woolf, who had walked into the River Ouse in Sussex, dressed in an overcoat with her pockets full of rocks; and he, St. John, as Ernest Hemingway, who had died with a twelve-gauge Bass shotgun in his mouth, standing in the foyer of a house in Ketchum, Idaho.

St. John stood in the mailroom for several minutes afterward, waiting to feel momentous. When momentousness didn't come, he wandered back into the warm spring sun and comforted himself about the campus café art show's lack of selectivity by imagining student reaction to the photographs – he hoped for, and perhaps expected, shocked gasps and long, careful stares. He wanted people to approach him and wonder after his inspiration, the stroke of genius that could inspire photographing incipient, recognizable suicide. He wanted the crowd around his pictures to swarm and pulse like insects converging on their target.

On the night of the showing, he arrived at Lidia and Kennedy's apartment twenty minutes before he'd told them he would and passed the time bouncing on the balls of his feet on the sidewalk in front of their door. His skin hummed and he savored the breathless queasiness that came with anticipation, the low-level buzz that reminded him he was alive and creative and worthy. *This doesn't matter to you*, he instructed himself, to keep the excitement off his face. *This is just some small great idea you had. This is the kind of thing you think of every day.*

Voices drifted from between the white curtains that always blew out the downstairs window like gangly, translucent wings and St. John recognized both the dramatic rise and fall of Lidia's and the deep precision of Kennedy's. He liked listening to them talk to each other – they were so used to being together, it seemed to him, that their voices interlocked and slid in and out of one another in a kind of easy pattern he had never learned.

"I'll just stay here," Kennedy said. "I don't need to go. If you think there's a chance, I don't need to go."

"You have to come!" Lidia answered, high and quick. St. John imagined her with one hand on her hip and the other woven through the hair on the crown of her head. She would be pacing, St. John thought, up and down the length of the cluttered living room. "If you just...I don't know...vanish – it'll look worse. You can't just stay in here forever."

"Then I'll come," said Kennedy. Her voice was calm and even and St. John knew, from the dozens of times he'd watched Kennedy absorb Lidia's excesses, that she would be balanced on the arm of the couch or the edge of the counter, watching Lidia with slow, infrequent blinks. Her eyes would be dark and her gaze direct.

"And...you're sure?" Lidia asked.

"Aren't you?" Kennedy answered, avoiding Lidia's question with her usual quiet skill.

“He’ll find out eventually.”

A long, stiff pause followed this. Kennedy, voice muffled as though she’d turned her face away from the open window, answered finally, “Yes. But not yet. I’d like to leave it. Just for a little longer. I just – let’s wait.”

Neither of them spoke after this and St. John felt the both creeping warmth of acquiring knowledge he wasn’t supposed to have and the cloying jealousy and confusion he always felt in the face of intimacy he didn’t know how to share. He wanted to be the *he* in the conversation and at the same time wanted to know what it was the *he* wasn’t supposed to know. He imagined Lidia and Kennedy moving towards one another, touching fingers or foreheads, and realized he couldn’t conceive of any secret Kennedy could have that would be important enough to keep from him. Kennedy’s life, to St. John, was extremely simple. She came from a wealthy family in Irvine, studied English, and had been assigned to room with Lidia their freshman year; she said witty things under her breath, leaving St. John to either stupidly ask her repeat herself or nod as though he had heard her the first time. He didn’t know what else there was to say.

St. John un-rooted himself from his position in the shadows and rapped his knuckles on the door, which was painted white but which had begun to peel and turn slightly yellow with pollen and the thick dark desert dust. Lidia came to the door at his knock and she shocked him with her visible exhaustion. Her body, which St. John always imagined to be hazy and blurry at the edges where she seemed to explode and blossom outwards from her skin, was tight and hunched; if he had passed her on the street, she would have been, for the first time since St. John had known her, easy to ignore. As she gave St. John a perfunctory hug, wrapping one arm around him and covering her yawn with the back of her other hand, it occurred to him that

perhaps Lidia had saved her exhaustion for someone else, and he was overwhelmed with the need to be the person who saw her tired before anyone else.

“St. John,” she greeted him. “Hi. Just a minute.” Lidia turned and darted to her room for her purse, keeping her gaze fixed on a point just over St. John’s left shoulder.

Kennedy emerged from the kitchen, dressed in what looked like nothing but leggings and a flowing cloth draped in strange loops around her torso, and stepped neatly past St. John onto sidewalk. She held the cloth around her body in a protective way but, unlike Lidia, held herself at her full height and took crisp, purposeful steps. When Lidia returned, purse in hand, and St. John stepped aside to let her through the door, Kennedy kept an unusual amount of distance between herself and Lidia. The space between their bodies as the three of them walked from the apartment to the campus was unpleasantly charged and St. John did his best to avoid it and the queasy feeling he got from being there.

When they got to the café and pushed the door open, St. John felt his disappointment flash visibly on his face in the second before he could hide it. For the most part, the café remained a café. Students curled on couches and tapped pencils on tables and the glowing bitten apples of at least twenty Macbooks pulsed at St. John in a lazy sort of way. The six photographs were hung with clothespins from a long string of twine in the back corner, unobserved. St. John saw one or two girls give them a cursory glance, but the six pieces of eight-by-ten photo paper could not compete with the enormous paper-maché vagina set up in the exact middle of the floor or the painted plaster casts of faces lined up on a bookshelf in the opposite corner. St. John made his way over to his pictures and tried to pretend he was seeing them for the first time.

Lidia’s were still best, even after all the months that had passed since he had taken them – he liked the purple tinge of her closed eyelids, liked the tumble of her hair across her cheeks and

onto the bottom rack of the oven as she knelt on front of it. If he were to pick the most appropriate death for Lidia, it wouldn't be this one, but the girl in the picture was more than Lidia. She had Lidia's glamour and Lidia's exaggeration, but there was something softer, too, St. John thought. He liked to imagine Lidia as a mother and liked to imagine her crying, the kind of crying that came gradually and stopped suddenly, leaving the crier boneless, the grief complete and finished. He wondered, every now and then, if this meant something.

He wondered, too, if the sick twist he experienced in his gut when he looked at Kennedy's pictures meant something else. In one, she stood to her knees in water and her body took up the entire photograph, her hair in long strings down her back, arms loose and palms open at her sides; in the other, she was looking backwards over one shoulder, presumably about to say something acerbic, and the pale gray light caught her and held her still. St. John, who had always thought that light loved Kennedy less than it loved Lidia, had the overwhelming urge to pull Kennedy from the water and onto land with him. He couldn't see the picture as though he had never seen it before.

The tinny music hissing out of the overhead speakers echoed around the high-ceilinged room and St. John looked at the side of Kennedy's damp, pale face, and at Lidia's blonde hair falling into an oven, and at his own shadowed body sitting on its plain wooden chair, and wanted to cry. He felt Lidia approach him and stand next to him, and her tentative concern threatened to reach out and envelop him. Her hand, in his peripheral vision, stretched out toward his shoulder and retracted when it was an inch from his skin. It would have been so easy, he thought, to collapse into her and allow her to stroke his bruised ego, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

"This is bullshit," he hissed under his breath, refusing to turn away from the pictures. If he got angry, he would not cry.

“Come on, St. John,” she said, also in a whisper. “It was a great idea. It was. But what did you expect? They’re depressing.” Lidia tugged at his hand to turn him around and sat on an available armchair, massaging her neck with both hands. “Let’s just sit and relax, okay?” she went on. “I just...I want to spend time with both of you. We don’t really have a lot of time left.”

“The pictures mattered to us,” said Kennedy. “It’s fine if they don’t matter to them.” She put the palm of her hand on St. John’s shoulder and her touch was light and feathery. He turned to look at her and was surprised, as he always was, that they were the same height.

“The point was to make them look!” St. John’s decibel level was rising. “It was about paradoxical access and the impossibility of witness, and nobody can see that but me.”

“Calm down.” Lidia, looking around to see if anyone was listening, yanked the sleeve of his jacket so hard that two buttons popped off and rolled away between pairs of legs, many of which were now beginning to turn towards St. John and his petulant breakdown. “Please, St. John, calm down. I don’t want to do this right now.”

“We understood what you meant,” said Kennedy, who had removed her hand and was now using it to push at a cuticle.

“No, you did not,” he said, with as much contempt as he could muster to cover up the awful tightness in his throat. “You did not. Not even for a second.”

“St. John,” said Kennedy, “we did. You wanted those pictures to change people, right? Well, I think – I *know* – they changed both of us. Don’t we matter more anyway? More than all these strangers?”

“You wouldn’t – you can’t – “ St. John wasn’t even sure what he was trying to say. He just knew that he had needed these strangers to see him, more than he had needed Kennedy to see him, and now, at eye level with her, he felt a pang of sharp, unexpected guilt.

“We wouldn’t *what?*” snapped Lidia finally. “We wouldn’t worship you? Talk about you to our friends? We’re the people that are supposed to matter, St. John, and you’re so busy trying to make an impression on everyone else that you’re never going to see that you don’t even know – you never even asked – ”

Lidia stood up and grabbed Kennedy’s arm. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s go somewhere else.” She led Kennedy through the café, around the paper-maché vagina, and out the door into the dark. A few heads turned to watch them go and then returned to books and screens, sinking back into the low thrum of late-night café noise.

St. John wrapped his arms around his ribs, as though hugging himself, and felt his face burn and crumple like a child facing a strict parent – no one was looking at him anymore but the room still felt tense and awkward. He wanted to know what Lidia had thought he didn’t know but was too wounded to ask – he imagined going to her in the morning, apologizing, bringing her a coffee and a Danish and saying he was so sorry, please, he wanted to help with whatever it was that was making her so tired, but he knew would not do that. Apologizing felt like losing and he understood, as he had never understood before, that he could not let go of his surety that they had not understood his purpose, because if Lidia and Kennedy had understood his photographs better than he had, he was nothing. He remembered sitting with a shotgun in his mouth and not being changed, and he remembered Kennedy’s quiet promise that she, in fact, had been. Kennedy and Lidia had ascended, he thought, to some higher place, and left him ignorant and small among stucco buildings and whitewashed walls. They had discovered the vaulted rooms of myth that he had thought were his, and he didn’t know how to join them there.

St. John skulked out the back door and walked in circles around the perimeter of campus for what seemed to be hours. *What were you thinking, when you did it?* he asked Laura

Crawford, dead for decades, imagining that she walked with him and kept him company. He imagined the resolution and composure she must have had as she killed herself, the belief she must have had in what she was doing. Only Laura Crawford would have understood his pictures, he knew – only someone who had killed herself like Charlotte Perkins Gilman would have understood how badly St. John needed to be remembered. He pictured Laura in black and white, as she had been in the yearbook photo he'd found so many months ago, and he mentally embellished the picture he had seen of her until she had a long neck and high cheekbones, a graceful arch to her back as she knelt on an unidentifiable floor, tipping the contents of a bottle of pills down her throat. He remembered listening to Professor John Prentice bring her up casually in conversation in September and it felt to him like looking back on the moment you met someone who would change you – it was as though he'd bumped into someone who would become his lover in a sandwich shop or a bookstore, brushing his elbow against hers by accident while reaching for something on a high shelf and thinking her the kind of stranger whose face you will never remember.

Laura Crawford, at least, would have understood that the moment before death was the most important moment, the moment that could leave you alive long after you were dead. She would have understood why St. John needed to capture it and make it real and visible, why he needed to be able to taste it and feel what it was to watch Lidia's hair tumble onto the racks of an oven. Laura, St. John was sure, had been ordinary except for the moment before she died, and he clung to her so that he was not lost in the vast numbers of forgettable people, forgettable people who seemed to follow him and walk with him, brushing their hands over his face and chest with cold, forgettable hands.

Two weeks later, St. John had still not spoken to Lidia or Kennedy since the fiasco in the café. Twice daily, once upon waking and once upon going to bed, St. John stared at his phone and willed himself to call Lidia – one swipe and one tap and he would be talking to her, apologizing if he could, pretending nothing had happened if he couldn't. But twice daily, St. John reminded himself that she hadn't tried to call him, hadn't dropped by his room late on a Friday night to pry him from his books and take him with her for drinks. He owed Lidia nothing. And if his mind wandered to the conversation he'd overheard outside Lidia and Kennedy's apartment, he tried to forget it – he couldn't stand the gnawing feeling of knowing that there was a secret that had slipped through his fingers and, more than that, he couldn't stand the occasional flash of ugly, twisted guilt that was realizing that, even had he known the secret, he was now too far away from Lidia and Kennedy to have made any difference at all.

This particular morning, after staring at his phone for a full five minutes and running through several scenarios of a tearful Lidia, overjoyed to hear from him again, apologizing profusely for having walked out on him, St. John checked his email to find a message from John Prentice. Sitting at his desk and staring at the screen, he could not think why. He hadn't had a class with Professor Prentice since sophomore year, and apart from overhearing him mention Laura Crawford for the first time in a sandwich shop the previous September, had not had any interaction with him at all in the years following. He double-clicked with his eyes shut, as though he were loading a webpage with an admissions decision or a very important test score.

John Prentice <jprentice@clarkcollege.edu>

To: Norman Danes <ndanes@clarkcollege.edu>

Meeting

Hello Norman,

You may remember me from Woolf and Joyce, a class you took with me two years ago. I apologize for bothering you at what I'm sure is a very busy time, but could you please come by my office sometime this week? I would very much like to talk with you.

Best,

JP

St. John was perplexed and annoyed. The email was cryptic and unhelpful, and he resented any professor that insisted on calling him Norman. He slouched in his chair and rested his feet on the edge of the desk in front of him. He contemplated, for a moment, ignoring the request, but knew he couldn't. If John Prentice knew something about Laura Crawford, he had to know too. Whatever John Prentice knew had to be the missing piece that would make up for the fight in the café, for pushing Lidia away and being unable to get her back, for remaining unchanged.

For dignity's sake, St. John neglected to respond to the email and allowed himself two and a half days before walking through the gathering morning heat to John Prentice's office, which was on the third floor of the oldest academic building on campus. The carpeted staircases leading upwards were thin and covered in dusty yellow fleurs de lis. The doors, when opened, creaked and resisted, the knobs trembling in the hand that turned them. Most horribly of all, in St. John's opinion, was the lack of air conditioning. Starting at the end of March, the building was stuffy by ten in the morning and stifling by noon.

A simple plaque on the door read JOHN PRENTICE in neat, boxy letters and St. John rapped on the wood with two knuckles before entering. John Prentice, barrel-chested and white-

haired, looked up from behind the desk, and St. John remembered the photograph he had found, at the beginning of his search for Laura Crawford, of John Prentice and a man called Charles Peckham standing with their arms around one another in the warm fall light. The young, craggy face in the picture was unrecognizable as the jowly one in front of him.

“Ah,” said St. John. “You, ah, wanted to see me?”

“I did,” said John Prentice. “Come in. Sit.”

St. John did as he was instructed, negotiating his way through piles of papers and stacks of cardboard boxes to the high-backed chair that sat facing the desk. It reminded St. John of a chair you might sit in to be interrogated.

“Why so many boxes?” he asked, suddenly nervous. He detested nervousness, especially in himself.

“Unpacking from sabbatical. But perhaps you didn’t know I’d been gone.”

“No, I did. I just – you’re back early, aren’t you?”

Prentice didn’t answer. As he stared at the wood of his desk, St. John could make out some of the young man in his face. His brow ridge was still prominent and his hands were still large and square. The papery skin of his face was covered in stubble and St. John imagined it growing back in a dark, rusty brown.

“I saw your photographs,” said Prentice, after several minutes. His voice was calm and even, but there was a harshness to it that reminded St. John of yelling.

“Oh?” said St. John, unsure what else to say.

“I did. Was it your idea?”

“Was what my idea?”

“The pictures. Suicides modeled after authors.”

“I mean, yes and no,” St. John stuttered, feeling his speech beginning to speed up with fear. “It was my idea to take the pictures – I don’t think anyone had ever – I just thought it would be an interesting project, you know, to, ah, access the moment just before death...”

“I see,” said Prentice. He gave St. John a small smile and added, “You haven’t changed at all, then.”

St. John opened his mouth and shut it again. “I’m sorry?”

“Nothing, I’m sorry. I meant nothing by it. My question was, in case you misunderstood me, was whether the idea behind the photographs was yours.” Prentice was leaning back in his chair, as though he and St. John were merely discussing a particularly tricky passage in *The Waves* or the course offerings for the following semester, but his hand was clenching and unclenching into a fist on his desk, half hidden by the book he had been reading.

“Oh,” said St. John. “You mean – the suicides. The author suicides.”

“Yes, exactly. Was that your idea?”

“No, not exactly – I heard there was a student here, forty years ago – she, well. She killed herself. Like that.”

“And you liked the idea?”

“I mean, I didn’t like that she *died*. I just thought it was important, how she did it – no one would forget her, even if she hadn’t been memorable. In life.”

“Do you think that was why she did it?”

“I thought – I thought she wanted mourners. To leave a legacy. She understood – I thought she understood that our lives are boring, that they don’t matter, that if you don’t do anything important you have to die like art. You have to be art.”

John Prentice nodded slowly. “You weren’t as wrong as I thought you were,” he said finally.

“You knew her?” said St. John. “I mean, you *knew* knew her? You didn’t just know of her?”

“I knew Laura,” he said. “Not well.”

St. John’s palms were sweating and he found that his entire body was trembling where he sat. “Why?” he asked.

“Why did I know her?”

“No, why did she do it?”

Prentice relaxed the hand that had been making the fist and sighed, releasing the breath in a steady stream. He fixed St. John with a sad, old look. “You really weren’t trying to steal, were you?”

“No!” said St. John. “I mean, no, of course not. I just – it seemed important. Bigger than she was. Her idea, I mean. Like she was trying to be myth.”

“Norman,” said Prentice. “She was in love. She was a stupid girl who was hopelessly in love.”

“What?”

“She was in love with a professor. She was in love with him, and he didn’t return her affections, and she destroyed his career and killed herself. She was just a girl, Norman. I don’t think she ever considered becoming myth. I don’t think she would have known what you meant.” Prentice paused and laughed for a beat, putting his hand on his rounded chest. “I don’t think *I* know what you mean, entirely.”

“But why – why did she pick Gilman? Why would she do that if she weren’t trying to be remembered?”

“Because I think she was trying to be remembered, in a way. He taught her ‘The Yellow Wall-paper.’ She must have thought it was theirs, or that he’d hear about it.”

“And did he?”

“No.”

“How is that possible?”

“The details weren’t reported, Norman. We didn’t have the internet or cell phones or, I don’t know what you call it – social media. She died of an overdose.”

“Were you friends with him? Couldn’t you have told him? Couldn’t *someone* have told him?” St. John’s chest felt tight and uncomfortable and it hurt to swallow.

“Yes, I was friends with him,” said Prentice, his hooded saggy eyes bright for a moment. “I could have told him.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“She didn’t deserve it.”

St. John sat in silence for several protracted seconds, feeling the air in the room growing thick with his own unruly, unwanted emotion.

“Why did you bring me here?” he asked finally. “What was the point?”

“You should give credit where credit is due, Norman,” Prentice answered. “I wanted to make sure you knew that. Don’t steal her idea and make it yours, as sad and desperate as it was. It still belongs to her.”

“I’m sorry, but how does it? Taking inspiration from life isn’t *stealing*.”

“It is if you don’t give credit.”

“I don’t need to give credit to some stupid girl who was in love with some stupid professor!”

“You didn’t know them, Norman. Don’t pass judgment on him.”

“On *him*? You’re worried that I’m passing judgment on *him*? That professor – he’s barely even *relevant* here!”

Prentice’s fist clenched and released on his desk in front of him again, and St. John imagined that had muscle been visible through the loose fleshy skin of Prentice’s jowls, the muscles of his jaw would have jumped. Prentice flared his nostrils and took a long breath, as though preparing to yell at St. John, but must have thought better of it, because when he spoke, his voice was cool and indifferent.

“It was his story as well,” Prentice said, “and not yours.”

St. John stood at this, shoving his hands in the pockets of his pants to absorb the sweat. He was hot and nauseated in the way that only profound and deserved embarrassment can cause. “I’m sorry for taking your time,” he said, not sorry at all. “I should be going.”

“Whatever you like,” said Prentice, picking the book back up off his desk and returning his eyes to it. He did not appear to be so much as watching St. John leave, which St. John found inexplicably peevish. He would rather have had Prentice go through with his fist-clenching and nostril-flaring and simply yell at him, call him a liar or a thief, than have gone unobserved while he walked out like a common, uninteresting fool.

When he was at the door, he turned on his heel with his hand still on the doorknob. “And it’s not Norman,” he snapped. “It’s St. John. It’s from *Jane Eyre*.”

Prentice looked up for a moment, almost smiling.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m sure it is.”

St. John couldn't remember ever feeling as sick as he felt walking down the two flights of stairs that led outside. He passed through a courtyard with a sundial and a bed of yellow roses and couldn't decide if he was furious or embarrassed or a combination of the two. His stomach was gluey and soupy with shame. St. John hated very few things in the world as much as he hated being wrong, and he wasn't sure if he'd ever missed the mark quite as he'd just missed it in Prentice's office. Laura Crawford had been a pathetic, tragic twenty-year-old with a crush on a teacher, and absolutely nothing more. She was no more unique, St. John realized, than anyone who does a desperate thing to get a lover's attention. She was the same kind of person as the spurned wives who rent city billboards to advertise their husbands' infidelities, and she had not even had the sense to suffer her rejection in dignity, where rejection belonged.

And falling in love – anyone could fall in love. It took no intellectual prowess, no great curiosity – in fact, St. John thought, it took a lack of originality, the distinct absence of a mythic imagination. People who worked at law firms and grocery stores and local bank branches in all the blank prairie states of America fell in what they thought was love and went home to it nightly, taking comfort in the predictable and slowly aging bodies of the people they had given their lives to. St. John's parents had fallen in love, and look what good that had done. The Laura Crawford St. John had discovered, so many months ago, was the kind of woman who would have understood that abandoning herself to someone was the way to be swallowed up and forgotten until even she could not recognize herself anymore. St. John missed that Laura Crawford and hated John Prentice for taking her away from him.

St. John's blind rage took him, on autopilot, to the campus's central courtyard. He caught sight of his own reflection in the glass of the mailroom door and was startled to see that he

looked hollow and lost. Swiping into the vacant mailroom, he sat in the air conditioning on a wooden bench that had been rubbed as smooth as metal. He put his hands on his knees and took several long breaths, trying to control the humiliated flush he knew had spread across his cheeks since leaving Prentice's office. To distract himself, he stood up and went to his mailbox, even though he was not expecting any mail – grad school decisions, he assumed, would be delivered electronically, and his mother called him rather than sending him letters. He twirled the dial without looking and was surprised when pulling back the small silver door revealed a thin envelope. He registered that the return address was in New Haven before he registered what the letter actually was. Ripping it open, he unfolded the paper, which read:

Dear Mr. Danes,

I am very sorry to inform you that it is not possible to offer you admission to the Yale University Doctoral Program in English Literature. I wish I were writing to report a different decision, but the competition was so rigorous this year that there were many outstanding young men and women to whom we could not offer places in the class.

This year, a record number of students applied to the entering class. The great majority of the applicants could certainly have been successful here academically. The Committee was, therefore, faced with the necessity of choosing a class from a great many more talented and highly qualified students than it had room to admit.

We wish it were possible for us to admit more of our fine applicants, and we very much appreciate the interest you have shown in Yale University. We hope that you will accept the best wishes of the Committee for success in all your future endeavors.

Sincerely,
Jonathan Troy
Yale Graduate School of Arts & Sciences

St. John was overcome with the urge to crumple the letter and throw it at someone's face. Instead, he shut his eyes and heard Lidia's voice in his head. *It's okay*, she said. *They're idiots*.

Someone will let you in, don't worry about it. He imagined taking comfort from her smell and her arms and, even in his head, neglected to tell her that he had only applied to Yale and Stanford, because he had thought the rest beneath him. He could not face even her imaginary disappointment, though he understood that Lidia's pretend reaction was not what he should be worrying about. He had no back-up plan. He had no job prospects lined up. He had no connections. He had counted on the moneyed Bohemian homelessness of his early twenties to be enough to sustain him for years, had assumed that jadedness was enough to compensate for ambition. He remembered telling Kennedy, trembling and muddy from the pond and still dressed in a trench coat, that they would all be fantastic. *I'm sorry*, he told her, also in his head. *I think I might have lied.*

After several minutes, St. John re-folded the letter and pressed it between the pages of the Norton Anthology of British Literature, which he had been carrying around in his bag for a month out of thesis-driven habit. One day, he was sure, he *would* become fantastic, and then he would laugh at that letter. "Even I," he would say in an interview, one arm draped over the back of a velvet sofa, "overcame obstacles in my time."

April, 1979. Laura.

Laura took a deep breath and knocked on John Prentice's office door, almost nauseous with déjà vu. If she tried, she could make herself believe that this was Charles Peckham's office door and that Charles Peckham had not suddenly and, to most, mysteriously vanished from campus, leaving an old, nearly retired woman with a long gray braid to teach his courses. But Laura willed herself not to try. There was no response to her knock and she pushed the door open a crack, peering inside. John Prentice was sitting in the chair behind his desk, elbows on his knees and hands pressed over his eyes. He was taking slow, raspy breaths and his back was rising and falling in a predictable rhythm. Laura pushed the door all the way open, knocking again as she did so.

"Professor Prentice?" she asked, voice as quiet as she could make it. "I just...I wanted to talk to you."

He looked up, shaking his head slightly, and looked at her with flat, forcedly bland eyes. "Laura. I wondered when you'd be by."

John Prentice's office was entirely unlike Charles Peckham's. It was cluttered and dark, dusty and unwelcoming. The curtains were drawn across the windows and books were piled on all available surfaces, spilling from the bookcases and toppling over into the walkway from the door to the desk. The couch was red and split down the center, so that white filling oozed from the rip. And John Prentice himself was entirely unlike Charles Peckham in all the ways that most mattered to Laura; his face was neither kind nor soft but ruddy and thick-skinned across his nose. His shoulders were broad, his feet large, and eyes dark. On an average day, he appeared wild and commanding, but today, he seemed vicious and cornered, like an enormous trapped hound that

knew you were responsible for its pain. Laura was sure that she had never been more afraid of anyone as she was of John Prentice right then.

“I just...I had Professor Peckham’s class today, and he wasn’t there, and I thought maybe you would know...I know you two were friends...” She trailed off, the speech she had practiced completely forgotten in the face of John Prentice’s quiet, trembling anger. His entire body seemed to vibrate as he stood up to his full and impressive height and loomed over her.

“You did,” he said.

“I did what?”

“You thought I would know what happened to him?”

“Yes.” Laura was whispering now.

“Are you telling me you don’t know?”

“Not really, no...he didn’t tell me himself.”

“And you thought he would?”

“I hoped he might.”

At this, John Prentice began laughing. He tossed his head back, his coarse dark hair sliding from his forehead, and ran his hand over his beard. He continued laughing for several minutes, leaving Laura to stand in front of his desk, staring up at his face. She wanted to turn and run, go back to her room and indulge in her misery, lap it up like warm milk – instead she stayed as still as she could and tried her best to swallow around the sharp obstruction in her throat.

Finally, John Prentice stopped laughing and fixed Laura with his dangerous, canine stare instead. “You little bitch,” he said. “You fucking *cunt*.”

Laura, who had just drawn a breath, forgot to let it back out. “What?”

“You reported him, Laura – you went to the administration and told them your little lies and you expected he’d still be teaching today?”

“I didn’t think – I was just angry – I didn’t think it would matter much, I thought they’d just get him in a little bit of trouble.”

“So this was your revenge?”

“No! I didn’t mean it to be like that.” Except she had, she reminded herself – she had meant it exactly like, and John Prentice knew it. He smirked in a humorless way to let her know that he knew.

“So what did you mean it to be like, then? Go on, tell me.”

“I just – I didn’t think. He didn’t love me, I couldn’t think past that – don’t you understand that?”

John Prentice shook his head like he was attempting to rid himself of a gnat or a fly buzzing in his ear. He snorted. “Of course he didn’t love you. He’s a homosexual, Laura, do you know what that means? Or did you just use it to get him fired?”

“I knew what it meant, I just didn’t – I know now. I *know* now.” She just wanted Charles Peckham back. She wanted him to come back, even if it meant him loving someone else – she would settle for sitting in his classroom and knowing that, each time he looked at her, he was forced to confront the harm he had caused. Laura refused to consider the idea that he had not caused her hurt. His refusal to love her had caused her hurt, and his refusal to love her belonged to him.

Laura made herself look into John Prentice’s eyes, even though she could not remember wanting to do anything less. To her surprise, he did not look away. They stood like that, staring into one another’s eyes, for several minutes.

“I’m sorry,” she said finally, still not looking away. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“It doesn’t do any good to tell that to me.” John Prentice’s voice was suddenly much quieter, though still immediate and furious. He sounded throaty and close to tears.

“It doesn’t?”

“No, it doesn’t.” He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth and stared momentarily at the ceiling. “It was my job – I should have known this would happen. I should have seen it coming, and I didn’t. He *told* me about you, said you seemed so *interested* in your education and in nurturing your *fucking* student-teacher bond – he was so naïve, always wanted to see the most harmless things, the best things...we both should be begging him for forgiveness. I as much as you.”

“I would,” Laura said, leaning forward suddenly. “If I could, I swear, I would. I didn’t mean – I didn’t want – I wanted him to be hurt, but not like this. I just wanted him to – I wanted him.”

John Prentice’s shoulders seemed to collapse and he sat on the edge of his desk. He made as though to touch her shoulder but retracted his hand. “I know.” He paused and exhaled, the electric current that had seemed to crackle over his skin subsiding until it was nothing but a dull, defeated buzz. “You’re so young,” he added, as an afterthought. “So young.”

Laura couldn’t distinguish the exhaustion from the pity in his voice, and she just nodded. The sun was just beginning to set and the room felt unbearably tired in the long light. The jackets hung from the backs of chairs seemed limp and drawn and all of it reminded Laura that she would never speak to Charles Peckham again, would never beg him for his forgiveness. All she had was John Prentice and whatever food there was to be had in memory. She knew that soon she would forget the details of Charles Peckham’s face, forget the unendurable sensation of

watching him write on a blackboard with the hands she nightly imagined touching her in the places she did not want anyone else to touch her. She had built an entire relationship in her head, she knew that now – knew it and could not bring herself to accept it. She had taken a lover who had never so much as spent the night in her bed. She wished, suddenly and enormously, that it were Charles Peckham calling her a fucking cunt, and not John Prentice, and the strength of this wish brought the sting of tears to her eyes.

“Don’t cry,” John Prentice said. “Please, don’t fucking cry. He won’t hate you forever. He won’t even hate you as long as I will.”

“I know,” said Laura, who would have preferred that Charles Peckham hate her forever. “I know.”

“You should go,” John Prentice added, not unkindly. His legs were shaking and he looked about to crumple. Laura did not want to see a grown man crumple.

“Yes,” she said, turning to go. She hadn’t brought anything with her to gather up, and she pushed her fists into the pockets of her pants instead – she hadn’t bothered to shut the door behind her when she had entered, either, and it was anticlimactic to simply walk through the way she had come. The hallway, when she reentered it, was lined with closed office doors, and no light shone through any of the windows set over the nameplates – everyone had left the building except for John Prentice, who was kept company by his rage and his grief, and Laura Crawford, who was kept company by hers. She felt light and insubstantial as she walked down the two flights of stairs that led to the third floor and made her way into the setting May sun. A student coming home from dinner smiled at her, taking bites of a pastry he was holding with both hands, and Laura was surprised that she was still visible. She felt as though she had been taken apart, body part by body part, and reassembled with her organs connected in all the wrong ways. She

was unsure that the air she breathed went to her lungs or that the pulse she felt in her neck came from her heart. She wanted to cry out for the person who had reassembled her, to say, *No, you've done it wrong, I don't know myself, can't you see?* But she understood that she had been uncreated and that no one was there to explain to her how this new body worked.

Laura Crawford walked the rest of the way home from John Prentice's office feeling, for the first time in her life, as though she were the only person in the world. The lawn had just been watered, the excess flowing in broad bands along the sidewalk and evaporating into the warm evening air, and she stepped slowly on the tiled parts of the pathway, taking light dancer's steps, feet turned out. She didn't splash any of the water onto the backs of her calves and she took no small pleasure in this.

It was an enormous shock to push open the door to her dormitory and find the air cool. Two girls sat in the living room with their backs against either arm of a sofa, their feet and lower legs entwined. The girl with the longer legs ran her toes in rhythmic circles over the calves of her friend. Laura envied their intimacy, small as it was under the cathedral ceiling of the room. She had never met them. She wandered upstairs to her room and found that she had left the window flung wide open, the two halves of the screen pushed outwards until they bumped into the sun-bleached wall. It did not occur to Laura to close them and she sat on her bed, back completely straight and hands folded on her thighs. How odd, to be gutted.

She searched for the familiar desperate feeling she usually got when she thought about Charles Peckham and was almost unsurprised to discover a dark blank space where it had been. She found that she missed the desperation more than she missed him, and was reminded of waking in the mornings, months before, and reminding herself that she was alive because she had known that she loved him. If she had learned one thing about being in love, she thought, it

was that you were both elevated and reduced to it. Some days she had woken full of gladness. Of course I am a person. I am in love. And others, she had been consumed by the fact that her body, at that moment, had been untouched by his. All that I have is the act of loving you. What if I should stop?

A rare late-spring breeze blew through Laura's open window and it ran over her skin in a sudden, electric way. Laura wanted Charles Peckham to be happy, but if she was not part of his happiness, she wanted him to be as miserable as she was at being separated from him. The only people, she thought, who could unselfishly want good things for someone they had let go were people who had never been gutted like a fish caught on a summer camping trip – people who had never had their skin peeled surgically back and their innards removed by a delicate, careful hand.

May, 2011. St. John.

St. John, reading the Local News section of the campus newspaper on a bright afternoon in the beginning of May, learned of Kennedy's disappearance a week after it happened. Tucked in the upper right corner of the back page, under the headline "Student declared missing," a three-by-four-inch textbox read:

Kennedy Lott, a fourth-year student of literature who would have graduated this May, has been officially declared missing by local police. Ms. Lott's parents have declined to comment, and Ms. Lott's close friends report knowing of no reason for her disappearance. Foul play is not suspected.

St. John's first thought was a jealous one. "Ms. Lott's close friends" could only mean Lidia – Lidia had reported Kennedy missing, he was sure, and Lidia had not even told him that Kennedy was gone. Lidia had not shared her grief with him, or her fear. She had denied him access to her mourning and Lidia, of all people, would have understood that this was the worst possible punishment. She had let him find out from the back page of *The Clark Chronicle*, as though he hadn't been any more important in her and Kennedy's shared life than a professor they had both had for a single course or a boy they'd both met at a party. Admittedly, he hadn't spoken to Lidia or Kennedy since the encounter in the café, and had only glimpsed Lidia across dining halls or crowded courtyards after 1:15 classes let out, but he would have thought that something like this, something as monumental as an unexplained disappearance, would have outweighed an argument over some pictures.

What if it had been his own fault, Kennedy's apparent disappearance? He remembered her climbing from the pond in her white nightgown, trembling and terrified, and he remembered her wondering what would happen if they could not bear the world. But his pictures could not

have caused her flight, he reasoned – all he had asked her to do was stand motionless in thigh-deep water. He had held a gun in his mouth and he had not gone anywhere. Despite Kennedy's assertion that she had been changed, it seemed impossible that she could have been changed so quickly, and so totally. It could not be his fault. His stomach felt as though someone had stretched it into a rope and looped it through itself, and when he tried to consider the possibility that she was dead, he found he could not.

Several long minutes passed, though St. John did not register them. He had not moved from coffee shop's shadiest outdoor table, which was littered with thin papery leaves from the pale-barked tree sprawling overhead. He still had several books open in front of him, covered in Post-It notes and his own untidy handwriting; he was on his third cup of coffee of the day, and he was jittery and unsure of himself. Still holding the newspaper, St. John realized, almost as though the realization were unconnected to him, that he begun to think of their artistic clash over his immense project as an argument over some pictures, and he realized seconds after that this new assessment was not entirely incorrect.

St. John rapped on the front door of Lidia and Kennedy's apartment with the knuckles of his right hand, remembering coming to the same door so many times so many months before, examining Lidia's arms for the bruises her lovers left there and imagining the ones he couldn't see – one the shape of Australia on the rise of her stomach, one that looked like a lopsided heart on the thin skin of her upper thigh. St. John remembered feeling small and insignificant, standing uncomfortably in the living room on weekend mornings and waiting for whatever man was in Lidia's room to leave, and he suddenly felt very old and very far away from those mornings.

St. John waited outside several minutes before hearing footsteps and the click of the lock turning. Lidia, when she opened it, looked deadened. Her skin was ashy and dull and her eyelids looked thicker than usual.

“St. John,” she said. She stared at his face for several seconds, as though it were barely familiar to her and she was trying to place it.

“Can I come in?” he asked.

“Ah. Yeah. I guess so.” She stepped aside and he slid past her. She was packing, and boxes were scattered around the living room in various states of assembly. The boxes that had been properly duct-taped and stood upright all looked half-full of items unrelated to one another, as though Lidia had started on each and given up. Her shirts were draped over the edge of a box that was filled mostly with textbooks. St. John almost tripped on a pile of shampoo bottles and caught himself on the knob of Kennedy’s door. The knob didn’t turn and Lidia looked stricken, staring at his hand wrapped around the metal.

“Have her parents...?” he ventured, removing his hand cautiously. He had meant to confront her with his anger at being left out and his displeasure with her conduct, but seeing her made it impossible.

Lidia nodded. “A few days ago,” she said. “They took everything. Maintenance came and locked her room up.”

“How long – how long has she been gone, then?”

“Since a couple days after the café. The art show, I mean. Her car was gone when I got back from class. I thought – I thought she’d just gone to the store.” Lidia’s hand fluttered over her hair and jaw and face, seemingly unsure of the best place to land.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He asked the question as softly as he knew how, still standing among her boxes with several feet between her body and his. “I wish I’d known. I would have liked to know.”

“I couldn’t.” She didn’t leave the point up for debate and St. John nodded, considering his options.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally.

This, to his initial horror, made Lidia burst into tears. She buried her face in the palms of her hands and stood, shoulders shaking, in the middle of the room. She seemed very small and very alone.

“Oh, no,” said St. John, looking around as though he would find something nearby that would make her stop. “Please, don’t.”

Lidia didn’t even glare at him from between her hands.

“Can I get you something?” he asked. “Water? A tissue?”

She shook her head, a feat he found impressive given how hard she was shaking.

“Do you want to sit down?”

“Just stop *thinking* about it so hard,” she choked out, in a thick, phlegmy voice. “Just shut *up*.”

St. John didn’t know how to stop thinking about it. He wasn’t sure why he was there in her apartment – he wasn’t sure if he had wanted her apology or her comfort or her reassurance – and he considered the question for moment, wiping his hands on his pants legs. He had wanted to see her. He didn’t know anything beyond that.

“Can I?” He wasn’t sure which of them said it.

They stumbled as one unit of too many arms and too many legs towards Lidia's bedroom, hands sliding under waistbands and hemlines in the strange, exploratory way of two people who have never touched each other before, and St. John forced himself not to think about the men whose bite-mark bruises he'd seen on her morning after morning. He remembered, as her mouth moved from his neck to his ribs to the bones of his hip, meeting her and imagining her enormous and moth-like, mounted on a corkboard in front of him. She had been preserved that way, kept safe from the kind of close inspection that makes you forget the elegant brassy pattern on a silken insect wing and see only the thick black body, something you might wave away from a porch light without a second thought. Now, for what was perhaps the first time, St. John was in close contact with Lidia's saliva and pores and the reddened sweaty sheen across her face and, for what was definitely the first time, didn't mind it. Lidia was human, warm and wet and with sadness and greediness and something that felt like anger, and she brought Kennedy with her, who sat in the corner with her steady stare. St. John had been a fool to ever think otherwise.

They were finished what seemed like minutes after they had begun and they collapsed against each other, assuming the positions they knew they were supposed to take and holding them with unnatural rigidity. It seemed to St. John that they had both vacated their bodies for a little while and suddenly returned to them, in the way that a drunk person might suddenly come back to consciousness in an unfamiliar and unremembered place.

The room in which they lay was empty except for two large boxes stacked near the door and a pile of bedding in the corner. The bed had been stripped and the thick blue nylon of the bare mattress made high-pitched slippery sounds when they moved. The afternoon sun that poured in the window illuminated the dust in the air and St. John watched it move in slow, diagonal lines, unsure what was real. Lidia was very still against him, her head on his chest and

her arm draped over his stomach. St. John knew that as soon as she shifted and sat up, they would be forced to remember fully that Kennedy was gone and that they had just had sex in the empty place where Lidia's life had been, as if their fumbled touching could smooth the ragged, skin-like edges of the hole Kennedy had left.

St. John looked down the length of his and Lidia's bodies, he on his back and she on her side. She had a pale brown birthmark on her hip and a pale scar where she'd gotten stitches on her upper arm after falling down as a child, and he savored the idea that if he were to be in public with Lidia, walking down the street or talking to a waiter in a restaurant, he would know the marks were there when no one else would. They belonged partly to him and they could not be taken away.

Lidia stirred, pushing herself up on her elbow and using his stomach for leverage. She stared at his face with a hard, unreadable expression.

"How was it?" asked St. John uselessly. His mind felt strange in his body and he didn't know what else there was to say. The Lidia lying next to him was not the same Lidia as the one had had come to the apartment to see, and he wasn't sure if it was possible, or even desirable, to go back.

She gave a tight smile. "It wasn't bad, St. John. Don't worry."

He nodded, biting his lip.

"We're just – it maybe wasn't the best time – we're maybe not compatible – don't you think?"

St. John felt suddenly cold from his throat to his intestines. "We don't have to – to decide that now, do we?"

Lidia smiled again, allowing her lips to move a bit more this time. “No. No, sorry. Of course we don’t.” They were both aware, he was sure, that they would never do this again.

Lidia reached for her shorts and tank top and, after pulling them back on, lay down again. St. John, feeling uncomfortable at being naked when she wasn’t, retrieved his own underwear from the crack between the wall and the mattress and tried to put them on without disturbing Lidia, which proved impossible. It was several minutes until they were both clothed and resituated.

“Where are you going?” asked Lidia. “After you leave here, I mean.”

“Leave your apartment?”

“Leave school. LA. All of it.”

“I don’t know,” said St. John, though he had been planning to lie. “I didn’t – I didn’t get in anywhere.”

Lidia ran her thumb in sympathetic circles over his bare ribs. “I’m sorry,” she said. She offered no further comfort and St. John found he was glad for it. He did not want to hear the platitudes he knew would become familiar – that he would figure it out, that a gap year might help him find himself, that he could always reapply next year. He didn’t think he would be somehow better next year.

“What about you?” he asked. “Where are you going?”

“Home,” she said.

“Massachusetts? To stay?”

“For now.”

St. John didn’t feel that he could ask any more questions and instead ran a hand through Lidia’s tangled hair, which was tickling the skin on the underside of his left arm. He had the

growing sensation of pressure on his tongue that he always experienced when he knew he was about to say something that he would regret saying but had no hope of stopping himself saying anyway.

“Lidia,” he began, his treacherous tongue moving without his permission.

“Yes, St. John.” She said it with the kind of concerted patience you might use to talk to a five-year-old who’s just asked you twenty questions in a row and now has another.

“The pictures weren’t my idea.” It came out in a rush. Once it had been said, his tongue returned to its normal weight and slunk back into its cavity between his teeth.

“The pictures? What do you mean, they weren’t your idea?”

St. John debated telling her to forget about it, but knew that would be worse. “I stole the idea. Someone did it before me. Before us, I mean.”

“Took pictures like that?” Lidia laughed for a moment before the laughter seemed to catch somewhere deep in her body. “St. John, come on. None of us thought those photographs were your idea.”

St. John sat all the way up in surprise, dislocating Lidia and forcing her to catch herself before she fell off the edge of the very narrow bed. “You didn’t? At all?”

“Not really, no.”

“You knew about Laura?” This, to St. John, seemed impossible. How could they have kept this from him, allowed him to take his pictures and never told him that they knew exactly what he was really imitating?

Lidia turned her head until she was looking him square in the eyes. “Laura?”

“Laura Crawford.”

After a long beat, she asked, “St. John, who’s Laura Crawford?”

St. John sighed in relief, but Lidia seemed to interpret it as derision. “Don’t patronize me, St. John. I’m sorry I don’t know *all* the things you do, I have a lot on my mind right now.”

“No, no, it’s not that – I just – she’s the girl in the rumors. That’s her name. The girl who killed herself like Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Isn’t – isn’t that what you meant?”

Lidia stood, suddenly and robotically, and walked to one of the cardboard boxes by the door. She extracted a hairbrush, which she ran through the knots of her hair in long strokes. Her movement was crisp and clean and when she paused, her stillness was impeccable, broken only by the shallow, rapid rise and fall of her chest.

“You know,” she said, back to St. John and one hand resting on the box, as though she were steadying herself, “I always wondered. If it was your fault.”

“My fault...?”

“Kennedy. If it was your fault. Your pictures. Putting ideas in her head.”

“Lidia, no! I never meant – I swear, I didn’t – ” St. John scrabbled for his shirt and pulled it on over his head, feeling as exposed as a dead animal that was being skinned and gutted for scientific inspection.

“See, that’s what I told myself too. That you hadn’t meant it. That it was just an art project, and you were just being pompous and stupid like you always are, and it wouldn’t hurt to humor you because maybe it would mean something along the way. That none of us could possibly have known that anything really bad could happen because they were just fucking *pictures*, after all, they were just – ” Lidia broke off, still facing away from St. John.

“They were, though, I swear – they were just pictures. I didn’t mean for anything to happen to Kennedy. I didn’t, I really *didn’t*. I didn’t know – I didn’t think – I didn’t know she would take them so seriously.”

“You based them on some girl’s *actual death*, St. John! They weren’t an art project! You made us reproduce her death and you didn’t even *fucking* tell us what we were doing! How could you *do* that, turn all this death into a picture and make it about paradoxical fucking access or whatever it was you said it was about?”

“How is that any different than basing it on real authors’ deaths? They died too!”

“It just *is*! Those authors – they’re everyone’s stories, don’t you see? There’re a million books and movies and poems and I don’t even *know* what about Sylvia Plath with her head in an oven, but you stole someone’s story that no one knew and you tried to make it yours!”

St. John had no defense for this. “I wouldn’t have done it if I thought Kennedy would run away!” he cried, his voice rising in pitch.

“Kennedy’s *dead*, St. John! Because of you!” Lidia’s eyes were glassy and going red at the rims. She was still holding her hairbrush, and she let it fall from her fingers onto her feet, boar bristles scratching her shins on the way down.

“We don’t know that,” St. John said, collapsing against the wall and causing the mattress to slide forward, leaving him sitting on the metal slats underneath.

“She was *pregnant*, St. John,” said Lidia. “That’s what she wouldn’t let me tell you.” She sat cross-legged on the floor and held one of her hands in the other, running the thumb of one across the skin of the second. She seemed to St. John like an animal that had accepted its slaughter. She was, he thought, cornered by her boxes and her impossible, unforeseeable grief, by the locked door that had been Kennedy’s and by the thin, pale boy on her bed, who asked her for comfort and forgiveness that she was too tired to give him.

“How did you find out?” asked St. John, as if this mattered.

“I found a bottle of vitamins in her room. She never took them.”

“Vitamins?”

“Prenatal vitamins. Jesus, St. John.”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry. It wasn’t your fault, though, was it? You couldn’t have done anything.”

“Yes, I could,” she answered. “There were a million things I could have done and I didn’t do any of them. And it’s just like you to think there weren’t.”

St. John gaped at her. “I just wanted to make you feel better.”

“You can’t! You can’t make me feel better! You can’t come here and try to fuck me into feeling better! She’s gone, and she wouldn’t be gone if you hadn’t made her pretend to kill herself!” Lidia stood up again but didn’t move, as if the things she had to say could only be properly said from a fully vertical position. St. John felt wrong-footed and blindsided. Kennedy had agreed to stand in the pond, agreed of her own free will, and that didn’t change just because it had been Laura Crawford’s death, as well as Virginia Woolf’s, that she’d been imitating.

“She might still be here if she hadn’t gotten herself pregnant,” St. John answered quietly, almost under his breath, attempting to defend himself. He could not have picked a worse thing to say if he’d tried.

“Get *out*,” Lidia yelled. Leaning over the mattress, she slapped him full across the face and grabbed the front of his shirt, dragging him upright and across the room to the doorway. He scrabbled to keep his feet under him. “Get the fuck *out* of my apartment! I don’t want to see you again, ever again, I want you *gone*!”

When he crossed the threshold of her bedroom, she slammed the door. He heard the lock click into place and then something, presumably the hairbrush, make violent contact with the

wall. Taking his keys and phone from where he had left them on the kitchen table, he walked out of the apartment with steps that did not seem to be his own.

Standing on the street and staring at the white curtains winging through the window and against wooden outer walls of the apartment, he found himself thinking, as he had done so many times before, of Laura Crawford. *Look at this*, he said to Laura Crawford, in his head. *Look what you made me do*.

But he understood it was not her fault and he realized, quite suddenly, that Laura Crawford had done something he had never learned to do. Laura Crawford had loved something so much that she had died for it, and St. John knew there was nothing he loved like that. Whatever else she had done, she had been a part of a story he had no way to understand, and he was paying the price for reducing her raw anguish into six pieces of paper and pretending they were the same. For a moment, he thought he might be a great tragic hero – Greek, perhaps, or Shakespearean – and that this feeling of incredible insignificance was only a sign that he had reached a turning point in the arc of his life. He was Oedipus, blind with blood; Lear, holding the body of his Cordelia, or Othello, removing the pillow from Desdemona's gaping mouth. His stealing of Laura's story was nothing but his tragic mistake. This moment here, on the street below Lidia's window, was only his tragic recognition, his revelation, his knowing again – he had not failed but come into sudden, glorious awareness. But the moment passed, and St. John knew instead, perhaps for the first time, that he was a tall, thin boy from Oregon who was experiencing unremarkable human pain. If he were remembered, he would be remembered not because he had been great but because he had been pitied.

Walking slowly back to his mostly-packed room, St. John checked his phone, as he had been doing for days, for a call or a message from Kennedy, but the screen was blank. He

imagined that she was driving along a highway somewhere in Middle America, next to the faceless father of her child, her phone resting in the drinks holder and the shadows of electrical wires creating a strange grid on her pale face. He imagined that her phone was buried under a pillow so that its blue glow did not puncture the inky blue quiet of a midnight motel room and he imagined that, if she had read his panicky text messages at all, she examined his words with her usual thorough consideration and put them aside. She would not do this, he knew, to punish him, but because he no longer served any purpose in her life, or she in his. *But you do serve a purpose*, St. John wanted to tell her. *I need to know what happened to you. I need to know who did this to you.* He could not bear the thought that he would never know, and he knew that this should not be the thing he could not bear.

The Clark College commencement ceremony took place at three o'clock in the afternoon, on the rectangular lawn between the library and the humanities building. Rows upon rows of folding chairs crushed the newly watered grass and the vast white tents that covered podiums and stages and tables of elegantly prepared food threw distorted, geometric shadows across the fresh-swept sidewalks. The men, callused and smeared in sweat, who had spent the two mornings previous erecting the tents had vanished hours before, taking their trucks and pulleys and toolboxes with them. Clusters of white and blue balloons stood at the corners of every tent and one or two popped occasionally in the early summer heat. By the time St. John registered that the commencement speaker was delivering her speech, the speech was over and he was left staring at the microphone where her mouth had been and at the empty podium, which was draped in a cloth bearing the college's seal.

St. John heard his full name, the title of his thesis, and his Latin honors called as if the information was unconnected to anything important he had ever thought or done. He walked across a stage for his diploma and that was been that. He had expected to feel changed – he had expected colors, from the green of the grass to the yellows and oranges of the plastic-wrapped congratulatory flowers, to be vibrant, and the air to hum with celebration of his own great success. He had expected Lidia and Kennedy to laugh and hold onto one another's forearms and hug each other, in the perplexing way they had, and he had expected Lidia to kiss his cheek, leaving her red lipstick and a trace of her inimitable smile on his face. He had expected Kennedy to stand slightly back from this display of affection, hands clasped behind her and long hair straight and un-styled down her back. Her impressive height would have been particularly noticeable, he thought, and she would have nodded to him, just slightly, with one side of her mouth quirked. Her long clear stare would have glinted.

Instead, St. John stood next to Lidia, off to the side of the swarming reception tent. He had watched her say goodbye to friends he realized he should have known and had been only slightly surprised that he and Lidia had gravitated towards each other, the only two people on the campus who understood what it meant that Kennedy Lott, promising fourth-year student of literature, was not there.

St. John realized he had never seen Lidia completely free of makeup before the past two weeks. Her lips in the absence of paint were a fleshy pink, barely darker than the rest of her face, and they were mottled with patches of skin she had pulled on until they bled. Her cheekbones and the tip of her nose were reddened and bumpy. He wanted to think that she was prettier this way, but even to pretend to himself that it were true would have been an obvious lie. Lidia was ugly with crying. Instead, St. John tucked the tag of her blouse back under the fabric that poked

over the top of her black gown and let his fingers rest on the downy hairs of the nape of her neck for a second too long.

Standing in the grass next to each other, weak and disgusting with undignified grief, was the only funeral of Kennedy's they would attend together, regardless of whether or not she was dead. If Kennedy's body was discovered in the next few months, St. John very much doubted that her parents would think to invite a middle-class suburban boy called Norman, a boy Kennedy had maybe mentioned to them once or twice. His shins were sweating from the water in the lawn, which was rapidly evaporating in the afternoon heat and going straight up his pants legs.

"How does it feel?" he asked Lidia, for something to say. "To be graduated, I mean."

"Great. It feels absolutely great." Lidia stared straight ahead and her eyes were blank. She pulled her mortarboard off and held it in her hands, tugging at the tassel without appearing to realize she was doing so. The damp grass clung to the muscles of her calves, which were clenched from wearing high-heeled sandals. St. John noticed she had forgotten to shave one of her legs.

"She's probably fine, Lidia," St. John said, in a poor imitation of comfort.

"Let's not do this again."

"What do you want, then? I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do."

"That might be the first time I've ever heard you say that," Lidia said, turning her head for the first time in several minutes and giving him a weak, watery smile. "Thanks."

Lidia inched closer to him so that the side of her body was pressed against the side of his. He put his arm around her shoulders, uncomfortable with the contact, and felt the heavy weight of her head come down lightly on the bone of his shoulder. She made to put her arm around his

waist in return, but seemed to think better of it, and clutched the fabric of his graduation gown instead. They stayed that way until Lidia turned her face upwards to look at St. John.

“I know it wasn’t your fault. Not all of it.”

“It’s okay. I...I don’t mind if you blame me.”

“Is that an apology?”

“I think so. Yes.” There followed a long, stiff pause as Lidia continued to stare at St. John while St. John stared resolutely forward, trying as hard as he had ever tried not to cry.

“You know you’re important, don’t you?” Lidia asked. “I mean, you know you matter. To me.”

“I do.” It was the best he could manage. After a moment, he went on, “You aren’t going to write to me, are you. Or call.”

“No,” said Lidia, her voice so quiet that he leaned his head sideways so his ear was closer to her mouth. St. John nodded and she pressed a small, dry kiss to his earlobe. He found that he did not mind especially.

“Norman!” called a female voice from somewhere to their right, joyful and oblivious. St. John recognized it immediately as his mother’s voice, and felt Lidia detach her body from his. He made to grab her wrist, to say, *No, we aren’t done, please don’t go, I don’t have anyone else*, but she slid away before he could do anything.

“Hello, mother,” St. John said, when she had got close enough to hear him. A boy who had been in every single one of St. John’s French classes covered his mouth with his hand when St. John answered to Norman, and St. John took great pleasure in watching the boy stab himself in the nose with the thorn of the rose he was holding.

“Congratulations,” said St. John’s mother, unashamedly teary-eyed. “My brilliant boy.”

“It’s okay, honestly. You don’t have to cry,” St. John said, shifting from foot to foot and clasping his hands behind his back.

“I know, I know.” She pulled a tissue from the pocket of her slightly too-large blazer and wiped her eyes with it. “Who was that girl who left a minute ago?” she continued, smiling and elbowing him gently in the ribs. “She was pretty.”

“A friend, mom. Just a friend.” St. John was too tired to explain, too tired to stand in the hot sun and think about Lidia. St. John had followed Lidia home from dinner the first week of school and never quite gone away again, and suddenly this seemed like the most important fact in the world.

St. John and his mother found an empty table by one of the industrial-sized fans placed at the corners of the reception tent and sat, eating strawberries and pound cake from tiny paper plates. He unzipped his gown and set it on the table next to them. He realized he had no one left he needed to say goodbye to.

“Is Dad...?” he asked, not making eye contact with his mother.

“No.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry, honey. I asked him.”

“That’s okay. I didn’t expect him to.”

After several more quiet moments of chewing, St. John’s mother asked, “Did I hear someone call you St. John earlier? Before the ceremony?”

“It’s just a nickname. From *Jane Eyre*.”

“You and your books,” she said, taking a bite of a triangular cucumber sandwich. “More dignified than Norman Danes Jr., I suppose.”

“Maybe a bit.”

“Pasta salad? I can go get you some.”

“Please.”