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# The inside

Hannah Schlaferman  
*Vassar College*

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**The Inside**

**By: Hannah Shlaferman**

**David Means, Full Year 2017**

## Ping Pong

Our mother's condition determined my sister's name and mine. My mother, in one of her states of blissful mania, named my sister after a flower. Marigold: the golden blossom, bursting out from its center in vibrant color. The image stands clear in my mind from the first marigold I ever saw. It was in our neighbor's yard, a whole bed of flowers. Their orange and yellow heads stood out bright against the green of their leaves.

Mom picked one for me and held it up to my nose for a sniff. It wasn't like the sweet smell of most flowers, instead it was musty, sharp, alluring and unpleasant all at once. I crinkled my nose and then watched, fascinated, as mom brought the flower to her giant protruding belly. Holding the marigold by its green stem, she swirled the petals in a circle on her stomach. The movement was slow at first but then became rapid. The flower began to sag.

"Mommy," I whined, and pulled at her hand, but she ignored me. Mom moved the circle faster, and her eyes grew wide following its path. A smatter of orange dust lay on mom's shirt like a trail of blood left behind. "Mommy!" I yelled, "You're hurting the flower!" But she didn't even glance at me. The flower crumbled more with each turn. Finally, the head snapped off and fell to the ground. It rested against my white sneakers.

"Marigold," mom muttered, a strange smile on her face while she looked at the bed of healthy flowers, forgetting about the one destroyed at my feet. "That's a pretty name."

In many ways, the name fits my sister. Marigold's always been vibrant and golden. She has the ability to talk to anyone anywhere. I don't know how she does it. I've always been jealous of her courage. When she was four, she sweet talked a cop. Mom had left us alone in the car, the windows slightly rolled down, while she ran into CVS, and a police officer knocked on our window. He wrapped the glass right by my face and asked: "Are you girls alright? How old are you?" I was terrified. As the older sister, I knew I was supposed to take charge, but my mouth felt like it was full of sawdust. Marigold leaned over me and said: "I'm six and she's ten. Our mother will be out soon. Thank you officer." She gave him a wink. The cop burst out laughing. "Alright, girls stay safe," he said and walked away.

I always call my sister Mari for short. Marigold was reserved for those times when I was truly angry with her, when she'd stolen my white top and spilled grape soda down the front. Or just when I was trying to get her attention and couldn't seem to break through. "Mari! Mari!" I'd yell, until finally: "Marigold!"

"Whoa!" She'd say her head whipping around to face me.

My name, on the other hand, is simple and straightforward: Amanda. Chosen by my father when mom couldn't be bothered with the decision in one of her deep and black moments. My name was one of the many attempts by dad to do his best.

Dad liked to call mom his little ping-pong ball; sometimes she would ping up and sometimes she would pong down. Mom loved the nickname. Often before she started one of her wild projects, that she always abandoned half way through, she'd yell "ping." It was announcement of what was to come. Dad was amused by these "antics" as he called them. He'd shake his head and laugh when he saw mom had

taken all of the furniture out of the living room. She'd put it all in the dining room saying she needed the living room to be empty to fully "feel and experience the space."

"All I can feel, my little ping-pong," dad said, "is that there's nowhere to sit." But mom was already onto the next project, removing all the plates and utensils from the kitchen, leaving dad to move all the furniture back. I've never really understood how dad stood it all. How he continued to laugh, love, and be entertained by everything my mother did. When Marigold and I were little we were the same way. When mom couldn't lift the couch in the living room, Marigold and I took the other end, our scrawny arms straining under the weight. We were eager to please and help, excited about the activity, the action, the constant and ever changing goals of our mother.

At eight years old, I still screamed and ran around the house with Marigold when mom came home with her latest project: pints and pints of ice cream. She struggled to get through the screen door holding onto six plastic grocery bags. She pushed the door handle down with her elbow and used her butt to prop the door open. It looked like mom had bought the entire ice cream aisle. She'd gotten the normal flavors: vanilla, chocolate, mint chocolate chip, cookies and cream and the strange: phish food, americone dream, and confetti cake. She hadn't stuck to one brand either: there was Ben and Jerry's, Haagen-Dazs, Breyers, Edy's, and Blue Bell.

But even then I felt nervous about my mother's state. There was something about her an energy that was both thrilling and disturbing. Marigold was only five at the time and completely unaware, but I picked up on it. As I rushed to take a bag of

ice cream out of mom's arms, I brushed against her and could feel that energy, somehow metallic, rising off her skin. I could almost smell it. Her eyes were wide and shiny, her short blonde hair in a fuzzy halo around her head, and she talked quickly her hands moving all the while. She talked of how she'd been walking down the dairy aisle and realized she didn't know which ice cream to get. "How did you know what was the best brand?" She asked Marigold and me. There were so many flavors we'd never had before. "Which was better, almond or pecan cream?" We'd never know until we tried it. The only thing to do, it had struck her in a moment of brilliance at the grocery store, was to try every flavor! Every brand! Then we would know for sure which was the best, the most flavorful and exquisite, the one that melted in our mouths superbly. And wasn't it perfect because we were the best, the brightest, the loveliest, her and her girls, her two shining stars.

Three days later, mom's euphoria ended. She lay in bed, in utter blackness, the blinds down and the cream white curtains drawn tight. I visited her after school. Knocking gently, I slowly opened the door, the hallway letting in a sliver of light that didn't penetrate the darkness. Yet, mom still drew the comforter over her head.

"Not now, Amanda," she whispered, "I'm resting." I shut the door. Though I wanted to protect Marigold, the next day I brought her with me to mom's room. Marigold opened the door and crawled into bed with mom. I got in with them. "My darlings," she said with a weak smile and hugged us close, Marigold tightly with her left arm and her right arm extended past Marigold's little body to clutch my shoulder.

We ate the ice cream for weeks. I was in charge of Marigold when mom was “resting.” I prepared our ice cream afternoon snack with care. Marigold would offer up suggestions, caramel toffee with chocolate chip cookie dough or peanut butter bites with fudge chunk, while I scooped out the ice cream into the bowls. Often I’d decree Marigold’s combinations intolerable, strawberry cheesecake with cherry garcia and chunky monkey, disgusting. But Marigold didn’t mind my criticism or even if her concoctions turned out inedible. She loved to watch the different flavors melt into a horrible discoloured mash and then pick it up carefully with her spoon, balancing as much liquid as she could, pretending it was soup.

Marigold and I left the empty pints in the freezer. Dad didn’t suspect anything. We filled the pints with water so they felt heavy, in case dad picked one up while shuffling around in the freezer searching for dinosaur chicken nuggets. I thought it was ingenious. Now, I know there was no way he was fooled. Dad just tended to let a lot of things slide; you had to in our house. Making it to school on time, and eating well balanced meals weren’t top priorities and never would be for us. Dad was worried about other things like when was the last time mom actually ate anything or were Marigold and I safely home?

Even dad had a breaking point though. A time when he couldn’t stand it any longer. To him it was always justified. It was because when Marigold had asked for help with her history paper, mom ran off and wrote thirty-seven pages on the use of the minié ball in the Civil War. It was because I had missed my dentist appointment when mom was too depressed to pick me up from school. It was because mom couldn’t stop shaking her legs at the dinner table causing dad’s glass of water to

spill. But I never understood why these instances were different than any of the other moments in our lives. Why me missing the dentist meant that things had gone one step too far and that it was time for a change. With the ice cream project, it was because Marigold threw up after I challenged her to eat an entire pint of caramel toffee.

After cleaning up the mess, dad put Marigold into bed with me and turned Spongebob on the screen. "Watch your sister," he growled and marched down the hall. I heard my parents' bedroom door open and then firmly close.

I tried not to listen, but even with Patrick bawling that he couldn't find Spongebob, I could still hear what dad was yelling. I could imagine it too. Dad turning on the light and standing over the bed with his arms crossed. His voice slightly raised, trying to contain his anger. "Eileen, you have to get up." I heard him say. "You have to get out of bed. Marigold's been throwing up from all the ice cream you brought home." Mom probably rolled away to face the wall, deaf to all his words. "It's not fair to the girls! They can't take care of themselves!" The floorboards creaked as dad walked around to mom's side of the bed. "They need you. I need you." I could hear dad's voice beginning to crack, he was losing his strength which always scared me more than the shouting. "Please," he said, in a voice I could barely make out, "please don't leave me alone."

When I was older, things got worse. At fifteen, I felt too old to crawl into bed with mom and too embarrassed to bring my friends home where I never knew what to expect. But I also felt too young for my mother as well. Too young to be returning the thousands of dollars worth of clothes she bought at Nordstrom. The third time I

had to do this, I placed the bags on the counter trying to hide my face, hoping the sales assistant wouldn't recognize me. But she pushed the bags out of the way with exasperation. "I can't take back all these items!" Then she said more kindly, "Honey, we need a receipt, why don't you ask your mother where she put it?" I picked up the bags and walked out of the store.

A few times, dad took mom to the hospital and came back with an entirely different mother. She was fat, sluggish, and slow to think and feel. But in some ways, I preferred her. She was a mother who was always home when she said she'd be. A mother who wouldn't come home with pints of ice cream and then retreat to the dark. But this new mom never stayed for long. She'd lower her dosage, just a tad she'd say, just so I can get a little bit of myself back. 30 mg became 20 mg and then it was none. My old mother was back. Serving ice cream as a snack telling us not to worry, that it was full of calcium and truly, in the end it was good for you.

## The Perfect Bottle

I hate sleeping on the inside. It always feels claustrophobic to me. On one side a cold and oppressive wall, on the other a sleeping partner radiating heat. The outside is where I'm meant to be, able to easily slip in and out of bed to get to my nightly bathroom trip. Of course, I didn't tell Mark that. It's my first night sleeping over, and I wasn't about to start making sleeping arrangement demands. He fell asleep on the outside, so I took the inside. Now, I'm paying the price and struggling to get out of bed quietly in the dark. I move clumsily, scooting down to the bottom of the bed to get out. I place my feet carefully on the hard wooden floor, cold against my skin after the warmth of Mark and the covers.

I look back at Mark to double check I haven't woken him. Luckily, he's knocked out and hasn't moved from his bizarre position: belly down with his head off to the side on the pillow, legs and arms totally splayed out like a sleeping starfish. Honestly, it's a selfish pose, making cuddling completely impossible while taking over far more than his share of the bed. It's definitely the position of someone who likes to sleep alone. But maybe that's a good thing. I mean not that he *likes* to sleep alone but that he *is* sleeping alone. We still haven't had the "are you seeing other people" talk. A starfish pose I can change, but I don't know how I'd deal with him seeing someone else.

I pad across the floor carefully, testing each board for creaks before taking a step. I get to the bedroom door and slowly open it but it creaks anyways. I flinch. I look back at Mark. He hasn't moved. I exhale and side step out the crack in the door. My baggy t-shirt brushes up against the frame.

I have a knack for walking quietly. I got my training in college. Jason was always sleeping in until one or two in the afternoon forcing me to shuffle silently around in his ~~tiny~~ dorm room at Bowdoin. I'd read Plato's *The Republic* while he slept, actually managing to get a lot done for my Philosophy 101 class, which I took on a whim Senior year. After struggling through Plato's cave, I'd still be able to act like I hadn't been up for hours when Jason would finally wake up. He was the laziest boy I've ever dated. Well date is a strong word, more like hung out with. Like my mom loves to remind me in a sing songy way: always a date, never a boyfriend.

I walk down the hall less carefully now since it's carpeted, feeling my way in the darkness, my fingertips gliding along the wall. They bump into the doorframe and my hand scrambles along the wall as I try to find the light switch. I flick the switch, and stand still waiting for my eyes to adjust. The bathroom's not much to look at: a white-tiled floor with a grey bathmat, a see-through shower curtain, a toilet in the left corner, and a sink with a wooden cabinet beneath. The sink is covered in hair. It's disgusting. Unsanitary. How can Mark not clean up after shaving? All he'd need to do was a few extra splashes up the sides of the sink, quick and simple. I hate when people leave their hair in the bathroom. Megan, my roommate, was always leaving her hair in the shower drain. We fought about it constantly. She insisted she cleaned up, but I'd still find one or two stray blonde hairs. Sure, they were thin and light so you could barely see them, but they were there.

The hairs Mark left are much worse: short, black, and bristly like caterpillars. They line the entire sink evenly up and around the sides, except for directly under

the faucet where the water has splashed them away. I'm not sure if the evenness makes it better or worse. It looks like it came out a giant wooden peppershaker, like the one the waiter always uses at Gino's carefully grinding onto my penne pasta salad.

Maybe the uniformity isn't what's so disturbing. Maybe it's the color, the short pitch-black pieces against the stark white granite. Or it could be the juxtaposition in texture, the soft hair against the hard sink. At least I think its soft, there's no way I'm touching it to find out. It's not that I hate hair. I actually like the way it feels when it's attached to Mark's face, bristly against my palm when I rub up but soft when I stroke it down. It's loose hairs that I hate, the way they feel and cling to your body. When one falls onto my shirt and lightly brushes up against my upper arm. I'll turn my arm this way and that trying to find it, but I never can until it shows up cooked in my spinach omelettes. I want to leave the bathroom. Wash my hands and sneak back down the hallway. But I can't. I know if I leave all that hair there, I won't be able to stop thinking about it.

I grab some toilet paper off the roll hurriedly, double layering it to create a shield between my hand and the hair. Moving quickly, but carefully I wipe down the sink. There's so much hair I have to take another mass of toilet paper and attack again. I throw the paper into the trashcan causing the old grocery bag to lose its hold on the rim and fall in on itself. It's a Giant grocery bag. How disappointing. I guess it's good because it means Mark reuses old bags. He must be environmentally responsible. Then again, it could just be a sign of cheapness. I reach down and carefully fold the grocery bag over the lip of the trashcan. But I know with another

solid toss of trash it'll just fall back in. Stupid grocery bag— it's got nothing on Hefty bags extra strength. I love their bright red drawstrings. There's something so satisfying about lifting the bags off the rim of the trash and pulling the strings in a tight knot.

I return to the sink. It's clean now, not a hair in sight. I sit on the toilet and reach out with my toes to brush the bath mat. It is soft and unassuming. I shift it slightly with my foot, centering it in front of the toilet. I look around, examining the room. The floor's relatively clean, but the bathtub is a mess. There's Dove Men +Care Shampoo and Conditioner, a white square bar of soap melted into the soap dish, a bottle of Suave Men Active Sport Body Wash, and a black comb missing three of its teeth.

The bathtub itself needs a good scrub down. Surely, Mark must have some kind of cleaning products in here. I hesitate, I shouldn't snoop; what if Mark walks in and thinks I'm one of those crazy girls? But there can't be anything wrong with me looking under the sink. There's no way Mark keeps anything private there. I open the wooden cabinet slowly and don't discover much: an electric razor charger, a fallen over roll of paper towels, and two rolls of toilet paper. There's a beautiful blue bottle in the very back of the cabinet, peeking out behind the metal sink pipe. It's the shade of blue that only means one thing: Clorox spray bleach. I grin. There are few things that I love more than spray bleach. As rankings go it's up there with Mondrian's block paintings, *Grey's Anatomy*, and Lindt Chocolate Truffles.

Some people use powder bleach, but I find that completely idiotic for bathrooms. Sure, it might make sense for counter tops when you can easily sprinkle

it on, but for showers the spray's the only way to go. With the spray, you completely permeate the shower walls with bleach and then really go at it, a task that's completely impossible with powder. How are you supposed to sprinkle onto an upright wall? Plus, with spray you can stay far away from all the grime and dirt.

I move the paper towels out of the way and pick up the bleach. Turning to the shower, I begin dosing the walls, one spritz then two, three, and four. I use the paper towels under the sink, since I can't find a sponge. Mark really should have a sponge, it's a bathroom essential. But the bleach is enough, can't expect him to fulfill all my dream guy fantasies. Working methodically, I move from the shower walls, to the bathtub, then the sink again and the countertop. Spritz and wipe, spritz and wipe, every now and then pausing to throw out the dirty paper towels. As I clean, I think about what I'll say to Mark. *Listen, Mark, I want to talk to you about something.* No, no that's too serious. *We've been seeing each other for a while now, and I was wondering how you think things are going?* Maybe that's too vague. *I called you my boyfriend yesterday and well, are you?* God, that's even worse. *I was thinking about you and...* And what? And I want to know what's happening. Where this is going. I mean tonight I spent the night that's got to mean something, right? Okay, it's a little weird that he's never invited me to stay over before now, but this is definitely going somewhere, I know it is. I just need to push him a little bit say the right thing, phrase it a certain way. Not too pushy, not too intense. *Mark, I loved sleeping over here and waking up with you. Maybe we could start doing this more often?*

“Sam is everything okay in there?” I clutch tightly onto the neck of the Clorox. How long have I been in the bathroom? The place is spotless, there’s no way he won’t notice.

“Yeah! Just one second.” What am I going to do? Hastily, I open the cabinet and stash the bleach. I look at myself in the mirror, my hairs up in a sloppy bun, and I’ve got all kinds of blonde baby hairs winging out. I try to smooth them down behind my ears but it’s no use. I throw some water onto them.

“Sam?” Mark knocks again, harder this time.

“Hold on!” Giving up on the disaster that is now my slightly damp head, I swing open the door. Mark stands in front of me in his black boxers and soft grey t-shirt, his brown hair is dishevelled and sticking up slightly in the back, but it looks cute. He blinks against the brightness in the bathroom compared to the pitch black of the hall and reels back as the over-powering smell of bleach stings his nose.

“Woah, those are some serious fumes.”

I laugh, trying to play it off. “It’s just a bit of bleach. Sorry, if I woke you up. Why don’t we go back to bed.” I move forward holding the doorknob behind me, trying to subtly close the door without letting Mark get a good look at the bathroom.

“Bleach?” He pushes against me forcing the door back open and making me retreat into the bathroom. “Jesus, this place is spotless.”

“Yeah, I, I couldn’t sleep so I thought I’d do a bit of cleaning.” Mark continues to look around the bathroom.

“How long have you been in here for? This must have taken forever.”

“I wanted to do something nice for you.”

“So, this is like a present?”

“No, I mean yes. I just thought I’d do some girlfriendly duties.” Oh my god no. That wasn’t how I was supposed to do it! I can’t believe I just let it slip out like that. I didn’t even say girlfriend like a normal person! “Girlfriendly,” what a disgusting mangling of the word. Mark shifts uncomfortably, blinking blearily at me. He’s clearly not awake enough for this conversation. It’s the wrong time, the wrong place. Standing in a bleach-soaked bathroom at 4:00 am isn’t the stuff of romance. I look down at the bathmat, it’s shifted off center again.

“What do you mean?”

“I was just kidding! I mean I know I’m not your girlfriend because we haven’t talked about it yet, and you know it was something I wanted to bring up but obviously now’s not a good time. And yeah this looks weird but I couldn’t sleep so I thought I’d just clean a bit to relax, you know, and now look! Doesn’t the place look great? You had some serious grime caught in the granite, but don’t worry I got it all out.” Suddenly, all I want is to be out of this bathroom. How long have I been in here for? An hour? An hour and a half? Now that the door’s open and fresh air’s wafting in I realize how strongly the whole place smells of bleach. It’s overpowering, especially combined with the sheen from the bathtub reflecting the light above. All I want is to go back to bed with Mark and lie down in his soft off-beige sheets, that could use a bit of a wash.

“Yeah, I mean the bathroom looks really nice,” Mark says. “But Sam, we haven’t been seeing each other that long, only a few we—”

“Exactly! I definitely agree, which is why I was joking, you know, because if I was your girlfriend, I wouldn’t be cleaning your bathroom like this. You can bet you’d be helping me, mister.” Shut up Sam! Shut up, shut up! You’re ruining everything. Who says “mister”? Are you a seventy-year old grandma now? I take a deep breath to steady myself. “Listen, it’s so early why don’t we get out of this cold bathroom get back in bed and forget about this whole thing.”

“I don’t know, Sam.” Mark shifts his gaze, avoiding my eyes and looks over to the bathtub. “Did you rearrange all my stuff?”

“Yes, it makes more sense this way,” I say, “Taller ones in the back, shampoos and conditioner, and then the shorter ones like body wash in the front. But what you should really do is get a shower rack that way you don’t have to worry about things dripping onto the bathtub and staining it.”

“What?” Mark looks at me like I’m talking utter nonsense. I’m not though.

“A shower rack, you need one.”

“Sam, I don’t need someone micromanaging my bathroom,” Mark says. He has a bit of a tone all the sudden, like he’s trying to sooth me while remaining firm. I don’t like it.

“I’m not micromanaging! I’m helping you be efficient. Do you want to spend all your time in the shower searching for your shampoo?”

“Why are we even talking about this? You’ve never even taking a shower here, and what I do in the shower is none of your business.”

“Fine, have your stuff all over the place what do I care.” I swing my arm out and knock over the Dove Men +Care Conditioner with the back of my hand. I pick it back up and lean over to position it back in its spot.

Mark reaches over and grabs my hand. “Stop it, Sam.”

“Why?”

“I don’t need you to reorganize my stuff, I don’t need you to clean my bathroom like some total lunatic.” I drop the bottle of conditioner with a thud and try to back away from him, bumping into the toilet in the small space. Mark watches my face and seems to realize he’s gone too far. Does he regret his words or is he just worried I’m going to go for his body wash next? “I’m sorry,” he says, “that was harsh. I just, I— ” He bites his lip.

“Oh... right.”

“Sam, I’m sorry.” Mark runs a hand through his hair causing it to stick up even further. We stand awkwardly in the bathroom a foot apart, Mark is still hovering near the entrance, one step away from escaping. God, he’s scared to even be near me. He inches forward slightly looking like he wants to try and comfort me, but his face is full of such uncertainty and fear that I can’t take it. I can’t take the placating that I know will happen next. The fake reassuring words, the strange hug while he struggles to find the balance between what’s soothing and what’s too intimate when really he’s just worried about me snapping. I push past him into the dark hallway and run down the stairs. I grab my giant overnight purse that I left by the front door when I was trying to pretend that I didn’t care about the dirt on the floor. I shove my feet into my brown boots not bothering to zip them.

I slam the front door behind me and run to the car. I pull open the door of my Toyota Corolla, but then I wait. Any second now he'll come after me. I look at my car clock above the radio, the green numbers shift slowly, one minute, now two. After five minutes, I'm too embarrassed to wait any longer. What did I think would happen? That he'd come running after me begging me not to go?

I back up out of the parking lot and start to drive. I don't even make it out of the neighborhood before I have to pull over and cry. I park in front of a row of red brick townhouses with black shutters. They look identical to Mark's all the town houses here do. It's still a nice neighborhood, affordable yet up and coming. Each house has almost no front yard. Yet, they still manage to fit small batches of flowers or bushes on either side of the steps leading up to the front door. A practically perfect little row. I cry harder.

I sit motionless in my car, my hands clutching the wheel. I look at my hands. They're cracked and dry from constant bleach contact, and the nail on my left ring finger is broken. My light pink nail polish, the bottle called it Ballet Slipper, is chipped on every finger but my right pinkie. There's a small cut on my right thumb. Underneath my index finger's nail, I see a small black hair. I dig it out with my other index finger at once. I hold it between my thumb and index finger. With my other hand, I roll down the window. I blow it out.

## The Snack Shack

The bluish green hue of the dashboard combined with the flicker of the lighter eerily lights Brian's face. He holds the bowl up to his lips and tilts the lighter sideways. "See Callie," he says, "You've just gotta hold on to the choke and then let go while you inhale." He passes her the bowl and, already stoned, clumsily grasps onto her fingers. Callie grins at his touch, but I pretend not to notice. I'm slightly repulsed by the whole situation. Brian showing off to Callie, killing his lungs taking as big a hit as possible. Callie whose smile keeps stretching wider when she doesn't even like smoking that much. And me, looking on in the backseat seeing and understanding everything but acting like I don't.

Brian exhales slowly one long jet of smoke that adds a comforting haze to the car. "Nice one," Callie says, nodding with approval, and suddenly I feel silly. No one else is bothered so why should I care? So what if Brian is showing off to Callie? I should be happy for her. Brian passes the bowl to me and I inhale sharply, coughing lightly.

"Hey, you gotta cough to get off right, Amanda?" Brian jokes. I laugh weakly.

"Nice rhyme."

"Thanks, thought of it myself," Brian brags.

"No, you did not," Callie interjects.

"Yes, I did."

"Nice try, but we've both heard it before," Callie says twisting in her seat to smile at me.

It's the middle of July in Maryland and we've been parked for about fifteen minutes. We're sitting in Brian's Chevrolet at the pool parking lot the lifeguard's at. Brian's in the driver's seat, Callie's in the passenger, and I'm in between them in the back. The car is boiling hot. I can feel my thighs sticking to the seat. Every time I move, I have to detach a leg from the vinyl seat. My flip-flops feel constricting. The fake leather straps bite into the tops of my feet, which have swelled up like loaves of bread. The air's thick with smoke and humidity. My curly brown hair, already so difficult to manage, has entirely poofed out. I grab it in fistfuls, hating the way it feels in my sweaty hands, and tie it up in a low lose bun. The smoke is curling around me, trapping me further in the car. I can't take it much longer.

"Can we turn on the AC for a minute?" I ask. "It's so hot in here."

"We can't turn on the AC it'll get rid of all the extra smoke. Anyways, it's suppose to be hot. That's the whole point, it's a *hot* box," Brian says taking the bowl from me.

"So funny, Brian," I look to Callie but she's watching transfixed as the flames jump out of the lighter. I give her a poke. I can't say anything with Brian in the car so I give her the I-am-dying-of-heat-stroke-and-am-freaking-out-code. Looking into her bloodshot eyes, I can tell she's too stoned to pick up the signals. She knows something's up though. I raise my eyebrows at her meaningfully. "Amanda you make the funniest faces." Oh god.

"Someone's stoned." Brian says exhaling and then smiles at Callie. Hello, what about the person over here about to pass out?

"I'm just going to crack my window a bit," I say reaching towards the door.

“No!” Brian yells making my hand fall back onto my thigh, it makes a light thwack. “Amanda you’re going to let all the smoke out.”

“Brian, I’m dying over here.”

“Relax, take another hit.” Brian passes me the bowl and the lighter. I decide to take a huge hit; the faster we finish the faster I can get out of here.

“Woahhh, awesome,” Brian says nodding along as I pull hard, inhaling deeply.

It does make me feel better. Not more a part of things. I’ve known Brian since the third grade, our parents are friends, and Callie and I have been close for two years, since the beginning of freshman year. But right now, I’m just Callie’s airbag in case things go wrong. Five months ago, Brian met Callie and ever since then, he’s been turning up at my house hoping to see her. Last week, we went swimming and Brian couldn’t stop staring at her from the lifeguard tower. I thought it was skeevey, but Callie thinks he’s cute. She made me ask him to hang out.

I pass the bowl to Callie who shakes her head. “I’m all good.”

“Yeah, you are.” Brian says, like he’s made some big accomplishment. “Told you guys this stuff was good.”

I open the car door and the smoke instantly rushes out, I follow after it. The air feels so cool. I breathe it in deeply wanting it to completely fill me. That’s when I realize this whole time while we’ve been talking, I’ve been singing the Mike Snow song “Animal” on another level in my head. I’m struck with the brilliance of my brain. The fact that I can do these two things at once so easily and effortlessly that I don’t even realize it. I smile widely at Callie and she smiles back but she doesn’t understand, she doesn’t know about the two levels. I want to tell her. I want her to

know just how smart I am, how smart we all are and how good and relaxed I feel. But I don't know how to say it, and I'm terrified that she won't understand or will laugh so I keep it to myself. Maybe it's better that way.

Callie and Brian open their doors, and we walk out of the parking lot towards the snack shack. It looks different at night. It's weird to see it empty without the usual sweaty twelve-year-old kid inside ruining everyone's orders. The outside sort of looks like if you took a farmhouse shrunk it way down and stuck it by a pool for no reason and then put two sliding windows on it to service customers.

Brian holds the door open for Callie and me. "No fucking way, this is too cool!" Callie says. I follow behind her determined to not be impressed, but my mouth gapes a little bit. There's food everywhere: a big metal rack that goes all the way to the ceiling stacked full of Doritos, Lays, Cheetos, SunChips, and Fritos, a box refrigerator on the floor with all kinds of ice cream, and a huge box full of Airheads, Reese's, and Hershey Kisses. I want it all.

"Told you this was a good idea, Amanda," Brian says.

"Okay fine, you were right." The shack is small especially crammed with so much food and there are only two stools. I decide to snag one so I'm not stuck awkwardly hovering. Callie plops down next to me. Leaving Brian adrift, ha.

"Yes, look how big this bag of Cool Ranch Doritos are," Callie says grabbing it off the rack from her stool. She pulls the bag open with a pop and passes it to me first. I pull a couple of chips out, and Callie offers the bag to Brian.

"No, thanks." He reaches past her and grabs a small bag of Fritos instead.

"Brian, you're crazy," I say, "Fritos have like no taste at all. They're just corn."

“Yeah exactly, what’s better than corn?” Brian says while looking around for a seat, apparently he wants to be comfortable while he informs me that my taste buds are all wrong. “It’s practically the bedrock of America. Have some civic pride,” he says.

“Civic pride has nothing to do with taste,” I say.

“Yeah, but when you bite into a Frito you can feel the Corn Belt at work. The corn stalks swaying, the farmers working in the fields, and the tractors rolling through. It’s all there in each Frito.” He puts a Frito in his mouth. “Patriotism, delicious.” Callie laughs.

“Shut up,” I tell Brian, “and let us enjoy the snack shack.”

“Fine,” Brian says. We munch on our chips.

“How ‘bout some ice cream?” Callie asks. She stands up and walks over to the refrigerator. Callie leans over to try to read the ice cream flavors. It’s kind of dark inside since the shack is only lit by the pool lights.

“What do you guys want?” Callie asks, “They’ve got mint chocolate chip, vanilla, chocolate, Klondikes, orange cream bars, all kinds of stuff.”

“I’ll take some vanilla,” Brian says. Typical, the blandest flavor. Callie grabs the ice cream scooper.

“Amanda?”

“I’m okay. I’m not really an ice cream person,” I say shrugging in my seat.

“Since when? What kind of crazy talk is that?” Callie demands.

“You know my mom’s kinda weird. She thinks ice cream’s good for you because it’s got milk and like calcium.”

“So?” Callie asks.

“So, she used to give me and my sister a lot of ice cream and we got kind of sick of it. Jesus, lay off Callie.” I stand up and shuffle away from her and her probing questions as well as the ice cream, especially the caramel toffee. I’ve never felt the same about that flavor, since I watched Mari throw up an entire pint on our kitchen floor. In the small space, I bump into Brian who has been leaning up against the chip rack. He hurriedly gets out of my way. I pick up another bag of Doritos off the rack. I don’t really want it though, I’m just looking for something to do with my hands.

“Mmm, that is so good,” Callie moans. I turn around. She’s opened up the enormous mint chocolate chip container and scooped up some ice cream with her finger. Gross, so not hygienic. I feel bad for all the people who will be at the pool tomorrow, unsuspectingly enjoying their ice cream. I hope she isn’t double dipping. “Want a lick?” Callie asks Brian holding out her finger. “It’s incredible.”

“Sure,” he says grinning, moving forward. Disgusting! I spin back around so fast to avoid watching them my hair bun comes undone. I hear a sucking sound as Callie pulls her finger out of Brian’s mouth. I can’t handle it if I have to hear them make out. I need to make my escape. But first priorities: snacks. My eyes dart around the snack shack, what was minutes ago stoner heaven is turning into a soft porn nightmare. I have to find something transportable and delicious, fast. Then I see them: sour punch straws and not just any sour punch straws, green apple sour punch straws, my absolute favorite. I snag them.

“I’m going to go hang out by the pool. I’ll see you guys later.” I dash out the door before they can reply. It slams shut behind me. Good, I hope it kills their mood,

they could have showed some more courtesy to their third wheel. Like you know maybe remembering I was there or something.

The pool looks slightly eerie in the night but somehow pretty. Something about the light coming through the water gives it a blue-green glow. I walk slowly over the concrete to the deep end of the pool my flip-flops smacking hard and loud in the night air. My feet feel hot and swollen, so I kick off my shoes at the pool's edge. I squat down awkwardly, putting my weight on my hands behind me before putting my feet in. The cold water feels amazing. I splash around, left foot forward then right. I open up the sour punch straws and eat four in seconds. I splash some more.

I can feel myself coming down from my high, the sour punch straws don't seem as exciting now. They're really not the same unless you can drink milk through the straws anyways. That's what Callie and I always do. I throw the last one in the pool and instantly regret it. It looks desolate, lost. I try to grab it with my toes and reel it back in to safety but it creates a ripple and only floats further out into the pool. As I watch the little straw float out all alone in that big pool with no one else around, I think: *Come back, you're not safe out there.* The straw is bound to be sucked up into a pool filter with the rest of the leaves and the *Finding Nemo* pool toys or sink to the bottom with the neon green diver rings. Then again, maybe the straw will get lucky, maybe it will just float along undisturbed, and over time, it will slowly disintegrate away.

## Hats Off Costume Shop

Honestly, I'm not even sure why I bought this place. It was a completely idiotic decision, which I'm reminded of every day as fewer customers come through the door. Allen convinced me it was a good idea. He was tired of hearing me whine about no one recognizing my talent. He was over hearing me complain about auditions, where the producers were more interested in their iPhones than listening to my sparkling rendition of "One" from *Chorus Line*. He was sick of the stories he endlessly heard about stage managers screaming: "You run it again and again, or you get off my stage!"

"Why don't you just quit then?" He asked when I showed up at his apartment in tears.

"Because I *love* it!" I wailed, throwing myself face down onto the couch beside him. Usually, when I break into these kinds of theatrics, Allen tells me to get a grip, but this time he stroked my hair. He got up to make me some chamomile tea. I stayed splayed out on the sofa.

He called to me from the kitchen over the whistling kettle. "I know you love it, but no one recognizes your talent. You don't even recognize it."

"What do you mean?" I asked, sitting up. Allen walked back over, a mug in each hand. He holds the mugs far out, so if they spill it won't stain his white t-shirt.

"Martin, you're not a performer."

"How— "

"No, now just wait a minute," Allen said. "I'm not saying you can't sing or act, you can. But that's not where you thrive, that's not where you're meant to be. You're

a costume man. That's your real talent. Knowing how someone should look on the stage, what hat fits the right era, when a shirt needs to be cinched in." I thought about this for a minute, huddled over my warm tea. Allen sat down in the armchair across from me, and put his bare feet on the coffee table.

"Well, what am I suppose to *do* with that?"

"Design costumes," Allen said blowing on his tea. "Be a backstage man with me, I'll do the props and sets while you do the outfits." I snorted.

"Please, Allen. No offense, but that's the last thing I want to do. I'd still be getting yelled at every day, but this time I'd be dressing up actors so they could be on stage, while I just watched on the sidelines."

"Then... then come into business with me!"

"What?"

"I've been thinking about doing it for years. But I've always been too worried it would flop. But we could do it together!" He stood up quickly and placed his mug on the coffee table, spilling his tea in his excitement. He began to pace around the living room, running a hand through his blonde hair. "Think about it the two of us bringing costumes to the many. Showing them what wigs and swords they need." I watched him from the couch.

"Allen, your crazy."

"Oh, come on, Martin. You'd love it! I'd love it! It would be the two of us taking on the musical backstage world, being our own bosses, making our own decisions." He stopped and looked at me. "What's more romantic than that?"

I took a lot more convincing, but eventually I came around. Thus, a star was born! Hats Off Costume Shop. It wasn't at all as romantic as Allen made it sound. First of all, because Allen is the only straight person I know who loves musicals as much as me. Secondly, it turns out that costumes aren't the most marketable products, who knew? And it was *really* unromantic when Allen up and left. He's off prop managing at the Kings Theatre in Brooklyn. I'm happy for him. Well, not really, but I pretend to be. Allen isn't fooled though, he knows me too well.

He sold me his share of the business at a discount. I was deeply insulted, moaned and whined that Allen thought I was a poor pauper who needed his pity, threw my cashmere scarf behind my shoulder dramatically. Then I took the deal. Now, I find myself saying at least twice a day: "No, not a Halloween store, a *costume shop*." The most infuriating response I get is: "There's a difference?" Yes, there's a difference, a big one. A costume shop is for professionals: actors, costume designers, directors, people who are passionate about the arts. Okay, yes I do also get slightly hunched over and pimply teens looking for scream costumes and fake blood. It's not like I can kick them out of the store— believe me if I could I would. But no matter whom the customer is, they're always impressed with the place. They should be, it's not huge, only four aisles, but they're long and have everything.

Last week, I had a fortune-teller in here, and I showed her around, really gave her the grand tour. She looked the part too: golden jangly bangles that clashed with chunky silver rings, flowy blue dress that maybe would have been chic if it wasn't so baggy. She was middle aged and smelled musty like old clothes, perfect for a fortune-teller, though she tried to look younger with lots of heavy black eyeliner. I

thought she looked a little lost. I could tell by the way her eyes searched the display case. She told me she was setting up her own shop and needed a globe. But I told her the whole fortune-teller globe thing is so overdone, and that I could find her something much better. She didn't look pleased but followed me to the wig aisle.

I started showing her around. The wig aisle has real hair wigs on wooden mannequin heads, none of those shitty styrofoam heads that make the hair lose its shape. I've got shorthaired ones, long, medium, curly, straight, in every color from blonde to black. Even a few fake ones dyed bright magenta and neon green for the eccentrics, though I personally think they're tacky.

Did she see anything she liked? What about this raven-haired red one, short with some curls, would really look like something on her. I could see her eyes widen in longing, but then she fingered the price tag and shook her head no.

Alright, well what about the next two aisles. All kinds of clothes, most of them vintage, and all arranged by size and color. I've got a lot of time on my hands. Giant poof poodle skirts, clingy roaring twenties flapper dresses, fake mink coats, and black, pink, and purple leotards. I showed her a nice shawl: deep blue with faded white stars, would really add to her mystic.

"Beautiful," she said but no, she had a lot of clothes.

The hats, tons of hats. Wide-brimmed ones with huge bows and feathers like something Audrey Hepburn would have worn in *My Fair Lady*. Baseball caps, black elegant top hats, bomber hats, and cowboy hats. I even put one on for her, a giant top hat and swooped it off my head with a bow, "whata ya say my lady?"

I brought her to the miscellaneous section. This aisle's mostly full of strange props that catch my eye while hunting around on the internet: an old small wooden cabinet, a giant purple vase, a Roman warrior helmet, that sort of thing. She gravitated towards my most prized possession: the witch hat Idina Menzel wore in the original production of *Wicked*. I got it off eBay, but it came with a certificate of authenticity and everything.

"Sorry, that's not for sale, just display."

"Probably, out of my price range anyway," she said with a laugh. At that point, I gave up. I didn't bother showing her the gloves and shoes, which believe me are really something.

She ended up buying some cheap stage jewellery. I keep it in glass at the front to pretend it's something special, glitzy and embarrassing chunky chokers and "diamond" necklaces that look fake even from the balcony seats. That was probably the best sale I've had in a month since Allen left.

Now, I'm drumming my fingers on the same display case waiting for Heather to come over. It's an annoying tick that I can't seem to stop, but at least it's something to do with my hands. I just want to ring Heather up, since I haven't seen an actual customer all day. The mannequins in the backroom definitely don't count. Plus, Heather's bound to need a lot of costumes since she's the music teacher for Stanton High School. They do a musical every year. The year before it was *Peter Pan*. I helped Heather out with the costumes. Twenty-five pirate boots that all got lost in shipping, a total nightmare. I sorted the whole thing out with my usual flair. Drove

all the way into New York City and managed to find even better boots, fake brown leather with buckled straps and rolled over cuffs.

“Fucking hell this thing is heavy,” Heather says plunking a baby blue 50s telephone on the counter. She loves to swear, and since she can’t at the school she tries to get it all out in her free time. Once she told me she yelled out “fuck me!” at the grocery store, when she realized she’d forgotten eggs. All the little old ladies doggedly pushing their grocery carts, and mother’s rolling their toddlers along in cart baskets gave her looks of utter shock. Heather says she can’t stop though and that she’d rather offend strangers than the Stanton principal. But I think she curses because it adds to her eccentric aura, which in my opinion doesn’t need anymore work than she’s already putting into it.

Today, she’s wearing black woollen pants that are far too big for her small frame. The pants are barely kept up with her turquoise beaded belt. On top, her grey t-shirt is almost completely hidden by a bright red vest featuring a giant green and yellow toucan whose eyes are big black buttons. Since it’s a school day, she has her brown hair up in a semi-professional bun as opposed to the weekend where it hangs down to her knees. She hands me her credit card.

“Is this for the new musical?” I ask her.

“Yup, it’s *Bye Bye Birdie* this year,” she says. “I know it’s not exactly the best music out there.”

“I mean it’s not my favorite, but it’s got its moments. You gotta *spread sunshine all over the place/ and just put on a happy face.*” Heather looks mildly impressed with my musical talent. I do have a good voice. I used to act and sing all

the time. I never was the star of the show, but I had important roles like Nicely-Nicely Johnson in *Guys and Dolls*. Maybelline Branson in the *The Buffalo News* called my performance “phenomenal!” But then I got old and bitter and resigned to dressing people in costumes instead of wearing them myself. I run Heather’s credit card through the card reader.

“*Bye Bye Birdie* is such sappy shit,” Heather says, “I was hoping to do something a little more out there. You know, exciting. The director suggested *Cats*, but obviously that wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“True, there’s quite a lot of sexual tension in there, which you wouldn’t guess from the title.” She grins.

“Exactly, and I’ve never understood the obsession with *Cats*. It was clearly made by some fucking weirdo with a hard-on for a cat.”

“Oh, come on, that’s not fair. It’s a classic! Was on Broadway for eighteen years.” I hand Heather back her credit card and begin to wrap the phone in some tissue paper.

“Well, I’ve never liked it. I mean the songs are great, but the production is goddamn bizarre. Bunch of people running around in tight leather and fur while meowing like assholes.”

Heather’s busy rummaging in her purse to put away her credit card. Or is she trying to avoid my gaze? I can usually suss out when someone is pretending to know theatre when they don’t. I normally would never suspect Heather, since she’s a music teacher. But I mean you gotta wonder, when someone says they don’t like *Cats*. Who doesn’t like *Cats*? My musical instincts about fakers are usually right. I

could tell instantly that Anthony Spiegel was lying, when he said he knew every word to the Major-General's song in *Pirates of Penzance*. When I made him sing, he couldn't even get through the second verse.

"When did you see *Cats*?" I ask Heather. I pick up the wrapped telephone and double bag it. The plastic bag is heavy with the weight of the phone, but I don't hand it to Heather yet.

"A few years back," she says with a shrug.

"Uh-huh, who played Bombalurina? Was it Rebecca Welchert?"

"How am I suppose to fucking remember? Probably was."

"Ha! Marlene Danielle played Bombalurina for the entire Broadway production. Anyone who'd seen *Cats* would know that. You've never seen it, have you?"

"Not everyone knows every actor in every musical like you do, Martin."

"If you'd seen *Cats* you'd know who played Bombalurina."

"Okay! So fine, I haven't seen it on *the stage*," she says throwing her hands up to create dramatic air quotes. "But I listened to the music and watched the movie and that's enough."

"Unbelievable! You've got no respect for the theatre. There's no comparison between a live theatrical production and a movie. You can't expect a movie to capture the experience: the feeling of walking through the doors, the usher taking your ticket and seating you, the excitement in the air as the red curtain goes up on the stage, while the orchestra begins to play. No movie's going to give you that."

"Yeah, when you put it that way. I guess you're right," she says.

“You *guess* I'm right. I am right! I mean really, Heather, I'm surprised. As a music teacher, I'd think you'd understand. Don't let the fact that your teaching high schoolers ruin your musical integrity.”

“Oh, so now my integrity's at risk because I teach high schoolers? Because I fucking care about kids, and I want to inspire them. You know what Martin? You're a real snobby asshole. Like you're some big success sitting here all alone with your props. Get a goddamn life.” I'm still holding onto the bag, so she grabs it out of my hand and walks out in a huff. The bell door jingles happily offsetting her storm out.

I should get a life? She should. I mean teaching at a high school, how embarrassing. She's probably still hoping to be *discovered*. Pathetic. I'm not hanging around like that. I own this place. Though sometimes I wish I still had Allen to help me run everything.

Allen was better with the customers than I am. He would have known that Heather was lying about seeing *Cats*, but he would have let it slide. Allen would have been pissed, if he'd seen me accuse Heather. He wouldn't confront me about it though. Instead, he'd be off sulking in the miscellaneous aisle, angrily moving props around, while he yelled that I buy too many things online.

When Allen was here, we used to serve actual actors. Allen worked part time at the Barclon theatre, and all of his friends used to shop here. Marcey and Jackson would come to the store to talk and gossip. They'd say that Noah had really been something in last week's opening of *Guys and Dolls*, that they couldn't believe Stacey had been chosen to play Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and wasn't it embarrassing that Mia still didn't know her lines, all the while trying on wigs and gloves. Olivia would

usually buy something too. Right after Allen left, they'd still stop by. Now they never come.

Lately, the store's become overrun with itty-bitty ballerinas and their neurotic mothers. Mothers who yell at their daughters for wearing Vans that surely won't support their high-arches, while their daughters somehow still manage to look apathetic even with their ramrod straight posture. They're keeping me in business though. Ballet shoes don't come cheap, and they're always needing new pairs with their growing feet. Guess their mothers are wrong, when they say the lack of arch support is going to prevent them from "ever being able to dance again, do you hear me? Are you even listening?"

God, who'd have thought it would come to this? I throw my head onto my arms, smooshing my hands into the display case. It's no fun acting hysterical when no one else's around, and now I'll have to clean off the glass too. I turn to my computer to check on my Etsy account. I'm embarrassed to have an account, to be one of those sad sacks selling their crap on the Internet, but any extra cash would be a miracle. I'm not doing anything else with my prop art anyways. I like to make little displays in the backroom, when the days are really slow and post them online after. I scroll through my own images like a football player reliving my glory days.

I'll post my newest piece soon: prop art for *Rent*. I got some mannequin hands that end at the wrists and put these great worn out grey gloves on them. I cut off the fingertips on the gloves to make them look extra desperate. Then I positioned the left hand around a white drippy candle and placed a match in between the thumb and index finger of the right hand. Took me ages to get it exactly so; the

match kept falling out of the mannequin's fingers no matter how many times I glued it. I glued the hands onto some sheet music for "Light My Candle" to make it-obvious, in case people are too stupid to pick up the hint. I'm just looking for a raggedy scarf now to place around the base and the mannequin's wrists. It looks pretty good.

I've run out of my own images to scroll through, so I figure I'll do some online window-shopping, browse around and see what's out there. I'm checking out some vintage clothes when a message pops up. I click on it. The username says *costumes4luv58*.

*"Hi, I work for Mill Playhouse, and I love your stuff. Giving me some great ideas! Would you ever consider making something for A Chorus Line? It's playing next week, and I think one of your props would look great in our lobby! Let me know what you think.*

- *George Matthews*"

I can't believe it. An order! An actual order and for *Chorus Line*, that's a great musical. But oh my God by next week, that's not nearly enough time. I'll have to start right away. I grab my notebook and pencil that's been sitting by the computer. Maybe mannequin hands again? They could be holding a hat, *Chorus Line's* all about the glittery golden hat, gloves, and leotard for the big number at the end. Then again, I couldn't even get a hand to hold onto a match, so no way it could support a hat. A mannequin head then, with the hat jauntily to the side. I start to sketch it out, and I'm so distracted I don't hear the bell ring.

A man enters in a green plaid shirt and beige corduroy pants, definitely doesn't look like the costume buying type. What does he want? I nod at him and

return to my drawing. What about the mannequin's mouth? Should be bright, loud, she's a chorus dancer after all. I can see plaid guy out of the corner of my eye, he shuffles forward hesitantly. I ignore him. "Fire-engine red," I write in all upper case with an arrow pointing towards her lips. Plaid guy's right in front of me now.

"Yes?" I ask.

"Um, I was hoping you could help me. I'm looking for a wig. Do you have any?" Do I have wigs? I mean really what is he expecting in a costume shop.

"Third aisle, all the way back past the gloves, if you see a giant vase you've gone too far."

"Right," he nods but doesn't move.

"Anything else?"

"Do you think you could show me? I'm not the best with directions." He offers me a half smile apologetically. Like I have time for this!

"Sure," I say. I slam down my pencil, so he really knows what an inconvenience he's being. I march over to the aisle, he follows behind me.

"Help yourself. I'll be in the backroom if you need anything." I walk away quickly before he can demand anything else.

"Wow, this is a lot of wigs. Do you think that this brown haired one would be good for— "

"Good luck!" I yell over his mumbles. "Ring the bell by the register, if you want to buy something." He starts to say more, but I pretend I can't hear while closing the back door behind me. I've got a prop to make and my hot glue gun's waiting.

## The Clothes She Wore

It hadn't been the way she'd wanted. She'd always thought she'd lose it at sixteen, the most common age according to *Seventeen* magazine. It would be with her boyfriend of several months, she wasn't sure exactly how many, maybe six or nine, enough to be serious. He'd be slightly older, seventeen or eighteen and experienced. He would be a non-virgin (later she would think how strange it was that the English language has no word for this: the opposite of a virgin, somehow nameless, a laconic gap). He would have slept with one girl, just the one. But she'd have been slutty; it hadn't meant anything. No, it would be different with Amanda, would mean more.

Whenever Amanda did think about it, she went through the same process: the age, the boyfriend, the boyfriend's past, and then somehow stopped there. Imagining the actual location meant imagining the act, and Amanda couldn't do that. Not because she couldn't visualize it. After all, she'd see some porn by now, Tommy Anderson liked to put it on his laptop while they all hung out in his basement. He enjoyed watching Amanda and Callie squirm in discomfort. Amanda struggled under Tommy's gaze, attempting to walk the line, that she often found herself on when it came to sex, between disgust and a kind of cool detachment "I know what all this is about" attitude. But when it came to thinking about herself doing it, actually doing *it*, she couldn't. It was just too far fetched somehow.

Later, Amanda wished that it had at least been in a bed. A soft and large one, in a small room so that the bed took up the entire space. The bed would look slightly menacing and absurd as the only furniture in the room besides a small nightstand

squeezed in the corner. Instead, it had been on a couch. It was a sectional couch, a large brown L shaped one. The bottom of the L kept sliding apart from the rest of the couch, causing her to fall into the slowly widening crack. They'd disentangled and moved to a more stable section. But then the pillows began to fall on her head. She tried to push them up and off but they were still nudging her. He didn't notice though and she was too embarrassed to suggest moving again.

She kept the underwear she wore from that night, still stained no matter how she washed it. She never wore them. Instead, they sat among her other underwear, shoved all the way to the back of the drawer, like some strange relic. It slightly disgusted Amanda that she kept them. When she occasionally was digging in the deep recesses of her drawer for her fancy Betsy Johnson underwear and she came up with *that* pair she always quickly put it back.

Amanda kept the shirt for a few years. One day she put it on and it just didn't look right, didn't fit the same. It had gotten baggy around the middle and scrunched weirdly in the shoulders. She didn't want to throw it out, so she gave it to Callie. Callie had snickered when Amanda told her about the shirt's past. Whenever Callie wore it she said: "Hey, Amanda, remember *this* shirt?"

The purple bra had been from Pink, the trademark bright pink inside the cups, since she was still too small to fit into Victoria Secret. Amanda had kept it on during, too embarrassed to fully expose herself. She threw it out soon after.

She wasn't sure what jeans she'd been wearing because all of them looked relatively the same: straight legged and snug around her waist. It had probably been

the dark blue pair though. They'd been her favorite. She'd worn them endlessly causing the material between her thighs to thin and soften.

Months after, she was pulling them up by the belt loops when there was a ripping sound. She examined the damage in the mirror, turning her head around as far as it would go. A huge gash lay right across the butt. Amanda ran to get her mother's sewing kit.

Amanda worked in the kitchen where the light streamed in through the glass door that led onto the porch. She'd heard or read somewhere that the key to good sewing was lighting. She carried the standing lamp from the dining room in, its chord dragging dangerously behind.

Amanda was sewing the jeans when her father entered the kitchen. He tweaked her earlobe. She shrugged him off. Disappointed, he wandered to the dishwasher and began to empty it out. They worked in silence, only broken by the clatter of plates and utensils. After several moments like this, Amanda let out a loud and exasperated sigh.

"Let me see," her dad said. He came over to the kitchen table, and Amanda passed him the jeans. He examined the finished product. The stitches were uneven, sloppy, and too large. The black thread stood out, clearly visible against the blue, unlike the rest of the machine made neatly hidden stitches.

"It's dreadful," her dad said with a laugh. Amanda burst into tears. Her dad looked down. "It's alright, I'm sure we can fix it. There's that great tailor at the mall." Amanda continued to cry. Her father held the jeans helplessly in his hands. Pulling

on her arm, he made her stand up and hugged her rather awkwardly. He wasn't quite sure what to do with his hands and settled for patting her on the back.