

A Little Mercy

What will you want to remember?

The way they look at you: the boys like prisoners and the men like thieves.

The feel of your skin, tight, taut, radiating heat and shining after the sand and salt water and too-hot shower, the coconut lotion. How brown your stomach is, how flat; how red across your shoulders, the bridge of your nose, the sting of it. Your hair sopping the back of your shirt and the rubber smack of two-dollar flip-flops against your calloused heels, your cut-offs. Your sixteen-year-old ass and the cherry-red sun dropping into the bay and the smell of low tide, fetid and reassuring.

The comfort of all this, the insufficiency.

The splintered boardwalk and the drunks beneath it, the over-miked barkers with their parachute pants and Parliaments, their water rifles and clammy plush alligators,

under-stuffed and so much lighter than they should be, than you want them to be. The goldfish in their rows of bowls, dazed and still or circling, panicked.

The mosquito bite you scratched bloody, the scab on your arm, your paua-shell bracelet, your best friend Heather grabbing your hand to pull you after her up the metal ramp to the last car on the Matterhorn and the sandy bar across your laps, the suck of damp vinyl on the backs of your legs. How you loved that last car: when it went backward there was nothing between you and the air and the lights and the strobing beat from the speakers, all of it rushing ahead and ahead and ahead.

How long it took for dusk to fall and the stubborn August sky and their eyes that watched you from the safest distance, hearing them call after you and knowing that if you stopped, their hearts would too.

All this. Less.

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I spent my twentieth birthday in a bar, goat-thin and half-naked in a sky-colored satin dress, stained along the hem and wrinkled, blue as a dream. Three dollars at the Goodwill. A man with coyote teeth bought me lemon drops, sugar-rimmed and stinging perfect. He kept buying and I kept drinking and I led him through the churn of bodies on the dance floor to the back stairwell door, to the high buzz of dim wattage above them and metal steps below.

I spent my thirtieth in the top-floor suite of a hotel in Paris where a lifetime before German soldiers had played *skat*, eaten bread and chocolate and traded women like

matches across the card tables in the smoke and quake of the Occupation. I wore gray lace stockings and satin shoes, pinched cashews from a porcelain bowl and licked first-class salt from cabin-cracked lips. I'd eaten Valium for dinner on the plane. The man who'd paid for everything I touched watched me pour Chateau Mouton Rothschild into a tumbler I'd carried from the bathroom vanity, watched me drain the glass and pour another, eight hundred dollars gone in the time it took to slip the scarf from my neck. I toed my shoes off and raised my perfect legs for him to peel the stockings down.

And the birthdays in between, New York and Toronto and Nassau, dainty spoons for caviar, cocaine; orchestra seats and penthouse suites and roped-off blackjack tables where wide men in tuxedos stood tree-still, staring at nothing, seeing everything. Black chips, black tie, black eyes, but not often enough to matter, or beg to be tied to the mast.

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Heather's mother was like no one's I had ever seen: I could not understand how such a narrow strip of land could contain her. Her hair was long and dark and permed into springy curls and her earrings, a cascade of white shells, flashed from the thick of it. She wore white tank tops, spaghetti-strapped and edged in lace across her freckled brown chest, a rose-gold cuff on one arm and a slave bracelet on the other, two tiger's-eyes set in silver, one at her wrist and one on her finger, chain-linked and glinting on her narrow hand.

When I had dinner at Heather's I loved to watch her mother moving in the kitchen, hair pulled back in a leather barrette, no apron, a cigarette burning in the ashtray

on the counter, a pretty ring of flowers on the filter. She drank white wine while she cooked and hummed along to the radio and moved her hips as she stirred, swayed when she leaned to adjust the flame beneath a saucepan. I watched and wondered what had kept her from the highway anyone could see.

Come on come on everyone, we've got something new tonight, she'd call, carrying paella or jambalaya or cioppino to the table in a deep stoneware bowl with a loaf of bread split horizontally and smeared with soft margarine and minced garlic from a tiny jar, gleaming from the broiler; a salad of iceberg lettuce and quartered tomatoes and green pimiento-stuffed olives and three kinds of dressing on the table, the bottles cold from the refrigerator door.

Heather and I sank damp from showers into chairs around the cluttered table, feet bare and eyelids glittery.

Looks like someone got into your makeup, Heather's father said. A couple of someones. He sat for dinner in a baseball cap and flannel shirt undone to the third button and when he reached for the bread the shirt fell away from his chest and the thin twist of beaded leather around his neck swung forward, light, before coming back to rest.

When he caught me looking he winked, unembarrassed; unselfconscious in the way of a man who was used to being admired. He worked days at the marina and weekend nights at a bayside bar, he smelled of sandalwood and clove and he looked at his wife the way the boys on the boards looked at me.

Sweet Becky, he said to me, squinting over his can of beer, when did you get so dangerous? and Heather rolled her eyes and kicked at my sunburned shin with her sandy foot. Dad. Ew.

Leave them be, Joey, her mother said, brushing her hand across his shoulder before she sat. If you behave yourself I'll let you take me over to the Eastside and buy me a drink with an umbrella in it.

Wednesday's ladies' night, Heather said. Free drinks till ten—that's a deal, Dad.

And you know that how? her mother said, her eyebrow a perfect raised arc.

Oh my God they advertise on channel sixteen all the time—tell her, Becks!

They did advertise on channel sixteen but we would have known that anyway, lingering as we did by the bleached wooden patio overhanging a pizza-and-stromboli takeout Tenth Street and watching women stagger out in rope-heeled wedges to light cigarettes, sweat drying on their necks and shoulders, lamb-eyes bleary. The men who followed them had their pick.

Educational programming, Heather's father said, leaning across the table and burying his hand in his wife's dark hair, lifting it from her neck, and I brought a napkin to my burning face, ashamed of what I wanted.

Okay, we're outta here, Heather said, pulling me up after her and into the kitchen to dig through the freezer bin for the crushed box of popsicles.

Not too late tonight, ok? her mother said, We're going to your grandmother's tomorrow.

Have fun, her father said, but not too much. And Becky, you be gentle with those poor boys. Have a little mercy.

We slapped the screen door open and slipped out, lemon ice pops dripping. Three short blocks toward Ocean Highway past the rows of trailers, all of them set at angles to the sidewalk, their walkways edged with pansies. The bayside was quieter than the beach

and people kept their front door jalousies cranked open: through the frosted glass we could hear laugh tracks and newscasters, card games, babies crying, the pop and hiss of opening cans.

We tossed our sticks and wrappers in the trash can on the corner of Ocean Highway and I smacked the metal dome on the damp wooden light post, waited for the light to change.

If they go to the Eastside they'll come home shitfaced, Heather said. Streetlights and traffic lights swept north, a blinking chain that stretched to Delaware, where we'd gone more than once, to shop, tax-free. She worked a lip gloss from the pocket of her jeans, unscrewed the top and rolled a slick of cinnamon over her lips, held it out for me. And if they come home shitfaced we can probably head back out after they pass out. Probably. She leaned out over the bus lane and fanned her hair up from her neck, as pretty then as she would ever be, with her cat's eyes, her shoulder blades like wings.

The light changed and we crossed six lanes at a run, tumbled onto the splintered boards, into the neon and sugary grease, the thumping bass and spinning rides and crash of waves beyond. We twined our fingers together so we wouldn't fly apart.

Mercy for whom? Sunburned fathers in plaid Bermudas who pretended not to see us when they bent to scoop their screaming children up; middle-school boys in seething packs who tripped and pushed one another into our path, terrified, elated? Or the ones in between, feathery-lashed and barely whiskered, teeth white and fingers quick, foolish and hungry and reckless as we were?

They were already more dangerous than I would ever be.

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Those birthdays: by the thirty-fifth the slide had started, inexorable and merry, relentless; the march and tick of indifference even though my hair was still shiny my legs still long my mouth still warm and wet.

I knew it, I could see it in what was missing and in what was there instead—a room in the airport hotel for the left bank suite, a forty dollar bottle of brandy for the wine.

Even though, even then. There was the visible, and the rest: the blood-leather gloves with holes worried through the lining, the re-soled boots and the scarf just beginning to fray.

I told myself the brandy tasted like apples, I slipped plastic bottles of milky lotion from the bathroom into my purse. I'd wrapped that scarf tight around my throat in Venice in a blue November and tighter still in the back seat of a taxi idling at four AM in Knightsbridge. How many seasons before? The fabric was musky-sweet; rose, civet and sandalwood, skin, years.

Happy birthday to me. The fifth floor room, two double beds, built-in console desk and television in the armoire; a man with pocked cheeks in expensive shoes and shot cuffs and on the bed by the window a shirtless boy not quite young enough to be my son, long hair twisted over one skinny shoulder.

I'd opened the curtains first thing to watch the runway lights pulsing on the flat below. My bag was suede, oversized and filled with everything I could hardly bear.

We'd shoved the phone and lamp to the side and the desk was covered, trays of wilting sushi and pink ginger petals, a jar of candied walnuts and a cake topped with crushed rosettes, the bottle. The man poured glasses for me and the boy. The other guests had left.

My associate, he said, or maybe just my nephew. He grinned, he leaned and tugged at a lock of the boy's hair. Which is it? he asked, but the boy only watched the muted TV, one hand curled light around the remote. His pretty lips were slack and I wondered what they could do.

Myrrh, bergamot. An apothecary in Venice; then bitter thimbles of espresso, *amari* burning flowers down my throat in the morning damp. Everywhere a *chiccetteria*, a church; the churches filled with tiny stooped women and the bars filled with their sons and husbands and the alleys between them stone-slick and cold. Smoke was all around, cigarettes or incense or the sizzling fat of spitted meat. When I unwound my scarf opoponax bloomed.

The boy on the bed stretched and sat up, all bottomless pupils and rabbit hands. The room was overwarm but I drank that brandy down. Even then, already, I knew better than to expect the maître d'hôtel to present me with hot scones and clotted cream, a newspaper cone of chestnuts, a quiver of beating hearts.

There is something to be said for clean-enough sheets and a wallet full of twenties; for knowing the trajectory of your economic and aesthetic worth. And the boy was so sleepy.

His mama is a dear friend of mine, the man said to me, and I promised her I'd take good care of him for the next three to five. But I've been thinking he's a little old to need taking care of. The way she had in mind at least.

What do you think? he asked me, running a hand over my dying hip. You think he needs taking care of?

First things first, I said, and cocked that hip right into the spread of his fingers, their bite.

Something to be said for meeting expectations, or exceeding them.

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Twenty years old in candy-red stilettos and someone else's dress, in a room full of beautiful strangers, in the beginning of everything, and those lemon drops went down like sunshine.

The blood sang fearless in my veins and when the man who was buying the drinks leaned down to shout his name in my ear I nodded as though I heard or cared, as though a name could make a difference. I led him through the smoky crush, through a graffitied door to the stairwell and my shoes clanged, echoed. I hooked my peppermint heels onto a metal step and vined my skinny arms around him and his hands whispered over me in the hum and thump of music behind the wall, in the green exit glow.

I hiked my lying satin dress up and the tips of his fingers were dandelions.

I didn't care what he thought of me and I didn't care what might or might not happen in an hour or a day. I was afraid of nothing, too stupid for that, too clean. I

didn't care what fucking a stranger in a stairwell made me. I was too busy making myself.

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What else? Newport's stolen from Heather's father and No-Doz crushed and snorted in her bathroom after dinner, patchouli oil in a brown glass vial, shell-pink soap in a dish on the vanity and Zest on the shower shelf. I loved the smell of her bathroom, that Zest, balsam shampoo and the bay, always the bay, the jalousie window cranked open and the water slapping at the wooden pier beyond. We hooked each other's necklaces, squinting through watery eyes.

Caramel corn and funnel cakes and Heather's special floats: vanilla soft-serve in a cup doused in the root beer schnapps she carried in her salt-stained denim bag. The curve and knob of her shoulder bumping mine, her strapless sundress, yellow with blue daisies, and the flannel shirt she wore over it, the fray of the collar.

The boy who worked Skee-Ball on Tuesday nights, his winking earring and the scar below one gold-flecked eye. We gave him sips of schnapps and he let us play for free and when his shift was over he followed us out onto the boards and we followed him to where his friend was waiting, a sunburned boy in painter's pants slouched across the bench by the Tilt-a-Whirl. Scar was Heather's and Sunburn was mine and we trailed in pairs down the boards to the pier, sharing cigarettes. The boys pitched the butts out into the water and settled back against the rough wooden rails, V'ed their legs and drew us between them, against their chests and hard stomachs and zippers. They opened their

mouths against ours, tongues flicking, impatient on our lips. They pressed their hands on our backsides and we let them, they pulled our own hands to their zippers and we let them. We let them and let them until they were almost weeping, until Heather pulled back from hers and reached to pluck at my arm—We gotta go, Beck, or my parents'll *shit*.

Which never happened: we were quiet enough sneaking back in that they could pretend not to hear us even if they did.

My own parents were gray and slowing, refugees from narrow houses on city blocks gone cracked and buckling, from low ceilings and small windows, from corner lots scraped vacant. They slept long and deeply. They woke to surf and seagulls they never quite came to believe.

The front door left unlocked and the stove light on, Heather's mother's empty wine glass in the sink, her father's library book open on the coffee table, two-page diagrams of suspension bridge design.

Heather's bedroom, the floor strewn with piles of clothes that we added to, hanging on each other for balance while we tugged shorts and shirts off and dropped where we stood, where we swayed. Her white rattan bed, rumped. We collapsed into it. Her sleeping breath, a pause and rasp. She slept on her stomach, arms flung wide, unmoving, deep and as far from me as she ever was. I had a hard time sleeping even then and watched shadows on the ceiling, watched the ghost boys sigh above us with their snakey tongues and hooded eyes, their sweet dirty promises. I drifted off and woke. Before dawn I slid from Heather's side and felt my way along the short hall to the bathroom, the shag damp under my bare feet, the wall cool and rough along my

fingertips, half-asleep but not dreaming the sigh and squeak of sheets and springs in the master bedroom.

I saw Heather's mother on her father's lap, hair spread across her back, legs wrapped, feet locked, rocking, and her husband's face over her shoulder. His eyes were open, and his mouth, his hands on his wife's hips, the sheets pooled white around them. I did not move. Her breath caught in what sounded like laughter and he smiled, sweet and slow. He murmured in her ear but he was watching me. I did not move. He wrapped his arms around her back, under her hair, his lips moving against her shoulder but his eyes on me, my face, my brand-new heart.

He closed his eyes, still smiling, still seeing me, I knew. I would have stayed until the ocean came rushing and roared me away.

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When they disappeared I didn't miss them. I didn't miss their bespoke suits, their manicured nails or capped teeth. I didn't miss their tenacity.

I didn't miss their generosity, the sky-blue ribboned jewelry boxes dropped carelessly onto armrests, the lobes of *foie gras* tossed on the empty bottom shelf of my refrigerator, the Town Cars and drivers that idled at the curb for me, the maid service that scrubbed my clean sink while I stood by, cringing.

I didn't miss the lectures in first-class airport lounges, the too-patient instructions of how I could avoid sinking into ruin along with the rest of the fools who trusted the government, the treasury, the media. I nodded, I watched the departures board, the list of

destinations that cycled from potential to imminent to impossible as the minutes ticked past.

The rocks glasses in those lounges were heavy and cold and too big for me to wrap my fingers around. In the restrooms I ran warm water over my hands and slathered moisturizer over the damp, dabbed balm on my lips and under my eyes and perfume at the nape of my neck. In my carryon I kept a roll of bills tucked into the toe of a shoe.

They loved that I never checked baggage, that I could sail through concourses on four-inch heels, that I took the time to learn at least few phrases in any language I did not know. They loved my sense of the understated, the appropriate.

In the restrooms I swallowed half-tablets of Valium, I twisted before the full-length mirrors to be sure seams were smooth and hems were straight. I was sweet as winter fruit.

When they disappeared I did not miss their hands on my elbow, just firm enough that I would not misunderstand, lifting me up from orchestra seats from luxury boxes from limousines and into penthouses, into hotel suites, into dust.

I did not miss their monstrous certainty that nothing and no one was worth what they were worth. I did not miss the green leaf of their aftershave, or the charnel house stench beneath it.

Even so. When they disappeared I did too.

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Rain, pocked gray water and cold sand, wind enough to shake the pier apart. The wearying summer stumbled and we pulled damp sweatshirts from the back corners of our dressers, waited for Heather's mother to warm milk in a saucepan and shave chocolate into it.

Where are my socks? Heather crowed, stomping through the trailer, and her father looked up from his tackle box, open on the kitchen table. Good lord, flower, it's not that cold, he said, and Heather flung open the hall closet doors, muttering.

Oh you know what they're all in a huff about, her mother said, while her father made a show of checking his watch and I curled myself into a corner of the sofa.

As a matter of fact I do, he said, winking at his wife; as a matter of fact I think they've got about fifteen days and fourteen hours until homeroom. That sound about right? and Heather's mother laughed. That sound.

He had never mentioned that night, never acknowledged having seen me watching no matter how hard I wished, no matter how I lingered at the sink shucking corn while he sorted his spinnerbait at the kitchen table and the bay pulled the sun down into it.

I could not look at him without seeing, without wanting, and he knew. I ached and he knew, I could not breathe and he knew.

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Of course there will be a last one, and he will destroy you, or not. He will give you a necklace to wear over the place you used to keep your heart or he will fashion one of his own two hands. Either way the sky outside the windows where you are will be

high and bright at midnight, pricked with stars that are not yours. Either way the ground below will be treacherous as quicksand.

The last one will be no different from the rest, but you'll know he's the last before he even touches you, before he tosses his wallet and key-card onto the bedside table, before he loosens his tie and pours the wine and forces you to the plush plush carpet in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows and the riot of lights beyond them. You'll know by the way he looks at you: like the ghost of someone he has already forgotten.

Outside those windows will be Tokyo or Toronto or Barcelona but where you are will be on your best behavior, on your guard, on your knees: where you have been since you came to understand the concept of an exchange rate. Since you decided on a fair one. Be honest, there in that sumptuous room, in your floating hair and dissolving skin, in the cold burn of irrelevance.

Be honest, under that borrowed sky, under sheets as heavy and smooth as cream, under everything that is not yours.

Be ready to be over.

Au revoir, arrivederci, auf wiedersehen. So many endings at the beginning of the alphabet.

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I see Heather's father at two o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon in Dmitri's Tap & Package, the last stop on my rounds after the VA, the supermarket, the pharmacy, the last stop before I deliver the carload to whomever the eldercare agency has assigned me for

the month. Dmitri's is one long room with stools and high-backed booths, dusty windows and cracked vinyl and curling linoleum. Some days there is a plastic-wrapped tray of moussaka behind the bar, or Crock-Pot of potato and leek soup.

The bartender's name is Patrick. He spends the quiet of the afternoons in a square of sun by the register, sweater buttoned to the throat, the morning paper open to the crossword and a cup of tea at his elbow. When Patrick looks up he smiles, eases himself from the stool to pour me a Seven & Seven and collect my lotto tickets and cigarettes. These will go into the back seat of the agency car, along with the groceries and stapled prescription bags and case of vanilla Ensure. This month, it is the Sperrys who are waiting.

Heather's father is sitting at the edge of the bar, almost directly below the television he'd have to crane his neck to watch. Pale jeans and a darker denim shirt, a plaid wool jacket, hair pulled back into a tufted curling ponytail, graying but thick enough. Sturdy moccasins, rubber-soled, new-looking; an empty shot and full pint in front of him. His face is blurred and rough, just out of focus but still his: if he were on the screen above the bar I would know him through any flickering static.

"Here y'are, sweetheart," Patrick says, setting my drink on a napkin in front of me. "How are Mr. and Mrs. Sperry?"

"Keeping on," I tell him. "Their son is coming next week so I might get a few days off." Heather's father lifts the pint glass and his sleeve pulls back to reveal a wrist as fine and graceful as any boy's.

The last I heard from her was my sophomore year of college, a water-stained envelope tucked into my mailbox in the student union, lines scrawled in soft pencil on a

page torn from a spiral notebook and signed *Mrs. Hemmert*, a Polaroid of Heather and a boy with his arm in a cast in front of a narrow brick duplex, postmarked Youngstown Ohio.

Guess who's an old married lady! I folded the paper in half and half again around the photo, around the Hemmerts of Youngstown. I slid them back into the envelope, the envelope between the onionskin pages of my Norton anthology and the anthology into my backpack, and at the end of the semester when I crated my books for exchanging at the campus bookstore I didn't think to shake the pages out or remember why I might want to.

Heather's father drains his glass. I pick up my own and move down the bar and lay my hand on his sleeve like the kind of whore I wasn't. He looks up, and time slides beneath us, a tide rushing out.

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I will not remember how we agreed to be strangers that day, or who moved first, or how we knew which places were too damaged to touch.

I was lucky when I was younger, he says to me, I was—it's important, anyway. To know what you have.

I was never lucky, I say, and smile, so he knows I am asking for nothing. But I was dedicated. I was conscientious. I was good enough until I wasn't.

I don't believe that, he says, and I say You don't have to. That's the thing.

This is as close to the waiting graves as we are willing to go; we are not ready to dig and sift that soil. We know what we would find there.

The skin of his chest is puckered, paler than it used to be, leathery and worn; his hands and knuckles scarred: fish hooks, gutting knives, fire. My front door is locked and every window closed; the bedroom is a music box, an abattoir. His stomach is soft but his legs are tense, still muscled.

I will not remember how we agreed to pretend that all we knew was in that room, that the world went black beyond it.

I lower myself onto him and he pulls back to look at what's left of the girl he remembers, or doesn't, or won't allow himself to see, and I don't know which I am to him, but I have been invisible for such a long time that it doesn't matter.

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The Louvre, the Prado, the Uffizi; blood oranges and figs sticky and sweet as lies; kidskin and cashmere and water I will never see again. I am years from everything but him. He smells of salt, of the hot wind that blew east over the bay and burned through me. He sleeps like Heather did, arms thrown above his tilted head, palms up and empty and driftwood smooth. Heather's hands were full of stars; I could feel their bright sweet prick when she twined her fingers in mine and pulled me across the sand.

His sleeping breath is ragged, frayed as the cuffs of his shirt. If I lifted it from the floor and went through its pockets I would find nothing worth taking, no broken shells or arcade tokens, no fresh turned earth or feathered lures or hooks sharp enough to pierce.

Outside the afternoon bleeds away, the sky cotton-white, cold and heavy with water. In Venice the lagoon is milky green; the Seine roils gray, and darker. My dresser holds a shoebox filled with cash, bills rolled or stacked and banded. I was good enough.

The Sperrys must still be waiting, anxious in their living room, stubbing their cigarettes into the red aluminum ashtrays they bring home from the flea market by the dozen. Sometimes, when I drop off their groceries and medications, I tip the full ashtrays into the kitchen can filled with empty deli containers of pineapple-chicken salad and boxes of graham crackers. I tie the plastic liner shut, take the bag out the back kitchen door and toss it into the metal can by the alley. I am conscientious still.

In my bed he sighs and twists beneath the clean white sheets, small and knotted in futile sleep and far from any rest: there is neither comfort not distraction here, no limestone bridge or doge's palace, no gondoliers or chandeliers or bitter almond thighs. There is nothing here but what is left of us.

My lips on his neck are split and dry as moths' wings and when he lifts himself to me his mouth on my throat is a waking ruin. We are beggared vampires, here in this mausoleum with its clock that won't stop, needle-hands circling while our skin peels away in carnival ribbons and our barbed-wire fingers draw blood.

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What did you wish wouldn't end, those nights, your face tucked against Heather's warm neck, the two of you draped across the sandy boardwalk railing like some perfect vine, twin-blooming and only a little poisonous?

The burn of caffeine in your nostrils, patchouli oil in the crook of your elbows and the hollow of your throat, the hanging shard of moon. The crash of surf, the switchgrass and petrels, the pink dawn that lifted itself from the edge of the Atlantic and spread up and across the breathing sky.

The coconut press of strange skin, tobacco lips, denim worn snow-pale and soft, Old Spice and Irish Spring. The spit and sizzle of tongue and hands on your blistered skin, the vanilla melt of sticky lips and fingertips past midnight.

The pines across the bay that caught the night in their feathery branches and held it. The foam white against black sea, black sky. Delaware, and the rest of everywhere, waiting.