

Composite Body

Tony Tulathimutte

My new father Steve said he would be waiting there for us at six o'clock, but it was almost eight. It was as dark as eight, and under the eaves of our new home my mother and I sat on our luggage, because it was raining and there was nowhere dry to sit. My mother saw me shiver and she squeezed my fingers and said *You're going to love him as much as I do*, and I wondered about that: about how much that was.

This was a time when everything new to me was older. My new father was older than my old father. The new town was an old Connecticut paper town with that evacuated look to it, half-cemetery. And my new home was a bungalow with faded Sears-brown paint situated at the end of a cul-de-sac, not substantially different from the one-room efficiency where we had been living since the divorce. The flagstone walkway leading to the front door had fragments missing, leaving behind wide troughs in which brown water collected, too big to cross in one stride. Holes older than me.

I had never met Steve or seen where he lived, probably because my mom believed that the negotiations of post-marital courtship, the unromantic complexity of *adult love*, was something I should be shielded from. For the whole span of their acquaintance up until their abrupt engagement, all I knew about Steve was what I'd gleaned from a photo of him a New Year's Eve party, where even in his rented tux you could see he was a big bruiser of a guy, one who wore a cross on a gold chain with links wide enough to thread a shoelace through. My mother and I were of solidly Jewish stock, but the religion didn't matter to my mother; what mattered was that Steve was strong. Strength, it seemed, was his strong suit. Stronger than my other father, my mom assured me. That was important for my mother, for since the afternoon one month ago when my father had explained to us in a voice full of mucus that he had been seeing a woman for two years—no, okay, *paying* a woman for two years—it was my father's weakness she blamed. He was powerless to resist, she had said.

Resist what, I had asked. *Resist himself*, she said.

At eight-fifteen, Steve's muddy Toyota rolled into the gravel driveway of my new home. The headlights made golden shapes in the fog. As he climbed out of the car, into the darkness of eight-fifteen, he seemed

bigger than he did in his photo. He had a pink face and long sideburns, and the way he swung his arms as he walked was gravity-enriched, as if he were carrying buckets of water. With the engine still running, he jaunted over to my mother, put his arms around her waist and swayed with her. Her body surrendered the stress of the last few hours, of her last marriage and her whole life and probably the life before that, and she turned her head and flashed me an encouraged smile before Steve surprised her with a kiss. There was my introduction to their adult love, and so much for that. By the time they finished it was colder out.

"Hon, I'm late and I'm sorry. I was out picking this one up from an audition." Steve gestured at his car, which was still idling with its headlights on. He let go of my mom but kept his thick arm around her, and turned his attention to me.

"How we doing over there, big guy?" His voice was loud and chummy.

I smiled with my mouth, and he leaned over and shook my hand. In the sweat-cloud of his breath I smelled beer and something pickled.

"What's your name?"

"Joe," I said, and I wondered how much, or if, my mother had mentioned me.

"Joseph, you look like a real smart guy," said Steve.

I shook my head. "It's just Joe. My full name is Joe."

His smile dimmed. "Joe Blow. You look like a smart guy. A tall guy."

We were still standing in the beams of the car's headlights, which lit up the streams of car exhaust that hung around our legs. There was someone else in the car. It was Lorraine.

Steve jogged back to the car and opened the passenger's side door, uttered a few sentences under the chug of the idling engine. I squinted to see her face but couldn't. When she finally got out of the car, she did so in a hurry, re-cinching her dark gray trench coat and throwing a wine-colored scarf over her shoulder, then kicking the car door shut. Steve opened the door again and cut the engine.

She wore sunglasses, and I couldn't tell if she looked at me as she walked by, or if she looked at my mother, whose arms were outspread in greeting. But she passed by without a word, walked up the path to the house and let herself in, leaving the door open behind her. Steve's eyes tracked her, and after she was out of sight, he looked at me and my mother with half a grimace. My mother asked him, "How did it go?"

"Christ. Another lousy commercial audition and she acts like she's going out for Shakespeare. Those microwave potatoes, those... Instabakes, that's it. We drove out forty minutes to have her to say 'Mom, we forgot the potatoes!' Like she'd ever touch a baked potato anyway. So she says the line and they tell us to move along. Well, what does she expect? Now she's all pissed." Steve scratched his head, eased back into his grinning swagger. "She doesn't know where to look. No matter what she's supposed to be doing, she looks straight at the camera. What I keep telling

her is she needs to focus on the situation, you know, do some acting, and stop playing goddamn Miss Hollywood all the time.”

In the front yard there was one cherry tree and no other trees and no grass. The tree looked lonely and sick. On one side it was stricken with a flaky white fungus, fatal to be sure. Steve said the tree—the fruit-bearing idea of it—raised the property value, and to discourage crows he hung strands of tinsel in the bare limbs, tinsel which in some places clumped and formed nests, hives, tumors, and elsewhere it hung down like beards.

This is the first picture I took when I moved in. Terribly lit. The sky is overbright, it presses into the tree limbs and the roof of the house, makes them soft-edged and bled out. Steve used to call me “Spider”—*with your skinny spider legs*, he explained, as if I didn’t already get it. And so “Spider” is what this photo is called.

I took the next picture when Lorraine wasn’t around. It’s black-and-white, like all my pictures. It’s a wide shot of our attic room, me and Lorraine’s, on the night I moved in. Seven paces long, seven across. In the corner by the only window is my bed, which I fit into like a finger in a matchbox. Two Japanese rice paper screens surround my bed to protect Lorraine’s privacy, though they’re nearly transparent anyway. And then there’s Lorraine’s unmade bed, alongside the desk we shared. Lorraine was not happy about sharing; she needed the desk to store her makeup, her towers of *Victoria’s Secrets* and *Us Weeklys*, which were jealously dog-eared and catalogued. And there’s the giant cosmetics mirror, with tiny round lights in the frames and a concave side to emphasize shortcomings.

I sat on my bed unpacking my things on the first afternoon, and Lorraine was in her part of the room, and from behind the screen I could see her silhouette, a fuzzy shadow on the rice paper by the yellow light of her desk lamp. I unpacked and folded my clothes, and when I finished I didn’t know whether to open the screen and introduce myself to Lorraine, or whether to warn her before I opened it up, or ask her how her audition went, and I was about to do one of these things when she said, in a voice that wanted no response: “Joe, excuse me. I can hear you breathing from over here. Can you please stop *panting?*”

Sorry, Lorraine.

I concentrated on nothing more than the air entering and leaving my lungs until my mother called us down for dinner.

Lorraine didn’t eat or even have a plate, but Steve made her sit with us anyway. As we sat down, my mom extended her hand to Lorraine, and Lorraine gave my mom a barren smile and folded her hands on her

lap. Mom smiled back and turned to Steve, registering her discomfort by gently smoothing down her bangs. I lowered my eyes to my food.

Steve twirled his fork at Lorraine and me. "How you two getting on?"

Lorraine said: "Where's his stuff?"

My mom looked at me and I said to my plate, "It's in the car."

"What'd you bring along?" said Steve. "Books?"

"Just my clothes," I said. "And some camera stuff. And my ships."

"Your shit?"

"My model ships," I said, and my face warmed.

Steve and Lorraine both gave a short laugh.

"Woo, model ships!" Lorraine said. "Aye-aye, Captain."

They laughed again, inhaled cackles. Steve said, "Lorrie, how's the room? The screen holding up all right?"

"No, he can totally see everything. It's obscene. He's going to bust through and molest me in my sleep."

I sucked on my fork, ran my tongue across the tines, and Steve forced a laugh. The laugh said, *Him?* He reached across the table and chucked me on the arm with the back of his hand. And then he said, "This skin-nybones tries something, open the window and let him get carried out by the wind."

When he laughed again my mother joined in. It was okay, it was a joke. We were family. I slid the fork out of my mouth and there was red on it where it had gone into my cheek when Steve hit me. My dinner thereafter tasted rare.

After she finished the dishes my mother helped me move my boxes into Lorraine's room. Before we moved the last of them in, we stood in the hallway outside of the room, and my mother touched my elbow, leaned her face in close to mine.

"Joey, try to get along with Lorraine," she said in a whisper. "Remember, you're moving into her room and her house, so she might be a little chilly to you for the first few days. But she'll adjust. We will too. Do you remember how Toby took a while to get used to the house?"

Toby, our dog, belonged to my father now. Mom got me. "I know, Mom."

"And he was so frightened he hid under the kitchen table and just peed for days and days? Even in his water bowl and food bowl?"

"Mom, I know."

"He was a good dog."

"I miss Toby."

She stood on her tiptoes and pecked me on the chin, patted my back and went off to join Steve in the den. When I went into the room, Lorraine was on her bed, reading a magazine and listening to her Walkman,

and when I went behind my screen I saw that she'd penciled a note on one of the paper panels, which said *No Snoring*. And in smaller letters underneath, an afterthought—*if you snore I will kill you in your sleep*

And then under that: *this is not a joke*

The first time I spoke to Lorraine was that night, when we were figuring out where I was going to put the tugboat. I'd stowed most of my possessions away under my bed, except for this sturdy unpainted model, unsanded and still missing the electronics and decals. I had placed it on Lorraine's desk as I unpacked, and Lorraine regarded it as if it were a land mine. Once everything else had been stored, Lorraine sat hawk-faced on the edge of her bed, watching me.

"Further. More to the side. No, all the way," she said, scratching her temples, and I pushed the tugboat to the corner of the desk until the hull teetered.

She had heavy brown bangs that fell over her forehead like a fat comma, tap water eyes. A nose, lips. I looked at the desk and the floor as she spoke.

She sighed nasally. "Can you just try to fit it under your bed?"

"There's no more room," I said. Those were my first words to her.

"Can't you throw out the old ones?"

Throw out? One of my ships? The 1/40 scale Colin Archer with the tan airfix gloss, which cost me three months' allowance and a promise not to ask for another dog? The Karoline, which you could put in the actual water and rig with a remote transceiver?

I said, "I can't do that."

"Then your camera," she said. "Boats, camera, take your pick. Hell if I care."

It was getting late, and it was a school night. I did quick math in my head, estimated which would be harder to replace—and as I placed the tugboat in the trash, I gave it a gentle *bon voyage*, assuring myself that it was headed for greater ports of call.

For the first few weeks I behaved like a guest, walking on the sides of my feet and sitting near walls and making sure I never left a smell in the bathroom. I could no longer smell the permanent hairspray and fried food, and I only entered and left my room while Lorraine was in the bathroom. My mom checked in with me time to time, but spent most of her time with Steve, going to movies and dinners and coming back with messed-up hair and unrefresh lipstick. It took me a while to realize that she was in love, which was strange to me. She had never loved my father.

"Buggy, are you feeling at home?" my mom asked.

"I guess," I said. I didn't like when she called me Bug or Buggy or Buggabug. I was fourteen now and it made me sad and scared.

My mom asked, "Are you getting along with Lorraine?"

"Lorraine's all right," I said. I imagined my tugboat, lying crushed in a heap.

"I'm so glad to hear you say that," my mom said. "It's working, don't you think? Don't you feel like you're in a real family, now?"

"Yes I sure do, Mom."

A week after I'd moved in I started going to Lorraine's school. It was just like my old school: my head still rose a foot above the crowd in the hallways; I still wore thick glasses, I still tucked my T-shirt into corduroy slacks that were too short; my lunch table was still empty. Lorraine wasn't popular either, but she still pretended not to know me and kept to her small flock of unfriendly girls who wore short loose skirts and foundation to cover the zits on their foreheads and under their ears, which streaked onto their T-shirts during gym class. I avoided Lorraine because I was afraid of what she might do at home if anyone found out I lived with her. Already I'd been noticing that my things tended to migrate when I left them out unattended: my Rubik's cube, my clicky balls, my leopard poster—they'd sometimes vanish altogether, and at times I could swear that the paper screen was inching in on my bed. As a guest I kept my mouth shut about it, but I remained vigilant and always gave the trash a rummaging before it went out.

One evening at dinner I had a premonition: *Now. She's doing it now.* It was the only time of day I was out of the room and she wasn't. I threw out my dinner, washed my dishes and went upstairs, approached the door and she was sitting cross-legged on her bed with a box of my photos lying open on the floor, the paper screen pushed aside, and the prints spread in front of her.

In those boxes were pictures, some of which I'd taken for school projects, but mostly amateur prints of trees and buildings and, at the bottom of one box, some distance-zoomed pictures of women sunbathing around the pool at our old condo. I didn't know if Lorraine had gotten to those, and I didn't know what I would say, but it was going to be insane. I would let her have it for screwing with my tugboat.

Before I could open my mouth, she looked at me and said, "Do you do people?"

My stomach fluked. Already the anger failed.

"Portraits," she said, not waiting for my response. "Do you take portraits? I need professional pictures of myself," Lorraine said, "so let's do that soon."

I didn't know what to say so I said okay, without asking what for.

Later she told me that any actress, any actress serious about making it, needs an up-to-date headshot.

We shot four rolls of film on Saturday morning while our parents were at work, my mom at the grocery store and Steve at some construction site. Lorraine was nervous all day, stationed in front of her mirror and dusting her cheeks with powder, washing her face and reapplying, smacking her lips as she examined every ridge of her mouth. Her outfit had been laid out the floor since the previous night, the ensemble arranged just as she would wear it: a gold chain circled the space above the dress's neckline, fake pearl teardrops hung from invisible ears. I took a picture of her flattened clothes, the suggestion of a person, Lorraine minus Lorraine.

Lorraine worried that wind would mess up her hair, so we moved the shoot into the house, and since the kitchen and living room were a perpetual wreck we just wound up back in our room. She cleared her desk and sat on top of it. Her black dress draped off the edge of the desk and she tapped the toes of her high heels together as I loaded the first roll. With the camera mounted on the tripod I trained the focus on her, put my face to the viewfinder and twisted the barrel of the lens until she came in sharp. The crosshairs centered on her bent knees, and I coaxed the positioning rod to put her torso, shoulders, and arms into the frame. The crosshairs went back and forth, up and down, and in circles around her until she asked me what I was doing, what was taking so long, and I told her focusing.

She made a sculling motion with her hands in front of her like a hula dancer and said "Take one of me like this," then put a hand on her cheek and turned aside. "Or like this."

I looked up and said, "You need to stop moving."

She stopped, brought her hand down to her lap without an argument. She was silent after that, and I repositioned and adjusted the shades on the desk lamps in the room, closed the blinds, and began issuing orders quietly.

"Put your hands and back flat against the wall," I said. "Good. Now bring your knee up and tilt your chin down and keep your eyes on me. Good. Now turn to the side—no, try the other side... look at me. And push out your chest. Good. You look good, Lorraine."

Lorraine beamed, then deadened her face to keep it demure. I zoomed in on her eyes; through the lens, magnified in the viewfinder, she stared back at me. I pressed the release down and tried to keep still as the shutter enclosed her.

In a syrupy trance I exhausted the film, watched her whole body pop and flash, white light sparking off of her eyes and teeth. She moved when I told her to. When the last roll ended, I took my face away and touched my forehead with my sleeve and made a dark stamp. A red blush spread across Lorraine's bare arms, and she was rolling out the strain from her back and shoulders. It was the closest to bashful I ever saw her.

"When can I see them?" she asked me.

"Monday, after I develop them at school."

"Can I be there?"

"Mr. Barney won't let more than one student in the darkroom," I said.

Lorraine turned to look at me and her eyes, liberated from the viewfinder, drilled through me. The threat, I'd almost forgotten—it was back. "I want to see," she said.

"Sorry."

"Tomorrow after lunch. Steal the key from his desk and we'll do it."

"It takes a long time. Longer than lunch period."

"God, I don't care," she said, and she left the room, dropping her earrings into her fist, and already I knew I would be missing class.

Lorraine squinted into the pool of fixer, the red light of the darkroom defining the curve of her hair and shoulders. The chemicals made my head feel like a soap bubble.

"Oh God," Lorraine said. "I'm gorgeous."

"It's not done yet. Keep your face away from that," I said, and she ignored me.

As I tacked the photos up on the drying lines she smirked up and down the row of pictures. I leaned back each time she slid past—the darkroom used to be a supply closet—and she whispered to herself, "So good." I was glad, though my talent had nothing to do with it. She loved the image, stark, enlarged, monochrome—it made her look adult, especially the ones where she posed like Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, except without the long black gloves, and instead of a cigarette holder she used a chopstick from the previous night's Chinese takeout—other than that, a good likeness.

We snuck the pictures home from school, and Lorraine covered the desk, floor, and both of our beds with the prints. She'd stowed the paper screen under her bed to make room and now she lay on her stomach in the middle of this pile, propped on her forearms and appraising each print inch by inch.

"The problem, though," she said. "Actually, there's two problems. First, if you're going to be my PR, you can't wear glasses when you're with me. It's too dorky." She leaned over and took my glasses off. "Second—"

She tiptoed across the photos over to her desk and switched on the

lights of her cosmetic mirror, sat in front of it and pulled her sweater up on the right side up to the shimmering white line of her bra strap.

"At my audition. The girl who went before me was at least ten pounds lighter, and an inch taller, too. I was more talented than she was, but she had the look. The look is everything. Have you noticed I've been dieting?" She pulled her shirt back down, spread her arms and waited for an answer. I said she looked nice and she said, "Nice isn't the point."

Steve didn't like how tall I was. He said you have to be the shrimp and take shit when you're young so you know what it's like to be the little guy when you grow up. I was five-eleven, two inches taller than Steve.

I have this picture of him yelling at me. I pretended to adjust the lens while he lectured me about spending my allowance on film: "A photographer knows that it's as much about what you *don't* take pictures of as what you *do* take pictures of. Ever hear *Less-is-More*? You might think I'm full of shit, but I've got experience."

Experience. The picture I took of him yelling is a little off-center and at a distance. Steve is sitting at the kitchen table across from me, and his forehead is creased with annoyance, his eyes are squinted, and his mouth looks both open and closed at the same time, a trick of slow shutter speed in indoor lighting. He told me if he caught me wasting any more money on bullshit, he'd slam some fiscal prudence into my head. I nodded and wondered when Lorraine was expecting her next photo shoot. She was one week into her diet, and said she had to lose fifteen before she looked professional enough to go again. I was glad she needed me to take more pictures, but I told her that I only had one roll of film left, and it would take me awhile to save up for more. "If you want to help pay," I said, "we can probably do it earlier, but don't let your dad know you're spending money on film."

She asked why that was a problem, and I told her why.

"Dad is a D-U-S-H. Stay out of his way, and if he talks to you, just play the game."

"What game?"

"The game, the game you play with people who give you shit," said Lorraine. "Like, don't say anything you don't need to say. Don't let him 'teach' you anything. If he starts yelling, be quiet and let your Mom step in for you. And don't let him touch you."

"Touch me?"

"Yeah."

"What?"

"Touch you in your special little bathing-suit area. Ha. God, I'm just kidding."

I looked at her. She was brushing, brushing, brushing her hair. I never knew if she knew what she was saying.

Lorraine took her relief from a jar of ice water on her desk, and at night I would hear her stomach crawl and I would hear her turn over and tuck her knees to her chest to smother the noise. Her face, by nature a kind oval shape, began after three weeks to indent, and her cheeks drifted inward as if in light suction. Her arms defined themselves away from the bone in shallow grooves, in trenches—yes, this was trench warfare, and she upheld a military regimen of distraction. She test-ran every permutation of her wardrobe, wagged her feet to The Eagles and Wham! on her Walkman, drew circles and boxes in her magazines around her favorite chests, hairstyles, waists, eyes. She treasured efficiency: exercises that both burned calories and deadened her appetite, sugarfree gum that both deadened her appetite and sweetened her breath, ditto her jackhammer toothbrushing. Every half-hour or so, she lifted her shirt in front of the mirror, turning and admiring how her ribs were scalloping the skin on her chest, willing her stomach in and passing both hands down the inward bend.

The paper screen never came back up, and we spent most days just lying in our beds and reading or sometimes doing homework. Lorraine would utter whatever thoughts or words passed into her mind, without expecting a response. There was her idea for specially-bred mosquitoes that siphoned fat instead of blood. Her habit of repeating words that she liked. *Chicken. Chicken.* Or the one time she said, “My mother never writes to me,” and I told her that my father never wrote to me either. And Lorraine would talk about the future. “Rule number one for me is no pornos, ever,” she said. “No commercials and no art films either, if I can help it. I’ll only do big feature movies. I wouldn’t do pornos even if they promised me I could star in feature movies with Michael J. Fox in exchange for doing it. My movies are going to have names like *The Murder*, or *Desire*, or *God and Satan*, and I’ll make sure I’m always the main actress. I could play all the girl parts, if they needed me to. But they’ll have to pay me for each part.”

“From the moment you’re born the world just wants to fill you up.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, food. They put all this effort into making it look nice and appetizing, but in the end you see what it really is: a bunch of shit.” I nodded. “Everything is like that, if you think about it. Air, oxygen. Boys,” she said, counting these off on her fingers. “They want to fill you. And all this stuff, all this shit”—she pinched her arm—“covers up who you really are. The brain, the bones, and the heart, that’s all there is to people. So it’s all about being honest and not hiding yourself.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Sure,” she said, without hesitating. “Yeah, jeez, everything hurts. I can barely stand up without my knees giving out on me. Feel my fingers, they’re ice.” She gave me her hand; it was a dead milk color and cold as

glass. "But there's one good thing, even about that," she said. "If you're so cold that it shows on the outside of you and you get numb on the inside, then you can make people feel cold just by looking at them, and nobody can do anything bad to you, no matter how bad they want to." She let go of my hand. "Just by looking."

That was when I joined her. We were going to be honest, and we were going to keep everybody and every nasty thing the hell out of us.

So I didn't worry about wasting film anymore. I began to avoid meals and drank Diet Sprite and ripped though packs of spearmint gum with Lorraine (a stick in each cheek), and I stole developing supplies and photo paper from school and lifted money from Steve's wallet to buy film, and soon enough I'd thrown out my whole fleet of ships to make room under my bed for more prints. Another roll spent, another roll spent. When Lorraine wasn't around, I would take my own picture against a bedsheet, the same parts and poses over and over. Lorraine liked these pictures, just an arm, an eye, a knee—it left people wanting more, and people always wanted more than what they saw, even when they saw everything.

I scrutinized my pictures, believed that if you compared them under a microscope you could see the untruth going out of me minute by minute. There wasn't much more to lose—Steve already gave me constant hell for how I looked. His nicknames for me got shorter and nastier. Lorraine and I gave him brief nods when we felt indulgent, firm scowls otherwise, and that kept things peaceful because he was by his nature reactive, like a zoo lion, only drunk.

The problems between Steve and me made my mother crazy, but not much crazier than Steve was making her all on his own. The wedding was five weeks away, and Steve still hadn't gotten around to actually buying my mom an engagement ring; at first he'd told her that he was still saving up for it, but then he started griping about how it was a stupid gesture that the "ring manufacturers" used to get your money—he called them "Jew-lers," and managed to get a laugh out of it every time. That was another thing: Steve was planning a Catholic wedding, and my mother knew all along that he would never convert—I couldn't picture him stomping a glass under a *chuppah*—but she hadn't anticipated that he'd want *us* to. No he was *not* going to get hitched by some law-school pencil-dick Justice of the Peace, and as the wedding date got nearer Steve pushed her harder, and while they were busy bargaining loudly ("I'll get a ring after you get your ass baptized!"), Lorraine and I played the game.

We conspired and showed off. We mashed soft foods around on the plate to make it look like we ate more than we did, that old kids' cliché,

but my mother probably noticed, because once when she was clearing the table, she said to me, "Come on, Buggy, there are kids starving in Africa." Lorraine and I didn't hide our laughter. Usually we'd pick at our food, just dab a half-empty spoon or fork to our lips. Drinking anything but ice water was out of the question. There was one occasion, though, where Lorraine ate huge forkfuls of mashed potatoes and cuts of pork chop, sips of orange juice. She worked her food around in her mouth, and she tipped her head back at me. I glanced, confused and uncomfortable, until she put down her fork, lifted her napkin, and blew her nose, hard. "I think I'm coming down with something," she said, after four or five more loud honks into the napkin. "I'm just completely stuffed up." She looked at me, darted out her tongue for a millisecond, and for a second I thought—I told her this later—I really thought I was going to shoot food out of my nose too.

We weighed ourselves every hour. I asked my mother if I could move the bathroom scale to my room so I could weigh rocks for an earth sciences project, and she said it was fine as long as I laid a towel on it to keep it from scratching. The scale was at the foot of my bed, and I set my radio alarm clock to go off quietly when it was time.

But one day Lorraine told me that we were weighing ourselves wrong.

She told me to close the blinds, and I did. She wore a blouse that draped like a skirt from her shoulders, old jeans frowsy with wrinkles, and these she took off button by button, turning them inside out as they came off her body, and she stood in her white bra and panties, which looked odd and huge, slung over her dowelly frame. She untwisted her hair from its braids and flicked the hair-ties away, told me to undress, and I began unbuttoning my shirt with the detachment of a routine physical. I saw her reach her arms back to unclasp her bra, saw it fall to the ground, saw her panties skim down her ankles to join the mound of our clothes.

My mouth was dry. Lorraine stepped on the scale and held still, waited for the seesawing of the meter to fall in line with the needle, then let out a steady breath.

"Eighty-nine. That's a whole pound-and-a-half," she said, stepping off. The needle swung back to zero. She looked at me and said it was my turn, and I told her I could just go on the scale and then weigh my pants later.

"Come on," Lorraine said, and her voice was soft. I didn't move or respond, and she stepped toward me, moved closer until our toes met, and I smelled her lavender shampoo and the fruit-rot in her breath.

"Look at me," she said, and I looked down at her face and she was looking down at her skeleton. I looked. And I was afraid of what she'd see in me, the dark doubt in my chest. She unbuttoned my slacks and those came down, hooked her fingers in the elastic of my briefs and they

came down too, and in the expansion between us there was a release of heat. She closed my hand in hers, and I felt her dry skin and the strings of her tendons.

"I know you can't help it," Lorraine said, keeping her eyes on mine. "But try to stay cool, Joe. Scales always know weakness."

Two weeks before the wedding, the house was full of combat. Not only did my mother refuse to convert, but my Aunt Mishka found out about the whole ordeal and arranged for a rabbi to come calling at our house unsolicited for "spiritual counseling," whom Steve ended up seizing by the hair and launching into one of the lawn's standing puddles. I saw him stumble back to his car with milky brown water dripping from the hem of his jacket. Mom, still without a ring and desperate, took me aside one night and asked me if I really liked living here, if I wanted to stay and become a Leary. I said nothing. Mom said *Come here and hug your mother*. She hugged me and told me she was sorry, she'd made a mistake. Her wrists were wet on the back of my neck. After a while, she let me go and said, "You're freezing cold. I don't know why you're looking the way you look. I don't know why you won't eat. You're scaring your mother, Joe. I want you to go lie down and have some water." I didn't tell her that that was all I'd been doing for the past month.

Lorraine was turning ascetic, spending a lot of time in bed under heavy blankets, the shades drawn and the lights off and her head nested in the pillows like an oyster on lettuce. She read magazines very close to her face, which had become pale and skulled, sheer structure. I would take my camera apart and put it together again, fiddling with the heap of camera parts in front of me, the lenses and external shutter release and flash cube keeping my cold fingers working. I was lightheaded and it felt like I was being pulled downward by a strong natural force, but it didn't affect my thinking—no, I was restless for new projects and poses, more ways to picture Lorraine. I pestered her. I took photos of her while she napped. When I accidentally woke her up she told me to put the camera down and she said, *I don't always want this*. I asked her what she meant.

"I just mean it's not the point."

She breathed between sentences.

"When I'm famous I won't need pictures.

"I'll be everywhere.

"People will just know me.

"I could be invisible.

"You'll point the camera straight at me, take the picture, and when you develop it, it'll be like—"

She took a print from the pile on the floor and handed it to me. A clumsy picture of our backyard, taken from our bedroom window, day-time, overcast, tufts of crabgrass speckling the ground. Nobody was in it. She flipped the photo over. "Completely blank. That's what's beautiful.

Thin and sharp and pure blank white. It's when stuff gets put on the paper that things start to lose their perfection."

"You don't want me to take pictures anymore?"

She breathed in and out in a pattern of sighs. "You're not getting it. Not even pictures are honest. They're not real. I'm not even sure I'm real."

It was becoming difficult to talk to her, not as it had been when I'd first moved in, but as if years had passed without our seeing each other. I said nothing.

Lorraine said, "Oh, the camera adds ten pounds. Who needs it."

I put the pieces of my camera down. Lorraine was finished with preserving herself. The radio alarm went off. We shed our clothes, sighing in exhaustion, and when we stood together, her body gave an odd shudder.

"I'm so cold," she said. Her teeth clicked as she spoke.

I put my arms around her, tried to convey my heat to her in the confining darkness of our room, but there was no heat, just our touching and unsteady shivering. Our hips and ribs and collarbones clacked together, and it hurt.

"Open up. Lorraine, open the door. The fag's been stealing my shit."

The doorknob jumped, the door thundered. We separated and moved as fast as we could, stumbling over tangles of our clothing. A few seconds passed and Steve asked us what we were doing in a voice thick with menace. I'd only gotten one leg of my jeans on when I heard a thud, a lurch of the hinges, the sound of splintering timber in the doorframe. Steve burst in and the light pouring in from the stairwell turned us white. I squinted and looked at Lorraine, who had her blouse open, exposing her chest.

Steve swung to face me and I tried to run past him into the hallway but he caught my collar, punched me once on the side of my open mouth and twice again below the eye, and there was a wet crushing in my face. I tried to close my mouth but my muscles only twitched, feeling disconnected from the bones. My mother came in and ran to me, swore at Steve and he clutched her face, I saw his arm flex, and Lorraine's scream, a high broken note wrenched with panic, is what saved us.

I don't know how she got our new address, but yesterday an envelope came from Lorraine, an L.A. postmark but no return address. Inside were a few blank postcards with pictures—the Hollywood Hills, Sunset Boulevard, the Walk of Fame—and a stack of eight-by-ten prints. The photo on top was a black-and-white close-up of Lorraine's face in focus, smiling. It's a real headshot, the kind you pay eighty dollars a piece for.

Lorraine's hair crests in a satiny wave above her forehead before it comes down the left side of her face, which is about the same as I remember it: sharp-boned, socketed at the eyes and cheeks and temples. In black marker across the lower-right corner, there is a message in wide looping cursive that says, *Stay cool—Lorraine Leary XOXO*.

The rest of the photos are the ones I took, newly developed; here's the tree, our room, Steve's mouth, both open and closed. She must have taken the negatives with her, whenever she left. I never got to retrieve my things after I got out of the hospital, wasn't able to bring my photo boxes or my camera, couldn't save anything.

I have these pictures in front of me. I'm cutting through them, and they go limp as pieces of them fall away, grayscale pieces of my body and Lorraine's. When I finish, the photos have rectangular holes in them where faces, mouths, and arms used to be, and our limbs fall into a disarrayed heap, a pile of myself and Lorraine.

I begin to compose us on a sheet of paper, with her postcards as the backdrop: sunny palms and the low-rises and sprawl weather of L.A. swarming to welcome us, wishing we were there. In the center is Lorraine's bare torso, emerging from the flare of her hips and ending just above her ribs, ridged like stairs, and there are small crescents at the top where the flash had cast down the shadows of her breasts. My chest rises from her torso, with collarbones spreading like handlebars to each shoulder and a black rut where the ribcage funnels in. My legs stretch down past the bottom of the page, unaccommodated by the frame. Four arms jut from the sides bent at gentle angles, one pair mine and one hers, each shrugging a little. The top pair comes down and their hands meet and touch; the other pair crisscrosses and enfolds the body in a self-loving embrace, settling around the waist in a heat-huddle.

And it's my neck supporting Lorraine's head and face and hair; across her chin is a loop of her handwriting, the S in *Stay cool*. I've put on different eyes, still hers, but enlarged, zoomed-in, eyes that reach the sides of the face, and there's pepper in the irises.

I look. There's something wrong with how I'm breathing. I stop looking. I never made anything good except this. This disgusting composite, the only body I want.