

Stage Two

Mackenzie had almost filled in the upper right corner of her vision board when her older sister Cora called to tell her their mother was dying again. She was holding the final thumbtack, paused with its point to her palm as she shouldered the phone. *Nearing death's door* was apparently the way Cecilia had phrased it, her trademark melodrama undaunted even by mortality. It stung, only a little and pretty remotely, that their mother had singled out Cora as the recipient of this latest wolf-cry. "Will you forward it to me?" asked Mackenzie, poking the tip of the clear tack into her laugh line, testing the slim boundary between skin and blood. She figured it was a classic Mom Correspondence: splattered with references to the various ways in which she believed her organs to be malfunctioning, appended with WebMD screenshots about pulmonary embolisms and interstitial cystitis, highlighted with her own wide variety of personal symptoms. "Sure," said Cora, "only she told me not to quote-unquote burden you with it."

"I thought you blocked those sites from her browser," said Mackenzie, eyeing the hierarchy of infinity pools she'd stacked atop each other, anchored by one loose tack. She thought she might prefer the Singaporean penthouse pool, with its glittery digital futuristic view, to the one in Iceland which looked out over an endless velvet-watered fjord. That one looked haunted and cold. She couldn't pinpoint which she wanted; she changed her mind in flickers and jolts these days, mercurial as coastal weather and as prone to storming.

She slid open the door to the pointless balcony, which overlooked a concrete strip about six inches wide surrounded by white wrought-iron, and thought about just how committed you'd have to be to throw yourself off the side of this particular highrise. It would be hard enough to squeeze onto the ledge. Only the most determined jumper would pull it off. Mackenzie suspected

she wasn't committed enough to any particular feeling to die for it. Through the anemic palm fronds brushing the bottom of the orange sky she watched the trails of planes landing at LAX, the flat glitter of the city she was learning to hate in an absent, resigned way, the way she might have hated a birthmark or a scar or a badly-chosen breakup tattoo: it was part of her now, and both of them were going nowhere. The large corkboard rectangle upon which she was designing her future hung next to the open door, the only break in the monotony of off-white wall, and the sounds of the dull evening were dim and distant, and the edible she'd taken two hours before was beginning to slide its way across her consciousness with the gelid implacability of a slowly-melting laketop glacier.

Cora was accusing her of infantilizing their mother. It was a conversation they shared often enough that Mackenzie could comfortably assign about ten percent of her brain to following it, plugging in the "okays" and the "you're probably rights" at the necessary intervals. With the majority of her attention, she tried to figure out what was wrong with each potential dream house she had, two hours ago, apparently deemed significant enough to extract from a pile of real estate magazines and pin to the massive corkboard like so many net-snagged butterflies. The Marrakesh riad was a little too beige; the flat in South Kensington probably bloomed with black mold under the renovated mahogany floorboards. One of her neighbors to the left was barbecuing to the apathetic drone of college radio math-rock and sending all their smoke straight through her door, which she closed too late to stunt the incipient headache. She headed, dizzy, towards the couch, and as she passed the tiny kitchen the oven clock glowed a green 7:43.

To stem the deluge of information Cora was providing her with regarding their mother's bodily functions, Mackenzie, in quite an intentionally reasonable voice, said, "The problem with

this method of attention-seeking is we'll never know when something really *is* wrong with her. That's why I don't engage with it anymore."

"Mackenzie," said Cora, biting off each consonant with a determined precision Mackenzie hadn't heard in her sister's voice since their contentious childhood spelling bees, "something *really is wrong with her*. Weren't you practicing active listening? Wasn't that your homework for last month? How'd that go?" Mackenzie stretched on the couch until her feet touched Jojo, who was five years old and of indeterminate breed and who now rearranged with a begrudging sigh to accommodate her, releasing the faint corn-chip smell that lingered perpetually between her paws.

The dog had been registering the phone call with growing resentment as it stretched past her dinnertime, and was now curled up in somnolent rage waiting for the yellow bag of kibble to emerge from its sacred place on the high shelf. Mackenzie stroked Jojo's short burnished fur with her bare toes, noting without interest the abject state of her pedicure: glossy robins-egg blue corroded and flaky with neglect. She hadn't been practicing active listening last month. That was old homework. Last month, she'd been working on something even more difficult, which she now begrudgingly summoned up from the outbox of her psyche: *admitting fault*. *Sorry*, she felt constantly, so constantly that she resented anyone for making her say it. "Sorry," she said now to Cora. She wondered why no one ever told you how easy it was to become pathetic, a bottomless pit into which everyone else could pour their exasperated, righteous pity, and leave you down there, their shoulders lightened briefly, as you shellacked on another dutiful layer of boring, earnest, ultimately self-indulgent shame.

"Apology accepted," said Cora, and then repeated that their mother had received an official diagnosis: bladder cancer, stage two.

“Cancer” made no sense to Mackenzie. “Stage two” made a little more sense, and retrospectively conferred more clarity upon the word “cancer.” Stage two meant not so bad, right? Stage two was comfortably within the realm of early stages. Mackenzie wasn’t sure if there were four or five stages of bladder cancer, but either way, stage two was not in the latter half, the bent acceleration towards death. Regarding the relative severity of bladder cancer she was absolutely clueless, other than that she could not name a celebrity who’d died from it, whereas she could list off the top of her head those who had died of cancers pancreatic, lung and liver. She wiped her lips with her hand, a newish tic that had recently resulted in problematic amounts of chapping, and the hint of iron caught her in her body for a brief exquisite second. A bead of blood was drying in the center of her palm. It felt like nothing. Mackenzie placed the thumbtack, innocent and bloodless, on the side table, in the pool of sallow lamplight. Outside either a gunshot or a firework, followed by a nervous belt of laughter and the half-heard yell of “party foul!” In the purpling dark of the apartment she registered a white candle flickering on the kitchen windowsill, lit hours before and forgotten about, unscented and drowning in a bath of itself.

With all the psychic reserves she could muster after a day spent throwing endless tennis balls in the July heat for a dog who really needed to be herding sheep on some craggy foreign mountaintop, Mackenzie practiced active listening. Cora was telling her tickets to Milwaukee were four hundred and thirty five dollars on a certain website which scanned the other travel websites for the best deals. “That’s the best deal?” Mackenzie asked, and through audibly gritted teeth her sister asked her wouldn’t Russell help her out with the fare if she couldn’t swing it.

He certainly would, without compunction. He was near repayment on all his student loans and about to start accumulating a fair salary after eight years of medical training. The issue

was something else, a sharp and pungent embarrassment that Mackenzie encountered daily, the problem of her own inability to take care of anything the way other adults did. She could look at it through veils that made it more palatable: the veil of self-care, the veil of cognitive behavioral therapy, the veil of an abstract but perpetual childhood trauma that nobody else in the family gave credence to. All were, she knew full well, justifications; all were essentially false. The issue at the heart of it all had contours large and scaly. It cast a shadow she could barely contemplate; it was not a thing you could look at straight on.

“I’ll make it work,” said Mackenzie, and lied to her sister about having saved a few thousand from her last part-time job, proctoring library-based tests for high school students enrolled in online courses, a job which had ended in January and had barely paid for her half of rent on the apartment she ostensibly shared with Russell, though she seemed to be the only one who lived there.

They decided to visit their mother the next week. Cora would be driving over from Madison, where she lived like a sensible person without the type of grand pretensions Mackenzie had hogged all to herself. Mackenzie, it seemed, would be flying home from LAX to spend a few nights in her childhood bedroom, under the plastic galaxies that still emitted, at night, a faded green memory of their glow. After they said their goodbyes, Mackenzie sprinkled the brown pebbles into Jojo’s bowl, listening to the waterfall clatter of them hitting the metal. She told the smart speaker to start the psychonaut playlist, a seventeen-song assortment Russell and his med school friends left on in the background when they took their annual guided LSD trips, seeking guidance from above to stitch them back into the material world. An alien instrument creaked in the empty air of the kitchen.

Jojo wasn't eating, Mackenzie noticed as she came back from washing the rusty smudge from her hands; she was, instead, sipping the air in small, desperate gulps. Mackenzie put the unpunctured palm to her dog's hairless stomach, feeling, through the warm rubbery skin, the shallow pump of breath. She looked to the side table to see the lamplight illuminating the absence of a thumbtack. She took a deep breath, deep enough for both of them. Then she called her ex-boyfriend, because her fiance, as usual, was at work.

One of the least beloved aspects of Mackenzie's personality, as she knew full well but rarely had the energy to address, was her chronic inability to gauge even the most basic maintenance requirements of her car. Vehicles of all types had been the sole domain of her dad, and gladly ceded. Mackenzie had passed her driver's test on the third try and two years later than most of her classmates; she was given the family trash heap, a dented old minivan with the back seats removed, which, despite its unnecessary size, proved adequate for carting herself and any number of shitfaced revelers around the small beach town in which she'd barely graduated six years back. She cared nothing for cars, except old ones in movies sometimes, and knew no makes or models except the ones she happened to find herself driving and having to name for purposes of insurance or hail-mary repair jobs.

Her current ride was a teal Honda CRV bought for peanuts from a suburban aunt outside Valencia, whose purpose for the car seemed to have been limited to carting her two small daughters back and forth from their Montessori preschool until she upgraded to a Mercedes after her husband upgraded to his secretary. The once-beige bucket seats now sheened in the sinister, orange veneer of ancient Cheez-Its dust; the never-addressed sliver in the windshield from an aberrant pebble; the tacky ghosts of bumper stickers whose message she could only guess at,

probably the ordinary type, gutless and bland, promoting religious coexistence or public radio or honking if one happened to love librarians. And her current ride was also moot, untouched for weeks now, shunted into a corner slot in the underground parking lot with a near-empty gas tank and a battery whose probable death she had been too afraid to confirm.

Russell was predictably elsewhere: at the hospital, or marooned in the garish, sleepy neon of a drive-thru, or (a thought baseless and intrusive and nonetheless clanging in its insistence) wallowing beneath the pile of fleece blankets on the California king of his prettiest fellow resident, a girl named Aya from Detroit who was exactly his type, which Mackenzie knew because they looked like sisters. The two women had met twice, first at a stilted welcome dinner at the chief resident's home, next on the type of erratic, vertiginous night out that the residents managed every six months: an eight-hour block of time squeezed from the rigid cuboid days of their lives, eight hours to test the capacity of their livers, to swallow internet-sourced MDMA and dissolve, however briefly, into the buoyant chemical joy that apparently eluded them every other moment. Mackenzie, whose partying had generally taken place in the forgiving velvety dark of a bonfire or festival, had worn the absolute wrong thing to overcompensate, and spent the night sulking against the wall with a vodka tonic, her ribcage tight against a too-small leather dress, watching her fiance laugh with a blue-jeaned, perfect-postured Aya over tequila shots at the bar. She'd never asked Russell about Aya and she never intended to. Russell, currently on night shifts, had been coming home around eight a.m.; he wouldn't have to know about Jojo if she didn't tell him, so she called Cameron instead, giving thanks for his habit, annoying to her when they'd shared a bed, of keeping his ringer on loud.

Mackenzie was huddled by the window, her left hand administering a light massage to the dog's delicate skull, her right hand seeking clarity on the Internet, the several open Google

tabs an index of digital doom: *bladder cancer survival rate, my dog ate a thumbtack, how to practice box breathing, panic attack vs heart attack, liquor stores open near me*. A guided meditation from YouTube was playing at half speed, the smooth British narrator instructing her with artificial patience on how to engage her diaphragm, how to let the thoughts flow over her instead of clump around her, gnawing, like so many invisible ticks. Outside the empty street waited under a shroud of moonlit smog. Cameron was five minutes away, but five minutes could mean anything. Jojo's breaths whistled from her throat in a thin, erratic stream; the Internet had told Mackenzie, variously, that the dog was in no real danger provided a vet removed the thumbtack within three hours, and also that the dog might die any second from a perforated esophagus. "You are on the current, not under it," the narrator told her; "you are floating, not drowning."

When Mackenzie first moved to California she'd learned about how to escape a rip tide: swim parallel to the shore, not back towards it. The surf instructor had scrawled a sample diagram on the sand-propped whiteboard, with arrows indicating the direction of the current and the proper escape route; a tiny stick figure on a tiny surfboard lingered at the intersection of safety and death, being dragged out to the open ocean on the back of a rogue current. "You will instinctively try to swim straight back to shore," the instructor told Mackenzie and the other three students sitting obedient and cross-legged on their beach towels. The instructor, an annoyingly young semi-pro surfer whose bikini shots had almost made it to the final bracket for two *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issues, had made them all take this ocean safety course before they entered the water. She stood at the whiteboard by the lifeguard tower, gesturing with a blue marker, her wetsuit half unzipped; legs wrapped in slick black neoprene, the rest of the suit flopping down, swim-toned upper body rising unencumbered from the waist up. The effect was that of a

butterfly half emerged from its chrysalis, or a snake divesting itself of a useless season of skin; she appeared unfinished, on her way to something. Beyond her the ocean sat gray and wet under a sky made milky by the smothered glow of the sun. “This is an understandable instinct,” she continued, “but you’ll die if you give in to it. What you want to do is counter this instinct with logic: swim sideways, to get out of the current; then, when the water stops pulling you, you can start swimming back to shore.”

The other three were nodding, so Mackenzie did, too, but she already knew: if she found herself stuck in some random aberration of the tides, aboard an express route to the open sea, she would simply die. She would panic, inhale seawater, struggle vainly towards the shore, where ignorant beachgoers were clinking plastic wine goblets and slapping on sunscreen; the bass from someone’s wireless speaker would drown out her absurd pleas for rescue. She would not remember to swim sideways, and would wash up days or months later on someone’s private beach, netted in kelp and purple-mouthed, her flesh swollen white or removed in chunks by sharks or unfussy seals, her fingers whittled to bone by the industrious, patient claws of crustaceans.

Beyond the three lessons she’d paid for with an internet coupon, Mackenzie rarely surfed anymore. She told herself it was the expense of the hobby, and the inscrutable etiquette of its practitioners, that had prevented her from committing to it thoroughly; she knew this was untrue. Now, as the guided meditation ended and segued abruptly into a loud neon ad for low-sugar wine coolers, Mackenzie found her mind floating on the dark current, breathing in water as though it were air. A horn sounded from the dark street; Mackenzie and Jojo twitched simultaneously. She gathered the dog, whose smallness had heretofore seemed only adorable rather than pathetic, into her arms and went out to the car.

Cameron was in the driver's seat, listening to something loud whose lyrics stopped at the fogged-up windows, whose grinding, mechanical roar passed through Mackenzie's clingfilm fog without landing anywhere. He'd been waiting on them with his trademark eerie focus and was out of his seat and sliding open the side door and consoling Jojo with such specific gentleness Mackenzie couldn't help noting, abstractly, a quick and sharp clamp of grief in her gut. "Sorry if I'm late," he said, and she didn't know what time it was, and so she didn't know whether he was late or not. She thought that this animal deserved an owner with less of a tendency to dissociate, and then she thought: this dog was on death row, discounted, perfect of course but misunderstood, and for the first time that day a strange warmth rose in her throat.

She got in the backseat with Jojo and then felt weird about it, but it was too late to switch to shotgun; Cameron had the map keyed up with the all-night vet bleeping three long miles away from them on the screen of his archaic phone, and an estimated duration reading twelve minutes, because, although it was almost midnight, the route was along a highway still ensnared in the remnants of the day's permanent rush hour, still bracketed by incessant DUIs and fender benders and head-on-collisions, the inescapable debris of time and metal in a car-reliant city of four million shitty drivers.

Cameron didn't ask what she'd have asked him immediately had the tables been turned: "How come your doctor fiance, with the gym-perfected body and the bursting resume, isn't driving you and the dog we once shared custody of to the emergency vet?" He likewise refrained from inquiring about the thumbtack, and how Jojo had been granted access to it; he'd known her when she was little, had seen her open the car window with a spastic puppy paw and lean out so far her center of gravity almost shifted her out all the way; he'd once walked in on her consuming, with the greatest diligence and attention, the latter third of Mackenzie's

sporadically-kept dream journal, and for the next week or so kept an eye on her digestive processes, which ended up proving mostly normal except for some telltale flecks of lined notebook paper. He did, however, at a red light, bring up the time she'd hoped he wouldn't bring up. "You haven't really learned since La Place, huh?"

Years ago, now, when they'd been living outside New Orleans, in a terrible apartment complex with swampy gray carpeting and a leaf-strewn, dismal pool: the eleventh hurricane in a busy season, everyone fatigued and grumpy by the summer full of false alarms, drained by the days of hot, relentless rain. She'd thought fleetingly of filling up her gas tank the night before, then dismissed it, since surely this would pass just like the others, breaking branches, maybe, but nothing worse. Of course the next morning the power had gone out for what would end up being three weeks, and enormous oaks were downed in the parking lot, and all the gas stations within sixteen miles of them were dead. In what had not been the first gas-tank-related miracle of her life, Mackenzie had managed to steer them seventeen miles to the lights of a Chevron, pulling into the pump as the range dropped to zero.

"I'm generally getting better about it," said Mackenzie, wondering if Jojo was about to throw up the thumbtack: her noises were escalating to a gulping urgency. "I mean you knew I was never that practical." Her practicality, or lack thereof, had been a sticking point; she knew it, but she couldn't change it, or didn't want to. What Cameron had been baffled by, Russell had found endearing at the beginning: he loved to pay for everything, to have his name on the lease, to remind her of appointments and stick all her bills on autopay. By now he was tiring of it, and she couldn't blame him; his life had become what he'd wanted it to be, flush with regimens and outlines and investments; hers was still a deep blurry well of diminishing possibilities and

overdraft fees. Cameron pressed the first button of his preset radio stations and they listened to a third of an ad for a limited-edition vegan cheeseburger.

On preset four he found a Queen song, buoyant and orchestral, bleeding at the edges into the fuzz of the adjacent stations, a little mariachi seeping through. The city stretched in lacquered glass and multi-storied parking lots on either side of them, its gum-pockmarked sidewalks lying empty in the sallow flush of the low orange sky. After the Queen song came the Fleetwood Mac song she and Cameron had, five years prior, exhausted over a summer of repetitions: simmering bok choy and bell peppers in the cluttered kitchen, singing with full and embarrassing throat in the fragrant steam; letting it loop endlessly on aimless Sunday drives up the coast, boxes of fudge and six-packs from craft breweries and kitschy seashell-creatures colonizing their backseat. They'd finally laid it to rest one night at karaoke, blistering their lungs with bourbon-fortified passion, and if she'd heard it since (she must have; it wasn't exactly obscure) she couldn't recall feeling any kind of way about it. It haunted the conditioned air between them now: a shower of tumbling gold, Stevie Nicks and her impossible, perfect warble, the rich dusty thrum of the guitar. Beyond this there was silence. The dog occasionally emitted a troubling whistle from her preoccupied esophagus. The manufactured serenity of the GPS lady told them, at each step, where to go.

"I've got her," Cameron said when he'd guided the big Jeep into the parking spot marked for veterinary patients, next to the parking spots marked for patrons of the Ethiopian restaurant, the gentlemen's club, and the weed dispensary, and though she tried to help him guide the dog from the car, he blocked her with his big shoulders and lifted Jojo in her blanket cocoon into his arms. Through the spice-heavy air they crossed the fluorescent strip of white concrete into the bright clarity of the lobby, and together stepped up to the receptionist. Mackenzie explained

about the thumbtack. Cameron explained everything else (age, shots, allergies) and filled out the paperwork while Mackenzie sat on a long white bench against the wall and massaged Jojo's soft head with her fingers, in soothing, perpetual swirls. In the waiting room with them were a young boy and an older brunette woman and a cat in a carrier, a geriatric golden retriever heaving petulant sighs at his grim-faced, business-casual companion, and a clock on the wall that said 10:12 when they got there and 10:53 when the vet called Jojo in and 1:56 when they walked back out again, Cameron cradling a sedated and tackless Jojo and Mackenzie beginning to reacquaint herself slowly with the process of breathing.

The bill was nine hundred dollars and Cameron put it on one of his credit cards without even turning to her with a question mark. "I'll pay you back," said Mackenzie in the parking lot to his broad and massive flanneled back, as he arranged the sleeping dog in her backseat nest and murmured soundless benedictions into what he used to call her *little-baby-egg-head*. "Sure," he said, and his face when he met her eyes for the first time that evening was like a stranger's: cracked open along invisible faultlines but still holding tight together, anchored by the cold resolve of his depthless eyes, which looked into her and at her and through her simultaneously, as though she were really the cipher which she felt herself to be at times: the fuckup, the flake, the leech, the slut, the squanderer of childhood potential. The one who'd led him on and left him, who'd taken the one thing he loved more nakedly than anything else in the world: their dog.

Unspoken between them hung the invisible invoice: the financial side damning enough, all the red ink of her past transactions stamped with Cameron's name, the time he paid three thousand for her dead transmission because she'd dropped half that amount on a spontaneous trip to Tulum, the numberless months of covered rent and electricity, the medications and dinners and shampoos and batteries bought without ever asking for reimbursement. The other side of the

invoice was even harder to look at, the side where it listed all her failings: the infidelities, the gaslighting, the perpetual wasting of her income on stupidity: Internet-bought happiness supplements that caused low-level nausea and alleviated nothing, lacquered leather boots with silver toecaps that stayed entombed in cardboard in the back of her closet.

At the curb in front of her apartment building she tried not to show her shock at Cameron's offer to bring the dog inside, then recalibrated. He was not the type to try to hustle his way into a quickie with the ex while her fiancé was at work. He was, however, the type to be concerned about the helpless being in between them, and to see her safely to her familiar place. She accepted, rinsing her insides in the bleach of shame for her initial suspicions. He turned into the underground parking and slotted into the last remaining guest spot with the admirable precision he'd mastered at work. Responsible for maneuvering vehicles much larger than a Jeep around precarious building sites, his muscle memory was full of silent information about navigating spaces: once he'd spent a month learning the rules of cliff parking in mudslide-prone areas, as part of a team rebuilding a chunk of the 1 near Big Sur that had finally dropped off the precipice whose edges it had been flirting with for years. Here, the stakes were lower, but Mackenzie, stepping from the car, was certain that she could take a tape measure to his parking job and find that the space between the tires and the lines was equidistant down to the millimeter. Mackenzie, on the other hand, was a regular recipient of furious notes restrained by her windshield wiper, accusing her, perhaps correctly, of possessing an incurable form of narcissism based on her consistently lax respect for the lines that separated each parking spot from its neighbors.

As he came near to her, the air between them tightened; she found that her arms were crossed across her stomach with the strictness of a corset, as though she were worried her organs

might melt through the walls of her body, spilling into the parking lot in a gleaming reddish soup. His nearness was deeply threatening. It also woke her up. But he was all business, heading straight for Jojo, and as he scooped the sleeping dog from the backseat he slammed the door shut with his elbow and did the head-tilt nod towards her apartment. Mackenzie finally found her loose housekey in the pocket of her purse and did her best to undizzy herself, to separate from that problematic urge. In the elevator up to her floor they did not speak. Jojo chewed her invisible dream-cud, snuggled with proprietary smugness into Cameron's arms.

Mackenzie hated the apartment. For no really good reason. Though she'd never mention it to Russell or to anyone, for fear of being labeled spoiled, it always made her itchy; the air it contained, no matter how frequently recycled through open windows and sage cleansings and the neverending process of purifiers, was all wrong somehow, charged with particles invisible and bad. She could barely stand it when Russell was home. Alone it was practically unbearable. It created in her all sorts of untenable urges: to scream the dustless, camera-monitored silence away, to sweep the cheap wine glasses from their shelf to the floor with the handle of a broom, to repaint the walls in shades as inscrutable and anxious as the air: chartreuse, violet, blood orange. So, although she was anxious about it, she was basically glad when Cameron accompanied her inside. He placed Jojo carefully in her favorite chair, and in her drugged sleep she repositioned all her gangly legs, tucking them under her curled torso, a nocturnal ouroborous.

The learned urge to host entered her, and she offered him some tea, water, there's some whiskey in the glass decanter on the coffee table even though it's almost breakfast time. He accepted a cup of green tea, leaning over the steam for a second; she recalled with a hitch in her heart the way, when he drained pasta, he would bathe his face in the steam from the sink, claiming it was better than the facemasks she draped fruitlessly across her dry skin every night.

Cameron sat on the floor in front of Jojo's chair and blew on his tea and said, "Russell at the hospital?"

"He's been on overnights for three weeks," she said, "but it's supposed to stop soon. He told me he can put in for a schedule shift, but I think he likes it, actually."

"Gotta suck for you, though," mused Cameron, the teacup babyishly tiny in his big hands, his mustache sheened in the slight residue of hot steam. "Working from home and all, you have to hate that." She did hate it. She knew he knew that. Having lived with Mackenzie for three years, Cameron had a pretty solid internal catalogue of her irritants to consult, confinement topping the list. Cameron was a chameleonic adapter to circumstances; Mackenzie was rigid, pacing, prone to compulsions ranging in severity from tapping her fingers incessantly across any solid surface to three hours of cardio a day, anything to rid her of her lavish, proliferating, seemingly exponential energy.

"It's not that bad," she lied, and saw him not believing her, and saw him looking beyond her head and felt the elevator-drop in her gut. She knew what he was looking at, the only thing on the wall there was to look at. The vision board, half therapeutic homework, half ironic joke, though neither of those things was possible to explain right now. She would have liked to rise abruptly, stride across the floor to it, wrench the corkboard from its hook and throw it off the miserable balcony; she would have loved to watch the magazine cutouts flutter down four stories to the dirty street, melting into puddles of spilled malt liquor and gasoline. All she did was wait for his gaze to shift, for him to finish his tea and leave.

He kissed Jojo on the head when he went out. She thanked him at the door. When enough time had passed she slid open the door, leaned out across the stunted balcony and looked down: his Jeep was entering the choppy stream of traffic between the Taco Bell drive-thru and the

halfway house, and then he was gone, his car just one beater of many in the after-midnight gleam of the city's arteries.

Hours after the thumbtack had been located by a tiny camera on the end of a scope and removed in two parts from the wall of the dog's duodenum, Mackenzie was still marveling at the weird reality of the evening: the way time itself had become tangible for those few arid, endless hours. Faced with the wordless pain of a creature she'd elected to protect, a creature panicky and curled small as though in embarrassment, the bellows of her chest inflating in rapid, shallow beats, Mackenzie had felt the tightness of time settling around her heart, her stomach, her shoulders, in invisible and sticky bands, and though she had been grim and despairing she had also felt herself, with shame and elation, really alive, really in the fucking *moment*, for the first time since the ineradicable anhedonia had descended.

The world was not separated from her by a thick clear sheet; the world was around her, its white-tiled floors and ringing phones, its tired veterinarians with unshaved faces, its cold water released from a hallway cooler into a waxy paper cup of the ecologically unfriendly type she'd thought had been made illegal years ago. In the bathroom she had held her hands under cold water for thirty seconds, then turned the tap as hot as it would go: the burn had felt ridiculously exquisite, reddening her clasped fists with feeling, and in the Windex-streaked mirror she had looked into her own eyes and finally made contact with herself. After Cameron dropped her off, as time unshuffled itself from around her neck in thick ropes and resumed its steady endless happening, Mackenzie sat by the open bedroom window, tasting the heavy air, her hand stilled on the fleshy, hairless part of her dog's tender belly, counting two sets of breath in the fragile, endless stillness of the pre-dawn.

At some point before the sunrise Russell came in, eyebagged and stubbly and haloed in the familiar reek of a Doritos Crunchwrap. Jojo was out, tranquilized and dreaming her rabbit-chasing dreams; Mackenzie was stroking her head and letting crime shows play unseen on her laptop. “How the hell are you awake?” asked Russell, dropping onto the bed beside them, curling around Jojo with an ease he rarely displayed anymore with Mackenzie; the dog had become the receptacle for their deflected emotions, the easy third party to whom love and anger and sadness could be declared in perfect safety.

She considered telling him about her mother’s cancer. He would know about stage two, would comprehend the bladder’s hospitality for tumors; would offer, in a rush, to buy her ticket home. She considered telling him about the vet, about how her foolishness had jeopardized the one pure thing in their lives, had almost dragged them into something dark and irreconcilable. She considered telling him her dismal credit score, the medications she’d been trying and discarding behind his back, the way she felt when she looked at the diamond on her finger: as vacant and malleable and prone to corruption as a government official in a banana republic. She wondered if he’d seen her stupid vision board, its claustrophobic collage of lavish homes and vistas. The overflowing, gilded selfishness of her desires. “Don’t know,” said Mackenzie to the man she planned to marry in four months, as he buried his stupidly handsome face into the dog’s twitching ears and whispered unheard tendernesses. “Couldn’t get to sleep.”