Nobody wants to know where monsters come from. But I know. I am one. It’s a sound-proof room, beige and white, with a door that seals for positive oxygen flow. Monsters come from all around to be born there, in the pure oxygen. Still, the place smells like Vaseline and burnt toast.

Outside the room are six beds, hidden by curtains. There, the nurses put cadaver skin on you because it has nutrients your monster skin needs. The Asian nurse lady, the one who wasn’t afraid, told me that the gray pieces of dead guy she laid on my face felt like cold cuts. “You lucky,” she said, “because we only get handsomest.” When her fingers patted the gauze, I heard a scream. It came from me, a gust from inside, but I couldn’t find where.

She gave me drugs to forget my life before, as a person. But the drugs stopped words from having beginnings and endings, so I got what was in between: giant vowels, jets of breath, sobs when I wasn’t too fuzzy. My mother brought me magazines and my music. I could only put the earphones in one ear, the ear that remained, but music saved me. Movie soundtracks saved me. “Randy, he’s here,” my mother told me. “He’s in the building.” The boy that made me a monster was on another floor, getting saved. I asked the nurse to push as much forgetting into me as she could.

“You going to feel a itch soon,” the Asian nurse lady said. She sat on the side of my bed and showed me, scratching at her face. She had pink lipstick, heavy eye-liner, pretty for no one. She was a hundred years old and every one of those years she’d taken the bus. But her fingers were soft, the only fingers that I allowed. “When you feel itching, you think far away,” she said. “You think favorite place.” I thought of my last night, in the mall parking lot,
and Melissa Carmichael’s lap, Melissa who I barely knew, who never came to see me, good-bye Melissa.

After a week, a baby monster came. She had crawled into a heating vent and got stuck, pressed against hot metal. It’s dangerous to give babies the drugs, but she shrieked so much the doctors gave them anyway. Then she got quiet and I heard, through the curtain, the clicks and the wheeze of a bike pump going all night. At some point, the pump stopped and her mother gasped and wept. Maybe she should’ve fixed the vent. All of a sudden, I was crying too, except it felt like my face was tearing apart, like a paper bag I was done with. That was when my itch came, hot and unrelenting. Next day, the nurses had to tie down my hands.

One day, my mother brought me the newspaper. She put her hand on my arm and said, “He’s dead, Randy. It’s right here.” His high-school portrait, right above the funeral notice. They’d tried lots of things but his heart gave. My mother let the smallest smile happen. I saw every muscle doing its work.

Right after, I told the nurses to stop the drugs. It was time to go home, to remember my life. Except now, like every monster that ever was, I’ve got two arrows in my head: my life going forward to what I want, and my life going backwards, to what made me. These arrows move at the same speed, in different directions, and trying to hold them both in your head will make anybody crazy.

Is a horror story a horror story if the monster tells it?

A row of store-bought superheroes, cowgirls, and witches line up at the entrance of the Rutland Firehouse, waiting to be scared. In the crowded parking lot, adults in parent costumes lean against cars and blow air into their fists. Tonight is Halloween. I have my hair back in a ponytail. My costume is a sign around my neck that says Go Ahead and Stare.

Tombstones lean along the brick firehouse wall like a line of baby teeth. On a branch at the edge of the car lot, a yellowed medical skeleton dangles. One punk comes and snaps the last nob of coccyx. I hear the trees rattle above me, twigs in a pile. Already
this year, the air is a freezer door open to my face, and the cold makes the itch. Heat, sweat, cold, tears, smiling: they all make the itch. When that happens, I have to busy my hands. I press them onto the warm hood of my car, but I’m nervous and my hands won’t heat.

Jess isn’t here yet. Jess will warm things.

“Look at this,” Solvang says. “This one will rock you.”

He flips a playing card onto the hood. For the past three months, over cheese and onion sandwiches at lunch, Solvang has been giving me dispatches about this newest project, a deck of cards he has designed. He works at the printing office next to Kramer Photo and Retouch where I’m at, and he has access to the machines. After hours, he prints them up, each with a disturbing image on the back, gore from the Internet that no one should see: crime scenes, blade accidents, amputees doing stuff. Solvang spent his childhood in the Northern Territories, in a one-room cabin with his parents, backwoods Swedes who taught him that life is about having something to trade. The latest: a girl tucked in the fetal position, lying in soft pink soup.

“Guess,” he says.

“A kid in a big purse,” I say.

“Not even.”

“I don’t even want to know,” says Callie, Solvang’s wife. “Those cards are evil.” With one hand, she forks her fingers into her hair and with the other, she rains glitter. During the day, when she’s not taking care of their baby son, Callie housecleans for a B&B up on the ski mountain. Tonight, she’s a fairy godmother, in a busty silver gown and tiara. She was Wiccan for a while, so she knows how to accessorize. Except her magic wand is just a curtain rod with a tinfoil ball at the end, and I’m getting more of a chalice feel from it. I pinch the foil into star-points.

“That is a python,” he says, “with a girl inside it.”

I go, “I thought that was the other one.”

“That one was an orca,” he says, “with a dude inside it.”
He flips to the next: a Siamese cat crammed inside a bottle, face against the glass. Somebody trimmed its whiskers and it looks so not psyched. “Check it,” he says. “The cat lives in the bottle its whole life. They blow pot smoke in its face to runt it.”

“Bullshit,” I say.

“Some things you want to keep small forever.”

“Can we talk about something else?” Callie interrupts. “Something normal?” Callie hates when Solvang goes on like this. She does not like to get rocked.

A boy in a hospital gown approaches us, trailing his dad. The boy has a bleeding scar on his forehead, pie crust and red coloring dye. It looks carefully worked over and prepared, but to only mild effect. The kid’s mouth parks open.

“Your face looks amazing,” he says to me. “How did you do it?”

His father takes his hand. “He loves horror movies, sorry.”

I lean down to the kid, my cardboard sign dangling. I want him to be able to see up close, no flinching. “ Took me five years to get it like this,” I said.

The kid blinks, confused. His father forces a laugh and then jerks his son toward the line, like what I’ve got might be able to be given.

“So how much longer do we have to wait?” Callie says. “The posters said eight o’clock. It’s been eight o’clock for a year.”

Tonight is Eddie Cosimano’s show—his name was all over the poster (“Horror effects by fx wizard Eddie Cosimano, Rumplestiltskin II, The Witching of Amanda Jane). I’m betting he wants to make an entrance. I know Eddie from high school, nine years ago, when we worked in the audio-visual room, shuttling the TV carts. He loved old movies, where everybody looks like a corpse and the piano tinkles. Right after graduation, Eddie went out to California to work in film, but you have to freeze-frame to catch his name in the credits. Last week, I saw him at Hair We Are, saying that he’d come back to Rutland to “regroup.” One guy. He gets to regroup.
“I’m cold,” Callie says. “ Somebody warm me up.” Solvang rubs her shoulders, then nestles in for a kiss. I still don’t know what that feels like. I so want to know. He screws his lips like he’s drinking from a faucet, like she’s a necessary element and Callie moans a little. I think they do this for me. It’s nice to see love, you know, making.

Just then, a van with tinted windows pulls into the lot, brights in our faces. The line kinks around it, chattering at the arrival. When the driver side door opens, mist billows out to the ground. My heart seizes a bit to know just how far Eddie has taken this. A black boot descends, buckled to the knee, and Eddie steps from the driver’s chair, dressed in an overcoat and cap stenciled with “R II.” His beard has crop circles. He takes a scan of the crowd and then hits the unlock. Here’s where things get interesting, where things get different. The back doors open and a posse of vampire girls stretch their legs and follow. Last to emerge—she was riding the hump—is Jess, the stake in my heart, the answer for everything. Her face is powdered to alabaster. Her eyes and lips, coal black. A charcoal cape doesn’t quite cover her blouse. She wears a plaid, pleated skirt and ripped white leggings. She’s all Catholic School except for two gray fangs. She stumbles a bit, unsure where to go next, until Eddie whisks her inside.

The itch says Careful. My right hand dives in my shirt pocket to make sure the pills haven’t moved. All there, safe and unsound, a handful of white Roofies for the partner of my choosing. No more waiting. Tonight, I’m Jack with the magic beans. Here comes the stalk. Here comes the climb up into the clouds.

Jess stood at the door of Kramer Photo in her remember-me best: a tight blue v-neck sweater, brown hair curtaining around her face, and J.C. on the cross nestled between her Temple Mounts. It was the same outfit she had had on before, in her first negatives. She raked her feathery bangs in the overhead porch light, the only light I left on.

“I’m here for my retakes?” she said.
“You’re an hour late,” I said from the door, giving her my good side. She ran J.C. up and down on his chain. I bet, during tests, she puts him in her mouth.

“Sorry,” Jess said and shrugged. “Student Council.”

For six weeks in the fall, portraits from all over the county flood into Kramer Photo, half the business for the year. October is Yearbook season. I work in the back and out of view, on the color gun, clearing complexions, subtracting zits from the record. You wouldn’t guess, considering, that I am good at this particular fix. But I had the job before the accident, and Kramer kept me on after, and I only got better, got excellent. Nobody else will look as close as I do. I see all the way to the pore. The measly flare, the third-eye keloid, I know them. Our skin is where we’re judged, first and last.

I led Jess upstairs to the studio. The door locked behind her. I had dimmed the lights too much. I slipped on a catalog on the steps and, when I crashed into the handrail, Jess said, long after the point when something needs to be said, “Careful.” Like we’re all out in the world protecting each other.

Kramer and others had already left, so it was exactly us in the studio. I had spent time prepping and figuring how to shade the space. She’d stay under the brights and flashes, and I’d stay behind the lens, in the shelter of the velvet, until she blacked out. The shades were drawn, but the studio felt cool and outdoorsy—that was the “Forest Glade” on the wall, a twelve-foot scrim of birch and fallen leaves. For portrait backgrounds, Kramer offers “Star Field,” “42nd Street,” and “Forest Glade.”

“I made you some coffee,” I said.

Right there on the light table. Extra strong, to mask the dose.

“No thanks,” she said.

“Soda? No soda?” I offered. “Something harder?” I’d already had two shots before her arrival, to quiet the nerves.

But she ignored me. At some point, girls learn they don’t have to answer every question. And like that: my plan, the evening’s
ambition flushed out, the way a print left too long in the developer goes to black. But chemistry is long and good at waiting.

Jess spun around on the portrait stool while I mounted the Leica. Kramer doesn’t do digital; he specializes in large format, big negatives, everything adjustable. This camera is my favorite: brushed metal and cranky. I twisted on the long tube of 90mm, and at that magnification, I went right to her surface. In the camera frame, I noticed her two front teeth had a slot between them for the perfect dime. Her face was a dish of cream. There were bones but they were soft, ready bones, the pillow I might lay my head on. No blemishes—somehow she’d made it that far without scars. I would barely need to use the brush.

“I feel like I’m in a diorama with this forest thing behind me,” she said. “I should be wearing a papoose and holding a spear.”

“Didn’t your form say Forest Glade?” I said.

“I had nothing to do with the form,” she said. “My mother was all about the form.”

I felt a surge of ownership. I didn’t want her known or noticed, possessed by a family. When you come this far, this close, the aperture closes around what you see, and you want to be the only one looking. I tested the flash. The recharging whine rose to the top of the sound register. She asked if we lost other yearbook photos along with hers. I lied.

“I bet a lot of kids want to take theirs again,” she said.

“Sure, but you don’t want to peak when you’re seventeen,” I said. “You don’t want to be forty-five and look at the Rutland High School yearbook like those were the good days.”

“If I’m looking at my yearbook when I’m forty-five…,” she said, “claw out my eyes.”

Then she thought for a moment and took J.C. off her neck and laid him on the light table. A glimpse of her recklessness, a shedding of what she’d been handed. I was gripped. The lightning of decision, what no camera can ever capture.

“Got plans for Halloween?” I asked, burning time. She told me about Eddie’s invitation.
“Is he gay?” she asked. “Because he asked me to be a vampire in his thing and supposedly he’s amazing with make-up.” Suddenly, my plan floated back from oblivion. I’d find her then. Another chance for chemistry.

“He’s not gay, he’s just really into base,” I said. She laughed and it was like she released herself to me.

“Ready?” I said.

The grin is always the hard part, because it has nothing to do with the mouth. It’s all in the eyes. A smile lifted into her face, but it was only in the bottom half, what happens when you live with something. “Thanks,” she said on the way out, taking the stairs two at a time. “Make me look beautiful.”

Inside the Halloween firehouse, the light drops. I make out a long hallway of black-lit paintings and one cheap, low-hanging bat that won’t last the night. Then the hallway opens out onto the kitchen where a kid lies under a sheet on a table. On cue, a chainsaw cranks and Saul Church—the guy who trims everybody’s trees—steps out from behind the door. The sound is deafening, and Solvang covers Callie’s ears. Saul plows through the belly of the screaming kid, sending outrageous spray and guts into the air. Solvang casually picks a piece off his flack jacket. Baked ziti.

The chainsaw quiets and the disemboweled kid dips his hands into the gash to taste it. Saul knocks the side of his head. “Don’t play with your guts, idiot. It ruins it.”

The next room is a non-starter. A pack of ten-year-olds dolled up like zombies—Eddie really went for the coolie labor here—wander around and bump into each other. A pre-teen ghoul in jams clings to us, almost like he’s angling for change. Callie shoves him away, but I corral the kid before he can slink off.

“Where’s Eddie?” I ask.

“Why did she push me?” The kid repaves his bald cap.

“Because you were poking her.”

“I’m supposed to poke,” he says. “Eddie told me to poke.”

“Look, where is he?” I ask.
“On the roof, with everybody else,” he says, and then louder, to Callie. “And don’t push people. Slut.”

We zip through the rest of the building: more kids leaping out from behind chairs, mattresses. The longhair manager from Video King, way too old for the room, proudly wears a Diarrhea Ass costume from Spencer Gifts, leaking all over the place. In the shower, a chick dressed in a white sheet plays a harp. Solvang fixes on her and the girl waves all special. Callie pulls him on.

“Who the hell was that?” she demands.

“I don’t know,” Solvang says.

Callie knocks him on the head with her wand.

“Jesus,” he says. “Your fucking wand fucking hurts.”

Out the back, past the exit, I catch the murmuring up on the roof. A fireman training staircase runs up the back of the building, to the promising noise. Jess has to be up there. When I ask Solvang and Callie if they want to crash the party, they do that couple deciding thing, where she’s looking to see what he wants and he’s looking to see what she wants and it takes five minutes for them to decide that they’re too tired to go out. For once, Callie is game.

“What’s at home?” she says. “Let the babysitter deal.”

The roof is the size of the community pool. There’s a long drinks table, a bowl of cheese doodles, and a boombox on shuffle. Vents and skylights jut up on the moonscape. A dope cloud hangs low over the proceedings. At the other end of the roof, groupies circle Eddie while he boasts the fact that he “made over $1,000 in the first hour.” His jaw chomps and chomps, with some chemistry of his own.

“A thousand bucks?” says a Cupid in flip-flops and an arrow through his neck. “That’s a fuckload of CDs.”

I see Jess, propped up on the edge of the roof, imprinting the lip of a styrofoam cup with her fangs. She looks bored but her pupils are big as volume dials—Eddie must have fit her with black contacts. All the air jets out of my lungs.
“Mr. Randy DiSilva!” Eddie calls out to me. “Buddy, been way too long.” He waves me over and claps me on the back. Then he tilts his head and examines my face as if I’m auditioning.

“What’d you use?” he says. “Latex glue?”

“For what?”

“For this,” he says, running his finger down the left side of his face, eye to his chin. He has no idea.

I shake my head. “No latex.”

“Gelatin?” He asks.

“Glass,” I go. “Some fire.”

I let that sink, but Eddie’s too juiced to follow. He squints.

“Huh?”

Solvang shows up, changing the subject. “So, Randy, is Amanda Jane here?”

“The girl from the stupid movie?” Eddie says. “Oh yeah right, she’s doing Ouija by the keg.”

Solvang, dupe, scans for her. Callie watches him look for this girl, the girl that’s not her, and it pains me. She’s loyal to him the way people get when they start feeding a feral animal, leaving a plate out, expecting the animal to care. Solvang was raised in the woods. He’ll go back there eventually. I know they’re having trouble—Solvang told me that he can’t get it up since he saw her making way for the baby. “I just keep expecting other stuff to keep coming out,” he told me. “It’s your playing cards,” I told him. “They’re rotting you.”

I peel off from Eddie and head to the drinks. I pump two beers into red plastic cups and mash one of the blue pills on the edge of the table. It doesn’t quite powder and it gets in the foam, but I stir it in with a finger. She doesn’t need much. She looks up, blank and unfocused, when I approach. The itch starts up, with the sweat. The itch has marching orders.

“Jess,” I go. “It’s me, the guy who took your portrait the other day.”

“Randy, right?” she says. Maybe the friendliness takes a little too long to shape into her face, but we’ll get there. Her lips don’t
know what to do with the fangs, so they rest on the outside, like a rabbit. “I’m sorry, I can’t see anything. These contacts are driving me nuts.”

“I brought you a beer,” I say. She takes it, she holds it, it goes nowhere near her lips.

“So what’s your costume?”

“I came as normal,” I say. “I came as the Boy Next Door.”

“Oooo…That’s a hard one, that one takes time,” she says. The fingers have been snipped off her gloves. With bluing fingers, she accordions the pleats in her skirt. Her knees are right there, offered through the rips in her leggings. The itch says Start there.

She holds out her hand.

“You want this?” she says. A mint colored pill in her palm, like a fishtank pebble. High-octane delight. “Eddie gave it to me, and told me it was aspirin.”

So I have competition. I take it and flick it off the roof, to the parking lot.

“Eddie’s a liar,” I say. “That’s not aspirin.”

“And he smells like feet,” she says.

“And the movies he’s made are terrible,” I say.

“The movies he’s made aren’t even movies,” she says.

You don’t need to be all that smart. You just have to make the girl feel like she gives off light. Jess grins. So much specialness it distracts me, which is why I never get around to asking how she knows my name.

I’d just ruined the Bronco twins. Two cowlicky bullies from East Rutland who packed rocks and tacks in the center of their snowballs. I saw the princely poses and went: Here are two people who deserve bigger zits. All it took was a little more cherry and less nude in the color gun. When I was done, Kenny Bronco looked like a flaming leper.

So I didn’t notice her at first. I almost passed her prints into the finishing bath. Almost. But then, the way image blooms into a print, I took her in: head pedestalled in a blue sweater, brown hair,
that crucifix nestled. Her skin was trophy golden. She seemed familiar, like a sequel.

And then it wasn’t her face I was seeing. But a face I’ve seen so many times in my head that he’s my Forest Glade. I got to know her brother’s face in the Obituaries. My mother had kept the page for me until after I was out of the hospital and could focus. But my stepfather threw it out to “help” and then my mother had to rescue it from the trash, greased but clear enough. The paper said Eric Denning, 17. He’d started his own lawn-mowing company and was planning, like half of everybody, on getting the hell out of Rutland. I was too, before I became a monster. She and her brother looked like twins: same wide eyes, same forehead as big and friendly as a drive-in screen. Her whole family probably wears a limp J.C. Maybe it did her brother some good.

I went to Kramer’s catalog to confirm what I already knew: the photo in my hand was Jessica Denning. I never knew your brother, Jessica. But five years ago, drunk and bored, he bent time around me. He crossed the yellow line and my life splintered into two.

I took her negatives from the dry cabinet and waited until folks were gone for lunch. It only took a quick run of the Exacto to ribbon the whole run of them. Only the first of things I might do to her. My pulse jumped when Kramer whipped into the room. He dove into the office fridge.

“Mr. Kramer, I think this one is going to need a re-shoot,” I said. “I found a tear in the negative.”

Kramer whistled at the tear. “Well, schedule her for next week,” he said. “She’s all yours.”

Down below, in the firehouse parking lot, a police car pulls up. Siren lights make everybody on the roof wave the air to waft the dope smell which, for about five seconds, seems like an idea. Then they run. The staircase crams. “Welcome to Fuckedville,” Eddie announces to the roof. He hitched his pants, heads to the stairs. “Remember the legend of Edward Cosimano!” he shouts.
“What is it?” Jess asks, blinking. “I can’t see.” Her beer goes to the rooftop. She’ll never drink it now.

“Cops,” I tell her.

“Are you serious?” she says. She tugs her cape in close. “I have college applications.”

Solvang crashes into us, throwing one arm around me. “Hey, you—you should love this guy,” he says to her, drunk and loud. “Randy is ready for love.” I see Solvang punji’d on a stick, like one of his cards.

Callie comes and catches him. “He got in a drinking contest with one of the zombie kids,” she says. “You’ve got to help.”

Jess snaps off her fangs and says, “I’ll come with.”

Suddenly, she’s mine. Sometimes you walk up to a wall and you walk through.

I lope with Solvang around my shoulder, and we work our way down the stairs until we’re ground level. Out front, I can hear Eddie arguing with the cops. He’s making big shapes with his arms. Cars tear out of the lot, nipping past us. I dump Solvang in the backseat of my car. When I turn around, Callie is wiping her mouth with a bit of her gown. There’s a grim puddle at her feet.

“I just vomited,” Callie says, without surprise.

Jess steps around. “I call shotgun.”

We drive in quiet, like the wait for the hidden track. I need to shed Solvang and Callie, but they live over a garage in West Rutland and it’s a drive. As we pull into the driveway, their teenaged babysitter sits on the wooden stairs. She comes right up to the car. “I have been waiting for hours for you jerks,” she goes. “I was supposed to be at a rave at ten.”

Solvang twists out the door and just spills. The babysitter, disgusted, hops on her ten-speed. “The kid’s asleep—if you care,” she says and goes.

For a moment, we just sit there. “I’m pregnant,” Callie goes, into her hands. “I just thought somebody should know.”

Nobody says a word. I walk Solvang back to the house with Callie trailing behind in the silence she made. Their place is a
mess, like the baby is doing the arranging. Life-size cutouts of WWF wrestling guys—Solvang can’t get enough—circle their living room, peopling it with goons. I roll Solvang off onto the bed in the master bedroom. It’s a waterbed, and the wave action sounds like a stomach digesting.

Solvang is a little gray in the lips. He wakes up some and pulls my head toward his, mumbling.

“What?” I ask.

He takes my hand and rests it on his cheery erection. He’s proud. It’s a science project that managed to work after all. He smiles with his eyes closed, my hand on him tenting.

“That’s the proof,” he says, bleary.

“Proof of what?”

“Proof I’m not dead.”

In the kitchen, Callie sits at their tiny kitchen table, a sad young crone. I can hear the flesh on her arm stick to the laminate surface. She plays with her wand, remolds the star-points that have blunted.

“Callie, I’ve got to go,” I say.

She taps her wand once against her belly. “Bing,” she says. “All gone.”

Back at the car, Jess’s working on her eyes, trying to fish out the contacts. She peels back her eyelids and pulls down the passenger mirror. The rip at her knee, I swear, is bigger. She’s opening for me already.

“I can’t get these things out,” she says. “And it’s kind of scaring me.”

“Where am I taking you?” I ask, at the ignition.

She stops for a minute. “Not home,” she says. “Not yet.”

My point exactly.
noonday sun, we got our reflections back. The heat made the itch
so I couldn’t stay lit for long. I pressed my fingers on the left side
of my face to feel out the tender parts. It was all tender parts. My
face looked like somebody fried an egg there and forgot about it.
I looked like something you’d never want to look at.

“So what happened to the other guy?” I heard behind me.

A wraith in jeans and sunglasses sat in one of the folding chairs.
He kicked it back on its rear two legs. He was a treecowboy, one
of the loggers from upstate, compact and lithe. But his face was
a collage. His mouth was small. It was a recovered mouth, the lip
of a pipe.

“Sorry?” I said.

You hit back?”

No answer rose up. I felt like having my minutes in the sun.

“Four years ago, my wife set my house on fire,” he said. “Since
then, I’ve been coming back here. They take pieces of me and
move them around so I can look like everybody else.”

We looked at each other, we only saw the scars.

“I ain’t never going to look like everybody else,” he said.

“Neither will you.”

He banged his chair back to the ground so he could dig
around in his pocket. He found a blister pack of pills. No label or
markings.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty two,” I said.

He tossed the packet at me. “Take some of those.”

“What are they?”

“They’re not for you. They’re for her.”

“For who?”

“For the girl,” he said. “For the partner of your choosing.” I
shake my head and hand the pills back.

“You a virgin?”

“No,” I lied.
“That’s good,” he said. “Because you’re all broke now. Just like me. Just like every person who comes through here. No woman is going to look at you. You’ll see. You’ve got lots of time, lots of time to see what I’m saying. The only kind of sex you can pray to have, kid, from here on out, is a pity fuck.”

Then he must have seen something shift in me. Because he tossed those pills right back.

The Star Mart, it figures, doesn’t have a bathroom for my chemistry. So, with Jess waiting in the car, I end up huddled by the magazine rack, crushing two pills against the shelf. I won’t miss this time. I pour the powder from my hand into the neck of a sports drink and shake it. When I pay, the Indian at the counter gives me a look like: *Strange American*. Behind him, a bank of security camera feeds. There’s one over the magazine rack. He saw everything, says nothing.

Back in the car, I have to help her hands find the bottle—she really can’t see. “Did you have some of this?” she asks, smacking her lips. “The bottle was open.”

The Itch says *Soon*.

“We’re sharing,” I say.

I drive into the barren lot of the Rutland Mid-City Mall, where nobody is looking. It’s a ghost mall. You can look in the windows and see rolls of bad carpet and florescent bulbs, as if everybody knew they had a bad idea to begin with and didn’t want to spend a dime. In the acres of asphalt and lamplight, you feel like you’re parked on the moon. I used to come here, join up with a crowd of smokers on the backside, where we’d turned a piece of the curb into our spot.

“This place is special for me,” I say. It was here that I met this beautiful girl, in a hiking skirt and with scarves on her wrists. Melissa was down from upstate, the only one of us not getting stoned. I lay my head in her lap and I told her about my favorite soundtracks. Oh my god, she combed my hair with her fingers, made me puddle. She loved me in minutes. But then she had to
go, she was staying with a friend. “When can I see you? I have to see you,” I asked and she told me to come back tomorrow but it was more like a promise that we’d get married, except Eric Denning found me first and then I never wanted to see her again. “This is where I last felt like a person,” I say.

Jess takes in the chemistry. Across from the mall sit the rows of vacant downtown shops and apartments, a *This Property Available* sign taped in almost every window.

“My brother wanted to draw comic books,” she says. “I kept all his drawings. He wasn’t very good.”

Wind outside. Paper Halloween ghosts hang from the street lights, but they’re nothing to the one in the car with us. Jess peels the label off the bottle. It’s almost empty. She knows who I am. It only makes me want to push the clock.

“Once I came to visit you, afterwards,” she says. “I was eleven. And I went by myself. I was so scared.” She smears the black around her eye with the back of her hand. “But your mother was there. And she wouldn’t let me in.” Her hand crosses toward me, the tips of her fingers come right up to my face. “I’m sorry,” she says.

I flinch. “Don’t.”

She blinks like it takes energy. She’s already getting slack. I wonder how big a dose I put in there, how long she’s going to be out.

“I’m feeling sick,” she says.

Then she’s gone, pillowed against the door. Her chest rises and falls even and regular, and one wire of saliva moves down the front of her shirt. Her mouth frosts a white cloud on the window that grows as she breathes. Her cell phone rings. And rings. Someone’s looking, someone’s out in the world for her. I undo my seatbelt. It takes some doing, but I press my head where it belongs, into a warm invitation. I want to keep her like this for a long time.