

After my marriage dissolved, I was left with the dogs, which Vincent, my ex, said was fair since I was the one who'd wanted them in the first place. He said I'd wanted the dogs the way a child wants pets, first exuberant and enthusiastic, then my interest in the animals quickly waning when I realized much of dog ownership consisted of scooping shit, hauling home fifty-pound bags of dog food, and constantly using a lint roller on my wardrobe of mostly black clothing. Vincent said it was my fault I was stuck with two dogs instead of one because I had insisted that if we only brought home one dog it would get lonely while we both were at work.

On the day the divorce became official, I was at the dog park a few blocks from the home Vincent and I used to share, which I now shared with only the dogs. I had argued that I should keep the home if I was keeping the dogs since it was ideally situated near the dog park. During our negotiations, Vincent and I had been seated across a wooden table, he with his lawyer on his right side, me with my lawyer on my left side. Vincent's broken right arm was in a sling; it had been seven months since he'd broken it, and instead of healing smoothly, he'd had to have two surgeries, and he blamed me for this. "Fine, Amy, fine, take the house," Vincent had said, waving his good hand dismissively as if I were a haggler at a garage sale, trying to talk him down from fifty cents to a dime for an old record.

At the dog park that day, I kept thinking of the word

divorcée, which was what I officially was. Divorcée, divorcée, I repeated in my mind as Gunner and Rufus ran after the slobber-covered tennis ball I tossed.

"Beautiful dogs," said a man wearing rolled-up dark jeans, a red and black checked flannel shirt, and suspenders. He cradled a Pomeranian in the crook of his left arm. The dog's tongue hung out of the side of its mouth, and its eyes were slightly crossed, and I wondered if these issues were the result of overbreeding. It did not look like the man had any intention of putting the dog on the ground, and I wanted to know why he'd even brought it to the dog park. The man had a mustache with curled up ends as if he were a strongman in a 1920s circus. He was my age, late thirties, too old for the hipster urban lumberjack get-up. "What breeds are they?" he asked, gesturing toward my dogs with the hand that was not full of Pomeranian. Gunner had given up on chasing the tennis ball and had collapsed in a panting heap of gray fur in the shade of a tree. Rufus was attacking the tennis ball vigorously, growling as he gnawed on it.

They were mutts. Pound dogs. Adopted-before-they-could-be-gassed dogs. "That one," I said, pointing at Gunner, "he's a Snuffle Retriever. And the little one, he's a Blue Marmoset Snauzer." I waited for the lumberjack to tell me I was ridiculous.

"Right, right," he said. "I thought so."

"Rare breeds," I said. "Expensive."

"Of course," said the man. He brought a finger to his

face and caressed his mustache. “Rare and expensive,” he echoed.

I read once in a women’s magazine that life has three prongs: your personal life, your work life, and your home life. Home life refers only to your actual abode, not what goes on inside of it. The magazine said that you could only realistically expect to be happy with two prongs of your life at any one point. I wanted to say that at this juncture I was only happy with my home life, but happy wasn’t exactly the word. I possessed a home, but I wasn’t particularly happy in it, mostly because it had fallen into a state of disrepair since Vincent left.

After I got home from talking to the lumberjack at the dog park, I bent to wipe Gunner and Rufus’s muddy feet with paper towels and realized how overwhelmingly my house smelled of wet dog and how everything—including the white carpet—was covered in muddy footprints. I suppose I should admit that some of the footprints belonged to me. Vincent had been the one to clean, had always reminded me to take my shoes off by the door, had somehow kept the carpets the color of fresh snow, had gotten the dirt and footprints off the kitchen tile, had kept the whole place from smelling like drowned dogs.

The phone rang, and caller I.D. displayed a local number I wasn’t familiar with. Rufus howled, as he always did when the phone rang. I thought I must have forgotten another appointment, maybe with the dentist, maybe at the car dealership to get my snow tires on, maybe at the groomer to get Gunner and Rufus haircuts. When I picked up, I was disappointed to learn that it was Arnie Holmes, the Chair of the English Department.

“Amy?” he said. He sounded tired, troubled.

“Is everything okay?” I didn’t really care very much about his well being, but it seemed so strange that he’d

be calling me that I wondered if he was being held at gunpoint in his office, and he could only see my phone number in an open faculty directory on his desk. I imagined his unruly gray hair getting more unruly from stress, transforming itself into an Einstein coif. I pictured the armpit stains spreading on his polyester-blend short sleeve dress shirt.

“Well,” Arnie said, “there’s a bit of an urgent situation.”

“Yes?” I said, feeling a spark of excitement. I was ready to drive to the college, burst into Kellerman Hall holding a shovel, prepared to beat any intruders over the head. Or, if not that, I was ready to summon Public Safety on Arnie’s behalf.

“Sort of an emergency,” Arnie said.

“Yes, yes?”

“You know Morgan Norton?”

I knew Morgan Norton. She was a senior English and Business major, Communications and Pre-Law minor. She loved telling everyone how many majors and minors she had, and she loved telling everyone, especially her professors, how she was such an incredibly busy person. She was a know-it-all, blathering on all the time, espousing her usually wrong theories and ideas. I imagined her holding Arnie hostage, demanding he change her grade from a B- to an A, her eyes bugged out with insanity.

“What’s she done to you?” I said. “Do you need me to come over to the office?”

“Done to me? No, no, you stay put. I’m at home, not at school. It’s just a matter of this conference that she’d like to go to and I was wondering if you’d chaperone. The deadline for registering is today. Morgan just e-mailed me about it. The College requires a faculty member to accompany students on all trips.”

I felt deflated. This was decidedly unexciting.

“The conference is in Vermont, so only a little more than an hour away, an easy trip. Next Thursday and Friday. It’s for editors of undergraduate literary journals. Morgan wants to go with Bennett Belluci. They’re both on the editorial board of *Basilisk*.”

“I know that,” I said. I was their faculty advisor. Morgan and her crew were running the literary journal to the ground because Morgan, the editor-in-chief, always claimed she was too busy to organize any events or solicit work from students in my creative writing classes. Therefore, when the journal came out in May each year, it featured about five of Morgan’s terrible stories, a handful of her equally terrible poems, and a dozen stories and poems from other members of the staff of *Basilisk*.

“The administration would really love it if you’d do it. They’re encouraging us to do things with our students outside the classroom.”

“Do things with our students outside the classroom seems problematically vague, Arnie.”

He ignored my comment, which is what he generally did when I tried to stir up trouble. “Would you be able to drive a van? I mean, with the students in it. You’d have to go through campus van driver training first, but you’ve got a week, so that could perhaps happen.”

I didn’t want to drive a van. I didn’t want Morgan sitting in the passenger seat with a map open on her lap, barking directions at me. I didn’t want Bennett Belluci slumped in the back, taking a nap, like he did during most days of my Introduction to Creative Writing class. I wanted to drive my own car and be free to come and go as I pleased. “I had a bad van experience in college,” I said, even though this wasn’t true. But the man at the dog park had been quick to believe my lie about dog breeds, so I figured I’d try lying to Arnie. “I was in this band and we were touring and . . . bad things happened.” I would

have tried harder with the lie if it was anyone else besides Arnie, but he had very little imagination, which made him the ideal administrator. I imagined him whistling cheerfully over Excel spreadsheets as he figured out our course and classroom assignments each semester. He liked charts, numbers, and order, and sometimes I wondered if he’d have been better off in the Accounting Department than the English Department. Plus, he wouldn’t want to hear a more elaborate lie. He was always quick to depart the room if anyone, especially women, revealed anything about their personal lives, which reminded me of a series of male gym teachers I’d had throughout middle and high school who would excuse any girl from gym who simply clutched her midsection, and said, “Cramps.”

“All right, no van then,” said Arnie. “I think Morgan has her own car. So, yes, you’ll chaperone them? You go in your car, they go in Morgan’s car?”

“Fine,” I said. “But this means I have to cancel my classes and shift around all the assignments on my syllabi.”

“Excellent. But there’s one more crinkle in the plan. We currently don’t have funding for the students to attend. Or for you to attend. Will you put everything on your credit card? You need to book the hotel today too if you want the conference rate. And,” he coughed, “you need to book two rooms for the students. We cannot have a girl and a boy sharing a room. We’ll figure out reimbursement later. I’ll try to squeeze some money from a variety of sources on campus.”

“I am not independently wealthy,” I said. “Also, I believe we’re supposed to refer to them as women and men, not girls and boys. And why should I be working extra hard to make the administration happy when they cut our salaries by seven percent this year?”

“Yes, Amy, I know,” said Arnie. He sighed for a long time and so loudly that Gunner, who’d been resting at my feet, raised his head, alert. “We’ll figure out a way to get you reimbursed, but for now the school can’t front the money.”

“If the school won’t pay me back, will you?” It was unfair to ask, I knew, and I was talking to him more as if he were my father than my department chair, but Arnie always brought out the insolent child in me.

“We’ll figure something out.”

“But I can’t leave my dogs alone overnight. Will you watch them?”

“Oh, I, well, I suppose I . . .”

“I think it’s a fair trade. Two dogs for two students. You have a huge house. And a huge backyard. You could just leave them in your backyard and then have your cleaning lady pick up the poop after I come retrieve them.”

Every year, Arnie threw a department Christmas party at his house. His mansion. The first year I’d been invited to the party, I’d stood there gaping in the living room, looking at the spiral staircase that led upstairs, and Rosemarie Sethi, our postcolonist, sidled up to me and whispered, “His wife’s a lawyer. And he’s got family money.”

“Why is he teaching, then?” I asked.

Rosemarie took a sip of wine and shrugged. “This is the question we all ask about him.”

I heard Arnie clear his throat on the other end of the line. “I could walk them,” he said.

“Walk who?”

“The dogs. Your dogs. I had a dog as a boy. Roger. He was a basset hound. He was slow and too fat, but I loved that old boy. And I’d like to think he loved me too.”

I didn’t know what to say. This was more than Arnie

had ever shared about his life with me. Even during the Christmas parties, his wife was always away, supposedly on business trips, and although there was artwork on the walls of the living room—the only room we were allowed to be in—it didn’t contain any photographs of Arnie or his family. Most of the artwork were paintings of trees. I didn’t even know if Arnie had children, which is maybe something one should know about someone you’ve worked with for four years.

“Arnie, you don’t have any pets right now, do you?” I asked.

“Just a hedgehog,” he said. “But he won’t bother your dogs at all. I’ll keep him in the bedroom.”

I couldn’t deal with imagining Arnie a) in his bedroom, and b) with a hedgehog on his nightstand. And so the only thing I could think of saying before I slammed down the phone was, “I am going to be so fucking pissed if one of my dogs eats your hedgehog and then I have to pay for a trip to the vet on top of everything else.”

The first day of the conference was fine. Or as fine as a conference like that could be. It consisted of seven hours of presentations by undergraduates. Much of the day involved said undergraduates trying to find PowerPoint presentations they’d emailed to themselves, and I liked seeing the subject lines and first sentences of their emails projected on the large screen at the front of the room. Things like “Flush the Toilet on Clinton 2nd Floor, Assholes” to “Party tonight, bring someone hott this time” to “I love you!,” which was followed by this line: “Honey, Dad and I haven’t heard from you in two weeks and we’re a little worried.” Most of the presentations were boring and bumbling, much like the presentations given by the students in my classes who thought it was easy to get up in front of a room full of people and then, once they were

up there, realized it was actually not easy. There was a lot of mumbling and reading from notecards, and there was one boy who presented while balanced on one leg like a flamingo, crutches tucked into both armpits.

The grimy cast on the boy's leg was covered in signatures, and of course the cast reminded me of Vincent's broken arm. I had asked if I could sign Vincent's cast after we'd gotten home from the hospital, and he'd said, "I'm not a child. I don't intend to go around collecting signatures."

I told Vincent that when I was twelve I'd broken my arm falling off a large boulder I'd scrambled up on a Girl Scout camping trip despite my troop leader's warnings that the boulder was slippery. "You should have smelled the cast when it came off after six weeks," I said.

Vincent shook his head. "Well, that's how we're different, isn't it? You broke your arm because of your own lack of discipline and carelessness."

I knew he blamed me for the broken arm. I had talked him into going skydiving with the idea that it might somehow save our marriage, might scare our hearts into beating hard and wildly, might wake us up in some way. I was bored, bored with everything, with us, with our lives, with my job, with the novel I'd been writing for seven years that still wasn't finished or right in any way. We'd been married for six years by that point, and people had given up on asking us if we were going to have children. It was always a possibility, but a possibility for the distant future was how I always thought of it. Vincent's accusations that I was irresponsible and never took anything seriously were not untrue, and I kept thinking, year after year, that I wasn't quite ready for children, and then we were both thirty-seven and it had become more of a time sensitive issue. But I told Vincent that before we could even consider children seriously, we had to do all the fun

things I'd always wanted to do, and Vincent had said, "I think your idea of fun is very different from mine," yet he'd agreed to go skydiving with me.

"If we die," I told him in the plane, "it's good that we'll have left no one behind."

"We have two dogs," Vincent said, and I realized I'd completely forgotten about Gunner and Rufus.

Something went wrong with Vincent's landing, not something with the parachute, but something with Vincent spazzing out and flinging himself onto the ground after his feet had touched land, and that's how his arm broke. At the hospital, we sat in a dark room and he pointed to the X-ray, glowing in an X-ray illuminator, of his broken ulna and radius and said, "It's a metaphor for us. Broken."

"Metaphors are my territory," I said. "Insurance brokers don't get to use metaphors." I smiled at Vincent, but he didn't smile back. He'd wanted me to grow up, had expected it would have happened by now, and it hadn't happened, and he said he was uncertain it ever would.

I was struck by the sound of pencils scratching wildly on notebook paper, and I turned to look at Morgan and Bennett, who were scribbling notes on what the boy with the crutches was presenting on, something about creative nonfiction and how you have to make sure people aren't lying in their essays before you publish them or you could get in big trouble as editors. On the screen was a white slide with only the word **TRUTH** typed on it in large, bold, black letters. I'd never had Morgan in class because she believed she already knew everything she needed to know about creative writing, but I'd never seen Bennett so alert in any of my classes and I had never, once, seen him take notes, never imagined he could write so quickly and vigorously. Crutches Boy said, "Raise your hand if your school offers creative nonfiction classes,"

and Morgan and Bennett sat there, hands not raised, pencils poised to jot down the next thing Crutches had to say about creative nonfiction. "Raise your hands," I hissed. "I teach creative nonfiction. Every fall!" Dutifully, they raised their hands, although the looks on their faces showed they were dubious.

Because Morgan was a senior and Bennett a sophomore, she treated him like a baby, insisting he report his whereabouts to her. During a break from the endless PowerPoints, Bennett stood up, and Morgan said, "Where are you going?"

"Bathroom?"

"Well, you just make sure you're back before the next presentation begins," Morgan said, and Bennett nodded as if it were perfectly acceptable for Morgan to bark at him as if he were her toddler. "Call me if you get lost," said Morgan, her hand over her iPhone.

"God, Morgan," I said, after Bennett left, "the bathroom is right down the hall."

Morgan sighed. "In case you hadn't noticed, Dr. Miller, Bennett is kind of an oaf."

I had, in fact, noticed that Bennett was somewhat oafish. He was one of those boys who'd grown too big too fast, and he was unkempt throughout much of the semester, letting his hair and beard grow until he went home for breaks and was likely forced by his mother to clean himself up. Overall, he presented much like a Saint Bernard, oafish and large, fuzzy but pleasant.

"It doesn't seem nice to call your co-editor an oaf," I said.

"But Dr. Miller, doesn't he remind you of Shrek? I mean, Dr. Miller, just a little bit?"

I hated the Dr. Miller, Dr. Miller, Dr. Miller business with Morgan. If she paid any attention to anything, she'd

know I had an MFA, not a PhD, and I wasn't a doctor. I hated the repetition of my name with an incorrect title attached to it. I was sure she'd read about repeating names in some handbook for junior businesspeople, something about how you ingratiate yourself to people by saying their names over and over.

"I'm sorry, Morgan, but I don't know who Shrek is," I lied. "Is that some football player?"

"Oh, Dr. Miller, no, not at all. He's a movie star."

"Like Brad Pitt?"

"No!" Morgan said, a little too loudly, and some of the non-bathroom goers and non-smokers still remaining in the room during the break turned to look at her. "Dr. Miller, Brad Pitt is handsome. And Benny? Do you think Benny is handsome?"

"Legally, I'm not allowed to answer that question," I said.

"I'm not sure that's true," said Morgan. "You know I'm Pre-Law, right? Along with my Communications minor and my English and Business majors."

"Well, I'm not a lawyer, but I'm just saying you've still got a lot to learn in those pre-law classes. Wait, do you think Bennett is handsome?"

"Oh, I," Morgan said and stopped speaking and her face flushed red.

I saved her from answering by saying, "Look, Shrek's coming back, so let's cease and desist with this conversation."

At lunch, some of the other professors who were at the conference gathered together and others sat with their students, but I wanted to do neither, so I took a paper bag labeled TURKEY CLUB off a table with dozens of bagged lunches and wandered on the campus where the conference was being held until I found a bench behind

the art building. Inside, a handful of students wearing safety glasses were using loud circular saws to cut pieces of wood. I liked the noise, the loud and constant whirring that drowned everything else out.

I'd told Morgan and Bennett that I needed to make a phone call, but that wasn't true. In the past, I would have called Vincent, whispered to him about Morgan and Bennett, the poorly made PowerPoints, the word **TRUTH** hovering over Crutches Boy, but now I could no longer call him to jabber on about unimportant matters. He didn't want to hear from me. I could call and ask how his arm was doing, but I didn't want to bring that up either. When I had agreed to the divorce, I knew there'd be an empty space in our home, but I didn't think of the times when I wanted to call or e-mail Vincent that I'd have to stop myself. I missed Vincent most, it seemed, outside of the house, when I wanted to let him know how the day went, to run some sort of silliness or frustration by him.

I wanted to talk to someone, so I called Arnie's office at school. "Yes?" he said.

"It's Amy. I'm calling about the dogs. Just checking in."

"I have Rufus with me," said Arnie. He laughed, spoke away from the mouthpiece of the phone, and I thought I heard him say, "Good boy, who's a good, good boy?" I couldn't be sure, though, because of the noise of the saws.

"You have Rufus in the office?"

"He's tiny. No one cares. The students like playing with him."

"We're not supposed to have pets in the office. If I knew that wasn't a rule that actually had to be followed, I'd bring in Gunner and keep him under my desk and use him to warm my feet. As you know, the heat doesn't work in my office."

"Gunner is too big," said Arnie. "Come here, baby."

"Where is Gunner? And did you just call Rufus 'baby'?"

"Gunner's at home. Safe and sound. What breed is Rufus, by the way?"

"A Blue Marmoset Snauser."

Arnie was silent for a second. Then I thought I heard him typing something. "There's no such thing, Amy."

"No, you're right. He's the result of the coupling of a Chihuahua and a hedgehog."

"You should know that both dogs have behaved impeccably around Lord Byron."

Again, I wished I could call Vincent, to tell him that not only did Arnie own a hedgehog, but he'd also named him Lord Byron.

"What's going on there?" said Arnie. "What's all that racket? I can barely hear you."

"Oh, that. We're just having a shredding party. We're taking all the literary journals the students brought and we're shredding them. Because they're terrible."

"All of them?" said Arnie. "That's hard to believe."

"Yes, all of them. We're using this conference as a fresh start. A do-over for *Basilisk*. It needs to be built again from the ground up."

"Well, that's good. So this conference worked out then. Aren't you glad you went?"

"Oh, so glad," I said. "So, so glad."

I told Morgan and Bennett that I would drive to dinner, so I picked them up in the lobby of our hotel and walked to my car, a fifteen-year-old Toyota. I had to drive the students to dinner, pay for it, and hope for reimbursement at some point. I watched Morgan closely as she got in the passenger seat, and she seemed disappointed, as if she'd expected something much nicer. Bennett squeezed himself into the back seat, and his puffy hair was squished by the roof.

It was dark already and it was rainy. I got lost getting to the small downtown, looped onto a highway that took me out of Vermont and back into upstate New York for a few miles, and when I got off the highway, I found myself on a dirt road, and there was fog floating near the ground. A few minutes down the road we crossed over a red covered bridge. From the backseat, Bennett said, "This kind of feels like being in a horror movie," but he said it with such a flat affect that I was unsure if he was excited or upset.

There were only a few restaurants in the two-block downtown, so I picked a brewery and only once we were seated I realized I shouldn't order a beer since the college wouldn't reimburse for alcohol, and Morgan was old enough to order alcohol, and the last thing I wanted to do was pay for her beer. Morgan, of course, proceeded to order the lobster macaroni and cheese, the most expensive item on the menu, while Bennett and I both ordered moderately priced sandwiches. I still didn't know if I would get money back for this outing, and I was already out over eight hundred dollars for the registration fees and hotel for the three of us.

"Would anyone mind if I ordered dessert?" Morgan asked when we'd finished our meals.

"That's fine, whatever," said Bennett.

While we waited for Morgan's Baked Alaska to arrive, she leaned toward me and said, "Dr. Miller, I have an important matter to discuss with you."

I looked at the labels on the large silver tanks of beer that were brewing behind Morgan's head. IPA. Porter. Stout. Pumpkin Seasonal. I wanted a beer, but I knew if I ordered one, Morgan would order one too, and I was still committed to keeping her meal under fifty dollars.

"We were thinking of amending our club constitution to say that we won't accept any materials that include

use of illegal substances, sexual situations, or cursing," Morgan said.

"Why would you do that?" I asked.

"Because we're a Catholic school! Because we have good Franciscan values."

I snorted. Yes, we were a Catholic school, and yes, there was a wooden sculpture of Jesus on the cross in every classroom, and yes, there were some friars walking around campus, their brown robes skimming the ground, but mostly we used our Catholicism as a marketing tool. We told parents their children would be offered not only an education of the mind, but a moral education, an education of the soul. These parents, many of whom had sent their children to Catholic schools for their entire lives, were happy to continue to pay good money to continue this education of the soul, but from the stories my students had told me, there was just as much debauchery on our campus as on any campus in the United States, despite the watchful eyes of Jesus above every doorway.

"Morgan, you're in college," I said. "You're not editing a middle school literary journal."

"Yes, but I just don't agree with inappropriate material."

"Maybe you don't personally agree, but have you considered that what you want to do is censorship?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it censorship."

"Then what would you call it?"

"I would call it being selective."

"Bennett, what do you think?" I asked.

"Oh," said Bennett slowly, his eyes moving to Morgan's face. She squinted and her lips drew into a rigid line. Her hand twitched, and I thought she might hit Bennett if he answered incorrectly. "Well," said Bennett, "I guess I can see both sides of the argument."

"People use drugs. They have sex. They curse," I said,

and Morgan's eyes opened wide.

"No," she said.

"No? You're denying that people engage in these activities?"

"I'm not. I'm just saying I don't want to read about these activities. Look, I know where you stand on this, but do you think you could ask the President what he thinks I should do?"

"The president of what?"

"The college. I'm sure he has some thoughts on this. I mean, he's a friar. Could you imagine what would happen if he read the literary journal and saw something scandalous?"

"Actually, I can't imagine the President reading the literary journal at all. I would put down good money on him not even knowing of its existence."

"No," Morgan said again. "I'm certain he reads it. I brought a copy to the friary last May. I slid it under his bedroom door."

"I didn't think students were supposed to go inside the friary," said Bennett. "I mean, the friars live there. It's their home."

"Well, yes, students shouldn't, but the editor-in-chief of the literary journal is a completely different matter," said Morgan, and she shoved a large spoonful of Baked Alaska in her mouth.

After I dropped Morgan and Bennett off at the hotel after dinner, I decided I needed wine. By this point it was a need, not just a want. There was a supermarket down the street from the hotel, and I picked up two small boxes of Malbec. These boxes had twist tops, which meant I could dispense with the corkscrew and drink directly out of the box.

It was only 7pm, and I didn't want to go back to the

hotel and be alone for the hours until I fell asleep. Besides academic conferences, I was never in hotels alone; hotels reminded me of being on trips with Vincent. I liked going on vacation with him, just getting away from everything, seeing new things. Vincent was a planner, loved getting maps, highlighting the path we'd travel with a yellow marker, even though we could leave the directions up to our GPS. He studied too much before we went anywhere, memorizing the ten-day forecast, reading the Yelp reviews of all the most popular restaurants in the area, studying the topography. Throughout these trips he'd bust out facts and statistics about wherever we were visiting, and I would tune him out. Later, I'd inevitably ask him about something he'd already talked about, and he'd say, "Do you ever listen to anything I have to say?" His facts used to annoy me, but now I wished he were beside me in the grocery store, telling me which boxed wine *Consumer Reports* had rated as the best, coming up with a plan for the evening, spouting off facts about the elevation of the Green Mountains.

I walked up and down the aisles of the supermarket, dragging out the time before returning to my room. As I walked, I got an idea. In one aisle, I grabbed a box of Gobstoppers. In the next aisle, there were cheap toys, and I saw a treasure hunting kit, which included a map, a compass, and a magnifying glass. I put the kit in my cart. Then I saw a basket of small plastic moose and placed half a dozen in my cart too.

I returned to my hotel room, drank one box of wine from the container, drove to the covered bridge we'd driven over earlier, set things up, and returned to knock on Morgan's door. She opened the door dressed in flannel pajamas with poodles on them and fluffy white slippers.

"You're going to sleep already?" I said. "It's not even nine."

"The day was exhausting, Dr. Miller." She stood in the doorway blinking at me.

"Do you and Bennett want to go do something with me?"

"Bennett's Skyping with his girlfriend right now."

"Bennett has a girlfriend?"

"I know, can you believe it, Dr. Miller?"

"Well, didn't Shrek eventually find a girlfriend?"

"I thought you didn't know who Shrek was."

"Listen, do you want to go?"

"Go where?"

"On an adventure."

"I don't know, Dr. Miller. We have to get up early tomorrow for the conference."

"Live a little, Morgan."

"I'm in my pajamas. It's not appropriate to go outside in pajamas."

"So change."

"I have homework to do. I don't know if you know, but I have a double major and two minors."

"Why do that to yourself? Why sign up for so much?"

Morgan shrugged. Then she said, "I need to make everyone happy. My mom works for Goldman Sachs and wants me to go to business school after I graduate. My dad's a lawyer. He was an English major, though, and he said lawyers should be able to read and write well. Everyone wants me to follow in their footsteps."

"And what do you want to do?"

Morgan paused. "I have no idea," she said. "I don't know what I'm going to do or what I'm good at. And I'm graduating in a semester. Do you have any advice for me?"

"You'll figure it out," I said, but I knew it was one of the worst things to say. This was the kind of thing clueless adults who didn't remember being young and con-

fused and unsure of the future said to younger people. "So are you coming or what?"

Morgan stared at me for a few seconds. I knew that if nothing else she was curious and then the next day she could boast to Bennett that she'd done something he hadn't done, that she'd been invited out by a professor. "All right, Dr. Miller," she said. "I'll come."

In the car, Morgan asked where we were going. The rain was coming down harder, and one of my wipers squealed each time it passed over the windshield. I'd have to remember to buy a new one at some point.

"Nightclub," I said.

"Oh, no, really? I've never been to one. And I don't think I'm dressed for it. Oh, Dr. Miller, no, we can't do this."

I laughed. "Morgan, look around. What do you see?"

"Trees. Woods."

"Exactly. I was kidding about the nightclub. I don't think there's one for fifty miles. Just calm down." I reached into my pocket and extracted two Gobstoppers from a baggie I'd put them in earlier. I had originally brought the baggie to slip the hotel's TV remote into. It was something Vincent had always done, because he said hotel remotes were some of the most germ-infested objects in the world, but I'd already picked up and used the remote and had forgotten to put the baggie over it when I'd remembered I had one in my suitcase. "Have one of these."

"What is that?"

"It'll calm you down. The street name is Ataraxia."

"Dr. Miller, I don't do drugs. And you shouldn't either, especially not while operating a motor vehicle. You know I'm going to have to tell Dr. Holmes about this when we get back."

“Take one, Morgan. Take the red one. It’s for people who are really uptight. I’m having the green one since I’m already halfway mellow from drinking some wine earlier.”

“Are you driving drunk?” Morgan said. “That’s not safe, especially not on a rainy night.”

I laughed. How would Morgan deal with the world once she graduated? She was so self righteous, so certain of her own correctness, so sure that no one else knew what they were doing. I extended my hand with the red Gobstopper in it. She took the Gobstopper, rolled it around her fingers, and smelled it. She stuck out her tongue and licked it.

“Dr. Miller, this is an Everlasting Gobstopper.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe it’s just packaged to look and taste like a Gobstopper. Eat it and see what happens.”

Morgan rolled down her window and threw the Gobstopper out onto the road.

“Great,” I said. “Do you know how much that one Ataraxia cost?” I wondered if I could take Gobstoppers to the dog park and sell them to the hipster lumberjack or to suburban moms who just wanted an escape from the drudgery of their daily lives, the monotony of cook, clean, bath time, bedtime, repeat.

“Dr. Miller, could you please take me back to the hotel? I don’t want to be in this car with you in your compromised state.”

“Ha! I’m just like one of those characters in the stories you want to censor, right? What’s my next move? What’s my next *crazed* move under the influence of a small box of wine?”

“Dr. Miller, I think you’ve lost your mind.” Morgan grabbed the handle on the passenger side door. “How about you pull over and let me drive?”

“It’s fine. We’re here anyway.” I stopped next to the

covered bridge. Morgan took her phone out of her pocket.

“I don’t have reception,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it. My phone isn’t working out here either.” I could tell she was panicked. I reached into my jacket pocket and withdrew the map from the treasure hunting set I’d gotten at the supermarket. “I found this,” I said. “In my tote bag from the conference. I think someone wanted to let me know there was treasure out here.”

I’d taken the map and wrinkled it up and had drawn a few landmarks on it that I’d seen on my drive, including the covered bridge. I’d ripped off part of the map, which showed an Egyptian pyramid and claimed there was a “tomb of jewels” inside.

“This is a toy,” said Morgan.

“Is it?” I said. “Or is it a map to treasure?”

“Why would they put a map to treasure just in your tote bag, Dr. Miller?”

“Sometimes our job isn’t to ask why,” I said. “Sometimes our job is to seek out adventure when it’s been laid before us.”

“Dr. Miller, I think you’re drunk.”

“Stop it, just stop it, would you, with the Dr. Millers? Enough. Can you just call me Amy?” The car was beginning to fog up from our breath.

“I can’t call you by your first name. You’re a professor.”

“Then just call me ‘Hey, you’ if you need me, just stop with the constant Dr. Miller, okay? Miller’s my husband—my ex-husband’s—last name. I just can’t stand hearing it come out of your mouth every five seconds.” I unbuckled my seatbelt.

“Oh,” Morgan said. “I didn’t know. You’re still wearing your ring.”

“Let’s get out of the car,” I said. “There’s an X on the

treasure map at this bridge.”

I led Morgan inside the covered bridge. Our footsteps echoed in the damp darkness. It felt cooler inside the bridge than it had outside. I could barely see anything, just Morgan’s dark silhouette.

Morgan pulled a small flashlight out of the pocket of her jacket and shone it around the bridge.

“You’re impressively prepared,” I said.

“I’m a Girl Scout,” Morgan said. “I haven’t been able to keep up this year, but maybe after I graduate.”

“Yeah, maybe you can be a full-time adult Girl Scout after graduation,” I said. “Can you get a badge for having the most majors and minors out of any Girl Scout?”

She glared at me. “This is totally creepy. I wish Benny were here. He could at least defend me in case you go completely off the rail.”

“I was once a Girl Scout,” I said.

“Apparently you learned nothing about being a good citizen,” Morgan said.

I laughed. I wondered if Morgan really thought I was going to do something horrible to her, kill her and bury her under the bridge maybe. I wondered if the thought that these were the last moments of her life made her bolder than usual.

I put two Gobstoppers in my mouth and let them clack against my teeth. I held out the bag to Morgan, but she shook her head. “Hey, are you into Bennett?” I asked.

“Benny? No, I, no, I mean, he’s nice and all but he has a girlfriend.”

“And if he didn’t? You’d go for him?”

“It’s not exactly that simple in matters of the heart.”

“No, it’s not. You’re right about that.”

“The thing is, Benny would never go for me. His girlfriend is gorgeous. And look at me.”

“Oh, Morgan, you’re . . .” I swept a hand toward her,

taking in her black North Face jacket, her gray sweatpants with the college’s logo printed up the side, her Uggs. She was perfectly normal and ordinary. She looked like thousands of other twenty-one-year-old girls. Nothing that would make her stand out, nothing bad, really, besides her personality.

“See, now this is where you should be lying. I believe it’s called a white lie and you tell me that I’m not an ogre and it wouldn’t be impossible for Benny to like me.”

“I was just distracted,” I said. “Just thinking of how Bennett could find himself a gorgeous girlfriend.”

Morgan shrugged. “He’s easy to boss around. Some women find that very attractive.”

She stomped to the side of the covered bridge, her steps reverberating. She shined her flashlight up a horizontal beam, and reached up. She pulled down a moose. She stepped a few feet away and pulled down another. She kept going until she’d pulled down all six moose I’d purchased earlier in the evening.

“The meese are a clue to treasure?” said Morgan.

“Is meese the plural of moose? Not moose? Like shrimp is the plural of shrimp?”

“I’m certain it’s meese,” Morgan said.

“I think the moose or meese *are* the treasure.”

Morgan examined a moose under the beam of her flashlight, held it up close to her face in the darkness. “Did you come out here after dinner to put the meese here? Why would you do that? Don’t you have papers to grade or something?”

“I have plenty to do.”

“And instead you do this? What’s wrong with you?” She put the moose on the ground, lined up in a neat row near the side of the bridge, so if any cars drove over the bridge, they would not crush them. I could hear rain falling outside. Morgan’s hair had frizzed from the moisture,

and her words came out with small puffs of smoke.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," I said, and I really didn't. But I was starting to think that maybe Vincent was right, in some ways at least, about my needing to grow up, to take things more seriously. How had I found myself on this dark bridge on a cold night with Morgan Norton? What was I hoping to accomplish here? I was like that hipster lumberjack holding the Pomeranian in the dog park; I was someone ridiculous with no good reason to be where I was.

"I was supposed to call my parents tonight. To let them know I'm okay. They would freak out if they knew I was in the middle of the woods right now," Morgan said.

I thought it was nice, important, to have someone to report in to, someone that cared about your whereabouts. In just a few months, Morgan would be thrust out into the world, and no matter how many majors and minors she had, they wouldn't protect her from how difficult real life could be. Nothing in textbooks and classrooms really prepared people for how to live once you were on your own, once you were done with school.

"Let's go," I said. "You want the moose?" and Morgan shook her head, shined her flashlight beam over them one more time, then clomped toward the car and impatiently pulled at the door handle. "I have to unlock it," I

said. "I don't have automatic doors."

In the car, Morgan shivered, wrapped her arms around her torso. I turned up the heat and we drove away from the bridge and headed back toward paved roads. My arm, the one that I'd broken all those years ago, bothered me and I steered with only the other hand. The arm got sore when it rained hard, when it was damp, as if the bones could remember how once they'd been shattered. I thought about Vincent and his still-healing arm, and I hoped this last surgery would work, that his bones would grow together correctly. I thought about Arnie playing with our dogs—no, my dogs—maybe with them curled up on his bed, warming his feet. I wondered if the dogs would want to come home to me after all the attention Arnie had given them, after Rufus's field trips to campus.

"So all of that, it was really a wild goose chase," said Morgan. She fidgeted with the zipper on her jacket, zipping it up and down, up and down. "A waste of time. Do you know how much homework I have to do?"

The first thing that popped into my mind was wild moose chase, but I didn't say it out loud, I didn't say, "No, Morgan, not a wild goose chase. We went on a wild *moose* chase." Instead, I said something else, something I almost never said, had not ever said to Vincent in the years we were married. Instead, I said, "I'm sorry." 