

One More Story

There is much we disagree on, but not Paris. Rarely do we speak in superlatives. *The best. The most. The happiest.* We are spoiled types, having seen too much of the world, too young. Raised on grass-fed expectations the world has yet to meet. But Paris—Paris, we say, nodding, our shoes striking the cobble stones just a beat apart, is the best city in the world.

We are walking, as we often do, without a destination in mind. There is nothing slated on the agenda beyond mother-daughter bonding, which neither of us know how to translate into actionable items. Turning onto Rue du Montparnasse, we decide to stop at a terrace café that still has a few open tables because it's on the shaded side of the square this hour of afternoon. The awning is green, rimmed with pink and white flowers whose plastic leaves still manage to detach from their stitching, settling into our hair. We brush them away and do not speak to one another, save to remark on passersby who have made questionable fashion choices, or to repeat, for the fortieth time this week, how unreal it still is to be in Paris in the spring. I have seen half a dozen Paris springs, watched the Seine soften from gunmetal gray to a shade that could almost be mistaken for blue each time I return. But nothing will ever match the first time I realized that what I had confused for shrubs all winter in the Jardin de Luxembourg were crocuses, learned that cities, like people, change with the seasons. I envy her fresh pair of eyes. She is falling in love. I don't have the heart to tell her that cities can't love you back.

Not that this ever stopped me from trying. When I return to Paris it feels like a rebound. I'm cheating on New York with my aloof, better-dressed mistress. But Orwell aside, everyone writes about Paris this way, personifies it as the unattainable and uninterested crush, and it is their embarrassment at these one-sided feelings that corners writers wax eloquent about Paris in that distantly admiring way you speak to a lover you think is too good for you, not wanting to scare them away. Really, Paris is a manipulator. You confuse the blossoming of spring as the city opening up to you, mistake choreography as intimacy. My daughter takes a hesitant sip of her tea and tells me she can't believe the semester is already over. She's not ready to leave. There is a part of me that feels guilty for steering her here—she

was torn between Paris and New Zealand—and the selfish part of me thought that if she spent enough time staring into the golden light of this city, her eyes might adjust such that she could see all of the ways I have been stained by it. I tell her it doesn't matter how long she stays here, she would never feel ready to leave. Paris is the best city in the world.

But this Paris I love is a rewritten one. A palimpsest. I try to erase that first draft, the hurried lines and declarations of an overconfident writer, but young love isn't one for writing in pencil; it would rather hold a lighter to the corners of the page. Especially when that love is twice your age and also your professor. Well, advisor. Twenty years ago, I would have insisted there was a big difference between those titles. I still don't believe it was the age gap that was so wrong about our relationship, though it is easier for me now to use words like "taken advantage of" and "victim." But it is hard to assign uncomplicated blame to a man who would lose his breath just looking at me, who asked me what planet I came from, swirling the wine in his glass, he'd never met anyone my age so mature.

I loved him and so I loved Paris. I loved Cameroun, too, for the same reason. I should tell you, that is how we met. I was nineteen and had never left the country. Had never left the gridded farmland of Illinois, either, until moving to the West Coast for college. No one wanted me to leave. My mother most of all; she was a beauty pageant queen with dashed dreams of Hollywood, and from a young age became dependent on the constant attention and validation of others. Male others. By age eight I was signing off on her outfits for the day because she couldn't leave the house without a "second opinion." I think part of the reason I chose to go to California was because I wanted her to take it personally. Studying abroad was just another twist of the knife. My little brother kept saying he wanted to follow me out west. Asked tactless questions about the amount of available floorspace in my dorm and insisted he would grow his hair out when I told him our floor was female-only. I spent fifteen years putting his DVDs back in their cases and cutting his grilled cheeses diagonally while my mother chose an extra shift, an extra "something to take the edge off" over her family. Heaven forbid I ask for a break.

He was the academic director for my university's program in Cameroun. I was a philosophy and government major—studying abroad wasn't so far out of left field. I thought I wanted to do international

development. Leave the world a better place than I found it, and all that brochure-ready liberal arts altruism. I had the French, and also the desire to do something different from what everyone around me was doing. Instead of one semester abroad, I would do two. Instead of Australia and Copenhagen, I would choose Cameroun and Paris. Cameroun because I wanted to go far, far away and it was the most exotic place my undergraduate brain could think of and the financial aid was good. Paris because, well, it was fucking Paris. He thought it sounded like a great plan, my advisor. He had a way of making your choices feel self-authored, even as he guided them, his linen sleeves rolled as he pushed back his oil-black hair. There was a research component to the program and I wanted to write about prostitution and female exploitation. The north was all muslim so the women weren't allowed to be prostitutes, and the east, where most of the prostitution was actually happening, was "too dangerous" for the program to operate there, so I would spend most of the semester in Dschang, a western city close to the capital, Douala, where the program was conveniently headquartered.

I knew to expect the heat and the poverty and the strangeness so it wasn't so much the visuality of Cameroun that surprised me. Each hand-painted road sign and dead-eyed hitchhiker we passed on the bus ride from the airport was confirmation of an image I had already rehearsed. Restaurants carved out of garages and a single traffic light for every town. What did surprise me was the near-suffocating sense of abundance. The picture I'd been given of poverty was one synonymous with scarcity: eczematous deserts and up-turned palms and somber children staring at their feet. But Cameroun is a country of excess. Too much water, too much life. Too much air—the atmosphere is denser here and it felt often like I was swimming through empty space to get from place to place. My host family, the Nanés, kept a small vegetable garden behind their bamboo-walled house, though you would not be able to identify it as such had you not been given a tour. The produce was caged by overgrowth.

I gained twenty pounds that semester. Fifteen of them were from fufu. Madame Nané prepared a massive bowl of the stuff every morning for breakfast and if I didn't finish it, I wouldn't get dinner that night. He said he liked it, that I finally had thighs worth squeezing. Every fifth day there was a market held in the village square, and the merchants who didn't have established stalls would pitch these colorful

beach umbrellas over sacks of onions, rice, peanuts. There was so much food. How could this be a country where one in five were starving? The men stretched beneath the stingy shade of the trees while the women did all the carrying, clay pots stacked sometimes three high on their heads, all without disturbing their foulards. Most days one of the men would leap up from their crate-turned-seat and start waving bags of rust-red spices so close to my face I thought they were trying to hypnotize me the first time it happened. They wanted me to teach their children the alphabet.

We didn't start sleeping together until halfway through the semester which is why I thought it was love. He said he wanted to court me properly. Bought me so many beaded bracelets from the market that my entire forearm was a tan line. Took me on his motorboat into the part of the ocean where the sameness of every direction feels like a bad dream. When he told me we had crossed into Gabon the only reason I believed him was because the sun had dragged itself so far across the sky we must have gone somewhere by then. He loved boundlessness. Didn't like cities because they were too claustrophobic, which I could never understand. In my mind claustrophobia meant the flat, uniform infinity of cornfields. But he loved nature. I almost loved nature because he looked so much healthier in sunlight. In poorly-lit spaces he had the washed-out, sickly skin of white guys who spend too much time in Africa, laughing when people warn them not to drink the water. But movement inflated him until the concave parts of his face had solidity. He told the best stories when we were hiking. He had this way of describing the myth of his adventures while also making you feel like he was a little sad you hadn't been there with him. Even when he was talking about being imprisoned in Mozambique or being told to hide a gun in his pocket at a party in Kosovo you regretted not having tagged along. Later, after hearing how he would recount the adventures we both had shared—the “illegal trespassing” into Gabon we did, or the night we took 21 shots for my 21st birthday—I learned to measure suspicion when it came to believing everything he told me.

The program ended mid-December but he wanted me to stay with him over winter break. I did. Swiss Airlines was generous and let me reroute my flight back home to Zurich. From Zurich I would take a train to Paris. But instead of spending those last few weeks together at his place in Douala I remember only the popcorn ceiling and damp sweat smell of my hospital room. It was probably me, the smell. I had

malaria and was in no position to be bathing myself. I thought I knew something about heat by then, three months in the equatorial jungle, but malaria showed me what it was to burn from the inside-out. At some point I must have gotten better though because I remember entering the train station in Zurich feeling like the future had been installed overnight. I thought time had been warped by my sickness and twenty years had passed, not two weeks, because when had humanity invented this shade of white? I bought a ham sandwich from a store with too many umlauts in the name and they served it to me with a packet of cutlery and condiments. I couldn't believe the luxury. The luxury of sufficiency, not excess.

The first thing I noticed as I left the Gare de Lyon was the cold. I was wearing the only sweater I had, lugging a suitcase filled with tank tops and booty shorts, and for some reason it had not occurred to me until that point that this would be an issue. My mother mailed me a bunch of her clothes from home but I never wore them. Too much cheetah print. I bought two more sweaters from a street vendor along the Seine who also had cigars and Eiffel-Tower-shaped bongos for sale on his blanket and rotated between my ensemble until April. They were always confused by my accent, the French. Couldn't figure out where I was from—I had all the sloppy liaisons and improper conjugations of an American, a refusal to use the subjunctive, but with the musical cadence of West African French. When I told them I'd spent the past four months in Cameroun, they furrowed their brows with such force they looked like emaciated caterpillars (it was the early 2000s—everyone wanted brows thinner than Paris Hilton). *Why would you go there?* They said.

Believe it or not, I lost all the weight in Paris. My boyfriend wasn't around enough to unravel my self-conscious spiraling. He was on sabbatical that semester and would visit every month or so. Everyone else in the program was buying youth rail passes to gallivant around Europe like you're supposed to do when you study abroad, but I chose him at every juncture. Didn't go to class the weeks he was visiting. And when he wasn't there I would walk. I lived in the dix-septième. One of the wealthier arrondissements, which meant it was quieter, even as the streets widened. These grand, empty boulevards with narrow stretches of park running between the lanes. I would walk them up and down, up and down, because to turn onto one of the commercial avenues meant being tempted by the boulangerie display

cases. Every third store in Paris is a boulangerie, I swear. Sometimes the smell would be enough to satiate. Butter so dense and rich the air seemed chewable. On days I trusted myself, having woken up feeling that sudden allegiance to a better version of yourself you might just be “someday,” I would turn onto a curling *rue* where cars might’ve been allowed, had it not been clogged with pedestrians, and walk beneath a rainbow of awnings, taking pride at every pastry I turned my nose at. Sacrifice beauty, for that hunk of greasy bread?

I was surprised by how little else there is to do in Paris besides eat, drink, and walk. Sure, there’s all the magnificent art, but it too is best enjoyed on foot at a slow drift through a museum. Beyond the monuments, the postcard attractions in Paris are the neighborhoods themselves—Montmartre, Le Quartier Latin, all the beautiful jardins. If you have money, I suppose there is the shopping too. But I was broke. Buying eggs in batches of fifty for a discount at Lidl. Wearing the same faux-leather boots day in and day out, until the stains layered into something almost iridescent, like an impressionist painting of an oil slick. I read that novel which staged Paris as a never-ending visual feast, a conveyor belt of street performers and curiosities and tucked alleyways. I tried to find a Paris that wasn’t already claimed by the books and movies, so I strayed from Rue de Rivoli onto Pavée and Seigné, took the metro up to Belleville since they thought it was dangerous in the ‘90s, but I was too scared to risk anything past Saint Denis.

I wonder now how there could have been so much to think about. Entire days given over to walking—what possibly could have filled out thoughts? Or maybe the point was that the city did the thinking for us; my mind was a hotel room and the day’s sights passing visitors. But metaphor oversimplifies. In a selfish city like Paris I was conditioned to think greatly about our futures and identities. For most of my youth I split myself between ambition and desirability. I could hear the sound my high heels would make on Wall Street but knew money meant nothing if you didn’t have men to inferiorize it with. I told myself I was different from the other young women always failing the Bechdel test because I couldn’t be boy-crazy if I only wanted older men. When my boyfriend wasn’t in Paris it felt like only half of me was in my body at any given moment. He had quietly directed so much of my life, was the one who suggested I could work at the UN someday. I supplied the ambition but he channeled it.

Alone in Paris I had no direction. I thought I was too cool for the other kids in my program because I'd lived in a part of the world they only knew from documentary clips, that I knew something about poverty and cruelty and desperation. I didn't go on our program's trip to Versailles in protest of the opulence. Alla didn't go either—she was my only friend in the program, bonded by a shared dislike of our cigarette-wielding, Vuitton-crazed peers. We didn't want to be tourists in this city but we didn't want to be Parisian either, and so our identities were like black-out poetry, given meaning by omission. There were times while walking when we would come to an intersection or roundabout or some other irrational product of a city whose streets were laid out before the automobile, and we could not decide which way to turn; we would stand there, suspended, drawn and quartered by the pull of each direction, until some kind *jeune homme* came up to us asking if we needed *l'aide*.

I never accepted. My professors were worried. They'd heard from the program office in California that I was a model student—an avid participant in class, perfect attendance, spotless transcript, apart from the C in calculus. But here I was arriving halfway through class and submitting first drafts as final ones. I received emails that trailed off in ellipses, would be told to stay after class where a professor would ask, head tilted with rehearsed empathy, if “there was anything I wanted to talk to them about.” These were the only English words I ever heard out of my professors' mouths. I remember one day after class Alla told me she had a surprise for me. She wouldn't say what it was, and even though she avoided my eyes, I could tell there was a spark in hers. Alla is the type of person who gets nervous about the things she is excited for, so her words often don't match her face. Her grand idea was to split an entire bottle of champagne and go to the hamman and let the old Turkish ladies scrub us so raw we shed our problems with our dead skin. In the steam room she asked me if he made me happy. I couldn't give her an answer.

My host family liked to call me bipolar. The Pradeaus were French in the archetypical way. Roasted *lapin* for dinner, placed an ashtray on every flat surface of the apartment. Bread was their utensil of choice, and they'd leave it out on the counter until it got so hard you got a free tooth massage along with your snack. They didn't know about the boyfriend. At first they didn't know about the boyfriend but

then he got stuck in the elevator. He usually would rent a hotel room during his stays, and I'd tell the Pradeaus that I was going on a "cultural immersion" trip with my program. But he was feeling cheap this time and thought he could pull off staying with me unnoticed. The Pradeau's apartment was one of the traditional Haussmannian types, and while it didn't dare compromise its lutetian limestone with a fire escape, it did have an elevator, which my boyfriend took instead of the stairs. We were on the seventh floor, after all. The only reason I took the stairs was to burn calories. During the evening the Pradeaus liked to open a bottle of red and gossip on the terrace about the moral decline of the youth, which meant I could sneak him into the room. On the third day of his visit it started drizzling and they came in while we were halfway across the kitchen, and he had to hide behind the open refrigerator door, which I pretended to be deeply invested in. They didn't seem surprised that I was itching for a late night snack so soon after our herbed duck. Madame Pradeau also liked to call me *cochon*. Thought I should play tennis.

But on the last day of his trip, when the elevator stopped moving between the fourth and fifth floors, there was no plausible way out. Madame Pradeau was the only one with the number of the building superintendent—she didn't even let Monsieur Pradeau have it, since she liked to insist he be responsible for household maintenance. I told her that I'd invited one of my professors over for a drink to talk about his latest book. I figured maybe this wouldn't seem completely inappropriate in France. She laughed at me, in the airy but cutting way every Parisian comes into the world pre-equipped with. "Ah. Your professor works late," she said. When we went out to the elevator, all she had to do was press the button for it to come, and it came.

That spring break he took me to Thailand. He took me a lot of places that semester—London, Amsterdam, Copenhagen—but these were always day trips. In Thailand we had a week. We started in Bangkok, then hopped from Koh Samui to Koh Tao. It was my first time in Asia. First time somewhere tropical. Cameroun is technically classified as having a tropical climate, though the climate shifts spontaneously from region to region and the wet season lasts most of the year. But the rainforests of Cameroun are thick and smothering. This is not laze-around-on-the-beach heat. It's invasive, groping and feeling. A lazy heat, eager for touch, and never without the company of sound. What surprised me most

about Thailand was how quiet it was. Sure, there is the nightly chorus of Cicadas, but in Cameroun the heat is loud 24/7. It fills all available space. It settled into my skin and I've never been able to fully wash it out, like freckles after a bad sunburn. There were nights in Paris when I woke starfished on top of the sheets, duvet kicked to the floor, doused in sweat even though it was the middle of winter and the heat in my room liked to work the same schedules Parisians did.

Places die differently in different corners of the Earth. There is a permission granted to the dying in what we used to call the third world. In Cameroun and Thailand, abandoned infrastructure can wither and rust; it is not reborn as a symbol of the past. You can't drive five minutes in these countries without passing a mechanical graveyard of car hoods and metal scraps, tires bathing in pools of mud. These are towns that are eaten by their history, conquered from within like cancer. In Paris, the dying must also be beautiful. Raised scars of ivy along the façade, old bicycles painted to become street art. In Africa, age is neglect; in Europe, it is care. Preservation. The severed part of a one-armed sculpture is buffed into brightness and the tombs at the Panthéon look power-washed. When my daughter tells me Paris has ruined her, she can no longer see herself living in America—she needs to live in a place with history—I scoff, and think, *what do you know about places with history?*

This is not to say I distrust conservation. I love museums. Alla did, too, and she often joined me while visiting a new one each week. We loved seeing the world a different way, if only for a few seconds, trying on a new pair of eyes for the duration with which we were engaging with a certain piece of art. Museums are static beauty. Plastic flowers set on uncomfortable-looking old chairs so you don't sit on them. A way for us to access emotion in a curated, intentional way. This is also why we loved performances. We liked to think we were being changed by something in a way that was contained. We also liked to flatter ourselves as unusually cultured for our age. As a tour group of white-haired, scarf-donning Italians passed, fumbling with the volume on their audioguides, we joked about being the only visitors under middle age at the museum of the Middle Ages. The problem is, in France, museums are considered part of a child's life curriculum, so we passed two school groups in the courtyard and had

to revise our declaration. But what do any of these people know about art, we thought. Only we possess the patience and sensitivity to truly appreciate what hangs before us.

I wish I could say that Paris left a mark on me in the same way I check my skin after each museum I visit, hoping some of the paint rubbed off on me. But all I can observe with certainty is that I started wearing more leopard print and stopped hating jazz. It is hard to sift what from Paris in particular changed me, because its edges are fused with the before and after, of Cameroun and, well, Cameroun. He wanted to spend the last few weeks of the summer in Douala but first, he had a grand vision of a transcontinental roadtrip across the United States. We'd live out of his car and see all the sights we threw out like skipping stones in those dissolving hours of half-sleep. Even though I hated camping, I said I'd join him. We thought the grand takeaway of a year abroad was to be more open to new experiences. Plus, I did not want to return to a place that time and distance had made impossible to call home—that shoddy one-story home in the cornfields, my mother telling the same joke about how I need a neck brace, the weight of my ego must surely be hurting my neck by now. I did not feel like babysitting my brothers, two adult men who were still scared of driving on the highway and our toaster. The only complicating factor in this decision was the money. He said he would pay for everything. He paid for Thailand, London, all our trips, after all. I liked being spoiled but I did not like feeling obligated. These days I structure my life such that I never have any debts. I think part of the reason I stayed with him so long was because I felt a responsibility to; he gave me the world, all too literally, and the least I could do was give him a blank slate.

This is how I justify everything that came after. That summer I learned there was more to the United States than fly fishing and swinging sadly on a porch. We did the Boundary Waters in Minnesota first. We went to South Dakota. We saw the Badlands; we saw Mount Rushmore. We went to the Grand Tetons and hiked the Crest Trail. We ran out of things to talk about. This didn't seem to bother him, though. It was like he was having a silent conversation with nature the whole time. Sometimes even though two people are speaking a foreign language you can still tell when they are laughing at you. There were moments when the landscape would stun me into silence, but most of the time I was nursing a sour

resentment at failing to be what he wanted from me. I couldn't make myself shit in the woods and I never stopped squealing when I saw a bug that was too long, too hairy, or too legged. I think there was a part of the part of me that was in love with him that fell in love with Paris and couldn't learn to love another place in quite the same way. I shed my snake skin on Rue Daguerre and every time I return I hallucinate scales in the cobblestone.

We ended our tour in the big N-Y-C and took a flight from JFK to Douala. Returning to Cameroun was like rereading your favorite book from childhood. The prose is clunkier than you remember, the characters flat, and you find the whole experience a disappointment of memory and expectation. I should amend my earlier assertion that Paris didn't change me—if anything it ruined me for the world. I could no longer stomach the texture of fufu. A guilt flowered in my ribs when I moved through the market aware of how much more I had seen than everyone around me, the luxuries I got to narrativize that they had never bothered imagining. I couldn't play the poor, uncultured, naïve American from Illinois anymore.

I didn't tell the Nanés I was back in town, but they found out anyway. At dinner I couldn't help but stare at Madame Nané, who had a thick scar along the seam from the corner of her mouth to her mid-cheek. Looked like her face was fixed in perpetual smirk. A gardening accident. When I first met Madame Nané I thought she was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen. The spacing between her eyes was so perfect you felt seen with an unsettling but joyous totality when she looked at you head on. But the scar killed the effect; it was like one wrong note ruining the whole chord. She told me I'd gotten too skinny and fed me four servings of *ndolé*.

I made my boyfriend come with me to the dinner. I knew Madame Nané had a good sense for people and something about the prescription with which I looked at him had changed that summer. I didn't like the way he ate granola bars in two bites and laughed too hard at his own jokes. While we were cleaning the dishes she gave me a look and said I should be careful about who I surround myself with. You never know when they will end up being all you have. I am arbitrarily selective about heeding the advice I receive.

There aren't a lot of days in my life I can assign a weekday to, but it was Monday when he asked if I wanted to join him for dinner on his boat. I remember thinking the invitation was strange; his romantic gestures tended to cluster on weekends. He wasn't much of a cook, the kind of man who happened to have a woman around to take care of him, but he lit up telling me about the whole pig he'd bought at the market that day, and the apples he was going to stuff in its mouth. His boat was a cramped, sputtering shape of metal and I was confused how a whole spit and fire was going to be accommodated. Wasn't that a safety hazard, anyway? My confusion lifted when it became clear he was taking us to an island. In the gaping dusk the coastline looked like a cat's back arched over the water. Knotted fur. The pig's hind legs got caught in the railing when he tried to lift it. Darkness always had a way of softening his features, wiped away ten years from beneath his eyes, around his mouth. When he finally freed the pig from the railing he smiled at me with an embarrassed but self-satisfied victory. He looked so boyish that night.

It took so long to get the fire going that looking at it hurt my eyes when it first erupted, my pupils had adjusted so totally to the dark. We were on a narrow strip of beach, and I'd dug a constellation of holes with the heel of my sneakers. It had rained all day and the sky was still clouded over, but the embers rising from the fire almost looked like stars. Neither of us knew how long to roast a pig for, especially since our fire kept teasing us on its deathbed, and we didn't want to undercook it, having both contracted our fair share of diseases in this country. When we took it off the spit to transfer it to a sheet of aluminum my boyfriend had laid over a cooler, the flesh looked like obsidian; it had a glassy shine to it, which I didn't expect. At home I am a vegetarian, which I had to put on pause for my semester in Cameroun. In Paris I only had meat when the Pradeaus prepared it, which was every meal we ate together. But seven years of not eating flesh marks you in a way that leaves a shadow even once it is erased. After the second bite of pig shoulder (he had wanted to try the ribs first, but the carving technique was too complicated) I started to cry, and had to pretend it was because I was choking. My boyfriend thought this was funny. I couldn't eat any more and even after wiping my hands on my skirt twenty times I still could feel the grease on my fingers when I rubbed them against my palm. But my boyfriend didn't notice that I'd stopped eating. He had started telling me a story, about the boat trips he and his father used to go on

during his oh-so-nostalgic youth, and when my boyfriend told stories he directed his words at an audience that was sitting above and slightly to the left of you, the balcony rows. These are his fondest childhood memories, he told me. When he has a son he wants to share this joy of enclosed and stagnant water with them, too.

I'd never seen him so animated, so full of life. Ten years later I found him on Facebook and he looked infirm. Like a partially deflated bouncy castle: wrinkled, sad, and sagging a little to the side. Turns out he'd contracted malaria again, then yellow fever. He spent most of that decade in Cameroun. Before I clicked on his profile I had braced myself for a forgotten shard of love to emerge, shrapnel from a bullet wound that your body heals around instead of ejecting, but even as I kept zooming closer into the photos on his page, wondering if the baldness was voluntary, there was no sensation remotely akin to regret, remorse, or love. If anything, I was disappointed at the nothingness that I felt. But that night on the beach I do remember a feeling: the second chord of disenchantment. I could not tell you why I said yes.

To my friends, to my parents, and much, much later, to my daughter, I would explain my reasoning in logical and calculated terms. We were on an uninhabited island with no way to escape beyond the vessel he had brought us there on. I was tired and cold and still a little feverish. I was young and in love. I don't like to replay the memory, but I pop it from the casing often enough that I might have scratched the reflective side, and I don't fully trust the fear in my gut memory suggests existed that night. I think I placed it there sometime afterward. My mother is the superstitious type who says "bread and butter" when you split the pole and believes good things come in threes, which is why she divorced her third husband. Watching her wipe tears with the paper wrapping of a straw at the diner she broke the news to us at, I swore I would never get married. The truth is that I am embarrassed by the possibility I might have loved him enough to forget this vow. It is this embarrassment that kept me from telling my daughter this story for twenty years. But feelings are dissolvable where action is sturdy, and what I do know for certain is that after he stood, brushing the sand from his left knee but missing most of his calf, I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed it and said yes, yes, yes.

We don't give hindsight enough credit for its sense of humor. All those nights I spent sweating my white tank top gray in our room, the fan angled to his back but not mine, still insisting he wrap his arm around me even though the limb seared my torso. I kept asking him when we were going to get married and he would get annoyed with me. I was worried that once we got back to campus the normalcy of it would shock him into realizing what he'd done, and he'd call off the wedding. I thought solidifying the details now would prevent this. But all it did was teach me that my fiancé liked to pick at the calluses on his fingertips when he was angry.

I was right that returning to campus would lift a veil from our love, expose the machinery inside the magic. I didn't realize that it would be me who snapped back to reality first. It helped to be told, at every 2 p.m. dining hall breakfast and leisurely walk between classes, that I was crazy. That he was crazier, for proposing to a girl who still had her wisdom teeth. The problem with choruses is that when they're all singing the same song, it becomes too easy to ignore them as a singular identity. I had a ring on my finger the entire four months of my senior fall. Had I not attended a debate tournament in Los Angeles and fallen for my opponent, I can't say with certainty that I would have ever taken it off.

I hate to say that it was another man who made me change my mind. It sounds pathetic. I've spent the past two decades building my identity as a career woman, a need-no-one boss lady who corrected people who used "Mrs." After I had my daughter I swore I'd never get married. But all my life—since sixth grade, at least—I've never gone two months without a boyfriend, and I can't remember the last Valentines Day I didn't receive flowers. He was a red-head, the debate guy. He wasn't even competing in the tournament; he was the coach for the opposing team. A PhD student. We hooked up a few times over the course of the weekend, and the following two weeks. Los Angeles isn't very far from Claremont. It sounds stupid to say now but it didn't feel like cheating because my fiancé was so far away—he left for Cameroun midway through the semester. How can you cheat on someone who has so much power over you? It was my way of evening the scales. A month later I was throwing up into the compost bin at the dining hall and two red lines extended off the test, train tracks leading away from the future I had imagined for myself.

I am unable to give a satisfying answer as to why I kept the child. I had made the decision before I told my fiancé, who insisted it was his and said I had no right to kill his son, even though I knew the timing didn't line up. He left campus in October. This was January. I told him about the debate tournament and he said he didn't care. He didn't think things were exclusive until that summer, anyways. I do not want to admit that it was this line, that stinging jealousy, that convinced me to end it. I wish it was more complicated. It was more complicated. I could tell by the contours of his anger that he would make a terrible father. I called off the engagement and let him sling a few verbal shots before hanging up the phone. This was after I got him to write my Fulbright recommendation letter, of course.

Besides, he wanted a son, and I knew she was a girl. I still believe that mothers-to-be are faking it at gender reveal parties—you can't be growing something inside you and not know the shape of it. All of my friends thought I should get an abortion. This was advice they didn't bother to be subtle about, reserved for whispering tones and forgotten campus benches. I'd be coming out of office hours and whoever was waiting to go in after me would eye my stomach and say something akin to, *you're throwing away your life*. But I'd already had one abortion. Eighteen. I didn't think it was the kind of thing you did twice in life. There was more to my decision than guilt, though. I liked the independence. Here I was, creating this *thing* entirely by myself, with no help from anyone. I wanted to prove to myself and to the world that I could raise a child alone, which is why I never told her father. I don't believe in regret, but even if I did, there is no alternate universe in which some three-armed, eight-foot version of me regrets creating my daughter.

I went back to Illinois that summer. No one wanted to hire a college graduate six months pregnant. My ex-fiancé didn't have my home phone so he called Alla instead. Crying, begging her to ask me to take him back. Saying he didn't care if the child wasn't his, he would love it like his own. I would be lying if I said there weren't nights I didn't imagine him next to me, running a hand over my stomach. The main reason I didn't take him back, if I must be honest, was because Alla was the middleman, my buffer—I'd have to admit to her my failure, first. When I look back on these months of my life I can smell

them; guilt has base notes of orange peel and burning rubber. The Stop & Shop ran out of Chunky Monkey ice cream. My mother would only look at me when I was underneath a blanket.

I'll let myself feel guilty but I won't let myself regret. When my daughter opened her eyes they were blue as the California ocean; that is to say, a murky green-blue with flecks of gray, but she is the first of our family tree to wear such a color. My ex-fiancé's eyes were blacker than his pupils. It gave him the look of a hunting owl. Over the years those flecks have been absorbed by her irises and now the color is a matte steel blue. It matches the faded porcelain of her tea cup. I learned in Paris that it's not the eyes that betray when a person is in love, it's their mouth. We're both not saying anything to each other but there's a smile that won't leave the corners of our lips, curved like dried petals. Combined, we understand maybe eighty percent of what is being spoken around us. No matter how many times we return or how long we stay we will be outsiders. A hasty waiter nearly knocks over the vase containing a singular tulip on our table with his elbow. The sun in Paris sets deceptively late this time of year, so it always feels like there's time for one more story. I think my daughter would like to know this one.