(7) Plus and Minus

by Nathaniel Bellows

Nan felt different—like she had the flu; leaden, sluggish, but with a clear head, a sense of clarity that told her unquestionably: *something's wrong.* She was never the kind of person who was constantly wondering if she was dying—or the kind that was always waiting for evidence that her death was imminent. She'd had a roommate like that in college once who, upon the first sign of a headache or a ringing ear, would instantly assume she had a brain tumor or an aneurism, and would start saying her goodbyes. (The girl had been starving herself for years, so Nan always figured she was just hungry.) For Nan, the idea of dying young, dying suddenly, wasn't something she took lightly: when she was a senior in high school, her older brother had drowned while skating on the river near their house. All their lives they had been so close, so in-tune, that the tragedy of his passing brought with it an odd kind of resolve: she no longer feared dying herself. It was life that had always scared Nan the most—living.

So, in the beginning of July, when she realized her period was late, and she started feeling ill, the thought that she might be pregnant made her more terrified than she'd ever been in her life.

She bought two pregnancy tests, at two different drug stores, five blocks apart, and took one on Monday and the other on Wednesday. On Monday, the test's result was *plus*. On Wednesday, she sat on the bathroom floor and, through squinted eyes, peered into the wand's little plastic window: *minus*. They were in disagreement. She closed her eyes and shuffled the sticks in her hands, then laid them face down on the cool tiled floor. She placed an index finger on each one, assigning them the names of her conspirators: on the right, Albert, her boyfriend of barely more than a month; and on the left, Professor Paulson, her advisor—*ex-advisor*—from college.

Nan put the wands in the medicine cabinet and went up to campus to pick up her paycheck at the language lab where she'd

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worked since she was an undergrad, and to make an appointment at the health center. On the way back home, she stopped by the library to see if Albert was in his carrel. She had no plans to tell him anything. She had no plans to do anything at all—only to try her best to calm the rising sense of dread that ballooned, like bread dough, just beneath her belt buckle.

She took the elevator up to the top floor of the library and saw the light on under Albert's carrel door. Before knocking, she took a deep breath, looking at her shadowy reflection in the frosted glass of the door. *I look the same*, she thought. *I am the same*. *Nothing has changed.*

Minus.

She rapped quietly and, hearing no response, opened the door a crack to see not Albert, but his carrel-mate, Peter, hunched over his laptop, staring at the screen. She could hear classical piano music, tinny and insistent, through his earphones from across the room. She quietly turned to leave when he looked over at her.

“Hey!” he shouted over the music, smiling. “Come in! Come in!”

He ripped out his earphones and stood up, toppling a pile of photographs, their protective vellum sheets sliding over the dusty tiled floor.

Nan peered down at the images—old, daguerreotype portraits of stern, ghostly faces, turned in profile or staring accusingly out from inky black backgrounds. Peter got down on the floor and began to collect the pictures.

“Aw, shit,” he said, inspecting a scratch across one image. “Well,” he smiled up at her, “they're just a reproduction. And besides, it's not like this person can get any more miserable looking.”

He held up the picture for her to see. It was of an old woman in a black coat and a high white color that seemed to glow at the base of her bleak-looking face. Seeing the woman's expression, Nan felt like she could be looking in the mirror.

Peter pulled himself up off the floor. He was a large man, sturdy and broad; he reminded her of a bear—a circus bear, with his

tapered face, small, almost-black eyes, and his penchant for wearing sweater vests that were always a size or two too small.

“As you can see, Albert's not here,” he said, settling himself back in his chair. “He's meeting with his thesis advisor right now, which I'm sure you know he's been *dreading*. The plan is to meet for drinks at happy hour to get the full report. But I assume you know that, too.”

Nan had known that Albert was dreading the meeting—he had yet to find a suitable topic for his dissertation, and time was running out, as his advisor was returning to France in a week. But she hadn't known about happy hour, and the idea that this, or any foreseeable hour in her near future could be considered happy, made her stomach hurt even more.

Peter began to close his computer, but then stopped, leaving it halfway open.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I don't want to disturb you.”

“No!” he said, closing it with a snap. “Please. I appreciate the distraction. I *need* the distraction. I cancelled my class this afternoon just so that I could work on this ridiculous conference paper I have to give in Maryland next week.”

He gestured to Albert's empty desk chair, which Nan sat down in. She always felt at a loss talking to Peter, or to his girlfriend Mary, who was getting her doctorate in Psychology, and sometimes even to Albert. Though they never seemed to intentionally make her feel it, the specter of their academic prowess seemed to loom over every interaction, and Nan's BA in English, so recently earned, so unproven in its relevance, felt measly and thin—like a coupon for only the generic brand items in a store.

“I'm actually glad you stopped by,” said Peter, grinning. “Because I wanted to tell you that I read your short story in *Verbiage* and I thought it was fantastic!”

He folded his arms across his chest and tightened them, as if to emphasize the completeness of his opinion.

“Thank you,” she said, trying to mask her surprise. “Thank you for reading it.”

“Of course I was going to read it!” he said. “It was completely transporting. I really felt like I was *there*—in those meadows, in that forest, on the banks of that river...”

Nan smiled at him, fully disarmed. She had yet to get used to the fact that something she'd written had been published, and that at any time, someone unexpected—someone like Peter—could come across it, read it, and choose to tell her, always with this instantly intimate enthusiasm, what they thought about it.

“I will say, though,” he said, fixing his heavily browed eyes on her. “It was extremely sad—what happened, in the plot, I mean. I know you're not supposed to ask an author if their work is autobiographical, but it's hard not to wonder, especially when you actually know the author.”

She smiled nervously. She knew the disclaimer was a just polite gesture, and braced herself for the inevitable inquiry.

“What I mean is,” he said, cautiously. “The brother….the brother in the story. I mean…was that *your* brother? Do you have a brother?”

A bead of sweat formed at the top of her neck, right under her hair, and released, falling all the way down her spine, absorbed in the thin waistband of her underwear.

“No,” she said, standing up. “I don't.”

Peter looked at his watch and stood up, too, hauling his bag up with him.

“Really?” he said, shoving his laptop in and among the books. “No brother? No siblings?”

She shook her head. She smiled.

“Well then, hats off to you again for making it all the more convincing. Mary and I were discussing how—”

“Mary's read it too?”

“Of course she did—she's the one that bought us our copy. Albert offered to lend us the one you gave him, but we told him that we were going to buy our own and support the cause.”

She remembered giving Albert the copy of the magazine—one of her author's copies—on their third date, or maybe their fourth. He'd acted so excited; he'd told her that he was impressed and proud and

couldn't wait to read it. *That was the night*, she thought suddenly, the pink plus and minus signs floating across her eyes. *That must have been the night.*

"Just out of curiosity," said Peter. "What did Albert think about the story? It being so…emotional, I'm curious how he reacted."

A shooting cramp encircled her pelvis. She leaned back against the desk to steady herself.

"I actually don't know," she said, stifling a wince. "I don't think he's read it yet."

"What?" he nearly shouted. "Seriously?"

She shrugged.

"That's inexcusable!" he opened the door and gestured to the darkened hallway. "That's ridiculous! You're the best thing that's happened to him in years—maybe even ever—and he doesn't take the time to read your first published story?"

"I think he's just busy."

"We're *all* busy!" he said, fighting with his key in the lock. "That's no excuse. I'm going to have a word with him."

"Actually," she said, leaning against the cold, stale-smelling library wall. "Maybe don't say anything, because, I haven't even really brought it up with him."

He shook his head in disbelief.

"That's all the more reason to say something!"

She had an hour before she had to meet them for drinks, so she went to the bank and deposited her check, and then back home to change her clothes. When she rounded the corner of her street, she saw Professor Paulson walking into her building with a plastic bag tucked under his arm. She ducked behind a tree and waited. A minute later, he came out, without the bag, and walked quickly back toward Broadway and disappeared. When he was gone, she went into her building where the security guard was sitting at her usual foldout table, listening to music on a plastic transistor radio. She was a large woman, with elaborately braided hair, and gold necklace

with a charm that had her name spelled out in script: Denise. Ever since Denise had met Nan's parents during graduation, and marveled at the fact they'd brought her vegetables from their garden in Vermont, and a sweater Nan's mother had knit, she had begun referring to Nan as *Country Mouse,* or sometimes just *Mouse*.

“Some man just dropped this off for you, Mouse,” she said, holding the bag up by the handles. “He was just here—you just missed him.”

Nan took the bag from her.

“Thank you,” she said. “How are you?”

“I'm good,” she said, shaking her head. “But that man wanted me to let him upstairs so he could wait for you up there.”

“He did?”

She nodded emphatically, her heavy gold hoop earrings jangling against her pillowy neck.

“That's right,” she said. “But I wouldn't let him. I told him that's not how things work around here.”

Nan laughed.

She looked up at Nan skeptically.

“I'm not judging,” she said. “But that man looked a little shady to me.”

“No,” said Nan, smiling. “He's my teacher—or, he used to be.” She opened the bag and took out a book. “He just wanted to give me this book.”

“I know that—I looked in the bag; I saw the book,” she said. “But I'm just telling you, Miss Mouse, that man's a little shady.”

Nan sat on her bed and looked through the book—a collection of essays written by various authors on the subject of writing. On the title page, Professor Paulson had inscribed: *You're on your way! Yours, CP.* She'd read some of the book while standing in the bookstore awhile ago; she didn't know when exactly, and she didn't know when she must have mentioned it to him—after the magazine had accepted her story and he'd taken her out for a drink? Or at the graduation party he'd thrown for all his advisees, which she'd

attended with her parents? Or maybe it was the night they'd gone out to dinner together, just the two of them, a month or so before, right after she got back from Vermont?

That evening was still a blur to her. She'd gone into it feeling optimistic because she had graduated, and things were different—she was no longer a student, no longer an advisee, and Professor Paulson was no longer a teacher or an advisor—as of that evening, she believed, they were officially friends. And he seemed to think so, too. Only, she would soon come to see that they were apparently the kind of friends who order another bottle of wine at dinner once the first bottle was done. And the kind of friends who go back to his empty apartment—with his wife and children away in the country—for more wine, and to sit on the couch in his dark living room and drunkenly discuss books and writing and the *artistic mindset*, while shoes dropped from feet and shirts came slowly open. Somehow, between the time she had gotten her diploma and the time she came back to New York from Vermont, they had become the kind of friends that wake up naked together in a large bed, among crisp linens and unfamiliar pillows, with a wedding band, glowing like an ember, in the dim morning light.

“All in all,” said Albert, sitting back against the booth, sipping his beer. “The meeting I've been dreading for so long actually wasn't so bad.”

“That's good!” said Peter, raising his glass.

“A toast to it not being so bad!” announced Mary.

They all collided their glasses above the table, and everyone drank their beers—except for Nan. She had ginger ale. She told them she had a stomachache, which wasn't a lie.

Albert sat across from her, the window light hitting his face, which was pale and finely boned, like the skulls of sparrows Nan would sometimes find in the field beyond her house back at home. He smiled at her wistfully.

“You must be so relieved,” Nan said. “What did he say about your idea?”

She knew better than to try to summarize it, especially in front of his friends—something about landscape painting in the 18th Century: the figure in landscape; the relationship between the figure and the natural world, or the contrast between the two; in France, or in England, or the Netherlands. At one point he mentioned Flanders and she immediately thought of the poem, *In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row...*She'd didn't mention this to him, because even though she knew the occasion of the poem, a part of her still thought of Flanders as an imagined place, like the Elysian Fields, or heaven.

“He said that my idea was a good start,” said Albert.

“Here! Here!” said Peter, raising his glass again. “A good start is the best way to begin!”

“I don't know though,” said Albert, rubbing his eyes. “I have to get a partial bibliography to him before he leaves, and I'm still not sure if there are enough books here to do that.”

“Inter-library loan!” said Peter.

“The main public library on Fifth and Forty Second has everything!” assured Mary.

The amount of effort Albert's friends put into buoying the conversation humbled Nan. She felt grateful for them being there, and wished all the more that she was not.

Albert reached over and grabbed Nan's hand.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I told you I'd be relieved once this was over, and now I'm not at all. You must be so sick of hearing about this.”

“No,” she said, squeezing his hand back. “Not at all—this is your life. It's important.”

“What a great answer,” said Mary, putting her arm around Nan's shoulder. Nan could smell the dulled fruity scent of Mary's shampoo, infused into her wiry curly hair. “Did you hear that, Albert? Did you hear her? This girl is the real deal. Don't let her get away.”

Nan liked Mary, but hearing this clumsy endorsement made her want to crawl under the table—and further, under the linoleum.

“Whether or not Albert does know it,” said Peter, setting his glass down. “Doesn't excuse the fact that he hasn't even read her first published story yet!”

Nan's stomach twisted and cinched; she actually feared she might vomit. Across the table, Albert looked frozen; his hand went cold in her hand.

“Good god, Albert, she gave you a copy!” said Mary. “What are you waiting for?”

Nan leaned back and pushed herself against the wooden booth, wishing she could pass through it like a ghost and waft out of the bar and into the safety of the fading afternoon. Mary turned to her.

“Oh my god, I read it twice and cried both times. It was so amazing.”

“Thank you,” said Nan.

“It *is* great,” said Peter, leaning into the center of the table. “But, as I said before, beyond being technically skillful and effectively written, it's also fascinating for the purposes of speculative autobiography.”

“Peter!” said Mary. “Not this again.”

Nan looked down at the table and noticed that they were almost done with their beers. Soon, she knew, one of them would have to get up and buy another round. It would happen in one minute or in five minutes, but no more than that. She had to endure the situation for that long, and then she knew she could flee.

“What are you guys talking about?” said Albert.

“If you read the damn story,” said Peter. “You wouldn't have to ask.”

“I know that,” Albert said, growing annoyed. “But since I haven't yet, and you're talking about it like this, I'm obviously curious now about what you're referring to.”

“Do you mind me telling him what it's about?” Mary said excitedly to Nan. “I won't give anything away. I promise.”

“Before that,” Peter said, looking down at the empty glasses. “We need another round. It's my turn.”

He got up and started to dig his wallet out from his back pocket. Mary squeezed out from behind the table.

“I'm going to the bathroom,” she said. “Don't say anything until I get back.”

Nan followed her out of the booth and picked up her bag.

“I'm actually going to go,” she said. “I'm sorry. I'm just not feeling that well.”

“No!” said Mary. “Don't go! We have to talk about your story and guilt trip Albert!”

Albert looked confused, fighting off a miniature panic. He tried to stand, but he could only rise halfway, stuck between the booth and the table.

“Are you okay?” he said to her. “You said you're feeling sick?”

“I'm fine,” she said. “I've felt this way all day. I think I just need to lie down.”

“I'll call you later,” he said, sitting back down. “Okay? Will you be around?”

She looked at the faces of these three people before her, two of whom seemed to be looking into her soul with relish, and the other, the one she wanted more than anyone else to know her soul, seemed to be looking right through her, as if she were nothing more than the dim tavern air, speckled with dying sunlight and dust.

Nan went back to her apartment and lay on her bed. The light in her bedroom was an even gray, which made the space feel close and quiet and safe. She lay on top of her quilt, with her hands over her bare stomach, gently palpating the area above her pelvis, where, for the first time, she allowed herself to imagine a tiny being—a creature; a seahorse, a pupa—possibly dwelling inside, already living off what she ate and the air she breathed.

If it is alive, she thought, *it is because I am.*

If it is alive, she thought, *then I'm not alone.*

She thought of Albert sitting in the bar with his friends and felt relieved having escaped, and just at the right time. She picked up

the phone and called her advisor's office on campus, knowing that she'd get his voicemail.

“Hello?” he said.

“…Hi,” she said. The word came out hollow and fluttery, as if she'd sung it.

She heard his desk chair squeak, and could now picture him perfectly, sitting up, suddenly alert. The image sent an unexpected thrill of satisfaction through her.

“Nan!“

“I just wanted to call and thank you for the book.”

“You're welcome,” he said, quickly. “I'm glad you got it. That guard at your building wasn't too keen on me letting me leave it there.”

She wouldn't let you come up and wait, she thought.

“I haven't heard from you,” he said. “I haven't seen you…it's been quite awhile.”

“I know,” she said, closing her eyes. “I've been busy.”

“Busy writing, I hope.”

He had read everything she'd ever written since she'd arrived at the university, and liked to joke he had claim on whatever she wrote next, as if he'd legally retained her for any and all creative output. She'd always appreciated his support, and never so much as now, for it was he, the editor of *Verbiage*, that had found some way to publish her story—he'd told her an editor-at-large had gotten their hands on it, and insisted on its acceptance. He said he could hardly disagree.

His chair creaked again—now he was leaning back, she knew, getting comfortable, his feet up on the blotter.

“I am trying to write,” she said. “But it's going slowly.”

“As it will,” he said. “Read those essays I gave you—the people in that collection have all kinds of things to say about their process. It's actually quite illuminating. But, as I said in my inscription, you're a natural. I reread your story just the other day. It's so very haunting. It makes one feel…closer…to the author.”

A warm breeze came in through the window and grazed against the bare flesh of her stomach, her shirt raised up over her ribs, her hand tracing a slow line between her hipbones.

She could hear him breathing on the phone, the scrape of his stubble in the receiver.

“What are you doing right now?” his voice was hushed.

She looked up at the ceiling. A flake of paint the size of a palm was in the process of detaching itself, the swirled yellow plaster peering out from underneath.

“I don't know.”

He chuckled.

“You're talking to me.”

She could tell by his voice that he was smiling. She knew that smile; she'd known it now for years—since he'd accepted her into his exclusive Romantic Poetry seminar, when she was only just a sophomore.

“I am.”

“You've been missing,” he said.

“I know.”

“And missed,” he said. “I don't like to admit it, but I was a little hurt when you disappeared after that night.”

She'd woken up to the sound of him snoring, and the feel of his rough toenails against her ankle. Careful not to wake him, she extracted herself from the bed, collected her clothes from the floor, crept out of the room, and dressed hurriedly in the foyer. She didn't dare look at herself in the elevator's triangular mirror as she made her way downstairs, where she bolted past the doorman in the lobby, and fled into Riverside Park. Hung-over and dazed, with an acute pain skewering her heart, she sat down on a bench in a patch of morning sunlight and cried. Somehow she'd managed to contaminate the only relationship she had with the only person who genuinely supported and appreciated her work. And in doing so, she'd poisoned the part of herself she'd brought from home: innocent, but aware, virtuous, but scarred. Her actions in the city

seemed invariably designed to destroy that person, which she'd worked so hard all her life to become.

She stared down at the paving stones, uncertain as to what to do next—go back to her apartment? Go back to Vermont? Go apologize to Professor Paulson, and tell him it was all a mistake? She didn't have the chance to choose, because that was when Albert appeared, standing before her, looking down at her with that steady, sad look in his eyes. She found out later that he'd been seeing her in the park over the past few months, walking under the trees, or sitting on a bench, reading. All that time he'd wanted to say hello but never had the guts. That morning, that ruined morning—her lowest point—was the day he decided to finally take a chance.

“Can we have lunch?” said Professor Paulson. “Tomorrow? Are you free?”

“I really just wanted to call and thank you for the book.”

“And you have,” he said. The chair squeaked again; he was sitting back up. “And of course you would. Because that's how you are—you see, no one else…or, very few people would do that. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?”

“I honestly don't.”

“I'm trying to tell you, Nan,”—he exhaled—“that there's no one else in the world like you.”

The room was almost dark. She could hear the cars passing on the street, the distant sound of her neighbor practicing the piano on the ground floor.

“Let's go for a drink,” he said. “Right now. How about it?”

She pressed her hand into her stomach, imagining a hand, a paw, a fin, pushing back against it.

“I can't,” she said.

She felt lightheaded, drugged.

“Are you sure?”

“…yes.”

“Okay, then,” he said, the smile returning in his voice. “I'll go back to my original question: how about lunch tomorrow?”

“I have to work tomorrow.”

“Don't you have a lunch break?”

“I have a doctor's appointment then.”

“You do?” he said. “Is everything okay?”

She thought of the two white wands again, stashed in her medicine cabinet, their little windows bearing their conclusions, so resolute, so final—and yet telling her nothing.

“I can meet you after I get out of work,” she said, annoyed at this contagious uncertainty. “In the park—maybe we can go for a walk in the park.”

He laughed heartily.

“Okay, then. That sounds very civilized. A walk in the park.”

“Thank you again for the book.”

“You're welcome again,” he said; the chair eased backwards with a slow groan. “I saw it and immediately thought of you. I knew that you'd—“

“See you tomorrow.”

She hung up the phone.

The doorman at Albert's building took Nan's umbrella to keep while she was upstairs. Unlike her own building, where people left their umbrellas outside their apartment doors, fully opened, tilted like flowers, still clinging with water, in Albert's building, there was nothing so much as a welcome matt to clutter the corridors. Nan handed over the umbrella to the doorman who eyed it with admiration.

“This is a nice one.”

He shook it, smoothed off the rain, bound it tight with its little strap and snap, and slipped it into a decorative ceramic cylinder by the door. Nan looked at it among the other similar looking umbrellas.

“Don't worry,” he said, smiling. “I'll remember which one is yours.”

“It's just that it isn't mine,” she said. “I can't lose it.”

He gave her a little wink.

“I'll make sure you don't leave without it.”

She took the elevator up to the tenth floor and walked down the long hallway to the last door. She rang the doorbell and listened as Albert shuffled from the study to the foyer to peek at her through the peephole. She waved; he chuckled. The locks clicked, the chain slid to the side, the door opened and he was standing before her, his hair rumpled. He was wearing his heavy-framed glasses and an oversized zip-up sweatshirt with a cranberry juice stain down the front.

“Hi,” he said, bending down to kiss her. “Come in. You sounded worried on the phone. Is everything okay?”

She followed him inside. She had yet to get used to this apartment, which was actually his uncle's—a banker in London, who only came to the city a few times a year. The place was filled with expensive furniture and rare pieces of artwork on the walls; there were ornate moldings and polished wood floors and an expanse of windows that looked over Riverside Park and the river. Scattered among all these fine things were the scrappy emblems of Albert's identity: library books and papers; muddy running sneakers in the front hall; an electric guitar, amp, and mixing board, tangled in wires and pedals, stashed under the polished dining room table. It struck her as the oddest contrast, like a gerbil living in Versailles.

She sat down on the couch, which was a modern design, white, low to the ground, and as comfortable as a sponge. Albert sat across from her in a bright orange egg-shaped chair, which seemed to float off the ground, held aloft by three tiny silver metal legs.

“Do you want anything?” he said. “I can make more coffee.”

“No. I'm okay.”

Through the living room she could see into the study where his computer was on, the screen showing a page of tightly packed text in a tiny font. The desk was piled with more books and papers. His chair had been pushed out at a reckless angle—she had disrupted him: his work, the world, herself, everything was his constant disruption.

He watched her carefully.

“So…”

“So,” she said. “The reason I came over…is to tell you something—or, to talk.”

“Which one?” he said, sitting forward. “Those are two different things—to tell someone something versus to talk to someone about something.”

This was how he got when he was nervous, she knew, exacting to the point of nonsense.

“I think we should break up.”

His head cocked backwards as if yanked by a string.

“What? Why?”

She looked away from him, out the windows at the falling rain.

“Because of the story?”

“What story?”

She honestly didn't know what he meant. There were already too many stories in her life, in her head—unwritten, unrealized, *unborn*—for her to keep track of now.

“*Your* story,” he said, his hands grabbing at the air. “The one you guys gave me such a hard time about the other night at happy hour.”

“I didn't give you a hard time about it,” she said. “I never have.”

He looked doused.

“I know,” he said. “You're right. Not you. Those guys did.”

She looked around the living room for the copy of the magazine she'd given him. The coffee table was full of large format hardbound art books and glossy catalogs from auction houses, obscured by piles of his notes, paper coffee cups, leaves of newspapers, wax paper bagel wrappers smeared with cream cheese.

“I mean to read it,” he said. “I really do.”

He stared down into his lap.

“I don't know what to tell you.”

She thought of Professor Paulson, who would read her grocery list if she'd let him—he was the least appropriate person for her to be involved with, her biggest shame, her most significant mistake. And yet here he was, doing everything he could to claw his way into her head and her heart.

She didn't want him there.

“You don't have to like the story, you know,” she said, finally. “I would totally understand if you didn't. But what am I supposed to think when you don't even care enough to look at it?”

“You have to know that it's nothing personal,” he said, defensively. “It's not about you. It's me. I'm just…I'm so preoccupied. I'm always so stressed out. I really don't think I'm in the kind of place where I could appreciate it—or *anything*—properly at this point.”

She got up from the couch and stood at the windows. The rain was falling sideways, thrashing the leaves on the trees in the park. The playground across the street was empty, the downpour darkening the sandbox to a tawny, dull brown. Under the jungle gym she could see the few surviving swipes of sidewalk chalk—blue and pink and yellow—still safe from the encroaching rain.

He stood up and joined her at the window, taking her hands in his.

“I know I've been annoying with all this dissertation stuff,” he said. “And I've probably been a bad boyfriend, but I promise I'll get better. I'll *be* better”—he smiled at her—“you make me want to be better.”

Down on the sidewalk, a man hustled through the downpour, futilely holding a sodden newspaper over his head. He dashed across the crosswalk, his leather shoes disappearing into a deep black puddle by the curb. She thought of walking in the park with Professor Paulson the day before, and how they'd huddled close together under the broad canopy of his umbrella, to keep the prongs from dripping water onto their shoulders.

They went down to the second level of the park, where the trees and benches lined the paved promenade. Out on the river, a tugboat labored to push a huge iron barge against the current, up toward the George Washington Bridge. Nan watched the tiny boat making imperceptible progress, the frothy wake kicking up, dissolving in the cloud-colored water.

“I really have missed you,” Professor Paulson told her, his face leaning down close to hers.

She didn't look up at him. She watched the waves in the river, and the unfair task set to the miniature boat, and the traffic on

the highway below them, going north and south, crashing through the puddles alongside the median. She watched the rain—relentless, trapping her under the shelter her advisor held high over her head.

“I know that night was sudden,” he said. “But, in a way, when you think about it, it wasn't sudden at all. We've known each other—gotten to know each other—for quite awhile at this point.”

His oiled raincoat beside her cheek smelled like campfire and wet dog.

“And I know this situation is a terrible cliché,” he said, laughing lightly. “The advisor and the advisee; the teacher and the student, but we're not those things anymore. And when we were those things, we never did anything wrong.”

She covered her face with her hand. He took it away gently.

“Talk to me.”

“I just…” she said. “You're…married.”

“Barely,” he said, quietly. “In fact, hardly. I haven't been happy for some time now.”

How could he even speak of happiness? Just hours before, during her lunch break, she had been squatting over the toilet in the sterile little bathroom at the campus health center, aiming the plastic cup between her legs to fill with urine, to deposit into a paper bag and leave with a work-study student at the front desk. When she'd first arrived for her appointment, she'd broken down to the doctor and told her about the two possibilities—the two different men involved in her situation. The doctor was kind and patient, but looked at Nan with a pitying sadness, the way someone might look at a stray dog who had no understanding of just how lost it actually was. The doctor told Nan that if she were pregnant, the first encounter—the earlier of the two—would most likely be the one responsible. Before leaving the examining room, she recommended that Nan make an appointment at the counseling center.

Professor Paulson put his arm around her and pulled her close, kissing the top of her head.

“You're being quiet again,” he said.

She peered up at him, *the first encounter.*

"But what about your wife?" she said. "What about your children?"

He looked down at her, his dim brown eyes flanked by his graying temples.

"What?" he said, mirthfully. "I thought you liked kids."

He was joking. This was still fun for him. It was his adventure, his own little story to write. She thought she might vomit.

"I'm serious," she said. "This isn't just a joke to me."

He gripped her tighter against him.

"Nor to me," he said. "But something amazing has happened between us, and it makes me happy. Who can blame me for that?"

In the window light, Nan could see how tired Albert was, and, as always, how lost. Her brother had often had that same injured look in his eyes—that hard-wired sorrow that would always be out of her reach. It was what had first drawn her to Albert—what had gotten her off that park bench that terrible morning, and into a diner where they'd had breakfast and talked for hours. He was not her brother, of course, but there was something about him that reminded her of what was missing in her life, what had been taken away. It was why she wanted him to read her story so badly—the story of a girl and her troubled older brother, who grew up spending all their time together, out in the fields, in the forest, swimming in the streams, hiking into the mountains of Vermont. *Figures in the landscape*. One winter night, the brother asks the sister to go skating on the river with him, but she doesn't go, choosing instead to stay home and work on her college applications. He never comes back. He falls through the ice and drowns, and she is left with the sense that, even though they'd spent all their lives together, they knew each other better than anyone, she'd allowed him to die alone.

Nan looked up into Albert's eyes, and thought again of the poem: *Short days ago / We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, / Loved*

and were loved, and now we lie / In Flanders fields. She couldn't help it; she put her arms around him. He held her tightly.

"Are you really breaking up with me?" he said, his voice felt miles above her. "Is that really why you came over?"

She stared out the window. The river was empty; the boats were gone, in their place were thousands of waves, breaking into each other, tearing apart.

"I think I just need some time by myself right now," she said.

His arms tightened around her and she instantly felt the echo of her advisor's embrace from the day before. He'd left her in the park, holding his umbrella, which he insisted she keep and give back to him when they saw each other next, which he made her promise would be soon.

"Time by yourself?" said Albert, looking down at her. "Why?"

She pictured the copy of the magazine she'd given him, somewhere nearby in the apartment, lost under the detritus of what she knew now to be an ignorant and indifferent stranger. She pictured the umbrella downstairs in the lobby. She would wait until the doorman was busy—helping someone by the elevator, calling a cab—to slip out, leaving it behind for someone to take.

"Is that really the reason?" said Albert. "Is it something else?" he stopped himself. "Is there some*one* else?"

She slid her hand out from around his back and pressed it gently against her stomach, which, just that afternoon, she'd been told was hollow, empty as a grave.

"That's the thing," she said. "There's no one else."