Madrigal

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Madrigal

Madrigal was the sort of girl who might keep honey-bees, or give you a plant for no reason at all.Granted, the plant might sometimes turn out to be full of allergens and the bees could very well swarm after she forgot to give you protective mesh during a visit or two, but Madrigal was the sort who could make errors like that and still maintain the role of most trusted ally, both in school and out.

Madrigal (or Mad, if you got close enough to be her friend, which most ninth graders didn’t) had transferred here on a Wednesday, after the close of Unit One—we had all just taken our quarter-semester exams for every period, and she just wandered into Algebra one day I was feeling particularly like a fraction, humming a tune like a music box. She sat in the same back-corner seat in every classroom, every period, under the shelves that held pencil boxes and the exposed teeth of defaced textbooks. She sat back there, Todd Irwin said one day at lunch, to hide a hair-dye job gone wrong—“It’s not even pretty,” he minced as she took her seat one morning (this seemed to greatly offend him), to which she replied, eyeing him steadily, “Pretty is not my job.” In the shade the whole mass of it appeared almost black, but when the sun hit it, certain locks seemed to glimmer like cranberry plants in winter, submerged under grey ice. That had to be it—a bad dye job—because no one at St. Rufous High just up and dyed their hair dusty blue.

Others murmured that she sat back there to obscure her drug-snorting habits from the teacher, which, although no one had caught her at it, would arguably be quite easy to do from behind Sorrel Howe’s tall fedora-ed head, which (in English class, anyway) blocked most parts of Madrigal from view. She did spend bunches of time with her chin craned over that opening at the back of her desk, which most students used for half-popped boxes of Chiclets and Pokémon cards.
to trade (even if they didn’t actually play for real). Yes, very likely she was a druggie, or even a drug lord. Could girls even be drug lords? Lordresses? Drug ladies? Druglies? That made the boys snicker.

They snickered often in class—a continuous moving undercurrent like the smell of processed cheese popcorn that has sat under the car cushions too long. The girls usually sounded more high and rolling and chemical like green-apple Bubble Tape, but some sounded more like the boys, while some boys conversely joined the girls in timbre. It all, really, existed on a spectrum, and no one ever played by all the rules of each extreme, not even in how they laughed.

But of all their objects for laughter, Madrigal—poser, druggie, and, most recently, self-proclaimed witch—was their favorite. We had all suspected that one for a while, what with her whispering nonsense-phrases at her own ankles; a favorite, Sorrel said, was the chant, “Rrrr teh ESHH...” which could very well, she suggested with mock-hesitance, have been the long-repressed anxieties of a Russian sleeper, taking the form of toxic spells. “You can curse someone with uranium,” she insisted, zebra hat rim bobbing. “That’s how cancer happens.”

These exchanges occurred not constantly but in sporadic bursts spread across 50-minute class periods like cold butter—a suggestion here, a shouted “hey, nice vest” there, a dozen condoms shoved through the slats on her locker for use probably never, fragile membranous reminders of the special male attention she was supposed, by now, to have enjoyed as a rite of passage into romantic maturity.

If these monkeyshines perturbed her, though, you could not tell. To the first, she would curl her lower lip or laugh silently, a spiteful, genuine snicker that flashed with gold out her eyes. She was laughing at her own joke, the only kind, we thought, that appeased her ridiculous standard—she was not the sort to laugh at your jokes if they weren’t laugh-worthy. If you were laughable, though, she’d share the joke with herself and that secret cavern at the back of her desk,
obscured in shelf-shadow like one of those crooked heroes in films who sit in pub corners, backlit by the fractured moon through a window caked in dirt and nose-grease. All that the light ever hit was one of her creepy white hands be-ringed and be-symboled as though she’d lately joined the local Renaissance Faire—a hand which would furiously twist at the same lock of hair, no matter the subject or day. We could not discern whether anxiety or a need for focus through repetition drove the tic (Florence Potts and her wrestler brother Neill, both very tough customers, went through a phase where they’d incessantly knit table runners in History I—said the repetition and chronology of the stitches helped them remember timelines more effectively), but all in all, it did not really matter to us what Madrigal did, even when she responded to the sneaked condoms with a lofty reference (probably drug-induced) to all the unicorns we didn’t see that she still could. Utter bull crap, really, says Todd, the unicorn stuff. He says all the books she reads are turning her brains to applesauce.

In class you should see her. She talks to the teachers like they’re deities and they give her old, torn-up copies of books nobody wants anymore—King Lear, The Scarlet Letter, The Red Badge of Courage. As though on cue, she receives each bit of junk—at the teacher’s desk, of course, so as not to bring him into her desk-space and near whatever it is she hides back there—open it with a crack, sniff it deeply, and then with a frown or curt nod weigh its fate, occasionally qualifying the gesture with a remark of round-eyed ominousness (see: “I never much liked Cordelia, but then, what with her grisly end, I suppose Shakespeare had his misgivings as well”). Then, she drifts back to her seat with eyes opaque, her skirt-draped feet seeming to move fluid as a conveyor belt.

Most of us dismissed her talk as blarney, just a ruse to sound smart. Teachers are really easy to fool, anyway; slap statements like “throughout history, racism has been an issue” or “Hester Prynne’s illegitimate child is a metaphor for life” and they swallow it right down with the same
enthusiasm that your mother might get on Christmas, when you tell her those hateful brown Keds are, in fact, just what you wanted. They think they’ve done so well, teaching you, when truly, Todd Irwin’s crew has been copying slightly modified versions of Rune Birchmeier’s exam answers into their own blue books for years. Sorrel, however, prefers to cheat using her phone. You can only imagine how the Industrial Revolution came about, according to her; it probably had something to do with vampires.

You might be wondering at this point what kind of fruit loops would name their daughter Rune. Her parents were very prestigious Swiss watch sellers, from actual Switzerland, and the Birchmeiers lived, as we did, on the Whipped Stream (really more of a rushing river), in a self-built lodge made almost completely of glass. At night it looked like one large streetlamp whose glassblowers had forgotten to stop adding air. From my old bedroom, I used to be able to see it glowing through the trees, nearly obscuring them like a spotlight on a spiderweb. From the attic, I could not watch it quite so well now, and the new angle at which the moonlight fell on my bedspread had the odd effect of doubling everything within reach—monogrammed sweaters, pashminas, a pair of socks. Perhaps, though, this had more to do with the lucid times of night I chose in which to watch the world below, Rune’s place somewhere just out of vision and to the right.

It would have made a perfect party house, the Potts twins often hissed to her as the weekend approached, but Rune was emphatically not that sort of girl, or, rather, we were not the sort of people she preferred to host. Rune was possibly the happiest person you’d ever meet, barring perhaps the time she had thrown an open Rice Krispie treat at Liam Greene’s face after he called her a rich snob. They dated after that, though, so it can’t have been fully in earnest.

Other than Liam, though, who would return from their house wide-eyed and divulging nothing, the only other student ever to venture within its mysterious walls was Madrigal—and she
wasn’t about to tell us anything.

Well, she wasn’t about to tell them anything.

Our first real encounter (outside the sphere of school, that is) occurred at a Bonfire Night celebration, if you can believe it, right atop the steep sledding hill from which families and teen couples would watch the fireworks. Around here, we just treated it like a second Fourth of July—same colors, same cookout fare, but fewer visible knees dotting the grass. Madrigal had, according to Sorrel, recently finished an accelerated summer class in order to prepare for some major you wouldn’t expect at some college you couldn’t pronounce. Rune and her happy blond parents had convinced Madrigal to try graduating one and a half years early—which, despite providing us with concrete proof that she’d elicit even fewer friends in college than she did in high school (after all, what kind of masochist would subject herself to the wiles of an underage roommate who reserved her laughs frugally like coins at the carnival), more crucially reduced the available time we had to learn just what it was she kept inside her desk.

Anyway, I had just wandered over from the carnival (whose same grim-toothed group skittered its trailers and chemical breath across the downtown softball fields like forgotten beads in a puddle, every year). She lay supine with ankles crossed, feet bare and extremely distinctive in the thin blue dark. I pretended not to see her—I do not fully know why—and became so immersed in the act that I nearly tripped over her lower half.

“There’s room for an extra.” Madrigal looked up at me. She knew what I had been up to.

“I’m sure it would be fine if you sat.” As if she had many other companions to choose from.

“Oh really? Can I join the group, then?” I glanced at the space next to her, which was
empty but hooded by a yellow-checked umbrella. “Is that yours?”

“Nearly. For the ashes. Just in case they fall here.” She lapsed into silence—not a dismissive silence, or for that matter a strained one where, flailing for appropriate phrases to contribute, you pull from your teeth a thought as unnatural and commonplace as crabgrass (see: “There are an awful lot of people here tonight,” “This blanket is soft,” and “Wow, five minutes till the fireworks start,” all of which I would have used had she been Sorrel or one of her Blackberry-toting friends), and then loathe yourself afterward.

No, Madrigal’s silences allowed you to breathe. Still, though, I felt like some social nicety was in order, so I spoke.

“So, you and Rune, hm?” I realized only afterward how it sounded and blushed practically orange. “Uh—uh—that’s not what I was, uh—“

“Look at me. You haven’t made me tense.” She rolled her face toward me seriously. “She is where my gossamer threads caught.”

“Okay, what does that mean?” Definitely, I thought, her mind was wonky. I would need to relay the information to Todd immediately.

“I commandeered that from a Whitman poem.” She smiled, raised her creepy hands, and let them drop behind her, reaching out for the chain-link fence to the skate park. One index finger hooked around a link and tightened. “He likens a soul to a spider shooting out threads, ceaselessly, to see who will catch them. I like to tell myself they’re dangerous, too—the threads—imbued with dart frog venom or the like. That would be quite a challenge for someone, don’t you think? Only the best would get through.”

The unexpected harshness of that final comment did something odd to my veins. I could suddenly feel the redness of them, if that makes sense. I stopped minding, just then, whether she was a druggie or a lesbian or a witch.
Then the fireworks began, blooming like willow trees over our heads. I enjoyed the plain white ones best, dull as it may sound; their thick crackle was reminiscent of the sparklers my twin sister, Mary, used to hold up to my ear, saying that fire moved like voices and voices should never be ignored. She was sort of angry and sadistic too, sometimes. Girls can be quite often, especially when they’re experimenting and you happen to be the designated test subject. We can manipulate like you wouldn’t believe.

Thinking of Mary, then, I began to glance at Madrigal out of my side-eye. Her eyes, fixed on the light show above, contained a certain roundness about them that I didn’t recall seeing before. I hazarded a half-guess—it was a response, maybe, to me. She liked having me there, a companion for the dark who said nothing. I moved hardly at all so as not to give an impression of moving nearer (due to presumption) or farther away (due to fear).

Then, I wondered. Did this encounter count as her experiment? Was Madrigal testing me in some way—recording on some mental ink-stamp just how long I could keep silent and play by her rules before growing itchy with pent-up energy and failing without even being given a fair chance to begin? Would she stamp my forehead with the number of seconds, then, after it was all done, so Todd and the crew could see firsthand what a dunce I had become?

My rabbit-trail was absurd, I knew, but the jarring motion of the proverbial railroad cart as it followed the rabbit down knocked an imp loose from one of the catacombs in the little rabbit-village, and it climbed out. It—I—needed suddenly to—

Have you ever come downstairs on an entirely peaceful afternoon, sunshine viscous and red, and found your cat stretched like tender meat across the rug? Lying there so primly, with glossy paws crossed and eyes like honey or gelatine, it pretends not to watch you watching it. But instead of allowing the cat its liquid nap on the rug, which would, to be fair, be the polite thing to do, you suddenly find that your dearest desire is to barge into the picture yourself. You would
rather, you find, hold the cat squirming in your lap than simply let it be. Its loveliness is not enough for you, left alone; you must, must, you see, come to be part of that loveliness yourself.

She lay there under the latest barrage of neon, and I broke the lovely silence, just, really, to elicit any response at all.

“Does it bother you that Rune has Liam?”

She glanced at me, impassive. “Why should it?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. I propped myself up on an elbow. “He’s not the brightest crayon.”

She squinted an eye quizzically. “Isn’t he, though?”

“You’d know better than I would, with your ‘dinner parties’ over there and all.” I paused, hoping she would take off from there.

“Welllll...” She looked about us with mock deviousness, then sat up, tightening a transparent bowtie. “I can’t divulge much, or the Templar will hear of it, and one doesn’t want to be excommunicated by those fellows—and women, of course. They let in women now.”

I snorted. “Of course they do.”

She glanced at me, wordlessly. Her eyes seemed to go opaque again. I was shut out, at least momentarily.

“Oh come on.” I fidgeted. “It was a joke. Take a joke.”

This next silence was palpable, and we both turned away to watch the fireworks again. The finale had nearly come, and below the glare I could see a trail of children running gleefully askew in blinking hats with star-antennae and such, around and around the chairs of their exhausted parents. Just when in life is it, I wondered, that people begin to grow weary of each other?

“For the record, I trust Rune’s judgment on the subject of Liam.” Madrigal was back again with translucent eyes. “I assure you they have plumbed the depths of many a well together.”
Now that I couldn’t let alone. “I’ll bet they have.”

She seemed to weigh a response for a moment, then thought better of it and glanced over at her umbrella. I wondered briefly if she would hit me with it. I hoped, briefly, that she would hit me with it.

Instead, she did something odd—peered under it as though checking on an elderly guest who had remained unobtrusive till now. I looked where she was looking, though, and the dark blanket-corner still appeared as empty as before.

About thirty seconds later, the show ended. I should have mentioned that during its entirety, a substantial sprinkling of firework-ash had fallen variously on the heads of watchers at the top of the hill especially, but Madrigal had, oddly enough, not picked up her umbrella once. When asked about it, she nodded vaguely at the children in the hill’s trough, skidding about and stuffing popcorn down each other’s shirts. “It served its purpose,” she said, folding her blanket over a forearm so its swinging tendrils evoked those of a baby octopus at the meat counter.

“Well, uh, that was...thank you,” I said in her direction, brushing my jeans pointlessly of the grass that wasn’t there.

“Thank you,” Madrigal replied, and then, likely to add something more to the obligatory response, she stopped gathering her strewn possessions and turned to face me. “Really. Thanks.”

“Happy Fifth,” I said lamely, at her then-retreating back.

“Cheers,” she called over her shoulder, laughing like a mallet striking an alto xylophone.

Reality television can be blamed for a multitude of social ills, the most glaring of which is that it gives a voice to good people and horrible ones alike. Madrigal lately learned that this adage
can be just as true of the fans as for the ‘actors’ themselves.

On Madrigal’s second week of Politics class that semester, Mrs. Quarrey, a tiny woman who lives in tweed power suits, discusses her myriad allergies with something like relish, and speaks as though throwing continuous puffs of concentrated air at you, entered briskly and began to yell the following sentence as she wrote it on the board: “What do you think about majority rule?”

Madrigal’s right hand rose like a drawbridge, the left still spinning furiously at the usual lock of hair. “I think it is silly.”

“Really?” Mrs. Quarrey exhaled in excitement, breaking her piece of chalk. “Please share with us why.”

“Because—have you ever seen that singing show with the three judges, and a winner who is chosen at the end of the season? That show—I can’t recall—“

Tabbie Hix, the kind of person you’d be afraid to let near your fish for fear that she’d spray her mother’s eau de parfum too close to their tank and make them go funny forever, whirled around in her seat so quickly that I feared for a split second she had snapped a vertebra. “Idol? You mean you don’t know Idol? What, do you live under a rock?”

Most of the class looked equal parts revolted and pleased. Mrs. Quarrey cut in, jovially: “Now hey, guys, I don’t watch that Idol crap either. CSI is where it’s at, am I right, Mad?” She winked at Madrigal, who returned it with a small, noncommittal smile. I could see her lips forming the word Madrigal as she ducked her head.

“But you’re a different generation,” Sorrel added indulgently. Her seatmate, a stylishly-dressed exchange student named Ravi Jha, looked solemnly on this interaction.

Madrigal placed a hand inside her desk and tapped out the opening beat for a song I half-recognized. One, pause pause, one two, pause, one pause two three four five, pause pause. “I
don’t like to concern myself with trivia.”

The class renewed its undercurrents at that one, but she had not finished yet.

“That show, as I was saying, yes, ‘Idol’—well, it often asks the viewers to make decisions as to who stays and who goes home. You’d think, though, that the judges, who have presumably been trained in this sort of thing, would have a better conception—“

There was the cheese-popcorn snicker again.

Madrigal’s parsnip face did not register amusement. “Conception—would have a better...would better be able to tell who deserved to advance, yes? Well, then, why do we put such a decision in the hands of the untrained public? After all, the problem of who wins this competition is clearly one of (and here she tipped an imaginary hat toward Tabbie and Sorrel) great, lasting, and gobstoppingly crucial import.”

Mrs. Quarrey’s buoyant smile had, at this point, tightened into a line like pizza dough wanting to contract. “Point proven, Mad. Now, does anyone else—“

“Wait,” Todd pointed out from behind his brown-Kedded size 14s, which hung over the front of his desk, creating a radius between himself and the rest of the students with surnames G-L. “She didn’t even answer the question.”

The rest of class continued like that, with Mrs. Quarry asking questions and Madrigal answering when no one else did (Rune was home sick). Eventually, the teacher began to preface them with, “will someone other than Mad...”

And Madrigal shut up.
Rune’s return to school two days later was marked by a profound shift in Madrigal’s behavior—or perhaps the two things just happened to correspond without any sort of causal connection. After all, Madrigal had flounced into First Period English the morning of October 13 wearing a really theatrical ensemble: chocolate-brown galoshes, chocolate-brown shirt and overalls, and an oversized bow the color of ripe pomegranate seeds subduing her dusty locks. Her poofy vest, a garish gold, completed the ensemble and she concealed a half-eaten peach in her right hand.

Rune, who had been pulling tissues from a tiny carved box on her desk with a magician’s conjuring grace, glimpsed her friend before any of us did and abruptly stood up, hands outstretched as though holding a pair of pies. “You’ve got to be kidding. It’s that day?!”

“I’m afraid it is, bosom friend,” Madrigal replied as she crossed to her seat, eyes twinkling.

At this, Todd Irwin, who has always had a ‘thing’ for blondes and foreigners (types which Rune cannot help but embody) crossed his large feet and arms and burst out, “Ooh, Mad, ‘bosom friends’…..what goes on at your sleepovers?” Sorrel covered her mouth and giggled in Ravi’s direction, as though inciting his approval. He simply watched her and made a show of rolling up his cuffs. Madrigal, who had heard, breathed deeply, clenched her jaw, and turned toward the window, which had been cracked to let in a breeze. “Hm, the air smells ash-brown today,” she suggested absently.

Rune, however, marched toward Todd’s desk and playfully smacked his feet off it. “Shut up, idiot. You’ll never understand what we have.” She winked at the class (most of whom chuckled in appreciation), cleared the hair from one of her shoulders, and turned back toward her seat. She did not look at Madrigal right away, then, but, as the two sat side by side, she eventually did slip her friend a sidelong grin.

Madrigal returned it and began hushedly babbling to her. I myself was separated from her by a desk or two at the time, but it seemed that she whispered something sounding like “birthday.”
She then brought out from her backpack a tiny wrapped chocolate with a candle stuck victoriously through its center—which Madrigal then proceeded to spark with one of those cheap lighters you can find at the grocery store. The two laughed in a veiled way, without making a sound.

Just then, one of Mr. Wormaald’s long legs stepped into the space.

Mr. Wormaald is one of those hip teachers that almost nobody hates—whether because of his tidy, unruffle-able demeanor and self-deprecating humor or because he has “hot eyelashes” (I wonder sometimes why guys grow eyelashes so disproportionately longer than any I’ve ever seen on a girl, not that I’ve ever gotten close enough to another girl to measure the difference). Mr. Wormaald is such a cool guy, though, that if he singles you out for swearing or organizing a book drop in the middle of an exam to distract from your photographing Rune’s half-finished multiple-choice page on the desk next to you, you can’t even conjure up enough rage to down-talk him to your friends later at lunch. He enforces the Rules with the air of an uncle who’s come to dinner and (you know) only keeps from pouring whiskey into his soda to indulge your curmudgeony buttoned-up father, who hasn’t drunk since his teeth returned to their pre-braces form after college. Depending on the level of giddiness in the classroom on any given day, he sometimes overlooks our antics altogether.

The smell of smoke, though, he couldn’t ignore, as it wafted from Madrigal’s candle down the left wing of desk rows and toward the chalkboard. I saw her subtly attempt to direct her breath toward the back slat of the desk, where she had apparently shoved the conquered truffle.

“Well—I smell something, guys.” He grinned quizzically at us all, striding back and forth in a leisurely fashion. “Someone want to tell me...who’s our go-to man? Or lady, as it were.” He cast the girls a mischievous look and toxic green titters erupted throughout the room.

Neill Potts, who had left his knitting needles at home that day, swiveled his tree-trunkish neck toward the teacher. “Mad has more fancy-fancy tastes.” He remarked in a monotone drawl
and then withdrew his head to his neck once again, his face harboring a little smile that suggested
he’d said something infinitely clever. Madrigal scoffed at him.

“Mr. Wormaald, I don’t smoke. I find the entire idea repulsive, despite its implied
sophistication. I would rather pierce myself with blunted sewing needles than inhale carcinogens.”
She leaned back under her shelves once more, twisting that link of hair. Rune hissed an emphatic
“ouch” at no one in particular, but those in her immediate vicinity snickered.

Mr. Wormaald raised his eyebrows, amused, and remarked without missing a beat:
“Obviously you haven’t tried coffee, then. That’s my carcinogen of choice. You’ll have to forgive
me for that.” He was playing along with her!

She tipped her head in mock deference, eyes a little less opaque than before. “Of course.
Coffee is an exception for which I must allow.”

“I thank you for that admission. Unfortunately...,” Mr. Wormaald said, “I still have to
check your desk.” Todd and Neill exchanged looks of birthday glee. We had waited months for
this day.

Madrigal nodded. “Understandably so.” Her hand shook almost imperceptibly as she lifted
it toward her mouth, licking two fingers as though about to turn a page in Kafka’s Metamorphosis,
which sat open before her. Behind her free hand, she began to repeat, “Ahrr...tem...” as the other
dropped behind her desk, out of sight.

A slight hiss could be heard, and Madrigal winced. Mr. Wormaald strode down the aisle
and was there.

“Excuse me.” He intoned gently. She obliged and stood to the side.

“Thanks, Mad.” Her lips moved soundlessly in response—Madrigal. Madrigal.

His hand alighted on the corner of the slat and he bent over to examine its contents.

Almost.
Suspended for possession of illegal substances, I could already tell.

A look of surprise—but a surprising one. A sharp cry of pain. And Madrigal stood frozen, eyes opaque, as Mr. Wormaald dismissed class 46 minutes early that day.

Here is a problem I have with unconditionality. See, what if you had a well with ten valuable secrets inside. These secrets are your crown jewels—you could arguably order others made if those got lost, but that would take too much time, not to mention the unjustified incitement of at least one volcanic eruption and miners upon miners for chipping the gems out of the solidified magma. The point is that, due to a dragonish worry that the gems will fall into fickle hands, you quite often keep these parcels of information hidden.

Except from a certain girl. This charmer learns and subsequently disperses them as one might a handful of dandelion seeds—thoughtlessly, one by one. You desperately want to continue trusting her despite this, but by now, your secret-supply has dwindled by half, to the detriment of everything that once made you seem mysterious. At which point does your unconditional patience—even love—for your aggressor turn into enablement, especially if this dark habit of hers shows no sign of abating? At which point, then, does unconditionality become illogicality?

As far as the administration at St. Rufous High was concerned, I began to suspect the latter had happened, especially because Mr. Wormaald’s mysterious medical leave was only the first in a series of Madrigal-tied health mishaps schoolwide. Mrs. Quarry had stayed behind at the bell for third lunch because Madrigal had an extra credit option to discuss, and Tabbie later heard from one of the more loose-lipped secretaries (you know the type—liquidy-looking nails and a wealth of snarky desk-plaques screaming “I’d rather not work here—or at all”) that the teacher had had to lie down in the nurse’s office, gasping, until an ambulance could pick her up an hour later (our town
is far-removed from any hospitals).

Three weeks after that, even the principal—a timid lady whose dearest passion lay in rendering our theatre and English curricula as G-rated as possible, often at the risk of bending copyright laws—fell ill during a meeting with our resident witch, who had happened to be petitioning at the time for permission to open a chapter of IJM supporters. Madame Coupe did not return to school for three days, although the vice principal explained via the PA system that this was because the lady had to care for her “petit fille,” who’d suddenly been stricken by flu.

We did not buy that pimento-loaf, though. (I use this here to mean nonsense.) The twins theorized at lunch that noon—in our usual spot by the pillar closest the girls’ locker room—generating a series of scenarios which usually ended in the revelation of Madrigal’s identity as the Zodiac Killer (I had two large beefs with this conclusion, both of which should be obvious). They even began crocheting gloves with the cross-and-eye signature he reportedly used to use post-crime—just to see how Madrigal would respond. Directly, she did not—only answered questions in class more voraciously than ever.

“Who were some major Enlightenment philosophers?”

“John Locke.”

“Good. Another?”

“Thomas Hobbes.”

“And does anyone know what he believed about human nat—“

“Humans are inherently dark, evil, flawed. Before becoming truly human, they must be fixed.”

Mrs. Davis, the long-term sub, would wink at her with a “thank you, hunny;” (or, once, a mistaken “Thank you, Madeline,” which drew a venomous glace from Madrigal (Madrigal, Madrigal) and tenuous chuckles from everyone else) and was used to dismiss class triumphantly, as
though having just brought a hall of cabaret patrons to their knees. For all intents and purposes, she did not see the rest of us—although, to be fair, most would rather she hadn’t anyway. We just wanted the seconds on the clock behind us to pass more spryly and with lower density, to speed the mid-afternoon rush to the slushie shack at the mall by way of parents’ Subarus or an older sibling’s junk car. In ninth grade, the mall was the place to be at night. So Todd poo-pooed Madrigal’s success in the classroom, scoffing, “Let her have her accolade” (or he would have in those words, if he did that sort of thing). “Outside school, she’s just a bitch with no friends anyway.” (Yep, that sounds more like him.)

What perplexed us, though, was why the school had allowed her to stay in the first place—why, upon returning, Mr. Wormaald, Mrs. Quarry, and the ever-unpopular Madame Coupe all continued, it seemed, to treat Madrigal with civility, even esteem. Even when Mr. Gulvey caught her siphoning red cabbage juice from our titration lab in Scientific Foundations, he didn’t scorn her—simply adjusted his bifocals and asked her what she planned to do with it.

“It gives parchment an excellent stain, and my grampa was getting bored with the eggshell color in my letters,” she replied, owlish in the yellow lab goggles.

“Ah. If you had been wanting to drink it, I’d say—go ahead! Full of antioxidants this cold season. Ha ha.” Juicing all manner of plants was one of Mr. Gulvey’s chief pastimes, and he was constantly trying to convert us all to his way of life. “But,” and here he gesticulated toward her partner, Ichabod (preferred wardrobe color: black, preferred occupation: beta-testing for World of Warcraft), “the wonders of the pH spectrum might just be lost on your friend here if our indicator fluid went missing! Now, class, remember when we discussed plant biology in Unit One? Specimens like this cabbage here give off methyl jasmonate, just as the nightshade makes hyoscyamine or the wormwood, artemisinin, in response to an attack....”

And they protected her, both in her icy opaqueness and her vicious translucency. And we
did not understand why, except to suspect that it had something to do with her desk and the secret she kept inside it.

Madrigal had this bike trail—overgrown and peppered with scat from deer, foxes, coyotes—which she’d habitually ride along on her way home from Rune’s that fall. My house lay directly between them, and as such, I often found myself glancing with peripheral vigilance at the path, splayed on my belly while my upper torso hung off the bed and onto a dresser pushed up against the window. This time, Chinese checkers pieces rolled everywhere as I skipped the surface with my fingers, splintered from the last time I’d done this.

She began to look more opaque than ever, then, on her bike rides home—the kind of opaque where you walk into a bar and watch the exchanges and reflect on how the room really is all like a Christmas tree, the honey-or-ice-colored bottles backlit by the tender’s jovial self-preserving grin—and suddenly, on the brink of entering the membrane (so easily punctured by a joke or trigger anecdote you feel you should know how to arrange by now) but the whole social endeavor starts to seem like an arithmetic problem thrown into a calculus test to derail you when, in fact, socializing—like arithmetic—should be simple—shouldn’t it?

My point, heavily dwindling by now under influence of the liquor from this imagined bar, is that at this bar, a defamiliarization takes place, during which you, who watch this tiny beating cell world so intimately from outside, feel abruptly and acutely your own invisibility—dispensability—to it and its members, despite your desire to blink and make it otherwise. Well, Madrigal began to look more and more like that. She stood outside the membrane of our high-school world and could not (would not?) enter it.
They did not make it any easier for her, though—the Sorrels, the Todds. Her clothes grew exceedingly more erratic and mismatched. As she walked by our lunch table one day, clutching a bouquet of spiny pink fruits and some steaming liquid in a mug, Sorrel stood and cut her off, cheetah-print cardigan as loud as her voice: “This is so crazy. We live on the same street and my house didn’t even get hit!” She towered over Madrigal, a tall girl herself when not placed vis-à-vis next to a clopping pair of studded wedges.

Madrigal gazed up at her, jaw so set it could have popped off, in the manner of a ventriloquist dummy with an overzealous puppeteer. “What do you mean.”

Sorrel touched her fingers to her own chest, feigning compassion. “Ohhh. I only meant, how bad for you to lose power in the middle of October and have to get dressed in the dark this morning!” She paused to let it sink in. Madrigal simple looked at her, unlaughingly, as Todd and his cronies “veiled” their snickers in a way that begged notice by the snickered-on.

Sorrel retaliated. After all, joking at an enemy’s expense only worked if that enemy understood. “I only thought, well, your clothes.” [Checkered blouse, flowered lederhosen, hounds tooth pashmina.] “Was it laundry day at your house?”

“Yes! We did laundry in the dark with the power off. That’s when the washing machine works best.” Madrigal replied, oozing irony like wax. “Now let me by.”

Sorrel looked severely affronted, as though the latter had instigated things with her. “Whoa, I was only asking a thoughtful question. No need to get so mad, Mad.”

Madrigal lowered her shoulder and slipped by her, satchel bulging oddly and fruit bunch snapping in places. She strode onto one of the long bench seats and balanced along it, toward her own table in the corner adjacent to ours. She mumbled something only I, on the periphery of the group, could hear: calm, honey, calm.

“What did she say?” Tabbie squealed, delighted.
Tossed over Madrigal’s retreating shoulder: “I said ‘Madrigal.’ Do not call me Mad.”

A rolling “OOOhh” from my table—a “What happened this time?” from the protective Rune, just returning from the bathroom—and a tiny misplacement of an agile foot were enough to distract Madrigal, now at the end of the bench-block.

She tumbled. It was not very far, but the jostle was enough to misalign the magnets holding her satchel-flap in place, and soon, before anyone had time to react to her heretofore-unimpressive exit, a freezer-bag full of live spiders flew out and skittered across the cement.

I suppose the first day I imprinted on her was the first day she cried on me. Does this make me an opportunist? She had been zipping along the bike trail more hurriedly than ever, as though escaping a swarm of bees, and appeared (from my third-floor vantage point) to hit a rock, flipping both she and her bike into a blackberry patch with a distinct crack. Whether said crack belonged to a mechanical malfunction or ankle injury could only be ascertained at closer proximity and after much sprinting.

She had extricated her matted hair from the brambles by that point, and her multi-patterned skirt fanned around her bunched-up legs like a big top.

“Madrigal.” I said from a distance, not wanting to startle her. She glanced up at me, strain apparent around her temples.

“Sorry, no entomology experiments today for you to gape at. Ugh. What a weekend for my parents to trek to Maine.” She winced. I could tell by the weird angle that her ankle had broken.

“Oh, yikes. I’ll go call Rune’s parents.” I made to run back to my house but failed to take more than three steps.

“I don’t want them. I don’t want her.” Madrigal clutched at her elbows and laid her head
upon her knees.

“Why not?” I queried.

“Well, I—“ I fiddled with a cowlick on the back of my head. “You seem to want to speak.”

“Yes. I don’t know, though, that you’ll understand. People tend to view my ire as—“ (here she drew a circle around herself in the dirt and began to sprinkle the excess across her bare legs. They gleamed like makeup over sick cheeks.) “—ill-justified.”

“I want to hear them,” I replied, a bit too eagerly. “We can go inside, if you want.”

And we put her bike in a safe coverlet of forsythia arms, tenacious and dry—and Mom called the ambulance, which (apparently) would take “only a hop, skip, and a jump” to arrive. Madrigal led the way, limping, upstairs as though this was her house and she had invited me in to visit. She brushed a sweater or two into the corner, draped her shawl over a chipped chair, and made it into home.

I tried to summon up that probing machismo expected of rescuers, but she looked so peaceful perched on my bed gripping her coffee (my mother jumps at the chance to assail walk-ins with the stuff) that I could not ask her right away. It would have seemed like a business transaction—*Well, let’s get to the real reason we’re here*—but I couldn’t think what else to do to fill the interim, except wind up the little music box on my nightstand and set it down gently again. (Even then, it sort of plays when it wants to.)

“She gave me the look—“ Madrigal was glazing at half-vision out the window I usually utilized for spying purposes. “That ‘don’t you have somewhere else to be?’ look.” She shifted, palms on the bedspread. “Liam was there.”

“Oh—Liam.” I sat down on the corner. “She has a boyfriend and you feel...” I trodded with exquisite carefulness. “gypped?”
“Yes, but not for the reason you may think. Boyfriends don’t interest me; consequently, I don’t feel gypped of my rightful fella, or what have you.” She snickered to herself, inhaled sharply at a pain in her ankle, and then continued.

“I feel cheated of Rune, of her essence—or of my closeness to it.” The increasing monologue-speed was inversely proportionate to her narrative coherence. “She walks around in a mist which used to be ours and I’m shut out inexplicably and I don’t know why—well, I know why—but I haven’t the faintest what he’s got that I lack—well, I do—but he’s swooped in so quickly without really taking the time to...and...”

“Madrigal.” As I did not know what sort of audience her monologue required, I naturally did what did not feel natural at all and interrupted. “If she loves him, then you could try to be happy—“

“I cannot. I’ve used that logic on myself many a time.” She ground her nails into the bedspread (foot still sticking out at a disconcerting angle), and I half-expected to see a series of molten stitch-veins light up, originating from the spot. “…to hang onto Rune as she hikes this sand-heap or to let her be. That is the question.”

I moved closer to her clutching hand. “How do you generally prefer to love people?”

She stared resignedly. “Apparently, to the point where people run.” A tear ran down her nose and she held a finger against the duct, as if to stop any more from engaging in that foolishness.

The music box sang, finally. Moon River, wider than a mile, I’m crossing you in style someday. It faded out for a while and clicked.

“Ah, here’s one.” I said. “How do you know she even meant what you interpreted her ‘look’ to mean? She could have just been angry at something unrelated—“

“I know her looks and am rarely wrong.”
“Hmm.” I folded my arms and leaned back against the dresser.

“I chose her and she was mine.” One of her sting-like nails traced the rim of the cup, as though wiping it of an invisible lipstick stain. The music box clicked on—oh dream-maker, you heartbreaker, wherever you’re goin’, I’m goin’ your way.

I will be honest. I’m a failure at confronting other people’s problems unless they remind me, in some capacity, of my own. I guess, though, everyone really does this—filter an unfamiliarity through their own window of knowledge or experience.

Her silence did not press.

Two drifters—click.

I tried.

“I was reading up on owls yesterday.” She sat up, eyes glowing in the half-light.

“What did you find?”

“Some varieties imprint—in rare cases, they mark different entities in their lives as sacred, like an object, a space, a human—even another owl.” I found myself growing suddenly articulate under her keen watch. “Once they choose to trust this thing, or things, they can seldom revoke that trust, even if they want to. And it is not contingent on anything the object does—at least, not primarily. Because imprinting has a chemical, or addictive, element, it relies less on the actions of the object than it does on the owl’s initial choosing. It sounds really textbook, but—“

“So the owl essentially says, ‘I will keep choosing you’?”

“It doesn’t matter what you do after, yeah. Although” (I sometimes attempt wit), “if that object happened to be a dust bunny or a spoon or something, then there isn’t much it could do to dissuade the owl anyway.”

Madrigal chuckled through her nose—actually chuckled.

Then my subtlety sort of went poof. “So,” I laughed alongside her, mimicking Mr.
Wormaald’s candid tone, “Is *that* what you keep inside your desk, Mad? An angry little imprint-owl that bites at the slightest provocation?”

She flinched, spilling her coffee in a russet puddle on the bed. “Sorry—I have to go downstairs now.”

Just then, Mom called from below: “Honey, ambulance is here. The sirens are off because the injury’s not critical.”

And Madrigal snatched her belongings, tossing back a goodbye that evoked an image of something cornered. She had spidered back into her pocket-enclave and I did not wholly know, *my huckleberry friend*, what I had done.

Madrigal sat concave on a cafeteria bench, an opaque expression pending and tendrils of chicken soup trailing from hair to brow to lip. Almost reflexively, she swallowed a drop.

Tabbie returned to our table to back-pats and Bubble-Tape giggles, a smirk in her jowl only made apparent by the glinting eyes attached. You know Enjolras, the tragic hothead who leads the failed revolution in *Les Misérables*? Well, as far as our table was concerned, Tabbie had accomplished a comparably heroic act—albeit against a Royal Militia of one.

Now, as ribbons of noodle and carrot streaked her blush, I thought back to the day she cried—earlier that week. A sickish mixture of guilt and gratification gathered at the front of my forehead and diaphragm—guilt because of the imprinting and all inadvertent emotional obligations attached, and gratification because, aside from my sister Mary (before she went away), no one had ever defended my well-being so vividly as Tabbie just did. I wanted to savor the table’s collective sympathy at the news I’d just uttered in a desire to play entertainer for the lunch period—wanted to pull my dripping comrade over by the fingernails and show her this fine specimen of how easy
building a friendship could be.

Never mind that I had just learned the secret today. Never mind I’d had to betray my imprint (so soon!) in order to apprehend it. Not even Madame Coupe had done the same in my position, and Madrigal had not even spilled coffee and thoughts on her bedspread.

Sorrel laid her hand on the small of my back, and I slid down the bench an inch or two in response, apologizing simultaneously for my surprise. “I know,” she said confidentially, “you feel awkward. But it had to be done. You’re such a sweetheart, and she had to be stopped.” I shrugged a limp shoulder in acquiescence, warming to the nurturing gesture. She continued to dust off my clothes, once pulling off a hair from my elbow which appeared almost blue under the fluorescent cafeteria lights.

Rune was at Madrigal’s side now, with an inspirational speech of sorts; Liam, standing reedily to the side, handed her paper towels, which she squeezed around the seaweediest portions of Madrigal’s hair. Mad was smiling, but for Rune’s benefit. It did not reach her eyes.

But I suppose she did deserve some consequence, since the teachers had enabled her for so long.

What I mean is, that day—the day she cried—had not ended with the ambulance, but rather with a bewildering string of lights and darks that, for me, ran something like this:

\begin{verbatim}
I am falling into a bush full of stings—

and huckleberry huckleberry huckleberry huckleberry—

“Don’t move just look at the flashlight, focus on the flashlight

and breathe long breath—“

—“Bread? I’m Dr. Bechtol, what kind of bread do you want

with breakfast—and lunch—and breakfast lunch dinner”—the succulents

on the windowsill were a gift and they’re dying—shame—tag
\end{verbatim}
you’re it and I spy white sheetstowelsockspillowsbleach—“I can
shower myself, thank you—must have fallen down the stairs silly me—“
—“Are you sure that’s what happened, mis—”—a huckleberry
huckleberry rash appeared patient seized—“...and a little morphine
will do you a world of good--good—go—“

We had, Mom said, ridden in the ambulance together, although I did not remember ever
having traveled past the second stair from the top.

I had ricocheted into the wall and sported a banana-mush bruise on my temple to prove it;
in fairness to me, the wall does not look too impressive now, either. I had slid down backwise after
that; what with her broken ankle, Madrigal could not catch me except to momentarily grab my
clutching hand with her fingernails. The little moon-pocks they left have only just faded. As she
needed Accident and Emergency and I Critical Care, we did not share a room, and it was best that
way.

Over the course of my stay I received a succulent plant with no tag to indicate who had sent
it. As they planned to release me on Wednesday, Wednesday became its name. You can ignore a
succulent for days, I’ve found, and it will still cling to whatever water you’ve fed it. It has an eerie
ability to survive despite a lack of outside nourishment, whereas I, the humanoid, needed an IV.

As Rune mopped her up, Madrigal clutched the satchel tightly to her chest, rocking slightly,
forward and back. Across the gap between tables, I watched her begin to talk to no one in
particular. Rune seemed to chide her, possibly for the way the action would come across, but the
talking seemed to calm Madrigal enormously. I have heard that the human spirit finds an
incantatory solace in repetition and meter. Perhaps she was reciting poetry.

Either way, I did not approach her; faintly she replied, “But Rune, it’s Emily Dickinson’s birthday. Surely you can’t have forgotten.” By the latter’s suspended expression, it was clear she had.

“Well, I have all this wretchedness in my hair,” Madrigal tacked on, dropping a waterlogged and extra-frayed noodle to the floor. “I should take a trek down to the locker room.” And she vacated her seat, shouldering the satchel and clomping past our table to the showers.

“...”

“That’s quite a nasty cut on your wrist,” the nurse said one morning while re-tucking my sheets. “The other injuries were relatively straightforward, but this one baffled us.” He threw a “How did it happen?” over his shoulder with mock nonchalance, made less nondescript by his erratic and entirely unsure tossing of pillow cases out into the hallway. I had never seen him before. He was clearly new to the establishment.

They had been pestering me with similar queries since I’d woken up, so the impish side of me responded with a reticent stoicism often associated with trauma victims. “Uh, I don’t really remember. I do live in an attic, though, if that helps you any—lots of loose nails hanging around on doorframes.”

The linen-tossing ceased and he plastered on a polite smile. “Well, actually, an infection like tetanus would look different. The wound would consist of a raw hole in the skin, but yours looks more like—“

“A rancid balloon.” I poked it and let my arm sag on the sheets. It felt as though it had taken on the added weight of a bag of beans. “Maybe a little attic-spider got fed up with my company after all these years and just let it all loose at once.”
“We had thought a spider, or even staphylococcus, but neither would fully explain your instantaneous reaction; you described it as...hold on a sec...” He thumbed through a clipboard which had been hanging on the door. “Ah. ‘A little like being electrocuted.’”

I thought. “It was...a bit of a jolt, yes.” Suddenly aware of just how short my hospital gown fell, I gradually guided the hem down past my knee, keeping firm eye contact with him the whole time, as though directing his primary vision would have any effect on his peripherals. I was like a child who covers its eyes in hopes of winning at hide-and-seek, playing brain-tricks with its eyes.

He began applying clean linens to everything—the pillows, the towel rack. He drew a smiley face on the whiteboard in green marker and accompanied the gesture with a sardonic grin.

“Did...” I could tell he was perusing a mental rolodex somewhere. “...your friend—the one with you—see anything at all?”

I blanched. What had she told them?

All that came out was a very small—and not entirely interrogative—“what.”

“You said your friend saw what happened.”

“When?”

He looked nonplussed, shrugged, returned to the board. “While I did checks last night. You were sleeping.”

I tried to cancel the bizarre expression that was pouring out of my eyes like vaporized cream. I pulled the hem down more. “What—did—I—say?”

Realizing he had crossed a boundary, he hurried, “Oh, nothing profound or detailed. You just mentioned something about a friend—a huckle—“

“Huckleberry friend, probably.”

“—yes. And you said to ask her what happened to you. You said she would know, if I even remember correc—“
“Yes, that’s likely right,” I agreed in an okay-now-hush fashion. “Her name is Madrigal. She would be in the Emergency ward. She might know something, but you should really check with her.” I laughed nervously, more to myself than to him. “After all, I wasn’t fully present, so I wouldn’t remember anything of value.”

He nodded, and a nub of his hair came loose from its contiguous gelled cap. “I’ll see what I can do.”

With that quarter-promise, then, my nurse left the room, the task of cycling out every bit of breakfast material I had (thanks to the continuing muscle spasms in my wrist) tipped onto my bedding complete.

Also, a notable hip hurray—on exiting, he left more spongy hospital socks at the foot of my bed, which I stashed in my satchel with all the others. (Socks make for excellent cage-padding, and Mom promised me a pet owl when I get out of here.) I still had not heard from Madrigal, but Wednesday, an adequate companion for the time being, was thriving in its little pot in the sunshine.

“I am terrified by this dark thing that sleeps in me.” Mr. Wormaald’s crisp checkered shirt was unbuttoned two from the top, and I in my fragment-state could only think over and over, “How glad I am that no chest hair is poking through. What a comfort that is. If he had chest hair climbing out, I don’t know what I would have done.”

The oddest details stick out in times of transition or crisis—the day of the car accident all those years ago, I do not much remember a phone call or the smell of hospital hallways; rather, I recall that sometime in the between, two room-temperature sticks of sweet cream butter lay perfectly wrapped and parallel on our kitchen table, and I thought, now Mary will not get to have
her birthday frosting, confectioner’s sugar already measured and spritzing the inner edges of the bowl. *What a shame that she won’t get to blow out her candles and lick the frosting off.* This was, to my eleven-year-old self, very important.

Now, at fourteen, I scrambled under Mr. Wormaald’s roving eye. He must have always known who’d done the homework; it was directly proportional to the amount of eye-pairs that did not shy from his gaze.

“Come on, guys,” he grinned, “I know you read this avidly. I’ll give you a hint—it’s by someone from the Confessional Poetry movement we’ve been discussing this unit. Wrote *The Bell Jar*? Suicide by stove?...no one?"

Madrigal did not speak up because she wasn’t there. He strode behind his desk, sat, and made a bridge with his fingertips, looking straight at me—“No Madrigal today, then?”

Mom must have told the faculty about us. I peered at him and shook my head.

He let it slide, eyebrows slightly higher than usual. “Well, for those who *didn’t* get around to the reading—‘I am terrified by this dark thing that sleeps in me.’ Think about it. What could she have meant?”

Todd and Sorrel stopped passing notes long enough to exchange a meaningful glance. He answered with a measure of sarcasm, so as to retain legitimacy among peers. “She totally means a spider.”

Sorrel chimed in. “Yeah. Or a whole bag of them.”

The rest of the class—excepting Ravi and Rune—tittered.

“Ah, but only if they’re noiseless, patient spiders.” Mr. Wormaald chuckled, oblivious to Todd’s reference. Someone said, “I see what you did there.” He went on. “Way to tie Plath back to the transcendentalists, Mr. Irwin!”

Without Madrigal, we now possessed no buffer for the challenges the faculty had been
presenting us all along. Her absence got me wondering who else I’d trust to watch my new pet owl in the event that I went away, too.

The doctor, who wore red-winged glasses and insisted I call her “Only-Patricia,” visited my room every couple hours. She and Mom alternated like the balls in those metal desk games, where the leftmost one arrives at center only to knock the rightmost one away careening on its spiderwire, and vice versa: they seemed attuned to each other’s movements so that whenever Interrogator A’s tactics failed, B could step in with an entirely new method to implement.

By the fourth day, my intermittent vomiting spells and night-seizures had dwindled to the point where Just-Call-Me-Patricia felt comfortable sending me home.

Wednesday’s waxy leaves grew plumper and more jubilant the more I neglected them, and she remarked on this as we reviewed my paperwork before release. Among other things, I had received a ‘poisonous bite from an unknown source, and suffered a possible allergic reaction besides’ (the test results for the latter had yet to come in). She recommended, Honey, that my parents and I don thick clothing and treat my bedroom to a thorough sweep.

As she wiped the whiteboard clean on her way to the door, Just-Patricia paused. “Oh, by the way, Bradley mentioned your request that he ask Madrigal about your injury.”

I nodded, folding up my last pair of socks and returning the bed to a reasonable incline via remote. She looked searchingly at me, head cocked.

Oddly enough, I could anticipate exactly what she was about to try.

“Madrigal?”

“Yes, that’s her name.”

“Madrigal Mere?”
“Yes, that’s what I told you.”

“Honey...we don’t have a patient named Madrigal here.”

Mary pressed her forehead and pale fingertips against the ovular flight window. “Mmm, cold,” she said, although frost crystals had yet to form outside. We had just taken off and I let out the breath I had been holding, swallowing against the custardy misery that had slowly built up in the doughnut-holes of my ears. Mary had always been better at flying than I was.

Occasionally, I would catch her eye and try to elicit a grin from her with just my bared teeth—just to reassure my needy brain that she was, indeed, with me. She’d return it, when she saw it, but mostly she’d continue to gaze out the portal at the wiped November forests below, drained of their pigment—conserving her deepest warmth like a handful of two-toned Euro coins in a traveler’s neck pouch.

She once gave me four Bottle Caps—all orange—and I saved them in my coin purse until the following New Year, whereupon I promptly vowed to stop with this reticence I had amassed in shame for feeling more affection than she ever showed. I said, “I will love her spherically, and if she stares at me woodenly in return, this is how many monkey droppings I will give.” I would make an ‘o’ the size of a coin with my thumb and index and challenge the empty wall with my eyebrows, convincing myself that this method of thinking would solve everything in a while. I ate the Bottle Caps and determined I’d create chances to get more.

I dimmed my eyelids at Just-Patricia, unimpressed with her research efforts thus far. “No Madrigal? At all?”

“Afraid not, Tater Tot,” she replied, facing me dead-on with a look that said in
parentheses, “and are we going to have a problem, O Duchess of Kent?”

I zipped up my duffel and slung it over one shoulder; it had gained so much weight over the past four days that I walked at a distinct slant, like Ethan Frome or one of those adjustable protractor arms flicked from 90 degrees. So this was what people with missing limbs felt like all the time. “Well, actually,” I told her, “that makes sense. She wouldn’t have stayed here as long as I have. Maybe check the lists for...three days ago? Two?”

Pat squinched both lips to one side in a semblance of perplexity. “Well...I’ll see.”

“Thank you.” I said, scooping up Wednesday’s ceramic pot with my free, non-duffeled arm.

She would not.

As we reached cruising altitude, a blot of sunset-light reached its fingertips through the cracks of a shut window in the neighboring row. Mary peeked through with scorn at the dozing couple it belonged to—as if to shout, “I have caught the sun’s secret snicker and you have missed it.”

“Isn’t it funny,” she said under her breath, “how gobstoppingly far you can see from up here?”

She was talking to me—no sparklers held to my ears for personal entertainment. She was sharing. I couldn’t spoil it.

“Yes. And how, the farther up you go, the less space seems to matter—like you’re at the top-bread of a sandwich and there’s nothing substantial connecting you to the bottom.”

The sunset filled our whole cabin with orange, although everything below and around the plane loomed like dark talcum.
She smiled at me—radiantly—and her upnose and dark mane backlit by the viscous outside (which now, I was sure, couldn't frost if it tried), created a cameo picture I've never wanted so much to snap.

Instead, we watched the distant gradient between ocean and sky, and the pilot’s announcements fell mute on our ears like sparklers in a bubble bath.

After the noodle soup incident, I did not see Madrigal again for a while—couldn’t hear her literary whisperings with Rune nor the hisses (Ahr-te-meshh, Ar-Themm-ash) usually tossed so gently into the back of her desk. Over the firstfruits of freshman year—those poignant months which, as far as establishing a ‘cool’ persona goes, can either affirm or derail with the slightest wardrobe decision or bodily noise—Madrigal’s patterns, once so vibrant and ultramarine, had all but gone out.

This should have bothered my imprint-self, but instead, I thrived. Todd and Sorrel and Tabbie and the twins—all, I began to discern, essential allies for survival—liked me, sought me out at lunch, caught my eye in homeroom. Once, in January, I was one of the first to receive a passed note in Mr. Wormaald’s class: Book drop, 10:15. Be there or be SQUARE! (Everyone else got the same note eventually, but there was a certain hierarchy that affected Order of Receipt quite significantly, I came to realize).

And Madrigal, sapped even of the well-liked Rune’s company most days because the latter (it seemed) had tired of her comrade’s grimness, continued to skip school.

Although, after the accident that directed us both hospital-ward, Madrigal and I had not spoken much, I could not fully relinquish the idea that the doctors had lied to me about her stay. I
therefore called the hospital daily under assumed names, asking to speak with a different member of the staff each time. (I found that requesting nurses with names like Lisa, Sarah, David, and Trish will rarely serve one ill.) The conversations generally ran similarly to this first one:

“Yes, hello, I’m a relative of Madrigal Mere. She was a patient in Accident and Emergency last week.”

“Uh, I’m checking now...do you mean Madeline?”

“No.” I snickered in spite of myself.

“We had a Marisol in that ward. She was 63.”

“Was?”

“Yes, ma’am, she passed away suddenly three days ago. Cardiac arrest.”

“Ah, I’m sorry. But no Madrigal? You would remember her. She had blue hair and talked like a book.”

“Sorry, ma’am, but I can’t help you. Have a nice day.”

I would conclude by holstering the phone—resisting the urge to pester the receptionist more. I would then push all my furniture into a corner and sprawl supine across the emptiest area of floor, filling up my diaphragm with air and imagining what being crazy would feel like. Then I’d put it all back and do the same thing again the next day.

*I’ll be in Emergency*, she had whispered, perched in the ambulance hull, gripping my limp wrist for a pulse with her long fingers. I remember that comment and not much else, aside from the feeling of sheets under my bare elbows, stiff like Kleenex steeped in the cornstarch Mary used to knead through her hair to avoid showering. Since my ambulance-afternoon, thoughts melted more than usual in and out of the Moon River tune like the decorative foam on a latte newly stirred.

More importantly, though, I became, over a startlingly short period of time, grossly
obsessed with what I viewed to be the profound mystery of the year: where had Madrigal gone, and why had the nurses allied with my parents in hiding her from me? My wrist, scoured of toxins for a week by now with antibiotics and bleach, began to close up.

Grown dissatisfied with Mom’s black coffee offerings infused with the bland assurance that “wherever Madrigal is now, honey, I’m sure she’s fine,” I decided to consult a person I knew would clarify certain segments of that day, at least in part.

It was lunch time, and Mr. Wormaald was just exiting the teacher’s lounge, skinny tie in place and hands brimming with a mug of hot coffee. He strutted over to me, cheerily keeping time against the ceramic with his fingertips in response to some internal tune. “Hi, there.”

The hall echoed. I cleared my throat. “I’d like to talk in private, please.”

His face got static for a moment, as though a curtain had closed between acts—the run crew already knew what would happen and had to prepare the order of set-pieces, so no one would look foolish when their entrance came up. His mouth relaxed. “Sure.”

The English room, despite its cornflower walls—each brick inscribed with favorite literary quotes from classes past—seemed otherworldly in its emptiness, like a video game level set in a place that should be familiar but is not quite. Mr. Wormaald took up his usual desk perch, bridging his fingers in a comfortingly characteristic way. At least he had not changed. I sat on a front desk, legs suspended and swinging.

“So,” he quipped, “What did you wish to discuss?”

I gave him no time to regroup behind his curtains. “What sent you to the hospital that day?”

His eyes trickled to the left. “I don’t know.” He suddenly didn’t look like himself, and a
haunted feeling pooled itself into the soft spot on my clavicle as though I’d just stared at my own reflection and found it wanting of personhood.

“You must have some idea. What did—if you don’t mind my asking—what did your doctor write down on that release form people get?” I was obliquely hinting I could relate.

He leaned back in his chair, contemplative. “They treated me for—"

“A serious poisonous bite?”

He remained impassive. “—perhaps. But, mind, that’s just their guess. I didn’t observe anything strange before blacking out, though—no insects, reptiles, or um, hypodermic needles anywhere around any of your desks. Unless there’s something you’ve yet to admit?” He grinned widely. “Just kidding. I appreciate your concern, though.” The last bit was a finality. He wanted to finish his coffee in peace.

I curled my knees up to my chin, resolute. “Do you think it might have had to do with Madrigal’s desk? Or, rather, something she kept inside it?”

He inhaled slowly, sipped his coffee. “What makes you say that?”

“Well, I have a suspicion as to what may have stung you.”

He looked at me over the rim of the coffee cup, listening intently. When I made an inarticulate chirp with the back of my throat, he prodded. “Go on?”

“First of all,” I coughed out, sitting on my hands to keep from running them continually across my eyebrows and tear ducts—a nervous tic of mine. “Before you went unconscious, did you feel a sort of—electric shock? Like you’d just touched a live wire?”

Mr. Wormaald nodded cautiously, gently, as though praying I’d ask no further. “But I’m sure that can be applied to many types of bites or stings.” He did not ask how I knew about the shock.

My eyes trailed out the window. “Even those of an Arizona Bark Scorpion?”
He scrutinized me, eyes slats in the encroaching sunlight. It seemed he was weighing the possibility—or simply trying to ascertain my level of sanity. Then he stood up and marched toward the door. “I’m going to call the nurse.”

“What do you—why? I got stung, too—one day while she was in my room. I saw it and pretended not to, because I care for her. Very much.” I was babbling with increasing ferocity, now; my feet no longer swung. “Don’t call the nurse. Don’t call the nurse.”

He planted his feet in front of the door—somewhat apologetically—and dialed for Mrs. Gill. He would not meet my eyes. I stood up and backed toward the window.

“You knew—you knew—and you didn’t turn her in, either. You helped ferry her through because she’s special. You understand. Who turned her in, then?”

He leaned out into the hallway, checking. “Bark scorpions are illegal and deadly. I can assure you that no student would have brought one here.”

I shed two tears from each eye respectively, and then more, increasingly hot and indistinct from each other, ran down my cheeks, nose, and (as I was tossing my head every which way) ears. “Okay, whatever you say. But—then—why—did—they—send—Madrigal—away?”

His frantic coffee-cup tapping slackened finally at the approach of Mrs. Gill’s footsteps in the corridor, brusque and purposeful.

I darted to the back of the room, crouching behind Madrigal’s desk, where Mrs. Gill’s large hips would not fit. They could not make me forget so easily.

Mr. Wormaald and Mrs. Gill dragged me the entire way to the nurse’s bench, and I shouted for my Madrigal until Mom arrived with Benadryl and I fell back into my own pillows, breaths drawn out as though I were inhaling Jell-O through a straw instead of air.
I woke to the ringing of the telephone downstairs. I heard Dad pick up faintly, and a short conversation ensued, concluding with a promise on our end that he would talk to Mom and have a final follow-up shortly. “Thanks, Dr. Bechtol. Sorry, Patricia. No, we’ve received the records today, they’re right in front of me. You were very prompt, thanks again. I’ll—I’ll—yeah. Soon.”

Patricia. What did my doctor want to follow up about? I sat up and hung over my dresser to peer out the window, as I had always done before. Madrigal’s bike had been moved from the clump of forsythia and was nowhere to be seen.

Who had taken it—Madrigal’s parents? Madrigal herself? And why had she stopped attending school—she, who osmosed facts with the momentum of a downhill snowball and conversed with literary characters as though expecting a dialogue to follow? Had she been forced to relocate, and if so, which of the teachers had reported her for keeping Artemis in the back of her desk—Mrs. Quarry or Madame Coupe? Come to think of it, how had she continued safely for so long, if the politics teacher, the English teacher, and the principal herself had been aware of the creature’s presence in a public school setting?

What is more, if the school administrators had been the ones to send her away, then why did Madrigal’s doctors (and other hospital personnel) appear to have knowledge enough to omit her name from the patient list while remaining fairly open about others (like the late Marisol)? And didn’t sharing privileged patient information—as with Marisol—with random strangers over the phone constitute a breach in confidentiality? Was this normal hospital protocol?

Perhaps, though, the patients mentioned were not real, and the medical staff was using peripheral “facts” to distract from a grimmer possibility that I could not entertain for too long without spiraling into whatever mental oddities befall an addict—or imprint—denied her trigger substance.

My arms, flopped over the dresser-edge, began to sting from being pressed against its
chewed corners for so long. I ogled the window-contents as though in a trance—shallow breaths and
dangling mouth and all—and made up a little plan in my head—and thought how Mary would have
been sitting, plotting on the bed next to me, had she been here.

“Dad,” I whimpered from the bottom step, wrapped in blankets enough to rounden my
torso like a chinchilla’s. “I have no idea what happened to my T.V.” It would take him at least two
minutes to realize the wires had been painstakingly snipped with a pair of nail clippers.

The envelope was on the counter—thick, pale, manila. I flipped it over, to the new-opened
seal, and slid out an assortment of papers. An e-mail, marked urgent, from three days ago fluttered
out from the bottom of the pile.

*I'm afraid we’ll have to put your child on rest for a time because the treatments did not
produce the desired result.*

I froze. Did she mean me? Of course Just-Patricia did. I was an only child.

*Although after the car accident three years ago, we all saw this as an apt way for Madeline
to process the trauma, her responses to therapy have lately taken a turn for the worse. Projecting
Mary’s good traits on the fictional Madrigal—which we and various schoolteachers encouraged—
provided some catharsis at first, but as Madrigal became more colorful—gained a dimensional
personality, shall we say, through Madeline’s nurturing attention—Mary’s extremes, sometimes
dark, which we had meant to channel for a more constructive end, floated to the surface of
Madeline’s subconscious memory.*

*These extremes began to take the form, in her mind, of the bark scorpion Artemis, who
she named and fed and to whom she awarded a large portion of her energy. Thus, when ‘Madrigal’
felt powerless, Artemis stung. When ‘Madrigal’ felt angry or misunderstood or betrayed, Artemis*
stung then, too. Since none of these incidents occurred outside the figurative sphere, one might write this kind of flooding off as having been successful in its own self-contained state; the problem was that, as with Mary, Madeline began to invest too much—to take ownership of the girl’s highs and lows as though every time Madrigal was bullied or disparaged by her peers, Madeline held complete responsibility for it. Convincing herself otherwise never produced a sustained effect.

As a result, she began to disappear in personhood—to pale in comparison with this vibrant kindred of her own making. Before Madeline had a chance to defamiliarize from herself completely, we simulated during last week’s session a kind of accident, which we thought would dissuade Madeline from seeking contact with Madrigal anymore. Unfortunately, it appears we cannot induce Madeline to forget. Madeline has, even since the ‘accident,’ expressed a need to have the character Madrigal back. We believe, however, that to reintroduce such a corrupt entity into Madeline’s routine would impede her emotional progress considerably, and suggest that you refrain from mentioning Madrigal at all until further notice.

Another page.

Medical Record: Madeline Rook- H. Stile Clinic

Gender: Female

DOB: January 3, 1992

Problems: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Services Due: hypnotherapy (via programmed relaxation exercises)

Frequency of visits: weekly.

Weekly? I had never visited this clinic in my life.

Feet began to creak down the stairs. One more page—any page.

These same hypnotherapy treatments can be simulated via soothing auditory cues we’ve implanted into the enclosed music box. Find receipt attached.
I scuttled back upstairs, smirking. What an elaborate hoax. My Madrigal was real. So was Artemis. I knew it—because pieces of our experience existed in realms the doctors had not mentioned, and could not have orchestrated or known.

Here is one—the most important one—a deleted scene, if you will, from the tidied-up product I’ve presented thus far, so as not to worry all you charming individuals who’ve been reading my journals up till now.

Madrigal stood over my form, crumpled against the railing at the top of the stairs. The room behind was dipped orange with sunset and her skirt rippled as though dozens of tiny circus performers had been sewn into its seams.

“I am sorry for what Artemis has done,” she whispered; “When I’m irate, her protective side comes out.”

The scorpion, graceful, the color of honey, had withdrawn under a chair. Madrigal reached a taloned hand under and gently coaxed her out, murmuring, “Artemis, Artemis, come into the light,” all the while—“my huckleberry friend.” She suddenly looked like a mother whose child does not need her help walking to the bus anymore: melancholy and shining, as though on the brink of a choice.

She lifted her injured foot until its shadow aligned with the scorpion’s tail. “But I will stomp on her for you.”

She leaned against the doorframe, a hand pillowed against her open mouth and eyes wide at what had just flown out of it. She gave a small nod nonetheless, slightly quieter this time. “I will.”

She made to smash it, but I choked out a frail, gossamer “don’t.”
An incredulous pause, a sharp intake of dust-mote attic air, and Madrigal fell beside the befuddled creature, sobbing. “Why not?” she hissed between spread fingers.

I held the railing above my shoulders like a yoke. My throat had almost closed. “Because I will still like you, even if you don’t.”

Her eyes, fixed before on her feet, met mine like a rising drawbridge and were translucent for a moment, as though a vault behind them had gone unlocked. She beamed. I had stayed.

Madrigal’s shrill distress cry echoed down the stairwell like a birdsong, and Mom responded right away—responded because Madrigal made, in fact, a sound—dashing to carry me to the waiting ambulance outside.

In the interest of speeding up my own therapy (for, as the new doctor, Something-Bull, often reminds me, lying or withholding only defamiliarizes us farther), I add, for your perusal, one deleted scene more, produced during an automatic writing exercise. It is a coincidence, really, but one that, if you read it, might elicit a snicker or two. And reader, I do hope you laugh.

All final exams at St. Rufous High were cumulative, which I did not mind that May, because the teachers always loaded their early units with attention-grabbers, so that we’d be better-disposed toward the duller material that came later, like the Puritans, or a sentence diagram, or mathematical proofs. Unit One sort of apologized for Units 2-4. I began the first phase of studying, then, with an eager lucidity, fueled by Mom’s black coffee and a sunbeam that sat on me like fleece.

For English, I reviewed Ovid’s story of Phaethon, who crashes his chariot against the stars. I read about Diana, the huntress, who transforms and shoots down threatening entities.

For Scientific Foundations I read about the chemical defenses of the wormwood tree.
For History, I reviewed vocabulary about the music of the Baroque Era. *Allemande.*


*Madrigal: a sung composition, often in two parts.*

The textbooks stared up at me like fish eyes.

I slowly tipped the coffee over them and sketched a firecracker into the central one’s disintegrating cover.

I began to twist a piece of my hair, and it came off blue in my hand.

Please laugh.

_fin_