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Lovers

]] sat back in the chair with her knees open and a Marlboro Light between her lips, smoke rising gray against the dark. How do you picture her? Naked? Is she? Have she and I just been together, bodies matching on the couch, kisses easy as long sips of water? And now she wants to watch? Most likely.

We want her to watch too. The confidence in her shoulders as she leans back. Peter hears her voice in caricature, loud, with a cigarette rasp. I think of tone, words meant only for my ears.

"If anything ever happened to him, I would take care of you. Let that be our little secret." She wasn't being morbid. They'd been friends for five years before she ever decided to come over and fuck me.

I'd said, "The baby's asleep," and she'd said, "That's a wrap," and hung up the phone. In the interim, Avery had woken up, maybe sensing the hard edge of intensity in my energy, the way babies do. I was sitting in the rocking chair nursing her when the downstairs door opened and shut, then the stairs creaked. "She changed her mind," Peter said. I stroked my thumb across the baby's forehead.

But then the stairs started creaking from the bottom up, and Peter laughed. They were messing with me. There she was, an eager silhouette, leaning down to kiss me full on the mouth while I nursed the baby. We'd only met a few times before that. We looked at Avery, who was almost asleep in my arms.]] said she'd be downstairs, no rush. Because of her easy acceptance of the situation, I began to accept myself and drop that scrim

of shame and apology that I've felt most of my life.

Why, at age nine, did I picture Dea and myself locked in the dark of the classroom closet? The teacher was angry; Dea was afraid; I was a comfort. I'd imagine such things in bed at night with my hands between my legs. Go ahead and analyze it. Maybe the fast heartbeat of excitement equated itself with fear. I wouldn't have known the connotations of the word *closet* just like I didn't know yet about sex for pleasure, or even what exactly I was doing to myself. She and I were in the archetypal dark. That was my earliest fantasy.

When we lived in East Rockaway, Peter began to whisper fantasies involving Sid and me. Eight years older than I am and five inches taller, Sid was married then. On her husband's money, she treated me to expensive dinners and wine in the days when I ate Kraft Macaroni and Cheese because it was twenty-five cents a box. Sid turned out to be the first woman I'd sleep with—and only once. She couldn't talk about it and pretended it had never happened. I turned her into a muse so that I could expurgate all the psychological and emotional discomfort.

My shoulders crush into the crease between the cushion and the arm of the couch. My legs wrap around Peter's waist. In a little while, I'll reach out my hand for hers. JJ's. She'll take it.

When Peter and I lived in the upstairs of a two-family house on East Olive, three blocks from the Atlantic shoreline in Long Beach, he once laced the balcony with sheets and tried to make love to me under the blue summer sky. I couldn't. No one could have seen us, but the idea made me freeze up.

In those years, even though he did physical labor from dawn until sunset, I'd wake him up for sex. If rejected, I'd pout and cry, or even turn on the lights and make noise until I got what I wanted.

With JJ, everything is fine. I am complete. He watches us. She watches us. I never watch them. I would, but she insists against it. Not that we ever suggest it. She's already made that clear.

He is probably the only man she knows who has honored her in friendship by never hitting on her. Note the irony. They met when she got transferred to his site because she'd gone to HR about sexual harassment at her previous site. That's why they'd known each other for five years. They went out often on Friday nights with a group of coworkers.

The first time I met her was at a bass-pounding club called Savannah. "I'm JJ," she said. "I'm gay." I knew already. Peter talked about everyone at his site, but most of all about her.

"So am I," I said wryly. She went on and on, reassuring me she wasn't interested in my husband. "I'm not worried about it," I said. "You're a really good friend to him, he's told me."

I never worry about him cheating. Lying about how many beers he's had or something related to small sums of money, yes. Loyalty, not at all. Back in Long Beach, I'd encouraged him to go after the woman who lived next door. Her husband was in medical school. I was in graduate school. She used to come over to smoke with Peter. I wanted to prove to him that a person can love two people at the same time. I wanted him to know that when I fell in love with Sid, and when I was brokenhearted over her, I still loved him as much as always.

It never worked out with the woman next door. His honesty about my encouragement is what we suspect ruined it. She'd rather he was cheating on me. My knowing made it unsafe. If I got jealous, I could tell her husband. An inequality there. Clearly my need to prove to Peter that a person can be in love with two people trumped my understanding of morality.

Peter composed a song about her called "Still I Wish It Happened." The song aches with discordant piano notes. He also wrote a song about JJ, which sounds like snow falling. It's been many years since he wrote a song about me, but he's writing one now. It's called "You Give Me Ground," and I love it so far. Sometimes he doesn't finish the songs he writes. Sometimes he records them in his friend's basement studio.

Sid cheated on her husband with me, asserting, "It's different with a woman," which makes sense to me sexually but not morally. Her husband had been cheating on her for years, but that still doesn't exonerate us. I debated with myself in my journal for months prior. I ended up doing what I am certain is wrong. I rationalized that planets were pushing at my back and that we'd been attracted to each other since I was fifteen. Before she even knew him. Our attraction traversed ten years before anything came of it. For most of those years, I was too young in her eyes since she was eight years older, and I was repressing what I knew to be true.

I was fifteen, in fact, when I lost my virginity to a man twenty-three years old. Vinnie was decent, though. He stopped when I said it hurt too much, and at fifteen, I read that as the sign of a decent character. I'd heard a story about a friend's older sister who'd said "Stop" unsuccessfully.

I can tell the story in a sordid way or in a way that shows true affection between us. He was adopted. Had a chipped front tooth. Believed full-heartedly in the psychic he consulted. I connected with the poetic loneliness of those facts.

I'd been anorexic, but for some reason, I could lounge in his apartment nude and feel at ease with my body. We used to have long phone conversations. The kitchen in the apartment where I lived was narrow, just room for a sink and stove. The

phone was affixed to the wall there, and I stood against the wood molding talking to him.

Vinnie's apartment was seedy. A common bathroom in the hallway. Beach as a bedrooms door. Porn on the TV set. One time I saw high heeled shoes in the front closet by the doorway. I had no illusions. After a sex-ed seminar in school, I insisted on condoms. He insisted I'd fall in love with him; I told him I wouldn't, and I didn't.

It wasn't about that. It was about my rite of initiation. I understood that even then. I was a level-headed latchkey fifteen year-old who got high grades and worked after school. I was just conquering a blend of anorexia and bulimia all on my own. I'd never dated. You could call it statutory rape, but I wouldn't. For me, it was relief. I'd worried for a long time about my sexual orientation, but by the third try, I became a bit of a nymph.

At the time, I had a friend, Emilio, who'd come to America from El Salvador. He remembered seeing war up close and described it to me. In the caption next to his yearbook picture, Emilio included my initials. Most days after school, he'd drive me home in his El Dorado. He asked me to the prom, but I declined. I cared about him and still regret maintaining such a rigid boundary. I wasn't attracted, wasn't gracious enough to accept his invitation. I wasn't gracious with myself either.

There is a short story by Margaret Atwood entitled "Rape Fantasies," which, when I read it, provided me with great relief. Generally, I never fantasized about it happening to me, but more often about other women. I've decided the images and sounds on television and in film are primarily responsible. As a child, something flickered in response to the calls for help from female cartoon characters. Later, Charlie's Angel became

an obsession, one of them always precariously vulnerable to harm.

Let's pause.

I am mother to a daughter now, and this story of the loss of my virginity, which I used to romanticize in the same way people romanticize poverty and depression, is something I see from an entirely different vantage point now. Who knows what elusive influences created that odd blend of sadomasochism that shows up in my fantasies, but I hope my daughter can sidestep them, that I can protect her by teaching her to find strength, self-love, and confidence.

I indulge myself in recalling a journey of bisexuality when I might be writing about Avery, who is now two-and-a-half years old and speaking in full sentences—that little voice piping out ideas and questions one after the next. That I write selfishly induces easy guilt. In a sense, I'm familiar with feeling I don't have a right to explore where I stand on the continuum between straight and gay. In fact, I didn't even know there was a sexual orientation spectrum until I was in my twenties. I promise I will write about Avery too, all the beauties and epiphanies of mothering and the wisdom of children. But I need to write about all of this too.

When she sleeps, I hold her, then draw back and use my senses. Take in the stale, milky scent of her exhalation. The sight of her little hand still holding the bottle I'll carefully extricate. The ruffley shadow cast by her eyelashes. Her hair and her limbs growing longer. Eventually, she'll need her own bed in her own room.

First, she was inside my belly. Then she nursed beside me, in fetal position against my belly. Now she sleeps beside me, her fingers tangling themselves in my hair.

You live for no lover like you live for a daughter. With a lover you can indulge the id, but as a mother you are responsible, compassionate, patient, loving, tender. When Avery was first born, I looked at everyone, especially strangers, with the gaze of a mother. Every person I saw had once been a vulnerable infant, in need of protection every single second.

If I have made any mistakes, if there have been any lapses, then I trust the night, when her unconscious mind feels my presence, and her sleeping body trusts my arms around her, and the dreams do their repair work.

When she is asleep, she looks exactly like Peter, the puffy bottom lip, the underside of the nose. In his sleep, Peter emanates warmth. Before Avery was born, I used to tuck my head under his armpit and my cold feet between his thighs. I have lived with him for more than half of my life. He loves to laugh about the early phases, telling the stalker story, about how I used to slip my hand through the mail slot to unlock his door, and how I'd be inside waiting for him when he got home from work. My favorite memory of that apartment is the way the radiators shot steam around as if we were in a steam room. Big drops of water would bead up on the ceiling and fall like rain. All his comic books dried in the shape of paper waves. When we made love, sweat would drip from his shoulders onto my face. I loved the salty taste of it. From that dreamlike tropical room, we moved into our first place together, an apartment with drawers built into the walls, and from there to Long Beach, where we'd walk the beach in any weather, witnessing ice-*over* jetties or topless women taking in the sun.

It happened the same year: our daughter was born, so Peter, Avery, and I became a family, and I entered our realm. You hear all about postpartum depression, but do you know about

postpartum bliss! That is what I experienced. Steady Zen state most of the time. And while JJ's presence may seem incongruous to most, I felt complete.

Maybe motherhood was the reason I opened my heart so wide. Or maybe it was JJ herself. How within minutes of walking in the door, she might jump into Peter's arms and wrap her legs around his waist. Or pull my clothes off and lay me back on the couch, her hands opening my knees, her palms behind my thighs. She always began with eye contact. Those race-car eyes.

She repeated the words "I love you" like a habit, but the one time I looked into her eyes and told her the same, she said, "Love is like confetti, people throw it all over the place."

Her character was not refined. Alcohol, cigarettes, and weed were givens. Even though I'm not prone to using, she'd take a hit off a joint and cover my mouth with hers, releasing the smoke into me, kissing me while my lungs expanded. Rather than chance waking the baby by using the upstairs bathroom, she'd piss in the kitchen sink. She showed us the scissor strips in her bra where she used to hide the coke she'd do when she went to clubs.

The first time we slept together, she'd done coke. Her sweat had that flat, feral scent. She stopped short and began a naked diatribe about how her father used to leave her sitting in the back of his Bronco for hours at a time. Stories of abandonment. I listened from my vantage point of being eleven years older than she was and my recent motherhood, remembering when I sought out my own pain in order to make sense of it. I saw her as immature. Knew that her story told me clearly *I will abandon you*. I felt compassion, yet I also felt detached and wary.

I had some parallels to my second female lover, Naomi. Both part Asian and part white, bombastic in petite bodies and direct. They were born two days apart in January. After three times together, Naomi told me I was too rough. That she thought being with a woman would be different, gentler.

But months later, I became Naomi's lifeline. She dropped into nihilism and tried to escape by renting a room at Montauk Point. Grilling fish on a backyard barbeque, looking out at the story beach and water. We hiked to Montauk Lighthouse together, sat near the water, and took turns coming up with excuses for the sound of the ocean rolling the pebbles that skirted the lighthouse base.

When Avery was two weeks late, I had to have her heart-beat monitored daily. The sound of it filled the exam room. It sounded like an express train, like a horse's hooves. I'd brought books but did nothing but listen.

When the baby inside me was a few months old, the midwife could not find the heartbeat. She assured me it was early yet, normal not to hear it. Reassurances echoed hollow in my mind. I went home and made line drawings of a fetus with a beating heart. Sid arrived on a plane that night, and I picked her up from JFK. I'd never been more preoccupied with myself and less with her. The second midwife we met couldn't find the heartbeat with the monitor either, so she had me get a sonogram right there in the office. And there was the baby's body, swimming inside me.

Every day of those two weeks was a day I knew that nothing mattered more to me than hearing the heartbeat gallop around the room. During every minute of the twenty-four-and-a-half-hour delivery, time mattered only to those monitoring. What else would I be doing that could be more important to me?

There was a rainstorm outside. Lights flickered in the delivery room. I knelt and said "Jesus." Ironically, his statue hung over the bed. Peter said, "Jesus doesn't help atheists like you." We laughed. Avery's birth is a story she'll hear over and over again. Various versions, depending on her age.

JJ would tell a story nonstop and full of description. I used to question her performer's nature. Was it an audience she needed? But she could listen without interrupting for as long as I needed to talk.

JJ has a massive tongue and she knows how to use it. She has a true heart encased in protective lies.

When she and Peter first met, she stated she was gay, but eventually she had a boyfriend. The first time she came over, they had broken up, but later they got back together, and she cheated on him with me. I suggested she just invite him instead. He and Peter would smoke spliffs and talk like sports commentators while JJ and I did all over each other. While Peter did me, I'd watch them: Drew's body, large and mahogany, hers light, bent over the ottoman. Their skin tones harmonized. He was good for her. Hated the coke and nagged about her cigarette smoking. He was a laid-back guy. Called me her girlfriend.

She and I took Avery on a road trip to New Hampshire to visit a friend of mine. JJ had bought a T-shirt for the occasion. It read "Got MILF?" She also bought pink boy-shorts. She was entirely present with Avery, her protective maternal reflexes quicker even than mine. We laughed a lot on that trip: about the way she told off the cop who circled around when we were kissing in the parking lot of the welcome center and Avery was asleep in the car seat; about trying to make love in the pitch dark on the floor and missing each other's mouths. We said,

"How does Helen Keller have sex?" I was mother by day, lover by night, and then there would be a few hours of us sleeping with Avery between us.

It was on this trip that I asked her if she considered us girlfriends. It had been seven steady months. In New Hampshire, she made a show of lovers' body language while I pushed the stroller. The way she answered me showed her confusion. Back home, in her apartment, after sleeping with me, she'd told Drew she thought she was gay. She'd been on the straight path with him, on and off, for almost two years, so I tried to downplay the insensitivity of her comment by smacking her with a wooden spoon, and an all-out competition began, ending with the two of us red-wetted and tangled up on the kitchen floor. But up north, she told me she wanted to marry him and have kids, as if that eclipsed my own relationship with her. "I like it the way it is," she said. She'd always talk about how she wished she could live in a mansion one day, with me in the west wing and her in the east and an intercom in every room. "Avery can babysit my kids because she'll be old enough by then." A wink.

All the while, I had another lover in my back pocket, Mallory. Or maybe she had me in hers. When I first met her, she was a bartender living in a basement apartment with her boyfriend. She'd been to Amsterdam on a Fulbright scholarship and was studying law. The first time I came over, her boyfriend told me, "Mallory only cleans this place when she wants to get an."

When she'd kiss me, she seemed like a tall flower with a bending stalk. Peter and I had met her at a Halloween party a couple of years before we became parents. Mallory was dressed as Lara Croft, complete with black duct tape encircling her thighs. She bought me a glass of wine and asked for

my phone number. Maybe once every few months, we'd talk books over dinner or go to Manhattan, make out in my car, or get it on at her place if her boyfriend was out on a date. When I was pregnant, she wasn't feeling it; after Avery was born, she was, thanks to my round, warm, milk-filled breasts. I'd melt into intimacy with her. She'd leave her voice mail full and my texts unanswered. She cited Ayn Rand as a rationalization.

The deciding moment was when Peter and I threw a big house party for my birthday. We had Avery stay over at her grandparents' for the night. As the other guests left, Mallory lingered, as did JJ and Drew. I got someone to drive Mallory home. JJ led me into the living room.

I pushed JJ away when I started losing her, after she broke up with Drew and found another guy. Shae methodically brainwashed her, then one night beat the shit out of her roommate. Initially, she stopped sleeping with me because Shae wanted her all to himself, but then she came over behind his back, thanking me for being her "sanctuary," saying she wanted to move into our basement. The last time she came over, she told Peter to fuck her, and he still regrets that, protectively, he didn't. Eventually, I told her what I thought of her relationship with Shae: "I think he'll turn abusive toward you." JJ's first girlfriend had.

While I drove the long, dark New England highway back from New Hampshire, JJ told me about her first girlfriend and about how she'd never give herself over to anyone like that again. She also told me about a letter she'd written about her feelings for me. She'd hidden it away in a bottom drawer.

I wanted to protect JJ from Shae, but he steadily encroached upon her every moment. I had a daughter. My priority, clearly, had to be to protect her. I couldn't sleep with JJ while she was

attached to someone like Shae. Couldn't take the chance he'd follow her here.

Peter deserved better too. In our living room one night, pre-Shae, while Drew took JJ from behind, I slid underneath her like a car mechanic on a dolly. I held her body close as she took the impact. Drew took my calves into his hands. Peter knelt near my shoulder, but I was so absorbed in JJ that I touched him only briefly.

I grieved so hard after JJ and I split that I'd pull the car over to cry, and I'd cry loud, like I never do, like a child does. Involuntarily, I'd cry when Peter made love to me because the memory of her touch was everywhere on my body.

I still left a voice mail or sent a text occasionally, but the last time JJ and Peter met for drinks, she told him, "I don't want to be friends with your wife anymore." I knew she was under Shae's hold and that the abandonment of her early childhood had wired her that way. I forgive her inability to face me. For a long time I felt certain she'd come back to me. Of all the female lovers, JJ was the only one who swam deep with me.

Part of what had attracted JJ was the love between Peter and me. We'd been together twenty years: seven before my experience with Sid, ten before marriage, seventeen before we became parents. My entire adult life. People have always commented on our love and how it is like an aura around us. JJ was always saying, "I want what you two have."

To distill moments from twenty years . . . It doesn't come down to details, but to something sensual, emotional, intuitive. The way I feel when he holds me. The fact that he is the only person I can cry in front of, and he'll hold me and not ask me to explain my feelings. The way he taught me, when I was bitter and closed, how to trust love.

For years, and after each breakup with a woman, I tried to quell my feelings about women. I never understood myself. For one year I was complete. Absolutely, completely, imperfectly, perfectly complete. I had a man, a child, and a woman. Peter, Avery, and JJ. I loved each. And myself. I wanted no other man, no other woman. I was amazed at what it is to love your own child. The odd thing is, having been complete, and now that the grief over the loss of JJ has diminished to echoes, I am still complete. I know my nature and have lived it, at least for a time.

After two years apart, I snapped a photo on my iPhone in which Avery had one of JJ's expressions. A vestige, maybe, of bonding with JJ as a toddler, resurfacing at age four. All the times I'd quelled the urge to make contact. Impulse finally compelled me. I texted the picture to JJ with a short note, left my phone upstairs, went downstairs, and ignored what I'd just done. Later I found she'd left a long, excited message. When we reunited, she ordered me silent and gave me a speech: apologizing, promising, recognizing, and loving. Now, two years have passed. In this second round, the new depths are beyond what I could have anticipated. So are the complications. We're girlfriends, intensely. She's drunkenly talking about tattoos or rings on our right ring fingers. She's stating we're best friends, not girlfriends. But we snuggle, kiss deep, and sleep spooned. Always eye contact and that undeniable energy, and our tongues, mouths, bodies. The game of musical beds. Mine, the pull-out couch, hers.

How Peter feels is just as complicated. It was one thing loving a woman who is open to women, but he never bargained on my being this emotional about, this devoted to, another

lover. The logistics are tricky. Fridays, for example: Avery goes to her grandparents' for a sleepover, I to JJ's rented room overnight, then home early Saturday morning to get it on with Peter. The emotional landscape is delicate territory. I worry when JJ feels lonely, experience guilt when Peter is resentful. There's constant concern that as much as I give myself to them, I may be too selfish. But my strongest feeling is simple. And it's as deeply natural as it is to be Avery's mama. My love is profound in all three directions. One child, two lovers. I think about the four chambers of my heart: one for each, including myself. I still don't really know how it can possibly work—only that, at times, it does.