

Chapter 5

Dear Quinn,

Sorry it took me so long to write back. I've been in one of my major funks. Remember those? This wasn't one of the worst ones, but they're all bad. Please don't write back with some lecture about "staying on my meds." I've heard it all before.

I'm writing because I'm about to do something I've never done before. I'm working on the final rewrite of a new novel set to come out late this year, and I've been talking with the publisher about doing a book tour for this one.

I don't know exactly why I have this sudden urge to reveal myself to the world. (My shrink has been telling me it would be a good idea for years, but that's not why I'm doing it.) If you ask me, it's a damned arrogant thing to want to do. Nick says I should let my writing speak for itself, but I just feel like I've kept too many secrets for too long. That, and I'm getting that old feeling that I need to be around a lot of people, though I'm holding a pill in my hand that would make that go away.

I think you should tell Mark about this. Just to prepare him. It's not like I'll be all over the television, but it's liable to get picked up in magazines, and, who knows, maybe I'll do Oprah (ha ha ha).

Quinn, I have this terrible premonition that something is going to happen. Nick has been acting strangely and I think it might be time for me to move on. I don't know what's going to happen, but whatever it is, I want people to know who I am. Especially Mark. It was all for him. Everything. Maybe they'll book me in Seattle or Portland. We'll see...

Love,

M. C. (A. R.)

I've thought a lot this summer about hobbies and pastimes. Most of us feel a great need to pass the hours of our days doing something creative, constructive. My father brews ale in his basement, ale that's better than anything you find at the grocery store and most bars. Erin, my college girlfriend, my tattooed and pierced and depressive waif, was into knitting. She delighted in the paradox of her stylishly altered body curled into a sofa at night with the knotted yarn of a blanket or a sweater cascading over her legs as her fingers worked automatically while she watched TV shows about police forensic techniques. My aunt Laura makes short digital art films she edits on her Apple computer. The films consist of cityscapes and strangers and nature scenes edited together over music composed and recorded by a friend of hers in his home studio.

I think about pastimes because, without a job, without school, I worry that I've wasted my summer. My own hobby is letter writing. I have a fetish for Crane stationery and interesting postage stamps. I buy fifteen-dollar boxes of blue Pilot Precise V7 pens. In the past I've sent letters to friends, but these were rarely returned after about the eighth grade. Kids would move away from the city, and we would write back and forth until we lost interest. My generation is the first e-mail generation, so I've given up on people my age. I've sent my letters to editors of newspapers and magazines, to Congressman, Senators, and the President. I've sent them to CEOs of companies, to writers, musicians, artists, and designers. Letters of praise, letters of criticism. These letters are almost always gratefully returned. There is something about handwritten, thoughtful correspondence that conveys weight and density beyond the 100% cotton writing paper. The replies come to me on watermarked letterhead, on multipurpose office

paper, on ruled pages torn from spiral notebooks. Some are thoughtful, some are form letters. I keep the good ones.

Shortly after arriving in Ann Arbor, I bought a new cell phone with a local area code, and I didn't give my father the number, although he's paying the bill because it's automatically charged to my credit card every month. The only way we communicate now is by US mail from me, which is slow and thoughtful and keeps me from saying things to him I might regret, and e-mail from him. I write him weekly with questions and feelings, and he replies with information and apologies.

I read a few of the letters from my mother on the plane. I read them in reverse chronological order, starting with the top of the stack. Without the letters my father sent to her in reply, there is no meaningful narrative, anyway. Sometimes there were many months between the postmarks, and I wondered if my father had purposely removed certain letters before handing the collection over to me. It didn't matter. I read on in confusion until I was lulled to sleep by the airplane air and the soft brush of engine noise filtered through disposable yellow foam earplugs.

When we landed at Detroit-Metro, I felt even worse than I usually do in airports. It was later than it should be. My shell of a body moved slowly through the biomass, my carry-on rolling behind me. I stood on the right side of the moving walkway as business travelers strode by on my left with unnatural speed.

In general, there are two kinds of people in airports, those leaving home and those coming back. The ones leaving pass me like birds, unthinking but moving with chemical urgency towards their objective. The ones coming home have become human again. They are

reconnecting. Their movements are mammalian, slow. They have opened their invisible boundaries to the welcoming human touch that announces this: “You are home.”

I was somewhere in the middle. My movement was slow. I felt almost robotic. I was not leaving home. I was not coming home. I was homeless. And my objective filled me with dread.

I started composing a letter to Quentin in my head, a letter I would write after I’d had the chance to stop by the stationer’s. It would begin, *Dear Quentin, I hope you can sense and understand my bitterness over Marianne’s letters. I feel—I think justifiably—like the victim of secret-keepers. I don’t understand exactly what’s going on here. I don’t know what I’m going to do. I have a lot of questions, and I hope you’ll help me answer them. The first one is, how long have you been sleeping with Laura?*

At the Enterprise desk I rented a car and drove it west on I-94, following the map of the Detroit Metropolitan Area, the image of which I had burned into my brain while the plane sat on the tarmac waiting for a gate. I got off at the US-23 exit and exited again at Washtenaw Avenue. I found a liquor store. I found a hotel and passed out.

*

My first weeks in Ann Arbor were characterized by spasms of productivity followed by days of what I can only describe as wallowing—wallowing in self-pity, in anger, in purposelessness—all of which are essentially the same state of being, hence general wallowing.

Finding an apartment was simple enough, though not without obstacles. Every May the city drains itself of students, and apartments and houses stand empty. Sublet notices abound, but I had no interest in subletting for the summer and then moving again, and I wanted nothing to do with a room in a house where I would encounter roommates and their pesky habits and their

desire for community. I wanted my own place, and I wanted it for a year. Space and time. After two trips in an afternoon to two property management companies (neither of which had anything available near campus for the next year), I returned to my hotel room and wallowed for two days. On the third day, I opened the phonebook to the real estate listings and made phone calls all morning while I drank the complimentary coffee left by the housekeeping staff. I'd hoarded three days' worth, so that morning I was fueled by sixty ounces of Columbian as I dialed one of the last listings in the book, a small company judging by its one-line listing.

"Hargrove Properties," said a smoke-lined female voice.

I introduced myself and said, "I'm looking for a rental near campus."

"In September?" she asked.

"Now, actually," I said.

"Oh. I'll have a place on Hill and Church ready in about a week. How big do you need?"

"It's for just me, but something bigger than a studio."

"It's two bedrooms, one bath. Half of a duplex."

"Can I take a look?"

"Sure, yeah. It's, ah, right on the corner...Hill and Church. Do you know where that is? The painter should be there. Just tell him Janet said you could have a look around."

We said good-bye, and I drove over to check it out. It was a Colonial style house with deep red wooden siding, white trim and shutters. The front door was open and the flat, bassless sounds of rock music from a cheap radio jangled through the opening through the smell of latex. The front yard was mostly dirt with a few low, struggling clumps of grass and weeds, mostly clover. I walked around the house, which was separated from its neighbors only by thin concrete

walkways. A narrow wooden deck jutted off the back of the house and around the north side to a stairway that led up to the entrance to the second unit. I walked inside and said, "Hello?" loudly enough to be heard over the radio. The music snapped off and I heard footsteps upstairs. The painter jogged down the steps, a barrel-chested man with curly hair under his white cap, sideburns, and a goatee. He was clad all in paint-spattered white. His face was tanned and pockmarked, and he had dull blue eyes. In his right hand he held a roller brush with white paint on it.

"Help you?" he said.

"Yeah...I'm Mark," I said, holding my hand out to shake his, but he didn't take it. He just lifted the hand with the roller in it slightly and didn't tell me his name. "Janet said I could take a look around. If that's okay."

"Just don't touch the walls," he said. He turned and walked back upstairs, flicking the radio back on.

The kitchen and dining area were downstairs, as well as a washer and dryer in a nook behind sliding doors. The appliances in the kitchen looked new, as did the cabinets and tiled floor. The floor in the entryway and short hallway to the kitchen were wood and freshly refinished. The stairs were carpeted in near white, which continued throughout the upstairs where the living room, bedrooms, and bath were. The painter didn't acknowledge me when I walked past him in the living room, just continued rolling his paint onto the plaster wall, up and down. AC/DC played now on his little radio, the antenna of which had been augmented with a crinkled tube of aluminum foil.

I left the house and called Janet from my cell phone, told her I'd take it, and we arranged to meet the following morning.

“The rent’s fifteen hundred, in case you were wondering,” she said.

“That’s fine. It looks good.”

We hung up.

The next day we met at her home office. We talked for a little while over coffee, simple get-to-know-you stuff so she would feel comfortable putting me in her renovated apartment. We talked for about a half hour, though I think she was satisfied once I told her I wasn’t a university student.

“So what *do* you do, Mark, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Again, the purposelessness threatened. I couldn’t very well say, “Nothing.” I didn’t want to tell her my long-lost mother had turned up dead thirty minutes south of here. I said nothing for a moment, perhaps a moment too long, and then I said, “Writing a book. I’m here to write a book.”

“Oh!” she said. “What about?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Is it non-fiction or fiction?”

“Non.”

“Huh.” A light had come into her eyes, and a far away look. Then she said, not looking at me, “This should be a good place for you. Your neighbor’s quiet. Did you meet her?” I told her I hadn’t. “She’s an art student. Spends most of her time on North Campus. Pays her rent on time.”

She went on for a little while but I wasn’t paying attention. I was wondering why I’d told her I was writing a book.

She did a credit check on the computer in her impossibly clean office space, and I signed the lease and gave her a check for \$3,000.

In the back of my mind, the outline of a purpose had formed around the words in the last of my mother's letters. But its refusal to resolve into anything but the shape of a giant, looming question mark—Mystery—held me back from any action.

In another rush of productivity, I bought some supplies to get me through the week while I waited for the apartment to be ready, but back in my hotel room, I was rudderless again. I channeled through the cable but it was midday: talk shows, soap operas, CNN, sports, and a couple bad movies. I chose CNN for background noise and made a pot of tea after running a couple cycles of water through the coffee maker to remove some of the coffee residue. Then I sat at the little table in the corner and read more of the letters, but this time I started with the bottom of the stack and read them in order.

The first one was five pages long. Here, finally, was the good-bye letter Marianne had declined to leave behind the night she left the old farmhouse in Walla Walla. She had mailed it three days after she left, and it had a Boston postmark. In it, Marianne confirmed a suspicion I had about why she left and offered some bitter, spiteful emotional truth-telling.

I was never really in love, Quinn, but I thought it was the right thing to do. When I realized I couldn't have trust, either, I had to go.

But this is only part of the story, the beginning. Again, something was taking shape, though I couldn't define it. It was ghostlike, which, I thought, seemed appropriate. Something in the way the tone alternated from the high to low octaves of the emotional scale. Some passages read like a ship's log recording her mental state at a particular moment.

This morning I was depressed, this afternoon, confused. Now this evening I'm writing you a letter to try and sort it all out.

The handwriting was beautiful, and it stretched across the paper from edge to edge. She used a huge vocabulary, and I made a mental note to buy a good dictionary.

Eventually, as would happen over and over those days, my attention dissolved into a bottle of wine or the electron traces of the TV screen or the ADD layouts of some British men's magazine full of mostly naked girls.

After a couple days of this, I decided to buy a car. I went to the bank and took out \$5000 and then bought a newspaper. I found an Integra listed for \$3,999 in the classifieds and called the listed number. A young man named Henry answered, and I told him why I called.

"You want to take a look at it?" he asked.

"Sure, what's the address?" I said.

"I've actually got it with me. I'm at the Media Union."

"Where's that?"

He told me it was on North Campus, on Bonisteel. "Can't miss it," he said. "Call me when you get here and I'll come down. I'll be here all day."

I called a cab, not wanting to drive my rental all the way up there and then have to leave it. By the time the cab got to the hotel and then to the Media Union it was after three o'clock. I paid the driver and called Henry.

A few minutes later I saw a tall, well-built Asian American man come striding out the front doors of the huge glass and brick Media Union. He said, "Mark?" I nodded. He reached his hand out and gave me a bone crunching shake. He was sharp-eyed and clean-shaven, and his

dark hair was spiked. He wore the ubiquitous North Face jacket, black and red, and he had a laptop bag over his shoulder.

“Wanna take a look?” he said. “Then we can take it for a drive if you want, and if you like it, we can go to my place and get the title.” He showed me a dark green coupe. It had been washed and vacuumed out recently, but it had a big ugly scar on the front bumper under the left headlight. “You drive a manual?” he said as he dug the keys out of his pocket. I said I did.

I drove to the highway with Henry giving directions in the passenger seat. It was a ninety-seven, he told me. The stereo and speakers were new because he blew the factory ones. He laughed hugely at this. The tires were in good shape because he had a set of snow tires for winter driving. “I’ll throw those into the deal if you want ’em.” I couldn’t believe how loudly he spoke. He was kinetic. As if to prove this, he clicked the stereo on and out pulsed The Basement Jaxx. He grinned at me and bobbed his head in an embarrassing way. He simply could not sit still. I imagined him sitting at a study table or computer back at the Media Union with little ear buds on and bobbing his head, tapping his pen on the table, annoying everyone within hearing distance.

“We’ll shoot south to Geddes, turn around, then head back north. The speed limit’s seventy, but you can get away with eighty. Drive faster if you want, but the ticket’s all you, Bud.” I ran it up to eighty-five in the left lane and then backed off and moved to the right lane when I saw the sign for Geddes Avenue. I was smiling in spite of myself. His vitality was contagious, and it was a great car. On the way back to Plymouth Road he said, “What do you think? You like it, don’t you? Yeah, I thought so. It’s nice, right?” I hadn’t said a word. He navigated the way to his apartment in one of those bland complexes full of identical white and

green buildings. We parked next to a new BMW, and when we got out he patted the hood of the black sedan and said, "This is why I'm selling. Nice, huh?"

"Yeah," I said. "I had one in Seattle. Older, though. Eighty-six."

"Nice," said Henry. This seemed to be one of his favorite words. Then he said, "Classic."

We walked into one of the white buildings and up a flight of stairs, and Henry keyed us into number two-fourteen. The living room was dominated by a big TV and ratty gray couch. Video game controllers reached out toward the couch like feelers from the console under the TV. Beer cans stood on every flat surface, and it smelled like cat litter.

"Something to drink?" said Henry.

"Sure," I said.

"Beer?"

"Sure." He handed me a Miller Genuine Draft in a long neck bottle and opened one for himself.

"So. What do you think?" he said again.

"Will you take three?"

"Can't go that low." He shook his head. He was almost shouting "Three-seven."

I said, "Thirty-five. Cash."

"Done," he said and shook my hand again, grinding the bones together. He walked back to his room to get the title, and I sipped my beer in his kitchen. It tasted off, and I couldn't decide if it was the beer or the ammonia smell of urine-saturated gypsum.

When he came back he laid the document on the counter and began winding the keys off his ring. I reached into my front jeans pocket, slid out the bank envelope, and counted thirty-five

hundred dollar bills, making sure none of the slick new notes stuck together. I counted twice, quickly but carefully, trying not to look like an asshole, which is hard to do when you're counting money. Henry counted them again when I handed him the stack and smiled in his boyish way. It was the smile of a hyperactive eight-year-old. I half-expected him to start drumming his hands on the counter.

“Nice,” he said.

I said, “Thanks. Enjoy the Beamer,” and turned to walk out of the apartment before he could go for another handshake.

He walked me to the front door and I stepped out onto the landing and was on the stairs when he said, “Give me a call sometime if you want to hang out, Dude. You got my number.”

I flashed him a peace sign over my shoulder and jogged down the stairs and out the door.

*

It was another two days before I mustered the energy to return the rental car, and then it was only because Janet had called to tell me the apartment was ready. A shuttle from the local Enterprise branch brought me back to the hotel. I had gone early, right after Janet called at nine a.m., so I could make the eleven o'clock checkout time.

I packed up my room quickly because most of my clothes were dirty. I piled them into the suitcase around bottles of wine, whisky, gin, some open, some not. I hoped none would leak in transit. I checked out, paid the bill, and drove over to the apartment.

A phonebook lay on the front porch. I took it in, dropped it in the foyer, and carried my bags up the steps. Upstairs, two words came to mind as I walked through my new place in the midday light: all white. With the painter and his things gone, the place was all walls and ceiling and floor, and it seemed smaller than the fourteen hundred square feet Janet had promised. I was

trying to decide what to do with the space. I left my bags in the larger of the two bedrooms, though I wasn't entirely sure that's where I'd be sleeping. Only the first floor offered any variation, with its tile and oak floors, the kitchen's sleek Ikea cabinets. The dining room had large windows on the north and west walls so it would catch sunlight only at the end of the day. I stood staring out at Hill Street traffic. Hydrocarbons from the floor finish made my head feel clean.

Unable for the moment to make any decisions, I opened the phonebook and called the electric, gas, and cable companies to put the utilities in my name and have services installed. I took one final tour of the house in search of inspiration and, finding none, decided to go the book store.

At Borders on Liberty, I sat upstairs at a café table with a stack of books on home decorating and feng shui. I had some vague hope that, by paging through them and scanning the photographs of other people's homes, I would become an expert by osmosis.

Someone had left a pile of books on the table next to mine, and the spine of one of them caught my attention. It was the thickness of it. *Infinite Jest*. I remembered friends reading it in high school, emoting over its brilliance, and then never finishing it. I reached over, removed it from the tower of paperbacks, and examined its condition. No bent corners or cracks in the binding. I bought it and took it to Espresso for the afternoon.

I spent my first night in the apartment on the carpeted floor of what would become my living room.

In the end, it was *Infinite Jest* that brought inspiration. I read it in a week. It dictated the need for a comfortable bed to read in before sleeping, a big leather club chair to read in, nice

lamps to read by. I cancelled my cable order. I bought a bookcase, a coffee maker, a wicker chair for the porch.

One book led to another and pretty soon I had an entirely furnished apartment. If my place was to have any guiding feature or purpose, it was to facilitate my project, and my project would involve a lot of reading, research, rest. My apartment became like a storm shelter full of canned goods, frozen dinners, wine and whiskey for warmth. I left the house as little as possible, ordering from catalogues or online if I could. At some point I found myself sitting at an antique writing desk in a Herman Miller chair in what I'm sure was supposed to be the dining room but had become my office, writing a book. At first it was only a journal, but somewhere along the way I had decided the answer to the question "Who was Marianne Caxton?" could fill a book.

But still I couldn't read my mother's work. Still I avoided her house. How long would my father's accountant continue to pay the credit card bill before asking Quentin what was going on? How long would my father finance my depression vacation? Of course, I had the money from the advance for *Collected Poems* and the royalty checks from the other books (whose sales had spiked after Marianne's violent end), but this all went into a savings account I wouldn't touch. The money was a dilemma. It had the weight of conscience, shame, and anger. I thought I would just wait out the emotional storm as my mind struggled to accept the unfairness of my situation. But the storm didn't pass. It was a two-month-long gale between my ears that swept other thoughts away like leaves. I wrote furiously in my journal as if I could purge my thoughts onto paper. I wrote mornings, afternoons, evenings. When I wasn't typing my life down into the hard drive of my computer, I was trying to absorb the lives of others from pages of novels, biographies, poetry—purge and replace—but it wasn't working.

Then I stopped. I slept more and ate less. I went to see independent films at the Michigan Theater by myself. I read *Moby Dick* over a six-week period while drinking Oberon Ale at an outdoor bar called Dominic's from one o'clock to four o'clock every afternoon. Dominic's sold beer in pint, quart, and half-gallon Mason jars. I found few things more enjoyable (or, if not exactly enjoyable, at least soothing) in those days than the sight of a full quart jar golden in the sunlight of the restaurant's back garden area. I would drink two of them, in pursuit of my own great whale, sleep.

I slept too much and wanted to sleep more. If I was awake and unoccupied, my thoughts filled up with dread, so my waking moments were spent seeking either distraction (movies, books) or sleep (drinking). But it became more difficult to sleep. I stopped drinking coffee and smoked more. I stopped running and ate one meal a day. My body softened. I even managed to find a halcyon supplier.

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I made the party circuit every Friday and Saturday night, listening to monotonous music (the same at every party), squeezing my way through crowds, trying not to spill my plastic cup o' beer, unlit cigarette clenched between my teeth, looking for a certain group of partiers. They were usually to be found in the backyard, though sometimes they opted for one of the bedrooms. Outside was better. If you found them inside, it was always in a room with at least one lava lamp, a couple black light posters, incense burning, Jimi Hendrix on the cobbled-together stereo. It was terrible. Outside you just had the night air, the humidity, the smell of marijuana. Outside, you found the Talkers. It only took me three weeks to find out where I could buy my pharmaceuticals.

One of the houses on fraternity row was always dark and quiet. This made it difficult to know when to make your approach. Fraternities are a strange cross between the public and private. I decided on late-afternoon. I knocked, no one came, and I tried the knob. The foyer was dark. A loveseat sat in the entryway, and I smelled patchouli and clove. I called out but heard no answer. I wandered back into the common spaces. A TV was on with the sound muted, tuned to financial news. Out back, through a sliding glass door, was an expansive deck with a table and chairs beneath the shade of maple trees. Someone was out there having a cigarette. I slid the door open and stepped out. He looked over his shoulder and said, "Hey."

"Hey," I said and took out a cigarette of my own.

He wore wireless eyeglasses and had a neat haircut. He wore a polo shirt and jeans and stared past the trees. "What do you need," he said.

"Sleeping pills," I said.

"Come back tomorrow."

It cost me an even fifty bucks, which made me think he's probably stealing the pills from the hospital, but I didn't care.

His name was Gregory Burrows, and he was in medical school. Everyone in the house was a med student, which was why it was so quiet. Burrows' fellow residents, men and women, lived at the hospital, in labs, libraries, cafes. The house was just an occasional crash pad for most of them. Gregory, for this reason, found the house to be the most peaceful place on campus and did his studying there, sitting on the back deck whenever it was warm. The deck furniture even featured an umbrella.

Somehow his own drug habit had not so far managed to corrupt his coursework. He would confide to me later that he took high-dose Ritalin when he needed to study and Valium

when he needed to sleep. “It’s the only way to get anything done. After a while, caffeine and alcohol are useless.”

But it would be months before I learned all this from him. Our first meetings were simple exchanges, supply and demand. I did my best to ration out the pills, knowing full well the danger of dependence, and the bottle of thirty doses lasted me a full two months. Between the booze and the drugs, I was sleeping up to sixteen sublime hours a day.

“Halcyon and on and on”: you know how the song goes....

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One day early in July I “came to.” I was sitting in bed, leaning against the wall. A cigarette burned in my right hand, and I was masturbating with my left. The new issue of *Playboy* magazine was propped up against a pillow next to me. Also next to me on the bed were an ashtray and a half-full quart jar of beer, a jar I had pointlessly stolen from Dominic’s. Without taking my eyes off the naked girl in the magazine, my right hand groped for the ashtray and instead tipped the jar and spilled the beer onto the mattress and onto me and sent me flying from the bed. As I sprung up I brought my hand down on the edge of the ashtray and spilled the tobacco ash into the beer pooling on my sheets. I stood there for a moment, wearing just a T-shirt and socks and staring at the cigarette and, after the initial shock and anger, laughing at myself. I picked up the glass and the ashtray and the magazine. I stripped the bed and started a load of laundry. I mentally thanked the salesperson at the furniture store for being so persuasive about the special mattress pad that was guaranteed to stop spills before they got to the mattress itself. As I performed these tasks, I laughed quietly to myself. This was truly stupid and pathetic, I thought. Snap out of it, I thought. Jesus Christ, *snap out of it*.

With the bed resheeted, I showered, dressed, and resolved to go for a walk. As I dressed, my eyes fell on the corner of a manila envelope in my top drawer beneath my socks. I tugged it out, emptied it onto the dresser, and sifted through the contents. I picked up the driver's license and looked at the address. I put the license in my back pocket. Then I grabbed the key ring, pocketed it, and started out the door and up East University.

I crossed the Diag, the pathway that cuts across the heart of the university's central campus, looking around at the strange mix of neo-classical and modern architecture. Past the campus buildings I came to State Street and walked north past Espresso and Liberty Street. When I came to East Anne Street, I turned right and walked until I stood in front of number seven-twenty-two. I double-checked the address on the license and stepped up the walk. At the front door, for some absurd reason, I knocked. After a minute, I inserted the key into the lock and turned...

...and had the sensation of walking unbidden into a stranger's house, the fear of being discovered. It was a small old house with a wide open floor plan. The floors were wood. There were brightly colored woven rugs of various sizes in all the rooms, lots of books, a small TV with rabbit ears. A stairway led up from the foyer and I went up halfway, wincing with each creak of the old wood. The bedroom would be up there, and I couldn't make it to the top. I thought at the time I was simply overwhelmed by the task, but I'm not sure it was so simple.

When I stepped out the front door of the house to walk back to my apartment I had to pause and breathe for a few moments. I could feel sobs pushing at the back of my throat, a heaviness in my eyes. A forsythia blazed yellow next to the porch. It was too bright; my eyes were wrong. A lawn mower droned somewhere close. I smelled cut grass.

I sat on the steps in front of my mother's house and finally the tears came to my eyes and I felt that glorious pressure behind my forehead as my face tightened and contorted in grief and reddened with a fresh supply of blood and my abdominal muscles clenched and my limbs were weak. I stood and vomited into the forsythia and sat back down with my head in my hands and wept.