

Chapters 8 and 9 from *It's Not Nothing* by Courtney Denelle

8:

I want to linger in twilight sleep—half in, half out. Where I no longer require convincing, where I'm capable of wanting more than what I've come to expect.

Instead, I'm met with the coarse feel of industrial sheets against my cheek. The plastic rustle of a mattress cover. My torso dipping awkwardly into the crimped contour beneath me.

My lashes pry apart. My eyes adjust. I'm in my body, in my cot. I fold it up every morning. Unfold it every night.

I have slept in the shelter for sixty-one nights.

Forty-two in the *shelter* shelter where I was signed-in every night at five, kicked out every morning at eight. It demanded punctuality. Nothing was guaranteed, no matter how long I had been sleeping there. Six bunks for twelve women, never more, never less.

Now I sleep in a room with a door that locks, a room I share with Deb.

The shelter director, Betty, she'd pulled me aside and told me a bed had become available in one of the doubles. She thought that bed should go to me. The rest of the staff had agreed. I was cutting the line, Betty said. There were other women who'd been at the shelter longer.

Did I want to share a double with Deb? As if I'd say no.

It's not big, our room. Two cots with a night stand in between. A small kitchenette with a fridge. Our own bathroom. The shower head is missing but the pressure is ferocious and more than makes up for it. My first night in there, I stood under the hot water until I was purple and lightheaded.

Each of us has a particleboard armoire. I hang everything up when it's not on my body. It makes me feel something, seeing my stuff in there.

There was this woman Katie who had stayed at the shelter for months—a *young* woman, younger than me. Katie ran around for three weeks telling anyone who'd listen that she was pregnant, except she wasn't. Deb narced when she found out. She said Katie was like a daughter to her, that she felt betrayed by her lies. So she told and told and told.

Katie wanted someone to treat her with care, even if it meant inhabiting a fiction. That's how I saw it. But Katie broke the rules—something about liability. She was booted from the shelter, barred from ever returning.

My bed had been hers.

Days pass with a million zips of a razor, countless peals of cardboard under foot. I'm glad for it. I can do anything, it seems, as long as I do it every day.

Me and Linda lift and count and break down boxes. She's my mother's age, with twin sons my age. Both live at home. She's happy to have 'em, Linda says, often. Her Boys. That's what she calls them, husband included. She smiles when she says it.

We're not the only ones who work back in the stockroom, just the only ones who talk while we're at it. She talks. I nod. Linda's got a lapping rhythm. Can I believe she's in her fifties? Hauling inventory keeps her in fighting form, she says. She has to have strong arms to ride her Harley. Did she tell me about her Harley? Her Boys ride too. They head up to Laconia for Bike Week every year. It's something they do together.

I'm cued up from time to time. Linda pauses, her eyebrows stretched in anticipation. I hit my mark: You're *right*, I tell her, and she laughs. Throws her hands up in a show of motherly martyrdom, I *know*, right?

She goes and goes and spares me from having to talk about myself. Why I wear the same clothes every day, why I don't eat much. She spares me from talking about where I live, assuming I have a place here in Providence—with all the other *arty* kids, she says. I never correct her.

My timing couldn't have been worse, looking for a job back in January. Service staff gets carved to the bone after the Holidays. I knew as much but had no choice. I rolled the dice, headed to the mall up Providence. Filled out fifteen applications in a single day. Start date? *ASAP*. Wage requested? *Negotiable*. Availability? *Sunday through Saturday, open to close*.

From store to store, I had insisted on speaking with the hiring manager. Handed them my application with a smile. I passed. It worked.

Now I long for the ordinary. Khaki pants and coupon clipping, cell phone plans, extra sugary coffee, diet tips, and reality TV. It's better than being at large. Dailiness and monotony have taken on the look of a miracle.

I had been hard up when I walked through the shelter door. What, with the meds drawing me back in my body, and my time at the Pineapple Inn ending unceremoniously on New Years Day.

Betty led me into the office, poured me a cup of coffee. Told me a bit about the place. The McKinney Shelter in Newport—one mile, one million light years away from the hedge-rowed mansions of Bellevue Avenue and the Tennis Hall of Fame.

She offered me a bus pass. Suggested I head over to Human Services, sign up for food stamps and state assistance. I declined, told her that sort of thing is for people who are really in-need. Her brow furrowed. She said nothing.

I just need a job, I told her. A job and a place to stay.

Betty sat upright, squared her body in my direction. What are you doing here, Rosemary?

An absent moment, I swallowed hard.

I was hospitalized, I said. A few times. And everything just... fell apart. Which wasn't the whole story.

And your family? I shook my head no. Which *was* the whole story.

I told her it's okay. I'm okay now. They put me on new meds, the *right* meds. I take them every day. Quit drinking too. This has all been my fault, I said. Some lessons can only be learned the hard way.

I told her I'd think about it—the food stamps, that is. But I took the bus pass and thanked her.

That night I slept with my shoes on, unwilling to soften. Clutched my backpack close, my greasy, bulging backpack as a little spoon, and kept my coat buttoned to the collar. The only bed available was a top bunk alongside a drafty window, rattling leaded glass above Marlborough Street. The bitter cold swept up from the Bay, crept through all of me, and gave the night a strange austerity. Not safety, no, but shelter.

I am never far from my nook. I see it when I get off the bus in the morning. It's a ten-minute walk from the mall where I work. The nights I spent under those stairs intrude on my memory from time to time. How I sang every song I knew just to stay awake.

But it's a good thing. I see my nook and I act accordingly. I do what I can. I have divested myself from myself.

I feel a lot of things. Feelings aren't facts. Here is what I know for sure: I am safe so long as I am on guard, even when I am safe. It requires I keep one foot in front of the other. Forward, always.

There are no answers for me in all that has passed. Sifting through the why's and the how's and the what if's—it's like drinking milk when I am thirsty for water.

Why does the water taste like milk?

I'm good at not thinking about them. I've had a lot of practice—it's been almost a year. What helps is, I think they were right, when they said I'm beyond repair.

My mother delivered her parting shot at the top of her lungs through her front door. She said, You should be grateful I still care about you despite knowing *what* you really are.

What, not who. An effective jab is one you suspect to be true.

Some cologne-drenched shoe salesman pops his head in the stockroom. Girls hauling stock, he says, laughing. Had to see it for myself. Guess Filene's is hip to the feminist agenda. Good on you two—give 'em hell!

Linda's face turns stormy and clenched. Not me, nuh uh, no way. The world is what you make of it, she says, and I ain't no one's victim. She turns to me for reinforcement, for my knowing nothing response: You're *right*, I say.

Linda is also, as far as I can tell, a climate change denier and, in that way, ought to be excused from jury selection. Facts? Evidence? For what? But I am toothless at work. I'd like to get it done, thank you, I'd like to get on with it.

Is there a good way to learn you have holes in your sneakers? In March? No—no, there is not.

What I should do is, I should cut down a few squares of cardboard, just fashion myself some insoles. I think of all my *shoulds* at a time like this. If I were smart, I'd remember what I'm saving for.

My wish for a knowable home is a thought. The thought, a well-worn groove of my memory.

Two weeks on the futon in my parent's basement after I was discharged last March. Two weeks before my mother grew offended by my wallowing, incensed by my excuses, my unwillingness to snap out of it. Two weeks before she reached her limit. She had all she could stand and no she didn't care really because it wasn't even her idea in the first place. It was that pushy doctor who'd insisted—the know-it-all social worker, too. You must've really snowed those quacks over with your sob stories, she had said, but that wasn't gonna work on her.

Wait, *no*. No, no, no. My safety relies on lessening, lightening to survive.

I have cast out retentive memory. I shall have no more of thee!

Two salespeople chat at the cash wrap, decked out in their referee-striped uniforms. They greet me with vigor, but turn cold as I head for the sales rack.

A pair of Chucks stop me dead. Shiny shiny black. Fake patent leather.

Do you have these in a ten, I ask, holding the sneaker up high. They answer with matching shrugs. Well, can you check please? Matching eye rolls. One heads into the back, returns empty-handed.

Maybe a nine and a half?

No half sizes, they say.

I guess a nine, then.

I lace them up quick, glance at the angled mirror by my feet.

I'd like to wear them out, if that's okay.

I toss my holey shoes as I dash for the bus. Cast off, they look woeful—all salt-stained and gray, poised atop the overflowing trashcan.

The bus is in sight, parked with the engine running. Passengers are lining up, and my long strides become a trot. Two blocks away, two minutes before it departs, and my trot becomes an all-out sprint. The plastic edges are razors against my Achilles tendons. The pounding pavement tamps my toes into a hoof. I roll my body weight to the outer edge of each foot to shift the pressure, to shift *something*. Steady my breath to withstand the brunt of it, like biting down on a leather strap.

They'd break in, probably. I'd get used to them, these too-small shoes. They're plastic and agonizing, but they're shiny and new. I cannot take them off. I'll never get them back on.

Aspiration means looking forward, it means drawing breath. My bane and my antidote are before me, fogging up the bus window.

I get by the Shelter office unnoticed. Betty's in there wrangling some old guy I recognize. She's turning him away because he's fall-down wasted, but this old guy isn't having it. He'd keep Betty busy for a while, at least until the cops show up.

I take the elevator up a single floor. The doors part and reveal a smiling Deb.

I got one for you, she says, dancing from foot to foot. Why can't dinosaurs clap their hands?

Why?

'Cause they're dead!

Good one, Deb.

She looms behind me as I fuss with the sticky lock.

Just so y'know, I'm sleeping up in Joey's room tonight, she says. Our little secret, right?

The boyfriend. I don't know much about him, and don't care to. I've only ever seen him hanging out by the alley-side door, holding up the wall, always flanked by two other guys.

Smoking, spitting, eyeballing passersby. *Spitting*. The boyfriend is a Spitting Guy. I'll never

understand spitting as a final stop, and all the stops along the way that had a hand in making a Spitting Guy—it's a definite type. But he and Deb share his tiny cot every night up on the men's floor. Both of them could get kicked out for it. They know as much but don't seem to care. They have nothing. They have each other.

I make like I'm zipping my lips. Throw away the key. I head into our room—my room for the night.

There's an intimacy between us. Not warmth, certainly—something more desperate. Whatever it is between me and Deb, it appears as an instant. A stay in time. And it's easy to believe in that instant that we might keep one another intact in some undetermined way.

Betty and her Bruins games. She's invited me to watch along with her in the office. A wavering rabbit-eared TV fastened with a padlock high up in the corner. And I sit, watching, trying to. It requires I interpret a whole new language *and* follow the puck; a teensy black speck that is never not in rapid motion.

Are the refs unionized? What's the average age of the players? Is the Stanley Cup heavy? And—most importantly—how do I get a job driving the Zamboni? It must be so satisfying, witnessing your good work as you go, your good work done and put behind you. Every two hours, a clean slate.

But I tamp down my own questions. I keep them to myself.

Smells like snow out. March demands the risk to believe, not exactly my strong suit.

A new-to-me black pea coat from Saint Paul's—it's pill-covered, a bit short in the sleeve with a lining shredded to ribbons, but it looks good. Good and clean. The lady running the coat drive, she needles me when I pluck it from the donation pile. She says, It might be wise to choose something more sensible, don't you think. This isn't a fashion show, after all.

This one like so many, with their compassion measured, even in charity. Like sizing up a panhandler's shoes before tossing them a buck. We should look the part, but not too much. Have some self-respect, and be sure to use this money to get a meal, won't you. This one, with her cashmere twinset, her eye lift, her cloud of Chanel No 5—handing down the final word on who among us is worthy of care and concern.

But I let it pass. *Go fuck yourself* has been redacted from my vocabulary, at least for the time being.

The off-season streets are uninhabited and gray. A few days earlier they were kelly green. The sun shone. The bars were crammed to maximum capacity, buoyant with curse-chucking day-trippers in town for the Parade. A Newport tradition, a ghastly one. I've always been content to leave Saint Patrick's Day to the amateurs, even back when I was still drinking. My freckles always singled me out among the boorish *Kiss Me* types—weekend warriors who can't hold their booze. I'm mostly Scottish anyway.

The celebration continued for two days following the Parade, straight through the holiday itself. By now, the piss and vomit has been washed away, the green plastic what-have-you, swept up and thrown into the garbage where it belongs.

Folks from the shelter fuck in the cemetery on Parade Day, Deb tells me—some unofficial rite of spring. She is very matter-of-fact in the telling, without so much as a passing whiff of judgment.

That's so—*goth*, I say.

Whaddya mean, *goth*?

It's like... a performance of sadness, kind of. Like, the look of it. Deathly as fashion.

She rolls her eyes in an over the top show. *College* kids, she says. Got too much damn time on their hands.

Except how Mary Shelley lost her virginity at her mother's grave, wore the calcified heart of her dead lover around her neck as a pendant—that's how it's done.

Oh my *goth*, Deb says, smiling. Which is pretty good.

Come summertime, these narrow streets will be clogged once more. At every turn, khaki shorts and flip-flops astride rented bikes. Tourists with feet so tan you might wonder if they'd ever worked a day in their life.

When they think of Rhode Island, they think of *this*. This—*postcard*.

You'd have to squint your eyes. But once you see it, you see it everywhere and cannot un-see. All of us, hidden in plain sight. Even the shelter itself; a concrete block, pale as death, located smack-dab in the touristy fray. Downtown Newport, narrow streets, centuries old, converging in impossibly acute angles.

Maybe they can't see for the looking. Tourists who say *Local* and it's a barbed word, a word with teeth.

What I should do is, I should tell the social worker he keeps asking the wrong question. That it's not a matter of, do I ever have the urge to drink. It's a matter of, do I ever have the urge to die, even still. The Venn diagram of these two things is a single circle.

People like him, they understand to the extent that they're capable of understanding, which is to say that they don't. They can't. How could they. It wasn't rock bottom like you see on TV—there was no comeuppance or absolution. The story of my relationship with the bottle isn't that kind of story.

Still, moments pass. Days too. And every moment that passes is a moment of something reclaimed. To live as I live now, despite all that is rotten in me and around me—that amounts to something, I suppose.

But I don't tell him any of this. What I do is, I shrug. I tell the social worker, No, not really, thank god for little blessings.

It's not that I pity myself. It's just—

It's called an Anniversary Event. A buoy, far offshore, marking the distance to and from.

A false estimation of time is called an anachronism.

*Mot juste* means the exact, appropriate word.

We might have to cut it short today, the social worker says. The storm's supposed to be a doozy, and on the first day of spring, too. He throws his hands up: *New England*, am I right?

It's just as well. My birthday always puts me in my place. With its inward eye, where the girl I was twines with the whole year past—with March and the held out hope for warmer weather that never seems to come. Like earlier, headed to the bus stop, heading to the appointment. A sliver of sunlight peeked through the cloud cover. A touch of warmth snuffed out by a gust off the Bay. It slapped my face hard.

The social worker doesn't notice the date, its substance. He's got a few pep talks on heavy rotation, and he sticks to the script.

He babbles and my mind goes. I think about things, oddball things. Like how we have parts that can't move towards healing—how teeth can't *get better* with time. Or how born deaf schizophrenics don't hear voices—they see disembodied hands, signing furiously. How a fatal mind knows a single way of being, and that way demands fulfillment.

Focus on how far you've come, is a thing he likes to tell me. But I know enough to know better. Here is what I've come to expect: a malignancy of known patterns; a voice that says I have no one to blame but myself. I suspect it's my mother's voice, lingering.

She has treated me like a drunk—like she’s dealing in tough love. But I don’t have a drinking problem. I have a living problem, in the sense that I don’t want to. Or, I *didn’t*. The urge has left me. They call that Recovery, too.

The social worker says it’s time to take the next step. That it’s part of healing to think you can be healed. He hands me a list of shrinks. The paper is warm from the printer and the warmth holds a charge: *It’s time to. It’s time, too*. I thank him and smile, I say see you next month. I give him no indication I will never return.

Could I revive myself if I erased myself? I remember so much, never on purpose. Like the sound of my own voice, teeny and peculiar, calling out for her. There’s got to be a word for it—that keystone need for mother. What do you call a reason *why* that defies all reason?

I’d come close, closest yet. Bandages hugged my forearms. I didn’t have to look. The tension of fresh stitches stung from wrist to elbow. They would scar and I was glad for it. There—now it shows.

The curtain parted. A nurse emerged from the blue-white hospital glow. All I wanted to know was where she was, if they’d gotten in touch with her yet.

The nurse approached my bedside, clasped my hand with both of hers. Her delivery was gentle: Your mother isn’t coming; she doesn’t want to see you.

I knew there was more, that I was spared the details of what my mother *really* said. Something about selfishness and sob stories, how everyone’s got problems; what made me think I’m so special?

The nurse said she was sorry. I asked her what for. She told me *no one* chooses this, that I was not to blame. I took little breaths and managed a nod.

Silence fell between us and held us close together. The nurse called me Sweetie, released my hand and left.

It's been a year, one year to the day. I remember every day since.

I've got a job now, a job and a place to stay. And both should set me right, enough that I could regain. But my nature is constant and makes itself known. It's as if a bird flew straight into my chest, right into the center, and got stuck there. As if the bird were flapping its wings madly, blowing my chest apart in an effort to get free.

The meds, in theory, help me manage. I take them without question. It's a thing I can do, a proactive thing.

Riding the bus is a comfort, how it moves in one direction. I train my eyes out the window. A familiar blur of gas stations, coffee shops, and pizza joints. Twilight deepens. The interior light turns on and stays on. My reflection appears in the glass.

It starts to fall. Slow at first, then faster and faster. Broad wet flakes that will make a mess. Each headlight and streetlight, a birthday candle flickering in the springtime snow.

A woman gets on in Warren and takes the seat beside me. She's workday weary, she's had it up to *here*. But her bare legs draw my attention—plump and pale and peppered with razor burn. The fluttering hem of a floral dress peeks out from under her woolen parka, just below the knee.

I see her, how she understands all that I've forgotten. Winter always turns to spring.

This life must be a test I am taking. Unless the test is to see how much I can take.

Deb clucks her tongue. However you're doing it, Ro, it is a good way to do it. Because you's here, ain't you?

And don't say hate, she says. Hate's not a nice thing to say.

Fine—I dislike it to the maximum.

I'm on the wrong side of my twenties now, anxious to feel as little as possible. It requires vigilance. I have to keep my wits about me.

I still see the bearded brain doc at the mental health clinic, of course I do. I take the pills because he tells me to. I still don't have health insurance, of course I don't, but I get my meds filled at the clinic for free. I feel terrible, yes, but not unhinged. Life insists I am just like this now, and so I act accordingly. I understand the stakes.

I could stay in Newport. That is a thing I could do. Stay where I landed—stay where I fell. Beats my life of same, same, same, where the scene of the crime is all over the damn place. Crime scenes everywhere.

By the time I ditched out of the emergency room back in June, I could see it all unfolding as ever before. How it would lead me back to pre-dawn vitals, mewling cries, a slow-rolling Lithium shuffle in treaded socks. How nothing would change, I wouldn't change, because I could no longer remember when things had ever been any other way.

Maybe I would do well, staying in the system. But most of the long-timers here at the shelter are up to their eyeballs in the system, Deb included. And what of it?

We're all doing the best we can do—there has never been a time when we weren't doing the best we could do.

I come upon the scene by the stairwell as it's wrapping up. Deb is distraught, screaming into another woman's face. It's called incontinence, you bitch, and it's *not* funny!

I don't have to know what happened to know what happened. The picture is pretty clear.

Imagine yourself falling in love, falling deeply in love with someone, only to find out they believe in ghosts, they clap when the movie ends, they vote Republican. What I mean is, it could always be worse, Deb.

She knuckles her tears away and says, My ex saw a ghost once, and he wasn't that bad.

She's closer to sixty than not, but times like this, I glimpse the little girl she was—or the little girl she could have been, were it not for everything else. That's the thing with Deb, with all of us here. The thing beneath the thing.

She says, You know what I wish? More than anything?

It's something heartbreaking, the thing she wishes for.

She's sleeping the sleep of the dead when I return from the mini mart. I hide a surprise in the sleeve of her parka. A pack of smokes and those crumbly coffee cakes she loves. I will already be gone by the time she finds them tomorrow.

No parting words, no fake plans or false promises to stay in touch.

Some call it a French Exit, or an Irish Goodbye. Not me, but some people.

The Townie Split: It's my signature move.

9:

The air mattress has emptied slowly through the night. 4am and I am shivering on the floor. This is fine, I say aloud to no one.

I've fled into the arms of Pawtucket, into a two-room studio less than a mile from where I was born. A decision deprived of any meaning, as far as I'm concerned.

Beggars can't be choosers. I am doing what I can.

You know how certain places grow more powerful in the mind with the passing of time? Yeah, me neither.

Lockdown drills and gonorrhea outbreaks at my old high school. The principal arrested for possession of child pornography. My old weed dealer, that troglodyte grab-ass—he's a local cop now. Look away, folks. Nothing to see here!

A young woman dives from her Suburu, barely managing to throw it into park. Ambushes me on the sidewalk, introducing herself. She's one of them, I can tell, and maybe she thinks I am one of them too. The artists and musicians abandoning Providence, moving to Pawtucket, trying to get a scene going, trying to make Pawtucket a thing. Everything is changing, it's true, but people rarely change. Pawtucket, I know, will push back.

So, where're you from? she says.

Here.

No, I mean, where were you raised?

Here. Right here.

Where'd you go to school, then?

Didn't.

Ugh, that's so punk rock, the young woman says, smiling. *Love.*

But she works in an office drafting grant proposals. I work in a stockroom.

Did I mention my apartment has a view? A sweeping vista of a gym parking lot?

In a fit of optimism, I purchased a bureau and a hulking TV set from the previous tenant. Thirty bucks for the two. I have nothing to fill the bureau, but I might. No—I will.

And how it turns out I am a cat person? They left their cat behind. They just—left her. Now she is mine. Now she's named Dot.

I am okay, but I am not well. Now that I'm left to my own devices, a ringing doorbell might be the end me, might be the very thing that does me in.

There, an unannounced visitor did the job you could never manage!

That's me, speaking to myself. Speaking to my fucking scars. The ones you can see, the ones you can't.

All in all, there are two rules in the Program: Don't drink, and go to meetings. The simplicity is appealing. That, and how the Program loves an aphorism. The best one is, You're only as sick as your secrets.

I continue going to meetings, but there are no answers for me in those seated circles. I don't even keep track of the time that has passed. It's been how long, without a hangover? No use

celebrating, no need to pat me on the back. It is not virtuous to not do the thing I do not want to do.

What keeps one foot in front of the other is selective remembering. Selective forgetting. Like how I don't go to the library anymore because it is brimming with all that has passed.

The bathroom where I had washed up, where I took a breather or took a nap. The green reading room with the green reading lamps. The fiction stacks, all my friends lined up in a row. I might smell the familiar smells, I might see the familiar sights. Yet something essential has changed. Like I've lost myself and gained empty space for the losing.

So—I am gathering cracked spines, underlined passages, and dog-eared pages. I am buying up used books, as many as I can. As if I could live inside them.

I will stack the odds in my favor. I will stack them all around me. My bookcase deities.

I will buy a bookcase, cheap.

I bolt my door at night, every night. The irony of it. Me, making nice with notions of safety and control. Me, who lived so long with the steady urge of a mind that wanted me dead.

Here's the movie I want to see. A killer breaks into the home of a broken, fatal-minded woman, and is greeted as a conquering hero.

*Finally*, she says, and puts on some Elliot Smith.

These little red pills coax me on. Better than coffee and diet soda and energy drinks combined, plus my sinuses are wrung dry. But I've been cut off at the pharmacy. I have to wait until next month. I really flipped out on the pharmacists. Went full-tilt riled-up dirt bag, and proved their point in doing so—they're right to keep the cold medicine behind the counter now.

You're not going to like this, I tell Dot. It's nothing personal. I flutter my feet beneath the blanket. She jumps from my lap to the floor, follows me into the bathroom just to sit and glare. It's like she doesn't believe me. When I say I am sorry. When I say I'll be right back.

There was a time when people trusted me. I wouldn't leave me alone either.

Hunting something unseen. So is the cat.

I find it in my shoe, eviscerated. What had I expected? That maybe Dot would just rough it up a bit. Like—don't come around here no more, and tell your friends the same!

I wrap it carefully in toilet paper, as if preparing it for a teeny pyre. But the murdered mouse is tossed without ceremony into the storm drain on my way to the bus stop. Let the rainwater take it to Valhalla, I'm late for work.

And then another one. My sweet fuzzy Dot—a totally sick fuck. Except she doesn't kill it outright, just mortally wounds it. Scampers away, invulnerable, and curls up on the air mattress for a nap. But the mouse is still breathing. I see its chest rising and falling from where I stand. Vomiting comes as a surprise, hard and fast. A dead mouse—okay, fine. A dying mouse, it turns out, is all too much.

It's not that I feel bad for myself. Not in the slightest. A grownup is someone who is always upset. Misery as a rite of adulthood—the only rite that matters. A lesson from my upbringing, growing up in the shadow of a forlorn mill town. The weight of Pawtucket crushing us all.

Like how some parents have ideas: My children will have the opportunities I never had.

And yet—I *work* for a living, the parents always say.

They say, Let me tell ya something. And it's always something terrible.

They say, I wish someone told me when I was your age... And it's always something brutal, the thing they wish someone told them.

The ability to take a beating. It's really something.

Get in your room and shut your mouth, my mother would hiss. Your father's downstairs paying bills. The coded phrase our little bodies could translate.

I look into my face reflecting. I say, You're fine, everything's fine. It was a rough patch, is all. But a phantom paces behind my irises.

Get me out of here, I whine, and what I am talking about is my body.

Me and myself are in constant dialog. The conversation is going nowhere.

These voices think they have my best interest at heart—can you imagine? They step up to the mike as if they're not an attribute of my self. As if they're the whole shebang.

My urge to hurt myself never left me. I know because I smoke in bed. All night, smoking, not sleeping.

I am the highly suggestible type. Infomercials, they work on me. I want it all, but especially the food dehydrator. I delight in the idea. A world of turkey jerky and watermelon fruit roll-ups is the world I want to live in. So much better than this world of mine: Diet Coke twelve-packs, an oven filled with used paperbacks, ashtrays balanced on stacked up phone books.

The phone books are really something. They won't, stop, coming.

How hypnotic is my sleeplessness? I imagine myself joining a cult, but a new one that's just getting off the ground, when everyone is riding high and living with purpose. Before the polygamy, the child abuse, the demanded liquidation of personal assets. There's always a pink cloud era in these cults, however brief.

I'm an easy mark. That kind of crushing certainty. It really appeals to me.

Me and 4am Existentialism. It's a torrid love affair; an outgrowth of what is normal to my nature. Why do I exist? Or—*since* I exist, now what? Why should there be something to live for instead of nothing? I could just as easily ask the opposite. Maybe nothing is the natural state of things, and something would be weird. Really though? It doesn't matter.

But I'll see you in hell, person on my block who's been screaming on the street for an hour now.

Don't they know some of us have alarms to snooze? Some of us have buses to run for. Buses to miss, excuses to make.

And that racket overhead, stomping feet, furniture being moved in the middle of the night. My upstairs neighbor, conjuring fresh ways to ruin my life.

My anxiety is the *stare at the wall* kind of anxiety. And my coffee habit is the *by the vat* kind. These two form a formidable pair. Their powers combined consume hours of my day. Left to my own devices on a day off from work, I don't inhabit my body before noon.

What it means for me is—why bother with TV when you can watch your wheels turn.

Baby blue eye shadow, probably a stay-over from something she heard once, a way to make blue eyes pop. A knock-off designer handbag that passed well as the real thing. Extra money spent to ensure the counterfeit tell was on the inside. Sun-damaged skin across her nose and cheeks. A face round as mine. My face, a face round as hers.

I scan her as she appears in my mind but I cannot make out her shoes. There's nothing south of the ankle. I focus real hard but her shoes do not appear. Sandals in the summer, I think. Maybe.

To that end, she'd say something like, how could I've forgotten that ankle boots or loafers or whatever the fuck else were her thing, how my forgetting means I never knew her at all.

Image is what matters to my mother, and it is all that remains. What's missing means more than the image of the thing itself. Thing, not person. What, not who.

It's a stretch to imagine. A hand on my head. A comforting embrace. A muffled voice whispering, I love you no matter what. It's a stretch.

What I have is the contented engine of my cat. I long to see myself as she sees me.

A scene from an alternate reality might look like:

A waitress asking, No Pepsi—is Coke okay?

A guy seated beside me on the bus asking, Got enough room?

A phone call from my mother asking, How you holding up?

I am sick and tired of thinking about her. In the Program, they say the change happens when you're sick and tired of being sick and tired. Halfway there.

I could maximize on those things I have control over. That is a thing I could do.

I've discovered that the battleship gray floor paint in my kitchen has been done over so many times it peels off in long, easy strips. So that's what I'll be doing this evening.

Shouldn't I take pride in my surroundings, now that I have a place of my own? I've considered it, yes. But womb-like comfort is what I'm after. A womb with a view. *Here is some stuff I like* is my design aesthetic. I've gone and kissed my security deposit goodbye, wheat-pasting magazine cutouts onto the wall. I'm pretty much one Bob Marley poster shy of a freshman dorm room. It's like that.

So, I live like a boxcar hobo. But I can translate my own disarray. Like I know I will find my coffee mug on the bathroom sink because that's my last stop before I shoot out the door, late

for work. Thinking along those lines, everything makes sense. Nothing is ever out of order. Nothing ever goes lost.

I'm locked in an endless feedback loop of reactions; it's true. But I can make a deliberate choice. I don't feel like I can, it doesn't seem like I can, but I have experience to draw upon. Like that time I rolled on Ecstasy while wearing red pleather pants, as one does, understanding those pleather pants might never come off.

Better to find consolation in a place—this place, my place—than in *stuff*. When I lament the loss of all my *stuff*, I try to remember there's power in it. How no one worth knowing would ever say, I'm so glad I still have those red pleather pants I wore back when I was 20. I can be the person worth knowing in this scenario.

Now is the time for guts and guile. But all I'm asking for is the nerve to tell the cashier at pizza joint she has made a mistake with my order.

I'm splintering. An example: summertime now, and the windows are open. I wonder, Do the people passing by on the sidewalk hear me talking to my cat? I ask my cat to weigh-in, but Dot is grumpy and particular and I respect her boundaries. I close the windows just in case.

There are always familiar faces on the bus to and from work; those of us who are on the same timetable. But I keep my head down. I am not above telling a person, Sorry I do not want to talk to you. Only twice has someone called me a bitch in response.

He keeps my attention though. No joke, his name is Romeo—Romeo, the boxer. Or so he says. I like his crooked nose and every last beating it implies.

He works at the mall like me, at the vitamin store, selling legal speed and legal steroids and strange chalky powders. I've seen him around, I tell him, and he says he's seen me too; that I'm hard to miss.

I feel his eyes on my skin, gliding, and I feel his eyes peel away. In the white morning light, in the hot summer heat, my purple seams are raised and angry from wrist to elbow. They look like what they are. Oh, these? I walked into a sliding glass door when I was a kid, and some other self-deprecating nonsense, something about clumsiness. He laughs a nervous little machine gun laugh, offers up a quip of his own. For the rest of the ride, the silence we share is an awkward one.

And now I have to go up a floor, box around, and take the escalator back down again just to get a coffee from Dunkin' Donuts. I have to avoid the vitamin store—I have to take an earlier bus.

In the play, Romeo was a whiny weasel. Juliet was the one with balls. Gave herself a knife to the heart, for chrissakes, and that's no small thing.

Could I get off even if I wanted to? I have dead pussy and it feels like relief. One less thing, you know?

The Olympics offer two weeks worth of something to look at. I like the racing sports best. There's nothing subjective, only a time. You're either the fastest, or you're not. I don't consider myself competitive, no. I just have a hankering to be the best, even if it's best worst ever.

My take away from the closing ceremony spectacle is, the host country sure has tremendous control over their people.

Lawnmowers and leaf blowers and someone somewhere discordantly pounds a hammer.

Since January, I have limped towards summer: Everything will be better come summertime! But I hide with the shades drawn and the windows closed. Sweating, cursing, wondering when it was that my outsides came to match my insides.

Shoveling, putting up Christmas lights, raking and mowing, ripping up the ivy. I was the biggest. I had to help. The ivy was really something. It grew back with a vengeance year after year. Weaving in and out of the clapboard siding, thriving in the shade. By August, it covered the garage from top to bottom.

My father, swearing and ripping, refusing to wear gloves. Me, gathering and piling, stuffing the vines into sturdy brown lawn bags.

It'll take over the whole damn house, my father would grumble. That kind of tenacity—he took it personally.

I prayed, Grant me the resilience of a climbing plant. But I am a human animal, brutally aware, born to freeze. I used to be a fighter—now, not so much.

And now there are the migraines to contend with. Scenes from a life lived, a denouement rolling out on the backs of my eyelids, exploding behind my face. I see auras, except I do not believe in auras. But what the hell do I know, what, with my pupils dilated in mismatched sizes.

There is no range of motion in which to find comfort.

The salve of darkness, at last, and I open a window. Outside it smells of plants at night—summer humidity, green life.