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KAREN BROWN

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## *Galatea*

I married William in upstate before he turned out to be the Collegetown Creeper. I took his last name and became Margaret Mary Bell. I was named after my father's Aunt, who was a novice with the Benedictine Sisters of Regina Laudis, in Bethlehem, Connecticut when she died on the turnpike with three other Sisters, all on their way back to the convent after a retreat. I often imagined them driving in a sky-blue sedan with the windows down and the bright sun on the hood. The air on their faces is cool and smells of cut grass. It catches in their wimples, invades the seams and soothes their scalps. Their habits flap. They have the radio on, and the Searchers sing "Love Potion Number Nine," and they laugh. They are young women, wedded to God. Their mouths open and drink in the sun and the wind. Under the black fabric their bodies surge in secret, betraying their vows. Sometimes, I wanted to be pinioned in that faith, in the rules of their love. I felt my heart drawn out in wild longing with the words: devotion, ecstasy, rapture, and betrothal.

I was going to graduate school then, and writing, and I met William Bell one day while my sister was visiting, and we went to a park playground by Cayuga Lake. The lake was dark and cold, and the wind gusted off of it in an unfriendly way, rattling the bare maple branches, clanking the chains of

the mostly empty swings. The playground was the old-fashioned kind, with wooden seesaws, and one of those spinning platforms with metal handles, and the few kids there were playing on that, all of them running in the worn circle of dirt, making it spin, feebly, and then jumping on. My sister and I didn't have children ourselves, but we remembered how fun it was when we were small, and so we told them to climb on, and we both grabbed one of the metal bars, and the kids held on with their mittens, and we ran and pushed with all our force. Some of the kids were too small, and the spinning made them afraid, and one even flew off. It was a sickening sight, the way he was flung into the dirt. My sister and I looked at each other in horror and a few of the other mothers knelt down by the boy, who turned out to be William Bell's nephew, and I almost cried I was so embarrassed. Then William came over and grabbed the boy by the arm and righted him, quickly, as if nothing was wrong.

"God, don't hate me," I said.

William had one of those smooth-cheeked faces that flush in cold weather. He brushed the dirt from the boy's pants knees, and wiped his tear-stained face with his bare hand, and the whole time he kept glancing up at me, reassuring me no, really, not a big deal. Meanwhile the little boy whimpered, and I wondered if he'd bumped his

head, or sustained some injury of which William remained oblivious.

“Is he OK?” I asked. And sure enough his pants had torn, and his little knee was skinned and raw and bloody.

“Oh, shit,” William said. “My sister will kill me.”

The other mothers had silently reclaimed their children, and none of us really knew how to tend to the boy, so William was resigned to taking him home that way, and suffering his sister’s anger. He told me about it that night when he called me, how his sister’s eyes panicked, and she grabbed the boy away from him so quickly he felt like a criminal.

“You should have told her it was my fault,” I said. I sat on my bed, pulled out from the couch. It had begun to snow. In the streetlight, I could see the snow whitening the branches of the big elm outside my window. I had written my phone number on a ski tag I tore from my sister’s parka that afternoon. I was so happy he had called. I kept remembering his eyes looking at me in the park, and the way his cheeks reddened from the cold. My sister sat watching TV a few feet away from me, shushing me every so often so she could hear. We drank hot chocolate spiked with Kaluha and ate candy corn I bought in a moment of nostalgia on Halloween. I told William about my Women and Grief course, how we listened to tapes of keening women from Ireland and Greece.

“I can barely stand it,” I said.

“Is it sad?” he asked me. “Is it awful?”

I tried to explain how it was so awful I wanted to laugh, and how hard it was not to, did he think

I was crazy? He told me no, of course not. You’re interesting, he said. He lived with his sister and his nephew, and was in between jobs because he’d been kicked out of the university’s College of Engineering. He was an inventor, he said, who could not abide by someone else’s schedule. He called every day that week, and our talking became whispered intimations, everything taking on some imagined double meaning. He said the moss on the rocks at the bottom of a shallow stream were the same color as my eyes, and asked if he could come over to my apartment, and I remembered he had called me *interesting*, so I said yes.

He came on a Friday night. I watched for him out of my window, through the branches of the elm. My apartment was only one large room upstairs in a house on Seneca Street. Downstairs lived a poet named Angela who was a student, too. She was very tall and soft-spoken, one of those people you sit with late at night and tell everything to. I could see the light from her window, the way it shone out onto the snow. I often imagined what it would have been like to live in the entire house alone, to move freely through all the rooms, to traverse the stairs and wander into a dining room and a kitchen at the back of the house. Now, someone living a separate life occupied these spaces—Angela, and Geoff and his dog Suzie downstairs, and Professor Harrow upstairs with me. Our lives invaded each other’s in unwanted, unacknowledged ways. The floors were oak and creaked, and I listened to Professor Harrow’s insomniac footsteps back and forth when I couldn’t sleep. I had a fireplace in my

apartment. Angela had one downstairs in hers. We were not allowed to use them, but we put large lighted pillared candles in them, and it gave the illusion of the warmth that we desired.

The cold here was bitter, different than New England. Outside the city the wind spilled across sweeping, open spaces dotted with abandoned farm machinery, and old houses buckling in on themselves. You wouldn't think they were habitable, but once in a while there would be a tacked-up sheet in the doorway, or plastic nailed over the windows, and the narrow ribbon of smoke from a chimney. William Bell was not from anywhere else. He was born here, in Tompkins County, and lived here all his life. At one time his father sold and repaired lawnmowers in a shop behind their house, and before that he was an attorney. They had an enclosed front porch with an air hockey game, and gnome statuary on the front lawn that William, as a child, believed came alive at night. Before she died his mother grew apples and sold them from a small roadside stand, MaCoun and Winesap and Cortland. I imagined, from these aspects of his life, that I knew everything about him. When he pulled up to the curb I found myself rushing down the stairwell to meet him at the door, tugging him by the arm in from the cold. It was still snowing, the light, fluttery, lake effect snow that went on for days. Come here, you, I said. He smiled, slowly, unsure what to make of me. His cheeks held their usual flush. He wore a wide-brimmed, beaver-skin hat. We stood on the old worn Persian rug in what once was the vestibule. The walls were papered in brown, with

tiny pink roses. The woodwork was brown, too, mahogany shining in the weak yellow overhead light. There was a coat rack and an umbrella stand and a small, rickety antique table. The whole downstairs smelled of Angela's incense.

He looked around, somewhat sheepish, and removed his hat with one hand, grabbing it at the crown. "I like this place," he said, nodding.

"Your hat is different," I told him.

He looked at it in his hand. "Well," he said. "It was my father's hat."

When he glanced up at me his face was sad. I thought that, once, women met their lovers here who, pressed by decorum, demurely took their hats and coats. I wondered if the thought I had ever occurred to them—that if William Bell and I had sex there might be some sweet added dimension of loss and sorrow conquered, for a moment, in my arms. I didn't know this person I had become. I had always assumed I would demand things of boys and men, dicker with my body, holding out interminably until they proved themselves in some way. But that night, I didn't wait to kiss him. I wanted to ease that sadness about his mouth with mine. His lips clung and trembled, kissing me back. Upstairs in my apartment, by the wavering fireplace candlelight, I undressed for him. All year, except the months of July and August when the summer heat rose to make a sweltering pocket, my apartment was cold. William slid his hands up and down my body and felt the raised bumps on my skin.

"I can't warm you up," he said. So we climbed into my bed under the quilt and the blanket. That

night the palms of his hands skimmed the surface of me, and he talked, his voice a soft hum that I had grown used to on the phone. I didn't know what he wanted with me. When I touched him he took my hands away, sweetly, like a correcting parent. Then, he fell asleep.

My bed was lumpy with springs, and I had a certain angle in which I slept. But with William taking up the space, and my body burning and bright from his fingertips, I could not. I imagined I was Auntie Sister, who at my age entered the abbey. I'd always pictured her alone in her chaste bed, consumed with desire for something ineffable and bodiless, but lying there I knew you could not separate the two—body and desire. I watched the shadows of the elm on my white plaster wall. I listened to the silence of the snow. The branches, sheathed in ice, clicked together like delicate bones. On my wall above my desk I have pasted a poem Angela gave to me, one of Sylvia Plath's with its elm voice: *Clouds pass and disperse. Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables? Is it for such I agitate my heart?* I listened for Professor Harrow's slippered footfalls, their shushing across his oak flooring, back and forth. Sometimes, a deliberate, thoughtful pacing. At others, a slow, anguished dragging. I rarely saw him in our upstairs hall. When I did, I must have worn an expression of sympathy, because he avoided me, and hurried down the stairs, as if he knew I knew, and he was ashamed of his wakefulness. The times we met his face was white and startled. His hair was dark, combed back damply. He wore a camel overcoat with soiled elbows and smelled of the cigarettes

I'd seen him smoke furtively, like a teenager, at his cracked window.

On the first night William slept with me, Professor Harrow was quiet. I envied him. I tried to breath in and out, regularly, to feign sleep. I propped my head in my hands and looked at William Bell's face. Were we still strangers? I wondered. Or had something been forged about which we would never speak. I wouldn't know just then how he felt. His sleeping, slack expression revealed nothing, and I felt a small, pitiable stone of fear. How easily I could be abandoned. At least, in sleep, I would not have to wonder what I wanted. When I did sleep, it was near morning. I awoke to find William Bell watching me in the gray light. We were like sentries who had traded places.

I looked at him, looking at me. He seemed sad again, defeated.

"You could never love me," he said, somberly.

His cheeks were flushed again. His breath came out in a white cloud, and the candles in the fireplace had burned down to flat saucers of wax. He sat upright, with his bare chest exposed, and my grandmother's crocheted afghan swaddling his waist, multicolored and garish.

"Well," I said. I didn't know how to finish. I could not admit that I was thinking about his body below the covers. "You look cold."

He stared at me, his chest pale against the afghan. "I don't care," he said. "I don't care about anything right now."

He looked away. I heard him breath, deeply. But he didn't make a move to get up and leave. "You

don't have to stay," I said. I rolled away from him, to the metal edge of the bed. I thought of Professor Harrow, waking, what his routine might be on a Saturday morning—toast, coffee in a china cup. I imagined him with buttery crumbs on his fingers, listening through the walls. William Bell sighed again and heaved himself out of bed. He was tall, and I heard his body unfold. I listened to him find his clothes, to his soft sighs retrieving them, and the sound of the fabric slipping over his arms and legs. Finally, he put on his shoes, big boots that clomped appallingly. I turned around and he was standing over the bed.

"Tell me not to go," he said.

"Tell me you want to stay," I told him.

"Ask me to kiss you," he said.

"Do you want to kiss me?" I was confused. I saw it was useless to talk.

"I want to kiss you more than anyone I have ever met," he said, but he made no move toward the bed. His eyes were troubled, and dark. He turned then, and went out the door. I heard him thump down the stairs. I didn't get up and lock the door behind him. I lay there for a long time wondering whether or not to believe him. Finally, I slept again. When I awoke it must have been early afternoon. Weak sunlight shone across the end of the bed. And William Bell was there, sitting in the armchair I found in an antique store, its worn upholstered arms curving over wood inlaid with the carved heads of ducks. He was watching television without the sound. He ate from a carton I recognized from the Korean place in Collegetown. I thought I should be a little

afraid of him, coming into my apartment without asking, but I was not.

I moved on the bed, and he glanced back at me. He smiled, wide and happy. I hadn't seen him smile like that before. There were many things I hadn't seen about him, things I couldn't know. None of that mattered then. My body was warm, my limbs slid across the soft sheets. He brought the food over to the bed and sat on the end. Are you hungry? he asked. I rose up onto my knees and put my arms around his shoulders. His face changed, quickly, like clouds moving over the sun and the shadows lengthening on a lawn. He set the food down on the floor. I smelled its spices on his mouth. I heard his breathing catch, felt his body's sudden shift, its tension, like something coiled and tight. His hands were cold. It felt wonderful, his hands on me, his mouth moving, his groans. I thought: he came into my room while I slept, and I grew breathless and greedy for him.

We stayed in bed all that day. I heard Professor Harrow come up the stairs and slip his key into his lock. William Bell held me in his hands. I felt my body transform, heighten and strain and sigh. What else would make me happier? Just then, I believed in anything—love, *irretrievables*. The light moved in its pale way across the foot of my bed, across the worn oak floor. It settled in the lap of the antique chair. We let the room grow dim and darken and match the outside. When the streetlight came on, we watched the snow falling in it.

"Does it ever stop snowing here?" I asked him. His hand was heavy, pressed to my bare

stomach.

“It’s winter,” he said, as if this was an answer.

My stomach rumbled, and he said we needed to feed me, and so he pulled me up and my nakedness was light and airy in the dark. I stood on the foldout bed. He slid off the end and stood in front of me.

“Look at you,” he said. “Galatea.”

I posed, rigid, like marble.

William Bell reached up and put his hands on my hips. I remembered this moment for a long time after—the press of his thumbs, his cradling of me. He leaned in and kissed my hipbones, my thighs. I didn’t need food. I wanted to be ravished. This was, for the most part, what became of us. His devotion, my submission. That night we dressed and went out into the snowy street. The houses lined up in their rows, their roofs thick and white, the lampposts and power lines and tree limbs all leaden with snow. The snow falling was eerie and oddly warm. He held my hand, and I let him. Every so often he stopped and pulled me in to kiss. A passing car’s headlights would light us up.

“Isn’t this being in love?” he said.

I told him I didn’t know.

We stood on the sidewalk, under someone’s porch light. Inside the house we saw people watching television, just their feet in socks propped up on a coffee table. They still had their jack-o’-lanterns on the porch. Nearly buried, you could just make out the carved grimaces. I noticed, all around, things caught unprepared by snow—a rake propped on a fence, a child’s bicycle tossed

down on the grass. On the porch a pair of socks, pulled off and abandoned, frozen stiff in their contortions.

“You don’t trust anything,” he said, despondent. He let my hand drop. I had to retrieve his hand and tell him to stop it. I wondered if this was love, this constant reclamation, this rush to reassure. We kept walking and he steered me past the railroad tracks, into an end of town I had never been, not even with Angela in her Volvo. We stopped at the head of a path. Below us a creek, not yet frozen, rushed in the dark. To the right were scattered twinkling lights, and a soft din of conversation. I sensed low-built dwellings coated with snow and imagined people in them. There were several fires burning. The place smelled of wood smoke and the dank creek mud.

William Bell took my hand. “Let’s go,” he said.

Of course, I would not. He looked back at me, calmly chastising. “These people know me,” he said.

My feet had grown cold in my boots. I didn’t know what he would need to say to make me walk down the path with him. He stepped toward me and slid his two hands up under my coat, under my sweater and T-shirt. His hands on my skin, the press of his fingertips, were somehow consoling, familiar.

“You must trust me,” he said, softly, into my hair.

And I was not sure whether it was that I trusted him, or that I worried if I didn’t, he would take his hands away forever. He held my hand again

and we went down the path worn muddy by others' footsteps. The enclave consisted of tents and tarps strung on two-by-fours. Strung bulbs, or Christmas lights, powered by a small generator, lighted some of the dwellings. There were end tables with small shaded lamps and tinny radios. Under the tarps, or around the fires, the people sat in aluminum chairs, the kind with plastic slats, low-slung canvas chairs, camp chairs, the type you took to an outdoor concert or a kid's sports game, or the beach. The people eyed us, warily. They were dressed for the weather, in layers of clothes that made them look lumpy, and all of the same size and sex. We kept walking down the narrow paths. The snow fell, landing in their fires, and hissing. The mud sucked at my boots. From the tents came the smells of humans—stale breath, refuse, the odor of a dirty clothes hamper. We arrived at a fire removed from the others. Around it, the people laughed, and passed a bottle around. They smoked and their exhaling formed large clouds about their heads. When they saw William, they greeted him, all at once.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Bell Jr." one said.

There were no chairs for us. We stood beside their group, feeling the warmth of their fire on our faces.

"What do you have for us," someone else asked. I wondered if this was a kind of password, or mode of entry, the bringing of something, like a gift. I still could not distinguish between the men and the women. Their voices were the same—deep and gravelly. They wore knitted caps, some with pom-poms, some striped and bright. They seemed

like children sitting by the fire.

"I've brought the woman I'm going to marry," William said.

I looked at him, quickly, and stepped away. "What?" I said.

There was a sudden quiet. A throat was cleared, raspy, horrible. Either William's announcement, or my objection, was out of place in their circle. I thought I saw one person roll their eyes.

"Oh Lord, get Billy Bell out here," another said.

Around us the snow blew softly. The sky was a black bowl, starless. I could see the shapes of trees, their remaining leaves withered and clinging, lonely shapes on slender twigs. A man emerged from one of the nearby tents. He was tall and well built. He wore a heavy tweed overcoat and lumbered up to us. In the firelight, I saw his eyes in his roughened face, exactly like William Bell's.

"What now?" he said, gruff, unforgiving.

He pulled out a cigarette from his pocket and then looked to the group for a light. William took a silver Zippo from his own pocket and lit the man's cigarette. Both of their hands went up to cup the flame from the wind. Here was the man who lined up mowers on his front lawn with prices handwritten on cardboard placards, who with youthful earnestness argued cases in a courtroom in downtown Ithaca. I noticed he was unsteady, swaying in his long coat.

"Did you hear?" someone around the fire said. "He's brought the woman he is going to marry."

"Or not," snickered someone else. The group laughed, tentatively, not sure of what to make of

this situation.

The tall man sighed. He wore a wool Burberry's scarf tucked into his collar. He would not look at either of us.

"Get out of here," he said, quietly. His voice was ominous, threatening.

William Bell stayed. They were nearly the same height.

"I thought you should meet," he said. I sensed the sarcasm in his voice, a kind of tremor. I saw that once, the older man would have put his hand on William's shoulder, or taken him in his arms. I knew that William was waiting for all of these things.

Someone in the circle started singing a low, bawdy song. Something about *wedded* and *bedded*, *O*. Others joined in, creating a distraction, an odd background accompaniment. The older man turned, and stumbled back into his tent. I figured he would have his place to sit there, his bottle. He could listen to our retreating footsteps in the mud and feel whatever it was he felt—compunction, sorrow. As we left, the other groups around their fires joined in the song. There was cackling laughter, not derisive, but a waylaid sadness. I imagined all of them having slipped down their own lives to this place, forsaken, or perhaps unwilling to let anyone lay claim to them. We made our way up the embankment, listening to the creek slough its banks. Soon, the temperature would dip and its surface would still and thicken. Underneath the rainbow trout would sit, dumb and cowed, waiting for spring.

I did not talk about the incident of that evening

to William Bell. We returned to my apartment and it was dawn. We had walked home in silence. I had held his hand. Upstairs we met Professor Harrow in his plaid robe and slippers. His ankles were bare and white. He seemed dazed, standing on the landing. It was cold, and our breath came out around our heads.

"Good morning," he mumbled, standing there as if he'd been chased from his room by something to which he did not wish to return. I put my key in the lock and regretted seeing him like that. Inside the apartment it was still cold, still gray and dark. William Bell sat heavily on the end of the bed and put his face in his hands. The elm scraped my window. The snow fell, invisibly, blending into the whitish morning. I sat down beside William and felt I might save him with a profession of love. I pushed him down on the bed and looked into his face. He shook his head and tried to turn away.

"Look at me," I said, and he did.

We looked at each other for a long time, believing we knew what the other thought. I saw I could imagine anything about him, even a past he might never confess. I saw this was what love was.

"Will you?" he asked.

I kissed him. His hands fell back into place on my body. We both got what we wanted, I think. A notary in an old house on Tioga married us in a civil ceremony. Outside, the snow was like powdered sugar falling through a sieve. It didn't seem real. It was like stage snow, pretty and harmless. As we spoke our vows, though, it turned to ice, and slanted against the window, a



vindictive tapping.

We had very little money. He worked for a few weeks at Agway, selling snow shovels and bags of salt and light bulbs, and I was proud of him, getting up at a normal hour, showering and putting on clean clothes. He came home sedate, and smelling of loam, and I was happy. Then he quit. He acquired and left a succession of jobs, and I discovered that this was his pattern, and he saw nothing wrong with it. I stayed with him in Ithaca for the Christmas holiday. His sister had been furious when she found out we'd married, and she refused to have anything to do with us, so I hadn't, yet, told my own family. It seemed then the most foolish of things to do with my life.

We fell into a kind of decline. The apartment was cluttered and unclean. I had a small stove, and a few pots that we washed out when we needed them. They sat on the burners with their previous contents congealing. William's bits of magnetized wire, bulbs and circuits and metal shavings littered the window ledges. The little Christmas tree still sat in its pot on the table by the window, its branches absent of any green life. The glass ornaments slipped off, one at a time at night. In the darkness, they made small splashing sounds when they shattered, like spilling water.

Winter in upstate is interminable. Here the snow was a burden in piled banks, an endless tumbling of flakes. Icicles hung from the house's eaves, deadly threats you ducked under, or knocked off with a shovel. The reaches of snow were vast, wide white fields rolling on and on. There was a bitter wind that rattled the windows

in their frames. I didn't think I could stand it, and I told William Bell, and he gave me his look of reproof. Consider the people in the encampment, his look said. We had not gone back there again, though I suspected that William did. When we shopped at Goodwill, looking for a writing table, he purchased clothing, and shoes that I never saw him wear. Often, Angela offered us food, extra loaves of bread, casseroles in disposable tins, and it disappeared. I didn't question him about anything. I let the undiscussed spaces in our life together flourish. I didn't care where he went, or what he did, as long as he returned to me.

And then one afternoon I came home and the chairs that went around my small table were missing. Another day the lamp was gone, and then the table itself. These things were not acceptable, I told him. He stared at me, blankly, with his beautiful flushed cheeks. He did not return that night, or the next, or the next, when the snow stopped, and things began to melt and drip. I called his sister, but hung up on the answering machine. For two weeks I went to my classes, and came home, and he was still gone. I began to imagine Sister Margaret Mary, her unrequited body prone on her narrow bed in her sparsely furnished room. There was her dark clothing in the closet, and above the small chest of drawers the brassy body of Christ on the cross, the object onto which she safely fastened her own longing. And then I came back from class one evening and the hangers that once held his clothes were bare wires, and the bureau drawer where he kept his sweaters and balls of socks was empty.

I distracted myself with cleaning, left the windows open and let the cold air blow through the place. I brushed William's magnetized pieces of wire and metal out the window into the snow below. I used bleach and scrubbed, borrowed Angela's mop. I loaded the blankets and sheets in her car and drove them to the Laundromat, maneuvering around the potholes in the streets, the slush spraying up onto the windshield. Outside, without William Bell, the world was changing.

At the Laundromat, I saw a boy I'd met when I first came to school. I could not remember his name, but he remembered mine, and he asked me what I was reading, and what courses I was taking this semester, and then asked me more things, and I realized I wasn't answering him the way I normally might because I was married now, and I felt the boundaries of this, without really wanting to. The big hot dryers rolled and tumbled. Pieces of lint floated past. And I looked at his earnest expression, his eyes lit with genuine interest, and I looked at myself as he saw me: my hair too long, uncombed, my sweater with its unraveling wool hem, the smell of bleach on my hands. And I wondered, crazily, if he could love me. "Help me take my stuff to my car," I said.

He grabbed armfuls. I opened the Volvo's trunk and we put the sheets and blankets inside. And then we stood in the slush in the cold, filling the space between us with our fogging breath. "Come home with me and help me make the bed," I said.

He glanced around, as if someone might

witness all of this occurring, as if he'd stepped into a story and been asked to play a role. He didn't smile and answer right away. Then I saw him bite the inside of his cheek.

"Are you serious?" he said, quietly, covertly.

I shrugged. "Of course," I told him.

Climbing into his car he was eager and quick. He drove that way, too, following too close behind, almost hitting me once at a stop sign. At my house I parked at the curb and he carried everything in his arms up the stairs. His footsteps were light, glancing off each step, careening up to the landing where he had to wait for me to unlock the door. I heard him breathing behind the pile of laundry.

Inside, the breeze had whipped things into frenzy. Magazines and manuscript pages had blown onto the floor. The curtains were caught up in their rods. All of the old smells seemed resurrected—fireplace ashes, oak polish, the walls' dampened plaster. It wasn't unpleasant. It felt cold and fiercely alive.

"It is freezing in here," the boy said.

I imagined he dreaded removing his clothes.

I shut the windows and the room stilled. I turned to him and tried to remember his name. We were in the Native American class on the third floor of the Andrew White house. We read the story of the Lakota. He grinned at me from across the room. I saw he had no idea what to do, and without any complicity, neither did I.

"This is the bed," I said. The mattress was thin in the pitiless March light. He grabbed an end of a sheet, and we stretched it out from either side.

From the pile of bed sheets we found the one to go on top, our heads bumping, sorting through everything. His hair smelled of shampoo. The room filled with the smell of clean laundry. We made the bed. He was very competent and serious, as if this was really what he had expected. When we were done he sat down on the edge.

"I want a cigarette," he said. He looked up at me, apologetically.

"I don't smoke," I told him. I sat down on the bed next to him.

"Maybe we should go out and have a few pitchers of beer," he said.

I took his hand and placed it on my leg. We both looked at it, a fine hand with long fingers and bulky knuckles. "There isn't a set way to go about this," I told him. "Either you want me more than a cigarette, or you don't."

He chuckled and ran his free hand through his hair. He would not look at me at all. "Do you do this a lot?" he asked. "I mean you're a pretty girl. I could be the Creeper."

I asked him what he meant, and he told me the story of the Collegetown Creeper, how he showed up in women's unlocked apartments while they slept. They awoke to him standing over their beds, or sitting idly in a chair wearing a wide brimmed hat. I imagined they did not look favorably on his presence, or invite him to bed. They screamed, and swore at him, and called the authorities. I looked at the boy's fine-boned face, his eyebrows drawn together, telling his story.

"You aren't him," I said.

"Didn't you go to Wellesley?" he asked.

I told him he must have me confused with someone else.

"Didn't you go to Yale?" I asked him.

He laughed then. "No, I didn't," he said.

"Well then," I said. "We aren't who we thought we were."

The sheets smelled like laundry soap. The spot of sun on the bed was almost warm. "We are just imitations of what we thought," he said.

His hand on my leg heated it up. Our bodies touched at the shoulder and hip. They sank at varying depths into the too-thin mattress. "What if we kiss?" I suggested. Anything to stop his musing.

He put both of his hands on my face then and held it like a bowl you might tip and drink from. I felt my heart shift and give, dislodged from its winter hibernation. Most men exhibit at least one endearing gesture, and this was his. His mouth was soft and he closed his eyes. We kissed for a long time on the clean-smelling bed. He whispered my name like a summoning spell. I didn't even know his. I wouldn't have said it, anyway. I knew he wouldn't stay, that once he was through and his clothing back on he would saunter out into the hallway, relieved to be done with me, grateful and changed, but still relieved. It was this way with all of them afterwards. When they left, they always gave me something. "You're sweet," they'd say. I'd have put on his undershirt, and when I began to remove it he'd tell me, No, keep it. One gave me his St. Christopher's medal on a tarnished chain, another his L.L. Bean windbreaker. Often, when they spent the night I dreamed I heard William's

boots clomping up the stairs, scraping mud outside the door. He would come in and stand by the bed in the gray light. I'd search his face for some evidence of my betrayal, and find none. His eyes did their usual sad dance over the body he no longer held, and then he turned, and left the room. Sometimes, in the dream, I chased after him. And sometimes, awake, I did the same, slipping out of bed and down the stairs, out the front door onto the porch. I'd stand there, shivering, half dressed, fooled by what was dream and what was real, no longer able to tell the difference.

At Easter I finally went home to visit, and when I returned to my apartment it had been emptied of its furnishings. Angela was out of town. When I knocked on Professor Harrow's door he answered and placed a hand on my arm. His eyes held a blinking lasciviousness I had never

noticed before. "Well, well," he said, and I pulled my arm away. "I assumed you'd moved out." There had been banging on the stairs, he told me, and a pickup truck at the curb. I knew William Bell had been there, and taken everything. I would not go looking. I did not trust what I wanted to find—my duck-carved chair inside the flap of a tent, its legs sunk in muddied earth, the bed unfolded from the couch in the broad spring sunlight. I might have begged to stay, to lie down on the worn sheets that smelled of melting snow. At night the little strung lights must leave spangles on the canvas like stars. The bonfire smoke invades clothing and pores. The creek rushes its banks again with fervor. I no longer remembered the day we married. Only the day I knew we would, those moments with my heart warm and rapt, the silent promise of the frozen world, the elm chafing in its coat of ice. 