

The Duplex

AMY SILVERBERG

I moved to Los Angeles to sing. When was this? August? June? I was twenty-nine, and those were shapeless months, when the days blended together and I refused to pull them apart.

My landlord was unusually close to her adult son. His name was Jeffrey, and my landlord said he was around my age. I'd never met him even though his apartment was apparently only twelve minutes away. I lived on the bottom floor of her dilapidated duplex; she lived upstairs. Every night I'd fall asleep to the sound of her feet shuffling across the thin wood floor above me.

I slept with my bedroom windows open, hoping for a breeze to carry in the burned-air smell of the city. Instead, my landlord would wake me up in the morning by pulling aside my curtain and thrusting her hand inside my room, offering me a gift—a spare tomato or a pamphlet about the Hare Krishnas.

“For you,” she’d say, averting her eyes.

I always slept in the nude, though I never shared the bed with anyone. It was a shame, because I had the distinct feeling I’d never look that good again. Don’t get me wrong—I didn’t look great. But I wasn’t eating all that much, and from afar, I had the sinewy profile a lot of girls were after. The last person who’d seen me naked said my body was extremely economical. “There’s nothing extra,” he’d said. That had been a while ago and I took it as a compliment. If nothing else, I was willing. Willingness could take you places. At the few parties I attended, I wore my willingness like a backless dress, a symbol of more to come. Willing to do what, was the question. I could never seem to move from willing to doing.

“Ricki, I brought you another brochure about kabbalah,” my landlord said one Monday, when she caught me suntanning on the driveway. “I think you should read it. You have no idea what you’re missing here in the sticks.”

I’d never considered Los Angeles the sticks but I didn’t argue. She was big into travel—less the act than the idea of it. I was lying on my side, so I turned over to face her and squinted at the landlord-shaped shadow standing over me. I could feel the ridges of the brick driveway through my bath towel. I was wearing a very small old bikini.

“America has no culture of its own,” she continued. She tended to walk around her property bursting with talk, as though she were a soda can that spent the day being shaken, waiting for any human interaction to pop her open. “What is American culture? Nothing. Trinkets and kitsch and Cracker Barrel restaurants. Anything good we’ve stolen from other people.” She had a long list of grievances, and America ranked high in the repertoire. She had been born in New Jersey.

I closed my eyes. Sometimes feigning sleep worked, and she’d walk away. “What are your favorite foods?” she asked. It sounded like an accusation. She bent farther over me, completely blocking my light. I sat up, sweat pooling in my belly button. I hoped she was looking at my body. Someone had to.

“Eat your heart out,” I said.

“What?”

“I dunno,” I said. “I guess I like sushi.” I said it like a question.

“Aha!” she said. “Exactly. Japanese food. What is American food, even? Give me one example.”

“Apple pie,” I said. “Hamburgers, hot dogs.”

“American kitsch!” She made a face like she might want to spit.

I didn’t think apple pie was kitsch.

“Besides, those are descendants of European cuisine. Aren’t you Scandinavian or something?”

I, personally, had come from a suburb outside Chicago. I’d started as the lead singer of a new age jazz group called the Fairfax Five and Dime. We didn’t last long. There were too many conflicts: scheduling, personality, intrinsic ways of navigating the world. I was having trouble finding a job. What I had thought was a temporary rut had extended into something more permanent. I still sang, occasionally, but the difficulty of that world had eroded my desires. Other people’s confidence had smoothed over the edges of my ambition, made me complacent and lazy. My father was still dead, too, so there was that.

“By the way,” my landlord said now, “a position’s opened up at Jeffrey’s company.” An office job sounded appealing: a bright cubicle waiting for me every morning, a distinct destination to give shape to my formless days. Now, my days were like rows of oversize sweatshirts lined up in a closet. Plus I’m sure my landlord was nervous about how I would continue to pay the rent. I’d been depending on unemployment, which I referred to as “the kindness of strangers.” Why not? I’d never met them. Anyway, my coffers were low, almost empty, the last of the coins dinging against the tin at the bottom.

It turned out Jeffrey worked at a gourmet dog-food company. I’d always liked dogs. “I’ll take it,” I said.

“Sweetie,” she said, brushing away a fly, “you know I think you’re a doll. But you’re still gonna have to interview. And you might want to wear something that covers you up. You know, take a shower.”

“I shower!”

She had a strange look on her face. “Nobody’s accusing you,” she said.

JEFFREY’S DOG-FOOD COMPANY was in a utilitarian office building on Wilshire, across from a bank and a small Korean deli I frequented for their bucket of giant pickles.

Jeffrey was an account manager, whatever that meant. He had a hint of a potbelly, which was made more obvious by his too-tight button-down shirt. I imagined a multicolored stack of them in his room, all purchased by my landlord. Still, there was something nice in his face, a longtime kindness that had settled there.

It was odd finally meeting Jeffrey, considering I'd heard so much about him from his mom. I could list his favorite foods (chicken pot pie, steamed mussels, pad see ew) and what he had majored in during college (political science) and why he'd been teased as a child (a brief speech impediment).

His mother visited him weekly. Why didn't he ever come to her house? Did he wait until I was gone to visit? But I was so rarely gone!

"It's great to finally meet you," he said from across a stainless steel desk. Through the windows in his office, I could see the snake of cars crawling down Wilshire, on their way to somewhere better than wherever they'd just been.

"You, too," I said. "Your mom is—" I was going to say "wonderful," but I didn't want to start our relationship off with a lie. She wasn't wonderful. She was lonely and well intentioned and I saw something of myself, or my future self, in her. "Your mom's kind for letting me live there so cheap," I said finally.

"I think she likes having you around," he said.

A high-ponytailed woman cleared her throat by the door. "Jeff," she said, "the Weimaraner people are on the phone." Did people normally call him Jeff? Did the name Jeffrey remind him of his mother—did it place me in the company of old, lonely women? But I wasn't old. I pulled my shirt down a little, to remind him of my youthful breasts.

"I'll call them back," he said, and the woman glided away. He turned his attention back to me. For a minute, there was something taut between us. "Listen, it's pretty much just an admin job."

I didn't know what admin meant in that context, but I nodded.

"My mom tells me you moved here to do music," he continued. "But—"

"To sing," I interrupted. "Mostly jazz. Classic stuff."

"To sing," he repeated, but didn't ask any other details. Something I noticed: when you're in the midst of failing, it becomes important to you that people get the particular details of your failure right. He'd grown up in Los Angeles, so he must have encountered plenty of parched remains, failures just like mine. This city is a boneyard, I thought. Luckily I didn't say it out loud, which was a problem I had then—interior versus exterior dialogue.

"This job isn't anything like that, of course," he said. "Nothing artsy. So I'm not going to make you sit here and tell me why you want it."

“Money, mostly,” I said. He laughed, and I felt that laughter against my face.

“Well, that’s what we’ll pay you with,” he said. I told him I’d take it.

“Don’t you want to know the job description?” he asked.

“Sure.” I said. “But I’m willing regardless.” He was attractive, I decided then. Maybe not sexually or physically, but I felt a definite pull.

THAT NIGHT, my landlord and I celebrated. She strung up paper lanterns and opened a bottle of wine and invited me upstairs, all in that order. I’d been to her place a few times. It was covered in patterned rugs and the shelves were lined with ceramic jars and sterling silver trinkets. It smelled close and slightly musky, like someone’s recently slept-on pillow.

I’d been thinking about Jeffrey/Jeff all day. Not in a romantic way, exactly. I just wanted to know more about him, mostly how my landlord had seemingly made him from scratch, raised him from the ground like a stalk of human corn.

She led me to the couch and handed me a glass of red wine. The lights were dimmed, party lighting, though it was just the two of us.

“To new doors opening,” she said, clicking her glass against mine. I could smell the toasted air of a bonfire outside. She was in one of her good moods—expansive. I felt as though I could see the kind of young person she’d been, before the world had sought to protect her, to chisel her down to a manageable size.

I decided to be bold and asked to use her computer to YouTube a song I liked, sung by a woman with a deep, scratchy voice. The song drifted around the room and started raking against my chest, and I thought I saw it working on my landlord, too—a slackening in her posture. That’s when I suggested we play a game of twenty questions.

“Too many,” she said. “Let’s do ten. Five each.”

I wanted more but decided not to press my luck. After all, that seemed the root of my problems: how much I’d once wanted. If I’d only wanted less, I wouldn’t have had to settle for it.

“What was Jeffrey’s dad like?” I asked after she’d wedged herself between two pillows. Since my father died, I’d become fascinated by other people’s fathers.

“Pass,” she said.

"You can't do that," I told her.

"My rules." She put her feet on the coffee table and crossed her arms. "House rules." The surface of the table was embedded with tiny blue tiles arranged in the shape of a whale. "It's Moroccan," she said, when she caught me looking. "My turn. Where do you go at night," she asked me, "if you don't sing anymore?"

"I still go to the open mics," I said. This was true. I ghosted around the bars that advertised a microphone and cheap drink specials. But once I took a seat and the bartender asked if I wanted my name on the list, I'd become suddenly tight-lipped, showing him my palms. Not tonight, I'd demur.

"Why doesn't Jeff—" I began.

"Jeffrey," she corrected me.

"Why doesn't Jeffrey—"

"These questions should be about me," she said, looking startled. "We're the ones having this conversation. He's not even here to defend himself!"

I was surprised. Usually my landlord loved talking about Jeffrey. I thought all over-involved mothers loved talking about their sons. Didn't they shine and coddle them for that very reason, to mention them at a moment's notice?

I only had sisters, both of them quite a bit older. I was the favorite. Much adored. Too adored, my father always said. My mother claimed to like us all the same, but my father never made that pledge.

"Jeffrey has his reasons," my landlord said, "for being the way he is."

"Sure," I said. "Of course." I was unclear how to proceed. What way was he? She refilled her glass of wine and her hand shook slightly. The song I'd played on her computer had long since ended and now I was aware of the silence in the room, which felt like another person. I could hear the cars outside, the agitated line of them crawling down Crescent Heights, their honks like sneers.

"I guess I should go back downstairs," I said.

"Fine. But before you go, I'd like to ask *you* one more question," she said, "now that we're on the subject."

"Sure."

"How did Jeffrey seem to you?" she asked.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I said.

“Just your general impression.”

“Health-wise?” I asked. “He seemed good. Rosy cheeks. Good posture. Definitely eating enough.”

She looked down at her hands, sheepishly, as though I’d just handed her something obvious, like a misplaced purse that’d been right near her feet.

“Thank you,” she said, standing up quickly. “That’s enough, I think, for the night.”

IT QUICKLY BECAME APPARENT I would get no face time with the dogs or the executives—a true middling; I could see both the top and the bottom, but I wasn’t allowed to touch either one. I was only there to answer phones and fill out spreadsheets. I didn’t really mind. I liked the monotony of the work, the rhythm of it. I could have been painting at an easel or using a loom. I became lulled into a deep, underwater type of concentration by the sound of my fingers clicking against the keyboard, hypnotized by my own thoughtless competence.

One task I looked forward to each day was getting the mail and distributing it around the office. Mail time! I ran to meet the mail carrier, pressing myself up against the glass like a Labrador retriever. I liked stretching my legs, and I liked the pure, easy purpose of delivering people their news. “Here’s your mail. I brought it to you.” It forced the higher-ups to take notice of me, if not with actual words then at least an eyebrow raise or a quick twitch of the mouth.

My first Friday I saved Jeffrey’s stack of mail for my last delivery, even though I’d already passed his office once. I noticed one of the letters right away—smaller than the others, with the words PELICAN BAY STATE PRISON SECURITY HOUSING UNIT stamped in red. The postage stamp was an image of an animated rat. I recognized it from *Ratatouille*, the Disney movie in which a rat becomes a famous chef. I’d liked the movie, how a rat could want something more for himself and manifest it through sheer will and improvisational skills.

I didn’t want Jeffrey to think I was rifling through his mail, but I still left the prison letter on the top of the stack. I thought maybe he’d bring it up out of embarrassment or a desire for full disclosure. We hadn’t seen much of each other during my first week, though I seemed to know where he was at

all times. I guess that's being attracted to someone: you grow a new antenna with only one purpose. Maybe now, in delivering the letter, my presence would be cathartic, and the details of his strange life would pour out. I'd be the bucket—an empty object ready to be filled.

When I placed the mail on his desk he gave a brief, perfunctory smile. He turned back to his computer. I walked very slowly toward the door, hoping he'd stop me. I took at least twenty-two tiny steps.

"Ricki," he said finally. I was lingering, my hand outstretched a few inches from the doorknob. "My mother wanted me to apologize to you on her behalf. She said she didn't treat you very nicely at her house. That's very unlike her, you know." Here he smiled a little ruefully. "Her words."

"Thanks," I said. "But she could have just told me herself." Had she acted any ruder than usual? Not by a lot.

"She thought it would mean more coming from me."

"Okay," I said. I tucked my hair behind my ears and tried to meet his eyes in a way I hoped was flirtatious. On second thought, I could easily have seemed deranged. "I guess you're right about that," I said, but he had already been drawn back to his computer, the click-click of his mouse the only sound I heard as I softly shut the door in exactly the way I thought a good admin assistant would shut it—with little fanfare.

THAT NIGHT, I CLIMBED the steps of the duplex and knocked hard on my landlord's door. The whole place smelled like lasagna.

"It smells like lasagna," I said when she answered.

"I made a five-layer one," she said, "the American kind. With that ketchup tomato sauce the Italians wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole."

"Smells good," I said. I'd forgotten why I'd come. She had that effect on me. She turned the space around us into a vacuum, sucked every thought from my head.

Then I remembered. "Your son receives letters from a prisoner," I said. "Why?" Something tense crossed her face—quick as a rodent—before she nodded.

"We don't always pick the right people," she said.

"So it's his wife?" I asked. "His girlfriend?"

"Oh no," my landlord said. "I was talking about me. It's his father. Jeffrey's father."

“Ah,” I said. “What did he do?” I was aware my curiosity knew no bounds, not even politeness or common courtesy could hem it in, but when she blanched I was embarrassed for myself all of a sudden.

“I’d rather not say, if you don’t mind,” she said. I *did* mind, but I knew I couldn’t say so. “You can stay for lasagna,” she added quickly. I had no plans other than to go to a bar called the Pig ’n’ Whistle and watch people sing, watch them move through the fluorescent tunnel of their ambition while I sat in the dark, apart.

“Sure,” I said, “I’d love to.”

“Jeffrey’s coming, too,” she said. “So obviously. You know. Behave.”

I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to take from that. Was I normally not behaved? Don’t sit on his lap during dinner or don’t bring up his father’s letter from prison or don’t make a face when she says for the hundredth time that America was not a melting pot but a sewer?

I agreed with the sewer image, but I didn’t like to picture it when I was eating.

“I know you think he’s very handsome, my Jeffrey,” she said. The *my* surprised me, the possessiveness of it. Did I think he was handsome? Or was he just an open target for the arrow of my longing? There was a pleasure in wanting, if nothing else.

“Sure,” I said. “He’s handsome.”

Just then we heard a knock at the door. “Jeffrey!” we said. We looked at each other as though we’d both been caught.

“I’ll get it,” she said, smoothing her dress, which looked like it was shorn from burlap. Most of her dresses looked like they might be used to haul groceries.

Jeffrey looked surprised to see me but not unhappy. “I didn’t know you’d be here,” he said. I wanted him to say, “I didn’t know you’d be here, *Ricki*.” I didn’t like that he didn’t say my name, that he didn’t make sustained eye contact. It’s a thing I hate, when someone takes up more space in my head than I do in theirs.

“Lasagna!” my landlord shouted. Was she nervous? She seemed so all at once. I wondered if she was having that “worlds colliding” feeling I used to get when I was still singing and before I moved to LA, back when I had a lot of different friends and the act of putting them in the same room was like exposing myself, as though everyone would learn something strange and

private about me just by meeting one another. That stopped being a problem when I stopped going out. The light in every room seemed changed, harsher somehow, without my dad in the world.

But maybe my landlord was always nervous around Jeffrey, and I'd just never seen them together.

"You both look lovely," he said, which seemed like a flat-out lie—his mother in burlap, and me in a faded T-shirt with the words CACTUS COOLER on it. But I wasn't wearing a bra and the material of the shirt had worn very thin, so he could probably see my nipples. "Mom makes great lasagna," he said to the floor.

My landlord busied herself setting an extra place for me. "Ricki's been telling me she's enjoying work," she lied to both of us.

"Sure," I said. "I like admin!"

Jeffrey laughed, though I hadn't meant it as a joke. "Well, she's doing a great job so far," he said. Then the conversation slowed to a halt as we dealt out bricks of lasagna and poured red wine, and I wondered, if I weren't there, whether they'd have more to talk about. Was my presence an albatross around the neck of the night, weighing it down?

"Are you dating anyone, Jeffrey?" I asked suddenly. It was my curiosity, and my desire to have something to talk about, both. I thought his mother, my landlord, would be upset with me, but instead, she looked up, interested.

"I'm not, no," he said. "I had a few . . . personal things to sort out in the last year. But I've been feeling better. Probably finally up to it now."

"Well, that's great—" my landlord started.

"And you, Mom?" he asked. "Have you been dating?"

My landlord laid her palms primly on her lap. "Oh, I'm fine," she said. "Just fine. I have Ricki here anyway. Visiting all the time. Keeping me company." I looked up at the ceiling. It was hard to tell if I'd started something, or what exactly I'd started.

"My parents divorced a long time ago," Jeffrey said.

"Oh?" I said. "Huh." I'd never been very good at pretending. When I sang, people said you could always tell what I was feeling at the time. You could see it right there on my face. But with singing, that's sometimes a good quality.

"She already knows," my landlord said. "She knows where your dad is."

“Well—” I coughed.

“It’s more complicated than it sounds,” he said.

“Well, I actually don’t—” I coughed a little more.

“It’s a funny thing,” he said. “When people hear that he’s in jail, they think they know what kind of person he must be. But that’s the thing, people don’t know the extenuating circumstances. Nobody knows those, ya know? That’s life,” he said. “People read the headlines. They don’t see what’s in the margins.”

“Sure,” I said. “Makes sense.” When I looked up, my landlord was fanning herself with a parking ticket.

“I’ve lived here so long,” she said. “And I still get these. Isn’t that strange? That I can’t get it through my thick skull when they’re coming to street-sweep and on what side?” She sounded angry.

“I get them, too,” I whispered.

“Sure,” she said. “But with you it makes sense.”

“Mom,” Jeffrey said softly. “Everybody gets parking tickets.”

“No, she’s right,” I said. “I’m pretty irresponsible.”

“Some people just are,” she sighed.

What now? I drummed my fingers on the table.

“So what’s your dad in for?” I asked. Goddamn it, I thought. What was *wrong* with me?

“Nothing big,” he said. “White collar. Corporate stuff.” I knew as much about the terms *white collar* and *corporate stuff* as I did about *admin*, so I just nodded my head in a noncommittal way.

“So why did you leave Chicago?” Jeffrey asked me.

I wondered how much I should say. For instance, that my dad had died a few months before I decided to leave. That I had been having trouble prying myself out of bed. That I’d thought maybe a new city would make me feel different or make me sing better or, at the very least, more often.

“I kept getting in my own way,” I said instead. I was trying to keep it simple. “I thought a change would do me good.” I hummed a few bars of the song from which those lyrics sprang. They both looked at me, Jeffrey with his head cocked to the side, like a dog.

“Are you glad you moved?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I guess the things I wanted haven’t really panned out. But”—here I paused—“I’m not sure I still want them.”

“I know how that is,” Jeffrey said.

I let the moment between us stretch out. It reclined, catlike, right in front of his mother. "I made dessert," my landlord said, standing. "It's Julia Child's crème brûlée—the kind that would make an actual French person turn over in his grave."

"Great, Mom," Jeffrey said. I looked at him across the table. He was smiling at me in a new way, as though we'd become coconspirators.

MONDAY, AT THE GOURMET DOG-FOOD COMPANY, I lingered in the doorway of Jeffrey's office with the mail.

"Come in!" he said.

"Ricki," I said softly.

"What?"

"Nothing," I said. "Here's your mail."

He started flipping through the envelopes as I stood at the corner of his desk, trying not to breathe too hard or too loudly. He looked up suddenly. "Did you need anything?" he asked.

"Oh," I said. "I guess I just. Do *you* need anything?"

"Oh," he said. "Uh, I guess not. Thanks for the"—and here he slapped the stack of envelopes against his denim-clad thigh—"mail. See you soon, I hope."

"Yes," I said. "Definitely." I started to walk across the room in a way I hoped was serious yet lighthearted. I might have been lifting my feet a little too high in the air. Once I'd made it to the door, I wheeled around on my heels. "Tonight," I said.

"What?"

"We could see each other tonight."

"Oh," he said. "Okay. Where?"

"Do you like music?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. "Most kinds."

"You could come watch me sing if you wanted. I go to this little bar. I mean it's not a big deal. You sign up on a sheet. Of paper. On a clipboard."

"I get it," he said.

"Okay," I said.

"Sure, I'll come."

I walked slowly back over to his desk and wrote down the address and the time I thought he should arrive: eight twenty. I wrote it on the back of

one of the envelopes I'd just handed him, which might have been a little presumptuous, but what can I say? It was the first slip of paper available.

"Okay," he said. "See you."

I closed the door as softly as a whisper.

AT MY OWN DESK, I immediately began to panic. Should I tell my landlord? Did she have any right to know? No, I told myself, and then again louder—no. Would he tell her? No, I thought, that would be bizarre. And yet it didn't feel right to exclude her.

What to sing? Studies show people prefer to hear songs they're at least vaguely familiar with, but not songs that they know *too* well, because they have too many preexisting associations with those songs. I'd looked into this before. I did a few Frank Sinatra covers that people seemed to like—not the famous ones, but the ones that should've been more famous.

The phone rang. (The phone that sat on my desk never rang.) "Hello?" I said. "Ricki speaking." I would've said the name of the dog-food company but I couldn't remember it just then. Instead I said, "Admin."

"Ricki, hello," my landlord said. She didn't say her name and she didn't need to.

"Hello," I said.

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Oh?" I asked.

"What," she repeated, "are you doing tonight?"

"Just hanging out," I said. "At a bar. With music."

"What's the name of the bar?" she asked, and I told her. Again, it was hard to keep anything from her. She reminded me of my father—a man whom it pained me to refuse. If he'd left me a note that after his death he wanted to be launched into space instead of buried, I would've tried.

"Maybe I'll come and watch," she said, and hung up.

I spent the rest of the day tapping too loudly on my keyboard about dates and times and dog breeds. From the corner of my eye I watched my phone's clock cycle through its usual numbers. At the end of the day Jeffrey stopped by my desk. "Still on?" he said, as though it were his idea.

"Yes," I said. "Your mom—"

"Oy." He shook his head. "I *had* to tell her," he said.

"I know," I said, because somehow, I did.

THAT NIGHT, AT THE BAR, I wrote my name down on the list and a familiar terror thumped in my chest. The longer you stayed away, the harder it was to return. It wasn't unlike sex, love, or the gym.

The bar was dark with a lot of plaid fabrics. Portraits of farm animals hung all over the walls.

Everybody else clumped into different corners, greeting each other with an overfamiliarity that struck me as a personal affront. Had I been gone this long? A bearded man came in with such a strong scent of damp wind and cigar smoke it made me forget where I was. I might've been back in Chicago then, or back in my childhood den, where the TV was and where my father often sat. I turned toward the door to look. Behind the bearded man, Jeff and my landlord walked in together. I did that kind of double take you see in those romantic comedies Meg Ryan once starred in. Words appeared in neon in the billboard of my mind: *Here they are.*

"Hope we're not too late," Jeffrey said.

"No," I said, "you're a little early."

"I don't like to have to rush," my landlord said. It was strange, seeing her away from her land—she seemed smaller somehow, meek. I leaned closer to hear her better.

"A red wine," she said, though I hadn't asked.

"Uh, sure," I said. "I'll go to the bar and get you one."

The night progressed in jittery bursts, at least on my end. We sat around a small table. I repeated numbers to myself (I'd heard once that repeating numbers sometimes calms you), though I didn't pick them in any particular order. Occasionally my landlord would whisper something in Jeffrey's ear, and he'd listen with the serious face of a doctor.

"Ricki," the host said, finally. "Ricki with an *i*." I never wrote my last name. It seemed too permanent. I wanted to be as slight as a ghost, a wisp of smoke. What can I say? I stayed too long in Chicago and made things heavy. That was a word my dad used to say, *heavy*. He was everywhere by the end.

Before the music started, I positioned the microphone in the way I liked, with the domed beehive part just above my thumb and pointer finger. I gripped it loosely, as though I might let it drop out of my hand and onto the floor at any moment. Sinatra's brass section kicked in and I waited for my cue, a trumpet's long note in a key that seemed off but wasn't. I'd had one beer with no dinner and I felt I was hearing the notes clearer, as though they were

vibrating a little harder, just for me. I looked at Jeffrey and his mother in the audience. They were staring up at me, waiting. They looked like a couple just then, not romantic, but like two people who definitely went together. You purchased them as a set. I understood Jeffrey's tie to her. Whoever said love sets you free was wrong—it ties you down, it makes you loyal to something other than your own happiness.

I know the song is going well when I'm inside it somehow, not outside it. Time passes unnoticeably, and I get a feeling that I understand everything, that I know the world is filled with misunderstandings, and I understand those, too. As I kept singing, I thought about a lot of things. I thought about Jeffrey's dad. Whatever he did, I bet it wasn't that bad. I was sure he had his reasons. I thought maybe this was the way I should spend all of my days: singing. I thought about being with Jeffrey, and what it would be like. I'd only been with a few people since my father died, and not for sex, not exactly. I just took people home and rolled around a little. But I didn't worry about Dad's ghost watching me and getting upset or grossed out. First of all, he didn't believe in ghosts or the supernatural. And second of all, he had wanted me to be happy. He was always in pursuit of pleasure, and thought I should be, too. He wasn't the most honest guy, my father, at least not when it came to business or my mother. He might even have been a little like Jeffrey's dad, somebody whose ethics were his own. And anyway, my dad might laugh, if he saw me fucking. He might laugh and say, *Atta girl*, and of course he'd cover his eyes, on account of not wanting to see his favorite daughter nude.

Once, when I was twelve, I asked my father what he did for a living, and he said, "Odds and ends." I remember we were in the den and a sitcom was blaring in the background. My father sometimes yelled at people on the phone outside of restaurants, while inside the rest of his family sat waiting for him to return. But when he came to watch me sing, he cradled his chin in his hands and sat with a stillness he never exhibited in regular life. People are complicated.

After the song finished, I gingerly stepped offstage and moved through the applause until I was standing in front of my landlord and her son. She was picking through her french fries. Did she miss her husband the way I missed my dad? Was there a husband-shaped absence the approximate size of her son?

“You weren’t half bad,” my landlord said.

“An understatement,” Jeffrey said. “You were wonderful.” The way he was looking at me just then, I felt it acutely, a shared hunger for something lost.

“It’s not that hard,” I said. “Singing, I mean.” I don’t why I felt the need to be self-deprecating, but I did. I felt big, I guess, too big. I felt expansive, like I filled the room.

My landlord was looking beyond me, at the moose head above the door.

“We could get moose heads for our apartments, Ricki,” she said. “One for each. Jeffrey could help us hang them up.”

“I’m sure she could do it herself,” Jeffrey said to my landlord.

“Sure,” I said. “But I won’t refuse the help.”

“You hear that, Jeffrey?” my landlord asked. “She’ll let you help her every once in a while.”