

LET'S BUILD A HOME

A Novella

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Against the Grain

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The problem with June was that she wanted to suck Jimmy's cock, but she couldn't for a number of reasons. One reason was because it was physically impossible; Jimmy lived in a different state. He lived in New York and she lived in Texas. June had always lived in Texas and Jimmy had lived in a lot of different places so he wasn't really *from* anywhere. But for the most part he had lived in New York, and as of recently, Brooklyn. June hated Brooklyn; she could never imagine herself sucking Jimmy's cock there. She had been to upstate New York once and liked it. She had been to Ithaca, Seneca Falls, and Syracuse and she liked those places a lot. June didn't really understand why Jimmy lived in Brooklyn; he didn't seem like the type of person who would live there, but she kept that observation to herself. Another reason why June couldn't suck Jimmy's cock was because he didn't want her to—and it wasn't because he didn't *want it*. He brought it up subtly many times and often sat with his legs apart in a suggestive way, letting her know he was interested, but he didn't want her to actually do it yet. Jimmy liked to pretend he was the kind of guy that could just unzip his pants and pull out his cock, but he wasn't that kind of guy at all. June thought this was silly, but it also turned her on. She was the kind of woman who would actually suck Jimmy's cock if he really wanted her to. She ended up thinking about it more than she should, often coming to the frustrating conclusion that it would probably never happen. But she thought about it anyway, driving herself nuts about it. She thought that if it did happen it would be in the heat of the moment. They'd be kissing and suddenly he'd decide to undo his pants. She'd be so excited about it that she'd just start sucking right away. June imagined giving Jimmy a good slow suck usually when she was trying to take a nap. She'd feel like masturbating, but she wouldn't. She'd get up instead and continue her day, only vaguely feeling the sexual tension in her body.

Jimmy was an older punk and June found this to be incredibly hot. And even though Jimmy was a punk, he was also mostly regular. He was better looking than most aging punks and June thought this was because he had succeeded in transcending certain mentalities. Jimmy was smart. He had been to college and grad school. Although, when they first hung out together, things didn't go so well. First, June mistook another guy for him, which was embarrassing, because she had only seen him once before and didn't fully remember what he looked like, but when Jimmy walked into the coffee shop wearing a leather jacket, she *knew* it was him. He bought her a cup of coffee and they sat outside. The conversation didn't go well. June started to regret meeting up with him. He was clearly nervous, and since he was nervous, he decided to ruin things by being as awkward as possible. At one point he asked her, "Do you know how expensive it is to live in New York?" The fact that he had asked her that made her really angry because she had only ever lived in Texas and to her it was such an irrelevant and pretentious question. However, June came to accept this as part of Jimmy's nature. He was dry beyond dry. But at the time it had made her so angry that she actually thought about never talking to him again, until she got back to her apartment and felt completely turned on by him.

The first time they met was at a poetry reading in Austin. June had purchased Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Pictures of the Gone World* and sat in the back row reading it when Jimmy sat down a few seats over from her and asked her about the book. They started talking about the poetry reading and then he asked her for her phone number. No one ever asked June for her phone number. This was the sole reason she gave it to him. She got a text message from Jimmy the next day asking her what she thought about the poetry reading. They talked a lot after that through text messages, mostly about basic life stuff, and poetry. That's the part that excited June the most: Jimmy wanted to talk about poetry. He was also a poet, which was even more exciting

to her. June considered herself to be a serious poet. She wrote poems regularly and submitted them to literary journals which always rejected them. June had been writing poetry since she was thirteen. She had gotten her MFA two years ago and now she was mostly on her own to figure out what to do next. Grad school was tough. June made no friends and almost no one shared her sensibilities about poetry. The high point of her MFA experience was when she discovered James Wright and realized she wanted to write poems about being alone in nature. Before that she had been really into Charles Bukowski. When June was twenty, she thought Charles Bukowski was the greatest poet who had ever lived. She imitated his style until she realized that she needed to write poems that sounded more like her. This caused June to go through an identity crisis that lasted a few years. It got so difficult for her to write poems that she had to stop for a while, which kind of felt like a death to her. After June turned thirty and realized she needed to get serious about poetry again, she decided to apply to grad school. No one in grad school liked Charles Bukowski, so it was hard. June drifted through, mostly writing and studying on her own, but she wrote a good thesis and that's all that really mattered to her. June always wanted to be someone who had written a really good thesis and she felt confident she had accomplished that goal. After June got her MFA she went through a period of anger and several months of not being able to write. But then she started working on her first real book of poems and things got better. Jimmy had read a lot of Charles Bukowski.

The one time June had an actual phone conversation with Jimmy it ended up turning into intense phone sex. They had a steady friendship now; whenever they saw each other they'd do things like go to the bookstore, go to the record store, or see bands play. June was still trying to figure out why Jimmy lived in Brooklyn and kept failing at it. She wasn't the kind of person who asked nosy questions. She let Jimmy tell her whatever he wanted to tell her. But that didn't stop her from using her imagination. June feared that maybe it was because of a past relationship, an old girlfriend he couldn't get over. She wasn't sure why she should feel fear about something like that, but she chose not to dwell on it. Instead, June decided that Jimmy lived in Brooklyn because of business reasons, which made little sense. She knew that Jimmy had been published. He had three books of poems put out by a small press that was located in Brooklyn, but he didn't seem to like the press very much. When June asked if she could see the books, Jimmy was hesitant, but he eventually brought her copies. Jimmy had an MA in Poetry and June thought his poems were better than hers. This made perfect sense to her; he was older, he had more life experience, and he had lived in a lot of places. All of those things were in his poems. In fact, June thought Jimmy's poems were some of the best poems she'd ever read. She wanted to tell him this. So she called him. It was later in the evening and June was sitting on her patio. She told Jimmy what she thought about the poems and he didn't say much in response, but June understood why. It was never easy for her to listen to someone else talk about her poems either. But then June realized that wasn't the issue with Jimmy. He let her do all the talking because he *enjoyed* it. He was getting pleasure from the sound of her voice and what she was telling him. Then, out of nowhere, he asked her, "What color is your bra?" June got up and went inside. "Black," she said.

What June liked about Jimmy was that he didn't seem to care that he was middle-aged. In fact, he didn't seem to give a shit at all, but it wasn't out of some sense of immaturity. Jimmy was very mature and very comfortable with himself. Sometimes when they were in public, June would look at other men in his age group and a lot of them looked and acted old. Some of them were grandfathers. Most of them looked like lecturers. Jimmy was not a lecturer. He never said things like "When I was a kid" or "I remember when" or "You're probably too young to remember when." His conversation topics were different. He'd see a guy walk by and he'd turn to June and say, "Look at that jackass." It would always be some random guy walking by, young or old, and he'd say it in such a matter-of-fact tone, as if it was completely obvious. It always made June feel good when he did that. She *knew* what he meant.

One of the things June noticed about Jimmy's poems was that she couldn't detect an influence. She knew he was very well-read in poetry, but his poems didn't reflect any particular school of thought. June saw this as a big strength of the work. In fact, she felt very drawn to Jimmy's work; it seemed important to her. She felt like her life was different after reading his poems. They stayed with her. June got curious about Jimmy's reading habits. She asked him who his favorite poet was and he said he loved Emily Dickinson. For some reason his answer stunned her. June had never read Emily Dickinson, not once all through grade school and college, not once during grad school. June had never been interested in Emily Dickinson. Now she was interested. She went to the used bookstore, found a copy of *The Complete Poems*, and bought it. She took it back to her apartment and spent a month reading through the poems. June realized right away that Emily Dickinson's poems were really good. It was difficult for her to believe she'd gone so long without reading Emily Dickinson, that she'd only just now discovered that Emily Dickinson was an exceptional poet. When June told Jimmy all of this, he didn't say much.

He mainly just wanted to hear what she thought. When she went back and read Jimmy's poems again, they sounded even better in her mind.

“Do you want to have sex with me?” Jimmy asked on the phone. “Yes,” June said, realizing for the first time that she really did want to have sex with him. But Jimmy wasn't in Texas at that moment. When he said to her, “My cock is really hard,” June went into her room with the phone and shut the door even though she lived alone. She turned off the light. She got a deep fever in her body as she masturbated on the phone with Jimmy. It was so good and so dirty it almost felt like they were actually having sex. After they finished, it felt like a huge relief; June hadn't realized how much tension she'd been carrying around. “I really want to kiss you right now,” Jimmy said. He sounded lonely when he said it, and passionate. June realized Jimmy wasn't just lonely. He was lonely *for her*. They'd just had their first sexual experience together and they hadn't even kissed yet. It was startling, but also really arousing. June wanted to have phone sex with Jimmy all over again. She thought about what it might feel like to actually kiss him. It made her start to feel lonely for him too.

Jimmy asked June if he could smoke a joint in her apartment. She didn't think much about it before she said yes. Her neighbors, who were nice people, always seemed to be smoking pot, which made it even easier for her to say yes. June had a larger concern on her mind: the fact that she had a desire for cock that never got satisfied. She'd taken to fantasizing about getting fucked by Jimmy and she felt pretty sure that he was probably really good at fucking. June thought about being in bed with Jimmy a lot. This made her craving for cock worse than it already was. It frustrated her, but she never *did* anything about it. She'd just read a book or listen to music or sit on her patio instead. At first June thought that maybe she just liked feeling frustrated, but the truth was, there was no clear solution to the problem. She wanted cock, but there weren't any cocks around. June would see a guy walk by and she'd look at his crotch and think to herself, *no cock there*. She eventually came to accept the fact that cock didn't really exist. Until she met Jimmy. Now it was worse. He had aggravated the problem.

Once, when they were in the record store, June looked at Jimmy's crotch and thought she saw what looked like a bulge. At first June thought this was an optical illusion, but she didn't want to look again right away. She waited until they were farther back in the store where no one was around. It wasn't an optical illusion; Jimmy was in fact a little hard, and he didn't seem to care at all. And then June realized that Jimmy wanted her to see it. In that brief moment she imagined a scenario: the two of them going to the restroom just so he could show her his cock. June blocked it out of her mind right away. When Jimmy asked her if she was done looking around, she dropped the two records she was holding. When he bent down to pick them up for her, his arm gently bumped her shin. She got aroused from it.

June understood that this situation with Jimmy was different. She knew that part of the attraction had to do with the fact that they weren't talking about it. This mainly had to do with the fact that Jimmy didn't want to talk about it. But he wasn't being flighty either. They talked regularly—and June noticed that Jimmy was spending a lot more time in Austin, which she thought was a good thing. He seemed depressed in Brooklyn. June still knew very little about Jimmy's personal life. She cleaned her apartment the day before Jimmy came over to smoke the joint. June was the kind of person who liked to clean; she thought she was good at it. She liked cleaning toilets and sinks and she liked vacuuming. As she was cleaning she tried to think of some questions she could ask Jimmy about his life, questions that seemed harmless, like *did you play any sports growing up?* or *did you have any pets?* But those questions felt lame. What bothered June was that she couldn't ask Jimmy the questions she wanted to ask, like *why do you live in Brooklyn?* or *do you have any ex-girlfriends?* More truthfully, June was bothered by the fact that she couldn't tell Jimmy what she really wanted to say: *I like you a lot and I want you to fuck me.*

When Jimmy came over the next night, he wanted to listen to music while he smoked, so June let him go through her records and pick out a handful. What June liked about Jimmy was that he listened to a wide range of music just like she did. He was a punk, but he didn't only listen to punk. He was the kind of guy who liked The Vandals *and* ZZ Top. He liked Bad Religion *and* Black Sabbath. He liked Judas Priest, Mötley Crüe, *and* Rancid. He liked Van Halen. As Jimmy picked out records, June thought of another question to ask him: *do you know how to play any instruments?* Jimmy put on The Skatalites and right away June thought this was an incredibly sexy choice. He sat down on the couch beside her, took out the joint, and set it on the coffee table along with a lighter. "What are those?" he asked, pointing to a small stack of

literary journals. “Lit journals,” June answered. Jimmy pushed the journals over the edge of the coffee table, causing them to spill onto the floor. Then he placed the joint in the center of the coffee table. “You shouldn’t read those,” he said. “They’re bad for creativity.” June knew that Jimmy no longer submitted his work to literary journals, but this sudden moment of hostility seemed misplaced. “Is everything okay?” June asked. “Everything’s great,” Jimmy said. “Do you want to smoke with me?”

June wasn’t prepared to answer this question. She hadn’t really thought about the possibility of smoking a joint with Jimmy because she didn’t smoke. In fact, June had never even had one puff of a cigarette. She couldn’t even begin to imagine trying to inhale smoke from a joint. It was inconceivable to her. Jimmy lit the joint. June thought about him and The Skatalites and the literary journals on the floor, but she mostly thought about Jimmy and what she couldn’t seem to say. Suddenly, June was glad Jimmy had pushed the literary journals onto the floor. “Did you play any sports growing up?” she asked. “Yes,” he said. Jimmy took a puff of the joint, moved close to June, touched her chin, and kissed her. The smoke went into her mouth; she breathed it in. They did this a few more times. Then, they were just kissing. Then, they were making out. It felt like the heater had kicked on in the apartment. June wanted sex—and she wanted it bad. Then, they weren’t making out anymore. There was just the music. “Do you have any ex-girlfriends?” she asked.

June didn't believe Jimmy when he said he didn't have any ex-girlfriends but it wasn't because she thought he was a liar. Lots of people stayed alone because they were unable to find the right someone who could meet their needs. This made a lot of sense to June. She didn't believe Jimmy because he seemed very comfortable with himself in ways that suggested to her that he had relationship experience. He knew how to be with her in a way that could only come from knowing a woman on an intimate level. June decided that Jimmy had probably been with women, but had never had an actual girlfriend. And she realized that the question she'd really meant to ask was *have you ever been in love?* In that sense, June knew Jimmy was being honest. She'd never been in love either. And then June got the idea that she should visit Jimmy in Brooklyn. This was an awful idea for so many reasons. The main reason was that Jimmy might also think this was a bad idea. He might not want her to visit him in Brooklyn. Another reason was because June hated Brooklyn and really had no interest in seeing the place. She only wanted to see Jimmy. Another reason was that June couldn't begin to comprehend the logistics of actually traveling to Brooklyn. She wasn't a mobile person. She knew nothing about planes or how to navigate her way from the airport to Brooklyn to where Jimmy lived. It all seemed way too complicated and overwhelming to her. June had always lived in Texas. This wasn't a problem for her. She liked Austin; she liked the familiarity of her home state, for all its plusses and minuses. But because June liked Jimmy so much, she wanted to *know* him. She wanted to see how he lived. She wanted to look at his kitchen; she wanted to see his plates and utensils and appliances. She wanted to see his furniture, his bedroom, what books were on his bookshelf. She wanted to see his closet, his bathroom. She wanted to see what his toothbrush looked like. June let her imagination take over. She saw herself going to Brooklyn, appearing right on Jimmy's

doorstep. She imagined knocking on his door. She imagined him opening the door, letting her in. And June's imagination took her to the most inevitable thing—sex. Sex on Jimmy's couch, sex in his shower, in his bed, in his closet, and on his bedroom floor. Sex everywhere. He wouldn't even need to take her anywhere because she didn't *care* to see anything. Just him.

June looked up travel information and came to the obvious conclusion that it was impossible—and for the best. For the most part June just tried to focus on her poetry, but it was getting difficult because she was starting to feel dissatisfied with her work. She had fifteen poems she'd been working on for the better part of a year, and although June thought they were good poems, they weren't doing it for her anymore. Her poems were still getting rejected by all the journals, but this didn't really surprise her. It was a fact of her life. What June needed to do was refocus. She walked over to her bookcase and started yanking books off the shelves, tossing them in a pile on the floor. She removed books she'd gotten as a grad student or had been holding onto that seemed important but didn't really mean much to her. T.S. Eliot was the first to go. She tossed down Edna St. Vincent Millay, who she could never get into, and a book of Randall Jarrell's poems she'd found dirt cheap at a used bookstore but had no interest in reading. She threw down Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Gary Snyder; she threw down Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. June began to feel better—and her bookcase *looked* better. Another thing June did: she took all the literary journals, put them in a hefty trash bag, and tossed them in the dumpster.

Jimmy texted June, asking if he could spend the night, and June answered yes without a second thought. Over the course of the evening Jimmy showed up with a duffel bag, saying that his friend's apartment was being fumigated. June was surprised he volunteered this information, but at the same time, this was an unusual situation. Jimmy placed a sketchbook on the coffee

table. June's first thought was *he has a sketchbook*. Her second thought was that she wanted to look through it. If Jimmy was making art in those pages, she wanted to see it. June hadn't worked in a sketchbook since high school. Now, she had the urge to go get her own sketchbook. June had always loved art even though she couldn't draw or paint. She mainly wanted to look at Jimmy's sketchbook to see if he could do those things. But she resisted the urge, thinking instead about the Art History class she'd taken in college. The lecturer hadn't been very good. She didn't seem to care if anyone showed up or not and every time she asked a question the same two or three people in the front row would always answer. It was just slide after slide of paintings and architecture and sculptures—things June knew almost nothing about. She'd always loved graffiti, collages, a well-drawn flower, and intricate drawings of psychedelic scenes. She wondered if any of those things were in Jimmy's sketchbook—a three-eyed space creature or an expertly-drawn chrysanthemum. June also liked well-drawn horses and remembered her failed attempts to draw them as a ten-year-old, and all of her failed attempts to draw, period. She regretted not taking a regular art class in college, but she'd had no interest in making art back then. The history of art had seemed much more important to her.

Once things settled down, June's cat, Charlie, walked into the room. He was black with gold eyes, a stray that had followed her upstairs to her apartment. June picked him up, scratched his head, and told him she was going to take a shower. She often told him when she was about to do something: cook dinner, read, clean, go to sleep, take a shower. This time, because Jimmy was there, and June was feeling sociable, she asked Charlie, "Do you want to join me?" She knew it was a bad joke, but she liked bad jokes. But then Jimmy said, "Yes." So, June continued the bad joke by asking, "How hot do you like the water?" And Jimmy said, "Really hot."

Suddenly, the bad joke turned into an erotic situation. June put the cat down and motioned for Jimmy to follow her, and he did.

Showering with Jimmy felt surreal. Kissing him in the shower was phenomenal. Finally getting to see his cock was breathtaking. When he held her; he *held* her. It made June feel like a woman in ways she couldn't articulate. And then Jimmy said, "I lied about the fumigation." Being naked in the shower together dropped them both to zero—and in that moment June felt like they were the same person. "I just want to be with you," he said. June felt Jimmy's cock on her skin and remembered that they weren't the same person. They were alike, except he was male and she was female. Feeling Jimmy's body made June realize her body was different, but in a good way. And so she said, "Let's just be together then."

Something important that June was still getting used to was the fact that she was the inheritor of a large sum of money. Her grandmother had given it to her after she finished grad school with the hope that she'd continue to focus on her writing. June hadn't expected to get any money at all until after her grandmother's death, but her grandmother thought it was important that June should have the money *now*. June came from frugal people. Her parents were working people who knew how to make very little go a long way. Her grandparents were the same way except that her grandfather had been able to make some smart investments at a young age that had yielded a small fortune. Since June came from people who did not live above their means, the money never really got used for anything. Her grandparents lived on a small piece of land in the hill country; they never traveled, never owned expensive cars or jewelry. June's grandfather died when she was young, but she had spent a good amount of time with her grandmother who liked to be outdoors, who tended to a well-cultivated garden along with chickens and a few pigs and a cow. She also liked to draw and paint and read, so all of her time was spent doing these things at her farmhouse. Everyone felt like June could benefit from the money now because the first time she graduated college things had been bad for her. She'd been unable to write, and at her lowest point she'd taken up drinking whiskey alone in her apartment. June's family wanted her to be successful this time around. Now, June felt like she had a huge responsibility to succeed, but she also felt motivated by that responsibility. She had wanted to be a professor ever since she started college, but she knew that couldn't happen until she had published something noteworthy. So that was her primary goal—to publish something noteworthy. June hadn't told Jimmy about her inheritance, but now that they were together, she felt ready to share that information with him.

The subject came up when Jimmy asked June where the paintings on her wall had come from. “My grandmother made those,” she said, and then added, “She gave me my inheritance early.” It seemed like Jimmy didn’t know what to say at first, but then he said, “She’s a good painter.” June was glad he felt that way, and after that he studied the paintings more closely. June liked how she and Jimmy were interested in the same things—like poetry, music, and art. This made it even easier for them to connect intimately. One important thing that June learned about Jimmy was that he liked to sleep naked. June had never slept naked, but now that they were sharing a bed, it seemed odd to her that she should sleep with clothes on and he should sleep naked. So, June started sleeping naked even when Jimmy wasn’t in town. Also, Jimmy didn’t try to have sex with June right away even though they slept together naked. They kissed, and he held her, and touched her hair, and they masturbated together, but they hadn’t fucked. June sensed that Jimmy wasn’t ready and she didn’t want to push him. In a lot of ways it made things hotter. It took her imagination to new heights.

The first time they had sex was after a Claudia Rankine reading. June had admired Claudia Rankine ever since she read *Citizen: An American Lyric*. It made her feel very emotional in a way that was rare for her. She thought it was an important book. But it was more than the emotional charge from the reading that brought on the sex. June still felt dissatisfied with her poems. After receiving another rejection slip in the mail, she found herself sitting at her small dining room table looking at the pile of poems in front of her. They were fifteen of the best poems she could possibly write, and none of them were worthy of publication. June thought hard about what she should do next, and came to a decision. She took each poem and fed it into her paper shredder. She’d have to start all over again and that was that.

After June did this and moved on from the raw feelings, Jimmy handed her a folder filled with his old poems—some typed, some handwritten, covered with notes and arrows and crossed-out words and lines and sections. The poems varied in style and form; some of them had been reworked more than once. “Are you showing me these because I shredded my poems?” she asked. “Yes,” he said. June could see all the work Jimmy had put into those poems, and it put her feelings into perspective. But it also reopened old wounds, reminding her of all the effort she’d put into her work within the last five years alone, not to mention the time when she wasn’t writing poems, and the time before that when she couldn’t write poems, and the time before that when she’d been a teenager writing poems for herself, completely unaware of literary journals and the larger poetic tradition. Then Jimmy gave June something else—a three-ring binder. “What’s this?” she asked. “An unfinished novel,” he said. June knew it must have taken a lot for Jimmy to hand something like that over to her; he was putting them both in a vulnerable position. She wondered if he’d done this because he’d seen all the Kurt Vonnegut books on her shelf. Kurt Vonnegut was June’s favorite novelist; she read *Slaughterhouse Five* every year at Christmas. She figured the reasons went much deeper than that, though.

During the Claudia Rankine reading, June had all of these things on her mind: her shredded poems, Jimmy’s old poems, his unfinished novel, and also, all the poems she had yet to write. After the reading, when they were in bed together, June reached for Jimmy’s face and kissed him. This was something she did all the time now. She found herself always wanting to *kiss* him. A few times in bed, they’d be kissing, and June would start kissing Jimmy like she wanted more, and it would get intense, and he’d pull back a little. But June knew herself, and knew that sometimes she could be a little rough, and she didn’t want to push Jimmy into that roughness until he was sure he wanted it too. This time, as they were kissing, Jimmy got on top

of her. In that moment, the energy shifted; his body seemed to sink into hers. He was on her body and between her thighs. His hands were in her hair. “I love you,” Jimmy said. June felt his passion pouring all over her; it gave her a hard fire inside her body. “I love you too,” June said. And then they were having sex, the kind of sex she hadn’t been able to imagine because it was so hot and tender—and very real. Afterwards, things felt different because now he knew her body, and she knew his. In the days that followed, June wrote two new poems, and they felt especially strong to her.

June took the time to read Jimmy's unfinished novel and there was no question in her mind that it was good, but she knew better than to tell him that. So she gave him back the three-ring binder and said, "Keep working on it." June debated whether or not to tell Jimmy about her failed attempts at novel writing, but decided against it. June considered herself to be a failed novelist, but it wasn't technically true. She wouldn't be a failed novelist for sure until she'd given up trying to write a novel completely. And she hadn't quite given up yet. Now, whenever Jimmy came to town, he stayed with June, and this rekindled in her a desire to write in a more regular way. For June, it felt good to know that she could count on Jimmy to be around; it gave her a sense of comfort she hadn't felt in a long time. June no longer *felt* alone. It also meant that Jimmy would get to see the intimate parts of June's being, like her dirty laundry or the journal she kept next to her bed or the rock musician collage she'd made out of poster board and pinned up in her closet. When June was a teenager, she used to decorate her poetry journals with collages made from pictures, images, words, and phrases she cut out of music magazines, along with bits and pieces of her own poems, and stored what she didn't use in a small lunchbox. When she started college, she outgrew the activity, leaving all of her journal covers blank. Just before June started grad school, she was cleaning out her closet and found the lunchbox, and decided to make one final collage out of what was left. When she finished the collage, it looked good enough to put up on the wall—in her closet. It was something she'd done for herself, as a reminder of her teenage self, who used to put a lot of time and effort into those poetry journal collages. It was also a reminder of her artistic self. This was something Jimmy would be able to see now, along with her stuffed animals.

What June liked about spending time with Jimmy was that there wasn't a bunch of pressure to do something. They didn't have to go to the movies, or go to dinner, or go on any social outings. In fact, they didn't have to *do* anything at all. One afternoon, they went to the art supply store. June had been to this particular store more than once, but always left emptyhanded. She'd look at all the drawing pencils and pens, at all the paints, get discouraged, and walk out. This time, she wanted to get a sketchbook for sure, but then the same issue came up again: which medium should she use? She started to get that overwhelmed feeling again until Jimmy asked her, "What looks like fun to you?" The word "fun" got to her. For June, fun was crayons, colored pencils, and oil pastels. Immediately she picked up a pack of each and was ready to go. Back at her apartment they worked at the dining room table together while listening to one of June's favorite records: Motörhead's *Ace of Spades*. Jimmy had bought drawing pencils, but he chose to use crayons instead. As he flipped through his sketchbook, June saw a lot of black and white, and some gray, but no color. He was pushing himself too. Once they both got relaxed, they worked on a piece together in June's sketchbook, playing around with shapes and colors. She'd draw a circle and he'd color it; he'd draw a square and she'd color it. Or she'd draw a circle and he'd draw a giant square around it; or, she'd draw three circles and he'd box them in and color around them. When June got up to use the bathroom, she left the door open. She wasn't sure why, but she wanted Jimmy to see her urinate. As she thought about Jimmy watching her pee, she looked up at her framed print of Claude Monet's painting of Venice. She'd had it for years, and now there was a long crack down the center. During her low point, June had gotten drunk and accidentally knocked it off the wall as she was trying to turn the bathroom light on. She hadn't realized until the next day that she'd cracked it. Instead of taking it down and trashing it, she left it on the wall as a reminder of that low point.

That night in bed Jimmy gave June oral sex. She wasn't expecting it at all. He'd been kissing her all over her body in the dark which was something she was still getting used to—the feel of his mouth on her body. Sometimes he kissed her; sometimes he tasted her. But his mouth was always gentle, and his tongue was very tender. This time, as Jimmy kissed her thigh, his mouth moved inward, venturing into her soft crevice. And then his mouth went further, and June realized: *he's eating me*. Jimmy's mouth was in a new place; he was *exploring* her. And then Jimmy started sucking on her clitoris. June found herself wanting the pleasure, needing the pleasure. And then she climaxed.

The next morning, as they ate breakfast, June wanted to say something about it, but didn't know how. The sketchbook piece they'd worked on together was still on the table. June realized it was the most fun she'd ever had making art. She wanted them to do it again. Finally, she just said, "Thanks for what you did last night," not caring if it sounded silly. "You don't have to thank me," Jimmy said. "Well, you're the first person who ever did that to me," she said. "Did what?" he asked, confused. June didn't know how to respond; her mind went blank. "Just kidding," Jimmy said. "I know what you meant." June relaxed, realizing Jimmy was just trying to get a rise out of her. "Do you want me to do it again?" he asked. "Yes," she said. This time they went in the bathroom. June pulled down her pants and felt Jimmy's mouth on her. She felt his tongue; she felt his hand grip the back of her thigh. And then June did a bold thing: she watched him. It took her to a new level of sexual bliss. Then she looked at the cracked Claude Monet print. Now it had a different meaning for her. June held the edge of the bathroom counter and let her body feel the climax. After that, she let Jimmy fuck her against the counter. After that, they took a shower together. After that, June worked in her sketchbook a lot.

June thought of something she wanted to do: she wanted to take Jimmy on a picnic. June loved to go on picnics, but since she'd been alone for so long, there wasn't much of a reason to go on one, although she'd tried a few times. Once, June went to a park and ate her picnic meal on a bench, but it was too windy and there wasn't enough shade. As an undergrad, sometimes June would pack a lunch and eat it outside next to the big fountain in front of the English building. It felt like a mini-picnic to her, but not really, because there were too many people walking around, ruining the mood. One time June packed a picnic lunch and took it to Lake Austin where there was a small, shaded park, and picnic tables. She ate and read a good chunk of a novel, but she mostly just stared out at the water. That's where she wanted to take Jimmy. June packed cold chicken, potato salad, applesauce, lemon tea, and water, and they went out to the lake. The weather was nice; there was plenty of shade and open picnic tables. They sat next to each other facing the water, which was blue, and rippled in the breeze. As they ate, Jimmy sat with his legs open in that suggestive manner. No one was around. June got the thought that she could easily lean over, undo Jimmy's pants, and suck his cock right there. Sometimes thoughts like that came into June's mind way too easily, so she tried not to pay attention to them. This time though, June realized that she hadn't sucked Jimmy's cock yet. There was a time not too long ago where she'd thought about it a lot. Now that they were together, and having a nice picnic lunch, June was reminded of that need to suck Jimmy's cock. After they ate, and enjoyed the scenery, Jimmy suggested to June that they could go to a minor league baseball game if she wanted. June said yes right away. June *loved* baseball.

Before she went back to school, June watched baseball every day. In fact, her life had been structured around Texas Rangers games. June was aware that this seemed a little much, but

she really loved watching baseball. She especially loved to watch pitchers pitch. For June, a good baseball game centered around good pitching. When she watched, her eyes became *glued* to the baseball. June loved pitching so much she thought she might write about it someday. At one point, she'd had pictures of Sandy Koufax, Dock Ellis, and Nolan Ryan taped to her wall. She'd even written poems about pitchers. As they watched the minor league game, June realized she didn't know who Jimmy's favorite team was. They hadn't talked much about sports. Now that June was so focused on her writing, she rarely got to watch baseball anymore. Sports, in general, as much as she loved them, were a distraction. During the month of October, June could watch baseball, football, and hockey all at the same time, and she'd done it many times, while drinking. Now, it was something June chose to avoid in order to help herself. Right now, she really wanted to know who Jimmy's favorite team was, but she couldn't make a good guess because she didn't know where Jimmy was from. Since he'd lived in New York for so long it might be the Yankees or the Mets, but June couldn't see Jimmy liking either one of those teams. So finally, she took the plunge. "Who's your favorite team?" she asked. "The A's," he said. Jimmy's answer made June very happy. "Vida Blue," she said. Jimmy responded by doing a rare thing: he smiled.

"Are you from Oakland?" June asked. "Yes," Jimmy said. June felt instantly better now that she knew Jimmy was from California. In fact, it made all the sense in the world to her. It also removed some of the Brooklyn residue. "I haven't watched baseball in a long time," Jimmy said. "I was a pitcher in high school, but I wasn't very good because I didn't have enough arm strength. I liked pitching though, but I liked writing more, so that became my main focus, along with music. I started playing guitar after I stopped pitching, and I got pretty good at it, but then I wasn't very good at being in a band. I'd lose interest in what the other guys wanted to do; it would just get boring. I think that's the main reason I could never settle down anywhere. I'd just

get bored. When I moved to New York, I liked it because it felt like something was always happening there. It's a place where you don't have to know anybody to enjoy yourself. You can just go for a walk and see lots of things and be satisfied. At least that's how I used to feel. It's starting to get kind of old now. Maybe it's just me. It's hard for me to feel satisfied. I think it's probably me."

"Why do you feel dissatisfied so much?" June asked. "I think it's because I didn't have much of a home life," Jimmy said. June wanted Jimmy to elaborate, but he stopped talking after that. When they got back to June's apartment, Jimmy watched June take her clothes off in the bedroom. This was something he liked to do, and it turned her on. No one had ever *watched* her undress before. In the shower, June decided that it was time to suck Jimmy's cock. Instead of bringing it up, she just did it. And she did it the way *she* wanted to do it. June sucked him and he grunted. He said her name in a pleasurable way. He put his hand in her wet hair and pulled the roots. June sucked a little harder and Jimmy pulled a little harder. It felt really good to finally suck Jimmy's cock. It brought June a lot of satisfaction to be able to do it. When Jimmy climaxed, June swallowed, and it felt like something big had happened between them. "Do you feel satisfied now?" June asked. "I feel like I fucking love you," Jimmy said.

One of the greatest feelings June experienced was when Jimmy would wake her up early in the morning just to have sex with her. This was like a new awakening for June—the idea that a man could want her so much that he would wake her up just to make love to her. It was sweet and hot, gentle and raw. The feeling of Jimmy’s arm hooking around her waist, the feeling of him pulling her close to his naked body—it made her feel desired. June would roll over on her back, half-asleep, and invite him to get on top of her. And then she’d wrap her legs around his hips, and he’d fuck her. What made it so good was the way June felt pleasure with Jimmy during a moment when they both felt vulnerable but open, wanting to make each other feel good. So much of it was a learning process; June was incredibly eager to *know* Jimmy and what his body needed. June found herself wanting to give Jimmy exactly what he wanted. And what she found was that he wanted to do the same thing for her. The fact that Jimmy was older and the fact that he was a punk made her deeper urges come out. What June really wanted was to *get fucked* by Jimmy. She wanted his dirtier side to come out; she wanted filth. Sometimes she’d venture close to it when they were in the middle of sex. She’d put her hips into it, wanting him to respond, but he’d resist on purpose. June could sense that Jimmy wanted to go there, but he liked the tension more, so they were always on the verge of having rough sex, but never quite making it there.

It finally happened on Jimmy’s fiftieth birthday. All he wanted to do was take June to New Orleans. June had never been to New Orleans before. On top of that, they decided to drive, which was even more exciting. June loved road trips. Two of the best road trips she’d been on were to Colorado and Florida. In Colorado, she and her parents had stayed in a cabin. June was fourteen at the time, and really into wolves. At a gift shop she bought a t-shirt with a wolf on it jumping over a log. The best thing about the t-shirt was that there were ten other wolves hidden

inside the big wolf. June had also bought a cedar box with wolves on the lid; to this day she still used it as a jewelry box. The road trip to Florida had been a lot of fun even though the hotel June's parents booked ended up being kind of rundown. June was eighteen at the time, and ate the best shrimp she'd ever had at a restaurant called Montego Bay. The shrimp were gigantic, had been dipped in batter, covered in coconut flakes, fried, and served with pineapple sauce. June was looking forward to a road trip with Jimmy because they could take their time, listen to good music, and see new places along the way. And the best part: she could watch Jimmy drive. June thought Jimmy looked really hot when he was driving. She often imagined what it would be like to have sex with him in the car. The more she thought about it, the more she wanted it.

June liked New Orleans a lot. She thought it was a really unique city with its own vibe. June and Jimmy went to the History Museum; they looked at Napoleon's death mask; they looked at old Mardi Gras costumes. They went to the Jazz Museum; they walked around Louis Armstrong Park. They took a ride on the Natchez steamboat. Jimmy bought June an assortment of bead necklaces—and she wore them. They sat at a café and listened to live jazz music. At one point June asked Jimmy, “How does it feel to be fifty?” and he said, “Better than I thought. This is the first time I've celebrated my birthday since I was a teenager.” June had been working in her sketchbook regularly now, so she decided to give Jimmy one of her favorite pieces: an abstract sun made from oil pastels. June wanted to give Jimmy something that would make him think of her when he was in Brooklyn. She waited until the night of his birthday to give it to him, after they'd gone for a walk around the French Quarter looking at the bright-colored houses and lush balconies. They were staying at a cheap hotel away from the French Quarter. Their room had dark green carpet and matching heavy curtains.

June took the framed sketchbook piece out of her duffel bag and handed it to Jimmy. “Happy Birthday,” she said. Jimmy didn’t say anything, but June could tell that he liked it a lot. Jimmy put it down on the mini-desk, gently grabbed June by the back of her neck, and started kissing her. He kissed June harder than normal, stunning her a little. “I want to fuck you right now,” he said. June knew what that meant. They kissed again and it was unruly and sloppy; it excited her. June undid Jimmy’s pants and he helped her get his cock out. Then, she undid her pants and he pulled up her shirt and her bra. It was happening really fast, creating adrenaline between them. They fell on the bed kissing; Jimmy got June’s panties off. “Turn over,” he said. The sound of his voice commanding her turned her on. June got on all fours and Jimmy grabbed her by the hips. He fucked her good and hard. He put his hand in her hair and pulled. June couldn’t think and she was glad. Jimmy made her feel so good.

Everything broke loose after that. Jimmy was in control. Every time he wanted more June let him have it. They fucked like animals all over the bed, against the mini-desk, against the bathroom sink, and in the shower. They fell back on the bed, soaking wet, kissing and touching and fucking each other. June felt really connected to Jimmy now, tangled with his body, wet and sweaty and out of breath. It was the best sex she’d ever had—wild and continuous and achingly rough. June didn’t even know what time it was; she didn’t care. She’d gotten her fill and she was relishing it. During the drive home, June felt light as a feather. She didn’t have a care in the world. In fact, she didn’t give a fuck about anything. Jimmy had finally given her exactly what she wanted. “Have you ever fucked like that before?” she asked him. “No,” he said. “Have you?” June laughed. “Not even close.”

June continually reminded herself of the fact that Jimmy had told her early on in their friendship that he'd gotten a vasectomy several years ago. Procreation wasn't something June thought about very much mainly because it was never a realistic possibility for her. June wasn't the kind of person who could ever raise a kid alone. For her, the only acceptable way to have a child was through passionate love. June only wanted to have a baby if it was a love baby conceived with a man she felt undying love for. Since she'd never felt undying love for any man, that's as far as her parenting fantasies went. But with Jimmy, things were changing. Things were getting serious. June was starting to imagine a more complete future with him in it. She hadn't questioned Jimmy's decision to get a vasectomy at all. Actually, it sounded like a good idea when he first told her about it. It meant that he was conscientious, which was rare, and refreshing. It was also incredibly liberating. But recently, whenever June was in public, and she saw a baby, she'd imagine what it would be like to make one with Jimmy. She pictured many different scenarios and came to the conclusion that it would be amazing. And then she'd get aroused. June never asked Jimmy if he ever had any intentions of reversing the vasectomy—or if he wanted children at all. It wasn't a subject she thought she could bring up yet, especially since she lived in Texas and he lived in New York. They'd have to be living in the same place before June could feel comfortable bringing something like that up.

However, their sexual relationship had intensified significantly. Often they would have sex more than once in a day. Whenever Jimmy was around, he seemed to want it a lot—and it made June want it more too. Jimmy had become much more vocal in his desire to fuck June. Most of the time he would just tell her when he wanted to fuck, and then they would fuck. The act of him telling her he wanted it was enough to turn June on. Jimmy had become freer with his

sexuality, and in turn, June had become freer with her sexuality. She realized how much they both liked sex, and how much they both liked having sex with each other. It felt like a natural thing, like another way for them to feel pleasure together—like making art or writing. It felt like they were creating something together, whether it was spontaneous or announced ahead of time. It felt like they were making something real.

June thought it was fortunate that her birthday came right after Jimmy's because it was almost like they had the same birthday. June liked the thought of the two of them celebrating their birthdays together at the same time. She decided that she wanted to take Jimmy to San Antonio so that she could show him the Alamo, the Riverwalk, and the old missions that still stood around the city. The hotel they stayed at was situated between a Harley Davidson store and a small strip club, and their room had a hot tub in it shaped like a heart. "Should we use it?" Jimmy asked. Overall, June felt like the trip to San Antonio was her way of trying to show Jimmy why she was so attached to Texas, but she wasn't sure why she felt the need to do this. For one, Jimmy never acted like he didn't like Texas. In fact, he seemed to enjoy Texas a lot. June saw it as more of an internal problem on her part. She felt uncomfortable that Jimmy lived in Brooklyn, and she felt like the mere existence of Brooklyn was a threat to her identity in some indescribable way. June wanted Jimmy to prefer Texas over Brooklyn, including the parts of it that weren't so great. But then, as they were walking along the Riverwalk at night, June realized her root fear—she was afraid to live somewhere else.

Jimmy gave June a really nice gift for her birthday: a gold necklace with a gold J pendant. It was simple and it was really pretty. He gave it to her while they were standing on a small bridge looking at the lights reflecting off the river water. It was the nicest gift anyone had given her outside of her family. Once June put it on, she never took it off. Back at the hotel, June

decided that she wanted to fuck Jimmy. June had never fucked a man before. As they were kissing under the covers, June said, "Let me get on top of you." Jimmy rolled over on his back without hesitation. June found herself straddling him; she found herself in control. It was a new feeling, and she didn't want to shy away from it. As June began to fuck Jimmy, thoughts about making a baby with him flooded her brain. It felt silly at first because June didn't want Jimmy to know that was what she was thinking about, but the thoughts became more pronounced and then she felt her body loosening; her desire to fuck Jimmy turned into feelings of wanting to pleasure him. June wanted to make Jimmy feel good. She wanted to give him an orgasm. June leaned over Jimmy and stroked his hair; she kissed his chest. Jimmy's body responded as he realized what she was doing to him. He grabbed June by her rear and *helped* her fuck him. His feelings of pleasure poured out of him. He said her name. He said he loved her. He said her pussy felt good. All these things stirred up deep emotions inside of her. And it felt really good when she finally brought him to orgasm.

"Have you ever thought about reversing the vasectomy?" June asked. "Yes," he said. June was laying on Jimmy, listening to his heartbeat as he stroked her hair. "Have you ever thought about having a kid?" June asked. "Yes," he said. June felt so loose and open and vulnerable that she didn't care if her questions sounded like they had come out of nowhere. "Have you ever thought about having a kid?" Jimmy asked her. "It's kind of hard to think about having a kid when there's no one to have a kid with." June didn't want to hold back anymore. It was her birthday after all. "Just a few minutes ago, when we were fucking, I pretended we were making a baby," she said. "Do you want to have a kid with me?" Jimmy asked. "Not if you're living in Brooklyn," she said. "That's a fair answer," he said. As they were talking, June felt Jimmy get an erection. She wondered if the thought of making a baby together had turned him

on. Jimmy rolled June onto her back and started to kiss her nipple in a very tender way. It made her feel good deep inside her body. Then, Jimmy started to suck on her nipple. And then, they were fucking again.

June was in the middle of cleaning when Jimmy asked her to come to Brooklyn with him. She was scrubbing the toilet while he stood in the doorway watching her. More importantly, he told her the reason why he'd been living in Brooklyn. "I just finished art school," he said. "I now have an MFA in Drawing." June was pleasantly surprised by this information—and comforted. She continued to scrub the toilet, pushing the cleansing foam all around the toilet bowl, running the brush along the rim, making sure not to miss a single spot. Then she dipped the brush in the water and scrubbed the opening that led to the pipe. And that was when Jimmy asked her, "Do you want to see where I live?" June flushed the toilet and said, "Of course I do." This was going to be monumental, and June decided that her best option was to say and do as little as possible. She decided to put her bad feelings about Brooklyn aside and just be open to the experience. Jimmy was inviting her into his private space and June wanted nothing more than to build upon that trust. Instead of worrying about being on an airplane for the second time in her life, or what she might encounter in an unfamiliar place, she chose to empty her mind completely. It turned out to be a really good idea. Upon their arrival, June took in the sights of the buildings, the streets, the cars—and the weather. She said nothing; she made no judgments. She let things be. It seemed that Jimmy appreciated this because June could tell he was nervous. His apartment was not unlike hers; it was small and plain and only contained the basics. For the most part it felt monkish to her which also turned her on. The initial feeling June got when they first walked in was that she needed to have sex with Jimmy right away.

June discovered that the feeling was mutual. After setting down her duffel bag in the bedroom, she was faced with the sight of Jimmy's unmade bed, and Jimmy getting undressed. He had an erection and June wondered if it was from the excitement of finally getting her into his

bedroom. They were a long way from Texas now; it almost felt like they were in another dimension. “I want to take you somewhere,” Jimmy said. “Sure,” June said, “but what about that?” She pointed to his erection. “Ignore that,” he said. June had a hard time ignoring Jimmy’s erect penis. It had become a natural thing for her to want to help him take care of it. And his room was so dark and cool. The vibe of the environment seemed to be beckoning June to get naked too, to crawl under the sheets with Jimmy and disappear into their mutual arousal. These needs and feelings circulated through her body as Jimmy put on clean clothes and led her back out of his apartment.

June had been exposed to something big and indescribable: the energy of Jimmy’s personal space. But now he was exposing her to something even bigger: an art space where three of his pieces were displayed side by side. June stared at them for a long time, saying nothing. All three pieces were largely abstract and intricately drawn, but the third one really got her attention. The focus of the piece was a naked woman who looked like her, braided with nature images and lines of poetry. It was absolutely beautiful. June wanted to ask if it was her, but she couldn’t. Everything about the moment felt magical and surreal. June realized this was the reason Jimmy wanted her to come to Brooklyn. He wanted her to see his art in a very specific way—in this art space, at this particular moment in time.

June had never been to an art space before and she found it to be creatively stimulating. She looked at all the displayed pieces and allowed her mind to absorb them. In the end though, she couldn’t get Jimmy’s art out of her mind, especially the naked woman who looked like her. After June looked at everything, she went right back to Jimmy’s art and stared at it some more. “Are you glad you went to art school?” June asked Jimmy on the way back to his apartment. “Yes,” Jimmy said. “It’s something I wanted to do for a long time.” And then June asked Jimmy

the question that was really on her mind: “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” It felt like a question that was a long time coming. It was also a question that contained another question: *Why didn’t you want to tell me sooner?* Jimmy said, “It was something I did for myself and I didn’t want to say anything until I knew for sure I was going to finish. It was hard sometimes.” June felt the weight of Jimmy’s response and said, “I’m glad you finished.”

In bed, Jimmy kissed June all over her body in a way that was different, like he was learning her body all over again in this space. In the middle of kissing, June asked him: “Was that naked woman me?” Jimmy, with his mouth close to her ear, said, “Yes.” And then he started kissing her all over her neck and face. June just felt so turned on. In the middle of fucking, Jimmy started to give June anal sex. His body moved so well; June loved to watch him fuck her. And now, his erection was in a new spot, making things extra sensitive between them. He started to stroke her clitoris. The contrasting sensations made June really want to have an orgasm.

Jimmy put his tongue in June’s mouth. Then he put his fingers inside of her. The whole situation was aimed at making her come. June got excited; she wanted it more than she ever had before. And then Jimmy got excited. And then they both came. For a while, June forgot everything: where she’d been, where they were, how much time had passed. She just knew that she felt good. More importantly, she felt good with Jimmy. And then she remembered exactly where she was: Brooklyn.

June had considered herself to be a punk ever since she was a teenager. At sixteen, a friend let her borrow a cassette tape of NOFX's *White Trash, Two Heebs, and a Bean* and it was the most punk thing she'd ever heard. For June, the act of deciding to become a punk had been enough for her. She never felt the need to rush out and dye her hair or wear fishnet stockings or anything like that. She'd had aspirations of going to college and being a writer. For June, being smart had been really important. Even as she went through her twenties trying very hard to succeed at being well-educated, she never lost sight of her punk nature. It kept her grounded, humble, and realistic. It gave her permission to accept and embrace her imperfections. She was reminded of this aspect of her life when she went into Jimmy's closet and saw a denim vest hanging out of a box. It was old and worn and covered with patches. Against her better judgment, June had to pick it up and hold it in her hands. It wasn't out of some sense of nostalgia; it was because it belonged to Jimmy. The denim vest represented something very specific they shared—a subculture ideal that still felt very important to her. June never asked Jimmy what kind of punk he'd been because she could see what kind of punk he'd become. Now that she had a tangible artifact in her hands, she got visions of Jimmy wearing this vest with a Mohawk, hanging out at some small club in Oakland. And then June came across a stack of photographs in the box along with an assortment of stickers, buttons, flyers, zines, cassette tapes, and letters. June picked up the photographs: Jimmy as a pitcher, Jimmy playing the guitar, Jimmy on a skateboard, Jimmy with a girl. She looked closely at the last one before putting them back.

June continued practicing feelings of openness as Jimmy showed her around Brooklyn. But in the end, she felt distracted. She couldn't get the image of young Jimmy out of her head. June kept thinking about their age gap, about the fact that she'd been just a kid when those

photographs were taken. More importantly, based off of those photographs and what she'd seen in that box, June came to the conclusion that had she been old enough at that time, she would've liked Jimmy a lot. And then there was the flipside of that thought: if young Jimmy had been around when she was younger, things would've been much different for her. It was the feeling of "if only" that June was caught up in. She had to remind herself that she knew Jimmy *now*, and that was what really mattered.

In bed that night, June fucked Jimmy, and then they laid there in the dark together, in Brooklyn. "I came across that denim vest in your closet," June said. "I keep meaning to throw that stuff away," Jimmy said. "Why would you want to do that?" June asked. "It's old stuff from a long time ago. It's not who I am anymore." June wanted to disagree with this statement, but realized she didn't know enough about Jimmy's life to make an effective argument. "I saw the pictures of you. Who was that girl?" June asked. "She was someone I knew who died of a brain hemorrhage," Jimmy said. "She got drunk, hit her head on some cement steps, and ended up on life support. She wasn't very smart. She used to throw things at cops and she used to let herself get beat up at shows. Her mom was her only family and they weren't close. She couldn't decide what to do so she asked me to make the hard choice. I told her to let them pull the plug."

June couldn't think of anything to say that would be helpful or productive, so she didn't say anything at all. "I could throw all that stuff away tomorrow and not miss it," Jimmy said. "None of it was real." And so June asked him, "Why haven't you?" Jimmy didn't seem to have an answer. "Did you have any boyfriends?" he asked. "One," June said. "But I broke up with him because he wasn't really interested in me. After that I met a guy who lived in Seattle who I liked a lot. He asked me to come visit him, so I did. That was my first airplane trip. When I got there though, he acted like he didn't want to see me even though he was the one who wanted me

to come out there. I took a big risk doing that, and he changed his mind about me, just like that. It bothered me for a long time. I got tired of being treated like I was inferior, so I decided to stay alone after that.”

The troublesome feelings were creeping up now and June didn't like it. She didn't want to sit in that pit of despair. She'd done enough of that. “If you want to throw those things away then you should,” June said. “But when I saw that stuff in your closet, I couldn't help but think to myself that I wished I'd been there. I like the you I saw in those pictures and I like the you I'm looking at right now.” And then Jimmy said, “I don't want to live here anymore.” He got out of bed, went over to his duffel bag, and pulled out a stack of papers. He walked back over to the bed and tossed them down on the mattress. “I bought a house,” he said.

June didn't touch the papers or look at them. She looked at Jimmy instead, naked and vulnerable and punk and middle-aged, standing in his near-empty bedroom in Brooklyn with two master's degrees and three books of poems. “It's in Austin,” he said. “How did you afford that?” she asked. “I used to be a songwriter. I also wrote some screenplays.” Again, June wasn't sure what to say, but she knew what she felt. She felt like everything was becoming real. “There's no reason to live here,” Jimmy said. “There's nothing here and I'm tired of not having a home. I want to be where you are. I don't care if it seems like too much. I bought a house in Austin because I'm in fucking love with you.” Just like that, June's distaste for Brooklyn dwindled down to nothing. “I want to be where you are too,” she said.

June learned that Jimmy had done pretty well for himself financially over the years, not just as a songwriter and screenplay writer, but as someone who had the skills to do a variety of jobs that involved carpentry, car mechanics, and graphic design. He'd even been a dishwasher and a janitor; he'd also taught music—guitar and piano. He'd been good enough at his art to be able to sell a few of his pieces to the right people for a decent price. This made June realize that she hadn't done a whole lot with her life aside from go to school and write poetry, but she also recognized that their situations were different. From what June knew about Jimmy so far, he'd been on his own for a very long time and most of his financial decisions were based off of survival. He had no active social life and a past that mostly consisted of living as simply as possible and saving money. Jimmy was mobile but he was frugal, and now he could afford to settle down. June wondered what Jimmy would've done if they hadn't met. She imagined he wouldn't have stayed in Brooklyn much longer. Helping Jimmy move meant that June could get a closer look at his personal belongings—which excited her. He had some things in storage, mostly tools and equipment related to carpentry and car repair, but what June noticed was that Jimmy had very few keepsakes or personal items. She figured this was due to having to travel light for so many years, but it still surprised her to discover that Jimmy had accumulated very little; it made her realize how serious he was about her. Jimmy was making the decision to root himself in Texas because he really wanted to be with her. June understood right away that Jimmy's next move was going to be to ask her to live with him.

June also recognized that once Jimmy did ask her to move in with him, the answer would have to be yes. He was changing his life for her and it already seemed understood between them that she would eventually be moving in with him—sooner rather than later. June didn't feel

pressured or overwhelmed by this understanding. It felt like the right move, the right direction to go in. It made June think more seriously about what she was doing with her life. Up until she met Jimmy, her life had been about going to school and being a poet. Now, it felt like a door was opening up, allowing her to see that she could be something more than a poet with an MFA. She could become more fully-realized; she could reach authentic maturity. June looked through the box that contained Jimmy's records. She took out the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and then she took out *Pet Sounds* by The Beach Boys, remembering all the times she'd sat alone in her apartment listening to the songs from those albums. She went through Jimmy's box of poetry books and saw books by Kenneth Rexroth, Stanley Kunitz, and Sharon Olds—poets June hadn't read much of, but wanted to read. She did find one box that had some personal items: baseball cards, a small set of matchbox cars, and some old sketchbooks from middle school. June also found a box full of art books. She picked a few up and flipped through them. Most of the names and images were unfamiliar to her, but she wanted to learn about them. One thing June realized was that she couldn't find any traces of Jimmy's parents anywhere among his stuff. It looked almost like he was an orphan.

For dinner, Jimmy took June to her favorite restaurant in Austin—24 Diner. It was small, contemporary, and served high-quality comfort food—and it never closed. June and Jimmy had spent a lot of late nights there talking, sharing a plate of fries. They had also spent a lot of time in the record store beside it. The place was a little busy tonight, but they were lucky enough to get a booth by the window. “Can I ask you a personal question?” June asked, squeezing lemon into her tea. “Yes, you can,” Jimmy said. “Your parents...,” June trailed off. “That’s not really a question,” Jimmy pointed out. “I know,” she said. “I guess I’m just curious about them.” Jimmy

didn't seem like he wanted to answer at first, but then he said, "My dad died when I was sixteen and my mom is remarried and still lives in California, but we don't talk."

June spent the night with Jimmy in the new house that wasn't very new. He'd bought a fixer-upper, something he could work on and make his own. June thought it would be good for him. It would help him to develop a better sense of personal identity—which was something June wanted to do for herself too. They were going to sleep on a mattress placed directly on the floor in Jimmy's empty room. As they lay there together, naked, Jimmy seemed very tired from all the moving activity. June suggested giving him a back rub, which he did not turn down. She straddled him as he laid on his stomach, and slowly moved her hands up and down his back. Jimmy's skin was warm and smooth. June pressed down a little harder, massaging his back muscles. Then, out of nowhere, Jimmy said, "My dad died on a boat, in his sleep. He and my mom had been separated for about a year. He was pretty much living on the boat. He didn't have much else. He'd been a heavy drinker his whole life. It was only a matter of time." June worked the muscles in Jimmy's lower back. "Is that why you don't talk to your mom?" she asked. "I don't talk to her because she was a bad mother."

Jimmy turned over on his back. June continued to straddle him as she massaged his arms and then his chest. "My dad was a really good carpenter, but he had a hard time getting work because he had a serious back problem, which made his drinking problem even worse. My mom worked a nine-to-five office job and when she wasn't working she was either out shopping or out with friends. She was hardly ever around. My dad pretty much raised me. He and my mom were more like roommates than an actual married couple. Eventually my mom got tired of him and moved in with another man, basically leaving us to rot. That's when my dad started spending more and more time on the boat. When he died, my mom sold the house and I lived with her

until I graduated high school. I've probably seen her a handful of times since then." June began to rub Jimmy's thighs. "What would you have done if we hadn't met?" she asked. "I was thinking about leaving the country. I really hate it here sometimes."

June thought it would be a good idea to take Jimmy to meet her grandmother and get a look at her house so that maybe it would give him some ideas about what to do with his new house. Whenever June felt especially stuck or flat in her day-to-day life, she would visit her grandmother to get some inspiration. Sometimes just being in her house, or in her garden, or in her art studio would be enough to rejuvenate June's mind. Jimmy seemed very eager to meet June's grandmother. On top of all that, June wanted Jimmy to spend the night there with her, in the room she used to sleep in whenever she visited. When June used to spend a few weeks with her grandmother in the summer, it would put her in a different frame of mind, and she'd feel freer to use her imagination. Often, as a teenager, June thought about what it would be like to bring a boy there. Now she had the chance to bring Jimmy. June gave Jimmy a tour of the house—the den, the country-style kitchen, the upstairs loft, and the bedroom they'd be staying in. June's grandmother always kept everything in her house exactly the same and this was what June liked about it. There was no reason for her grandmother to change or update anything because her house looked good just the way it was. June took Jimmy around the garden, which flooded the backyard with flowers and plants and vegetables, all growing together. June showed Jimmy the chicken coop and the pig pen and the stable and small pasture where her grandmother's cow grazed. She took him to the giant tree in the front yard with the swing still tied to the big branch. Jimmy sat down on the swing and held the ropes. June's grandmother made them roasted chicken and potatoes for dinner, along with a cucumber salad. "Did you show Jimmy the art studio?" June's grandmother, Ellen, asked. "Not yet," said June. "For a long time I couldn't decide if I wanted a greenhouse or an art studio," Ellen explained. "I used to paint in the loft, but it started to get overwhelming with all the canvases and books and supplies. But at the

same time, I really wanted to grow some different things. Eventually I decided on the art studio because I realized I already grow all the things I want to grow and there's no reason to try and grow things outside my range. I'd rather have the space to make my art."

After dinner, June's grandmother took June and Jimmy into the art studio, which was in a remodeled barn on the other side of the garden. In fact, they had to walk through the garden in order to get to it. There was a small gravel path lit by solar lights and glowing lanterns that led to the art studio. Once inside, June's grandmother showed Jimmy around; he listened attentively to everything she had to say. "I've got a few boxes of supplies I don't need anymore," Ellen said. "You're more than welcome to go through them and take what you need. Also, if you see any books you like, you can just have them." And then June's grandmother brought out some finished paintings. "Take some for your new home."

"Your grandmother is really generous," Jimmy said as they played checkers in the loft later that evening. "This place is her life," June said. "She doesn't get very many visitors." And then Jimmy asked her, "When do I get to meet your parents?" The question caught June by surprise for a second and then she said, "Whenever you want." Jimmy claimed two of June's checker pieces. "How about you bring them over for dinner after I get settled in?" June claimed one of Jimmy's checker pieces. "Sounds good," she said. Jimmy slid one of his checker pieces into June's back row. "King me," he said. As Jimmy took a shower in the upstairs bathroom, June laid in bed and took in the energy of the room. She had spent many nights here, happy but lonely. She'd liked the freedom of being able to do whatever she wanted in this place, but ultimately wished she'd had someone to share it with. For June, being at her grandmother's house gave her bittersweet feelings. When Jimmy came back into the bedroom, he only had a towel wrapped around his waist—and he took it off as soon as he shut the door. It didn't seem to

bother him that they were in her grandmother's house. In fact, being in her grandmother's house together seemed to invite the possibility of sex even more.

Jimmy got on the bed and moved toward June. She lay on her back underneath him as he pulled the bedsheets away from her, helped her undress, and then they were naked together, kissing. Jimmy's body settled into June's body as they got more comfortable kissing in this space. Jimmy kissed June's neck; he kissed her breasts. June started to ache for sex. She put her legs around Jimmy's waist and he began to fuck her slowly. The room was dimly lit, and they looked at each other as they had sex. The ecstasy of the moment got to June. She murmured his name, feeling deep down inside her body how much she wanted him. Jimmy's hands went from her hips to her belly. He touched her breasts. He gently moved his thumb across her nipple. This gave June an intense fever, combined with the pleasure of being fucked. "Do you like my cock?" Jimmy asked in a low voice. Asking that question in this environment excited June. "Yes," she said. The sex felt like more than sex. It felt like Jimmy was making love to June. She wanted it to last. They barely slept. They spent most of the night tangled in the bedsheets together, having slow, deep, drawn-out sex. In the morning, June woke up to the smell of her grandmother cooking breakfast. She smelled scrambled eggs, turkey sausage, and coffee. Jimmy reached for her as soon as she started to get up. "One more time," he said. When they finally went downstairs to eat, June felt rejuvenated in a way that she couldn't quite articulate, but she knew it was written all over her face, and she was glad.

June put a lot of effort into helping Jimmy get settled into his new house. She liked doing this kind of activity—opening boxes, taking out items, and putting them in their appropriate places. It felt a lot like cleaning because in a sense it was about taking care of things, putting things in their right places. Looking at all of Jimmy’s possessions and organizing and arranging them got June thinking about her possessions and their arrangements. She began to wonder if there were things she could do without: extra kitchen items, old clothes, magazines, or decorative objects that were really just taking up space, and got the urge to clean out her apartment. June was normally good about keeping the clutter low, but because Jimmy had so little, it made her realize she was still holding on to too many things. As June helped Jimmy unpack his kitchen boxes, she came across a small notebook filled with handwritten recipes. June flipped through them and came across a lot of interesting recipes, both simple and complicated, that seemed exotic to her only because she’d never had them before, like roasted chickpeas or beef wellington. “You’ve been collecting recipes for a long time,” June noted. “I haven’t looked at those in years,” Jimmy said. He started to throw the notebook in the trash, but June grabbed it. “You’re really quick to throw things away,” June said. “It’s out of habit,” Jimmy said. June could see why, given Jimmy’s past of never living in one place for very long and never having enough space—physical or emotional—but she also hated to watch him discard years of handwritten recipes without a second thought. “Now that you have a house, maybe you can think a little bit more about holding onto things that are worth keeping,” June said. “Fair enough,” Jimmy agreed.

Jimmy reached for a banana and unpeeled it slowly. He took a bite and held it out to June. She took a small bite. Then, Jimmy moved closer to June, until their bodies were touching. They took their time eating the banana together in the quiet space of the kitchen. Jimmy placed

the last of the banana into June's mouth and watched her chew it and swallow it. Then, they started to kiss. Jimmy's mouth tasted sweet from the banana, and felt soft and warm. June noticed Jimmy had a special affection for fruit. Whenever he used to stay with her he'd always bring some type of fruit with him: oranges, grapes, or strawberries. Once, he brought strawberries fresh from a farm and they ate them straight from the carton—big and red and bulging. Now that Jimmy had a permanent kitchen, June was curious to see what kinds of dishes he would make. The ideas stacked up in her mind as they made out against the counter. Then, Jimmy reached down and unzipped his pants.

They spent the rest of the afternoon in bed. Jimmy wanted to go slow, and it made June want to go slow. He kissed her all over her body, and then she kissed him all over his body. In that moment, it felt like they had the rest of their lives to fuck. June also noticed as she helped Jimmy unpack that he had a lot of books about sex, ranging from the female and male orgasm to sexual intimacy and technique to books that were more graphic. June wondered if Jimmy's interest in sex stemmed from the lack of intimacy he'd experienced for most of his life. He knew a lot about sex, but he never talked about it. It was just part of who he was. Jimmy embodied sex, and he was comfortable with it. June thought a lot about the lack of intimacy she'd experienced in her own life. When things got sexual between her and Jimmy she didn't shy away from it like she might have at a younger age. It had taken many years of living a solitary life for June to truly appreciate sex.

As things in bed started to heat up, Jimmy left the bedroom and came back with two peaches. He got on top of June and bit into the first peach; juice dripped all over her belly. Then, he handed her the peach. It was soft and smelled sweet. June realized she'd never eaten a peach while laying on her back before. She was always either standing up or sitting whenever she ate

one. She started to eat it from this different position, and it tasted perfectly ripe. June indulged, tasting and chewing the fruit, letting juice drip down her chin and neck, while Jimmy watched. Jimmy ate the second peach and June watched; juice dripped down his chest. After that, they licked the peach juice off each other's bodies. Then they were kissing; then they were having sex. Jimmy went really slow, drawing the pleasure out. When June experienced orgasm it was intense and fulfilling. She couldn't get enough so they kept going. This time, June used her vaginal muscles to give Jimmy's cock some pressure, and he seemed to like it a lot.

In this new house, Jimmy was beginning to express his need for intimacy more openly. He held June longer, kissed her longer. He would get into her space and he would touch her, stroke her hair, or just pull her close, and she liked it a lot. When he did these things, June got a sense of what Jimmy's aching need for affection and closeness truly felt like. This opened June up in ways she never thought possible. She felt *desired*. June realized how much regular physical contact mattered to her because she'd never really experienced it before. It felt nice to be touched, to be kissed. Often, she'd return the affection by touching Jimmy's hair, or gently rubbing his thigh. Erotic feelings were continually flowing between them and it felt good. As they laid in bed together, June relished the current state of her body, which was sweaty and sticky. She touched Jimmy's face, touched his lower lip with her thumb, and took in the physical nature of his body. June wanted to enjoy Jimmy the same way she had enjoyed that peach. She wanted to suck him everywhere.

June couldn't stop thinking about the dinner Jimmy made for her and her parents. It had been such a simple meal, but so flavorful. Jimmy served them cod roasted in the pan with a lemon butter sauce, roasted fingerling potatoes cut in half and seasoned with sea salt and pepper, and a cucumber and tomato salad. For dessert, he served homemade vanilla ice cream with peach sauce. As they ate the vanilla ice cream and peach sauce, June couldn't help but think about the peaches she and Jimmy ate in bed. Jimmy seemed more interested in impressing June with his cooking skills rather than making a good impression on her parents. June had a good relationship with her parents, but she preferred to remain independent of them. They were both nearing retirement and were making plans to move to a small beach house in Corpus Christi. It was one of the reasons they lived so frugally. They wanted to grow old by the water in a place they could afford. June's parents had always done the best they could to provide June with the basics: food, clothes, and shelter. But the fact was, they'd married young and they'd had her at a young age. For most of her early life it had just been about getting by. June's dad worked a series of warehouse jobs until he finally got a more secure job in the shipping department at a warehouse for an oil company. June's mom gave up working as a secretary in an office to watch her full-time. When June was a kid, she didn't feel the need to socialize or make friends. She'd been perfectly satisfied occupying herself—playing in her room or in the backyard. She loved music at an early age and always kept a radio next to her bed. She raised hamsters; she rode her bike; she liked to jump rope. When June got into her early teens, her mom went back to work, starting off as a temp for a paper company, but eventually settled into retail work. During that time, both of her parents worked a lot, and that was when writing became really important to June.

As June walked her parents to their car, her mom said, “I like Jimmy. He seems nice.” And then June’s dad added, “I hope it works out.” June appreciated these comments, but they bothered her slightly because she knew what they were really thinking: *Don’t you think he might be too old for you? What if you want to have kids?*—and the most troublesome question of all: *What if he gets tired of you?* In reality, the dinner hadn’t been about them. It had been about June, about showing her parents what she wanted. June’s parents weren’t risk-takers. They were the kind of people who kept their heads down and worked. But they wanted June to be happy, and June also wanted to be happy. Jimmy made June happy. He gave them a tour of the house and answered any questions they had with a good amount of confidence. Once her parents were gone, the two of them could move forward. More honestly, June could move forward. She’d made it a point to show her parents Jimmy’s books because she wanted them to see the value writing had, because writing was her life. She wanted them to see that it was just as important to Jimmy, that they were on the same page. They could look at the poems, but they couldn’t evaluate them. The fact that he had published books was good enough for them. They took home copies of the books but June knew they would never read them. The books would serve a different purpose for her parents. They served as tangible evidence of Jimmy’s ability and worth.

June thought about this as she and Jimmy lay in bed that night. She still didn’t have any tangible evidence of her ability and worth. Her poems were still just poems, words typed up on a page. In a lot of ways, June still felt like an amateur. She wanted to get up and look at the new poems she’d written, to reassure herself that she had evolved as a poet, that she had made progress. But then Jimmy started kissing her. He wanted her on top of him, and quickly, they were headed toward sex. “I’m still on my period,” June said. “I don’t mind,” Jimmy said without pause. There were times before where June would be on her period, and Jimmy wanted sex but

wouldn't ask for it—but now it felt right. June got undressed on top of him and started to fuck him gently at first, but then they both got turned on by the experience and it got more heated. It felt good to fuck Jimmy on her period. It felt like she was letting him into a very guarded part of herself—the female part of herself that only she knew, the part of her that bled. That kind of sex, as hot as it was, left them feeling vulnerable, reminding them both that Jimmy was middle-aged, but June was fertile. “Which one did your grandmother raise?” Jimmy asked. “My dad,” June answered. The next day, June continued to feel very concerned about her poems. She took them out and read them and decided that they were still good enough. She was still learning, but she was getting better. By the end of the week, June had two more to add to the stack. She let Jimmy look at them, and when he finished reading them, he said, “Do you want to have sex?” They fucked twice—once with June on top and once with Jimmy on top. Afterward, while they were both naked and hot and still catching their breath, Jimmy said, “We should write some poems together.”

June discovered that Jimmy did have one special possession: a piano. It wasn't just any piano. It was a piano that had belonged to his grandfather. Jimmy placed it in the living room next to the front window and placed one of June's grandmother's paintings above it. June thought the whole setup looked great. There was a window, a piano, paintings on the wall, a fireplace, a sofa and rug, a coffee table and ceiling fan that Jimmy had designed and built himself. There was also a record player and stereo system, and shelf space to store records and CDs. Jimmy didn't own a TV. As June looked around this space, she wondered how her things would fit in here. There was a small loft upstairs that would make a good reading and writing space. June didn't have a whole lot of furniture, but she could envision her small sofa and writing table easily working in that space, along with her books and Jimmy's books. She thought about a small library with her books mixed in with his and it made her feel good. Their books would go very well together. Jimmy sat down at the piano and invited June to sit down next to him and she did. June loved pianos. She'd had a fascination with pianos ever since she was little. She'd had a mini-piano when she was very young and she'd played on it all the time, mostly making a lot of racket. When she got older, she and her parents attended a small church that used a piano during the worship part of the Sunday service. Her parents used to clean the church for extra money and June would help. Her job was to clean the bathroom mirrors and the glass doors and she took the job very seriously. She made sure the glass doors were as spotless as she could get them, scrubbing them extra-hard, especially at the bottom where dirt and cobwebs were more likely to collect. Whenever June finished cleaning mirrors and glass doors, she'd play on the church piano. Since she didn't know any songs, she tried to make up her own. She picked up a few things from some of the other girls at church who had their own pianos at home and were taking

lessons. June was envious of those girls; she wanted a piano of her own that she could play whenever she wanted. So, she'd just play on the one at church instead, making all kinds of noise until her parents were finished cleaning, and then they'd all get the hymn books out together, placing one on each chair.

Jimmy started playing Chicago's "Saturday in the Park," a song June had grown up listening to and loved very much. To her, the piano intro to that song was perfect. "Do you want me to show you how to play it?" Jimmy asked. June hadn't touched a piano since she was twelve, but she said yes, and Jimmy showed her bit by bit how to play it. June felt comfortable playing piano in a way that she hadn't with other musical instruments she'd tried to learn. As a teenager she'd fallen in love with the guitar and tried to learn how to play multiple times, but couldn't commit to it because all she'd had was an acoustic and she preferred electric guitar, but there was so much that went into purchasing and learning the electric guitar that felt overwhelming and discouraging to her. She felt like it was something she couldn't pursue on her own. During college she'd bought a trumpet and failed to teach herself how to play it. She'd felt very self-conscious about the sounds she made with it and so she stopped, but she still had it; it was sitting at the top of her closet. With a piano though, June could just sit down and play. She'd always liked the sounds she made with it even if they were bad. June decided that maybe if she could learn to play piano at an acceptable level, it would give her the confidence to finally learn the guitar—and possibly the trumpet too.

Jimmy had guitars and amps and speakers; he had recording gear; he had books on how to play guitar and how to record music. He also had a friend who was a drummer. Felix was younger than Jimmy and older than June. He was the person Jimmy would stay with whenever he would visit Austin. Like June, Felix was from Texas, but his parents were from Mexico. One

of the first things she learned about him was that his mom had named him after her favorite cartoon character: Felix the Cat. And then June learned that Felix was a really good drummer. He'd played in a lot of different bands: metal, ska, and punk. He'd also played in a Tejano rock band for a while. When he wasn't playing drums he worked in construction. Felix and Jimmy liked to jam together in a stripped-down blues style. Felix set up his drums in one of the bedrooms upstairs and they would play in there. June would usually sit in the doorway and watch them play. She was spending so much time at Jimmy's house that she eventually brought her cat Charlie over to live there permanently. When Felix first saw him, he said, "Please don't tell me his name's Felix." June laughed and said, "I guess there are probably a lot of black cats with your name." Felix bent down to pet Charlie. He asked June if she wanted to see his Felix tattoo. June said yes. He pulled up his left shirt sleeve; at the top of his arm, just below his shoulder, there was a tattoo of Felix the Cat flexing his cat bicep.

One time, when June and Jimmy were in the practice space, he showed her another special possession. He took out one of his guitars and set it in June's lap. It was old and cheap and covered in stickers. It was scratched up and banged up. It was beautiful. "That was my first guitar," Jimmy said. "I ordered it from a magazine when I was 17." June looked down at the guitar, examined all of its wonderful imperfections. "This is something I would never get rid of," he said. Later, in bed, June thought about that guitar and how much it meant to Jimmy—and how the fact that it meant so much to him turned her on. As they were kissing under the bedsheets, getting sweaty together, he asked her, "Do you like Felix?" The first thing that came to June's mind was the tattoo. "Yes," she said. "Would you let him fuck you?" Jimmy asked. June had never even considered the possibility of being with two men like that, but the idea of it stayed in her head as they fucked.

One day Felix showed up to return a few of Jimmy's records he'd borrowed. He also brought two boxes that Jimmy had left at his apartment. June was at the house alone, working on her writing; Jimmy had gone into town to run a few errands. "Do you want to see what's in these boxes?" Felix asked. Before June could answer, Felix was already using his car key to cut through the packing tape. Both boxes were filled with DVDs. "Before he met you, he wasn't doing much of anything anymore," Felix said. "Was there any specific reason why?" June asked. "Loneliness, I think. It just starts to get old after a while." After Felix left, June looked through the DVDs to see what kinds of movies Jimmy liked to watch. He liked a wide range, from science fiction to comedy to drama; there were even a few adult movies in the collection. Her eye caught a few titles: *The Birds*, *Spinal Tap*, *Good Will Hunting*. June found herself fixated on an image of Jimmy sitting on a couch staring at a TV all day and all night, and it saddened her. She knew what that existence was like. June moved the boxes to the hall closet and decided to wait until later to bring it up. She went back to her poems, but she couldn't focus on them now. Instead, she got some notebook paper, numbered the lines all the way down the page, and started writing, skipping every other line. She tried not to think too hard, and wrote down whatever came to her mind. By the time Jimmy got back, June had filled up five notebook pages.

"Will you do something for me?" June asked Jimmy. She showed him the notebook pages. "Write in the blank spaces whatever comes to your mind," June said, handing him a pen. Jimmy didn't hesitate. He sat down and began writing lines without reading what June had written. When he was finished, June took the pages and made a poem with the lines they had both written. The next day, Jimmy brought June a few notebook pages filled with handwritten lines. June filled in the blank spots and gave the pages back to Jimmy so he could make a poem.

They repeated this process until they both had a stack of poems. Then, they sat down together, exchanged lines they hadn't been able to use, and read through the poems. "These look really good," Jimmy said. "Should I type them up?" June asked. "Definitely," he said. Once June typed the poems up, they looked even better. She couldn't stop reading them. She gave them to Jimmy and he couldn't stop reading them. The poems lifted both of their spirits in a much-needed way. The work was so much better when it contained both of their voices, their different ways of writing and modes of thinking. As they continued to work on the poems, Jimmy began leaving post-it notes that had words, phrases, or bits and pieces of song lyrics written on them all over the house for June to find: on the fridge and kitchen cabinets, on the piano, on the bedroom door, and on her writing table. One day when June went into the bathroom, there was a post-it note on the mirror that said, *let's build a home*. June knew it was a reference to The White Stripes song, a song both she and Jimmy liked a lot. But seeing it there on the mirror, right in front of her face like that, caused her to have an emotional reaction.

June found Jimmy in the kitchen eating a banana. She took the banana out of his hand and started kissing him. She wanted him bad; the ache in her body was intense. Right there in the kitchen they started taking their clothes off, tasting each other's mouths. As they were undressing, Jimmy asked, "Have you thought about what I said about you and Felix?" June pressed her body up against Jimmy's. "I want to stay focused on you," she said. June started kissing Jimmy's chest; she rubbed herself against his erection. Things got extra hot. Jimmy began to fuck June from behind as she held the edge of the kitchen counter. He fucked her really good this time, a little hard and a little rough. It felt incredibly dirty to get fucked that way, in the kitchen, in the presence of the butter dish and the salt and pepper shakers and the stove and cabinets and cooking utensils.

Felix came by later that week to jam. June stayed in the loft this time and typed up more of the poems she and Jimmy had written together. She liked how the vibrations from the guitar and drums filled up the house, how the sounds hummed through the walls and the floor and the ceiling. It was a nice feeling. June printed out the poems and read them. It was clear to her that they had something special here. She felt like if they could write these poems together, they could do just about anything together. That night in bed, Jimmy asked, “Why didn’t you tell me Felix brought my DVDs over?” He didn’t seem upset, but his question made June feel a little guilty. “I should’ve told you, but Felix said all you used to do before you met me was sit around and watch movies. I didn’t want you to relive those bad feelings again, so I just put them in the closet.” Jimmy put his arm around June. “He’s right,” he said. “I wasn’t doing anything.” Jimmy started kissing on June, and she got aroused. He got on top of her and they started fucking like they both needed it really badly. They moved together so perfectly, drawing out the pleasure and savoring it together. When they were done, Jimmy said, “You should just move in with me already.” He reached for his pants, which were on the ground, and said, “You should also have this.” Jimmy took June’s hand and put a ring in it.

June woke up naked in a motel bed, sunlight pouring in through the sheer curtains. Jimmy had gotten up before her, opened the layer of heavy curtains, and made a pot of coffee. Now he was in bed with her again. They were married. June was still processing this reality: Jimmy was now her husband. After he'd given her the ring, and June said yes to the idea of marriage, the thought burned in her head for days until finally, one evening she went up to Jimmy while he was working in the garage and said, "Let's do it now." June didn't like weddings; she'd never had fantasies of being a bride. She'd been to plenty of weddings when she was younger. She'd been a flower girl in her second cousin's wedding (who had long since been divorced), wearing a purple dress and carrying a baby's-breath bouquet. She'd kept the bouquet until the flowers dried out and crumbled. She'd been a junior bridesmaid in her aunt's second wedding, wearing a pink chiffon dress and little silk flowers in her hair. After the age of twenty, June stopped going to weddings altogether. She'd always known what she wanted to do: elope. She liked the idea of running off with the man she wanted to be with. She wanted to say "I do" to him, privately, away from the crowd. And then she wanted to drive off to a motel with him and do nothing but fuck for two weeks. That's what she and Jimmy were doing now. This was their third day at this motel. They were in Oklahoma. For their honeymoon, they'd decided just to get in the car and drive. They went north and crossed the border at night, found a cheap room, and as soon as they got the door shut and locked, June began taking her clothes off.

Jimmy dropped their duffel bags on the floor; June unzipped his pants; he put his hands in her hair; they started kissing. His fingers went all through her hair; she put her tongue in his mouth. June drew Jimmy to the bed by the front of his shirt. He took his shirt off as she sat down on the mattress, pulled his pants down and started sucking on his cock. June sucked him and

licked him all over; she put her mouth on his testicles. Before long they were tangled together on the motel bed fucking. This was exactly what June wanted. They didn't stop. They fucked until the sun came up. June couldn't fall asleep; neither could Jimmy. They lay there all morning together, in the middle of nowhere, naked, covered in each other's scent. Eventually, they went to get food at the diner down the road. They sat in the booth next to each other, sharing a big plate of eggs and hash browns. They went for a drive. They stopped at a gas station with a gift shop attached to it. June bought an Oklahoma magnet and postcard. They drove to a fruit stand and bought a bag of cherries. They went to a steakhouse and shared a steak. Afterward, they went back to their motel room and ate the cherries while they fucked. When June woke up the next morning there were a bunch of roses and carnations on the bed beside her.

They drove up through Kansas and made their way into Nebraska. June's body burned with excitement and arousal. In a sense, she and Jimmy had run away together and it was thrilling. Whenever they got to a new motel room they immediately got undressed and went to bed together. June found Jimmy to be more irresistible than she ever imagined he could be. She found herself constantly licking and kissing him everywhere. She felt connected to him in a way that was more substantial, more permanent—almost eternal. Jimmy *belonged* to her now. And when June fucked Jimmy she let him know it. The farthest they got was Omaha. They found a bed and breakfast with an available room and booked it on the spot. It was located on a nice piece of land with a dirt trail that led to a small picnic area. The bed in their room had an iron headboard. The first time they fucked on it, Jimmy took out some rope from his duffel bag and tied June's wrists to the iron headboard. June had never been tied up before. Jimmy kissed her all over her body, starting with her thighs. Everything about the room became enhanced: the rose

bedspread, the lace curtains, the paintings of country scenes on the walls, the wooden ceiling fan. Jimmy moved his hands all over June's body, letting her know that *she* belonged to him.

The last day they stayed at the bed and breakfast, they went to a small craft fair and they each bought something for each other. Jimmy bought June a pair of jade earrings. June bought Jimmy a dog figurine carved from wood. They also bought a knitted throw blanket for their bed. They shared a turkey leg and fresh-spun cotton candy. When they got back to their room, June stood in front of the vanity mirror and put on her new jade earrings. Jimmy came up behind her and unzipped his pants. Then he reached around and unzipped her pants for her. June took off her shirt; he helped her unhook her bra. They fucked like silent animals against the vanity. June saw their bodies in the mirror, the way Jimmy held her by her hips. Afterward, they lay in bed together, wrapped in the knitted throw blanket. Jimmy stroked June's hair and she rested her cheek against his chest, taking in the scent of his body. The next day, they decided to make their way back to Texas. In the car, June looked at the moving landscape from a different perspective. Before, they were headed north; now they were headed south. She thought about the fact that she and Jimmy were married now. And she thought about the fact that she wasn't alone anymore, but she also felt a new sense of freedom. She felt comfortable with herself and her body. They stopped at a motel in Kansas for the night. They took a shower together. They rinsed the shampoo from each other's hair and washed each other's bodies. Washing Jimmy's body made June feel even more attuned to her own body. When she touched him, it felt like she was touching herself.

For the first time in June's life she felt really good about her poems. She had a stack of thirty good ones sitting on her writing table in the loft. During the day, while June worked, she would look out the small window that faced the west side of the property. The house was on two acres of land, which gave her and Jimmy plenty of space and intimacy. As June looked out the window, she realized that this wasn't just Jimmy's home—it belonged to her too. Jimmy had made it clear to June that whatever belonged to him now belonged to her. June felt the same way, although at times she felt like she didn't have much to offer. But still—anything she possessed she wanted Jimmy to possess too. These days June thought less about external pressures and frustrations, like her inability to get published or the fact that she couldn't work as a professor. They bothered her less because she was more focused on doing what *she* wanted to do—like writing poems and making art—and how she was able to do those things with Jimmy. One night Jimmy took out an old canvas of his that had a few small splotches of paint on it and a box full of used paints. He handed June a paintbrush and said, "Put something on it." June had never worked on a canvas before; she'd never worked with paint either. "When I first started using canvases I used to fuck them up a little bit first so I could do the work," Jimmy explained. "Do you still fuck them up?" June asked. "Sometimes," Jimmy said. "I don't think art can be art if it's not at least a little bit fucked up."

June stuck with what she knew how to do, with what she'd been practicing in her sketchbook. She drew circles in different sizes in light blue, olive, and fuchsia, outlined them in black, and painted around them in dark blue. It was kind of a mess, but June liked it. Jimmy took out his portfolio and sketchbooks and let June look through them. He'd already done so much work, and all of it was beautiful and detailed, including the pieces he'd messed up on or hadn't

been able to finish. Jimmy had a good body of work and June realized she wanted to have the same thing. She filled up her sketchbook and bought a new one. She bought a nicer set of oil pastels. She was determined to get better. As June continued to look through Jimmy's sketchbooks on her own, she felt a real admiration for his drawing skills. She could tell he'd taught himself how to draw, and that made the work even more special to her. June noticed that there were a lot of drawings that involved the female body. Jimmy had been practicing drawing female bodies for a long time and June could see the progress he'd made. What June liked about those drawings was that the female bodies looked real. Jimmy had put a lot of effort into drawing female body shapes and facial expressions that were authentic. June spent a good amount of time looking at the bodies and faces of those women; she realized that Jimmy had a very good eye.

"You're good at drawing women," June said to Jimmy as she set one of his sketchbooks down and opened it. He sat with her as she flipped through the sketchbook, stopping at certain drawings. "How were you able to make them so real?" June asked. "I like models that aren't models," he said. Jimmy left the room and came back with a small box. He set it down and opened the lid. "I've collected a lot of images over the years. These are the models I work from." June looked through the images. Jimmy had collected a variety of images: buildings, landscapes, cars and engine parts, musical instruments, and objects both big and small, but a large amount of them were of women who didn't look like models in the classical sense. Some of the images were cut out from art magazines but a good chunk of them were from adult magazines. Some were in color and some were in black and white. June came across an image Jimmy had reproduced in his sketchbook: a naked woman standing with her hands tied above her head. June found the drawing in Jimmy's sketchbook and placed the image next to it. They looked almost identical. June thought back to their honeymoon, and how Jimmy had tied her up, and how it had

made her feel. They hadn't talked about it, but June had thought about it a lot. "Is that something you like?" June asked. "Yes," Jimmy said. "Do you want to tie me up right now?" June asked. "Only if you want it," Jimmy said.

That night, June let Jimmy tie her up. It felt different at first standing with her arms tied above her head; June felt vulnerable, but she also felt turned on. Jimmy gently gathered June's hair up into a ponytail at the top of her head and began kissing her neck. Jimmy's mouth and hands went all over June's body, and both were warm. When Jimmy fucked June from behind, it felt incredible. The tension created from being tied up brought about a deep orgasm. As soon as Jimmy set June free she was all over him with kisses. June thought about that orgasm for days. One night after dinner, she asked Jimmy, "Do you want to be tied up?" In bed, Jimmy lay on his back as June tied his wrists to the headboard. She moved her hands all over his body and his muscles loosened. Then she straddled him and began to fuck him. June concentrated on Jimmy's body, on making him feel good. She found a good rhythm and drew out the pleasure that came from it until Jimmy experienced orgasm. When she untied him he immediately rolled her onto her back.

As June continued to work on poems in the loft, she often found herself staring out the window, mainly looking at the sky, which was usually full of thick puffy clouds. One day it started to rain. June drew her chair over to the window and pulled up the blinds. She watched the rain fall directly from the sky, through the trees and to the ground, where puddles began to collect. She wished she could draw it. Charlie jumped onto the windowsill and June scratched him on the neck, between his shoulders. She picked up the poem she was working on. Instead of continuing the thread, June started to describe what she didn't yet know how to draw.

Jimmy's mom came to visit after he called her to let her know that he was living in Texas now and he was married. All of this news had been such a big surprise to her that it caused her to get on a plane and fly out to Texas from California. She didn't stay at the house, partly because there wasn't a proper guest room set up, and partly because Jimmy didn't invite her to stay with them. She booked a hotel in Austin instead, and even rented her own car. When Jimmy's mom showed up at the house, she had a small box with her. "I thought you might like to have these," she said, handing the box to Jimmy. "Bill and I are moving to a retirement community, so I'm getting rid of a lot of things...downgrading." Jimmy opened the box, looked inside, and handed it to June. It was full of old pictures of Jimmy when he was a kid. The first thing June noticed about Jimmy's mom was that she looked and sounded like a heavy drinker and smoker, like she had spent a good amount of her life in bars. Her hair was short and gray and she wore a long, tight-fitting tie-dye dress. Her fingernails and toenails were bright red. Jimmy gave his mom a tour of the house and then all three of them went to Austin because his mom wanted to go clothes shopping. She bought three new dresses and a pair of sandals. June didn't say much aside from whatever casual conversation topics came up, but it was clear to her that she was making Jimmy's mom uncomfortable. She kept looking at June as if she wasn't sure June was really there.

"I feel blindsided by all of this," Jimmy's mom said to June during dinner while Jimmy was in the restroom. "I'm happy for the both of you, I really am...it's just that Jimmy never showed much interest in women, or settling down. He's just like his dad, who was kind of a hermit and wasn't really interested in women either. Jimmy must really love you. Anyway, I hope it works out." After dinner, as they were saying their goodbyes, Jimmy's mom put her hand on Jimmy's arm, as if there was something more she wanted to say, but instead she said, "I can't

believe you still have that piano.” Once they got home, Jimmy wanted to know what his mom said to June when he was away from the table at dinner. “Nothing worth repeating,” June said. “Indulge me,” Jimmy said. “She said she was blindsided by all of this because you’re like your dad who was a hermit and wasn’t really interested in women, but she hopes everything works out.” Jimmy sat down at the piano and ran his finger across the keys. June remembered how much she liked to do that as a kid: put her finger on the far left key and drag it across the rest of the keys, making a clumsy but harmonic sound. “She doesn’t know a fucking thing about anything,” Jimmy said.

June stayed up late that night looking through the old pictures of Jimmy. There were some school pictures of Jimmy, little league pictures, Christmas pictures. There were very few pictures of Jimmy as a baby. June also noticed that Jimmy never smiled. There was one of him standing with his parents in front of a tan brick house. His mom had big flaming red curly hair. His dad was on crutches, with his hand on Jimmy’s shoulder. Jimmy came into the kitchen in just his underwear. He got some water from the fridge and then walked over to the table. “How old were you in this one?” June asked, holding up the picture of Jimmy and his parents in front of the house. “Five or six. That was when we first moved in. Before that we lived in an apartment. My dad had recently had back surgery.” Jimmy sat down next to June. “It’s funny how my mom says my dad wasn’t interested in women. He was in pain most of the time because of his back.” They looked at the pictures together. Some of them were really old, in black and white. “Who are these people?” June asked. “That’s a really good question,” Jimmy said. He collected all the pictures that didn’t have him in them and threw them in the trash. “I’m sorry you had to meet her,” Jimmy said. “I only told her about all this because I felt like I had to. She only came out here because she wanted to make sure you were real.”

In bed, June thought about what Jimmy said, about how his mom came all the way out to Texas just to make sure she was real. “Why wouldn’t I be real?” she asked. “Because my mom’s never seen me with a woman,” Jimmy said. June turned to face Jimmy in the dark. “You don’t have to apologize for anything,” she said. “I know,” Jimmy said. “It’s just that she embarrasses me. She always has.” He climbed on top of her and pulled the sheets up around them. “I can see why,” June said. “She’s cruel.” Jimmy started to kiss June. It was way past midnight and June could barely think about sleeping. They continued to make out for a long time and it felt nice. June felt really lucky to have a man like Jimmy, who noticed her, who wanted to be with her, who wanted to kiss her. They kissed until their lips were connected, barely moving. Jimmy filled June’s mouth with his tongue. They’d been making out for so long that June felt aroused all over, especially in the core of her vagina, which felt sensitive and excited. She reached for Jimmy’s cock, wanting to fuck, but he said, “I just want to kiss you.” The next day, June found at least one picture where Jimmy was smiling. He was about eight years old, and he was holding a turtle. June went through the pictures she had of herself as a kid and found a good one of her standing on the driveway in her roller skates. She put them in a hinged picture frame and placed it on top of the piano.

For an entire day June and Jimmy did nothing but lay in bed together. June hadn't spent so much time in bed since she was an undergrad, and it had been for different reasons—depression mostly. But on this day, it felt especially worthwhile to do nothing but lay in bed with Jimmy. It felt good to be close to his naked body, and for June to be able to let Jimmy feel the closeness of her naked body. Being naked with Jimmy never got old. It felt like a privilege June never wanted to take for granted because she'd gone so long without it. Before, June had put very little focus on her physical body, and what it meant to relax. She hadn't realized how disconnected she'd been from her physical self because she'd rarely thought about herself that way. She'd come to regard herself as an entity, unable to satisfy her physical needs. With Jimmy, her physical needs were met on a daily basis, and June felt more connected with herself as a female. In bed, they gave each other long back rubs; they talked; they kissed; they had sex. They opened the bedroom windows and let the cool air in. They lay tangled together listening to the wind in the trees. The next day, June felt completely refreshed. She felt well-rested deep inside her bones. When she went outside, she saw that the yard was full of leaves. "We need a rake," she said to Jimmy. They spent all afternoon raking leaves. June hadn't raked leaves since she was a kid. She'd collect just about every leaf she could get with the rake and make one giant pile. Then she would lay in the pile like it was a bean bag chair and stare up at the sky. June loved the dirt smell of leaves, the crunching sounds they made. When they got the leaves into a big enough pile, June sat back in it. Jimmy picked up a handful of leaves and poured them over June's head.

Not long after that, June found Jimmy looking over the typed manuscript of the poems they'd written together. "These are still really good," Jimmy said. "I know," June agreed, sitting down at the table next to him. "I think we should publish them...like in a book," he said.

“How?” June asked. “We could just do it ourselves, self-publish,” Jimmy suggested. June hadn’t considered the idea of self-publishing before, but it sounded right. “Let’s do it,” she said. Jimmy put the manuscript together in a digital format and had books printed through a book printing company. When the books came to the house, Jimmy got out his box cutter, made a slit in the tape, and opened the cardboard flaps. Because June had never seen her name on a book before, it overwhelmed her at first. Her *name* was on something. More importantly, her name was next to Jimmy’s on a book that belonged to them both. It was physical proof of how connected they really were. They had written a book together. June picked up one of the books and flipped through it. The pages smelled crisp and clean. There was a part of June that wanted to take the box of books and put them somewhere safe where no one could get to them. That’s how much they meant to her. She wanted to protect them. Jimmy picked up one of the books and started drawing all over the inside cover and title page with a black pen.

“Now what?” June asked, as Jimmy continued to draw in the book. “We give them out to people,” he said. “Like who?” June asked. “People who like to read poems,” Jimmy said. That Friday night they went to a poetry reading in town. After the reading, they stood in the back with their box of books. On the front of the box, Jimmy had written Free Books with a black sharpie. At first, people weren’t sure if they were serious. June wasn’t even sure at first. But then she realized that just like Jimmy, she was dead serious. The poets who read and the people who ran the reading series all got free books. That night as they lay in bed, Jimmy said, “You could self-publish too.” The idea had never occurred to June. She’d assumed self-publishing was a waste of time. But the idea began to take root in her mind. Why not self-publish? She was already losing the game anyway by having her work constantly get rejected by every single lit journal she submitted to. Why not take herself out of the game completely? Why not do things her way?

In the following days June sat at her writing table and went through the pile of poems she'd been writing and putting away. She read the poems in the order she'd written them and noticed that they had a really nice flow to them. For the first time in her life, June realized she had a book. She put a manuscript together and gave it to Jimmy. After Jimmy read it, he said, "Let me make the cover." Without a second thought, June said, "Absolutely." It didn't take long for Jimmy to come up with something. He showed June the design. He'd taken bits and pieces of her abstract art and made a cover that was bold and colorful. He'd made art from her art. "That's perfect. You made my work look really good," June said. "That's because it's already really good," Jimmy said. When June's books came in the mail, she took a copy to the loft, sat down by the window, and read it from cover to cover. June had been writing poetry for more than twenty years and she'd never seen her poems in print before. She tossed the book down, put her face in her hands, and cried. She cried because she knew she'd never felt like a real poet before, because she'd never felt like a real person before. Now that there was a book, it meant that her work was real—*she was real*. Even if no one else saw the book—she saw it. It was sitting on the floor right next to her feet. It existed. Once June was done crying, she picked up the book and went back downstairs. Jimmy had taken a few books out of the box and set them aside. "Do you mind if I send these to a few people?" he asked. "No, go ahead," June said. "What do you want to do with the rest of them?" Jimmy asked. "I think we should give them away," June said.

As a wedding present, June's parents brought her and Jimmy a puppy. Their neighbor's two dogs produced a litter of Golden Retriever-Jack Russell Terrier puppies. There was only one female in the litter. As soon as she was old enough, June's parents brought her over. June and Jimmy named her Violet. She was golden, with soft fur, floppy ears, and a pink tongue. At night, she slept between their bodies up near their heads. One afternoon, they were all laying in bed together, with Violet on her back, her tongue hanging out, Jimmy rubbing her belly. June liked the way Jimmy handled Violet; he was very gentle with her and he never raised his voice or got impatient with her. In a lot of ways, it made June feel more attracted to Jimmy as she watched him care for this small puppy that they were raising together. It reintroduced the question that both of them had been thinking about off and on for a while now: *should we have a baby?* Jimmy brought the question up on his own right before they were given Violet. He had gotten balcony tickets for a Bad Religion concert. They were June's favorite band; they also happened to be Jimmy's favorite band. It had been one of the big commonalities that helped to cement their relationship. They even favored the same album: *No Control*. June had been listening to Bad Religion since she was eighteen and had seen them almost every time they came to town. Seeing Bad Religion with Jimmy was much different than seeing Bad Religion on her own. It brought up erotic feelings right away; it established a special closeness that was wholly unique to them: they both loved Bad Religion *and* they loved each other.

During the Bad Religion concert Jimmy put his hand on the back of June's neck and let his fingers curl into her hair. June had never been sexually stimulated at a concert before, aside from being aware of the fact that she was a female surrounded by guys with cocks she had no access to. But now that she had Jimmy, and they were in this environment together where it was

dark and filled with live punk music, June felt incredibly aroused. Once they got home, they were barely in the door before June felt the need to take her clothes off—and Jimmy’s clothes. By the time he got the door locked she was already unzipping his pants. In bed, the fucking was phenomenal because her arousal had been building all night. They kissed each other and fucked each other like it was their first time together. It was messy, sloppy, and deep. The sex was so good that by the time they were done they were both sweaty, and June was immediately ready to go again. That was when Jimmy asked, “Do you want to make a baby?” Right away June said yes and started kissing Jimmy all over his neck and chest. Now, as they were laying with Violet, Jimmy asked, “Have you thought more about my question?” June had thought about it a lot, and most of her concerns had to do with the physical aspects of childbirth. Was she strong enough to endure labor? This was something she had discussed with Jimmy before in a casual manner. But when it came down to it, the thought of making a baby with Jimmy only brought on the need for more sex. “Yes,” June answered. Jimmy placed Violet, who was sleeping again, in her puppy bed on the floor. “Elaborate,” he said. “We should make a baby,” June said. Then she helped Jimmy get his pants undone.

The next day, June got an email from a guy who edited a small poetry journal. He’d gotten a hold of her book of poems and wanted to know if she had any new poems. She did, and she sent them to him. He wrote back immediately and asked to publish them. June was excited. She went outside to tell Jimmy. He was in the backyard with Violet, holding a tennis ball as she tugged at it playfully. Before June could say anything, all these thoughts rushed into her mind about what it would mean to raise a child with Jimmy. She felt overwhelmed with emotion as she imagined Violet as a toddler. June walked into the yard, knelt down beside Jimmy, and asked, “How soon can you get the vasectomy reversed?” Jimmy let the tennis ball drop. “I can set it up

first thing tomorrow.” June knew what route she wanted to take: she wanted an all-natural at-home birth. She had a severe distaste toward hospitals and she didn’t believe in rushing the birth process. She wanted to be able to take her time. This was what Jimmy wanted too.

They put a book list together; they researched midwives; they cleared out the small spare bedroom and visualized a nursery together. It almost felt as if they’d already had the baby. June wanted to be as prepared as possible. If she could picture it, she felt more comfortable believing it could happen. The night before Jimmy was scheduled to get his vasectomy reversed, they lay in bed together, touching each other, reassuring each other. “Do you still think it’s a good idea?” Jimmy asked. “I do,” June said. “I’ve thought a lot about what it would be like if we didn’t try to do this. We’ve got plenty of things to keep us busy, but at the end of the day, I think we’d regret not trying. Creative projects aren’t the same as making and raising a human being together. It feels really important now.” June felt better after verbalizing those thoughts—and it helped Jimmy feel better too. “I agree,” he said. “For a long time I didn’t think it would happen at all. I never wanted to have a kid just so I could prove that I was a better parent than my parents were. I wanted to do it for the right reason. I wanted to do it for love. And like you said, creative projects can’t fill that gap. But I also want you to know, even after I get the vasectomy reversed, there’s still no rush. We don’t have to try right away. We can keep thinking and talking about it.” June felt better hearing Jimmy say that. It relaxed her body. “Some of my new poems got accepted by a small poetry journal,” June said. “Which one?” Jimmy asked. “Border Star,” she said. “That’s a good name for a poetry journal,” he said.

June's grandmother came by to look at the house. This was momentous because Ellen rarely left her farmhouse. She brought with her a chest full of heirlooms she wanted June to have. Inside were all kinds of objects Ellen had held onto over the years: photo albums, little animal figurines, a tea set, old books, and a few ceramic pieces she'd made herself. As June looked through the chest, she came across a small pile of baby clothes. She found a little yellow dress she'd worn in her first professionally-taken baby picture. It was pale yellow with lace around the collar and it had puffed sleeves. June set the dress on her lap and stared at it. "I made that dress," Ellen said. "That was back when I used to sew a lot, before I took up painting. I made that dress when I was pregnant. I was never able to use it since I didn't end up having a girl, but I always thought it looked so beautiful. It looked really good on you when you were a baby." June stared at the dress, imagined her baby in her lap, wearing it. "I wish I still had my old sewing machine," Ellen said. "That thing was a beast." June hadn't sewn since she was a kid. She used to keep a needle and ball of thread and spare pieces of cloth to practice on in a box under her bed. She'd once made a sunglass case for her dad by sewing two identical pieces of fabric together using a simple stitch pattern all around the edges, leaving the small end open, and then turning it inside out. June's grandmother still had piles of fabric in the same patterns and designs June remembered playing around with as a kid. "Are you having thoughts?" Ellen asked. "Maybe," June said. "It's always best to let them run their course...then make your decision," Ellen said.

Every time June and Jimmy had sex, the unspoken question came up between them: *should we let it happen?* It caused the sex to become really intense. In the middle of it, there was always that moment where it felt like all June had to do was say the word and Jimmy would take the condom off—just like that. But in truth, they were still thinking about it, still talking about it.

After Ellen left, June put the chest away. She didn't want feelings from the past to cloud her ability to make the right decision. The objects in that chest belonged to her grandmother, and that was what made them special. But June wanted to keep those heirlooms in their proper place—safe and valued, but out of sight. Not long after that, June's car died. She'd been driving her silver Honda Civic for years; it had been a good, functional car. There was a small auto shop off the main road. An old yellow pickup truck had been sitting in their junk lot for months. June eyed it every time she and Jimmy drove by. A few weeks after her car died, June found the yellow truck sitting in the garage. Her first reaction was to cry, but she didn't. She collected herself until Jimmy got home later that afternoon. June took hold of him as soon as he got through the door. He knew what her excitement was about. June kissed Jimmy really hard and really deep. She pulled off his jacket. June knew that as long as they continued to stay in this limbo, the madness would never end. The need would keep surging up. When they got to bed and started to fuck, June said, "Take it off." Jimmy pulled off the condom and fucked June better than he had ever fucked her in the past. It was raw and passionate. June held him close as they kissed and fucked, wanting to feel his cock deep inside her body, satisfying her vaginal ache. "Come inside me," she murmured. When Jimmy climaxed, it brought on heavy bliss, and June got an orgasm from it.

Once it happened, that was it. No amount of thinking or talking could compare to what they had just experienced together. "There's something I wanted to show you," Jimmy said, once things calmed down between them. "Get dressed," he said. As they were leaving, June looked in the mailbox and pulled out the new issue of *Border Star* that had her poems in it. She put the journal in the backseat of the car without even opening it. Jimmy took June to a farm property that was for sale. He pulled up to the locked front gate; they got out and climbed over it. Behind

the farmhouse was an old barn. “I bought this today,” Jimmy said. “I was starting to feel like maybe we were focusing on the baby stuff too much. That’s also why I got you the truck. I don’t want us to get locked into a certain mode of thinking. We could turn this barn into a creative space where we could make art, or music, or write—do whatever we want. I always wanted to have a space like this, and someone to share it with. What do you think?”

“I feel the same way,” June said. As soon as she said it, she realized it was true. She’d always wanted something like this too, but she hadn’t been able to visualize it fully until now. They went inside the barn and June touched the walls, felt the solid wood under her feet. It smelled like dirt and grass and earth. “I’m glad you bought it,” June said. “I think it’ll be perfect.” When they got back in the car, Jimmy picked up the poetry journal and set it in June’s lap. “Don’t forget,” he said. “You made that happen.” That night, as Jimmy sat in the practice space playing his guitar, June went into the loft. She took out the book of poems she and Jimmy had written together, the book of poems she’d written, and her sketchbooks, and set them down on her writing table next to the poetry journal. As June stared at all of these things she’d made and helped to make, she knew it was time to stop thinking about the baby. She wanted to let it happen naturally, in its own way. June opened her notebook, pulled the cap off of her pen, and started writing.

### About the Author

Andrea Syzdek received her MFA in Poetry from the University of Houston in 2017. She writes independently for her website *Against the Grain* ([andreasyzdek.com](http://andreasyzdek.com)) which focuses on book reviews and critical writing. She lives in Hockley, Texas.