

## STATEMENT AND GAME

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***He's not coming back? He's dead then. He's dead as far as we're concerned.***

—Tom Stoppard

*What you saw in that four months: the shine of everything you carried. Your weapon in your hands, your hands sunburned now for years. Clearly: sun, metal, sweat. Peripherally: your M4 and its pressure remote on your forward hand grip, its secret PEQ-2 working a line through the dark where only you can see it, your NVGs giving you magic abilities. What you saw: things only you could see. Lasers at targets, the targets being men. What you saw: dark houses. Foggy green deeds in foggy green light. The slap of sun through the tent. The way the heat massaged the air until it became like old glass.*

*Then one night there's a guy in the corner of a house, too fast, and there's a kick in your chest and you fall back and see Kelly's white face and hear your name, and it's not sunny, or hot, or even dusty; you're inside, in the dark like at some terrible party in someone's basement, and you think I could really be okay like when you're sleeping, and you hear people ask Is he asleep, and you laugh to yourself because you think you're not; you think you could sit up and talk to them, but then it turns out you don't, because you're asleep, or in this case, you're dead.*

*You don't think about it afterward; it's just death. You make your will before you go and you get your gear together, even the dive stuff, even though you're going to the desert, because you never know. You stop in Germany and get so hammered that you almost miss your flight, but you don't have all that training for nothing, so it's no problem to scale a wall, get your shit, and get on the plane. Then you get there and the weapons feel good in your hands, you are heavy with armor and the shine of everything*

*you carry. You work at night, you clear houses like you practiced; it is and is not what you expect. You keep your weapon a twelve-inch sweep from the guy next to you; you look everywhere at once. You shoot someone in the shoulder; he's bad, and you wrap him up and deliver him to the Iraqi army, where they'll do what they do.*



After Hugh Wellbeloved was killed in Iraq, canceling the hopes that Viola and her colleagues had fostered for the basketball-star-black-eyed-dreamboat of Putnam High in northern Rhode Island, she spent a lot of time fixating on the impossible. She had a hard time not believing in visions; her greatest longing as a child had been to be prophetic. Barring a remarkable discovery in college that she and her roommate could hear each others' thoughts when sitting in two specific lecture seats in two specific classes, her life was devoid of such romance, and Viola forgot about the occurrence altogether when the roommate became pregnant and dropped out,. She had loved best the tricky stories in her old books: the girl who wished for her true love to put down roots in her hometown woke to find him turned to a deep-rooted sycamore in the town square, and cursed her careless way with words. Viola knew the importance of a well-turned phrase because she learned it from fantasy. Even now, she envisioned Hugh still alive, in those last days before graduation, summoned to her room by the school's creaky intercom. "I had a dream you died," she'd have told him, and the urgency in her voice would have convinced him to place his faith in her in ways he never had. Lying awake with tears in her hair, she swore to herself over Max's snores that she'd have sacrificed her credibility in the cause of saving Hugh's life.

She perched on the edge of a student desk at the front of her classroom to tell her homeroom the news of his death. She gazed into the face of the Shakespeare portrait she kept on her back wall and recited the words like an NPR correspondent: Ramadi, dissident. Memorial service. The room held the silence that teenagers create when they know something solemn is happening. A few girls cried, so Viola handed around the tissue box, and hit one girl in the eye in her haste to act. The laughter broke the mood. She was relieved; she was horrified. Once kids left the cradle of high school it was every man for himself; her homeroom was somber but quick to forget. The memorial was held in the gym, and at one point the principal swung his arm up towards the basketball hoop to remind everyone of Hugh's game-winning succession of threes in his senior year, and every head in

the place swiveled to face the glass of the backboard. A month later it was basketball season, and the gym stank of armpits and hot dogs. Hugh's mother approached Viola at the home opener, which she'd thought would raise her out of her funk. "I know you and Hugh had your differences," Mrs. Wellbeloved said. "But he loved your class." Viola staggered into the cold, sport-crisp night. Why had she come?

When she arrived home, Max was looking through the bathroom trash can for a rebate form from a new showerhead she'd bought months ago. She'd told him she'd probably burned the form in their perpetually smoking woodstove by now, but he was wrist-deep in stale condoms and Q-tips when she walked in the door, making sure there was no chance of getting their forty dollars back. "I just wish you could be more careful about these things," he told her as he washed his hands. She passed him the soap as she stared down her reflection in the mirror. "Me too," she said. Other people made savvy household decisions; she didn't know why she couldn't be one of them. Instead, she was caught up in the order of Shakespeare's comedies, the allure of the elusive *Cardenio*; she really was the geek her students believed her to be. ("You have a Hamlet shrine in your house, admit it," they said). Shakespeare, that businessman, would have saved the forty bucks, she was sure. There was no escape anywhere.



Her lesson plans aligned to the seasons: *Beowulf* for football, *Hamlet* for basketball. To finish up, Absurdism to reach the intellectuals who hadn't tired of murder, incest, and revenge, who had, she imagined, some intellectual curiosity.

"What's absurd in your own lives?" she asked them, tapping the cover of the Stoppard book.

"Reading this play," they said.

"Look, Gary Oldman," she said.

"Who?"

"From *Harry Potter*."

"Oh."



By his senior year, there was a lot of water under the bridge between them: "Do you remember the time I hit you with a snowball?"

"How could I forget, Hugh?"

Though she'd known him since he was a freshman in her study hall with a limitless supply of John Grisham novels, Hugh

wasn't on her radar until he became obsessed with the Questions game. Gary Oldman stood irresolute on the sun-dimmed TV screen in her classroom and assembled the clownish comprehension of questions that it took Hugh one page of reading to adopt as his new *modus operandi*. She used her standbys. "What you do want from me? Do you want my opinion? Why do you ask?" In the game was scope for his own particular humor, the way attention bled to his center as he bit his lip and wriggled his way out of another tight spot. In the halls, he'd try to catch her: "How are you today, Ms. Morgan?" She should have shut him down—"You got *owned*," his friends would have said in their flock around him, but she couldn't stop the heroic arcs of their words shooting from one to the other. "How are *you*, Hugh?" "Don't you think it's a beautiful day, Ms. Morgan?" "Do you think it might rain?" They were expansive, didn't mind an audience, kept it going around corners, down stairwells. In order to win she had to shut out everything except him. It wasn't hard; his friends called him Hef, or sometimes, Hugh Well-Blowed, because of his ability to get anywhere with any girl. "I'm looking into your soul," he told her with pseudo-seriousness as she watched the reflection of the classroom door in his eyes. "That's what you think," she said flatly. She laughed all the way home.



The ghost—she was unsure what else to call it—showed up the first night of one of Max's trips hawking software in Seattle. When he was gone Viola slept with a giant Mag-Lite, which she planned to use to first identify, then club, unfriendly trespassers. She was asleep with the dog on the bed, and when the voice woke her she threw out her appendages in every direction, shooting Huncamunca onto the floor, where she shook her collar in irritation. Viola didn't sit up but lay still, listening with a hand on the flashlight.

"Ms. Morgan?"

She tried to identify the source, wondering why the dog hadn't barked. It came again. It seemed to resonate inside her head.

"Are you there?"

"Who's there?"

"Who do you think?"

"Who's *there*?"

"Repetition. One-love."

This was it, then. She was going mad.

"No. No. Fucking. Way."

"Statement. And profanity. Two-love."

"You died."

"Statement and game. You were never much good at this."

And she knew it was gone before she bothered a perfunctory last question, the important one. "Hugh?" His name, after months of silence, blew out over her tongue. A name she could pretend to say while she was really just breathing. In the morning she stared into her own reflection but could see no signs of madness. It must have been real. No one had dreams like that.



It was soon after the Absurdism of Hugh's senior year had started that she decided she was waiting for Max to leave her. At home, Huncamunca whined with excitement and went into splay-pawed dives for tennis balls as Viola stood in the middle of the kitchen counting the difference in their ownership. The pots and pans registered in their name -- nothing fancy, because she'd been embarrassed to demand All-Clad from people she'd never met, all of Max's relations with indistinguishable names, Amys and Shellys and Barbs. She imagined sitting down with Max to divvy up the one, two, and three quart pots. Actions of fictitious characters. She imagined the shock when her grandparents discovered that she was not, in fact, the charming newlywed she pretended to be. After she turned eighteen and her mother died, she'd spent all holidays with her grandparents, and quickly learned how to say the right things to the woman who considered direct conversation a form of impoliteness. Sometimes, though, she felt her grandfather watch her watch Max, and wondered what he saw. She wondered what Max saw. The men in her life, their unknowable knowledge of her.



She found herself fantasizing about Max in the throes of affairs with larger-breasted women who could listen to his thoughts on state cell phone ordinances and still feel desire for him. When Max's office hired a woman their age with enormous knockers, Viola's hopes rose. But the woman had a fiancé, and Viola realized that they had entered the stage of life in which all their acquaintances were married, or were about to be. It would be a couple decades before everyone they knew was divorced, or was about to be. She was twenty-six and felt like the door had closed on any adventure worth having. She was the only teacher in her school without children, and happy that way. Max gave long tirades about the way the grocery store didn't keep their coffee all in one place; in a gathering of friends, she became used to the fixed grins on peoples' faces as he opened his mouth. She wondered if she had some disease, something that would have changed the way

she viewed everything. She found five ticks on Huncamunca's neck in a week; she looked up Lyme Disease but couldn't find any proof that she had it. There was no indication that she had anything; it was more of a lack that concerned her; she lacked an interest in love.



"Are you really joining the Navy?" she'd asked him that January when he still hadn't filled out a college application.

He tilted his head at her. "Are we still playing Questions?"

"No. That's a real question you answer."

He sat back on a desk behind him so they were eye to eye, but it wasn't a contest this time; he blinked, a lot. "Yeah. I've been thinking about it. I can't see myself in college, you know? If I could become, I don't know, a jungle guide, or something, I would." He ran a hand through his hair and she had a flash of his face peering from behind an enormous leaf, his athletic calves rooted in red-laced hiking boots. "Joining the Navy's more real, you know? I think I'm going to."

"Why?" she said, disregarding the fact that he'd just given her a why.

He looked at her from the corner of his eye. "I think it'd be fun as shit. I dreamed about it last night." He jerked his gaze to the door where kids were passing. "Don't tell anyone that."

She had the urge to lace her fingers with his where they rested on her desk, but instead shifted the ball she tossed around for class discussions under her other arm. "You know you'll end up in Iraq?"

"Haven't you heard the war's almost over?"

"Haven't you realized you could die?"

"Would that make you sad?"

"Yes."

"Statement." He stole the ball from her, grazing her armpit, and headed for the door trying to spin it on his finger.

"Hey," she rapped out in her best gym-teacher voice. He tossed it back; she caught it with her fingertips, eyes on his face as he recognized someone in the hall, and the coolness returned to his expression like a tide moving from jaw to hairline. His flirtation was predictable, but she enjoyed the feeling of being, briefly, in a movie. Eight years' more living on the planet—she had counted—made her able to intercept each of his moves. She had a vague sense that this was unfair.



*Riggle's asking me when practice is and she's handing back papers; it's a weird hot day and we're all wishing we were outside. My feet are out and she steps across my leg to reach Christina, and my shin raises her skirt and her bare leg slides along mine, miles of skin touching. I don't look and she doesn't look but I know she feels it because her face goes blank like sleep which is what she does when she doesn't want us to see her smile. Like the way you can get her to look out the window by stretching and your shirt goes up and shows your abs. She'll never look. She'll never let you see her laugh at the wrong thing. The bell rings and she keeps an eye on me and says You stay. I say to Riggle, Save me, and she laughs. Everyone's gone and she leans back against her desk and before I can stop it my mind has her clearing the desk in a sweep, and me on her, and somehow no one sees us. But she's still standing there and asks, Are you really joining the Navy, so that's what this is about. My potential. How could you, I know she's going to say. But all she does is say I'll probably die, and I back into the hall where Christina's waiting, so I wrap my arms around her and feel her ass pressing against my front, and I go work out until dinner, and the day's over.*



With Max away, she walked the dog alone in the dark past the cranberry bog on their lonely road, the unlit Mag-Lite in one hand. She didn't mind the lengthening nights that seemed appropriate in the days after Hugh's death, but she knew that if anyone approached her in the dark, she would cosh first and ask questions later. The idea amused her. She stood in the dark with the patient extended arm of a dog owner whose charge is enthralled with the odoriferous world. Good thing I know this is the place with the tipped-over scarecrow, she thought. Good thing I'm not about to turn on my light and think I'm looking at a dead body. She pressed the button, and the light glared into the face of a deer, struck by a car and petrified with its neck partially raised. Its eyes were open and, of course, seemed to stare at her. The scarecrow's arm was extended under the deer as if they'd fallen together in an embrace. "Come on," she told Huncamunca, and yanked the leash. In the morning as she drove to work she could see the deer's white belly at roadside, the legs four frail branches of November.



"Are you really joining the Navy?" she'd asked him, and he'd said yes. It was important not to get ahead of himself, to get

through one piece at a time, but he'd done his research, already knew what he wanted: to see some action, to clear houses, to do some fucking work, to have gone to war. S.D.V. team—fuck that. Sitting under the water in a little tube for eight hours every day. J.P. Feliciano came back from the Marines talking tough; he tried to change Hef's mind—"Dude," he belched, gesticulating with a Heineken, "when are you gonna get *laid*?" he said, but Hef laughed as condescendingly as he could and turned away. *Twenty-one days*, he'd thought. He'd been counting since the day he enlisted. It was three weeks before he'd never have to answer that question again.

It was harder than he'd thought, he'd admit that to himself. Standing there at home in his defensive slouch, telling people, "SEALS," and facing either their disbelief ("Those fuckers are a lot tougher than you, Hef,") or their ignorant encouragement, which was worse ("Well, sure. Good for you,") he'd been fired with a kind of righteous defensiveness that had lasted him all the way to Coronado. "If people don't understand, *explain* it to them," his mother had said, her hands clenched on the kitchen table, voice still strident with the disappointment of his decision, but he had no interest in circling the fishbowl of his town, setting people straight on something that wasn't their business. It was for him, it had to be for him. When he succeeded, they'd claim him back, but right now, they were sitting back on their paunchy asses to see if he could do it alone, and he planned to.



At the University, she'd had few friends besides the ill-fated roommate. She got to know some of the computer nerds in her dorm, and sat in boredom with her back propped against the cinder-block walls as Spinelli and Hess played *Need for Speed* and *Starcraft*. They had nothing in common besides a fondness for reruns of *Quantum Leap*, but it was enough to lure her out of her room once in awhile. Other than those unshaven two, her main companion was her work-study supervisor, a secretary in the library archives. Viola had heard people talk about how much fun they had at their jobs, referring to their "crew" as if serving ice cream or filing papers was on par with a Coast Guard rescue or a whitewater expedition. She tried to make pleasant conversation with Posey, but the woman had spent too many years as a secretary, and her flat Rhodie demeanor was impenetrable. Heavy-voiced, stolid, thick at the hips and sporting a tanning bed sheen, she clicked her French manicure against a keyboard and, regardless of Viola's performance, uttered neither praise nor criticism in her clamorous Cranston accent. The archives had no

public restroom; the day Viola found a plastic lunch bag filled with some desperate person's urine, Posey drawled out a request for a custodian and resumed typing. Viola was on the verge of quitting and living on Top Ramen when Max appeared in Spinelli's door one day. He took one look at the copy of *Henry V* in her hands, said, "We few, we happy few," and she was his.

One of the reasons Viola hadn't had many friends in college was because one thing that actually made her happy was writing papers. She'd run to the cafeteria at dinner when she was too hungry to focus on the words, cram a salad into her mouth gracelessly, her book still propped in front of her, and race back to her room, words thumping out of her. Her best rush was the A's she saw on all of her papers, the comments from her professors that made her feel as if they recognized her value; she could have loved any of them for the way they appreciated her use of semicolons, her ability to infuse an essay on *Hamlet* with sarcasm and still come up with something snappy and analytical. She loved the way her fingers flew across the keyboard, the decisive slam of the backspace when an entire paragraph had sluiced out of her control. It was like driving a sled team down a mountain pass with a full load of timber; her grandfather the logger, the mountain man from the north, had told her stories of the way the friction built a gutter of water under the runners—*thank God for friction, boys*, the team leader used to say, but it made for dangerous going, the horses could be killed by their own load, the sledge ready to go anywhere, slam into the river where the logs would eventually make their way to the mills with blood on them or not. That was the way she felt, skating one word after another down the hill of her thought, spiking them together and riding them downriver, eyes on the islands downstream built to break up log jams, where she could have jumped from one log to the next over the river and back, held up by thought, by the words she stuffed together.



What he hadn't counted on was how much, frankly, it sucked. He could run, and he could swim. When he wasn't working in the summer, he spent his time in Cobscot Lake, swimming laps while kids who hadn't yet graduated jumped off the rope swing and watched him with a lazy acceptance that made him grind his teeth. "He's going to be a Navy SEAL," they told each other lackadaisically, as if it had already happened, as if it were no big deal. They rode their bikes home while he was still surfing up and down the lake, skirting the dead moose that had fallen in that April. Run, swim: he knew how to do those things, and when he started training, he fell into the comforting knowledge that no

matter how hard, he could keep his body moving. He ran through town in the rain in summer, hair slapping his face, learned before he even got there how to ignore water on his body. Sweat grew loose on his body as rain, and the lake water was thick with demands he kept hooking into his rhythmic breaths. What he hadn't been able to prepare for was the way the body started making demands of the mind; he couldn't turn his brain off like he'd been used to. At home, nothing had been able to penetrate his resolve; the entire town showed up to watch him drain threes in the state playoffs and when he missed a shot, he kept moving, because points he missed were points he didn't need. The crowd's frustration meant nothing because he wasn't playing for them. Diving down to put his hand on the moose's side, holding his breath for so long that the dead animal seemed to move in the dark water, he had thought, *This is what dead looks like*, but he barely flinched when his hand brushed the moose and went right through its side, into its devoured organs. But suddenly he was faced with the thing he wanted—he couldn't play cool to himself—he fucking *wanted* this—and he couldn't shut his mind off. There had never been any question that he'd make it, but suddenly, *What if I can't do it, what if I can't make this time* crept into his head at the worst times, sand spilling under his boots in a constant nagging slide. His body should have been too tired to get any thought at all to his brain; working out at home, he'd been able to block it all; it was a matter of making the body too tired to let the brain speak, but here there was a sense of panic. *What if I can't, what do I do*. Soon he came to realize it was all a matter of time; if he could ration his body into pieces of time, he could keep from thinking. Three hours, he could do three hours of anything.

So when it was 105 in the desert and he had four quarts of water on him and had to run sixteen miles in full gear, he was fully aware that it was the worst three hours of his life, and he nearly wept through it—Christ, he might have cried without knowing, his body so used to being soaked and his breath as ragged as if he were sobbing—who knew what he was doing pounding his feet along— but there was a finality in that knowledge, because it was just three hours. The hardest things he'd ever had to do in his life were still quantifiable, and when they were over, and he'd sweated nine pounds off his body and hooked himself up to an IV, his arm extended and shaking, too tired to even admire the muscles he was building—they made his arm look like a man's arm; he was no young athlete anymore; he was suddenly grown, comprehensive, but too exhausted to care—he was still there, he hadn't quit. That was the only question remaining; not still alive, not still fucking sane, even. Just that he hadn't quit. That was what he cared about.



Even at the wedding, a day she'd resolved to be cheerful, she felt something strange, as if she were a child playing the role of a big girl. The priest, with whom they'd met twice before the ceremony, spoke for a few minutes before their vows, and he referred to Max as her "beloved Maxwell." Beloved? she thought, distracted at the dim front of the church. The word was cumbersome and its combination with Max's full name made her flinch. Maxwell. The w in the middle made the name flimsy. But she beamed along because there was nothing else to do. Beloved, she shuddered later. She didn't like the fuss, the tears in Max's mother's eyes. Why everyone else was so worked up when she was the one sashaying around in an enormous white dress was a mystery to her. At that point they were already living together. What pervaded was the anticlimax that lasted long after they had driven away from the reception. Apparently the guests who left later encountered a stray herd of horses who had slipped their gate near Smithfield; Viola envied them the night-dark adventure, working together to kill panic, wild-eyed horses soothed under headlights and the strokes of steady palms, a long drive ahead.



That night she was ready, got into bed as soon as she and Huncamunca finished their walk. She had spent the day reviewing her counters, sidesteps, reciprocations. She felt like a fencer slipping on a facemask after years of retirement. She tried to pretend that her stomach wasn't fluttering, but couldn't ignore the jump in her chest each time she recalled the dead boy's face. She read until midnight, then flipped off the lamp. A disembodied voice might need darkness, she thought, one hand on the Mag-Lite. By two o'clock she was spread-eagled on her back, staring at the ceiling. She recited "To be or not to be" in her head to make herself sleep.

He didn't come.

What did come was a stomach flu, sudden, violent, inelegant, three hours before sunrise. It was still dark, she thought frantically. Kid returns from the dead to find her in the bathroom in agony; what luck. Huncamunca curled up on the bath mat and snored. Viola pulled a towel out of the cupboard and used it to cover both of them. When Max arrived home at 4 a.m., he helped her back to bed, though she was happier on the cool floor. "How was your trip," she mumbled, and he said, "Not bad. I had dinner with some guys from Microsoft; they showed me their phones.

Naturally, we can't get them in the Northeast yet, but by the time the price drops, they'll be here." She fell asleep to his litany of the new phone, and later couldn't piece together whether he'd said it was magic. Was it called Magic? And made of... something. Latex? She couldn't remember. Her own phone had volume controls right where she held it, so she was constantly deafening herself.



Days passed. Viola found herself tacking up the halls gazing into the faces of students. If they weren't kind to each other they were kind to her, giving her room to pass between them, and when they didn't she made room. She spun them by their backpacks and they thought it was a joke; she placed a hand on countless well-defined shoulders to squeeze among the forest of bodies. She wanted to be in the middle of them, herded so tightly that if she collapsed, the pressure of their crowding would hold her up. She could make it through the day that way, with no one discovering her demise until it was too late, when she'd fall like the last clue of an Agatha Christie. "I notice you don't spend much time with the other faculty members," the guidance counselor said to her one day, and it felt like an accusation, an unfair one, she thought, since Hugh was dead now. How could she explain the comfort of mortality the students gave her? Where did all these thoughts of death come from, anyway?

It seemed, at least, that she wasn't the only one. By December, Hugh had been dead two months and there had been twelve fights in the school. The fights crossed genders and showed no respect for reality; Annemarie Sullivan and Callie Zapata nearly killed each other and ruined two faux-Louis Vuitton purses over an acne-riddled football player; a freshman taunted Cyrus Redbrick, who had a black belt in two martial arts, until Cyrus was helpless to do anything but shut the kid up. From his stretcher the freshman continued to wail insults, calling Cyrus *pussy*, *faggot*, *douche bag*, until even the paramedics told him to keep quiet. Viola caught a glimpse of Cyrus' face in the aftermath, defiant, his eyes watering. On top of this, Taylor Barrow totaled his pickup, then his mother's Monte Carlo on the same corner, when tailing his girlfriend to make sure she wasn't cheating on him. He blamed her for driving too fast to keep up with, and broke up with her via text-message. The most recent incident was the worst, when Michael Feliciano, a six-three junior, found Mercedes Shea, who'd slapped his girlfriend, standing at the top of the stairs after school and gave her a shove. She did not land on her feet, but fell spectacularly, making Michael laugh. He was suspended, but a boy in Viola's study hall showed up to her room the next day with *Free Feliciano*

scrawled on both arms. "I'm not a fan of hurting the ladies, Ms. Morgan," he told her, "but Mikey's my bud, you know?" She looked him in his muddy eyes until he sat down.

Hugh came back, in his usual style, just as she was on the brink of insanity, stretched so thin that her eyes were flour-dry and maroon, her pulse in a constant tug out of and into her chest, a sewing machine jacking through her. Max had gone to Minneapolis this time, and she was enjoying lying diagonally on the bed when the question came.

"Ms. Morgan?"

She scrambled to sit up, wishing she had worn something more flattering to bed than her "Chicks Dig Mariachis" shirt. "Hugh?" The important one first this time. But she knew his style. She remembered the sound of her phone going off in the middle of a deep sleep, and she knew him now.

"How are you today?"

"Where are you?"

"Would you believe me?"

"Hugh. What's it like being dead?"

"Are you afraid of death?"

"Yes. Dammit. I mean—Yes?"

"Statement. One-love. You were never much good at this."

There was a pause. Then, "Are you sad that I died?"

"Didn't I tell you I would be?" He didn't respond. "Hugh, why are you here?"

"Why not?"

"Why are you teasing me?"

"Didn't I always tease you?"

"Are you saying death is just a reiteration of life?"

"What's with all the death questions?"

"Why are you here, if not to answer my questions?"

"Why do you think I'm here?"

Her mind flooded with banality; no questions came. She wanted statement, concrete confession. Panic filled her at the thought he'd leave again, at the way he'd always disappeared with suddenness that reflected the speed at which he had crashed through his life.

"Do you remember dying?"

"Don't you think that's a personal question?"

"Don't you think showing up in my bedroom is personal?"

"Can you convince me that you mind?"



"How did you and your husband meet?" girls in her classes always wanted to know. Half of them had sat on the sidelines of

their own parents' divorces; she wondered where they'd gotten their romanticism. "Do you have a picture of him? I heard he was an underwear model."

"He's not," she told them. She imagined with disinterest what the girls would say to each other if she showed up one day missing her wedding ring, grateful she'd kept her maiden name. Lonely, maybe, but she'd been lonely before. She was starting to think she wasn't meant to be a married person, wasn't made for compromise. When she told Max about the fights at school he said, "They should let teachers use mace." She suspected the fact she didn't care about anything he said was proof he should divorce her, but he hung on despite it all, and always with a new description of some new kind of software that would allow someone to save half a second when downloading music. She didn't know what she did care about anymore, but she dreamed of Hugh more often than not. Even though he was dead.



After Hugh's graduation, the only student who didn't eye her with suspicion was Mercedes, a piece of flattery Viola viewed as dubious at best. As a freshman, Mercedes had dated a 20-year-old fisherman from Gloucester who came down on his days off to drive her around town in his beater pickup and screw in the more public of the town's makeout spots. When Mercedes' mother objected, Mercedes threw every kitchen chair they possessed at her. That summer, having broken up with the fisherman, she stole a car from a party, unhindered by her lack of license and .21 blood alcohol level, and drove it at 80 miles an hour into another car. Taylor Barrow had hitched along, and both of them walked away from the wreck, adding to their legends. Every time Viola heard one of these stories she groaned, but she respected the way Mercedes could walk down the hall alone, unaccompanied by the hip-slung, six-inch cleavage tribes of the school. Hugh's fan club had traveled in groups, wearing tops so negligible that Viola blushed when she stood over their desks.

By the end of her sophomore year, Mercedes had been in four fights, had been arrested once, and had finally dropped her habit of faux-squealing "Ms. *Morgan!*" every time she saw Viola, a change that caused Viola some concern. After graduation, though, when the underclassmen still had a week of school left, Mercedes eyed Viola with the sort of calm stare that Viola recognized as the look one peer gives another. "Hey," was all she said, her voice subdued but low in the way people speak who don't need to greet each other at all. "Hey," Viola replied, not bothering to use her teacher voice, a welcoming tone she'd picked up from a television

character back in college. She peered past the furrows of Mercedes' eye makeup to see Mercedes' sharp eyes totally lacking in irony. "Pound it," Mercedes monotoned, extending her fist. Viola brought her knuckles against Mercedes'; they came away bruised. Mercedes spun back towards her; "No, Ms. Morgan. You gotta do it hard; do it hard and it won't hurt you. You know? Here." She reached out again; Viola made a fist and met Mercedes' hand with frustration; her knuckles bounced back in a small arc. It was immensely satisfying. Viola smiled at Mercedes and walked away.



There was the time Hugh bench-pressed his buddy Jay Riggle in her room during lunch. She shouldn't have allowed it, but she really wanted to see if he could do it. A small crowd gathered as Hugh threw himself on the floor beside her desk. "Come on, come on," he said rapidly. Riggle lowered himself across Hugh's chest, face up into his audience. He held his arms at his sides but they kept falling in Hugh's face as he tilted and swayed. "Grab onto his butt," someone suggested. "He *is*," grunted Riggle, his face red. Hugh growled, and Riggle's head came up, then his waist, his feet flailing. Down, then up again. Riggle fell to the side; Hugh leapt up. "Yeuh," he bellowed. He was so powerful standing there that she was grateful a desk separated them. That much physical strength in someone so exuberant with youth troubled her. Two days later it was Valentine's Day, and he had a balloon delivered to her during his class, signed "from the stud in the back row." The class had enjoyed watching her change colors. She worked so hard not to look up into his knowing eyes that she shielded herself from what, now that it was too late, only the convex mirror of hindsight let her see: that, somehow, she had let him get too far with her.



*It's lunch but I said I could do it so I'm lying on the floor beside her desk and can see her feet in sandals. Riggle stands at my shoulder and leans back until I've got him across my chest, one hand under his knees, one between his shoulders. He bucks and puts his arms over his head; he's not heavy but he's like a fish and I can't find a grip until a cheerleader says, Grab his butt, so I do and then we're locked in because I can't have grabbed on like this for nothing. He lies very still and I release him towards me, look past him at the tiles of the ceiling where one tile's dislodged because we hit the ceiling with a ball last week when she was out copying something, and then he's down so I push him back away from me until my arms are straight and Rankin grabs his arms and*

*pulls him up and I've bench-pressed Riggle and Ms Morgan's feet walk away from me so I pick up Christina and curl her a couple times, which is easier and what I should have done in the first place, my hand hot red from Riggle's ass.*



Even Riggle, his closest friend, hadn't understood some basic shit about Hef, and this was the basic shit that no one else understood. When basketball season was over, Hef went back to working out alone because he got funny looks for running three miles with his hands over his head, for doing handstand pushups in the weight room. He had no problem doing shit that other people didn't get, but he never got to the self-assurance that allowed him to ignore their reactions. He could dismiss their opinions, but he couldn't tune them out in such a small town, so he was constantly fighting against the wave of voices that chorused, *Hef swims across Cobscot before people get there just so he can show off by swimming back*, even though he was just trying to beat the boat traffic, or that *Hef ripped open his shirt when he beat Jimmy Murphy arm-wrestling*, which was true, but he hadn't realized it would become one of the legends about him.



It was two in the morning. "What do you want from me, Hugh?"

"What do you want from *me*, Ms. Morgan?"



One day during lunch Hugh had stayed behind to ask for an apple out of the bag she kept, without irony, always at her side. He leaned with his hands on her desk as she crunched wetly, and she mumbled around the mouthful, "Sure. Give me a quarter."

"What?" he'd laughed. She held her glare. "Don't try so hard to be angry with me, Ms. Morgan."

She sighed and handed him an apple, one with a bruise.

"You take a lot," she told him. "You should consider giving back every now and then."

He was still looming over her, and she knew what she had just given him the chance to ask, and then he asked it. "Give? What do you want from me, Ms. Morgan?" He had one hand on either side of hers; his head above her finished the illusion that he had her totally enclosed. And she knew from his eyes that were forcing themselves to remain on hers what he was giving her the

chance to say, that they were feeling each other out, testing each other's ability to turn their back on the norm, on everything they knew about themselves and what separated them. She looked at him for a long time.

"I want," she said after she'd scanned the perimeters of his eyes, "for you to do the work in my *class*." She flicked down the last word as if it was the only thing she'd ever thought, but she knew that he'd seen her falter, that he was as terrified as she was in that moment when no one could hear them and they could have said anything to each other.



"...What do you mean?"

"Why am I here?"

"What, do you think I made you come here?"

"Didn't you?"

"How?"

"How should I know what's in your head, woman?"

She had to beat him to it." Do you remember—"

"—the time in the car?"

"...Do I have to answer you?"



It was the night before graduation when Hugh ruined her reputation. It had been her own fault; it was a Rhode Island June night, summer flowers in full bloom far beyond the easy cheer of dogwoods; the air was heavy and lightning unfolded on the sky every few minutes. After the scholarship ceremony, she had walked to the parking lot behind the school. "Sign my yearbook," Hugh said from his car, sitting in the driver's seat, so she stood in the dim orange light of the parking lot as the rest of the cars pulled away, until they were the only ones left. She balanced the hard cover on the hood of his car, but it made her lean at an angle that made her feel like she was posing for an inappropriate magazine, so she tried to perch on the hood, but then the mosquitoes started fluttering up her skirt.

"Screw this," she said. "Let me in." She climbed into the passenger's seat.

"It's a mess," he said. "Sorry."

She kept writing, her knees pulled up to avoid the carpet of bottles on the floor. *Best of luck? Have a good summer?* She posed everything as a question, closing off the questions game in a small attempt to win back control, her written record to him. She handed over the yearbook.

"Wait," he said, "I'm going to read it now." She sighed but waited, leaning on the door handle as far from him as she could be in the small car. "Come on, Ms. Morgan," he said when he finished. "Sign it again."

"What? Why?" she said, though she knew.

"Here," he said, flipping through to a page full of advertisements. "No one looks at these. Just write really small."

"No. No, no, no. What do you think I would say?"

"What do you want to say?"

"No. I'm not playing that game with you right now, Hugh. Tomorrow I'm done being your teacher, and I can't do this any more." *This*, she thought instantly. There's a *this*.

He turned to her and she was suddenly conscious of their closeness, the equivocation of his eyes far off in the dark but lit in flecks of streetlight. He leaned his head on the headrest, still eyeing her. *I'm looking into your soul*, she thought, but couldn't break his stare. But then there were headlights, and Hugh leaned away, and they sat a decent distance from each other as Christina Zugelder drove her Focus past at a speed calculated for spying. Even in the relative dark, Viola could see the flash of Christina's teeth as she took in the scene.

"I must be losing my mind," she said once the Focus was gone.

"I think you are," said Hugh, though nicely.

"I'm going home. Drive me to my car, okay?"

His hand came out and rested on her knee below the hem of her skirt. *Pull away*, she thought, expecting to panic, but all that happened was that she felt her teeth dig into her lip, another thing she hadn't done in a long time. *How does he know?* she thought, as his hand routed its way along her leg as if everything she wanted was mapped on her skin. He put another hand on the base of her skull and tugged at her hair, something Max had done only once despite the involuntary sound of pleasure she'd given, a rare moment of abandon that had led nowhere. *Then this is how it happens*, she thought, seeing Max's confused face as he tried to read her moods, and an inarticulate noise came out of her mouth as Hugh pulled at her harder, pushed closer. He leaned in, "You don't want to get in trouble. I'd really like to see you later." He dug his face into her shoulder and groaned, for long enough for them both to realize that she wasn't leaving yet, connected to him there in the dark. "I have to go home first. Can I call you—"

"No," she said.

"What's your cell phone?"

And she gave it to him, with each number feeling a little more of her resolve let go. By the time the seventh digit came out, she knew she had taken a step she couldn't take back.

When he swung his car into her driveway she had already showered, and when he kissed her for the first time, it was not polite or inquisitive but sharp and purposeful, their mouths bouncing off each other as his hands rappelled down the dark damp of her hair. He wrapped one hand around her neck, and she stared up at him silently; by the time he got to her collarbones she would have done anything for him. "I can't be there for you like your husband, you know," he said. She didn't realize until he was dead that he'd meant it, that it was something he'd planned to say, and that he'd known more than she did what it meant. She was so helpless by that point that it meant nothing.



*She appears in the doorway, her hair not wet any more but cold, her hands cold; she is another shadow. She hands me a cup of tea that tastes like animal breath but it feels good on my throat, which I've coughed dry the last few nights. She says, Come on, Hugh, I don't want someone else's cold, and gives me a meaning look. I never know when she's serious, her at the other end of the couch so I move slowly like I'm coming up on a cat that doesn't know I'm there, one foot up then the other so I grip her around the knees with my legs and her feet on my chest, squeezing the callus of her heel between my thumb and palm, and around the green veins of her ankle, up her jeans the dark slope of her calf muscle. Ran twelve miles today, she says, knowing what I'm feeling but it's not a boast. My hand running the same stretch of small ankle mysteries and cracklings to the triangle of calf, again and again like I'm polishing it to the shine it has, like brass, like a weapon. Her hand on my knee right where the muscle comes together, all those nerves and That feels good, I tell her. The surprise in her eyes, and I say, Are you looking at me Ms Morgan, because it's so dark she could be looking behind me, until finally I have to turn and look, and when I turn back she's let go. I take my shoes off and drink some more water then go piss outside where I just came in. I'm so nervous all I can focus on is the front porch light on the plants I'm pissing on, the way everything goes streaked with wet and shine. And I'm back inside and she's moving towards me and I don't know if I can breathe. It's a long way up her long body to her mouth, so I'm stranded until she sits up, grabs my hands, and suddenly we're getting somewhere I can recognize.*

*Kiss me, I say, but she doesn't move so I move in anyway and my mouth's on hers and it's polite and time has stopped into this simple moment of our mouths that happen to be touching, but then I put my hand to her face and hers goes behind my head and she makes the smallest noise, like a cat as it jumps a long*

*distance, and we're everywhere and I wish we'd stood up first because our bodies are hunched away from each other with our legs in the way and later I wished I'd pulled her on top of me but we just sat there, and she stopped and looked at me, her face so different, and I reached up and down her arms a hundred times, touching what for so long I'd been able to see but not touch.*



With Max in Calgary, she had no guilt to worry about until the next morning when, helping her seniors put on their green mortarboards and walking the line with a trash can for gum, she saw the scandalized faces of girls who had once smiled at her. A cold stab stuck in her ribs. "People are talking," she hissed at Hugh. "I know," he said baldly. "I just tell them, no." After graduation, as she made her way through the chaos to offer hugs and congratulations, in their emotion most kids seemed to have forgotten or were willing to forget, and she posed for photos with the ones who knew her well. An uncle said to Eric Leary, whom she'd had for four years, "Let's get a picture with your girlfriend," and she and Eric giggled at each other as they leaned together into the camera frame. "I think he likes you," he said, and they squeezed shoulders and moved through the crowd. She and Hugh kept their distance, moving parallel through the chaos; their eyes met once and then J.P. Feliciano, Mikey's big brother who had joined the Marines after graduating, picked her up in a bear hug, and she became distracted disengaging herself from his arms. He panted beer on her, and said "Are you staying at this job? Because I could be stationed anywhere, where do you want to go? I don't want to, you know, step on your husband's game or anything, but I can take you anywhere," and she looked around frantically but only saw Eric, who was not built to take on a Marine, so she said, "Thanks, but I've got to make the rounds here. I'll catch you later, okay?" and slapped his arm, thick as a horse's neck. She wondered, as she smiled at him desperately, why she felt the need to be oblique and polite even with a guy who'd ground his crotch on her hip when hugging her hello.

In the heat of the crowd she had the sense of being extraneous; she was not particularly good, she saw; she was just inexperienced with temptation. She recalled a girl in her dorm whom she'd ridiculed for drunkenly yelling, "No sex!" and driving a boy from her room, but now she saw how much willpower such an act might entail. Standing at the graduation ceremony, she'd been awash with terror at everything she knew she could lose: her job, her husband, her reputation and therefore her ability to find a new job, a new husband—all of this flew through her mind as she

listened half-heartedly to graduation speeches. She protected herself, told her principal what had been seen. She was forgiven but watched. Christina Zugelder continued to pronounce maledictions about her; Viola ignored them while she fantasized about cracking Christina in the jaw.



Once summer started, she went back to the bookshop downtown, where her co-workers were only a few of the many who had heard the rumors. They each had their own tales of heartache, which made them not sympathetic but rather wild for gossip with which they could soothe their own tragedies.

Zach, whose last boyfriend had stolen his car and left it on Staten Island, told her, "Here's what you do." She listened while blowing the dust off copies of a set of Jane Austens. He took her hand and gazed into her eyes. "Christina, sweetie. I'm so sorry to hear that you're losing your mind."

She laughed. "How about next time she walks by, I say, 'I don't know what I'm going to do when the baby comes!'" For the rest of that day they made up possible solutions to the problem of Christina, who continued to walk past the bookshop daily. Viola timed her breaks just after Christina's appearances. She armed herself with a quick stride and a bland smile half-hidden by her sunglasses, but never came face to face with the girl. Her fantasies surrounding Christina entering the shop varied between beaming her with a volume of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ducking behind a counter and staying there, and asking with deliberate nonchalance, "Have you seen Hugh lately?" but she was unsure, if it came down to it, which she would do, and knew she would probably smile politely at whatever Christina said until the girl left, then stomp around for the rest of the day in stunted anger.



During Hell Week, he got a total of an hour-and-a-half of sleep, most of it during a midweek nap. The break was not a gift; when he started to move again, he discovered that all the places on his skin that were rubbed raw had clung to his motionlessness as their chance to heal. Moving waist-deep into salt water with sores cracking all the way up his thighs, he couldn't be bothered to check his tears, and he heard sobs around him; he realized that every pain he had ever felt to this point was just discomfort; pain was the thing with long-term intentions that he had to keep at bay; he had to keep going, stay in the water. Lying arm-in-arm together during surf torture, guys on either side of him snapped hip flexors

from shivering so hard. The water temperature made being supine no replacement for sleep, but his body found ways to make up for it. Running down the beach with a boat driving a temporary bald spot onto the top of his head, he woke up to realize that he was two miles further along than the last time he'd noticed. It was bliss, a beautiful discovery, and he only wanted it to happen again.



Believing the lie of her innocence, she played herself above rumors that couldn't possibly be true. "I'm the only one?" he asked, and she laughed at the idea of anyone else. One exchanged look between the two of them in public kept her from eating for three days; he set every function she had in flux. She was even too excited to pee, despite living on nothing but cups of Earl Grey.

Viola realized when he left that first night that he wasn't going to give up other girls. At the time she was oddly immune to this thought, knew that he would spend the weekend partying off graduation with the short-skirted Miracle-bra set of his class and call her sometime, but her only concern was *when, when, when*. She carried her phone everywhere, and when he called she giggled at her reflection in the mirror. He texted her *Hey babe. U drove by me with ur hair blowing in the wind. Damn u looked good!* and she remembered Max's face the first and only time she'd called him *babe*, how he said he wasn't a babe kind of guy. What kind of guy couldn't pass off a simple term of endearment, she wondered? *Hey babe*, she whispered to Huncamunca, over and over, lifting her ear and feeling the fur blow back against the blunt word. *Hey babe.*



After the third time Hugh came over, Viola spent a week fighting nausea. She had lost four pounds because every time she looked at food, she thought of lying with Hugh in her bed, the joking curve of his spine, the enormity of his biceps, and then remembered that this feeling would be her most private fear, the darkest memory she possessed, and she was unable to get anything down. On that third visit, she told him she had to have some standards, she wasn't going to sleep with him, and he said, "I've heard that before." Despite her revulsion, she found herself perched on the edge of her bathroom counter with her legs around Hugh and his hips rocking into her, making her gasp. She realized that every *no* she had ever given in her life had only been a request to be convinced. It was just luck of the draw that everyone until Hugh had taken her seriously. "You like it slow, don't you?" he said. "You like making love."

"Yeah," she told him, feeling defensive.

"You never just want it hard?" he said. "You never just want to be fucked?"

"Sometimes."

"Want to go to the bedroom?" he asked, and she nodded.

"Let's do it," he rumbled, and in the dark the clean lines of his body were easier to understand, and he climbed onto the bed, onto her, but that was when it became apparent that he had nothing left to offer her; he said, "This has never happened with anyone else."

"Is it me?" she said, because she'd heard a woman on TV ask that and didn't know what else to say. Max was, if predictable, unflaggingly enthusiastic, and the vacancy Hugh left was something of a shock, the way one minute he was filling up her bed with the white sails of his shoulders and the next he was simply the ricochet of her screen door as he backed out her driveway. Later they laid sideways on the bed, their feet touching, and he told her about how as a freshman he'd been in love with a girl on the track team, and then got dressed and kissed her cheek like the last two times; she saw that it was a ritual they had and felt a cramp of loneliness at what came next. She walked him to the door. "Kiss me goodbye," she said because she knew it would be the last time, and he looked at her strangely but did, and when she opened her eyes he was watching her. "I have to go," he told her with exasperation, and she laughed, "So go."

He paused with a hand on the door and said, "You should think about dating Coach Chase. He's a good guy."

She saw that he was serious. "I don't think he's interested," she got out, and he said, his black eyes hiding nothing with his childish charm, "Just ask him out; he'll say yes, okay?"

She smiled her charming newlywed smile, said, "I'll think about it," and slammed the door behind him. Then she slammed every door in the house on her way to bed.



The rest of that summer she told herself daily that she was buying back her reputation with loneliness. She woke in the night like a teenage boy from a hot dream with his name coming from her mouth, terrified, on rare nights when Max was home, that he would hear her. She couldn't tell if Hugh had been on his way to giving her up, but she knew that the isolation after it all felt like punishment. After Hugh left the last time, she lay with a bucket between her and Huncamunca all night long—*I'll think about it*, she'd said, and she did, fighting vomit but wishing it would come and empty her out— and days later when he hadn't called or texted she called him and said, "I like you. I'm not going to like

you if we keep doing this. So we can't have sex anymore," and he laughed and said, "Okay."

"I want to still see you," she said, and he laughed again and said, "Okay."

"Okay, Hugh," she said.

"Okay, Ms. Morgan." She wanted him to linger, to show some regret, but he was gone before she even remembered to swear him to secrecy. She waited an hour and then sat on the couch and cried for the first time since her mother had died. She hoped for globs of snot, sobs that would shake her organs, but the storm only lasted a minute and then she was refrozen. She lay awake remembering the hurricane of his presence in the house, the way he'd pinballed off the surfaces of her kitchen, peered into her refrigerator, put his feet up on her legs on the couch and rubbed one of her own feet with a professionalism that poured smoke up to her waist.

Later that week Max left the computer for a minute, and sitting down to check their bank balance, she found his email open. The most recent message was from a girl from college; its subject line read "A thank you and an invitation to return," which told her two things. She refused to be a prying wife and so did not open the message. The next day he left for Houston. It was the first time he hadn't left her an itinerary.



Soon after Hell Week ended, he broke his tailbone—he wasn't even sure how, but suddenly it was broken and added to the long list of discomfort was the previously inviolate realm of taking a shit— but he was lucky because since he'd made it through to what was, unbelievably, the hard part, he never got a chance to sit down, so he didn't let it bother him. Pain, which had once told him that something was wrong, became a dull part of life; *still here*, it said. Nothing much about his body bothered him any more; he had what amounted to third-degree burns on his thighs from sand's constant scouring of his skin; he'd get a cut and his elbow would swell to twice its normal size; he did nothing about it because there was nothing to do. The trenches inside his thighs grew until they were a quarter the size of his hands; infection set in and the already tender skin on his legs had to be sliced open with a scalpel almost up to his dick, and then the pus was squeezed out, which was, if painful, vaguely satisfying, until he discovered that in order to keep it from happening again he had to stuff gauze into the hole that the pus left, and repeat the process every day until he healed. It was bad enough on his legs, but Kelly got it in his ass crack, which made Hef's broken tailbone pale in

comparison. Hef thought he was doing pretty well with the pain; the only thing that gave him pause was the discovery that when all his raw skin began to recover and grow back, his scrotum started to heal to his inner thigh. It had to be ripped from his leg so it could grow right, and hurt as much as he'd expected. That was the moment when he knew he would make it; his body was so battered that he'd stopped thinking about his nutsack, and he hadn't quit yet. Alive, mobile: sure, but he hadn't quit; that was the key.



School began again, and she dispelled rumors that boys could get lucky with Ms. Morgan by giving daily vocabulary quizzes and refusing to laugh, and the year passed and Max kept traveling, and then the next October they got word that Hugh was dead, and she didn't have to try not to laugh anymore, because suddenly Hugh was not going to come back for her. She came home from school that day and let Max make her pancakes, his traditional off-the-road meal, which she hated. She ate all of them. "Hard day?" Max asked. "I don't want to talk about it," she said. She waited until Max was asleep that night to think, to remember the long planes and knuckles of Hugh's fingers, the way he told her she looked better without clothes on, the time he picked her up off the couch and carried her into the bedroom, but slowly, meandering around to show off his strength, her lightness in his arms ("You weigh less than Christina Zugelder," he laughed, and she put her fingers over his mouth), and the openness with which he peed in front of her while she stood next to him looking out the window at the stars, arguing over the identity of planets.



"Was that Jupiter or Venus?"  
"Didn't you ever find out?"  
"Don't you know I would have fought with you about anything, just because you reacted?"  
"Why do you want to hurt me like this, Hugh?"  
"Why does this hurt?"  
"What future do I have with a dead boy?"  
"What future did you have with me before, Viola?"



Even when his friends were wild for details in the height of the rumors Christina started, Hugh never seemed to tell them

anything, which she'd thought was heroic. His phone rang when he was with her and he'd tell them he was busy, out of town, on his way to work. "I've got stuff to do," he said, and when he hung up she said, "'Whatcha doin?'— 'Ms. Morgan,'" and they stared at each other guiltily, and then he'd tickle her until she screamed with laughter, her hands pinned over her head. "Hah. What are you going to do now?" he goaded her, looming over her until he took up her vision; he was her setting; if she had been asked where she was, she would have said, *Hugh*. She loved it.



*Kelly steps out of the water with a hard line of spit dropping from his mouth and sand down his chin. His eyes are cold, the rest of him vibrating. Christ Hef, it's cold, he says but then he's back and gives me his old look and says, How 'bout a swim and we're back out of the unreal time. Kelly pulls me back even when I want to be in that oblivion. I feel like an animal confined to my own cycles of sleep and defecation. One time, four-wheeling in the woods, I found a beagle puppy, skin tight across its ribs as guitar strings, and my father made me call the owner who came with his six friends in his Avalanche and picked the dog up by the scruff straight out of my arms, threw him in the back with five others. I was so mad I couldn't find anything to say and that's how I felt, like that beagle.*



The summer of alienation she listened to her old poets, primarily Dylan. She sang him in her sleep, the line about being treated liked a farm animal vivid in her mind. That was how she felt, dropkicked out of his life, beaten like something mute and unable to understand its beating. She tried to bear it with the dignity of such an animal, one that wouldn't cry out. After she called him he began turning his back on her in town. She became accustomed to the view of his wide back, his straight-on gaze that refused to take her in. She could hardly breathe.



"Mmm. Did it hurt at all when I said we should stop?"  
"Do you want to have hurt me, or do you want the truth?"  
"Ouch. You never missed me, then?"  
"Are you still married?"  
"What's your definition of marriage?"  
"That bad?"

"How's your love life, sweetie?"

"Do you think you can keep from getting jealous?"

"Hugh Wellbeloved is getting laid from beyond the grave? Typical."

"Did you expect me to wait for you?"

"Hugh. What did you think was going to happen between us?"

"...I didn't know. You just made me feel good. I moved on pretty fast."

"You weren't worth it, were you? Wait. That was a statement. Are you hanging up on me?"

"I used to find your long hair in my clothes for days. I had to hide it."

"Statement. Hugh. Look. Don't go, okay?"

"This is it, Ms. Morgan. Don't miss me too much, okay?"

"No. Hugh. Not again." She heard her voice grating the air. But he was gone. Gone— how many times had she said that word to herself, anyway? This time it was true; she said it out loud to see if this time she could believe it. She waited, testing her nausea, the tensed muscles at the base of her skull where he'd pulled at her hair; her fingers dug into the mattress, but there was nothing to grasp. She didn't have to wait to see what happened, because nothing more would happen. It wasn't as grim as she'd expected.



Viola trolled the halls the next day expectantly. The students were appallingly young; the obsession Hugh had with being the only one was poorly placed, she thought for the hundredth time. It had been him alone, his cockiness, his brief pursuit of her. Hey, Babe. She mouthed it to herself, but it had lost its appeal. Between lunches she came down the front stairs to see Mercedes waving one finger in the air beside her shoulder like a talk-show guest while Mike Feliciano's girlfriend advanced on her, screaming something incomprehensible. "Lay off, you crazy bitch," Mercedes said laconically, but Mikey appeared from behind the wall divider and before she could think, Viola had sped up the hall and placed herself between the three of them. "Go to the office," she told Mike shortly, and he gave her a bashful smile. "We were just talking. Good kids," he said, extending an arm around each girl. She took a step toward him. The innocent boy routine. It made her sick. Hugh was dead and it made her sick. She stabbed out an index finger and ground it into the saucer of his sternum. "Like hell you were. Go. To. The. Office. Mikey." With each word she gave his chest a prod. She had never touched a student, but suddenly

wanted to bore a hole through his chest, was sure she could do it. He flinched and peeled away. She watched him down the stairs, then rounded on the girls. She ignored the girlfriend and went straight to Mercedes. "Haven't you had enough of this?" Mercedes just looked at her. "You can pretend that she started it, but aren't you tired of acting innocent all the time when you know the truth? When are you going to stop living a life you have to defend?" It felt bizarre to yell, but she couldn't stop.

Mercedes narrowed her eyes. "You're telling me about acting innocent when half the town saw you in the backseat of Hugh Wellbeloved's car two summers ago?"

Viola choked for a minute. No student had ever said it outright. And then, incredibly, she was laughing. It was a harsh sound, but it was clearly laughter. "Wow. I never heard about us in the backseat. I was definitely never in the back of that boy's car, Mercedes."

"He had some good tricks in his bag, though, huh?" Mercedes eyed her carefully.

"You can go," Viola snapped at the girlfriend, who huffed towards the office after Mike. "We're not talking about this, Mercedes."

"Sooo. Ms. Morgan and Hef—"

"We're not talking about this, Mercedes."

"Okay. It's cool, it's cool."

"You should be at lunch," Viola told her.

"No lunch money today," but Viola dug into a pocket, handed her a couple bills. She roped an arm around Mercedes' neck, and started them off toward the cafeteria together, their heads close, their feet stomping the floor in rhythm. It was a strange solidarity, but made Viola feel connected, pleasantly dangerous.

"You miss him, right?" Mercedes said at the caf door, with an arm still around Viola's waist.

She spoke slowly. "Well. If I did, I wouldn't be telling anyone, would I."

"You could tell me." Mercedes leaned back, scrutinized her face. "Nah. You won't, because you're a teacher, and you're Ms. Morgan, and you follow the rules. Usually. And you're married anyway, right? But you could tell me."

Viola smiled, rubbed her hands over her face. "Mmmm. Thanks, babe. You'd better go eat."

"Thanks for the cash. Peace out, girl scout." The girl flung herself into the cafeteria, where everyone had already made their selections, leaving Mercedes alone to walk the line at the front of the room with an audience. Viola couldn't imagine stepping onto the stage that was a high school cafeteria, facing the eyes of peers

who would say their piece about you no matter what the truth was. Mercedes eyed the remaining food as if it were all likely to offend her, but grabbed an apple, a chocolate milk, a burrito. When she passed back by the door she threw Viola a wink, cheesy, over-the-top, 1950's porn style, and stuffed half the burrito in her mouth.

"Actually. Actually, Mercedes," Viola said, though the girl was just an anonymous kid in the crowd by now, as they all were, and as Hugh, she saw in his last leaving, should have been, "I'm getting a divorce." She strode away, the words out, and because she'd said them aloud, true, binding her to something unknown and direct, her feet pounding the floor in rhythm, whispering *statement, statement, statement*.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Sheila McKown's** "Statement and Game" is partially based on information she got out of a friend who underwent the challenge of becoming a Navy SEAL, and partly inspired by an item in last year's newspaper. She writes, "When I'm not attempting to extract information from frighteningly large men, I work on a small sheep farm that I've developed since earning my Master's in English five years ago. I also play the cello and saxophone, though not for the sheep." You can reach her at [sheilamckown@gmail.com](mailto:sheilamckown@gmail.com).