

Field Studies
Roxbury, 1983

After my father began dating seriously it finally became clear— we could not continue living in a house divided. His new girlfriend questioned our bohemian arrangement, wondering what purpose it served to live under the same roof as an ex wife and her boyfriend, and he responded, sensibly, by moving out. The collective housing agreement was dissolved and we all went our separate ways. It was now the eighties, after all; the era of communal living and porous borders had come to an end.

My mother and Ty bought one half of a cream clapboard house that had been divided in two by a solid brick wall during the Great Depression when the neighborhood had been crowded with kosher delis and synagogues, and the old breweries had yet to be converted into factories, before the Great Southern Migration filled the factories and houses became apartment houses, synagogues became theaters and delis became bodegas.

The house stood on Beethoven Street, a block down from Mozart Street, two prodigies running parallel to one another, never crossing paths, along the border of Jamaica Plain and Roxbury. In the evenings the elevated train cast a latticework of shadow that tracked it's way across the block, in conjunction with the sun, until the darkness overwhelmed it, inspiring the streetlights to shine away the night. I could hear the train's rumble from my corner room. I could feel it in some interior chamber that resonant with anxiety. Outside my window rusting mahogany Caddies, their hydraulics shot from potholed years, grazed the sidewalk with their silver bumpers and waited patiently for their masters.

This new house was a cause for optimism. My mother had plans, a set of secondhand tools, and the belief in the potential of empty space. We moved in August and set to work on the house each morning, breaking for the mid-day and going back to work in the afternoon, stopping for dinner only when the Call to Prayer sounded and the neighborhood mothers swung open their paint-peeled doors and hollered *home* at the crowds of shirtless boys. I had my doubts about the new neighborhood where I was not only an unknown, but a *white* unknown. I feared the testing, which was inevitable in

any new neighborhood, but I was swayed by my mother's dreams of renewal, by her desire to create a home for the three of us. Like most children, my own dreams were too fantastic for my own labor to realize, so I was led to invest in the dreams of the ones who cared for me.

"How many layers are under here?" I asked.

We stood scraping the walls of what might one day become the dining room. The air was saturated with granules of paper, paint and plaster. They played in the currents of air like tiny, living things.

"I have no idea, but I bet we're close." She wiped her brow with a forearm, freckled with moles, and paused to retie the bright paisley bandana that barely contained her curls.

She was upbeat and enthusiastic, energized by her vision of what the house might become. Each room was cluttered with chunks of fallen plaster, the windows browned by generations of nicotine. A history of neglect had to be cleared away before we could begin to rebuild, to reshape the space as she imagined it. We worked in wore

"Close to what? There's probably fossils underneath it all." I joked without expectation, returning to my work only when the laugh didn't materialize, scraping maniacally for two-minute spells, then pausing, breathless, to let the dust settle.

A car horn called out from the street. A passing sparrow brushed against the windowpane. Swatches of wallpaper and paint peeled away from the plaster and fell to the floor. Fifty years of families lay in piles at our feet. I tried to imagine them: who had painted these walls sky blue, bone white, or burgundy with gold trim? When I struck the wall with enough force, the paint broke off in dense, sandwiched chunks.

I held one up, "Look, strata!"

"Yeah— it's like strata except each layer is three years as opposed to three hundred thousand." She smiled beneath her dust mask and returned to work.

I wedged the scraper beneath a layer of cream paint, and chipped away, trying to preserve the wallpaper beneath. A troop of pale blue colonial soldiers posed against a bone white field, their muskets trained on invisible Redcoats. Two soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder, while another knelt in the foreground his bayonet at the ready. I cleared a few more inches of cream. The pattern repeated itself.

“Mom! I found some pictures.” I pulled down my dust mask and called across the room.

“Let me come see... give me a sec.” She maneuvered around the ladder to reach me. “Huh. That’s a new wallpaper print... we’re getting down to the wall.” She chipped at the paint with a fingernail, revealing another soldier.

“Hmmm...” she considered the composition. “Very bourgeoisie.”

“Really?” I took a step back.

“Yes, I believe we’ve made quite a discovery. We’ve gone back in time to when white people lived here. Good work. You would make an excellent archeologist.”

“Like Indiana Jones?”

“I don’t think it’s quite that exciting, but sure baby.” She rubbed my back, smiling behind me, thinking of the house she had grown up in of working with her father in his woodshop.

She returned to her post and I paused for a moment, staring at the figures that had lain hidden beneath all those layers of paint for so many years. It seemed like a waste to destroy it. Why not continue to layer and layer forever, to preserve the historical record?

“What kind of people decorate their walls with *war*?” My mother asked of no one in particular. Her thoughts moved in associations that I couldn’t always follow.

I shrugged, drove the steel wedge beneath the soldier’s feet and scraped upwards— peeling him away.

They began arriving in early September, mysterious gifts from an unknown admirer. I noticed them first on my way home from school— dusty garbage bags resting among the crippled shrubbery of our front yard. I assumed that they were filled with trash, the discarded happy meals and six packs of the neighborhood. Someone had mistaken our ragged yard for a vacant lot. But one unexpectedly hot, autumn afternoon, I caught the smell, distinct, familiar and rank. I realized in that moment that these loosely wrapped gifts were both intimate and personal. They were filled with urine and feces, filled by our neighbors across the wall, and hurled into our yard as a potent commentary on the collage of our faces— our whiteness called into bright contrast by Ty’s blackness, our presence on the block noted as something more

threatening than just a white family. Our presence blurred the boundaries of here and there, and of then and now. The movement of one group from neighborhood to neighborhood, like a game of Othello, does not acknowledge the shades in between. Black surrounds and takes white, or white surrounds and takes black. To acknowledge that there might be other moves, or pieces of different colors, calls into question the game itself. And when you call the game into question people get *crazy*.

Ty and my mother held, what they referred to as an “emergency pow-wow” after I reported my findings.

“They must not have indoor plumbing,” my mother ventured.

“No, I know that for a fact. They definitely are without proper plumbing. No doubt about it.” Ty removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Freckle clusters filled the space beneath his eyes— bright flecks against his orange-brown, *Creole* complexion.

“Isn’t that against a housing regulation?”

“Must be. But I’m not a housing inspector. All I know is what I have observed.” He massaged the bridge of his nose. “These damn sinuses...”

“Great, so have you *observed* the bags of shit in the yard? Alex has. It’s crazy. They are free to have whatever opinion about us. I don’t want to tell people what to believe in their neighborhood, but bags of shit in the yard? What is that about?”

Ty adjusted his beret. “It’s about the place where the practical meets the irrational, baby.”

“That’s wonderful... very esoteric. Now, what are you going to do about it?”

“I’ll go speak with them, of course.” He returned his glasses to their proper position, knelt down and began to lace up his boots.

Ty moved with a studied, self-conscious choreography of cool; each movement seemed to have been practiced for an imaginary audience. His body language projected the idea that he could “take care of business”. He straightened up, and strolled down the hallway. The front door swung shut behind him, and we heard him knocking, greeting and then entering the other half of the house; a muffled discussion ensued.

Ten minutes later the front door swung open, and he reappeared.

“So, what did they say?” My mother asked.

She had spent the past ten minutes wiping down the banister with a wet rag, while I tried to interpret the sounds coming from the other side to no avail.

“They won’t be throwing their bags in the anymore.” Ty leaned over to stretch his legs, exhaled deeply, and started to unlace his boots; his hip was bothering him again.

“Yeah, but what did they say?” Her presence filled the hallway, projecting a mixture of anxiety and anger. She was glad that this was his job, but she was afraid of what that might signify.

“I told you baby, they won’t do it anymore.” He sighed deeply, implying that it had been heavy. She wasn’t buying it, but she also wasn’t going to press the issue in front of me. Besides, Ty had a tendency to dramatize the banal and downplay the dramatic.

“Good. I’m sorry they have to shit in bags, but throwing bags of shit is not an appropriate expression of anything... legitimate or otherwise. It’s not like we’re buying up the block.”

“No honey, it ain’t. It sure ain’t. And we definitely do not have the money to buy up much of anything.” He jumpstarted his bad leg with a swing, hip grinding against the artificial socket like a rusted ball bearing.

I don’t know why I hadn’t suspected the family on the other side of the house. I guess that I had given them very little thought. Other children played beyond the wall, but I had never seen them. After Ty’s visit I realized how easily sound traveled through the plaster. Now the thumps and moans became arguments, the music became a party. I began to imagine the outline of their lives. They had a boy about my own my own age, a boy something like me, a boy who read too much and was afraid of the street, a boy who lived on the other side of the wall.

I wondered why he was afraid to play on the corner, if he noticed the way the kids moved; the way they surprised themselves with the depth of their anger; the way they hit things harder than they meant to. Maybe their bathroom was next to ours, and when I was brushing my teeth he was brushing his teeth too, and when I looked at my body in the mirror and wondered when I would stop being so weak he was crying *how will I ever be strong enough?* at his reflection. Maybe our rooms were just across the wall, and we dreamt the same dreams, of teenagers with knives and Abominable Snowmen that stalked us through snowbanked city blocks. Maybe were bound to be fast friends, to comb through discarded lottery tickets in vacant lots together, hitting each other

when we were full of love for one another or full of anger for our parents, for other children, for the brick wall that someone built between us long before our parents were born.

I didn't want to go next door and find him, to pass through the wall to the other side. Instead I lay on the hardwood floor leafing through pages of the *Field Guide for Northern American Birds*, comparing the barn owls wingspan to the seagull's, studying the characteristics of finches and marking the ones I'd seen crowded into hedges, chattering away like hyperactive children.

I studied the habitat range of the kestrel, mouthing the names of each state that fell within the grey shadow cast on a blue map. I tried to record the markings that distinguished the peregrine falcon from the red-tailed hawk; I was working to memorize everything, preparing for something that was on its way to test me, something that hadn't yet come into focus on the horizon, but would surely appear one day.

My mother's footsteps approached; the theme music for All Things Considered trailed behind her. She walked into the room, stepped over my sprawled body, and tugged open the window. Children called to one another. Le Chic poured from a passing van. The block was alive with the last bursts of daylight energy.

"Al... when are you gonna go outside?" She stood over me, adjusting the strap on her overalls.

"When I feel like it and I don't really feel like it right now." I pulled a *Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians* from the bottom of my loose stack of books.

"What's wrong with you?" She asked, genuinely perplexed by my fears, by my stubborn refusal to engage the world.

"I don't know any of theses kids. How am I supposed to go play?"

"What... do you need an invitation? You're a kid. Go do what kids do. It's not a dinner party out there. Introduce yourself and ask if you can play?" As a child she had been isolated by geographic circumstance, playing alone in a pine forest. My fear frustrated her.

"Alright, alright. I'll go outside." I picked up my Greek Fisherman's cap, pulled it down over my matted curls and stomped my way down the stairs.

A group of seven or eight kids were playing tag down on the corner. Three boys huddled around the hood of an old Cutlass Supreme, home base, trying to fix the game's perimeter— arguing about how far was too far.

“Hey, I can get in the game?” I yelled out as I crossed the street, suddenly immersed in *it*, a character on the set of the sunlit block I had been trying to avoid.

“Yeah, yeah. He's *it*. Reesie's *it*.” A tall, light-skinned boy responded, pointing out a chubby kid who was grimacing at his reflection in the shaded car window. He pulled at a stained yellow polo self-consciously and turned to acknowledge me with a nod. His face registered a mixture of surprise and distaste, as if he had tasted something unexpectedly sour. But he returned to the hood without commentary and dropped his face into folded arms, opening the chant with “one...” as we scattered away from home base, sneakers squeaking, seeking cover.

I ran towards a vacant lot, pausing to calculate whether I was being too clever, whether I would be too well hidden. I didn't want to present a challenge that might outstrip the boy's desire to solve it. I could be easily forgotten, and end up communing with a discarded tire while the game renewed itself again and again.

Reesie mouthed the chant silently, “Three Mississippi, four Mississippi, five Mississippi,” lifting his head warily, searching us out, concealing stolen glances with a forearm. His eyes danced over the block, tracking us as we scattered throughout the street, crouching behind fences and rolling beneath parked cars.

I chose the safest option, lining up behind an electric pole, and watched the boy who was *it* as he watched us. He counted down to the final Mississippi, preparing to round us up easily. I don't know what made him cheat, and I knew that if I wanted acceptance it would be better to lay low and wait to be found, but something rose up in me and I stepped into the street, revealing myself. It wasn't the cheating itself that bothered me, the violation of a rule in a game I had outgrown, I was moved by a desire for things to be done *right*. I wanted things to work as they were supposed to.

I pointed at Reesie, “Yo! He's cheatin! Yo! Why you cheatin! Yo! Stop cheatin!” His face rearranged itself, fixing itself into the practiced grimace, into his version of the mask we all don before we fight, the mask that disguises the things that make us want to hurt another, that hides the terrible secrets about the ones we love and the things they have done to make us hate the world and hate ourselves for being of the

world, which like the luckier children, does not seem to deserve the praise and love that is bestowed upon it.

“Come out! Come out!” I called out to all the hidden boys, and they emerged from behind mailboxes, jumped down from the tops of trucks and pushed over discarded refrigerators, wondering why the show was over. *Who stopped the show?* Their eyes fixed on me.

I started to plead my case, but before I could speak, before I could prepare my opening argument Reesie, the boy who was *it*, who might still be *it*, rushed towards me. I was expecting him to proclaim his innocence, to curse and yell, to pull the *I'm crazy* act, to tense up and twitch as if he was just barely containing a hulk-like transformation. I was expecting the war dance, hoping that the ritual might substitute for the violence that I was not equipped to accommodate.

Instead the chubby boy caught me in the narrow passage between two cars, tearing open the air between us as the cheer went up. “Get that whiteboy!”

He grabbed the sleeve of my shirt with his left hand, as he threw punches across his body with his right. It was an awkward and ineffectual affair. I pulled away from him and became a blur in the humid air, dodging my way across the street. Older kids poured into the street from backyards, called by the cheers, and joined the crowd, egging him on and blocking my escape. Their bodies formed a loose ring that embraced sidewalk and street. I felt like I was swimming in something viscous and sour. I fought, but I couldn't summon my anger—the canals that might lead to that toxic basin had yet to be dredged. And I didn't care that it made me *better* somehow—that it made me *good*. I wanted to hurt when I was called upon to hurt. I would be too vulnerable otherwise.

I made a run for the house, pushing through two smaller kids, their sneakers struck at my shins, but I kicked through their legs, focusing on the door to the house. Reesie followed close behind, his belly bouncing beneath the yellow polo. He yelled at me as he ran, but sounds had become difficult to distinguish. Any unnecessary senses had shut down. I was just a body, looking for a space to hide itself.

Perhaps in another circumstance, Reesie's anger would have begun to fade, but the crowd fueled him, directed him. He was tapped into them, and they, in turn, were tapped into something older than us, than our parents, older than even the city itself.

But how much of the present can be blame upon the past? I sprinted up the steps, the crowd behind me. I put my hand out to pull the storm door open, but their bodies pressed me into the door, forcing my face against the plexiglass pane. Through the pane, I could see the staircase jump and shake. My mother's legs appeared in the in the upper corner of my field of vision. An elbow found my neck. The elevated train announced its passing. I closed my eyes.

My mother swung the door open, her weight and authority displaced the mass of children who had swelled the stoop. I was expecting her to grab me and pull me inside and embrace me, to lock the kids outside where they belonged. The door opened wide and I slipped past her, but when the door slammed shut she was on the other side, planted at the top of the stoop, arms folded— surveying the scene. Reesie ran off, and the older kids retreated towards the corner store where they would tell and retell the story of the fight, pantomiming punches and pitching pennies against a crooked brick wall. Only a few kids remained: what did they see? A big, crazy white lady wearing men's overalls spattered in paint, still unsure of how to proceed. A little, jug-eared boy clung to the fence crying hysterically.

“Muh, Muh, Muh,” he mumbled, stuck on the syllable.

“What's the matter baby?” My mother rushed down the stairs, knelt down and rubbed his arm.

“Muh... my... my”

“Its okay baby. It's okay now baby.” She extended a bubble of warmth around him.

He looked up, snot bubbling from his nose, still unable to release the words. The last stragglers looked on with bold curiosity while I watched through the storm door, just out of focus.

“That was his brother,” a little girl volunteered. She gestured up the street, presumably towards the house where Reesie lived.

“Oh... it's okay baby. He just got mad, and lost his temper. He's gonna be alright.” She brought him in closer, wiping his face with her bandana as he whispered his brother's name to himself, calling him back from wherever he had disappeared to.

I retreated deeper into the hallway, further away from the fading tableau— my mother holding the crying boy as the neighborhood kids looked on transfixed,

wondering how to explain what they have seen, and how to tell the story once they got home. I climbed up the stairs, talking to myself, telling myself that I was weak, that I was stupid, vowing to never go outside again until I changed myself or until the outside changed— whichever came first.

I had been tracked during the previous school year to attend the David Ellis school, a red-bricked was a short walk down School street from our new house. None of the kids from my block went to there, or if they did, I never saw them. I had been placed in the fourth grade “gifted and talented” class. Our recess was scheduled separately from the other classes because we were too soft, too vulnerable— a precious commodity of neurotic children working diligently to keep the school’s test averages afloat.

Our class was more diverse than the rest of the school, meaning that there was a sprinkling of white among the black and brown faces. The community was in the midst of the unnamed phase between white flight and gentrification— unnamed because there is no money to be made from real estate and only white people left are too poor to count. Jay, the other whiteboy in the class, flinched at sudden movements like a dog that had been rescued from an animal shelter. But our whiteness mattered less in the class because we were all outsiders, alienated from other kids, and in some cases from our own families, by the quirky constellations of our interests. We read too much. We cried too often. The neighborhood was naked to us, and we couldn’t stand to look directly at it. The unadulterated vision of humanity, might, like a gorgon, turn us to stone so we read about hobbits, or constructed dream houses from cardboard boxes, or drew pictures of distant planets on every scrap of paper we could possibly pilfer.

We had all been ridiculed, ostracized, jumped on the way home from school, yoked up outside corner stores. We didn’t have the knowledge or wherewithal to fashion filters, so fabricated shells from report cards, standardized test scores and our teacher’s praise. When the other classes called out “punks” in the hallway we could trust that the future might vindicate us, that they would grow up to be poor, broken, and unloveable, that they would stay *here*, right *here* while we might move on to become ourselves.

Released from the gaze of other classes we mounted improvised, pantomime productions of Greek myths on the uneven schoolyard tar. We staged mock swordfights, read chapters of *Encyclopedia Brown* to one another and debated the issues of the day: *Were ghosts real? Were Dominicans the same as Puerto-Ricans? Did babies come from ladies' bootie holes?*

We would never have survived being mixed with the Special Ed class, the emotionally disturbed children, the kids whose clothes smelled like stale menthol cigarettes, who fought over imagined slights, and couldn't wait to be grown because being grown was being powerful and being powerful was being free from fear. If I got up to sharpen my pencil just before lunch, I could look out the window and see them in the schoolyard, chasing and catching, chasing and catching one another—their ragged puffy jackets, torn open at the elbows, revealing the soft white down inside. Like the tiny feathers that trailed behind them as they ran, we had escaped them, and now we were free to be ourselves, to be smart. Because in their world being smart was being white and being white was being a faggot, and those were two things no one wanted to be.

Ms. Harrington thought deeply about the things she said to us. There were gears behind the gears behind her eyes, hung with curtains that hid the gears, so that even when she smiled it might not mean that she was happy. It was only when she leaned down at your desk and focused on you that the curtains were revealed, and you could see into her, which was only fair, since she could see into you. In her classroom every kid wanted to answer the question, and no one came to school with too-tired eyes or chewed up lips. I didn't get called out for being too white, or for being too pretty, or too crazy when I raised my hand and voiced my fear that I thought the world could not last. There were too many things to be afraid of: earthquakes and aliens, killer bees and nuclear weapons. *They could come upon us like a cloud one day. That could happen for real one day. It really could.*

By the time November rolled around our solidarity had cemented itself. We picked each other up when we were down, reassured on another that we were *cool*, that there was nothing wrong with us, that we could undo the psychic damage dealt to us in grades one, two and three. Our classroom had been transformed by images of happy harvests, smiling Indians and horns-o-plenty. Ms. Harrington, despite her black

activist persona (she didn't blink when I told the class that the CIA killed JFK) embraced Thanksgiving wholeheartedly. She affixed a buckled-hat sticker on our class calendar to mark the day we were going on a field trip to Plimoth Plantation. As we understood it, Plimoth Plantation was where the pilgrims still lived like they had back in the "olden days". I'm not sure that we understood what a historical reconstruction was; we certainly weren't prepared for the seductive mixture of shoddy research and local actors. Our only point of reference was our own history book which featured a nineteenth century print of a gang of Pilgrims standing around a feast, their hands extended to the Wampanoag guests, faces frozen in permanent greeting. As gifted as we were, the irony of the image wasn't evident to us. We had yet to acquire a taste for the tragically humorous conjunctions of history and iconography that plastered the walls of our everyday.

My mother volunteered for the trip as soon as she caught wind of it. She believed in "getting involved", in being part of the community, in contributing to the needs of the collective. At first I was resistant to the idea. I preferred my boundaries fixed, to avoid crossing the wires between home and school, but when it became clear that there was no winning this particular battle, I relented and my mother donned her navy blue pea coat and New Balance sneakers. We were prepared for the autumn chill, for the long bus ride, and to journey back in time before blackness and whiteness, when the tribal conflict over land and resources was framed in the simplest of terms— man versus savage.

My mother and I walked to school together for the first time on the day of the trip, passing beneath the shadow of Egleston Station then back into the morning bright. As adults we sometimes forget how early the school day is. The hours before eight-o'clock are busy with the safe transport of children. Danger sleeps late. The light is either too crisp or too dull, the world thrown into sharp contrast or ill-defined, disturbingly hyper-real like a 3-D slide or gently blurred like a silent film. That morning the light was unnaturally clear, the neighborhood saturated with color. The yellow of the school bus, seemed to me, the essence of yellow. It stood out in bright contrast to the worn red-brown brick of the school, and the dun-grey of the sidewalk. This was our time machine.

I stepped on, and made my way to the back of the cheesebus and took a seat next to Calvin, an unselfconsciously chubby, wisecracking kid who had become my classroom partner-in-crime. My mother found a seat up front with Calvin's mom, who was big like Calvin, shaking when she laughed or when she was angry. Neither of them ever bothered to hide her feelings about anything. Calvin and I exchanged a pound and settled into the stiff, pleather seats, cautiously testing the bounce of the springs. After checking for place where the sharp ends poked through to the surface, we threw our weight back and bounce forward in unison. Ms. Harrington walked the aisle, tapping our heads and murmuring our names. We froze as she approached us, flashed her our best grins and she turned to walk the gangway between the children, back to the row behind the bus driver who wore giant, gaudy, silver sunglasses like Marley Mal.

Ms. Harrington nodded at the bus driver. He pulled on a dashboard lever and the front door unfolded. The bus pulled away and a cheer went up. Calvin and I braced ourselves as we bumped along the potholed streets. He wore the same "Here's the Beef" t-shirt, that he always wore, and I was sporting my trademark Greek Fisherman's cap. We cast our hot breath on the bus windows, writing our names into the temporary clouds as the purple-orange blurs of countless Dunkin' Donuts sped by.

"Yo! Did you see Superfly Snuka fight Don Muraco?" Calvin sputtered, barely able to contain his excitement.

"Yeah, I saw it on channel 25. He did the Superfly Splash from up on the cage..."

"Yeah, he was like..." Calvin spread out his arms and extended his fingers, imitating Superfly's hang-ten gesture.

"He flew. He got so high. He *fucked* him up," I whispered the curse.

"He did. But that's what he gets."

"Who gets?"

"Muraco... the Rock. You saw him hit Superfly Snuka with that mike." He swung an empty fist. "Pap! He japped him in the head."

"Yeah, his head was all bleeding. I was telling my dad about it, and he was like, 'Wrestlings fake.' And I was like, 'Then how come Snuka was bleeding.' He said they use blood pellets."

“Wrestlings not fake. There’s no way. Wrestlings not fake. I’ll bet a thousand happy meals on that shit.” Calvin double punched the back of the seat to emphasize his point.

“I don’t know. He cut out something from The Paper and gave it to me.”

“What did it say?”

“That wrestling’s fake, it’s not real fighting more like dancing. They figure out what they’re gonna do ahead of time. And they hang out together. Like the Iron Sheik and Hulk Hogan are friends. They go to the movies and whatnot.”

“Nah, I don’t believe that. You saw Jimmy Snuka’s head, right? That looked like real blood, right?” He looked at me incredulously.

“Nah, it looked real. It looked real. You heard his girlfriend died?”

“Whose girlfriend?” He looked confused. “Jimmy Snuka’s girlfriend? I never see her with a girl in the ring.”

“Nah, his real life girlfriend. She fell and busted her head.”

“She died?” His voice dropped.

“Yeah, she died.” I nodded my head sincerely.

“In real life?”

“For real! You don’t believe me? Do I have to go and write a book about it?”

Calvin was quiet for a moment, deep in thought. “Yo...”

“What?”

“I just figured it out... Don Muraco killed his girlfriend. That’s why they had the cage match.” He gestured to the skies as if his insight had been delivered by the gods.

“You’re retarded Calvin! What did I say? Don Muraco is... not... even... real!” I closed the discussion, leaned my head against the windowpane, and relaxed the focus of my eyes, so that all I saw as a field of shifting, streaking color.

We hopped on and off the highway, the foliage was past its prime. The bright oranges and reds had flamed out, fading into ochre then brown. Leaves dangled precariously from trees, awaiting the first Nor’Easter to sweep the branches clean. The bus pulled into a gravel lot and we stumbled into the country air. Ms. Harrington handed out compare-and-contrast worksheets as we stepped off the bus. A drawing of a pilgrim printed next to a man in a suit— two smudged blue carbon figures. The

worksheet directed us to compare the pilgrims to ourselves in four categories: diet, clothing, work and leisure. I folded up my worksheet and slipped it into the pocket of my Member's Only jacket. A wooden fence ,two-stories high, ringed the perimeter of the Plantation.

"Does anyone know why they would build such a tall barrier?" Ms. Harrington asked.

"To keep out the Indians, so they don't kill everybody," a student called out.

There was an awkward pause. Ms. Harrington was unsure whether that was the right answer.

"Well, to keep some people out, the natives, but also to keep things in. Does anyone remember the name of the tribe that lived here?" She waited for an answer, but no one responded.

"Now remember, we're going back in time now. Does anyone know what year we're going back to?" she asked?

"Like... sixteen something?" Calvin ventured.

"That's right Calvin. We're going back in time to 1620. So the people inside won't know anything about modern life. Be sure to ask them lots of questions about how they live. That's what they're here for."

We filtered through the gate in anxious clumps of twos and threes. A young, heavily bearded man stood by the entrance, "Welcome to the town, how do you fare? Are you just passing through or mayhaps you are desiring to settle in this wilderness."

"Just passing through," Ms. Harrington shooed us in.

"The country's first Real Estate agent," my mother joked. She pulled her old Nikon manual out of its bag, set her legs for maximum stability, and took a wide-angle photograph of the Plantation. A sandy path bisected the ovular settlement that was about as long as football field. Through the exit on the far side I could glimpse the blue of the reflective blue sparkle of the sea. Thatched huts, fashioned from hewn stone, wood and straw lined each side of the path. Small gardens flanked the huts. A baby goat bleated. Calvin and I posed in the doorway of a thatched roof hut. He pretended to tip a wooden barrel while I held my nose against the pungent smell of livestock.

"Yo, is that a dog house?" Calvin pointed to a small structure raised on stilts, built from stacked stones, with a little roof. There was a hole in the stone that looked

like it might be the entrance for a small dog. A lady pilgrim peeked her head out the hut's undersized window. We jumped back in momentary panic.

"Good morn to ye. I see that you have taken an interest in my oven." She wore a broad straw hat and a button up sweater. Calvin was struck dumb. We stood silently, staring, waiting for her to continue speaking.

"That's where I bake the people's bread... except on the Sabbath. There'll be no baking on the Sabbath." She popped back into the hut.

"Bread, they eat bread!" Calvin announced and we started scrambling for a writing surface.

"Turn around Calvin." I put my worksheet against his back and wrote BREAD.

"Lets go inside and learn some more," Ms. Harrington gestured for us to come along.

"Let's not and say we did," Calvin gave my jacket a little tug. We quick-stepped across the main street, and ducked behind what appeared to be a common house as the rest of the group continued down the main thoroughfare.

We gave each other five and paused to take in our surroundings.

"Oh snap! Pilgrims!" Calvin warned.

Two pink-faced kids, about our age straddled a log, carving what looked to be a pipe out of a piece of wood.

"They're all over the place!" I spoke up to loudly, alerting them to our presence. They walked over to us, while we stood fixed to the cobblestones, unable to flee.

"Good morn, strangers. My name is Remember Allerton and this is my friend Resolve White." They tipped their ridiculously oversized black hats.

"Ah, good morning to you," I greeted them.

Calvin flashed his eyes back to the main road, but I shook the worksheet to remind him that there was a task at hand.

"Um, what are you guys up to?" I asked innocently.

"Oh, there is much work to do. Today, I plucked ducks, fetched wood for the fire and this evening I will serve dinner. I helped mind some of the smaller children as well. To tell you the truth, I a bit weary from all the work. I hope I have time to play with my friends later," Remember smiled mechanically.

"Damn, they work these pilgrim kids like slaves," Calvin shook his head.

“What’s a slave?” Resolved asks.

“What’s a pilgrim?” echoed Remember.

“They don’t even know what they are. That’s crazy.” Calvin seemed to think that they couldn’t hear us.

“A slave is a captured African that works in the fields,” I explained.

“I work in the field sometimes. Does that make me a slave?”

“Are you African? No. You’re pilgrims. P-i-l-g-r-i-m-s.” Calvin spat out each letter.

“You keep calling us by that word, but we are not Pilgrims. We are settlers from England. I know not of these pilgrims of which you speak, strangers.” The boy smiled a bit nervously, and adjusted what I assumed to be some form of cape.

I jumped in before Calvin can continue the interrogation, “Resolved, that’s your name right.”

“My name is Resolved White, stranger.” The constellation of freckles around his mouth seemed to rearrange itself each time he spoke.

“Je-sus. His name is white, maaan. Boy, they have some funny ass names,” Calvin was trying to keep his voice down.

“So, what are you wearing Resolved?” I pointed out CLOTHES on the worksheet and Calvin flashed the thumbs-up sign.

“Well stranger, my clothes and the clothes of the other children are very sturdy. I wear a coif on my head in part to keep my hair clean. I wear an apron over my petticoats...”

Calvin and I exchanged a quick glance. *Aprons? Petticoats?* We started giggling and made little effort to restrain ourselves.

“...I wear the apron to keep dirt off my petticoats. My apron is made of linen and is washed when it gets dirty. My petticoats are made of wool and cannot be washed.” He looked at us pleadingly. *Are we done here yet?*

“Thanks Resolved. Very helpful.”

“Al, turn around. I need to write this stuff down.” Calvin unfolded his worksheet, laid it on my back and scribbled APRON and PETTICOAT.

I turn to the first kid, “Wait, what’s your name again? I can’t remember.”

“Remember Allerton,” he started looking around for an adult. Calvin bent over, laughing uncontrollably.

“Sorry, sorry. One more question, please. What do you guys usually eat?”

Resolved sighed, “We eat venison and wildfowl. Mother says if I eat too much my belly will go ‘twang.’”

“Oh, shit... Twang? What the hell is twang?” Calvin collapsed into the wall of the common house, and buried his face in his arms.

I grabbed him by the hood of his sweatshirt, and dragged him away. Every few seconds he’d call out “twang” and we’d fall into another fit of laughter.

The rest of the group clustered together at the other end of the settlement, near a fenced-in field where a few haggard sheep grazed. There seemed to be some kind of scene taking place. Our classmates were mingled in with a group of students from some other school. Adults gestured wildly. Yells of protest carried downwind to us. We sprinted to meet them.

Ms. Harrington was facing off against a white woman I’ve never seen before. The women held her hands up, open-palmed, in a gesture of defensive submission. She was younger, her hair sculpted into a frizzy pouf. Two lady Pilgrims sat sewing on a bench, pretending not to take any notice. They focused their concentration on each stitch.

“My students would nevah say anythin like that or... bee-have that way. They know bettah than that,” the other teacher protested in her heavy, Southshore accent. Her hands flapped in the air like injured pigeons, trying to ward off the accusations.

Ms. Harrington kept one hand on her hip, while chopping in the air with her right hand, emphasizing each syllable, “I don’t care if you didn’t hear what they said. I heard what they said. My students, these children, heard what they said.”

My mother was standing over three of other classes’ students who sat along the fencing, “Don’t you ever use those words again. They’re hateful words. If you were my kids I’d be smacking you right now.”

The three white boys all sported identical bowl haircuts, their mouths frozen into smirks. They stared past my mother, through the open gate, out to the rocky beach where the Pilgrims first appeared.

My mother sensed me and turned around. The three boys seized the opportunity and took off, rejoining the crowd of kids hiding behind the their teacher who continued to stonewall.

“Well, I’m sorry that you feel that way. But my children didn’t say or do anything wrong and I’m not going to apologize for something that didn’t happen. Now, we’re going to continue our tour. You all have a happy Thanksgiving.”

“Yeah, have a happy Thanksgiving,” Ms. Harrington’s hands fell from the air and returned to her side. She looked defeated.

“Mom, what were they saying?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you later.” She sighed in resignation and turned to collect the class. A chicken passed between us, pecking alternately at kernels and pebbles. The signpost announced that there was to be a reenactment of the first Thanksgiving at noon. *Lunch will be served.*

“Fucking Pilgrims,” Calvin spat at the kids, who had migrated well out of range. They couldn’t hear him. They were on their way out of the gates, forward in time, back to 1983.

A month later my mother made the announcement that Ty had been “transferred” to Oakland by Line of March, the Marxist-Leninist organization they were both members of. Around the house Line of March had numerous monikers. It was alternately referred to as The Collective, The Trend or The Movement. I knew that we existed in different cities and that we were allied with organizations throughout the world, but Ty and my mother’s level of involvement was never completely clear to me. The possibility that one of them might be “transferred” to another city was a complete shock to me. It implied a framework, and a network of control that I found deeply disturbing. There were strangers, albeit *comrades*, but strangers somewhere whose decisions might change where I lived and where I went to school. What else could they control?

Our project, the house, was still unfinished. The front room would remain a work in progress. We would never find out what lay beneath the layers in each room, to trace the history of the neighborhood through the color and motif. The rain gutters

still hung askew from the roof like broken fingers. We wouldn't see whether the hedges might resurrect themselves in the spring.

"You can stay if you want," my mother told me as I hung in the doorway, swinging in and out of the doorway like an autistic child.

"I want to go with you," I said softly, ashamed at my own weakness.

"I'm sorry Ally. I know that you really like your class, but I have to go with him. I can't stay here without him. But you'll like it out there. Comrades will help us find new jobs and then we can get a new house with lemon trees in the backyard. You can grow your own lemons there, or oranges."

"When are you leaving?"

"We have to go soon, and you can come later when we have an apartment. Please understand." She looked into my face, trying to read me, to assess the damage.

"I understand. I understand. I'm gonna go take a shower." I kept my head down.

"Okay, honey. Are you okay?" She called after me.

I ignored her, let go of the doorjamb and dragged my hands along the walls towards the bathroom. Something that had been secured inside me, something tethered to an internal system of ropes and pulleys, was suddenly loosened. I felt its fall like as a wave of overwhelming nausea. I wasn't entirely sure who I really was.

The appearance of my face in the bathroom mirror was momentarily reassuring. I turned the old copper faucets away from one another and the water spluttered, then streamed into the clawfoot tub. I stepped beneath the showerhead, and let the water massage me while I cried, coughing and spluttering until I had been emptied, cleansed. I stayed in the shower for an hour, reorganizing the things inside me. I soldered down the things that had been loose and cut away the things that might hurt me. When I reemerged, my body still wet, I was a replicant of myself, an imposter who would act in my stead for the next ten years.

Before my mother and Ty moved to Oakland, the Trend received word that a building where some comrades lived in the South End might be set ablaze by the landlord. I knew from my father, who had been working as an arson investigator for the city, that there had been a rash of landlord fires across the poorer neighborhoods of

Boston. Families were being burned out so that building could be renovated, then rented out to the young professionals who were returning to the city in droves.

Night watched were organized in the abandoned storefront on first floor, where the windows had been smashed in and the snow gathered on the counter or behind the old display depending on where the wind blew. My mother was trying to spend as much time with me as she could, so she brought me along on one of their shifts. We sat on crates and drank hot tea with three Guardian Angels, Puerto-Rican teenagers from the neighborhood who had been recruited for the mission. They were trim and fit in their burgundy flight jackets and matching berets. They joked lovingly with one another, totally at ease with themselves. They seemed to have ironed away all their weaknesses, to have mastered their gestures and words, so that no one might be able to tell what they were feeling inside. I wanted to be like them.

When it became dark outside I pulled a Frisbee out of my backpack that I had received for my birthday. Blinking lights lit up its perimeter, so that when you threw it in the dark it looked like a miniature UFO. The Angels and I took it into the street and tossed it back and forth across the passing cars. It hovered in the air like something from another world, an object from another dimension that had somehow crossed over, floating in front of the storefront where they waited for a man to appear with a can of gasoline and a pack of matches.

My mother sold the house to a comrade for less than she had paid for it, and she and Ty flew out to Oakland before 1984 arrived. I moved in with my father and his girlfriend down on Rosemary Street where the kids played street hockey and called each other Scully, or Digga, or Flanny. I took the front room and kept the shades drawn like a fugitive. I must have begun to behave strangely because Ms. Harrington came to my father's apartment to see how I was doing.

My father, Ms. Harrington and I sat around the old oak table in the kitchen, and talk about me. Ms. Harrington was concerned that I haven't been myself lately, so I did the best to act like myself. We talked about what I might become, what I knew, what I needed to learn. It was good to be talked about, to listen to adults fashion a narrative for me.

I stared off at my father's arson maps hanging in the corner of kitchen he used as a makeshift office. In the maps, different neighborhoods were crowded with red

pushpins, each one representing a suspicious fire. They huddled together in neighborhoods that were ripe for gentrification in tight clusters like small children. My father had explained to me that each pin represented a family that had been burned out, or a business that was destroyed. I imagined the families that might have been left homeless. Where did they go? Did they have a son like me? I pictured a boy who looked like me, who moved somewhere else where no one knew him and he forgot who he was. Maybe fires weren't so bad, if they allowed you to become someone different, to start over, to become new again.