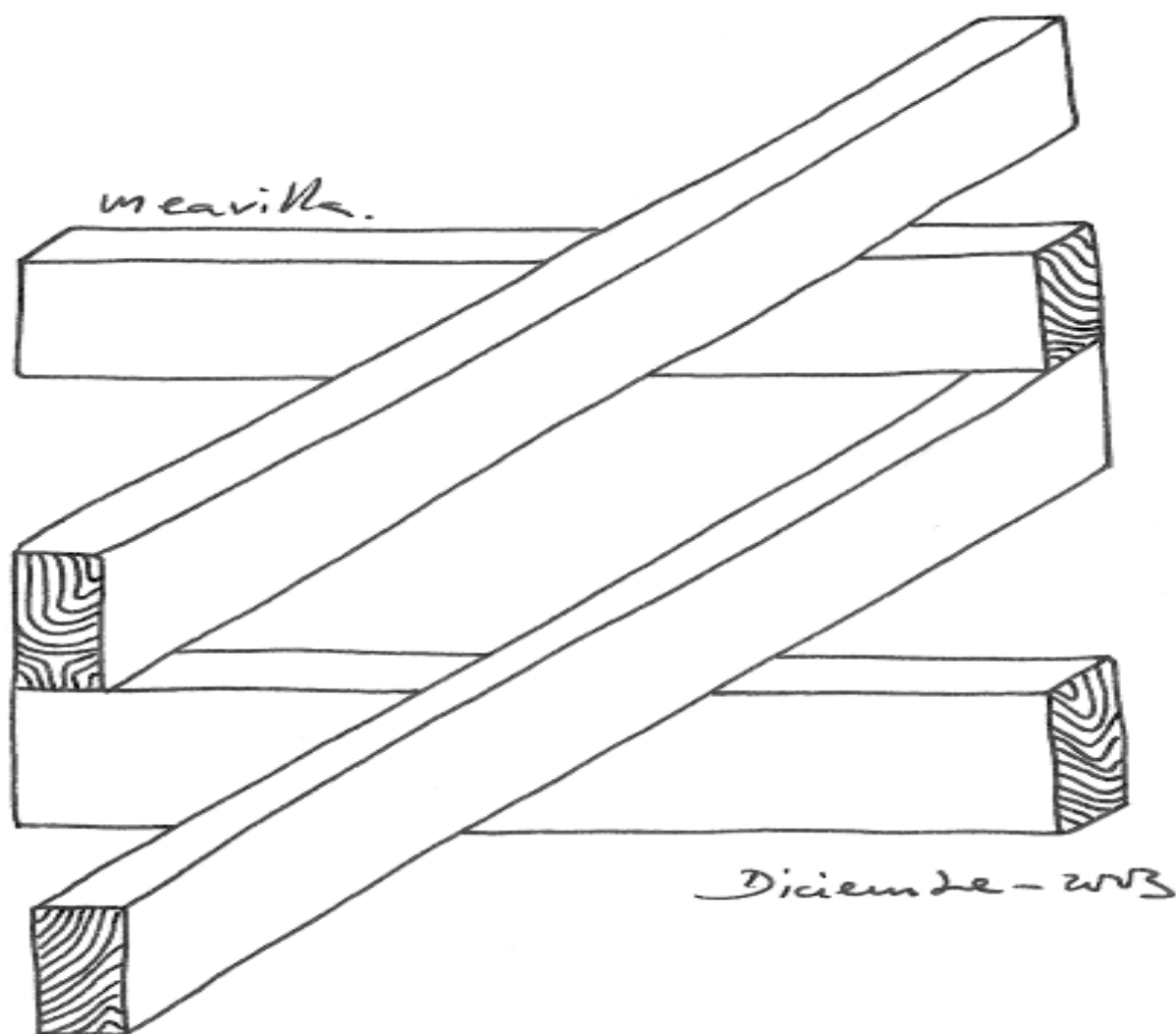


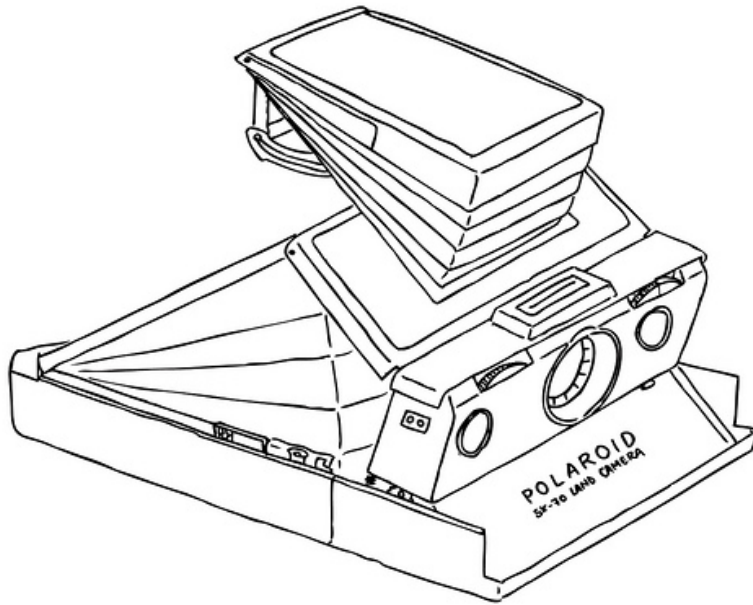
# SOMEWHERE BEYOND THE SEA



A NOVEL BY ASHLEY ELLEN

“Only those who attempt the absurd will achieve the impossible. I think it's in my basement... let me go upstairs and check.”

M.C. ESCHER



## CHAPTER 1 : RIGHT SIDE DOWN

When I woke up, it was 6:32 a.m., so I couldn't get out of bed. I didn't want to seem too eager, and now that I'm two-stepping into my first days of manhood I need to be chill about things, nonchalant, unflappable, with cool James Dean style. So I sat up in bed, put on my thick, black-rimmed glasses, which I didn't really need, but liked, and tore off yesterday to learn the new word of the day.

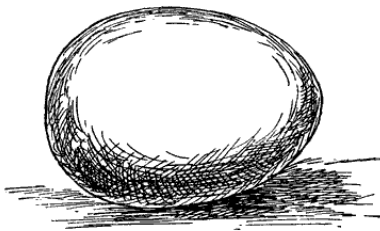
Today's word was:

**Abominable:** a·bom·i·na·ble (uh-bom-uh-nuh-buhl) *adjective*

1. Repugnantly hateful; detestable; loathsome
2. Very unpleasant; disagreeable
3. Very bad; poor; inferior.

There was an abominable storm brewing outside my window. Abominable. I've been learning words of the day for the last year. Because I'm on the shorter end of the height range, I need a more couth vocabulary for people to take me seriously. I think it's working.

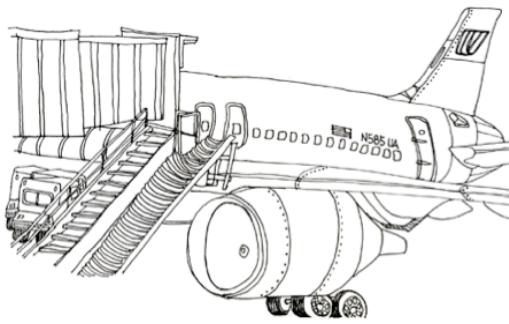
Rumbling thunder that sounded just a bit louder than the upstairs tenants when they get real horny and knock over their lamp brought my attention to the fact that the rectangular window at the end of my bed was wide open. The wind was spinning my temporary exhibit of drawings in a planetary motion. I've been working on a series. It consists of drawings hanging at varying heights from my ceiling attached by a clothespin and strings of hemp rope, because hemp rope is superior. At the moment, I have eight drawings I'm exhibiting...



1. *Eggciting (shading practice)*



2. *Llama Llama Llama (animal practice)*



3. *Avion (mechanical practice)*



4. *James Dean I (leather jacket)*



5. *James Dean II (cool stare)*



6. *Arm Chair (pun)*



7. *Sam (cubist)*



8. *James Dean III (pompadour)*

I reached for my book. I was reading *The Catcher in the Rye* for the tenth or so time. The pages were stained and stiff and crinkled in a slight wave because of too many close encounters with liquids. As I fanned open to the last dog-eared page, Tripod head-butted the door open, trampled over a stack of *McSweeney's*, knocked over my desk chair—which was across the room because of my needing to reach the ceiling four days ago—toppled a pile of had-been-carefully-folded laundry that was now disheveled on the ground, and scattered a box of technical drawing pens that tap-danced across the hardwood floor. Then he scuttled up the staircase to my lofted bed, using his shoulder to steady himself, pawed his way over to me and practically pulled off my entire comforter in the process; but it was okay because he sort of replaced it by lying smack across my chest. He was like a heavy dumb heat blanket that smiled.

After re-reading the same page about fifteen times, I decided I needed to get up. I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that I was now as old as Holden Caulfield. We even had the same initials; though Holden Caulfield was a much cooler name than Henri Carolina, I couldn't control that. What I could control was how cool *I was*. But I didn't have one girl's number, and the thought of even talking to a prostitute scared the crap out of me. Did that make me less cool? No. What did that matter? I knew words like abominable. And French filmmakers like John Luc Godard. And 50s actors like James Dean. And I could draw wicked good pictures. And in reality, the reason I didn't have any girl's numbers was most likely because the girls my age were total nut-jobs. Tripod shoved his head into me, stood up, staggered down the stairs and jostled to the door. He needed to go outside.

As I walked down to my dresser, the cool wet air hit my face. It smelled like camping. I pulled on some gray linen slacks that were atop the now-unfolded pile on the ground, set my glasses down, slipped into a way-too-over-worn white V-neck, and flashed a James Dean stare in the mirror as I sufficiently messed up my hair into a Pompadour. *Sixteen.*

I flipped the light switch on my way out to make sure I wasn't dreaming and followed Tripod out of my room. Uncle Jay's door was still shut and Sam was in the shower. Tripod pattered ahead of me, then stopped for a minute to itch his missing front leg, jingling his collar like crazy. He paused with his intact leg still outstretched, turned to me—panting—smiled, and continued scratching; jingling; shaking; panting; smiling; drooling; panting; shaking; scratching. There might be something wrong with him. He has been a little more odd than he was before the accident, but I like it, he reminds me of my grandma—she has dementia.

I walked to the door and slipped into my blue Sperry's. Just as I knelt down to attach Tripod's leash, the intercom buzzed; it was 8:36 a.m.

"Hello?"

"Hi, I have a package for Robert Carolina."

"That's me." Lie. "I'll be right down."

Tripod gave me The Look. I shrugged my shoulders and led him out the door. When we reached the entryway, he waddled right past the UPS man and up to his tree, lifting his hind leg, which is always difficult for him, balancing only on his other two legs. He looked like he was doing Pilates. And today, with the rain, the slippery grass was not proving to be any easier.

“Are you Mr. Carolina?” The UPS man was huddling under the overhang, trying to avoid the splashing from the sidewalk.

“I am.” Which was not a lie.

He handed me a pen. “Sign here.”

I signed “Mr. Carolina” so I wouldn’t have to lie again. He handed me a package. It seemed to weigh about five pounds. I scanned it to see where it had come from. The *To:* label read, “Robert Carolina,” my father, but there was no return address. It was, however, covered with international stamps, one of which was the ink stamp of the outgoing post office, and said “Paris, France,” upside down, and right side up inside its official seal that was forcefully pressed in blue ink. Apparently, nine days ago the anonymous package was put in the mail, and had now crossed an ocean, soared over several states, rode a dozen conveyor belts, been wheeled around in a couple carts of other people’s business, jumbled about on a bumpy ride, and subjected to splattering from morning rain, before being placed, just now, in my hands.

“Have a good one, kid.”

Tripod had returned. We both looked up at the guy and gave him The Look. *Kid*. Not anymore. Today I’m officially a man. I think because I realize that I’m substantially mature for my age, it’s an obvious sign of my sophistication, like when you know you have a problem, you’re much closer to overcoming it than one who is oblivious, well sort of like that.

The UPS man’s hat and shoulders turned a darker brown as he ran back to his truck. The street was navy blue even though it was morning, and was steaming as the downpour quenched its still-hot pavement from the summer heat. I opened the door



and bolted up the three flights of stairs to our apartment, four stairs at a time. Tripod kept up with me the whole way. He's amazing. He ran into the apartment leaving trios of muddy paw prints behind him. I shoved the door shut, kicked off my Sperry's, flicked the lights to make sure I was certain I wasn't dreaming, and set the package down on the yellow and white retro diner table Dad had salvaged from the Goodwill in 1982. At one point in its life it was in some bustling diner, probably with a juke box, or maybe a pancake house, I wish I knew. Sometimes, when I think of how many people have sat at that table, the room gets really loud, and I'm suddenly surrounded with a thousand conversations at once. I tried to quiet my mind and think only of Mom sitting at that yellow table, but all I could hear was Sam, my sister, singing in the shower, and the sky, crumbling around me. The lights on the radio flickered and the time started blinking "12:00." Storms.

I redirected my attention to the anonymous envelope, feeling the distance it had traveled on its journey. Had it come from Dad? My father was in Paris for the summer doing a photography exhibition at the Kadist Art Foundation. Uncle Jay was staying with me and my sister and I until he gets back. Uncle Jay is 30. The first time we met him was nine years ago. He was in Indonesia for a while, in a band, and then they broke up, or ran out of drug money, probably both. But he's single and he's really out of it, on who knows what, everything, and he lives with all of these really artsy types—hipsters is the term, I think—you know, the type who smokes a lot of cigarettes and talks really slow and low, and everything that comes out of their mouths sounds profound, but doesn't make a lot of sense, sort of like Beatles songs, and they all wear really retro clothes like they are trying to summon the '60s. We stay

at his place sometimes when he's out on late interviews, which is only every other week or so. He's a freelance journalist, but not a very motivated one. We will be staying there tomorrow.

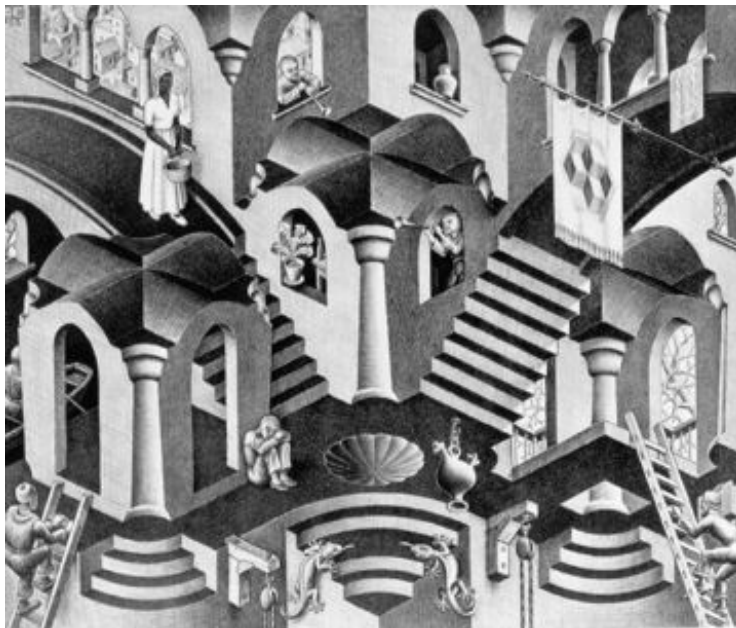
So I figured, since Dad was in France, it only made sense that this package was from him to us, or maybe just to me, because I'm more mature. It had to be a birthday present. I turned the package over and peeled off three strips of packing tape that sealed its flap. Inside, wrapped in brown packing paper, was something that looked like a thick book. It was fastened with a string of hemp rope, because the sender also thought hemp rope was supreme. Between the rope that held it together, was a quote, on a note card written in unfamiliar handwriting, that read:

*Photography is an immediate reaction, drawing is a meditation.*

*- Henri Cartier-Bresson.*

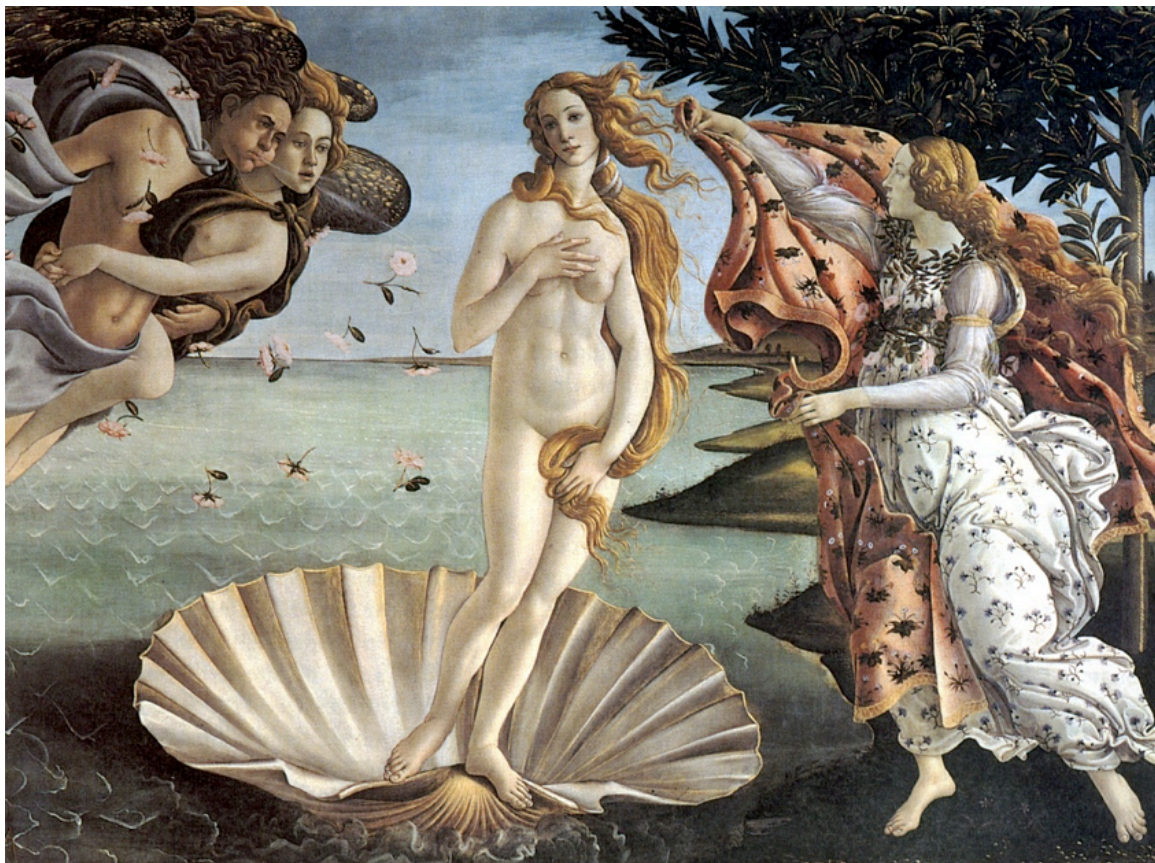
I set the card aside, untied the rope, and found a Polaroid camera, excessively wrapped in about eight feet of crinkled brown paper that I most certainly saved—a fitting surface for drawing—you could fit hundreds of drawings on it, or several at life-size, but being that it was eight feet wide, it seemed to present a suitable opportunity for one individual work, something continuous and large-scale, like an eight-foot Warhol-inspired still life of shoes; or a birds eye view of Oak Street Beach—not just girls in bikinis—but everyone, no exceptions, like: big fat ladies and their big fat kids eating big fat triple-scoop ice cream cones, elderly leather men in Speedo's, hairy-backed men in Speedo's, super-buff men in Speedo's, anyone in Speedo's, girls

with protruding ribs, girls with stick legs, girls with flat chests, grandma's, neon swim trunks, white-lotioned noses, Water Shoes; so—girls in bikinis and everyone and everything else you didn't want to see at the beach; or maybe it could be used to draw an impossible maze of Escher-esque staircases, where you walk to the next floor and find that the steps are extending out on a horizontal plane, the doors have suddenly become floorboards and you reach down to straighten your mother's favorite Italian renaissance painting on the wall that's next to your foot, because its six degrees of crookedness are bothering you, but as you get closer you notice that the clamshell in the painting is empty, and you realize it's not a painting, it's a window, so you pull



yourself through, the edges tight to your torso, you see that the shell is on the ceiling and you push your hands against the floor, you lift your waist and legs through, and catch a glimpse of long red hair running up the steps to your right, you reach for the railing and monkey-bar your way across until your feet hit the wall, which is actually a

staircase and the railing is upright and you're sideways and the woman's upside down, she escapes through an archway to your left, you hoist yourself up the wall and climb through the opening, where you fall on your back and hit the floor, her red hair whips through a doorway at the end of the hall, but when you get there, you're too late, and alone, in cream light, dim, and you have to catch your breath, you've missed her, you stop, tilt your head back, exhausted, you look right side up at a towering staircase, and take one step back to the hall, but you can't turn back in this maze, and the hall becomes a tunnel, and you fall and fall and fall to



the beginning, smash into a wall, slide to the floor, flat on your back and you look up, you see her red hair flying above, where no steps can reach, you realize you'll never grasp her hand, or whisper in her ear, because you aren't clever, or fast, maybe the

wind is, but it isn't blowing her hair enough for you to see anything but the tip of her ear, you just want to turn her around and see her face, her watery blue eyes, her yellow-white cheeks—soft and not too thin, she is Sandro Botticelli's Venus, she is your mother, they are the same woman, neither of which you will ever know, because you are in three different worlds: your world you still don't understand and maybe aren't supposed to, Venus' world—is in the sublime imagination, and your mothers', well, you will never know a world with her in it, you try to perceive it every day, but it is impossible; when you look around, you see a million stairs that lead in a thousand directions, and it's futile, because the stairs only climb across the space of your dreams, and not time, so as much as you try to catch her you'll always be running, but you still try—you draw entrances on walls to other dimensions, you white out windows to move the sky, you know to flip light switches from *Waking Life*, but you always forget, get sucked in, hours pass in seconds, and you've been walking in squares, you can't trick the maze, the maze is impossible, truly, impossible, but even if it weren't, I warn you, if it were, possible, and you meet her, then, it will only, it has to, it will be the end.

That was the maze I ran around in my recurring dreams. Have I told anyone? No. And I wasn't planning to. But I thought if I drew it from memory, I could plan a route to reach her. I'd most certainly make use of the brown paper, all eight feet of it, but I wasn't sure I was ready to tackle that maze; what I did know for certain was that I definitely should not and would not subject anyone else to it.

With the eight feet of brown paper strewn across me like a blanket, I picked up the camera. It was a Polaroid SX-70—the same type of camera my Dad had given to

my mother when they first met. But what the hell was it doing in an anonymous package? I picked it up, and noticed that when collapsed, it didn't look like a camera at all; it looked more like an oversized cigarette case, or a diary made of steel and leather. I grasped the small end of the viewfinder cap with my thumb and forefinger and carefully lifted it into its upright, triangular position. It was pretty fancy. There was some serious mirror engineering going on in there.

Then I heard the shower turn off and Sam's feet squeaking on the bathroom tile. I waited to breath to see if she was going to come out, but was relieved to hear the drone of the hair dryer. Luckily, it wasn't loud enough to cover the sound of the rain, which was tap dancing on the half-open windowpane. I looked down at the parasoled people, hurrying along the sidewalk to catch the Red Line. Tripod waddled his furry self up to the yellow and white diner chair and plopped down on the hardwood floor next to me, sprawling across it like a three-legged bear rug.

I held up the camera at eye level and looked through the lens for the sake of looking through a lens that had once captured love. As my fingers wrapped around the camera's leather body, I felt something smooth. I turned it over and discovered that taped underneath was a photo. It was my mother. I'd seen it before. I could recite the story exactly. Dad had told it to me so many times before. I turned the camera over again but this time noticed that stamped underneath the exact spot the photo was affixed to, it read: CAROLINA. It *was* my father's camera.



Dad took that quintessential (yesterday's word) picture of Mom with his Polaroid SX-70 camera the summer they met, when he was backpacking across Europe in the early 70s. She caught him snapping her photo in the *Jardin de Tuileries* on an apparently lovely lackadaisical lavender afternoon in *Juillet*. She was an *étudiant* at *L'école des beaux-arts* and, according to my father, the most beautiful redhead in Paris (fact: less than two percent of the world's population has red hair, meaning, there was an even smaller percentage of redheads in Paris, because, most French people are brunettes, therefore, his assessment was obviously true). To the French, it's a very bad fate to be redheaded, so when my father, a brutally handsome American (his words), called her *Belle Rouge*, she rightly let him stay in her flat for the week. When seven days had passed and it came time to catch his train, he was rough, like a shy schoolboy at summer camp, and he needed to know, in all certainty that he would see

her again. So in their attempt at communication, which was a mixture of Franglais and smiling and hand gestures and pointing and nodding and Pictionary, he placed his recently purchased pop-up pocket Polaroid SX-70 in her hands (because it was instant, compact, easy, and so elegant he knew her conscience would ensure its safe return), and said, "*L'amour* (it had been one week), I don't want to leave you," he gestured at himself and then at her and said, "Take it. *Mon camera.*" She pushed it back at him and said, "*Non, non, non. Je ne peux pas. Je ne peux pas,*" he pushed it back at her and said, "*Oui, oui, oui. I insist!*" she shook her head, "*Non, non, non.*" He needed to make this very clear. So he sat her down on a bench outside the *Gare du Nord* and pulled out his Moleskine from the inside pocket of his tweed sport coat. He flipped it open to a blank page and on the right side, drew a picture of a camera wearing a beret, waiving a French flag next to the Eiffel Tower; then he made an arrow to the left, where he drew an overly-large and disproportionate outline of North America with his name, address, physical description: brutally handsome blue-eyed brown-haired *beaux homme*, and phone number, inside. He tore out the page and handed it to her, then touched the breast of his sport coat and said, "I'm lending *la camera à vous.*" To further explain, he picked up an imaginary camera, pretend-took a Polaroid, said, "*Et vous send me les photos à la poste...*" mime-licked an envelope, pointed at an airplane, said, "*AirFrance...*" ran around the bench, pointed to his luggage, said, "*à Chicago,*" then unlocked and walked through a faux front door, sifted through an inexistent stack of mail, within which he enthusiastically found a letter, that he mock-opened, that held an invisible Polaroid, that he lifted in front of him, but he looked past it, into her, and said, "Please write me. I must see you again." She gamboled into his arms,



nod, nod, nodding, the sun springing from her smile, simultaneously shouting, “*Je promets, Robert, Je promets,*” and he grabbed her like Donna Reed and kissed the Wonder Life out of her. So that was it; she promised and he boarded a train of hope, which apparently equates to banging your head against a wall. How stupid he was, finding what filled the void he had felt all his life and then letting it go. He had never prayed to anyone or anything before, so he begged forgiveness from his Moleskine because all he had was her first name: *Michelle*, and the name of the street she lived on: *Rue de Saint-Simon*, and so he prayed to Moleskine and all of the other erudites who had scribbled their hearts on its pages before him: Van Gogh, Matisse, Breton, Hemmingway, Chatwin, et al. for his deplorable stupidity and prayed that he would see her and his camera again. He did, however, have other cameras with him, three others, actually. He had his much-adored 50-cent plastic-bodied Diana camera—impressionistic, and two fully manual Russian LOMO cameras: the classic Lubitel 2 with waist-level top-down viewfinder, and the more standard Smena 8 35mm—socialistic. All three cameras were so cheap they were sometimes considered toys, but it was the low-quality irregularity that he liked. He was practicing experimental photography, striving for artistic, ethereal photographs, because he wanted to remember his travels that way. Since his Polaroid SX-70 was the simplest of his cameras and developed instantly; it was the obvious choice to give to my mother; but once he left it, and her, and France, naturally, everything else—countries, hillsides, Cyprus trees, trains, dirt roads, Volkswagens, people, red balloons, sandwiches, days, thoughts—everything, was blurrier.

That's sort of how I feel when I think about Mom, she is a fuzzy concoction of stories I've heard and pictures I've seen. Ten days after we were born, she went into sudden shock and fainted. Dad rushed her to the hospital, speeding the whole way and almost killing us all in the process. When we arrived, the doctors immediately took her in to surgery; they wouldn't let us into the operating room. He said there had been very serious complications during birth: preterm labor, cephalopelvic disproportion (CPD; i.e. her pelvis was too small to fit either of us through), fetal distress, and an emergency cesarean, after which point everything went fine; she took us home two days later and we were a happy family. But the doctors said the complications had in fact caused severe internal postpartum hemorrhaging and massive blood loss (massive; they said that), which is why she went into shock. They needed to open her up and stop the bleeding, but they were too late. The doctor came up to my dad, said, "I'm sorry," and led us to a room to see her. My dad said we were both asleep in the stroller, peaceful and unaware of the tears silently coating the creases of his face. He told me that when he bent over the hospital bed and pressed his lips to my mother's cheek, he thought that the world had frozen on its axis. There would be no more spinning. The sun would not rise tomorrow. He told me that when he sifted his fingers through her red hair to the nape of her neck, it felt like wind was slipping between them, cool water, sand, breath, space, time. He slid his palm down her soft pale arm and up to her hands, which were still crossed over her chest, forming mirrored "V's" over her torso. He said he squeezed her right hand so hard he hoped it would send a surge of blood into her heart, but the blood rushed to his head.

I wish I could remember those ten days I spent with my mother. I wish I could remember her face, being in her arms, feeling what it was like for her to love me. Knowing that those days were somewhere in my consciousness, I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to summon them—the memories, the days—waited, looked at the bleak blur of black and tan and wondered if I was just looking at my eyelids or if there was some sort of auto-energy-saver that shut off the process of seeing; nothing. I hoped that my life was being recorded somewhere so I could remember it all when it was over—recording everything I noticed, heard, felt, thought, smelled (smell would be paramount; because it's one of those things that's hard to conjure up; you recognize it when it's there, you remember all the times you smelled it before, like when you're downtown and your head is exploding with nostalgia, and you try and seal it in a Ziploc bag, or one of those tiny, fancy, jelly jars, so you can write to your father in France about it later, but when later comes, there are no words to describe it; and like a dream, the second you try and think about it, it's gone, you feel stupid, especially if you were in the midst of explaining the dream, don't ever do that, just know, it's like shooting yourself in the foot), and tasted (taste—that's easier to remember; except you could never explain taste to someone that had never tasted before; "What do strawberries taste like?" "You know, like strawberry, umm, like sweet, uhhh... like red, or..." and then you'd just go on explaining how they felt, which the tasteless person already knew, "well see, they taste crisp, but soft, and watery in a good way," which actually isn't taste at all; feelings; and anyway, who knows if what strawberry tastes like to me is anything like what strawberry tastes to you; I mean, tell me what the color blue looks like, tell me; okay—let's not even go there). If our

lives were in fact recorded in this somewhere-out there-over there-under here-up there-who-knows-where place, I hoped that there were life theaters where you could go to watch any day of your life, or your mother's life, or anyone's life, so you could, say, step into the mind of John Lennon when he was writing Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds to see what he was thinking when he came up with rocking horse people and marshmallow pies, but after fifteen minutes in his head, you wouldn't be spit out into a ditch on the side of the New Jersey Turnpike, you could stay as long as you wanted because there wouldn't be time.

From beside me, a sheet of wind wafted a wall of rain that cheese-grated through the window screen into a million miniature drops, lacquering my arm and speckling the packing paper. The rain was playing a jazz tune on the pallid pewter street—thumpy-dumping on the roofs of parked cars, as the train stuttered by. I pressed the shutter to take a picture of the blur, but it was empty. Lightning shot across the sky as the train pattered off. Tripod huffed at me. I bent down to give him a good shake and noticed a piece of paper on the floor. It must have slipped out when I removed the camera and its eight feet of paper security. The letter was taped closed, so I peeled it open with extreme care. The penmanship inside was beautiful and oddly comforting, like I'd seen it somewhere before; sort of like how some people speak in languages they've never learned in past-life regression therapy. It's called xenoglossy, I was reading about it on the internet, it's amazing how familiar some things are when we have no recollection why. I held the letter to my nose. It smelled like cobble streets and old buildings and taxicabs and history and baguettes and cheese and cinnamon sugar crêpes and croque monsieurs and champagne and cigarettes, all at once. Some

of the black ink spread out across the page like upturned roots of fallen trees.

Unfortunately, the letter was also anonymous, and its contents painfully peculiar.

*Cher Robert,*

*Je suis désolé pour tous ces tormenting années of pain I have put you through. Il n'ya tout simplement rien that can undo my actions, nor anything that will bring back the near two decades de la vie that I have stolen de vous, mais do know that I regret it tous les jours.*

*Je ne suis pas making excuses about what happened, mais, Je voudrais que vous compreniez I wasn't ready. I wasn't in my right mind. I was in another universe, une très, très, sombre universe, one that I've struggled to escape from.*

*I've been à l'hôpital cinq fois and they still do not know what is wrong with me, mais I feel my life has been wasted. I wish I could fermer les yeux and wake up from this nightmare, mais il est impossible. So au lieu, I must let go.*

*Je suis de retour your camera so that you may burst life from it, as you had une fois rêvé.*

*il vous plaît pardonnez-moi.*

What did it mean? It sounded like it was from my mother. No. That's impossible. Dad must have given the camera to someone else. Another woman. But he's never told me about another woman. The hair dryer stopped. I rolled up the eight feet of brown

paper and shoved it under the chair, then collapsed the camera and hid it with the note in the envelope under a record on the table. Sam walked out of the bathroom.

“What are you doing?”

“I was about to put on Charles Trenet.” Nice recovery! “What did you do to your hair?”

“I dyed it.”

“It looks *abominable*.” Nice usage! “I didn’t think you could look any more pale, but you’ve proven me wrong.”

“Thanks, but I like it.” She tossed the black locks over her shoulder and walked into the kitchen. She’s obsessed with Jackie O. I’m sure that’s why she dyed her hair brown, or was it black? Yesterday she dragged me around to basically every vintage store in Chicago looking for the perfect Jackie O sunglasses. But the hair too? It was a shame. She used to have beautiful red hair like Mom’s. Why did she have to rid her head of Mom on our birthday? Sam put on her yellow, skirted apron, and started singing *Somewhere Beyond the Sea* as she squeezed lemons in the kitchen. She looked like some 1960s housewife, but she didn’t look like Mom.

“Are you going to keep serenading me, or is it okay if I put on the album?” I stood up, so as not to disturb the packing paper under the chair.

“Sure, but before we do *Boum!*, can you put on Bobby Darrin?”

Charles Trenet’s album *Boum!* was the record we designated for Mom. I loved his voice; it was what I thought my grandpa’s voice would sound like if I had ever met him. In my head, Charles Trenet was my grandfather. I walked over to the Wall of Records (we probably have about 900 records) radiating with that fabulous musty

smell. I love that—I imagine houses of the 50s smelled like that, and that life was in black and white; and then when the 60s came around, everything was Technicolor and smelled like flowers (which I know is not true, but wish was). I went to the top row, in the section next to French musicians, looking for Bobby Darin. Though *Boum!* was more characteristic of Mom's life, we both have always preferred Bobby Darin's version of the song *La Mer*. The English lyrics are a bit different than the French lyrics, and in my opinion, a bit more touching. In fact, Charles Trenet supposedly wrote the lyrics of *La Mer* in ten minutes, on toilet paper, in a train bathroom in 1943, so it's not surprising that the American version has a little more thought put into it.

A saucepan clanked as it was set on the gas burner atop the stove. Sam scraped a cup of sugar out of a yellow painted sugar bowl and mixed in water. She clicked the burner to a low flame. I walked across the room and placed the needle on side one and it scratched and echoed and crackled into place (that is one of the best sounds in the world). I really liked the sound of Bobby Darin's voice too. If I ever met my other grandpa I imagine he would have sounded like Bobby Darin. In my head, Bobby Darin was also my grandfather. His low, jazzy voice began, "Somewhere beyond the sea, somewhere waiting for me..."

Sam opened the freezer and started filling a pitcher with ice, so I grabbed the envelope from the table and snuck down the hall to my room. I ran up the floating staircase to my bed and climbed across to the giant built-in bookcase beside it, removed the Polaroid camera from the envelope, and placed it safely in the lower left cube. Next to the bookcase, fastened to the wall above the head of my bed was a string of hemp rope, because hemp rope is superior for holding the most precious of things. I



folded and close-pinned the mysterious letter to the rope as thoughts flooded my head. I needed to find a way to get into Dad's studio to find his Box of History that I'd seen in his storage closet. If I could get in there I could search through it to see if I could find something with matching handwriting. I clipped the envelope to the right of the letter, next to my List of Paramount Things. The list included, but was not limited to: things I needed to research, skills I needed to master, stuff I needed to upgrade, things I needed to look for, places I needed to go, things I needed to make popular, and ideas for drawings. I picked up the pen that was on a string that was also close-pinned to the rope and added "Box of History" to the list, below: the 50s, loafers, *Eight Elvises*, the Pompadour, average male teenage height growth per year, European man purses, the Six Gallery Reading, Chichen Itza, an instrument, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. I re-clipped the pen, nodded at the list, and slipped back into our still-life of a kitchen.

Every surface of our kitchen is covered with things: antique cutlery, vintage packaging, rusting scales, blenders that don't work—but look cool—iron owl trivets, countless ceramic roosters in varying sizes, stacks of brightly colored, hand-painted floral bowls (only for show), decorative spice boxes, and a large collection of orange and yellow and green and blue Anchor Hocking Sandwich glass everything—salt and pepper shakers, cake stands, jars, pitchers, plates, bowls, goblets, tumblers, shot glasses—everything. And it is all purposely placed; basically rendering the surfaces useless, but you can take a picture of any square foot of countertop and have a fabulous *I Spy* photo. That's why Dad put the stuff there in the first place, but that was a couple years ago, now it's kind of a hobby. Our apartment is a museum.

Sam was taking out glass mixing bowls and measuring cups and spoons and stuff. Whoever made the universe made rainy days for baking, and singing. I walked into the kitchen, hoisted myself up to sit on the island, picked up a wooden spoon like a microphone and joined Sam and everyone in the Theatre of Life, watching Henri Carolina, day #5,840, singing *Beyond the Sea*.

Sam set a green Anchor Hocking sandwich glass full of lemonade in front of me. I sniffed it.

“Try it. I squeezed it myself.”

“I saw. Did you wash your hands?”

“Then don’t try it.”

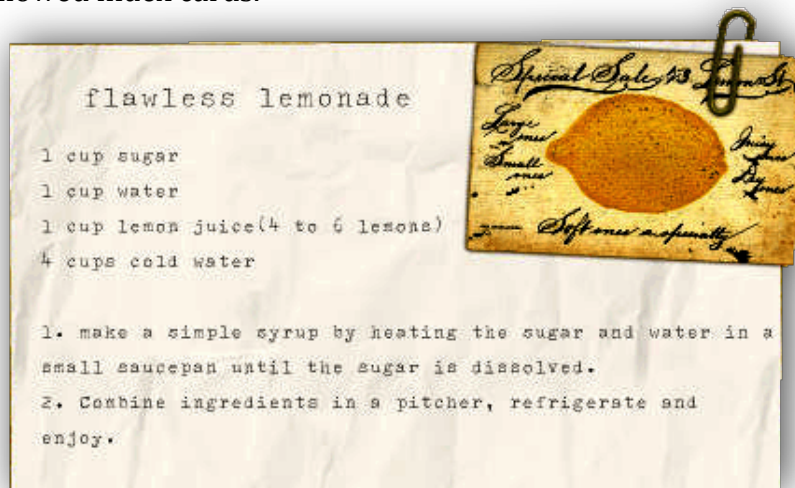
“Gross.”

“I found the instructions in this old recipe box. I think it was Mom’s.”

“Recipe box?”

“Yeah, it was in the very back of this drawer. It’s old. Real old from the looks of it.” She opened the big top drawer in the island and pulled out a rusty red tin box.

“Let me see that—” I grabbed it from her, opened it and started fingering through the yellowed index cards.



But they were typewritten. “Ugh.”

“What? I think it’s a pretty good find.”

“Nothing.” I looked at the backs of every card, but there was no trace of writing. Just stains. Disappointment #1. “Your hair is freaking me out.”

“I don’t care.”

“I liked the red because it reminded me of Mom. Why are you so obsessed with Jackie O?”



“I’m not trying to be Jackie O.”

“Yes you are.”

“Okay. So what if I am? Nice pompadour James Dean. It’s so irritating that you and Dad act like I’m here to keep her memory alive. Because that’s not fair. I’m not a replacement for her. I don’t even know what she was like. And whether it was our fault or not, I can’t help the fact that she’s gone. So I will be whatever and whoever I want to be, thank you.”

“Hey have you ever looked in Dad’s Box of History?”

"Box of History?"

"Yea, at the studio. We should go check it out."

"I'd be up for going over there."

"How about right now?"

"Do you have the key?"

"No, but Jay does."

"Where is he?"

"Sleeping."

"Perfect."

I set down the glass of lemonade and we crept over to Jay's room. I turned the doorknob. He was snoring. It was the loud, snarly kind that sounds like a failing lawnmower. *Creak*. We paused. On a crescendo I pushed the door open wide enough for us to fit through. Sam was leaning her head around me so close I could feel her breathing. I turned to her. *Ahem*.

"Sorry."

"Shhh!"

"Check the dresser."

"Which one?" There were six dressers in that room. The closets in our apartment were the size of lockers. My mom was very fashionable; so she needed the extra space.

"Why don't you take the right side of the room and I'll take the left." *Snore*. We tip-toed into the room and over to the dressers. There were no keys on the top, so I slid the doors open like I was playing Jenga. Drawer #1 turned out to be The Pot Drawer. Not surprising. Drawer #2. Naughty magazines. Interesting. I'll remember

that for later. Drawer #3. Whitey tighties. Stained. Gross. Hasn't he heard of boxer briefs? Or bleach? His taste is pretty abominable. As I slid the drawer shut, it jammed. Crap! I waited for a snore, and then shoved it with my shoulder. Jay stirred and turned over to his other side.

"Henri!" Sam coughed under her breath (exchanges of The Look) (shaking of heads) (waving of hands) (rolling of eyes). *Snore.*

I opened Drawer #4: Cargo pants—in five different shades ranging from tan to army green. I moved to the next dresser. Drawer #1: Wallet. Change. I had to be getting closer. A small envelope! But it did not feel like a key. Buttons. Shoot.

"Keys!" Sam shout-whispered.

"Just take them all. We'll see which one works."

*Snore.* We tiptoed. Paused. *Snore.* Tiptoed. Paused. *Snore. Thunder claps. Jingle. Gasp. Crash. Groan.* Jay shook his head awake, catching the terror in our eyes. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Umm..."

"Uhhh..."

"Looking for pot. Sorry. We just figured...it's our birthday and all..."

"Oh. Right. Yeah, that's cool. It's in the left top drawer." He motioned to me. "Yep, that one. Just don't tell your dad."

"Of course not!"

"Thanks, Jay. Sorry for waking you up. And for snooping."

"Nah. It's all good." He lay back down and covered his head with a pillow.

I ran down the hall into the family room and sat down on the burn-your-eyes-out olive green sofa. It wasn't the most comfortable couch in the world, but I'd consider it more productive and inspiring than typical family room furniture. I mean, if you own something called a Lazy Boy, what are you really saying to the world? On the other side of the family room we have two Monstera plants, also known as the Swiss Cheese Plant, the Fruit Salad Plant, the Monstereo, the Windowleaf, or simply, the Delicious Monster. Plants. My dad has had them so long he's given them his own names and now they're on the verge of death. "Sam, look what you've done to Miles Davis and John Coltrane. These are supposedly one of the easiest plants to keep alive! Please leave the watering to me. Okay?"

"Fine. Do you really want to smoke?" *Thunder.*

"Sure why not?" I packed the bowl. Bobby Darin was still singing in the rain by the window.

"Alright. As long as we're Red-lining it there. I don't want to deal with a cab driver if I'm stoned."

"Deal."

The three of us stumbled down the stairs and out the entry. Sam and I both had giant blue and white golf umbrellas, and she had tied sandwich bags around Tripod's feet. She insisted that the Red Line was way too dirty for him to be walking those three little feet on. He looked ridiculous. Poor guy.

But in truth, Tripod is a beautiful dog. He's a purebred husky. He could have been a show dog, not that we would have wanted that—you know what those people are

like—overzealous and weird. Handlers. And now, with his three legs, he'd have to go to some sort of special show, for dogs with handicaps, and I don't even think they have those. He smiled at me, plodding along in his plastic baggies. I started cracking up.

It was raining so hard I felt like I was in the shower; a domed shower. Everything echoed. Sam was skipping and singing, "Oh, my darlin'? Oh, my darlin'! Oh, my darlin'? Oh, my darlin'! Oh, my darlin'? Sweeeet Clementine! You may be gone, but—you're not forgotten! Fare thee well. So long! Clementine. Bye!"

I was surprised how many people were up at 9:18 a.m. There were some serious runners, not noticing the rain, or just not caring; that's dedication. A group of DePaul freshmen passed us—you could tell they were freshmen because their umbrellas were huddled together like a hot air balloon, and they were wearing miniature shorts, and giggling about how lost they were. Their heads turned to look at Tripod. This happens all the time. Whenever we go out for a walk, people stop and gawk—especially women; other dogs even stare—like how girls check each other out to assess who's more attractive and get fashion tips. I know this only because Sam always comments about it: rates them, praises them, mocks them, gets jealous. Girls.

"They look intelligent." She started walking faster, which caught the attention of our elderly neighbor. Crap. We were supposed to catch the 9:24 train. But it's not possible to have a conversation with him that's less than a half an hour. He'll tell you about his day, which always somehow correlates to a story about World War II. Yesterday I ran into him when I was taking Tripod for a walk. We jumped back in time when he got to telling us what he had for lunch, which included a can of baked beans, reminding him of how the U.S. government had asked Americans to salvage any

materials that could be used for the war after Pearl Harbor: metal cans, old pots, stockings, tires (apparently the Japanese had cut off the supply of rubber as they rapidly advanced through Southeast Asia and it was virtually impossible to buy any kind of tire, be it for a bicycle, tricycle, car, truck, bus, anything), cooking fat (though it may not seem like a critical national material, he assured me it was, and listed off about twenty such things fats were used to produce, including soap, candles, paint, varnish, polish, carbon paper, dye, resin, insecticide, synthetic rubber, petroleum, and most importantly, explosives). War.

“Hey, kids!”

“Actually we turned sixteen today. So I don’t think it’s appropriate to call us kids anymore.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Rainy day for a birthday.”

“I prefer rainy days.”

“Well maybe you should sign up for the Army then. When I was in Vietnam, it once rained for three weeks straight. I swear it. We sat in the muck, soaked to our bones, slimy, shriveled and slippery as worms. I thought it would never stop raining. You shoulda seen it. You wouldn’t believe it. It was practically a monsoon. And when you slept, you’d try to make a tent out of sticks and the rain would pool up on the top of your poncho and you’d be bathing in the mud all over again. Try to make food in the rain. It was damn near impossible to start a match. The light everywhere kind. Nothing dry to strike it on. So what do you do? You eat beans and cold franks. After a couple weeks of that you start giving them franks names. Oh, it’s pretty unbearable. You start to get delusional. Your feet go numb. Then your legs. Your arms shrivel up to



your pits.” He reached out and grabbed me in the pits. I shot Sam The Look. “Ha ha. And when you find some trees to huddle under, it’s like paradise. You wonder if it’s a mirage. But you don’t care. Why would you care? We eventually became expert fort builders. And foxhole diggers. Oh I should show you how to dig a proper foxhole. Might come in handy some day.”

I squinted at my watch. It was fogged up on the inside. His war talk was making me dizzy. I mean this conversation would be weird if I wasn’t stoned. And all I could think about was food. We had one minute to make the Red Line. He finally took a breath and I jumped in. “Yeah you’ll have to teach me sometime. Maybe when it’s not raining. But anyway, we’ve got to get going, the Red Line is coming in one minute! Nice talking to you!” I grabbed Sam’s arm and led her away.

“Oh, my God.”

“I know.”

Sam was laughing. We started running. She was jumping in every puddle, zigzagging across the sidewalk. I wish it were manly to wear rain boots. I think I’ll make men’s rain boots popular. I’ll have to add that the list, and I should get a portable list, one that’s waterproof for days like today. I heard the train screeching up. “Come on, come on!”

Just as the doors were about to shut we slipped through, pulling Tripod in at the last second. Wouldn’t want him to lose another leg. Our umbrellas were still up. Everyone was staring at us. A drunk, homeless man was eyeing Sam. He had a big creepy toothless grin on his leathery face.

“Let’s go to the back.”

“Yes, please,”

The homeless man’s tongue was licking his gums.

Everyone watched us as we passed. Giving us an assortment of looks. Sam was about to put her umbrella down when I stopped her.

“No, don’t.” I took the umbrellas and made a tent in front of us that blocked out the view of everyone else on the bus. Tripod jumped in between us with his sopping fur. It smelled like wet dog. You know, pungent as hell. We laughed all the way downtown.