

Pennsylvania, a beautiful Mennonite cemetery in Lancaster County. Way back when, some of my people were Mennonites. Some went to Canada. During the Civil War the cemetery was a battlefield. Under the rattle of the Gatling guns my pacifist ancestors flinched in their graves while blood leached through from above; and the grass there grows a rich emerald green. Beatrice loved irony.

Seated resolutely on my front stoop, while the flames leapt over my shoulders and smoke billowed into the sky, I listened to sirens wail out their lament through the crackling air and I spurned the outstretched arms of my neighbours. In striking a single match and tossing it onto the gasoline-soaked Persian rug, I had declared war on the God of my childhood, the God of Heaven and Hell, of Abraham, Jesus, Mohammed, and the rest who presume to animate his failed experiment. I was determined I would turn from grief, bitterness, and rage, I would confront him, face to face, heart to heart, and match his existence against my own, my suffering with his. As sparks became embedded in my clothing and scorched my hair, and flames seared my flesh, and clouds of smoke swirled down to engulf me, firefighters hauled me from the inferno's embrace. In the open air, I struggled against the treachery of unconsciousness, and silently acknowledged my war to be under way.

KATE HEARTFIELD

BLEACH

In Belizean Creole, to "bleach" means to "stay up all night." Teenage girls braiding their hair before the summer festival, where the punta drumming and dancing goes on in tents all night long, say to each other: "*Uno wa bleach tonight?*"

This is one of the things I think about on the nights you don't come home. I remember the time I was in Belize, when I was your age, another too-smart Canadian girl. That's one of the memories I use to keep my mind away from twisted metal in ditches, from rough fingers in panties, from little pills in your little hand. To you, it's breaking curfew. To me, it's standing in the kitchen, in this obscene, artificial light.

I make another cup of pale herbal tea. I think about the word *bleach*.

To stay awake is to bleach the night. To make the darkness pale. To make it something you might not recognize.

Often I think next of the big bottle of Clorox under the kitchen sink. The pale yellow liquid, almost masquerading as water, were it not for the smell like death, the smell that burns and roughens my nostrils.

I think about how bleach spilled on a black t-shirt will turn the fabric purple. As if the t-shirt were wearing its black as a disguise all along. Like the time I wore my Bob Dylan t-shirt to clean the bathroom and it ended up with purple splotches.

Then I remember the time my sister, your aunt, bleached her jeans in our bathroom sink when she was your age. She always used to bleach her jeans. But one time she did it wrong. She got lazy. She filled the sink with water, dunked the jeans inside, then splashed the bleach on top. The bleach hit the jeans directly and made white splotches. That was an eighty-dollar pair of Levis, ruined. Your grandma was furious.

I don't think teenage girls bleach their jeans anymore. I've never seen you do it, anyway. I've never seen you take a pair of scissors and make an uneven pair of shorts out of a perfectly good pair of jeans, and carefully fray the cut. I've never seen you take the dull side of the scissors and wear a hole in the knees, leaving a few white threads that will make red lines on your knee when you wear them. I have never seen you do that.

Now the jeans are sold already damaged. They have fake dirty patches, pre-made holes, fringes, and frays. The clothing manufacturers have finally anticipated every nasty thing a teenage girl wants to do to her jeans, and done it for her. I used to draw on my sneakers, too. I can still feel the slide of the pen on the rubber, the slip of the ink into the canvas. I've never seen you draw on your shoes. The ways you mark your presence in the world are different from the ways I marked mine.

I am writing all this down because I am afraid. I don't know what you are. And that scares me more than not knowing where you are.

No it doesn't. I lied. Tell me where you are.

When I found out I was having a girl, I was relieved. Did I ever tell you that? I was terrified of having a boy. Not a baby boy: something I figured I could handle. I just didn't know what I could ever say to a teenage boy. Oily, lurching creatures, jerking off and playing bad guitar. I suppose you know that by now.

I almost looked forward to your teenage years. Raising a girl would not be easy, but it wouldn't be alien. I would have some sense of what I was getting into, the good and the bad.

When I began writing this down, I think it was for catharsis. Do you know what catharsis means? Well, if you don't, look it up. But now I know I'll be folding this like a letter and leaving it for you to find.

I know you don't think of your bleaching as something you do to me. You think breaking curfew is a victimless crime. I thought that too, once, when I did it to my mother.

But I will not be my mother. I will not be here when you get home. I'm going out to do some bleaching of my own. It's not payback, or some tough-love technique out of a parenting book. I'm not doing it to you. I'm just doing it. It's becoming impossible for me to stay in this moment any longer. I need to go out, to discover what it is you've done to me.

J.J. STEINFELD**EXPLANATIONS**

The man looked at the clock in the kitchen: an hour until his wife, Deborah, would be home. Wednesdays meant a full day of teaching classes, including her evening course, *The History of Women's Criminality, 1800 to the Present*, one of the most popular courses in the History Department, if not the entire university. Her book on nineteenth-century female criminality was nearly completed. Hope you don't mind if I don't dedicate this book to you, she had told her husband this morning. When she had started the research for the book, began the dream of a ground-breaking work in an area she felt was under-appreciated, she had hinted that she would dedicate the book to him. She had warmly thanked him in the acknowledgements to her first book, but not in the dedication. Now it was going to be her thesis advisor and mentor from graduate school.

I hope she lives to see the book published, Deborah said. I hope I live through this day, he told her.

He was not having a good day: the sore throat and running nose, wheezing, coughing, moaning, feeling sorry for himself. He had tried to read but his concentration was ruined. Five pages of a mystery novel, getting half-way through an article in a magazine, and back to the morning newspaper. He caught himself reading sentences two, three times. His eyes hurt. He used another tissue. He couldn't remember the last time he had such a bad cold, or used so many tissues. Deborah had convinced him to call in sick—the hospitality industry isn't going to collapse if you stay home, she had jabbed at him. He rarely missed work, so a day or two off wouldn't undermine the hotel's operations. Why do you stay at that job, anyway? It's hardly intellectually stimulating. Why don't you use your education? You could go back to school, she jabbed some more. And these verbal jabs while he felt so ill—it just didn't seem fair. His wife hadn't criticized him about his career choice lately, but was back on it again. He liked his job, emphasizing that point once more as he blew his nose. Night clerk at one of the finest hotels in the city. That was the shift he favoured, was best suited for, he argued. I'm a night owl. Deborah told him he was starting to look like a little old hoot owl. Thirty-four is ancient for an owl, she joked. You learn a great deal about human beings working in a hotel in the evenings and at night, he said. So write about it, she had scolded on more than one occasion, and he said he didn't have a desire to write. The last time he had written anything of any length was the first two chapters of his master's thesis on the weekly expenditure patterns of rural residents during summer and winter months. That was as far as he had gotten: two chapters. What do you have a desire to do? she had asked during another one of their arguments. Love you, darling, love you with all my heart and soul, and make my modest financial contribution to our household. That sounds