Gretta rubs eyeliner from under her eyes and combs her hair back with her fingers. With a baby wipe, she cleans her hands and armpits. “PTA, remember that,” her grandma has said. “A good pussy-tits-and-armpits bath is an important part of being on the road.”

She puts Vaseline on her lips, and still she is not ready to go into the hostel. She has a history with this place that is less than pleasant. *An incidental backdrop.* It is not the youth hostel, she realizes, but more of her fucked-up *vitae.* Lacking in life experience, Gretta is not.

*KeepOut.doc*

I fucked around before the tequila man ever existed.

Gretta changes the name of *KeepOut* to *DescartesClassNotes* and shuts down. With a single act of documentation, she has entered a new level of secrecy.

She had been married for about a month and a half and had been giving Lance the silent treatment for about a week. When finally she spoke, Lance shattered a ceramic frog she’d made in the fifth grade then abandoned her to their apartment, which had already been broken into three times, twice with her in it. Monday went by. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. With each day that passed, one longer than the previous, she grew angrier. She had no idea where he was.

She was baking the fourth batch of cookies since he’d left, the kind you roll in nuts then poke with your thumb to make a chocolate-chip nest. She reached for the cocoa and found an old friend’s mother’s number.
This friend and Gretta had gone to college together in Idaho—they’d met in biology. His name was Jeff. They started doing homework together after they realized they had grown up in the same city. They liked to complain about the same Utah things: hairspray, Jell-O casseroles, twelve-pack families, state-sponsored gerrymandering, ultra-right-wing politics in a church founded in a commune. (“Not much different,” he liked to remind her, “from this shithole,” meaning anywhere in southeastern Idaho.) Biology was his passion, he said, so for the next couple of years she wrote nature writing. She hadn’t spent much time in nature, but she hoped to encyclopedically overcome her fear of it. Every word she wrote—on the biter monkey, the scaled gnopthia, the rain forests of Zaire—she wrote for him. She wrote of enraptured trees, heaving elk, quivering bodies of water. “Do you think I’ll ever be as good as David Quammen?” she’d ask him. “Sure,” he’d say. “Maybe.” But Jeff was married—in love with his wife, no less—so nothing came of it.

After he graduated, he moved to Salt Lake to work as an accountant for his dad. He called her from a pay phone not long after he got there and asked her to meet him in Moab on the first of July, at this very hostel, the Lazy Lizard. His love for his wife, he said, had waned. She agreed, though questioned why they couldn’t drive down together. “That’s neither here nor there,” he said. She still had a crush on him, so she didn’t challenge his response.

He never showed up at the hostel. Apparently, he moved to Bozeman, Montana, at the end of June so his wife could be with her family. But it had been a long lonely while since he’d stood her up at the hostel, and besides, she had carried that ceramic frog around for so many years. She liked her life better before Lance could bust her things against a wall—before he’d entered her life only to leave it periodically. *Pneumatic nomadic. Pneumonic asthmatic. Numeric…. It doesn’t mean anything. It doesn’t mean anything. It doesn’t mean anything—*

She called Jeff’s mother’s place. He was living at home in Salt Lake again. He said he had left his wife in Montana with a grocery clerk. Gretta said she needed company. He made it over to her apartment
fast—before she’d tossed the last cookie in the bowl of nuts and filled it with chocolate chips. She put the cookies in the oven, set the timer for eight minutes, and came on to him hard. When the buzzer rang, she was sprawled out on the couch, half-naked, horrified, without climax, without so much as a kiss or a kind word. Jeff had already come. Gretta could see his wife’s interest in the grocery clerk—in any clerk. Jeff left. Gretta never told him about Lance, and she never told Lance about Jeff.

Still, it complicates the tongue-lashing she plans to give her husband.

~ Two Rapids Hotel ~

Fun for the whole family!

Dear James,

Seriously, even IF Lance never came home—or IF I never took him back—how the hell would this work? Of course I don’t think you’re a kid, but you are what? Six, seven years younger than me? And your mother would still hate me. Your sister would still hate me. Lance would hate us both, and maybe your beloved Darrel would too. My kids would be confused. And I would still be, after all, me.

Love, Gretta

Her feet, she sees, are turned inward, toes curled. The flashbacks begin, each lasting no longer than the flick of a lighter: traces of dreams, of events that never took place, echoes of the current moment, of the woman sitting near. Part of her wants to see clearly; most of her just wants it all to go away. She closes her eyes and waits.

What does she want with me? The burning is almost unbearable—it’s her whole body, as if blanketed by dry ice. The sinking feeling is soon overwhelmed by her presence. The woman. Breathe two, three…. Who stands at the top of a tube. Exhale two, three, four…. Who is angry. Not
angry. Who wants something from her. She was here, parked at the hostel. In this truck, in this moment. She was already here. Gretta tries to look at her face, but it’s as if Vaseline is smudged over her eyes. Part of her wants to listen; most of her just wants to die, until the burning breaks down to nausea and she knows the wave is passing. She waits.

When her breathing resumes autopilot and she becomes less dizzy, Gretta is ready. She tears up the note she wrote to James. She stuffs the quilt and a few clothes into her pack but leaves the suitcase in the pickup. It’s a dumb case anyway—hard, blue, oddly sized, with an obnoxious alligator texture.

She drops her pack on the little dirt path in front of the hostel. A couple of men about her age sit at the picnic table outside the front door and gesture toward her with red plastic cups. They mutter to one another. Austrian or German, maybe. Definitely not American. She pretends she isn’t interested.

She checks out the bulletin board. “Going to Colorado Springs, will pay half gas.” And, “Going to San Francisco, need rider.” She wishes—

You have kids to take care of, you careless fuck.

“Nine dollars,” the man at the front desk says. It costs only two dollars more than it did the last time she was here a decade ago. She can still sleep here for less than the cost of a fifth.

She finds an empty bed and sets her pack, quilt, and laptop on the bottom bunk. Across the room is the bed she lay in over a decade ago—single, lonely, waiting to have sex with a married man and a newly fit diaphragm. She wonders whether she really thought she’d fuck in a dorm room—on a bunk bed, no less. She guesses they would have gone for a drive. The hostel has private rooms now, but she doesn’t remember seeing them then. Maybe this logistical difficulty was the idea.

She doesn’t know what to do about the kids. She is afraid of what Jackie might say about missing her date. She rifles through her pack for her phone. She is hoping to be inspired.