The problem is that Renata loves Jerry. When he moved in, she had seemed all sparkly, and almost pretty. I think it was the first time I'd seen her totally happy. For a whole year, Jerry remembered all the important times, like her birthday and Valentine's Day, and he took her out for dinner, twice a month, on payday.

I'm not exactly sure when things started to go bad, but I remember feeling weird one night, when Renata was at work and Jerry and I were watching a National Geographic show about whales. I was really into the show, when it slowly dawned on me that Jerry was looking at me, and not the television. But when I turned toward him his eyes flicked back to the screen. The next time I felt his eyes on me I got up and went to my room.

He did it a lot, after that first time. Watched me, but pretended he wasn't. It didn't seem like such a big deal. I didn't like it, but I could live with it.

Then one evening, some time around the beginning of the summer, I was cutting a tomato at the counter. He walked up behind me and put his hand on the back of my neck. I kept on cutting, hoping he'd go away, but he just stood there, his hand still and warm, getting heavier with each second. When the tomato was all sliced I put the knife down, and he gave my neck a squeeze, just a little one, and then slowly moved his hand down my back.

After he left I noticed I'd sliced into my finger with the paring knife, and it was bleeding everywhere, but the strange thing was it didn't hurt until a lot later.

Since then I feel like my life has become this big bubble, and I'm walking around inside it, trying not to break through. It's hard to concentrate on anything. I feel like I can't hear properly; the bubble is causing pressure in my ears so I have to keep swallowing and swallowing to clear them.

Not being able to hear makes it hard for words to come too. No matter how I rehearse what I'll say to Renata, it sounds wrong in my own head.

I guess I figure that either way it's going to kill her, and we'll both lose. If she doesn't believe me, she'll hate me, thinking I'm lying about the guy she loves. Or maybe she will believe me, and hate me even more.

*Ripe* (rip) adj. Grown to maturity, fully developed. 2. In full readiness to do or try; prepared.

I knew, after waking up sometime in the middle of the night to see Jerry standing in my doorway again, that I couldn't count on chimera. I knew that time was running out—knew with that same awful certainty that you know the dull throb in your back molar is a cavity you'll have to get filled.