STORYQUARTERLY

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STORYQUARTERLY

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RUTGERS UNIVERSITY-CAMDEN

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StoryQuarterly
Department of English
311 North Fifth Street
Armitage Hall
Rutgers University
Camden, NI 08102

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OVERTURE

"Komodo dragons resemble dinosaurs that missed their cue for extinction. Capable of smelling blood from miles away, they eat water buffaloes, deer and one another. Their saliva is laced with venom." 1 "The birds band together in 'screaming parties'-tightly packed formations of up to a dozen swifts that speed madly around trees and rooftops, slalom within inches of chimney pots, or snap suddenly around some invisible axle like a stunt kite." 2 "Studies have detected plastic fibers everywhere—in the stomachs of sperm whales, in tap water and in table salt... Plastic may help define the most recent layer of the earth's crust because it takes so long to break down and there is so much of it."3 "It turned out to be complicated to untangle the humpback because 'ropes running between its mouth and tail had left it hogtied at the surface." 4 "The majority of this came from one staggering spill on May 4, at a New Port Richey wastewater plant, where 300,000 gallons of untreated sewage leaked onto land and into the nearby Cross Bayou. Only half that was reportedly cleaned up." "Although people should be aware of the animals...they aren't looking to harm humans. 'If you see a shark try to stay as calm as possible. Sharks have the ability to sense your heart rate."6 "Interestingly, ornithologists have recorded over 500 variations of this basic song structure—but it is always somehow recognizable as 'song sparrow.' An individual song sparrow can have up to 15 different variations on its own song."7 "The penguin joins other oversized but extinct New Zealand birds including the world's largest parrot, an eagle with a three-metre wingspan, 3.6 metre-tall moa birds and other giant penguins."8 "Many of the creatures are keystone species in their ecosystems, such as beavers, and the researchers said their loss will have knock on effects on all fauna and flora and on the many millions of people that depend on the waterways for their livelihoods."9 "And, since beaches are constantly changing, the sand you walk on today will not be the same sand you walked on last year, last month, or even a few hours ago, whether it came from a natural source or beach fill."10 "'It's yet another piece of information telling us the whales aren't staying in the boxes we're drawing on the map.""11 "The chickens were making a racket and that's when she noticed the moose in the pool."12 "These dolphins are

known as individuals: they have names and people know their histories. 'If you are going to treat them as individuals, then you have a responsibility to them as individuals."13 "Cossett burrowed into the dirt, using her rear feet like shovels, before finally depositing four eggs, all smooth, oval-shaped and blue-ish, in the nest."14 "As [the chimpanzee] grew older she helped a diabetic chimpanzee named Abby...remember to get her medication. She was a loving, yet stern, aunt-like figure to a pair of young chimpanzees, Harper and Emma, and she helped Henry, a male chimpanzee who came from a situation of terrible abuse..."15 "And, his llama, Chubby, which goes along with the flock, 'just wants to make sure everyone is safe and in-bounds." 16 "The Ganges's waters brighten in the morning light. They turn from mud brown to a muzzy white-blue, until, at the horizon, the currents shine and appear to flow palely into a paler white sky." 17 "A weaker Gulf Stream would mean higher sea levels for Florida's east coast. It could lead to colder winters in northern Europe... And it could mean that a lot of the heat that would have gone to Europe would stay along the U.S. east coast and in Florida."18 "The waves hit my kitchen window, and my dining room window. Extremely powerful waves,' she says, 'and they have no place to go, if they don't have a barrier." "You and I are not free-floating minds that move around the world through text messages, apologetic emails, and bank deposits. We are carbon-based creatures so pathetic that we need a lot of silent plants to make carbon for us."20 "Scientists have been tracking stream temperatures around the Cook Inlet, located south of Anchorage, since 2002. They've never recorded a temperature above 76 degrees Fahrenheit. Until now."21 "Even in the dead of night, there's no respite. The Texas Gulf Coast city registered its warmest low temperature on record Thursday."22 "The glacier was officially declared dead in 2014 when it was no longer thick enough to move. What once was glacier has been reduced to a small patch of ice atop a volcano."23 "The video shows a young moose scaling some rocks on the cliffs of Nippers Harbour in Newfoundland, Canada. After tentatively toeing around the edge of the rocks, it takes the plunge and dives into the water."24 "[She] told the Indianapolis Star that after her husband fell [into the volcano], she climbed into the crater to rescue him."25 "Monarch butterflies-always at the top of everyone's favorite butterfly list-have returned to Yosemite National Park.... Unfortunately, you might not see huge swarms of them at the park. Western Monarch populations are down 86 percent from last year."26 "It is possible

that a freakishly warm Arctic, a staggering lack of sea ice, and even possibly smoke from unprecedented wildfires within the Arctic Circle...contributed to this lightning's unexpected appearance near the top of the world."27 "The M. family of Luther said holes have been popping up on the property over the years due to an underground pipeline, and people, vehicles and now the calf have fallen in."28 "[He] is also concerned that the number of visitors at these kettle ponds may increase as shark sightings continue to rise."29 "The Parks Department wildlife unit says squirrels are capable of finding their own food."30 "[She] said a gull swooped down between her hand and her face and snatched a Wheat Thin cracker from her fingers without leaving a mark."31 "The group has 15 goats in Sonoma foster homes that love to munch on blackberry and grape vines, green pioneer grasses, thorny shrubs and bushes, deer browse, chaparral, ceanothus, virtually all domestic plants, and evergreens such as redwoods, cypress and Monterey pine."32 "'I don't think it will be the humans. I think we'll go quite early on,' [she says] with a laugh."33

-borrowed and assembled by Paul Lisicky

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Taisia Kitaiskaia

There Is Nothing That I Want (Nichevo Ya Ne Hochu)

Ludmila Petrovna had been a dancer, and then a ballet instructor, and finally, after Soviet twists and turns, a teacher of informal art classes for the administrative employees of an American university. It was as if the customs officials, along with taking the music from her name, had shaken their heads at her occupation and stamped her papers with something more depressing and suitable for their country.

Ludmila found art menacing and knew to be menacing back, like a beast baring its teeth at another beast. Her students, who had signed up for the evening class seeking relaxation and enrichment, did not feel this way. They found Ludmila brutal and irrational and complained about her most recent assignment. "Create a papier-mâché sculpture of your lowliest self," Ludmila directed, walking through the classroom in the ghost of first position, a tendony, frizzy, middle-aged being in a tank top. "Depict your lumpish, sedentary office self, armpits both stale and acidic, brain grooved with the daily sound of plastic peeling from a frozen meal. Yes, exactly as you are now. But inside this hideous body, leave a small space with a hobbity door. The object you place in this cavity should represent what is most alive in you, for example a meatball or a marble that a cat has licked or your best sock, soaked in vinegar." The students stared at her with varying degrees of hatred, indifference, and fear, like they had watched her eat oranges in a cemetery at night, sitting on the fresh grave of a man who was not her relation, mashing the peels into the dirt to glow radioactive in her wake.

"This is reductive and prescriptive," said a bold young woman with short bangs cut straight across. "You don't get to tell me that my body is hideous and all I have inside is a wet sock."

Ludmila laughed with delight at the girl's boldness, and then felt sharply, extremely tired. The students were wrong about the cemetery oranges. The only orange thing about her was her hair, which she hadn't changed since Soviet days, continuing to dye it in the dubious old way and avoiding conditioner. It was one of the few things that had remained the same across her incomprehensible life, which felt longer than it should have. At first America had thrilled her with its picnic tables and endless aisles of ice cream, but in the end she was alone in a country that did not understand her, democracy had been an illusion, and human connection had become, somehow, no longer possible.

She left class early, telling the students to do what they want, and took the long way home through the park where one homeless man lived permanently and dogs gathered and dispersed fleas. Hungry and reeling, she sat under an old oak, facing the overgrown banks that led down to the little creek. The sky had a gothic romance to it, thundery and swollen. Ludmila spat out a citrus seed and wondered if she had, indeed, been eating oranges in a cemetery.

She saw a hairy backside sticking out of the bushes along the bank, it had a pig-like tail and looked awfully like a boar, though perhaps it was the black English lab, Samuel, who Ludmila hadn't seen in the park for some time. Dumb and low to the ground, he was always slamming into people's knees from joy. Perhaps Samuel had escaped his owner and stayed down by the creek, eating all the trash his heart desired. Perhaps Samuel had become a hog.

Ludmila went over to the little bridge above the creek to watch the boar more closely. His hooves were in the silt of the slow-moving water, and he had a red collar like Samuel, and a big snout, eating soft coffee cups, purple men's briefs, rotting vegetable matter. All of it was butter and mushrooms to the hog. Ludmila leaned against the railing with her eyes closed, listening to the hog grunt and shift. She felt the trees moving their shadows inside her.

Maybe all dogs at a certain stage of spiritual evolution become hogs, thought Ludmila. She heard more rustles and grunts and, as if her insight had unlocked some truer reality, opened her eyes to a creek lined with hogs, glamorous, rusty, blondeish, ginger, some smooth as fancy guinea pigs, others haughty and thick with knowledge. She felt that if she joined them, they would welcome her, nibble on her fingers and earlobes. To get closer to their warmth she stepped around the bridge and down to the creek. She crouched between the hot, bristly bodies of Samuel and a handsome blonde hog. She loved them. If she herself had to do the admittedly cruel art assignment she'd given to her students, she'd put a figurine of one of these pigs in the secret compartment. But that was over now, the 6:00 pm class—she'd never go again. She would become one of the hogs, growing hairy and pleased with them among the water snakes and dying fish, she would leave behind the corrupt

governments she'd known, the loneliness, she would join the anarchy of the hogs, there would be no hierarchies between them nor any rations, they would eat what they wanted and love each other without speaking, and when they tired, they would crowd closer together and bury their snouts under their hooves.

SHANGYANG FANG

Almost There, Oistrakh!

The violinist was given an eggplant to perform Bach's Chaconne. There was no violin. The violinist accepted the challenge willingly. For he believed that it was with will, Francis of Paola could step on water and cross the Strait of Messina to Sicily. So the violinist lifted the slender side of the eggplant, its emerald calyx, with his right hand, and then rested his chin on the thick buttock of that purple vegetable. He couldn't hide his discomfort. Despite his discomfort, he started to perform. Because if one believes one could walk on water, one walks on water.

The first few notes were almost inaudible. Quite frankly, I couldn't hear a thing. But because he was a prestigious artist, the performance was supposedly convincing—his right hand shifted up and down, as if severing the air, as if he labors long enough the thinness of air will give birth to an invisible bow. Nothing happened. Just his left hand gently massaged the soft neck of the eggplant. All these made the audience believe that the music was good, and was beyond our ears.

By the time the theme chords repeated, I could hear a slight sound. Squibs of it. Faint notes bloomed beside the artist's lissome fingers, dim as the flapping of mosquitos' wings. Then louder. Louder. Loud enough that for some reasons, I thought, the instrument was not a violin, but a cello. For the eggplant was lacquered, darkly violaceous, and was ripened, energetic at its prime season. The performance was concluded in an explosive fermata made possible by the musician's magnificent vibrato. To congratulate the musician, I tossed a few quarters. Then I went home.

From then on, all violin solos I heard in concerts were muted. All eggplants I encountered in markets started to sing.

Contingency on Singularity

1. One Night

Shostakovich went to the barn field, contemplating one note in his most recent symphony. He walked for two miles and the snow made everything forgettable. But the note, that note, he muttered, this shit is difficult. He then saw a troop of soldiers marching toward him like a flock of blackbirds. Their faces mudded, some were on stretchers. The moonlight flattens the field into a page of music sheet. After the troop left, he thought, this is not going to be a symphony. It is not. There he stood alone, alone in this barn field for 78 minutes. In case one forgets, the winter in Russia is very cold.

2. Tchaikovsky's Beard

Under the oppression of the Tsar, all his life, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky attempted to disguise his sexuality. This was the very reason he had skipped all Literature courses when he was a student at the Moscow Conservatory. To his knowledge, music exists, and music exists without the intention to mean, while literature, which resembles gossip, often induces endangerment as a consequence. Since then he had given up his dream of becoming a writer.

After the debut of his violin concerto in D major, a renowned critic told him with exhilaration, "Marvelous, my darling Peter, your music is joyful, tremendously gay." Poor Peter almost fell off his chair. He responded cautiously, "I thought my work was quite straight...forward."

That night, he slept very late. The window opened; the faint stars burnt patiently to light up a glass of silver milk at his bedside. He then imagined that he was in another land, at another time, speaking another language, where words were not meant for gossip, but music, music that smoothed one another's sharpest tooth, so that a man could kiss another man without being eaten.

17

HITCH (PLEASE DON'T LEAVE ME)

I learned the clove hitch when I was twelve. Mom stood at the lip of a canyon, leathery from sun and said, "Your turn, Princess." She hooked a carabiner through my harness and yanked the rope so hard it burned a new line into my palm.

"Climbing," I shook, repeating the command from memory.

"Climb away."

As a kid, I knew climbing knots like phone numbers. There was the bowline, double fisherman's, Flemish bend, figure-8 retraced, girth hitch. Now I love in knots. Claire was the stopper hitch. She wrapped herself around me until there was no more slack to give. Alex was a Kleimheist—almost too reliable, and so a bore to utilize. Jack was the butterfly knot. The two of us moved together, looping over and under and around each other so tight it seemed we'd merged; how a quick tug west unraveled us completely.

"Get out," he told me, so I met my mother on the side of a mountain. She was strapped in a harness and ready to fall. I pinched a beetle from her hair, cracked its shell until guts pushed out and I wiped the yellow paste across my cheek.

"You got me?"

She had a bag of pitons tucked in her shorts though we'd been busted for using them a few months back. Their spikes better anchored us to mountains. But they compromised the rock formation and so, especially in spots prone to rockslides, weren't allowed.

At dusk, she makes to start another route. The sun is a fat red yolk that spills along the horizon. I don't say anything, but I know she knows I'm scared.

"Let's go before the ranger comes." She ties a figure-8 so quick her knuckles whirr. "That blonde one? Takes the warm and fuzzy out of cunt."

We double-check the screws, the knots. She opens her mouth and dips her hands in chalk. I open the Nalgene and pour water over her tongue. My mom's so beautiful. Sometimes I look at her and think, I lived inside you. She climbs away from me so easily, it seems impossible. After a while, the rope grows slack. Either she's made it to the cave thirty feet below or the knot's untied, and parts of her are dripping from the trees like sundae fudge.

"Mom?"

My plea reverberates; each echo sounds more desperate than the next. I cringe. Concern disappoints my mother. When I was younger, she tried to raise me brave. Now I wait for her response. It's only a few seconds, but the silence seems intentional.

I can't help it. In the face of loss, I become undone.

By the time she says she's safe, my mouth has filled with blood. I bit my lip so hard, some's come off. I spit out salt, the chunk of annexed lip. I wonder if she remembers when I was a part of her; if in dreams, I return to her insides.

"Climbing," she yells.

"Climb away."

20

21

GOD IS A WOMAN, AND SHE IS GETTING OLDER (A POPULAR YOM KIPPUR SERMON)

The closest I have come to holy is on a mountain peak.

Strips of Utah desert conjure an oasis.

Water sluices canyon like a zipper.

I don't like to whine.

But death clings to me like a melancholy barnacle. Cancer bops about though, more often than not, organs I love combust in freak accidents. Someone caught on fire. Another person ran cross-country. During an important meet, she slipped on dew and snapped her neck. Last week, a childhood friend OD'd in Los Angeles.

This death was as entropic as the others because be real. We've all dabbled in cocaine.

When his mother sat shiva, she opened holes in her sweater and cried and cried.

What does an aging woman say about that?

Only that on Yom Kippur we think of sins. The leaky guilt that comes from life. I should ask Her how to mourn. Keep me out of deserts, away from high and shaky ground.

Instead I search for validation on the internet. It's become clear this week: I lack the stomach for performative grief. As I spent three hours searching photos of him & me to post to Instagram before I found I couldn't face it. He's still dead. But now no one knows I know, which means I never really cared.

Angel's Landing is the most famous trail in Zion National Park.

Its last two miles boast an elevation gain of 1,500 feet. You hold steel chains at points that brave men hammered into stone. Stand at a ninety-degree angle and protrude from the mountain like an untamed skin tag.

There is no WiFi on Angel's Landing.

Thus zero chance to compete in pain.

There is a view of the river, a constellation of smattered green.

By the time She summits, the difference between solitude and loneliness has clarified. It took a long time. She's out of shape. All jelly muscles and paper skin that sags around the bones.

I waited here because I thought that She could help.

Instead She sighed and said in the voice of a thousand sounds, Going down's the hardest part.

SAM BOYER

WHEN SEALS RETIRE

I don't know what my Uncle Mike was before, but as far as I or anyone else ever knew, he was a SEAL. For ten years, to be exact, longer than the average contract. "Most of them in reserve, as a medic, the keystone of any mission-capable team," he'd be sure to say. Bald and clean-shaved with thick forearms where muscle and wrinkles seemed to gnarl together, Mike looked like Popeye if he'd actually sailed.

When his left knee up and dissolved on him, Mike retired from the Navy and moved to a condo in Bowie with DeAnn, about ten minutes from where I grew up. Their rationale was that they'd be near family, but also close enough to make an emergency drive to DC if my uncle was called upon. That never happened. Instead, most days, he sat in his den on a puffy chair and pored over the monitor of his Dell, attending to a database, one he built, of everyone from '87 on who'd ever been a SEAL.

Every week he fielded requests from employers, anonymous coworkers or HR managers to verify the backgrounds of men claiming SEAL veteran status on their resumes. If I was visiting, he'd put the calls on speaker, and we'd listen to them squirm as he clicked and adjusted his glasses, calmly asking "What color helmet did you wear in Phase Two?"

If they couldn't answer, Mike would begin to percolate, pressing his hairy back against the floral print of his seat. "Not one of these shit-heads can pull up the first page of Google and see that the helmets are god-damn red."

Regardless of their answer, no one ever admitted to having never been a SEAL. Instead they would be busy at work and unable to talk until they got home. Or there would be a clerical error in my uncle's file, one they would fix with a quick fax later in the week. Mike found their panicked voices more comically pathetic than infuriating. "Bootcamp dropouts, Goodwill uniforms," he'd chuckle, "can't walk into Starbucks without running into one looking for a handout."

The smarter ones would say they served with Dave Johnson. Or Jake Smith. Or Mike Williams. They might even have their unit picked, some stories from Phase One. More than once I saw Mike interrupt with "Yeah, I

saw the Wahlberg movie, too." My uncle knew all the Smiths and Johnsons; he'd taken to calling them every few months, inevitably to find that they didn't know a self-defense guru in Fort Lauderdale, or a nursing director in Tampa. There were a lot in Florida.

Some wouldn't answer the questions at all. "Who put you up to this?" "I bled in the desert for this bullshit?" "I wanna see your credentials." They seemed the closest to normal: consultants, football coaches, sports bar owners, family men. My uncle called them the yellers, and his fury rose to match theirs. The shouting matches never really resolved; someone would hang up, and my uncle would be breathing heavy, disgusted murmurs rattling out of his voice like smoke from truck exhaust.

"Those are the guys with everything to lose," he'd tell me. "They'd sooner run you down with the family van than own up." The people calling Mike about this group were usually the wives.

He got so popular that he started charging, and so busy that he seldom left the den. Two years since the move and my uncle had no clue where the nearest grocery in Bowie was. DeAnn took care of that. But once, when she was out at Book Club, Mike left me to watch the house while he went to McDonald's.

The database was unprotected. It wasn't even online: just dozens of tabs with hundreds of names, roles, contract lengths and commendations on an Excel spreadsheet. When he got home, I waited until he was exactly halfway through his Big N' Tasty to ask if his name was in the database.

"What kind of question is that?" he said, snuffing out a cluster of fries in ketchup.

It was, of course. Only last year did I find out that Phase Two helmets are now blue. They've been that way since they added Phase Three in the '70s. It's on the first page of Google, but you have to scroll down.

RACHEL HENG

A DIFFERENT PLACE

The hairdresser asks me how I found her. I lie and say it was a friend, hoping she will not ask which friend. Though if she does, I will say: Anne Clarkson. She does not ask which friend. The truth is I have chosen the hairdresser for her low rates, she being the most junior stylist in the shop. Below the low rate was a short bio that explained her nickname was 'little ninja,' for her expertise with fine, flyaway hair. My hair is black and straight. In my mind this makes it easier to cut, but sitting before a mirror in a plastic shroud, I realise I may have been horribly mistaken.

While she works, the hairdresser tells me this town has changed a lot since she was a girl. There used to be more cowboys. There used to be troughs of water outside her high school, for the cowboys to leave their horses tied up while they were in class. Man, could those horses drink, she says. We look around the same age, maybe thirty, maybe younger, so this was a time not very long ago at all. I find it hard to listen because I am worrying about her expertise being fine, flyaway hair, but as it turns out, the haircut is very good. I shake my hair when she is done and my head feels lighter, my neck stronger. She asks if I want it styled, and if so, how. I say no at first but then I change my mind; I like the feel of her fingers on my scalp. I want to spend more time between her hands.

A year later, I go back. It is harder to make an appointment this time: the hairdresser's talents have been recognized, and she is no longer a junior stylist. It means the haircut will be more expensive, but even so, I am pleased for her. She remembers me warmly and asks how long has it been. Six months, I lie, ashamed at having let my hair grow wild for so long. It occurs to me too late that she can probably tell that it has been more than six months, she is a hairdresser, after all. All she says, though, is what a different place she was in six months ago. I ask how so. She was close to the end of a nine-year-long relationship then, she says. He was her college boyfriend. It got to the point where she felt like she was dating her best friend. I don't tell her that I myself, incidentally, am in a nine-year-long relationship. It often feels like we are best friends. She says that sometimes you just want more, you

know? She is so much happier now. She is seeing someone new and it's like, a real relationship.

I think about the things I know about my husband, what kind of man he is. A man who over prepares for being cold in theatres; a man who is very good at finding things I have lost, even things he has never seen before such as the blue rubber earbuds of my new headphones; a man capable of much cruelty, but in a way that I can understand. I too am capable of cruelty, he too understands. We too are best friends. Perhaps that is what makes a relationship work: an alignment of cruelties, a sympathy of kindnesses.

When the hairdresser dusts off my shoulders, I think about how my DNA is now lying around in a public place, lying around for the taking.

My haircut is not as good as the first time. In fact I do not like it at all; she has made the ends too thin and the layers too layered. The hairdresser tells me she got her nickname from climbing some mounted shelves to get a special conditioner for another hairdresser. Hence, ninja. So the thing about fine and flyaway hairs isn't true, I say. She laughs and shakes her head, but I tip her anyway. I leave resolving never to go back.

But after a week, I realise I love my haircut after all. Perhaps it has grown out, or perhaps I simply lacked the vision to see that it was a good haircut in the first place. As the months go by, I love it more and more. The shape evolves as it grows longer, yet the overall effect remains very pleasing. I receive many compliments.

TRACEY ROSE PEYTON

IGNORANCE

The three-hour class is supposed to show me how to recognize plants, how to forage for the edible while avoiding the poisonous. The knowledgeable man with the long brown ponytail is gentle in his explanations, pulling a red berry from a vine and popping it into his mouth. The class is held in a plant preserve a few miles from downtown that holds other classes that will teach me how to grow squash or tend tomatoes. I learn the individual names of plant parts and how to tell chaste tree from Texas mountain laurel, how to stick my fingers in the dirt to ascertain its health, and yet...

I have no memory. My home before this one was inside the cells of a woman who wrung the necks of chickens, who plucked bush beans and collards from the yard, who sowed seeds in dirt so red it looked like rust. And yet...

I know nothing but what I've read in books or on glowing computer screens, nothing but what has been written or published by those with the means to write or publish. I know nothing about the taste of red dirt and what it yields, when tended to or burned away, or how it gives under bare feet and swollen fingers. I know only that my not-knowing is considered progress.

Tracey Rose Peyton

CELIA IS LEAVING THE PARTY

She was going to risk the subway, but her feet hurt. Instead, she caught a cab along East River Drive, and it felt almost holy as dawn hit, the warming sun peeking at her through a light fog, the wind rushing through the window, the humidity of last night still clinging to the air.

The party was over, but she could still feel it on her. Her bare shoulders still felt warm from the night's kisses, from the man who held her neck in his hands when they danced close, how she spun and danced in the dark, the shifting light catching parts of her, but never all of her. She was herself and someone else, and her partner was too, both temporary and permanent, both himself and all the selves she may have ever wanted.

In the car, her tube top was still damp with sweat, her hair loose and blowing in her face, but she dared not tie it back. The wind was coming in so fast and full she wanted to be sucked in by it. Marvin Gaye was on the radio, singing "Why did I choose you, what did I see in you?" The song grew louder, an accusation rising up over her.

She felt like she was flying and she found herself waiting for the crash, for the car to drift off and collide into another, for something to slam her back into her body, into the worry that waited for her at home in the daylight. But things hadn't turned just yet. She could still be this girl with the wild hair, in the tube top dancing like no one ever had, with no other place to go or be than in this man's arms, with no sweeter thing to drink than whatever was in the red cup in her hand, with no earthly worries, like bills or late periods or sick mothers.

No, she could still be the freest thing you ever saw, so free some women hated her on sight, her excess offending them. She was "too much," it was often said, but only because she knew how soon it would become too little. How soon she'd too be invisible, a fleeting sweat stain on leather seats. And what then?

Would the wind remember her skin, would the light remember how it rested in her hair, on her shoulders? Would that man remember her body, its warmth, and how it felt similar but different from the women he knew before? And these streets, first Harlem and now Brooklyn and the Bronx, changing changing as quickly as light in the sky. Would it remember her footfalls, her breath, her hand on its fickle heart, her toes on the warm pavement? Or bodies like hers, the gait of their walk, the music that spun from their crowded blocks?

She knew the answer. A new body would replace this body, a new city would rise up and set itself upon this one, and all the Celias would be washed away, leaving only remnants behind. This hairpin, this tube top, this plastic sandal. What of these monuments, free of bronze and pedestal, set in the soil for all to see, worship, ignore.

TERRANCE HARVEY

THIRD VISIT

December 2, 2068

So they came up with a way that worked for some, but not so well for others. They shut down all the prisons in 2053, after trying many kinds of prison reform. Built thousands of spacecrafts, pushed thousands of shackled prisoners into them, and launched us into deep space.

These spacecrafts eliminated every problem the prison market was having. And traveling at light speed was considered a great benefit for prisoners: a way for us to serve our time while aging slowly. Many prisoners were ecstatic, those of us who didn't have family to love back on Earth. See, the problem wasn't only the itchy orange spacesuits, or worries about drifting into a meteor shower, or about being launched two hundred and fifty miles out of Earth's atmosphere (which is a shorter distance than a drive from San Antonio to Dallas). The problem about us prisoners aging slower than snails was you were forced to watch your toddlers turn into sick old men and die before you got a single gray hair. I fought, biting ears and headbutting, trying not to be sent into deep space, away from my Jahbari. So fucking what if traveling at light speed preserves me? I don't want to witness my son's death.

"Hobey, to the V.V. room. It's your day," said the space boss, swimming through the air toward me.

V.V. was video-visit. This was my third one. No one enjoys third visits. Your loved ones are usually dying of some sickness or suffering from a mental illness. My son Jahbari was only seven when I last held him, tickled him back on Earth when we had contact visits. The second visit I had with him, he was my age. Still had that little kid glare in his eyes.

This was the third visit. My Jahbari would probably be eighty.

"Hey, Daddy," Jahbari said, his face on the video wrinkled, sad bags thick as orange slices beneath his eyes. His body had a slight shake.

It was a total eclipse inside me, my sun was being darkened out of my life. My lips shivered like his body was. He found it hard to look in my eyes.

The tightness in my throat made my voice strain. "Hi, son. Daddy's so so sorry. I—"

"Time's up!" yelled the space boss.

SCOTT GLODEN

THE GREAT AMERICAN EVERYTHING

New Mexico is the fifth largest state in America. Average highs of ninety, average lows of twenty, the difference between night and day can carry forty degrees in some corners. It has the least amount of water area in the country, clocking in at a lean 230 square miles of landlocked pools. It's goddamn moony. My grandfather once told me, unprompted, that New Mexico has more cactuses than it has humans. He found a sense of longing in this fact, though he'd never been.

"Isn't that common?" I asked.

"Common?" he said.

"Aren't there more trees in Wisconsin than there are people?"

"It's a cactus. A cactus isn't a tree," he said.

I long remembered him saying this, but never saw its overlap in my life, too young to understand the mechanics of a future. Instead, I just kept growing up, just kept heading through the motions without his comment in mind: a solar eclipse in second grade; a participant ribbon at a fourth grade science fair; a last place finish at the eighth grade spelling bee on the word asparagus: a-s-p-e-a-r...; first kiss in tenth grade in a closet with someone on swim team; college; dishwashing; more college: a graduate degree in microbiology, and before I was handed that diploma I stood in the emergency room holding my grandfather's hand, watching the life pump in and out of him. I watched all the resilience a man could survive a life with stockpiled and erupt in one last scene, in a presentation to his grandson that said you fight you fight,

When I arrive in New Mexico, however, he's been dead five days, and there's not a standing cactus for a hundred miles in any direction. I ask someone at the first restaurant I stop, which is partly attached to the train station.

"Cactus? Sure," a waitress says, and walks away into the kitchen. A moment later, she reemerges with her apron loosed and cuffed around her wrist, and leads me through the exit by the bathrooms.

"See?" she says. "Can't miss them."

Out ahead of me, dots of sage and brittlebush tier in the distance. Squinting through the sun, hundreds of cacti slowly become apparent, though none are higher than a boot, all are swollen mounds of needles buried in the rocks.

"Oh," I say. "I was thinking of taller cacti, columnar."

"Saguaro," she says.

"Yes, exactly."

From behind me, she reaches over and places her hands on my shoulders, guiding my frame until my feet point westerly.

"You're one state short," she says, and goes back inside.

*

Truthfully, I don't know why I'm in New Mexico. Not an escape, not a terminus; it all rests on a comment made by a grieving woman. At my grandfather's repast, I was sitting beside my grandmother on her blue leather couch attempting to spoon-feed her cold cuts. After failing to do so, I looked for small talk, and thought to share this memory of the cactus, the same one I've always kept neatly folded in that mush of memory you don't ever touch. I said:

"Do you remember him saying that?" to which my grandmother only shrugged, before saying:

"Well, he would know. He lived there."

"He lived in New Mexico?" I asked, and silence—a concrete-poured-down-her-throat silence. For the next twenty minutes, we sat there until she slowly began to pick at the bologna.

On the drive home, I asked my mother and brother if they knew what she was talking about, about his living out west. Both just laughed.

"He flew to Niagara Falls for your aunt's wedding, and never left the state again," my mother said. "Wait," she said. "That's not true. Manny, what did he tell you the other week?"

"He told me he once crossed into Michigan's waters. He said that counted," Manny said.

And that was that.

Only, a day later, the night before I'm set to fly back to Tennessee, Manny, as little brothers will, entered my room without asking, and, as little brothers do, shook me awake.

"Look," he said. An inch off my nose, Manny stretched tight a piece of computer paper. From my bedside I fumbled on glasses, and slowly the snaking blurs of text grew into discrete, pinpoint sans serif:

Miranda, Felix

Age: 24

Registered: Democrat, 1956

County: Santa Fe

"Can you believe this?" he said.

"You don't actually think this is him?" I laughed, turning the paper over to see if any other information was listed: address, phone, height, anything, but it was only this line of everyday evidence.

"Of course I fucking do. I paid \$59 to expedite some online public records service."

"Manny, he married grandma when he was 18. They had two kids by this age."

"So? Maybe he skipped out on them—just for a time. Maybe that's why she didn't talk about it."

"Okay—let's say that's true. He abandons his family, moves across country, registers to vote in a primary, and, what? Drives back?"

"Why not?"

"I've lived in Tennessee for seven years and still have a Wisconsin license. People don't register to vote with a motel address."

Manny squats down from his excitement.

"Fuck. An hour ago sixty dollars felt like nothing to solve a mystery."

And, again, that should have been that. Your little brother mistakenly ventures beyond a paywall on a bad lure. Yet, the next morning, I woke to three new sheets of paper spread across my bed: a donation to the American Red Cross by Felix Miranda of Santa Fe; a New Mexico landline number for F. Miranda dated active in 1956; and a newspaper article whose fuzzily loaded caption identified a 'Felix Miranda' supposedly third in line from left to right. That last clipping is an image traumatized by sun exposure and

scanner streaks. It's as reasonably a picture of our grandmother as it is our grandfather, but something recognizable is contained, some private feature of lineage I can admit to if I allow myself. On this last piece of paper, Manny had written:

"Maybe this mystery is just going to cost a lot more."

*

Inside the restaurant, I order a plate of tacos and settle into a booth. From the depot, I'd recovered a handful of pamphlets from one of those magazine racks that only ever exist at a depot. The Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, the International Museum of Folk Art, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts; each laminate page inviting an appropriate distraction, a stay of execution for an impulsive airline change fee with no legitimate second foot.

"Was it just the cactus that brought you?" the waitress asks, refilling my water.

"Kind of," I say.

"Who told you they were out here?" she asks.

"My grandfather."

"Grandparents mix up that sort of thing. I had a grandmother who believed in ghosts."

"Sure," I say.

"Here long?"

"Just the night, I think."

"And you came in winter. No one comes in winter."

Assessing the stack, she lands a finger on the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, sliding it out from the others like a magic trick.

"That's the one to see," she says, and moves on to other customers.

In late November, Santa Fe is an ice rink. No snow, no textured cold, but the air is sharp, and the angles of the desert unknowable, frictionless. From every vantage, it looks like a dimension that leads lengthwise into the past.

The city's main square is a tourist bunker, one catchall peddler after the next, with turquoise and leather in overwhelming demand. Thinking I should have something to show from my trip, I concede to purchasing a small throw

rug, something just larger than a doormat. It has that overstated geometry and diluted, sunset color you can't help but associate with the Southwest.

"Is it a gift?" the cashier says.

"Maybe," I say, reasoning it's a gift to myself, and without asking, he carefully rolls the rug, and wraps it in dark, vellum paper, tying on two lashes with shoelace knots at either end. With the packaging, the rug is too fragile to fold in half, and too wide to keep tucked under my armpit, and so I walk the square with it leaned against my shoulder like a resting bayonet.

*

Manny is six years younger than me, which has set us on different paths. We've always existed one school apart, no overlap in interests, friends, even love. Yet, I possess more memory around Manny's life than my own. In fact, he is the first memory I can link up without dispute, as I waited for him outside the delivery room with my grandparents. That's where it all begins, inside a small hospital room, where a nine-hour labor became a 45-day entreaty to the Gods in which we do not believe to spare my brother's life.

"Hyper-vent-ill-ate," my grandmother said. "It's like when you stop running and can't catch your breath. Only he's not running, he's trying to sleep."

What caused this ailment was, evidently, luck. You either have it or you don't, and Manny's chromosomes just turned out to be a big red X.

When it was determined he would survive, be able to manage this syndrome we couldn't pronounce, we all went home and made a plan. My parents instructed me to all the warning signs, which carefully added up to Manny going breathless, Manny going blue, Manny going blue and breathless.

"What do you do?" my mother asked.

"I vell."

"What next?" my father said.

"I push his chest."

"What first?" he corrected.

"I prop his neck, then push his chest."

"Good," my mother said.

Only, in the next three years everyone somehow turned on each other. Manny required a CPAP machine, which whistled all night, the feedback

sailing through the speakers of the baby monitor so that we never slept. During the day, there was no childcare service we could afford, and so my father began traveling for better paying work, taking on months-long shifts in remote Pacific ports. Each time he came back more harried, more exhausted, until he didn't come back, and my mother didn't seem interrupted enough to look for him. My grandparents moved into a house only ten minutes away, my grandfather retiring early: he became an unobvious stay-at-home father whom Manny turned to calling dad the day the first syllable broke. There just never came a point in time for any of us to correct him. It wasn't until his funeral that my mother and I realized she possessed one son, and one sibling; that I was an only child; that Manny and I were perhaps always cousins. We were plagued with wrong definitions.

*

At the square's center, there's a sizable group of people standing in a half-moon around the gazebo. Their focus is a woman with deep, black hair two steps up, her head tilted back and projecting. As I edge closer, I realize it's a tour, as she spits out one state fact after another, from the yucca flower to the greater roadrunner, all with rote, dismissive pleasure, before moving on to the broader points of discussion:

"My people are Acoma," she says, her hands feeling her heart. "The Acoma are one of the few tribes to still occupy pueblo villages that were home to their ancestry."

"How tall's a roadrunner?" someone asks.

"Little," she says hurriedly. "Each year, the Acoma recommit to the pueblos, not in act of pilgrimage, but with purpose and reverence to the natural world that provided for our kin."

"Are they easy to find?" the same voice follows up, presumably about the roadrunners.

"All over," the woman says, with a flick of her wrist. In turning their heads away from her, the group begins to spy handfuls of roadrunner as they smart to and fro, kicking aloft the clay with little punches from their feet.

"The pueblo to which we call home still rests on the same mesa, over thirty stories high." "Is it near Abiquiu?" a new voice asks, and several heads turn with interest. "No," the woman answers. "It's nowhere near Abiquiu," and descends the gazebo, leading the group away from the square defeated.

A few stragglers huddle away from the crowd, including the man who had last asked a question. Off whatever impulse, I come between their group.

"Excuse me," I say. "What's in Abiquiu?"

"Uh-bee-kwu," he says.

"Sorry, Abiquiu," I repeat. "What's there?"

"The flower lady," the man says. "That's where she lived. Christ, what's her name?"

"Georgia O'Keeffe," his wife says.

"Georgia O'Keeffe," he repeats on her heels.

"Oh," I say. "People really seem to love her here."

"You don't?" the man says verging on annoyed, but doesn't wait for an answer, ambling off with his wife in tow, who tugs his arm toward a card table of hammered jewelry.

*

An hour more, and I'm ready to give up carrying the rug. Santa Fe is small, but with the yearly intake of tourists, is filled with hotels. I find one opposite a block of art galleries that's an entire pueblo recreation with largely lit terraces, fawning up-lights, and wooden ladders leading in and out of Shakespearean windowsills. Somehow, the hotel is more affordable than any hotel I can think of back in Nashville.

"What brings you to Santa Fe?" the attendant asks, checking me in.

"My grandfather," I say.

"Oh, does he live in town?"

"No, he passed away recently, but he talked a lot about New Mexico."

"You're here to scatter his ashes!" she says cheerily, clicking away on her keyboard.

"He was buried, actually."

"Shame. The desert's a beautiful place to scatter ashes."

I nod, realizing that sounds true. Even the word scatter, to be dispersed, particulate and windswept; it suggests an immaterial finish. I wasn't even

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paying attention to the direction the casket faced during the memorial. I don't even know which way his feet point.

"That's one room, two double beds, check out at eleven tomorrow. Oh, I forgot to ask, would you like your room to be near the other Miranda?"

"What other Miranda?"

"A Mr. Manuel? He checked in an hour ago, also from Wisconsin...I just assumed—"

"I'm sorry," I say, and hold up a hand. Manuel, I think. I don't even recognize the sound of his name outside the curlicue diminutive.

"Could you call that room, actually?" and the concierge dials out the extension, passing it along when it begins to ring.

"Hello?"

"Manny," I say, though it comes out with inflection.

"Bernie? Jesus. Did mom tell you to check in on me? I've literally been out of the state for all of four hours."

"Mom knows you're here?"

"Of course! You got her all freaked out in the car, when she realized I've never left the state either. She practically forced the plane ticket on me."

"And you picked Santa Fe?"

"It was all I could think of. I thought, fuck it, I'll go look for more clues—Wait, what do you mean here?"

Manny's room is on the highest floor, and has views that point toward the square, though it isn't high enough to actually overlook. He has a king bed with a backpack tossed on it, the minibar already exposed. His hair is wet and matted down into bangs, with his towel wrapped around his neck like a horseshoe. Instantly, I recall our childhood, and the twice-daily showers Manny used to insist upon, always working to improve some angle of his health, under the constant impression he was born jeopardized.

"So you came around to the idea?" he says.

"No," I say, "I honestly don't know why I flew out here." Shuffling around the room, I drop my bags on a corner of the bed. "There's literally hundreds of Felix Mirandas. I'm not sure how your idea made any sense."

"We'll see. City hall opens at eight on Monday," he says, to which I have no response, this odd inkling of pride creeping over me like a fog.

"What's that?" Manny asks, pointing to the rug, and I push it his way.

"Can I open it?" he asks, but doesn't wait for my reply, carefully untying the ribbons, and rolling back the paper in motion with the rug. "Jesus," he says. "What an ugly fucking rug."

"I know," I say.

"How much was it?"

"Two-seventy-five."

"Seriously? You paid \$300 for this little rug?"

"It all happened quickly. I thought I'd send it to mom."

"What's she going to do with an ugly rug?" Manny demands.

"Want to get out of this room? I could use a drink that's not miniature," I say.

"Sure. Though, I have plans already."

*

The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum sits unassumingly outside the downtown square, a slice of modern architecture slipped neatly between two rock-faced insurance agencies. Winter, yes, but a steady outflow of visitors is visible even as we approach. It's also fifteen dollars a head.

"What a rip," Manny says. "You close in thirty minutes. Do you prorate?"

"For sixty, you can become a member, and that comes with a free guest pass."

"It says here that Santa Fe residents only cost forty-five," Manny says, pointing to a sign on the desk, as if the receptionist would be unaware.

"Do you live in town?" she asks.

"No, but our grandfather used to. We're here trying to find out about his past. Does that get us anything, like a family discount?" he asks, and the woman smiles.

"One resident membership for two cute grandsons," she says, and Manny smiles big, indicating for me to pay.

"You live in Wisconsin?" she says, handing back my license and credit card.

"Just born there," I say, and the woman puts her hand on my wrist.

"Georgia was born in Wisconsin."

"I didn't know," I say.

"Well of course you didn't know-that's how kismet works."

The museum is clean and white, a blank-check environment unfurled in every direction, with those patent leather benches and the costume-sized buttons the centerpiece of each room. In other words, it's every museum. However, for the end of a day outside tourist season, it's still crowded, legs and murmur aswarm.

"It's packed," Manny says. "Are these locals?"

"No idea," I say.

The rooms are laid out chronologically: here's a picture Georgia made at age five for her mother's refrigerator; here's a still life Georgia's college professor told her wasn't any good; here's a scrap of charcoal shapes someone dug out of Georgia's wastebin when she wasn't looking; and, finally, *here* is Georgia O'Keeffe, resident mutineer of convention.

The latter series is the mainstay of the museum, with every flower painting you've either seen before or strangely recognize, all occupied by the pyramidal forms of onlookers. Each corresponding placard goes on to describe the flowers' clefts and innuendo.

"To think," Manny says, "she spent fifty years explaining to men that they weren't vaginas, only to arrive to an era when women *needed* them to be vaginas."

"I don't think I know as much about Georgia as people would like," I say.

"Didn't you have Ms. Prokes for art?"

"Sure."

"She was obsessed. That whole room was covered in prints."

"It was?"

"She had that giant one behind her desk. It was a cross, zoomed in really close. The painting is nearly all black except for this little sliver of sunset. Remember?" he says, which I thinly recollect, or my brain conjures up a makebelieve image for me to go from.

"That was a long time ago."

Manny pushes me to the side in a hurry, and I see his arm reach across the gallery floor and find the woman who checked us in.

"Excuse me. The painting with the large black cross, and the little line of sunset, do you know it?"

"Of course," she says.

"Is that one here?"

"I'm afraid not. Though, if you're interested, members can request art shares with the museum. If you put one in today, you might be able to see it here the summer after next."

"Wow, only two summers," I say.

"Don't listen to him. How do we put in the request?" Manny asks.

"Well, if two summers is too long, maybe you'd like to visit where she was when she painted it?"

"Let me guess, Abiquiu?" I ask.

"Yes! Well-Ah-bi-que," she corrects.

*

From the airport in Albuquerque, Manny had rented a small Kia Rio, and paid for full features: satellite radio, roadside assistance, a window-mounted GPS, even insured it for up to two million dollars in damages. On Sunday morning, I'm looking over the receipt after loading my luggage into the backseat. The plan being to drive to Georgia's property, take a picture, and head back for the airport, where I would take the only direct flight home.

"Why'd you pay for all this extra stuff?" I say looking over the sheet.

"Mom reserved it, you know her," he says, fiddling with the GPS.

"Okay, what are the coordinates?" he says.

"Just type Abiquiu."

"Coordinates are more romantic, more thrill-seeking. Can't you get them from the map she gave us?"

I unfold the map from the gift shop, and trace my eyes around the route. A goofy dotted treasure line in permanent marker smudged against the laminate creases. On it, cartoon imagery simplifies each town: a bottle of sarsaparilla in Albuquerque, a plated burrito in Taos, an adobe chapel in Los Cruces. Abiquiu is absent of markers.

"It doesn't have coordinates. We just drive north and it's on the left," I say.

"What is this world coming to," he says, and shifts out of park.

The drive is flat and treeless: long bridges of rock slink by in the distance, while the foreground remains patterned with low, desiccated plants. At one point, we open a game of desert I Spy when we see a real-life tumbleweed, but

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no other clichés surface. The night before, I had searched out the painting on my phone at Manny's request. It's just as Manny described, but beneath the arms of the cross are rows of hummocks, or sand dunes. They ripple outward in the painting, like the bottoms of egg cartons. As far as we can see, however, there are no hills like these in New Mexico.

"Cactaceae: A Comprehensive Guide to the Great American Cactus?" Manny says, rummaging around in my bag.

"I bought it at the airport."

Manny begins to flipbook the pages, and I regret immediately agreeing to switch drivers at every gas stop.

"'A columnar cactus generally does not flower until 35 years of age, and branches may not appear until the ages of 50 to 70 years; though many may not grow fruitful arms until 100 years. The average life span of an adult columnar is between 150 and 175 years. However, some biologists reason that some varieties will live beyond 200 years.' Was this book \$300, too?"

"I thought there'd be more cactuses here. Tall ones," I say.

"Saguaro," Manny says.

"How does everyone know that?"

He shrugs and, from his pocket, pulls out a small plastic device that looks like a pennywhistle. He raises it to his lips like a keepsake, and puts it back away.

"What's that?"

"My inhaler."

"What happened to your old inhaler?"

"Gas inhalers don't push medicine into the lungs any faster than these. It's quiet. Sexier," he says with a pause: "Cheaper, mostly."

The night before, as I lay in the king bed next to Manny, his CPAP machine divided us. In the years since we last shared a room, this device had also been made sexier, barely registering a noise, its tubing outlet no longer an oxygen mask, but a snorkel that suctioned against Manny's nose. In seeing it, another memory released, from when I was eight and Manny barely two, our father having just left for another tour. I remembered, in the middle of the night, going to Manny's barely-a-bed, the thrum of that old machine kicking on and off like an accordion. I saw it as the reason he kept leaving, the reason we never slept.

I pulled off the breathing mask, the elastic quickly untucked from his tiny head. I put it next to him, right beside his pillow, and even though the machine was still running, it was like hearing the world anew. Maybe if it stayed off this one time, Manny wouldn't need it again. Maybe if it stayed off, he'd come home, wrap his arms around us. Maybe if it stayed off, we wouldn't need Manny at all.

I don't know whether or not I was going to put it back on, but from the doorway our grandfather emerged. He returned the mask to Manny's face, delicately looping it over his ears, and pointed me back to bed. He never said a word about what I'd done, or considered I'd take it off again. Though, lying in bed last night, the soundlessness of the machine's pulse, I wasn't thinking about why my grandfather never said anything, I wasn't even thinking about how he came to be standing at the door. All I thought was what it was like to hold his hand that final time, the oxygen mask pinched over his nose—did he hold my hand and remember what I had done?

"We're here," Manny says.

"Already?"

"You turned autopilot as soon as I started reading your cactus dictionary," he says, pointing us toward an overlook.

*

Manny gets out of the car and stretches. He looks in both directions, and then over to me. He doesn't say anything, just scratches his head. A small hike away, in Manny's background, is a pueblo outhouse. Windowless, vacant, it's roughly molded together like a tomb. In front of it are three wooden crosses that front a rocky declivity.

"That," Manny points, and he begins to lead us forward. However, at a few hundred feet off, it's clear this looks nothing like the painting. The crosses aren't even set facing west, but south, so that no line of horizon would even be visible. Likewise, the hills are not hills, but patches of shrub and feather grass.

Near enough, Manny plants his hand on the middle cross.

"No way this is it," he says.

"What other cross could it be?"

"There has to be somewhere else."

46

I turn around, pretending to dizzy myself, but am fine giving in. "I think this is it," I say.

"You are just about the worst brother detective there is," he says. "You don't want to find our grandfather's secret life, you don't want to find Georgia O'Keeffe's cross. You can't even find a tall cactus."

"In my defense, I only came looking for the cactus."

From behind Manny, a dozen people surface from a small, wizened ledge of rock. Their heads peculiar blurs of life; they peer over the outlook, and then disappear.

"What about up there?" I ask, and Manny turns just as the group withdraws.

"Up there?" he repeats, and I push us forward across a craggy footpath, which eventually links to a set of stairs made from railroad ties, marching us into the sun.

At the top, dozens of tourists, all bundled up, are spaced across the property. The center of their shared interest is a ranch home, with perfectly massaged right angles, and wall-wide windows. Immediately it's clear that this is Georgia's home. Or was.

Between the herds of onlookers, docents scurry them in and out of rooms, survey her gardens, her favorite resting spots. Each group that passes by seems more enamored than the previous. Manny pulls out his inhaler and takes two more breaths at the top, leading us momentarily into a tour group, before breaking away toward the house's front door, his arm tugging on my jacket.

"I think we're supposed to pay," I say, looking for a kiosk.

"Are you kidding? We're members," and Manny leads us in.

The possessions we find are all cold and indirect. Flat chairs, flat tables, no rugs. It's a home that's never been cozied, and maintains the desired world of her paintings. Almost too purposefully. Possibly this was how she lived, but more likely everything persists how someone else envisioned a person to be. Someone without a toothbrush cup, or ringlets of stained water at their bedside. Someone who didn't grow frustrated, or draw lousily, or even splatter food when she cooked. Someone who just woke up and painted the sunset, the flowers, the crosses, and lived every day as an elegy.

I look over to Manny who is standing beside her bed, which sits exposed in the main room. He motions secretly for me, but there's no one else in this part of the house.

"What?" I say, reaching him, and he points to the bed.

"Lie down," he says. "I'll take our picture."

"In the bed?" I ask, but Manny is already glancing around in a huff, and getting himself situated, trying not to press any dirt from his boots onto the coverlet.

"Come on," he says. "One picture, we'll be up and out." I look around the rooms, and through the corner windows see out onto the courtyards and swimming pool, where visitors visor their eyes to better see the views, to playact what she saw.

"One picture. That's all," he says.

The two of us crunch together in a bed half the size of the hotel's, our shoulders pressed like logs. Manny pulls his phone from his pocket, and positions it above our heads. At first it faces the ceiling, but he flips the camera around, so that we can see ourselves in its screen. The camera autofocuses us in place; it centers our features, and holds them there for a moment, where we both pull back the same smile.

"Count of three," he says, but immediately takes the picture.

*

When Georgia O'Keeffe first arrived in New Mexico, she couldn't find any flowers. Amid the dunes and rock cover, she claimed all she found were bones. Barrels worth of horse and cow heads, skeletons too eroded to puzzle back together. Each morning, she'd walk a different vector of earth, trying not to repeat the same line. Sometimes she could carry only a single vertebra. Other times, she amassed gentle armfuls of remains. Back at her house, she'd pile them out front, a mound slowly linking together as more arrived.

Years later, just ahead of her 90^{th} birthday, she gave a series of interviews for PBS. About the bones, she said, "It never occurs to me that they have anything to do with death."

"They are very lively," she said.

Three hours later, and I'm sitting in the departures terminal, one rug rolled up and slipped under the main flap of my backpack like a small sleeping bag, when Manny texts me.

Not thirty minutes earlier he'd dropped me off out front, goofily smiling in my direction, like I was somehow a child he was releasing back into the world.

"Well," he said, "Sorry we didn't get any cactus pictures."

"That's okay," I said. "Driving straight back?"

"I don't know," he said. "Mom booked the hotel room for a week. In that time I could probably see every city in this state."

"Maybe you can find the cross she was looking at," I said, which Manny didn't respond to right away, before optioning his eyes to agree he might.

"You okay?" I asked, which, harmless enough, was not a question I was prone to asking.

"What do I do if it's him," he said. "Even if I find an address, it won't tell me anything."

"Maybe you're just supposed to look," I said. "I flew out here too."

"Yeah, but to see some really old cactus," he said, which I couldn't totally disagree with in the moment. Though, wading through the terminal, I realized I'd flown here for my grandfather, yes, but also for my grandmother, for Manny, for an entire family of reasons I could neither parcel out nor hold all at once.

Sliding open my phone, I see Manny has texted me:

"There. Proof we were both here," along with the picture of us in Georgia's supposed bed, which can barely be seen, which has no historic marker or significance, and could just as well be the bed of a stranger some thousand miles away. I move my thumbs across the image and zoom in against our faces. Only, the more I look at the picture, the more I see my grandfather's face in ours, as if aged in reverse and brought into the future. It's saying the same thing it did the last time I saw him, his hand pushing into mine: you fight you fight you fight.

OLD DOG, OLD TRICK

Arthur's wife, Kate, passed a week short of forty-four years of marriage, most of it pleasant, punctuated by occasional periods of passion so powerful they could not keep their clothes on for a week at a time. These alternated with doldrums in which neither could fill a sail. Soon enough, though, the children would pronounce some ridiculous truth that drew both their laughter or she would require his help with a sticky cabinet or he hers to coax free a sliver and they would be what they had always been.

But cancer visited her a third time and the two previous emptied her fuel to struggle. Her face became bone with skin, aside from her alive eyes.

"Make sure you buy a case of champagne," she told him.

"You don't even like it," Arthur replied.

"But the kids do."

"They planning a visit?" Arthur asked.

"I imagine they'll attend my funeral."

Arthur rose and returned from the kitchen with the coffee pot. He topped off his cup, then hers and added a squirt of the fancy cream she favored.

"I don't mean to be morbid," she said.

"Natural to wonder," Arthur replied.

She reached across the coffee table and touched his cheek. "I'm not wondering," she said. "It's nice to be certain about something finally."

"I don't want you to go," he told her.

"But I am going."

Her hand remained where it was and she bent and kissed him for a long spell. "You are a generous man," she told him. "And you are going to allow me this."

"I don't think so," Arthur said.

"You will," Kate said. After a week filled with guilt and television, she discovered the champagne in the pantry along with toilet paper and flour and the rest of her list.

Their unmet anniversary he attended a graveside service with their two grown children. The three didn't speak—not because they were a stoic or

awkward family, but because there was little left unsaid, or perhaps, because, alone with one another the memory of the ceremony continued to fill their heads with her and each respected the others enough not to interrupt.

The grandchildren and in-laws met them at the Eagles for a potluck meal. Though it was just past noon, Arthur unloosed the champagne corks and filled plastic cups and everyone drank. He, himself, had quit alcohol many years before, but permitted himself one glass for solidarity.

A neighbor boy, Jess Evans, occupied a chair next to him. His father and mother had divorced recently. It had been difficult for the boy. Kate baked him treats and he hovered at their door when his mother was absent for her grocery store shift and his father's empty trailer house turned his only other option. She and Arthur taught him cribbage and Chinese checkers. When he became accomplished at them, Arthur removed a marble chessboard from a drawer and lined the pieces—walrus tusk and onyx—and he and the boy began a running match.

Arthur had competed similarly with each of his children. From the beginning, he'd refused to return their moves and bullied them into positions that methodically pinched the breath from their king. When they angered him, he eviscerated their armies with cold, efficient murder. Many instances, each had refused to play any longer, but with Kate's coaxing, they returned to the board. After many defeats, the tallies under their name began to collect in fives and tens. His son once ended their daily game in three moves and refused his father a rematch. His daughter was less brutal but a peerless defensive player who seemed to tarry inside his mind and deny him moves a half hour in the planning. When she and her brother played, which was rarely as neither could tolerate losing to the other, the games were great collisions of near perfectly opposed wills. They lasted hours and the pleasure Arthur took from the contests was evident even to the children. Jess was not as quick a study, but he was curious. He and Arthur replayed games to reveal his mistakes, an exercise he had not offered his own children.

Each weekend for a month following the funeral his son traveled 600 miles and his daughter half that to look after him. In the living room, the children read stories and tapped at computer screens. There was even a game for the cat, they told him, little fishes it batted until the image vanished and returned elsewhere. The adults bore long, dull silences until Arthur

informed his children they had done right by him and now their duties at home required their attention. They continued to phone weekly, which was far more manageable for all.

Without them, Arthur occupied himself without trouble. Managing the post office for thirty years had left him acquainted with most everyone in the small town and his demeanor in his work—he had delivered mail to the disabled on his own time as there were only PO boxes in his portion of the county—encouraged the Lions and Elks Lodges to add him to their rolls, where he coordinated Christmas food drives and the annual white cane collection for the blind. Between, he shuttled the ancients to the senior center for their meals. He joined the volunteer fire department and was elected chief. In this capacity he organized a yearly drill on abandoned farmhouses. One January freeze when an electrical short put to flames a former boarding house that two young families shared, the department rescued three men, two women, four children and a pair of dogs before the place was consumed. Three missing cats stirred some panic, but they had escaped into a vacant lot, where they were discovered prowling for mice the next morning.

His chess contests with Jess turned fewer, and finally none. From his own yard, the boy would watch Arthur pass. He waved at first, then ignored him, hurt, Arthur knew, though had no idea how to ease his unhappiness. Then, one summer afternoon in Arthur's garden four years later, Jess appeared as if conjured. He'd twisted shut the water spigot. Arthur examined the sprayer in his hand. His shoes were deluged and his soaked pant clung to his skin. The grass under lay as if pummeled by a great wind and the water had plowed a furrow through Kate's roses.

"You want to go inside?" Jess asked.

Arthur nodded. He followed the boy to the slider. Yellow light splintered through the glass. He didn't recall light being that color. When the boy pulled the handle the runners squealed. He needed to clean them, Arthur thought. He sat in the recliner. The boy switched the television to the all news station. He disappeared then returned with a sweat suit and socks.

"I'm not inclined to undress in front of others," Arthur told him.

The boy considered the matter. "You unbuckle your belt and I'll be back later to check."

Then the boy was out the door. Through the glass, Arthur watched him coil the hose and hook it in the proper place.

*

Arthur's citizenship was not always praiseworthy. Though he was of average height and thin and wiry, from second grade the school expelled him numerous instances for fighting and after graduation, he served three jail stints for assault. The last, the judge told him to move to a different county after his term and start fresh then sentenced him to six months. Arthur felt no guilt and no fear as he departed court in chains and a jumpsuit. Then, in the back benches, he recognized the man he had beaten, his face a yellow misshapen gourd. Arthur averted his gaze. A beaten man is a terrible sight, stripped of ideas, honor, courage, until he remained only alive and afraid.

The children cowered. The children's mother, though, stared at Arthur with such moral conviction it staggered him. He contemplated her certainty of his black soul, a certainty he had never known, and he envied it. It was not hatred nor forgiveness; it was not religion, nor was it faith in man's law. It was nothing he had encountered.

One hundred and eighty days he deliberated. Free, he avoided bar rooms and liquor and met Kate and when the anger gnawed him he split wood or took hour-long drives or fished some place he was unlikely to encounter others.

His recent spells of memory reminded him of those rages. They existed in his absence, like a clouded sleep from which he couldn't wake.

A visit to the tavern and the fishing store and the senior center argued he was fine. When he drove, locals recognized his Dodge Lumina and waved or nodded. Sometimes, he would orbit his own block five or six times before settling into the driveway. Occasionally, it wasn't his own.

One morning, Jesse discovered Arthur parked in the correct driveway without the car running. He watched for several minutes, then approached the driver's side. "You ok?"

"Can't get the key to turn," Arthur told him.

"That place you're poking it is the cigarette lighter. Put it in that silver harness on the steering column and she'll go."

Arthur examined his blistered fingers and opened the car door.

"I can drive you anywhere you need," Jesse said.

"I appreciate that," Arthur said. "But where should I go?"

*

Jesse's mother phoned Arthur's daughter and the family descended upon him once more. He assured them he was fine—the spells were the exception not the rule—yet he appeared to them confused. The children remained a week during which Arthur visited specialists in Spokane who ordered x-rays and inserted him into a tube that hummed and growled. The pictures revealed a brain checkered with blank, infertile places where reason could find no purchase. Soon, he would be what was left: that was his diagnosis.

Neither the doctor nor the children spoke to Arthur. Perhaps he was vanishing, just a little at a time. No one knew he was present and soon no one would recognize when he wasn't. He could not be on his own, the doctors agreed. For periods, he might remain cogent but no one could predict when he would suddenly wander off or be helpless against a burning stove or a broken glass.

Like a stray dog, Arthur thought. He enjoyed dogs. He liked the notion of joining them and waited in reverie while the doctor and his children conversed.

That night, the children debated which of them would take him in, but his spin-the-bottle memory suddenly landed on clarity. He refused both notions. They were relieved, Arthur recognized and their relief turned his own. His eyes welled with tears. His daughter folded her arms around him; his son patted both his shoulders.

*

A pall descended over the town for a week or so as Arthur's presence was missed and word passed that he'd retired to the care center. No one visited. None knew what to say. Arthur understood that.

The home bustled with patients. Attendants shuttled to doctors or dentists or outings to bowl or explore town's seasonal decorations. Canned music competed with the sounds of televisions, each room, it seemed, tuned to a different channel. At night the nurse's padded shoes licked the linoleum

and he wondered where they had traveled. Finally, Naomi Walters who had served as town librarian now lurked the doorways where she unzipped men's pants and reached inside to tug their privates. The place seemed its own television show, with the volume too high, the colors too bright and the story incomprehensible.

*

Arthur broke dishes. Good-natured nurses called him a clumsy Gus and the doctors assumed he was suffering from an occasional palsy. However each instance, Arthur observed his hand open and the plate or glass midair then scattering into pieces of itself against the floor. He enjoyed the plate's clack, the higher pitch of glass, though neither trays nor silverware provided similar magic.

He turned moody, some days receiving his family with great pleasure and quizzing his grandchildren over school or inquiring about their mischievous childhood antics. Others, he sulked; the television distracted him; he complained over the food.

Often in the past, Arthur had beckoned his children by the other's name, or sometimes even their mother's. The post office had placed so many monikers in his head occasionally the wrong ones spilled out. Arthur was desperate to explain his memory's failure was for the old reasons but the words were difficult to retrieve without stammering, which worsened their fear.

Further visits, they reminded him they were his children and he nodded as if he knew so, but often he could place them in his life, though he was unsure where. He had worried once they may want something of his, but they appeared well dressed and comfortable and without need.

*

The assisted living facility overlooked a reservoir. A grass lawn led to a knoll and a picnic bench and a gazebo and you could enjoy the breeze that every evening rose from the water. As the sun dropped below the rocky horizon, the town's lights blotted the night. Cars pulsed along the water.

He could watch the gullies between where middle school boys lit firecrackers from the ends of smuggled cigarettes or hunted frogs or threw dirt clods in the creek's tall weeds until their welfare mothers screamed for them.

Once Jess joined them. He waved at Arthur. The others teased him, but the boy visited the home the week after. He brought a pack of gum that he shared with Arthur. Arthur had never been one for candy, but it tasted good and wore his mouth out in an agreeable manner.

It was a Wednesday and the boy returned the next one. Arthur marked his calendar and looked forward to the visits. Each time the boy delivered, a caramel, or Almond Roca or a plastic windmill Arthur could puff to spin. Once he spun a chess rook in pottery class and painted it white and printed Arthur's name beneath. He set it on the end table under a lamp Arthur passed several times a day. Arthur laughed and laughed until the nurses arrived with a hypodermic full of sleep.

*

Other days, Jesse would appear below in the creek learning those lessons no one would teach in school or at home. One afternoon, when the weather was unseasonably warm for November the boys tumbled into the creek bed with a pint of Canadian whisky. They hooted and spat out breaths until an argument commenced. One boy with a stick hit Jess from behind then clobbered him in the head. A moment later, Arthur was among them choking the culprit.

Arthur had returned to the facility by the time an enormous woman with a policeman in tow lumbered across the facility's grounds toward him.

"He sits up there and watches my children like a goddamned pervert," the woman said.

"This man?" the cop asked. "This is Arthur Hall."

"He attacked my son."

"Then the boy required it."

"You are not going to arrest this man."

"Lady, Arthur Hall has done more good than your fat ass has shit quarter pounders. Go back home and don't bother him again. Or me."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll arrest you."

"For what crime?"

"Assault."

"But I never hit no one."

"Anytime you leave the house and it's light out you assault the rest of us."

She stalked off. He turned to Arthur. "Next time that boy annoys you

Mr. Hall, I suggest you go to the source and choke her instead of the kid. It
would save us a lot of trouble and I'll make you an alibi."

Arthur sat a long while after. He did not know what part was happening and what part his head was constructing without his consent.

*

Snow fell in flakes as broad as teaspoons. The air was too cold to melt them, even those in the streetlamp's harnesses. The snow collected on curbs and walks and parked cars and soon obscured each shape and every line until all things turned part of the others. Arthur thought himself into movement and his steps punched the white surface, but when he glanced backward, the falling snow obliterated them as if the weather had its own notions about where people should go. Up and down became directions rather than sky or earth. His tears iced his lashes though he didn't recall crying. His gloveless hands hummed like tuning forks. He rested at a picnic bench. Car lights, thick and cream-colored, appeared and disappeared with the tires' hiss. Arthur reclined on the bench. He had not considered that he would die any more than he had considered that he would live. White fell on white, without apparent weight or mass. In the distance, police lights joined the vague ovals that delineated the streets or secured parking lots. Low clouds pressed the light to the snow. Arthur recalled suddenly a drunk colliding with Kate on the street, then cursing her as he stumbled away. It was thirty years at least. Still, Kate could not have ignored such a thing, Arthur knew; she should not have been forced to. She was less because of it and Arthur less still; he had turned placeholder, then and there, a zero in some great number that was not zero. A man breaks and is broken. He cannot remain neither and a man, nor can he exist as one or the other. He must be both. That is the only portion of conscience he is permitted.

Behind his eyes, part of his mind had unlocked itself and the other part lost the key. He refused to be sorry. Every act others claimed decent he knew was capitulation. His whole life was an apology.

He considered his chess board. Pieces arranged and rearranged, lost, reclaimed, sacrificed for a battle with no blows. The game settled nothing. Jess's face had become a gourd, too, blue and red and yellow. Someone said his ribs were broken. The hospital. The boy breathed, but so lightly his throat hardly fluttered. Arthur placed a thumb on his wrist to be certain of a pulse.

In the undercarriage of the center's van Arthur jimmied free the jack handle. The snow had started by then. Arthur awkwardly descended the grade to the creek, forded it then labored up the other bank. His bent shadow reached across the new snow, some hieroglyphic picture, before words were sounds that no one employed. The fat woman answered the door. The source, the policeman had said.

He wished he had a cigarette. It would warm him as if he were in the match, sulfur and wood and burning tobacco and smoke. A cigarette. That would make a difference. The fat woman bled from the ear. Her eyes blinked. Her mouth made B's like a fish on a stringer. Arthur had brought down deer in his youth and witnessed their death rattle: a final sigh, then every muscle relaxed and the body sagged farther into the ground beneath. The difference may have only been an inch, but it contained room enough for every religion and philosophy. He knew the woman was not dead.

Across the main highway, an open Quick Market sign blinked, half the Q shrouded with snow, a smiling letter with a split lip. In his pocket, Arthur felt paper money though he was unsure of the denomination. The market would be warm. There would be cigarettes and the proprietors would know how much money he possessed and they would not cheat him because people in general are good. Those in the store, they deserved a chance to help him. Not for his own sake. It felt rewarding: anyone ought to be offered that opportunity, to help. Even if others don't require it. He thought of tomorrow and the plummeting temperature and hard freeze to follow. He loved the winter. The air turned so still you could hear another's footstep a mile away. Intimacy. That was the word.

Luna and Mr. Strongbones

Per her custom, The Grandma is shouting. That's what we call her because we don't know her name even though she is our landlord. Each night beneath our floor, she becomes a Mahler symphony, with bursts of fury followed by chilling calms. Luna and I think there must be a family squabble, like a sister syphoning money from the overseas business. Or a daughter marrying a Silkbelly.

Sometimes we turn our speculation inward, convincing ourselves we trigger the woman each night. Who knows from what. Maybe it's because our space heater jacks up our shared electric bill? Or our cheap rent, and the fact that she can't raise it, leaves her in poverty?

We don't even know if The Grandma is technically a grandma. We've never had a conversation with her, have never seen her with kids. She just fits the mold, with her default scowl and bad hair dye, eggplant colored. What we do know is that her nightly commotion is done on the phone, because it always ends with a long, nearly sung bye bye.

She just said it. Bye bye.

I've been up for hours. It's just one of those nights, which I'm due for every few months. You're thinking The Grandma kept me up. But you're wrong. She actually *helps* me fall asleep. The foreignness is like white noise. If she spoke English, that'd be different; I'd get sucked into her gossip. I would tell myself things like, *that's not the word I would've used*.

My days are inundated in words. Words mumbled and misused. Words plagiarized. Sometimes I get lucky and hear words that come from the heart, but not often. This is the life of a Public Speaking professor at City College, San Francisco. Most of my students choose topics so beat into the ground I can't stand to hear about them anymore. Like overpopulation. Everyone knows in the last 50 years, the world has grown from 9.5 to 13 billion people, that the number of countries exceeding their resources has reached 43. And yet my students stand up there and act like it's breaking news. They implore vasectomies and adoptions, using big boy phrases like "due to the fact that" and "in correlation with" incorrectly.

Today, a sweet girl whose hair falls out in clumps, and whose face is chipmunked from prescriptions, began her speech: "In these current times in which we currently are living within..." She went on to claim "The Disability Generation" was a cold and unfair label for her generation, and needed to be amended. And that's kind of why I'm still awake tonight.

*

"I want to have a baby," Luna told me. This was a couple years back now. I remember the way she said it in my ear—gentle but certain. I liked the tone. I surprised myself and said me too. It was nice to let ourselves feel like having a child was still as simple as a stork and a blanket. Luna had orange hair and blue eyes and brown freckles like a soft banana. When she told me she wanted a child, it was the one day since we'd been together that the sun could be seen in San Francisco. Once every few years there would be strong enough gusts to clear up the sky and there it was, a perfect circle, grapefruit red. That day the sun bled through her hair and she looked raw. My heart did one of its hiccups, causing my eyes to bulge like I'd taken a cannonball to the gut. You'd think it wouldn't catch me off guard anymore, my heart, being that I'd lived with it all my life.

"I want one. But I worry," I said.

"The Grandma?" Luna asked.

I was thinking more about my heart spasming and me dropping our child down the stairs.

"Sure, The Grandma. That and our house falls to the forties in winter."

We had solar panels on our roof, but they were busted, decorations from an optimistic past. So the way to stay warm was blankets and boiled water. San Francisco held 4 million people, 700k underground. If you lived down there you were called a Silkbelly. You air-dried your laundry across relic transit tunnels and you smelled like penny-rubbed fingers. The big deal of late was kids down there were coming into the world hacking and suffocating. Districts demanded NutriSun Systems, those hanging ropes with sun-mimicking technology. That way they could grow plants out of boxes beneath pipe leaks to purify the air. Oxygen was a human right, they said. Stop having babies, people said. In general, I agreed. With each passing year,

I felt this was no world for a child. As far as I know, Silkbellies still haven't gotten the NutriSun.

*

If you were to ask me if I regret the way we approached pregnancy, I still say no. Once I came around to the idea, we did it the right way. Or I should say, we gave ourselves the best chance at a healthy child.

Before we started trying, I remember lying in bed in the morning as Luna got ready for work in the bathroom. There was the opening and closing of drawers, and the clatter of prenatal vitamins and calcium pills. She said cute things to herself, not knowing I could hear, like: "You're welcome, Mr. Strongbones!" Whatever good genes our kid got would come from her. This was clear on our first date years ago, how that emerald dress showed her shoulders and neck, elegant but sturdy, like a swimmer's. We watched *Pipedreams*, which was about a Silkbelly violinist whose music traveled through New York plumbing into a businesswoman's office. It was the frontrunner for the Oscars that year. It was overrated; I wished I could just watch Luna watch the movie.

Me—I tried to do my part for a healthy child. I chiseled my irregular heartbeat, and my Lupus. DNA Chiseling took a month per genetic trait, four appointments. It was the new trend. People were chiseling everything from high blood pressure to humped noses. There were no incisions, and when it was all done, whatever you were treated for was no longer in your DNA. It cured your future of your condition, but not you. In many cases, yours got worse.

For the appointments you could be knocked out, or not. I always chose to stay awake. I liked to watch, and imagine everything embarrassing in me sizzling into smoke. The laser began as a large beam, and the machine made clapping noises, like a short circuit. The claps sped and the laser thinned into a cord of woven rhombi, oscillating in neons, cutting into my skin, leaving no mark. I always wished I could take off the mandatory sunglasses and look at the light. Gradually my whole body stung like onion eyes. I told myself that the pain wasn't in any one particular place, which helped in a zen sort of way. After the procedure, the doctor always asked if I needed to use the bathroom, which felt funny: remembering I was a human.

I ignored the controversy surrounding chiseling, that it hadn't been researched enough. Luna was wary of putting something so tender as our

genes in the hands of tech. What if it turns out dangerous, and it's too late? She said it wasn't like my ailments were that bad, compared to everything else people had. That was the naivety of a healthy person.

"At this point, perhaps having no disability is its own disability," I said, all professorly.

When my heart malfunctions, it feels like it is gasping awake from a nightmare. People who witness are at a loss for words, somewhere between sympathetic and queasy. I have to close my eyes, and focus on breathing, or else my heart keeps acting like an arm wrestle. I think about if I lived in the wild, how quickly I would be prey. When I decided to go through with the chiseling, all I cared about was making a world where my future child did not feel his heart trying to beat out of his chest.

*

This was a time of Luna excitability, the whole trying to get pregnant thing. She would spring up at bedtime and bake a pie. She did handstands. One night, The Grandma was downstairs really laying into someone on the phone. Our walls quivered like timpanis. Luna said fuck it and got on the bed and started jumping in her pajamas and pigtails. I watched her nipples poke through her nighty. We fucked loud and theatrically and my heart cooperated. Luna rocked the headboard into the wall, squealed porn phrases I didn't know were in her repertoire. We sounded like a human sacrifice and that turned me on.

At one point we stopped, breathless, stifling laughter. The house was eerie. We felt The Grandma below us. We imagined her standing bewildered in athletic pose, as if bracing for the ceiling to collapse. It was our fun way to tell her we were people too, and could make noise in this house if we so pleased.

Before coming, I got slow and long. I figured the further I pulled back, the further my sperm might shoot. Like a rubberband, which was a good thing, I figured; it made sense to someone who knew nothing about this stuff. Luna sensed something was happening. I looked into her peacock eyes as I came; she dug her fingernails into my back like I might go somewhere.

*

Here is the breakdown. 67% of children are born with a disability, but that data is from last year, and it's got to be more now. If I'm being honest, it's rare to have a student with just one disability. My classroom lingers of ointments, sweet like cafeteria food. There is a poster in our Wellness Center: a family tree of the varieties of ADD. In my career, disability meetings have gone from once a semester to once a week. We get pie charts and spreadsheets, front and back, color coded with data and trends. Whereas collaborative, student-centered learning was the gold standard of yesteryear, the pendulum has swung, and we are back to lecturing. Students are most at ease when they are able to feel invisible, we are told. No more tests. No more due dates. I go along with it. The last thing I need is to lose my job. I already had a scare last semester.

The student was named Leone. He'd suffered a heart attack in a high school basketball game, fell over on the freethrow line. In class I'd catch him with an earbud in, listening to podcasts and audiobooks; I think his brush with death had left him with an inquisitiveness for the world. Leone had a charcoal hue to his teeth and a potpourri smell that he left places. The way he volunteered his smile told me he knew he might die soon.

A few years ago, the college started streaming all lectures to accommodate the rise in students bedridden with social anxiety. This made it so all speeches are stored in a college archive, which I can return to at any time. Tonight in bed, I have Leone's speech on space travel pulled up in one of my tabs. I lower the volume so I don't wake Luna.

"Today, walking to class..." Leone begins, with the jocular tone of a-guy-walks-into-a-bar.

"I first stopped in the restroom to wash my hands. To my right was a young man who, after using the faucet, ripped a paper towel from the dispenser. The boy ripped another. Then another. Three sheets of paper. Can you believe that? In this day and age? Then with his ball of paper, our friend shot a Michael Jordan step-back fadeaway, and missed the garbage.

"This reminded me of a story my dad once told me. My dad listens to jazz, and a long time ago, in the mid-nineteen-hundreds, there was this man named Elvin Jones. People called him the king of jazz drummers. Well along comes this rock 'n' roll drummer named Ginger Baker who calls himself the best drummer in the world. He says that Elvin Jones is too old to be respected anymore. Elvin gets all puzzled, and says with regard to Ginger Baker: 'They should make him an astronaut and lose his ass.'

64

"That's what I'm here to talk about today. As it turns out, Elvin was ahead of his time..."

Leone goes on to describe the corpse that is Earth, mentioning the Great Blue Storm—the permanent carousel in the Pacific Ocean of mattresses, computer monitors, baby clothes, brushing up against Hawaii. The microplastics that flake off into the rest of the ocean, into our food. The air quality, so bad in every major city that you can now stare directly into the sun.

"Our generation has the lowest quality of life, yet the longest life expectancy. Who knew God had a sense of humor!"

His eyes gape. You can tell he is delighted by what he is about to say. In the corner you can see that I'm scrawling notes. I remember checking "exceeds expectations" boxes up and down the rubric.

"Like Elvin Jones, I propose a human retreat. I don't believe life on earth should be a right any longer. We simply cannot afford it. It should be a privilege that must be earned. And if it is not earned, for instance, if you are wasting paper towels, then bon voyage! Send us photos!"

Leone then smiles mischievously. You can see the sides of his forehead starting to shine like a polished apple, which he dabs with his sleeve.

"If you think this process isn't already underway," he says. "You're mistaken." His lungs are phlegmy. "You may be surprised to learn that just in the last few months..."

In the corner of the screen, I put my hand up, an I-come-in-peace gesture. People thought I stopped him for his health. Having a student faint in class was a bad look. Administrators would show up with questions, fearful of lawsuits. Really, I worried about where Leone was going with his speech. His grin was like he knew something no one else did. I worried he was about to tell his classmates—with their pollen allergies and anemias and phobias—they all deserved to be shot into outer space. That was a classroom topic that could get a part timer like me canned. I couldn't risk it. Not with Luna and I about to have a kid.

*

Luna and I tried for a year. She started to get fidgety, and her personality got stale. She had always avoided the idea of artificial insemination, saw it as admitting some kind of defeat. But we didn't have any other option. I searched for signs that she suspected our infertility to be my fault, in her tone,

in her eyes. I tried to bait her into blaming me. I convinced myself that my weak heart could be causing non-performing sperm. Some nights Luna slept facing away from me. I told myself that she'd always done that, even before our struggles, but then I'd fall asleep convinced her love had begun to dull.

I ended up jerking off in a cup. There was levity in our relationship the moment an automated email from Legacy Cryo-Clinic® told us "our micro-date was a match!" We celebrated our pregnancy at mini golf. We got to one of those impossible holes with swinging blades and clownfaces. It kept spitting Luna's ball back.

"Now I know what it was like for your sperm," she said.

We laughed. At home, we drank tea bundled under blankets, my hand on her stomach, waiting for the first kick. Something was on TV but I was only half-watching. We caught a draft from a leak in the window sill. Luna shivered, then looked at me.

"We're gonna make it," she said. I believed her, and I put my nose in the part of her neck that smelled like plant soil.

From downstairs was a noise. It was faint, and unurgent.

"Is that singing?" I finally asked. We muted the TV.

"Is it her?" asked Luna.

The Grandma hummed, softly climbing octaves but never sounding strained. It was like a piece of family history she was keeping alive. Had we been wrong about her? Her language—its chaos, its ugliness—had she simply been recapping soap operas with an old friend? Or remembering a childhood vacation to Macao? Though to us she was unknown, we sat under the blankets with double socks, our breath looking like laundry exhaust, and we felt safe. We were surviving, the three of us, in this house.

*

Our baby liked to kick when we were cooking. I would stand in the sticky air of boiling potatoes with my hand pressed to Luna's stomach. We chose not to know the gender, an homage to a simpler time. We volleyed phrases back and forth, giving our baby a voice, things like: "let me outa here!" and "That's all you got? Potatoes?" and "you guys aren't going to do it again tonight are you? I'm trying to get a little shut eye."

When we were three months along, I woke up to an email: NOTICE OF CLASS ACTION LAWSUIT FOR CUSTOMERS OF LEGACY CRYOCLINIC. Luna lay beside me, sleeping the heavy sleep of a woman working for two. Her stomach was becoming convex like a contact lens.

Hello,

This message is for clients of Legacy® Cryo-Clinic Inc. at their 101 Bush Street location in San Francisco, as you may be entitled to a payment from a class action settlement.

A lawsuit claims that Legacy® is responsible for malpractice. Legacy® has agreed to settle the lawsuit by paying out \$86,000,000.00, to eligible clients, and adopting a more public policy. People who used the services of Legacy® between January 1, 2105 and July 1, 2107, will be eligible for possible payout.

Basic Information

1. WHY AM I RECEIVING THIS NOTICE?

Legacy® records indicate you were a customer for semen cryo-storage during the specified dates. Customers who used Legacy® within that timeframe are experiencing birth defects in their children ranging from intellectual disability, developmental delay, autism spectrum disorder, as well as various severe allergies.

2. WHY IS THERE A SETTLEMENT?

There is no conclusive proof that the disabilities incurred are from Legacy®, who maintains third party insemination clinics such as Ensemble® or Joined@TheHip® could be culpable. They also claim preexistent genetic mutations could be a factor. A settlement has been reached. Compensation for those eligible shall go to medical bills and other relevant costs.

"What do you think?" Luna asked our pediatrician.

"Bottom line," I added-my try at masculine forwardness.

"It's fairly unknown why we're seeing this spike in defective offspring. My gut would usually be that Legacy was holding secrets. But in this case, I think no one has any answers."

"Bottom line, about our child," I said.

"He means, how likely is a disability?" Luna said, and I felt the prickles as her hand crawled into mine.

"I'm not comfortable quantifying. All I really can do is point to what I assume you already know."

"What have you seen in babies from Legacy?" I asked. "What kind of damage?"

Luna frowned at my vocabulary. It was the precise word I was looking for.

"Mostly cognitive, behavioral, nervous. Not different than the general trend, just a steeper rise."

"Anything necessitating a motorized wheelchair?" I asked.

"Not that I'm seeing."

She squeezed my hand.

"What about diapers. Adult diapers," I said.

"I don't follow," the doctor said.

He stared plainly. I hated how doctors got to be so distanced and oblivious. How could he act like it wasn't obvious what I was getting at, that I was weighing our options to make the best decision for us, for our child? When I tried to imagine our child, he or she was featureless. A concept, a dot to fall somewhere on a graph. I worried about meltdowns. Blotting pants with stain remover. Bite marks. Our child falling in love with a Disney song, and listening to it for the next thirty years. At three months, our window to stop this was about closed. I feared always looking back at today.

Next to me, Luna sat with perfect posture, an absent smile on her face. I could tell she was imagining wholesome moments. Our child's goofy phrases that became inside jokes. The triumphs with math homework. Running the bases at the ballgame. Her optimism could power a backup generator. And I wanted to slap it out of her.

×

Things loosened up with the payout from the lawsuit. It's amazing how money solves things that have nothing to do with money. We bought another space heater for the baby room. We got a JungleCloud in the bathroom, filled up its bladder and took hot standup showers together. It was getting difficult for Luna to bend over, so I helped suds her body. I watched water bead off her orange hair. She hadn't shaved in a month. Across her body, she was ablaze.

Her spikiness turned me on. I ran my hand up and down her, felt her cactus layer like it was protection from the outside.

We settled on Harlequin green for the baby room. I suggested we paint pictures on the walls of places we heard once existed, and saw in image searches—the Amazon, Siberia, the Galapagos. We joked we could go to the baby room to escape each other. We read online reviews for cribs, and playpens, and baby monitors, putting 5 star products in our cart. We began to identify cupboards and sockets to babyproof.

The Grandma saw Luna's tummy. She did the math that we'd never leave, that she'd live out her life in poverty. We expected obscure retaliation, like tapping our floor with a broomstick, or leaving potato and carrot peels at our doorstep. Instead, we heard long yawns from downstairs at night. Weary but serene, as though making peace with something.

*

1) I am concerned with the decline in the livability on earth.





I dim the light of my screen, and I tap my touch-pad instead of clicking the mouse. Luna has been sleeping so well, and I would hate for her to wake up. Our child's room smells like fresh paint. The acoustics are echoey, waiting to be filled with soft carpet and human life.

2) I believe the decline is human-caused.

Yes X



I remember the day of Leone's speech, when I cut him short, he later appeared at my office door.

"May I?" he asked.

He sat, his hands folded across emaciated thighs.

"I understand why you stopped me today." He smiled, and I had an urge to wash my hands.

"I think some students felt insulted by your message," I said.

He smirked at this.

"Do you want to hear how my speech would have ended?" he asked.

Whenever he raised his hand in class, I could count on him to say something sharp. He and I would go on tangents and other students would seem offended, as though I ought to look upon them just as fondly for never saying anything. In my office hours, I wished Leone would stop by just like this. Just to pass the time. But now that he was here, the air felt stuffy, like traffic on a bridge.

"There are programs underway for full scale desertion. PROME is one. People for the Revival of Mother Earth. DESEARTH is another, with the silent h, of course. The number of applicants is climbing. It's not some fantasy anymore."

"You sign up to leave forever?"

"Yes. Wouldn't it be lovely? To have a solarium up there? I imagine looking down at the lights of Tokyo or Barcelona at night. Way better than actually being there. I tried to sign up—not like I'm much help down here anyway. But you know what they said? That I was too weak. I said, who cares who I am, as long as I'm gone, right? That's the whole point. They said my muscles would atrophy. Space travel would literally break my heart. Bad beat, pun intended."

"You failed your speech," I said.

Leone's posture shifted. I probably should have just let him find out on Digi-Grade like everyone else. But I had no choice—the words came out like bile, sudden and unapologetic.

3) I am willing to depart from earth without returning.



That night, I told Luna about Leone, how opening a door took all his strength and he was only eighteen. I told her looking at him, I sometimes had this vision of him as a grocery clerk. Gray haired at twenty-five, asking people if they wanted double bags, trying to keep up with the groceries, losing his breath, saying sorry, getting fired. To his manager, he would do that little bow of his, as if making mental note of another thing he wasn't cut out for.

I told Luna I failed him. And then, out of nowhere, I was crying, my

"You did the right thing," she said. She held me. "I know you'll always do what's best for our family."

I am willing to disconnect from family, with only intermittent contact.

Yes	No
X	

I tap quietly.

PROME allows you to travel with one other, man and wife, or parent and child, given both are deemed genetically eligible. Is this application for one, or two?



I lean in and nuzzle into Luna's neck, which she instinctively stretches. For the first time I wonder whether our child is a boy or girl. I grab a piece of Luna's hair and fluff it. It's light like packing tinsel. She chirps. Her arms are fat now. I kiss one. She begins the slow and arduous process of turning towards me.

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Winners of StoryQuarterly's 2019 Fiction Prize

Judged by Nafissa Thompson-Spires

Morgan Thomas Surrogate Winner

Pam Diamond The Knowledge of Nightingales First Runner-up

Anna Cabe Selected Episodes From Wartime Philippines on a Saturday Night Second Runner-up

MORGAN THOMAS

Surrogate

On Thursday after their kegels, while the surrogates drink ginger shots and lie belly down on bolsters, Brighten declares that she trusts her husband.

"Oh, honey," Jamila says, rolling her bolster to crack her spine. Mona swallows her ginger shot. "You trust him to do what, exactly?" "Just generally."

"I don't see what could bring you to that," Mona says. Brighten expects this from Mona, an ex-gymnast, head to toe tattoos. But the other four surrogates are also smiling and glancing away, as if she is stupid, naïve. She looks to Doc for understanding, but Doc is measuring Lane's abdomen, paying no attention to Brighten.

"It was because of the fire," Brighten explains. The Spring Creek Fire, which scoured the Basin nine years before. She remembers the day. She can explain.

Brighten saw that fire from the Mobridge Drive-in. She was fifteen, Orson a year older. He'd taken her to see an oldie—*The Towering Inferno*—on the big screen. They'd been dating just a few months at that point. Six years later, they would marry.

The drive from Omemee was five hours. Brighten kept her window down. Orson's was taped over, so it didn't open. They dialed between the two stations on the radio—one Christian, one rez. They couldn't hear either over the wind. Brighten combed her hair with her fingers, and the shed hair whipped in circles around the car.

There were drive-ins in North Dakota, but they hadn't considered those. The point was to dip south of the border for a night. It was her first time out of the state. Orson's, too.

The teller at the ticket window said, "You'd do better to get out of here. Fire's too close for comfort."

Orson refused. They'd come five hours to see the movie, and they'd see it. "I'm out soon as I press play. It's just the two of you," the teller said.

But when they pulled into the movie lot, they saw another car parked close to the screen. This reassured them. They decided to stay as long as the other car stayed.

The drive-in screen was three times the length of a man across and nearly twice as tall. The faces—the faces were huge. Brighten could have bouldered across Paul Newman's nose, dug her fingers into his tear duct and hung from it. She kept forgetting it wasn't real. She imagined the screen itself must be hot as the burning San Francisco Tower. The smoke thick in her lungs was surely California smoke. She expected the screen to go up in a sheath of flame as the Tower had, expected sparks to leap from the aluminum into the surrounding hayfields, fenced in barbed wire to keep kids from sneaking in on foot.

Of course, it wasn't the screen on fire. It was the Williston Basin—fire on the shale slopes, fire in Spring Creek Valley, the methane-laced creek itself aflame. From the drive-in, she watched the fire crawl along her horizon line, a small red-glowing worm. Twice, they considered leaving. But the other car stayed.

"You think they've got soda?" Brighten asked, nodding to the car. They'd finished a two-liter of 7-Up, and she could feel her tongue dry and swollen against her teeth.

"I don't know," Orson said. He watched the screen, where a woman opened the stairwell door to a wall of smoke.

"Want to ask them?"

They went together across the empty parking spaces. They wanted to know how long the family was planning to stay. They wanted to talk to someone.

They approached the driver's window, prepared to knock politely.

The car was empty. Just a crushed pack of Camels by the brake pedal and two tampons in the groove of the side seat. Deserted.

Brighten slapped her palm against the windshield. Orson kicked the tire. Brighten tried the door handles.

But the knocking, when it came, came from the trunk.

"Sorry?" This is Mona, who is digging one elbow into the space between Jamila's shoulder blades.

Something in the trunk knocked. A tapping in response to their noise. Something in the trunk said, "Is someone there?"

Brighten used to love Thursdays. All week, she looked forward to Thursdays. She looked forward, stubbornly, to leaving her daughter, Roo, with Orson's sister for the day. She looked forward, privately, to the company of Doc Lacher and the surrogates. She loved the drive to Doc's homestead—forty minutes alone through fields grazed down to thistle and knapweed. She was calm on those drives. Perfectly focused. She tuned in to her body. When she'd carried Roo, she'd tuned to Roo—the weight, the movement, the presence. It's different as a surrogate. She cares about the health of the fetus, but not the person of it. She doesn't love it. It's her body she loves—the stretch and accommodation of her muscles. She looks forward to the third trimester—the swollen ankles, the stretch marks, the distension of her abdomen, the physical marks of her capacity, her endurance. She will be gentle with herself in late pregnancy, as she used to be after a day of climbing—massaging her white and bloodless toes, taping her blistered fingers. She wants a reason to be gentle.

Doc taught her to tune to her body this way. Doc Lacher. Her surrogacy agent. Her coach. Her friend. Yes, still her friend.

Brighten discovered Doc Lacher on television. An interview special from WDAY Fargo. 4 o'clock news. Brighten had been watching coverage of a murder which took place just ten minutes by car from her double-wide. The accused was a thirty-one-year-old woman. She'd suffocated her neighbor with a pincushion, put the body in the bottom drawer of a chiffonier, and dropped the chiffonier off at a Salvation Army Donation Center. The woman accused had been unable to conceive, and the newscaster suggested she'd killed her neighbor because she wanted the child her neighbor cared for, a little blonde girl whose picture they showed when they weren't showing the courthouse.

"Liar," Brighten said to the thirteen-inch television balanced on top of their microwave. She sipped water from a beer mug and rubbed a square of cinnamon crunch cereal between her fingers to scrub it of excess sugar. She handed the scrubbed square to two-year-old Roo, who was opening and closing the cabinets. Roo put the square in her mouth to wet it, then stuck it to the cabinet door.

Brighten believed the woman was guilty, but she didn't believe the woman wanted the child. It was too easy. Too deliberate. Brighten didn't think the murder was anything the woman had planned. It was just the sun so bright off the concrete that day you couldn't see past it or the coffee grounds run out, though she'd just got a new bag from the Pantry. Maybe the woman

went to borrow some grounds from her neighbor, and the old woman said, "Get your fat ass off my lawn," or threw a handful of dandelions gone to seed over the property line. On a hot day or a Tuesday, it wouldn't take more than that.

They brought Doc Lacher on the news to discuss rising infertility rates. Every county in North Dakota had seen rates go up. The Cash Wise in Fargo had started stocking little jars of OvaBoost and FertilAid.

"It's a good year to be a surrogate," Doc said.

The papers blamed infertility on women who smoked, drank too much liquor and Mountain Dew, blamed diabetes, blamed girls too young to be messing around, boys subsisting on hot dogs and meth, boys who can't shoot, can't swim.

Doc Lacher blamed the water. "Don't drink it," she said on the television that day. Don't let your dog drink it. Don't bathe any child under two in it. Keep it out of your eyes. Keep it away from your succulents.

Brighten set down the glass from which she'd been sipping, watched the television screen through the liquid blur. Brighten had heard stories of reservoirs gone bad, of kids who were late to talking because they drank down lead. But she'd never worried about the water they drew up clear and cold from their sand-point well.

It'll take the finish off a non-stick pan.

It'll dissolve your corneas.

It'll wither your ovaries.

"Let's talk about your surrogates," the newscaster prompted.

"I don't have surrogates," Doc Lacher said. "I have athletes, and you should see the babies my girls produce."

Brighten leaned forward. She was an athlete. She'd spent weekends in high school driving down to Square Butte, climbed each face of the granite outcropping with ropes, then without. She got a partial scholarship to ND State for speed climbing, was the first woman from the Dakotas to make it to the Olympic tryouts. There, she hit a loose hold. She fell and was disqualified. She'd planned to try again the next year, but the next year she was pregnant with Roo. The year after she was tired like she'd never been tired. The year after, she'd lost it—whatever it was—the drive, the fire, the arrogance that can lead a woman to bank everything on a toehold and fingers dusted with chalk.

"Do you miss it?" Orson sometimes asked.

"Of course," she answered, and she withstood the strum of hope, her belief that he had some plan—a trip to Square Butte or an indoor wall or a nanny. She withstood the disappointment which followed when he nodded twice and ducked into the kitchen for a beer, as if the question and some accompanying sympathy were all he could offer, all he was required to offer.

At the bottom of the TV screen, the news ticker said what it took to be a surrogate: Between 25 and 35 years of age. One healthy child, naturally delivered. Doesn't smoke. Doesn't drink. No dietary restrictions. Exercises regularly.

Brighten dipped one finger absently into her glass and let Roo nurse the moisture from it. Brighten fit the description for a surrogate.

There was a time when Brighten fit descriptions for outdoor action shoots (shoulders that bunched when she tensed them), hand modeling (long pink beds, no hangnails), and toothpaste commercials (whitened with strips). That time had passed, but she still had the body. A muscular body, used to chimneying and one-finger pull-ups. Thicker around the middle, sure, but it was still hers.

Brighten pulverized a cinnamon square, let the pieces drop to the ground—It's a good year to be a surrogate.

The consultation with Doc was free of charge. No commitment, except a sixteen-mile drive to the address listed on the website.

"Perfect," Doc said when she'd finished measuring Brighten's vitals, her maximum heart rate and oxygen consumption. "You'll be perfect."

The evening after the consultation, Brighten picked Orson up at the frac pond, where he hauled water for Encanta. Four hundred gallons of water to every well, six hundred gallons away. Away, that easy blind word. Away is a gravel pit in North Dakota, fifteen minutes from Williston. Take highway two east out of town, make a right on the reservation roads, you can get away, too.

"I'm going to be a surrogate," she told him, loosing Roo in the gravel beside the pond.

"A surrogate what?" he said.

Orson hadn't always hauled water. In high school, after their trip to the drive-in, he talked about being a film professor. He didn't stick to that, didn't stick to anything. When they married, he was part-time at ND State, driving over-the-road to pay tuition and making progress toward a degree in Spanish literature. Sometimes he'd still say funny things—call windfarms *quick saw*

dick. When he said things like that, she'd feel herself pull away from him, nothing she thought about, a reaction she couldn't help.

After she had Roo, he started driving local, which meant he made less and was around more. She used to give him a hard time—"False advertising, that person you were when I married you"—but it went nowhere with Orson, saying things like that.

She liked to drive out to the frac pond with Roo asleep in the back seat and meet Orson at the gates fringed with barbed wire, liked to have him buzz her car inside, to hear the gates wheel closed behind her. The security added some gravity, some importance to his work. It was easier at the frac ponds, there beside his pup-and-truck, to be proud of him.

"A surrogate for a kid. To carry a kid," she said. "I'm perfect for it."

"You mean for money?"

"Fifty grand, plus expenses."

Behind him, aerators threw dirty water up into the sun. Roo reached with her hands to touch the spray. Brighten didn't mind if Roo touched it, but Orson wouldn't allow it. This was another thing she liked about the frac ponds—they were dangerous, a danger from which Orson could protect them. She set him up, in little ways like this, to impress her.

"We have money," Orson said.

"I want to go back to school," she said. There wasn't that kind of money. "We'll find the money."

Like they'd misplaced it. Like it was bundled at the back of their sock drawer. "It's not about the money."

Orson had proposed at the frac pond, sat her up high beside him in his pup-and-truck and pulled out a plastic ring he'd secreted away in the ashtray. After she agreed to marry him, he walked her down to the pond and flicked his Bic lighter, touched the flame to the water's surface.

Once, nothing.

Twice, nothing.

On his third try, a blush of fire. It skittered across the water's surface and was gone.

Methane, he said. They were surrounded by it. In the rock, in the river. Every bit of this land will light. That was Orson's idea of ceremony.

"You can do something else," he said now. "Some other work."

"What other work?"

"It's hard on the body, pregnancy."

"Oh, is it? I hadn't noticed."

Not what she meant. Not what she wanted—the flash of snark, of bitterness pure and hard. A signal, inviting him to face off against her in the quick-paced arguments which traversed always the same terrain. His chronic lateness. Her come-and-go depression. His weight. Her gluten intolerance.

He shook his head. "I wasn't saying you hadn't noticed."

"I want to be pregnant again."

Brighten had liked being pregnant. She was good at it. Talented. Carrying Roo, she slept better. Ate better. She never felt nauseous, never felt the frightening impulses—taking scissors to her belly, drowning herself in a community pool—other women discussed.

Mothering was something else. In the months after Roo was born, she often imagined binding Roo's small limbs to the trunk of her body and reinserting her. She still had the extra space, extra skin. She could carry Roo until Roo was larger, easier, both of them better prepared.

"If you want another kid, we can have another kid."

"I don't want another kid."

Orson wrapped his arm around Roo to prevent her dunking her head into the pond. "A well can be fracked three times," he said, "before it's depleted."

"I don't know what you're trying to say."

"I'd rather you did something else."

She'd decided. At some point in the course of the conversation, she'd decided to do it. It had become less a physical thing, less about the fact of a blastocyst, the fact of her body carrying a fetus, more about having something in her life, some center—failing to do it would be not like failing to finish an intimidating climb, but like failing to secure the top-rope anchor on which her life depended.

*

Each surrogate had her reason. Mona carried for gay couples, said it was her way of making a difference. Jamila carried first for her sister, liked the intimacy of it, liked the way her mailbox at Christmas filled with photos of kids from Florida and Ontario. Her husband bought her pre-natal massages

and injected her with hormones during the crucial, early months. Lane was paying her way through grad school, but she got lunch weekly with the intended parents and wanted the kid to call her aunty. Brighten had no interest in keeping in touch with the kid. She was the only one who didn't want to see the kid again, the only one whose husband refused to accompany her to meetings with the intended parents. "I don't want to meet them," he said. "I'm not part of this."

This was new for Brighten. Before this, whatever Brighten had done, Orson had been a part of it.

At the drive-in, Orson and Brighten had determined it was a woman in the trunk. They determined this from the timbre of her voice and because a woman was more likely than a man to find herself locked in a trunk. The woman in the trunk said to them, "You'll have to help me." Relief, in her tone. As if, merely by being discovered, she'd been saved.

"How'd you get in there?" Orson asked.

"How near is the fire?" said the woman.

"Did something happen to you?" Brighten asked.

"How near is the fire?" said the woman.

"Did someone lock you in?"

"You have to go and get someone," the woman said. "One of you has to go. Get the attendant."

"He's gone," Orson said. "I guess everybody but us is gone."

"You have a car?"

Neither of them answered this.

"Is there a key?" Orson asked.

"There's no key."

"Or a crowbar. Or an ax. We could break the window."

"There's no ax."

"We'll find something. There must be something. We'll go and look."

"Don't go. Not both of you. One of you stay."

They didn't listen. They both went to look. For a coat hanger. For a tire iron. For a spark plug. Brighten walked the perimeter of the lot looking for a rock the size of her fist.

They found an old orange and a plastic toilet lid. They told the woman in the trunk, "We can't find anything else."

"I need you to find an adult," said the woman. "One of you go find someone, and one of you stay here with me."

Orson and Brighten looked at each other. "No," Orson said, and Brighten felt a thrill at his daring, his refusal to obey.

"We don't want to do that," Brighten said.

"You have to find someone," said the woman in the trunk. "Is the fire very close?"

Orson and Brighten did not respond. They didn't want to think about the fire. They turned their attention to the screen, where Susan Flannery and her lover burned to two delicate crisps in each other's arms.

"Are you there?" the woman called through the seam of the trunk. "Are you still there?" She sounded sorry for whatever she might have said to offend them.

It was in that moment, Brighten first determined she could trust Orson. On the screen, men rappelled down elevator shafts. Men attempted helicopter rescues. Orson just put one hand on the trunk of the car, tapped once, let the woman know he was there. Nothing drastic. Nothing dangerous. Nothing heroic. Orson wasn't a man to go to extremes.

*

Now, Brighten dreads Thursdays. She drives slowly on the washboard roads, squeezing her thighs before inching over potholes to ensure nothing jostles her cervix. She circles Doc's property until she is five minutes late, ten, considers simply driving back to the city, making up some excuse—Roo has an ear infection, she won't stop screaming, Orson's sister has colon cancer, Orson's sister can't keep Roo. But Doc would know. Doc would know Brighten was avoiding the surrogates, avoiding her. Last Thursday, just before making the inevitable turn up the gravel drive, Brighten leaned forward, closed her eyes, and bit hard into the rubber of the steering wheel. A piece came away in her mouth, and she swallowed it.

Her hands tremble sometimes, as she climbs from her car. She expects to faint. She doesn't faint. She can no longer predict the patterns and impulses of her body.

She discovered this two weeks ago, when Doc kept her back after class to discuss her health and the health of the fetus. Her most recent blood work

was concerning. Heavy, Doc said. Her blood was heavy. Thick with sticky hydrocarbons and wheeling benzenes. There was a danger of premature birth. Because the environment was toxic to the fetus, the fetus might try to exit that environment prematurely.

"Heavy?" Brighten sat on the floor, arms wrapped around a foam triangle. Why hadn't she anticipated this? Heavy was a word from the centrifuge, but Brighten understood it at once. Her eyelids were heavy. Her limbs were heavy. Her placenta was heavy—a good, anchoring heaviness. Her blood—why had she never considered her blood?

Doc asked her questions—Had Brighten drunk anything? Smoked anything? Of course not. Not even coffee? Soda? No. Eaten any shellfish? Any ethnic foods? Any artificial sweeteners? Any soft cheeses? Any shark, swordfish, snails? Changed the dosage of any drugs? Sniffed paint thinner? Had she considered hurting herself? Killing herself? Brighten shook her head, shook her head, felt she was somehow making it worse for herself by saying no, no, no, as if she was declining an offer Doc, in her generosity, was making, a bargain, a plea deal.

She wanted Doc Lacher to say it wasn't her fault, nothing she could have done, but she couldn't ask for this. The doctor was different—impersonal, professional. "Are you feverish or just distressed?" she asked when she noticed the sweat Brighten left on the foam. She thumbed Brighten's lymph nodes. "Distressed. That won't help anything."

Brighten was not in love with Doc Lacher. She was certain of this, because she often had to convince Orson of it. When acquaintances at a potluck had once offered Orson their congratulations, he shook his head. "Pregnant by her mistress," he'd said, and she blushed and excused herself to the kitchen, where she filled a glass with tap water, then poured it down the drain. She found a 24-pack of spring water. She drank one bottle right there and slipped two more into her shoulder bag. In her surrogacy agreement, Brighten had agreed to drink only bottled water, but at home she still drank from the tap. She couldn't see her way to paying seven dollars for a week's worth of water. She'd grown up okay, after all, and she'd been drinking groundwater all her life. In bed that night, Brighten said to Orson, "Don't call her my mistress. It's not an affair." Roo slept between them. She'd refused to go down for the sitter, and Brighten had refused to spend an hour putting her down when they returned.

"You'd rather be there," Orson said. "I can see it, I can tell. Over me, over your own daughter, you'd rather be with the surrogates. With her. A woman who wouldn't look twice at you if you couldn't carry a baby."

"That's not true." Brighten put her hands over Roo's ears. "Not more than Roo. Doc worries about us, that's all. She takes care of us. We have a connection."

"A connection. Great. Good for you."

How could Brighten explain Doc so Orson would understand? Doc slept with a Colt revolver on the memory foam pillow where her husband—may he rest in peace-once lay his sweet head. She had twenty beef cattle on a homestead west of the city. She'd built the homestead-not with her own hands, but with her own money. She had opinions and wasn't shy about sharing them. "Omemee boys don't know anything but fracking," she'd say. "If they could, they'd frack in the roads and the bathrooms and the goddamn Marriott, frack all day, break for a cheeseburger, frack through the night. I caught a pair last week trying to frack in my front yard, ran them off with my garden hose." ("That's me, she's talking about," Orson said. "Not you," Brighten said. "You're not like that.") Doc had enemies. She'd received newspaper photos with her eyes inked out and a narrow beard scribbled in pen across her chin. She'd received letters—You're a pimp. A profiteer. You prey on dreams of parenthood. Someone had tried to poison her cattle with arsenic, but they'd dropped the D-CON wrapper near the feed bin, and she saw it, and she threw out all her feed. ("Sounds paranoid," Orson said. "She's tough," Brighten countered. "She's dealt with a lot of shit.")

Brighten had been Doc's favorite. She knew this. In Brighten's first interview with the parents-to-be, Doc had said, "If I was choosing a surrogate, I'd choose Brighten." Perhaps she said that every time, but Brighten didn't think so. Later, at twenty-eight weeks, Brighten predicted she needed a stitch in her cervix, and she did need one. "No one knows her body like Brighten knows her body," Doc said to the surrogates that Thursday, and Brighten felt elated, all out of proportion to the compliment.

Confronted by her heavy blood, Brighten had said to Doc, "I'm sorry." Brighten had the sort of headache that starts in one temple and pulses down the spine. She believed this was the sensation of remembering, of drilling back through every action, every meal of the past six months, trying to

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understand what she had missed, how she had fallen out of step with her body. All mining exhausts the deposit. She was exhausted.

"Your health is my health," Doc said.

*

After their kegels, while the surrogates drink ginger shots and lie belly down on bolsters, Doc tells them about Brighten's blood. Each has her theory.

Jamila says, "You been drinking? Alcohol? Caffeine?"

"Or the water," Doc adds. "Have you been drinking tap water?"

Brighten is saved from responding by Mona. "It's your husband," Mona says.

"It's not Orson. Orson doesn't even cook."

"Wouldn't have to be his cooking," Doc says. "Could be in your tea. Could be in your soap."

"There was a woman I read about, her husband had been lacing her blueberry cheesecake with arsenic for years."

"That's sweet," says Jamila with a lazy cat smile, resting her head against the mound of Mona's belly.

"I trust Orson."

*

Orson never took advantage of the woman in the trunk. He never asked her for anything. He could have taken advantage. The woman in the trunk offered them things. She offered Brighten a pair of black ballet shoes.

"I don't dance," Brighten said.

"She can't," Orson said. "It's something with her ankles."

"Don't," Brighten said to Orson. Brighten had too-short tendons, which caused her to walk on her toes, made dancing an embarrassment. She wore cowboy boots with heels, so it wasn't noticeable. Only Orson and her family knew—and now this woman, this stranger. "Shut up."

Orson only shrugged. "What's it matter?" he said. Brighten understood then what Orson had understood. They could say anything at all to the woman in the trunk.

The woman in the trunk said, "They can fix that."

Brighten knew they could fix it. In Fargo, they'd have fixed her with leg casts or a slice through her Achilles before she started school. But four hours west of the city, some things were overlooked and some things were left too long, and you lived with them.

"I could find you someone to fix that if you get me out," said the woman in the trunk.

"I don't mind it," Brighten said.

"What about the other one?" the woman asked. "The boy. What could I do for you?"

Orson thought. Orson put one hand on his forehead and kneaded the skin there. Orson turned to Brighten, shrugged his shoulders, mouthed, "Help me."

Brighten said, "He'd like an implant for his upper incisor."

Orson's tongue went to the gap in his teeth. He didn't contradict her. "She'd like a haircut," he said.

"He'd like a beard."

"She'd like a nose piercing."

"He'd like you to cure tone deafness."

"She'd like a dress with sequins."

"No, I wouldn't. He'd like you to improve his taste in movies." On the screen, the windows of the Glass Tower exploded outward, crumbs of glass falling to the street below.

"There's nothing wrong with my taste in movies."

"Okay," said the woman in the trunk. "Okay. I have an idea. For the boy. Come close, I'll tell you. Come close." She tapped to show him where to come. Orson went to the trunk, put his ear against the metal. He listened, breathless, to whatever the woman promised him.

"How's that?" the woman said.

"Okay," Orson said.

"Go and get someone, then," the woman said. "Go and get an adult."

They went. They left in Orson's car and never returned and never told anyone about the woman in the trunk, who seemed, even as they drove past the abandoned ticket counter, to have been part of the movie or part of a dream.

"You left her there?" Mona asks. "You just left?"

"We were kids."

"You left?"

"Plenty of kids help people in trouble," Jamila said. "Plenty of kids call 911."

"I read about a kid last week. Doused a grease fire at his mom's restaurant. Local kid."

"I had kids young as six and seven call the ER when I was working," said Doc. "You were sixteen."

"Fifteen," Brighten says. "I was fifteen."

"Fifteen's not so young."

Jamila comes up on her elbows, knees pressed out in butterfly. "What did she promise you?"

"What?"

"That woman. What did she promise you?"

"Nothing," Brighten says. "That was just Orson."

"Come on," Jamila says. "Don't tell me she never made you a promise."

Brighten is aware of having lost some control. She is not as happy as she was when she began the story. "That's what I am telling you. She never promised me anything."

"Did she survive?" Mona asks.

"I don't know," Brighten says. "How should I know?" But it seems to her, now, that she should know.

Mona laughs—a short, hard laugh.

The others are quiet. They look at each other and at their toenails. They don't look at Brighten. When she leaves, they'll whisper about her. They'll say they can't believe she left a woman like that. They're all thinking it would have been different if they'd been there. They'd have saved her, they think. Easy, easy thoughts.

"Test your water," Doc says to Brighten. "When you get home get a match, get a lighter, hold it to your faucet. If it lights, you've got methane. If it's not your husband, it's your water."

Brighten nods, but she doesn't see Doc. She sees Orson huddled over the trunk, whispering through the place where they could have wedged a coat hanger if they'd had a coat hanger. Left out, she'd wished briefly she was the one enshelled in the trunk.

*

Later, when Brighten picks Orson up at Encanta, she tells him, "They all think you're poisoning me. The surrogates. Doc." She pitches her voice low, because Roo, who can be counted on to sleep through any drive, is napping in the rear seat.

"Doc thinks everybody's poisoned."

"This is different. She's serious."

"What do you think?"

"You remember that drive-in, years ago? Where we saw The Towering Inferno?"

Orson nods slowly. "I might. I guess I do."

"And the woman? The woman in the trunk."

Another slow nod.

"She promised you something. If you let her out of the trunk. What did she promise you?"

"I don't know. Pizza?"

"Be serious."

"It was years ago, Brighten. How should I know?" He cranks the window, so the breeze cuts between them, across anything she might say. "What does it matter? You looking to collect?"

Brighten checks Roo in the rearview, her lips quivering in the wind or from a dream. "Why didn't we help her?"

"We did. We called the police."

"No. We never did."

"There was a payphone at the drive-in. I remember calling."

"What did they say?"

"I don't remember all that, but I know we called."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know, Brighten."

Brighten can tell from his voice, his face, that he believes they called.

For a moment, she allows herself to believe it as well. She sees Orson digging quarters from the crack between console and seat, sees herself on the phone, telling the dispatcher there was a woman stuck in a car, giving him the address of the Mobridge Drive-in. She can see it all. She can see it perfectly. Comforting, those thoughts. She doesn't trust comfort.

"There was a moment," she says.

"A moment?"

"When Doc asked if you were poisoning me."

Orson is quiet. "What kind of moment?"

"For a moment, I wondered." She doesn't remember wondering. She doesn't remember thinking about Orson at all. But it sounds true. It sounds possible. Why wouldn't she have wondered?

Orson nods, as if he expected this. "You don't trust me," he says. "We should try to trust each other."

She feels tender toward him for saying it, feels tender toward herself.

At home, Brighten will touch their kitchen lighter to the faucet water, letting it nod in her hand like a pumpjack until she sees, or invents, a whisker of flame, immediately extinguished. She will phone Doc to tell her, "There's methane in our water." Doc will phone the parents-to-be, and a week later the parents will send a man out to install a dispenser. For the remainder of her pregnancy, Brighten's family will drink from blue jugs like they do in the grand, gated houses. Roo's hair will get a shine to it, and Brighten will comb and comb it just to touch that copper sheen. Her own skin will become clear and smooth. When people attribute this to her pregnancy, she'll shake her head. "It's the water," she'll say.

She'll never get the belly she'd wanted. At thirty weeks, she'll deliver a preemie, who will spend three months in the neonatal unit at Fargo before going home. She'll leave the hospital the day after delivery, call Doc on the way home, tell her she's not interested in doing it again. Whatever talent she had, she used it up with Roo. She won't contact the parents. They won't contact her. Occasionally, in those deep summer days, those petroleum days, she will forget the child was discharged. She'll be certain the child died, and she will briefly cry.

But before all this, as she drives home beside Orson, Roo in the rear seat, she searches inside herself for the child. She listens, intently, for any knocking, any cursing, a muffled thumping against her uterus. Nothing. She imagines the small limbs drawn in tight, away from the walls of her placenta, afraid to press against that toxic flesh. She takes one hand off the wheel to find her cell phone, and she rests it on top of her stomach, plays a recording the parents sent that morning. In the background, the rhythmic whoosh of a washing machine. Over it, a voice speaks to the tissue sorting itself in her placenta, making the sort of promises no one can keep.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF NIGHTINGALES

1.

Some years back, a thief came in the house and stole my voice.

I neverminded about the rape. *Nevermind, nevermind.* But the guy who wore no shirt and no shoes stole the voice of Possum Fields—that's the bit I minded. At least he had on pants. The thief *was* wearing a pair of black and white checked pants. And an over-sized lime green shower cap.

Now, the checks on the pants were the tiniest imaginable, teeny tiny, a chessboard for ants and so forth. Marty slept in the four-poster in her room, I slept—crashing we used to call it—on the foldout sofa in the living room. I woke to see him standing there—I remember pushing up on my elbow, the sheet falling from me—and my first, not wholly unreasonable thought was: He's an apparition! Yessirree! An apparition! But those pants. Pointillated, the tiny checks stunned the rayon pants with a vaporous, dizzy-making sheen. The thief might have been an apparition but those pants were a mirage.

All that summer and for two solid years, the *Galweston Daily News* described him as a thief wearing a lime green shower cap. He was called the thief because, as a sideline to his other business, he helped himself to stuff, jewelry or trinkets. He stole my unstrung wedding pearls and Marty's garnet earrings and brooch. He made off with a leather satchel containing the pages of a first novel. He also stole our yellow wall telephone in the kitchen. I can still see the gouge in the sheetrock where he tore it off the wall. The wires, redbluegreenyellow, peeking out shy as the tentacles of a sea anemone.

The story even made it into the Houston papers. Except for Mardi Gras and hurricanes, Houston has, for the past hundred and fifty years or so, ignored her poor old neighbor, the island. Although, after the rapes of more than sixty island women, the *Houston Post* finally assigned a stringer, a young man with a flattop from Conroe. Who described the thief's headgear as a lime green bath towel.

An old seaport, Galveston is a cosmopolitan island. So I thought for a while he was raping America—tasting the honey pot melting pot, but no. What he was up to was older than racial division, was older than America for sure, older than Europe, older than the cradles of civilization and the Tigris-Euphrates valley they had us read about. *Older than dirt*, we say here. Was older than soft ashy dust where the compulsive house-making doodlebug goes about her business, over and over, and will not mind us, even as we destroy her. He could not see us. He was truly color blind and blind in general.

He raped old women who kept their life savings under the mattress and young women who had no savings at all-and a few plumpish middle-aged women who had just bought their first pair of Easy Spirits, women who kept their money in banks. He made them give up their wedding rings. There was a Chinese American elementary school teacher, an Egyptian third-year surgery resident, an African American junior high school principal, a mixed race manager at the Food Thing. And a Mexican woman who owned the island's best laundromat, a Japanese graduate student in microbiology, a young Hindu bride whose husband was away on a business trip, and three Yankee women who had moved to the island to get away from snow. The black women were descended from the island's and southeast Texas's nineteenth-century slaves; the white women were descended of Scots and Swedes, of Celts and carpetbaggers from Ohio. There was an Italian daughter of restaurant owners, a Greek girl with brown eyes that were wide and still as those of the triptych in the Orthodox Church. A Jewess whose father was on the board of the temple and a skinny Jehovah's Witness, whose husband was out working on the rigs.

*

Each night while I was at work, Marty made up the sofa bed for me. I had taken a job at a dancehall up here on the Seawall called *Bob's Country Western*. Bob was a gifted Chinese seamstress named Shelli who at closing time gave last call for alcohol and egg rolls. Marty and I were two recently divorced young women—she was twenty-eight and I, thirty. In those months after we first met in Galveston, we found we were working on similar projects. While it was true that each of us had left our husbands briefly, briefly for other men, we hadn't meant to be gone that long. Now we were each trying to get our young, former husbands back.

You mustn't think, as cynical people sometimes do, that Marty and I had come to our senses. Neither one of us had any sense.

We lived in a carriage house tucked behind a tall yellow Victorian facing a boulevard planted in oleander and thatched palm. The street ran across the narrow island like an embroidered belt.

"Chaarming..." we'd drawl when referring to the carriage house, sounding only slightly affected. Growing up we'd never heard the word charming used. While Marty was the daughter of North Texas, third-generation homestead ranchers, I'd been raised in Pasadena, a refinery town on the southeast coast. Which is to say that Marty and I grew up in two small towns several hundred miles apart in a country that no longer existed. When we met, we knew the same music, the patriotic numbers and fight songs, the show tunes and hymns.

The carriage house was charming but small—we only had the one bedroom. It was a genuine 1870, recently restored, carriage house, even if our disappointed mothers kept asking, Are you still living with that girl in that garage apartment?

*

I can see now the thief took some trouble with his disguise: pants, shower cap—a colossal confection, a wad of delicately folded lime green. So poignantly his own invention, his outfit. Almost touching. He took it upon himself to climb into the second-story window of between sixty and seventy historic houses, owned or rented by sixty to seventy women—the official police number was eventually sixty-seven—who ranged in age from seventeen to seventy-nine, while wearing this thing on his head that looked like a melting, lop-sided, supersized lime sherbet cone.

Set in deep narrow lots, the houses are set here so close to one another we sleep, tangled like sea tortoises in a shrimper's net, caught in one another's dreams. Relentlessly intent on his inward pattern, decked out and transformed by his regalia into some glorious transforming dream that only he lived within—he climbed.

He climbed the lower elephantine boughs of a century-old magnolia not Marty's and my magnolia, for us he brought an old ladder. He climbed two stories of latticework where purple waterfalls of bougainvillea, planted after The Great 1900 Storm, had climbed before him. He climbed massed night blooming jasmine where the ropy vines must have popped off in his hand. The next morning, shamed blotches—the vegetal remains where the suckers, each smaller than a baby's thumb, had been ripped away—ran all up the wall. It looked like the impetigo. He climbed Ionian and Doric columns, those of narrower circumference (around here he'd have to do something with the Neo-Grec Revival), balustrades painted in polychromatic schemes and an architrave, whatever that is, swag-pattern railings, marble Italianate facades, ogee roofs, turrets, gables, gargoyles, cypress shutters, storm drains, cupolas, and a chimney carefully composed of pale bricks that had once been shipped in a schooner's hold from Maine.

So.

At night I go down to the sea. Not in ships. Most nights I go out wearing a pair of worn, riotously untied tennis shoes and an old pair of pale blue pajamas. Almost every night since that one I walk across the island curved in sleep. The island is a crescent moon fallen in the sea. I walk and walk, amble really under a continuous black lace canopy of great live oaks.

After the man came in the house, I ordered six pairs of identical pajamas from a Victoria Secret catalogue. Mayfair, pale blue. I was thinking: hostess pajamas. Somehow all the tops and most of the pajama bottoms have survived epic cycles of washing and the nocturnal treks. But, I doubt that pajamas make a distinction between being washed and being drenched.

The street under my feet begins an imperceptible rise. I have lived here for so long I can no longer smell the sea. But I make do and ascend through aromatic veils of fried shrimp and fried crabs exhausting from the kitchens of seafood restaurants. By the time I reach the Seawall—it's the island's most arresting construct, our Seawall—it feels like I am wearing wet blue Kleenex. I sit here on this same damp stone bench—and think. Not to make it sound intellectual or grand, it's more like having termites. Or wasps.

You know how it is. One night in early summer a guy in checked pants climbs in the window to tiptoe over you as you lay sleeping. He takes your voice and leaves you thinking. You are no longer a waitress at *Bob's Country Western*. Now you're Aristotle.

2.

I have come to think that silence was the point of the exercise.

Surely if some character takes all that much trouble to climb in your window, he's probably come to teach you a lesson. He wielded the knife like a ferule, pointed it at me as if I were being called upon.

Let's say, he's come to take you as an apprentice to silence. In an ancient school. Where the *vive voce* is only given to an assembly of mute girls. Where the child so educated is truly left behind. I wish I'd passed. *Silence!*

Poor Philomela she lost her tongue and even when the gods transformed her into a nightingale, they left her mute. Silence!

I must have been a real disappointment. I've just never been any good at it. Silence! They always made me sit at the oceanic bottom of the Silence Class! As you hear, I never had the gift nor the natural talent for it.

Silence!

At the point of his long thin knife—I think it is a scalpel—the man herds us from the living room to the bedroom. In a former lifetime, maybe he'd been a sheepdog—or a realtor.

"Sit," he says in a preposterous voice, a disguised voice.

So we sit, Marty wearing her white cotton nightgown, me wearing nothing. Two young women perched on a Queen Anne settee and behind our heads, a formal curved pattern of leaves carved in cherry wood. Stiff as a ruff, the sofa either mocks or, perhaps more kindly, encourages our posture. You couldn't tell with that sofa, but we are gripped by good posture, as if good posture is our appeal. Spines straight, knees pressed together, thighs closed, slim volumes. With our feet we do the hook and eye, the Chinese contortionist thing, right foot hooked around the left heel. My left heel has a blister that Marty just opened with a sterilized needle. Tacky to the feel, weepy and pink as a small sun. In junior high school we were sent to etiquette classes where we learned to sit like this, slinging our legs sideways, hooking the feet. In case you ever have to sit on a stage in a straight skirt while your husband is making a speech.

We sit like ladies with the posture our mothers paid for, but it doesn't keep us still enough for the man. His audience is restless. I talk; Marty begins to recite the 23rd Psalm.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, he leadeth me beside the still waters, He..."

The man walks to Marty's four-poster, picks up a pillow, shakes the pillow free from the case, comes back to us, and drops the pillowcase over Marty's head.

The hem of that pillowcase is embroidered in white lily of the valley French knots. The pillowcase is delicate and beautiful because, in eleventh-century Brittany, a fourteen-year-old girl with a pleasingly high and smooth forehead—a forehead that disappeared up under her wimple—was taught to embroider French knots. The first French knotter was at the head of a long line of girls taught to embroider linens for their hope chests, their trousseau. Nine centuries later, Marty and I are standing at the very back of that line. We wait centuries for our turn; when it comes, when we step, one satin pump, up to the altar—embroideries, hope chests, trousseaus are sweeping past us in the opposite direction. Everything we thought we would need is disappearing down the flag-stoned aisle of history and out the vaulted door. Marty won't let 'em go. She saves, collects, hoards trousseau linens from garage sales, the island's antique stores—many from the last century, embroidered by women who could not now possibly be alive.

When that man shakes the pillowcase loose from the pillow, she does say, for a fact, "Oh, that's my favorite..."

Heartbroken.

All those pillowcases are her favorites. She is the most generous person alive unless you want to borrow a pillowcase or some sheets.

"Sure, take what you like," she says.

You pick one out, and she says, "Oh, that's my favorite..."

It is not easy to explain how a twenty-eight-year-old woman who sits as a captured audience before a man holding a long thin knife, a woman who sits on a Queen Anne settee in the valley of death can bitch, fuss about which pillowcase he puts over her head. I've had more than three decades to think about it. I don't get it, either. Although my mother often dreams that she lies in her coffin, trying with difficulty to open, to unseal, her eyes so that she can watch and see if my cousins are stealing my inheritance, her complete set of Tupperware. With the lids.

And they are.

Whenever I come home from my shift at Bob's, after I bathe, I go in the bedroom and lie down beside her for a while.

"Here, you need a pillow."

She would give me one from under her head. Her pillowcases, washed many times, smell of bluing and Downy fabric softener, Marty's rich dark hair, my bleached hair, our shampoo. We would talk in the dark and I'd go back to sleep in the living room on my sofa bed.

She sits beside me with that pillowcase over her head. The pillow corners stand up like small pointy hippopotamus ears. Or Dopey the Dwarf's ears. Or a Klansman. Or a human being who is momentarily to be executed. Or a kid dressed as a Halloween ghost on the other side of the screen door. I am ashamed I do not snatch the pillowcase off her head. No matter what he might do. She is so scared under it.

For a time, when the raft cannot dock with time, the young man demonstrates to us what he can do. The demonstration seems to be the purpose of his visit. I don't think he can help himself. We seldom can when we have an audience and are bent on the display of an acquired skill. He could be a World Book Encyclopedia salesman-if he'd come in the front door instead of the window. To prepare himself, he lightly pumps his shoulders and—flexing, stretching—preens his neck. This is all very lordly and self-regarding. He gathers himself into himself. He reaches for the quilt on the bed, grabbing its whole weight up by the blue middle patches. He tosses and shakes the quilt until he holds a middle seam by his fingertips. Now. Deftly concentrating all strength and grace into his fingers, he steps back. With his chin leading, he half-turns his head, shoulders and upper torso away from us. His profile, set off by his headdress, is young and fine, high brow and aquiline nose—and you are pretty sure he'd practiced looking at himself, his fine profile in a mirror. His right arm, the hand holding the quilt swings back, as that of a discus thrower does. He pauses. He seems to contemplate the gray still light beyond the window. And I think, He regrets this, he's going back out the window.

In one smooth and very beautiful motion, he swings his arm forward in a scything arc and hurls the quilt. For a moment, the quilt hovers, light as a parachute or a cast net, before it falls over us. Plainly someone, his grandfather perhaps, once took him to the reedy edge of a lagoon, there to teach him to throw a cast net. We sit there muffled in darkness, silently trying to work out whether or not he means to kill us. Under the quilt, Marty and I hold hands.

Zig zaw, zig zaw...

A rhythmic whine? A hasp?

Zig zaw, zig zaw...

A sawing.

The man is sawing the thick buckled straps on my leather satchel. Pity. The buckles give with a press of the thumb. I don't tell him about the buckles. Too many women have already told him too much; he isn't having any of it. I haven't helped. I have already told him too much.

The quilt lifts like a tent flap. He peeks in. A game of hide and seek, and he has found us.

With appallingly sweet manners, we reach up to help him hold the quilt. Two girls under a raincoat trying to share it with a third person. In this particular carriage house, I hear a voice say inside my head. It is the tourist guide voice that echoes out over the small pink tourist trains running through the island streets. They wake you up on Saturday mornings, recounting the history of your house, while all you want to do is sleep—Twenty-six persons, masters and servants, took refuge while the storm waters rose. The Great Storm, September 7, 1900, greatest of all U.S. disasters, 8,000 dead... It is interesting that dread has a weight like water. The dread quite literally drags down, pulls at my waist, rises to my chest. I have the impression that the old floorboards will not be able to support this weight. That he will crash through the floor like Rumpelstiltskin.

"You," he says.

He points to the hollow between my breasts. He flicks the knife up and up, like you do for a little dog when you're holding a treat. He wants me to stand. So I do. With a looseness in his wrist, he slices the gray air between us. He points to a bare place on the wood floor between the couch and Marty's bed. I step over to it, but to do so, I have to let go of her hand. I sit down cross-legged on the bare floor as if I am waiting for him to tell me a story. I like the way the floor feels under me.

There weren't any trees on the island, so before the creosote cross ties of the railroad tracks were laid on the salt marsh prairie, they used rough pine rafts to float the cotton bushels from Brazoria County, from the northeast Texas bottomlands, downriver through Wharton and Hempstead and Houston to the port in Galveston. Quite often the pine rafts were as valuable as the cotton load, and these rafts supplied the timber for the building of carriage houses, servants' quarters, privies, outbuildings of all sorts behind the big main houses on the island.

"Lay down."

Actually, *lay down* is not a term of slavery but a term of art from sharecropping days.

How much will you lay down, master? Meaning, if I need to buy shoes or a hoe, how much will you give me now that I will owe you on my next crop that you own a quarter of already, how much will I owe you forever and ever? Like VISA and MasterCard, I think. Lay down. The worn floor is smooth to the touch, soft and smooth with a hundred shuffling years of waking in the night, finding the honey-pot, pacing the sickroom, going to check on the baby, I got to get up, close that window, I got to get my rest, come back to bed it's cold, you can sleep in my bed if you want, don't touch me, your mama needs to see to about that diaper, I heard a noise, did you have a bad dream, you mean you don't hear that, come get in bed with your mama.

For some reason, I spread out my hair behind me. "Scoot down."

Scoot?

Mirror-close, he is a young man, really. One who seems not to age. Even as we do.

3.

After all that business in the bedroom, the thief herds us into the kitchen. Just as he, earlier, at the point of his knife, herded us from the living room to Marty's bedroom. We are docile with the herding. This is precisely how shame feels.

In the kitchen, he pushes us, penning us between the blue pine table and the window. The carriage house is Saturday morning quiet except for the screeching. He is pulling out drawers, looking for more loot. We don't have anything.

On the scratched blue tabletop beside me is the orange plastic typewriter. And wads of blue paper, a cracked sugar bowl covered with green shamrocks, a stack of baskets, a rainbow of silly translucent Easter grass, a pottery cup full of pencils and pens, a neat fat stack of fresh, unused blue paper. I look at the happy stilled life of it.

I sleep in the living room, but I work in the kitchen. The space is wholly my own on weekdays; Saturdays it belonged to the Brownie troop. Marty is the troop leader. It might have felt intrusive, an imposition—that rainbow of finger-painted Popsicle sticks on my work space. Instead, it feels like the sharing of space with fellow artists. Also a good way to track the seasons. The fans of Popsicle sticks, painted and spread as turkey feathers lay out to dry for Thanksgiving. Slightly later, painted ceramic handprints for Christmas tree ornaments.

Promiscuously, the evidence of each season lingers. The empty red construction paper hearts are only pushed off the table by the arrival of translucent eggshells and piles of multicolored, crinkly Easter grass. Since there are no major holidays pending, the Easter grass rustles slightly in the breeze from the open window.

The thief comes back into the kitchen dragging a quilt, the folds of it dragging like a fallen parachute on the wood floor. The windows are filling with gray light and he is becoming more anxious or agitated. He throws the quilt over us. In the musty darkness under the quilt, we can hear the high-pitched muffled squeaks as he pulls out more drawers, the haphazard fall of cutlery or plates or Tupperware lids as if repeating your ordinary kitchen accident over and over.

Sometimes he throws whatever comes into his hand at us or around the floor near our feet and of course the floor is already littered with wads of blue paper and spilled Easter grass, pink, mint green, yellow.

The yellow bristles of Marty's broom are near my feet. This makes me think of *The Wizard of Oz. Maybe he means to set us on fire like the fire caught the witch's broom?* We are on the second floor, beside the open window. I put my arms around Marty and whisper, "If he comes for us again, he means to kill us and we need to jump out this window." She squeezes my arm. A broken leg at worst, we can do broken legs.

Instead.

The screen door whines, slaps shut. The quick soft fall of his bare feet as he goes down the stairs, padding as if he were stepping through snow. I couldn't know yet—the thief has carried his loot away in my satchel and his pockets. We stand barefoot in the corner with the quilt still over us,

and a wonderful sound, or absence of sound, pours into the small house. The carriage house, like all the houses in Galveston, was built so the gulf wind may pass through to connect with breeze of the back bay. When the connection is made, when the house fills with wind from the south to north, the dust stirs on the floors, the crocheted curtains lift, belly with a spank like spinnakers. The wind and this great absence of sound spontaneously connects us to everything, to immediacy, to the glad life of the island.

Marty lifts the quilt, weighted with this brilliant silence heavy as a snowfall. Her voice quite soft, she calls out,

"Mister? Mister?"

I remember the utter politeness, the supplication in her voice. "Mister? Mister?" The silence was so great he must have played a magic trick to disappear sound. Marty slips the quilt from her face and calls out again, her voice high-pitched, quivering, makes little scratches on the immensity of the silence.

"Mister?"

We bolt out of the house, run down the stairs and around the front house until we stop under the pair of great live oaks at the curb. As it happens, we stop at the intersection of Twenty-Fifth Street and eternity. Marty still has on her white nightgown with the button missing. We are unlikely candidates for the Sublime. There is no chance this particular thief trafficked in the Sublime. Yet—backward turning, upside down gift—it is as if he ran down our stairs and accidentally caught the hem of the mist that veils the island, tugging the veil off as he ran away. We ran after—completely, joyfully, alive. For a little while to behold the brilliance. Standing on an ordinary sidewalk looking at the world: hibiscus, steeple, palm, grass, bird, tile, cloud, leaf.

We take into ourselves the scalded brilliant color of each distinct thing. All previous excursions towards ecstasy—loving boys in backseats or on the beach, the flooding of light through stained glass and smell of beeswax and the moldy paper of hymnals as you sat in the church balcony, or listening to the Ninth or the first time you saw a real picture, the water lilies say, or even praying to Roy Orbison on the jukebox—all of one's life experiences before this were only puny arrows pointing upwards to this unimaginable wordless joy.

William James says identity is when we feel most alive.

In this extraordinary morning, all our identity amounts to is two human beings who can see and smell and feel and hear and rejoice. As if for the first time, a small vivid garden has been prepared in the middle of an island, whose prospect gives onto a whole natural world. Dark boughed flowering trees and emerald grass, trumpet-throated red and pink and purple flowers, an ocean of blue streaked with green, tumbling into an immense jewel, an aquamarine. How much the bright things of the living world seem to want us, to completely want us, living among them.

"The grass is so green," Marty says.

We laugh because the blades of St. Augustine, so distinct, are greener than cheesy Emerald City.

The Sublime, apparently, is better than opium. I'm sorry but I am standing on the sidewalk thinking about George Steiner: language is a closed set. When you try to pull down phenomena beyond language into its nets, it flounders around and dies, becomes sentimental or trivial or silly. Human beings dump all kinds of palaver on the Sublime; she rises serenely above our flattering woefully inadequate attempts.

We are short-stay tourists to the Sublime. The seventeenth-century poets parlayed the trivial into the Sublime. Give two girls like us the Sublime and in twenty seconds we'll run it right down into silly.

On the sidewalk, Marty starts skipping. Since we are surgically attached at the palms, I have to skip too. I guess I want to skip. I haven't skipped in a while and I have never skipped naked—not across people's front lawns anyway.

Marty begins singing, "Gotta find a phone, skip to my Lou, gotta find phone, skip to my Lou." And so forth.

We fell from the ecstasy to an embarrassing happiness. While the island no longer looks like Nirvana, it still looks better than it has since the day before the 1900 Storm. The color! The grass! The red hibiscus! My thinking—it began when I pushed up from sleep and saw the thief standing behind Marty—has come back, so I note such things. We skip faster and faster. We run up on people's front porches and knock on the doors. One after another. Skip, skip, porch, knock. No answer. House after house. It is early but not that early.

"I guess they're just asleep," Marty says.

At one particularly dilapidated house, Marty gently stashes me in a leggy stand of azalea bushes. She does not knock on the peeling door so much as,

with both hands, slap it senseless. Marty is through with polite knocking. Her shoulders hunch in determination, resembling a bottlenose dolphin in a lacy snood trying to nose its way in. Even if the people inside are dead, they need to go ahead and get up.

Among the many Victorian houses on our block that needed restoration, this one was the most hopeless. Wind, rain, time, hurricanes and neglect had shorn the roof tiles into a Mohawk. The porch is a porcupine of splinters, windows are eyeless, patched with plywood. The massive and unpromising door looks like it has never been opened.

But it does open—with a terribly slow reluctance.

A stooped elderly man wearing a hearing aid the size of a table radio is standing there. His face and the coils of his huge ears and the balding top of his head fuzzed with curly grey-yellow hair. Just inside the door are piles and piles of furtive newspapers, magazines, cardboard boxes. As he opens the door, sun-moted dust clouds billow out as do swarming waves of Pekingese.

"Get out! Get out! Or I'll get my dogs on you," the man yells. You could tell he feared and expected invasion.

"Sir! I'm so sorry to bother you! But we need to use your phone! We need to use your phone! We need to call the police. A man came in our house." She can yell at somebody and be kind in the same instant.

Each of the Pekinese wears a different color ribbon holding her bangs from her eyes. "We don't have a phone," the man snaps, "wouldn't have one."

"Hi babies," Marty says to the snarling dogs.

I am standing naked in some very scratchy azalea bushes and Marty takes this moment to give each of the little shit-ass dogs quality time, scratching their proffered pig pink stomachs, admiring bows, learning each name. Sister. A beautiful morning. Violet. One of the most beautiful of my life. Lucille. Grace.

Alliteration, a special feature of Anglo-Saxon epics, is an aid to memory. I have remembered all these years what I thought, standing naked in the bushes. Because of the adrenaline—and alliteration.

I think:

We have survived the night, only to be picked apart by a pack of Pekingese.

The man doesn't have a phone. Marty can't charm him into having a phone no matter how much she admires the Pekingese.

We won't ever talk about the night just passed—women seldom do—but decades into the future, Marty, without preamble, will say, "I'll bet he named those Pekingese after his sisters."

We wander back in the direction of our house.

Blue pages. As we slide down from the Sublime, I see the blue pages out of the corner of my eye. All spring, I wrote a first novel on Marty's kitchen table typing on an orange typewriter. She gave me a ream of blue paper. Like a new variety of blue flower, the blue pages are scattered through our neighbors' small front gardens. Here was a blue page flown into a sappy white azalea bush, here a blue page stuck on a Cecelia Brunner rose, another page impaled like a bill on the spike of a low iron railing. A dozen or so blue pages are stuck to the sidewalk—as if a child had drawn her hopscotch squares in blue chalk.

The typed blue pages were in my leather satchel; they aren't now. The thief has thrown them willy-nilly into the yards. The thief must have run down our stairs—as the light was starting to come—with my satchel in one hand, hurling pages with the other into the yards. He seemed not to want the actual pages. When I was working, I stacked the tentatively acceptable pages of the novel in the satchel. I felt both relieved and rejected to get most of them back. For years, I will imagine him running barefoot down the wooden stairs at daybreak and into the neighborhood, like a junior editor—or a critic?—dressed only in black and white tiny checked pants, a lime green shower cap on his head, speed-reading the loose pages.

After a swift judgmental consideration, he threw the pages handful after handful, fertilizing our neighbors' lawns. I sympathized entirely, thought often of doing just the same thing myself.

As if we are responsible for the mess, Marty bends to retrieve a page, another and another. I stoop to help. We make our stunned way back up the street, collecting the blue pages together. We walk through yard after yard, holding hands. Marty stoops to collect each piece of paper and when the sprinklers come on, she picks up damp pages and tries to dry them on her gown. We look like girls on an Easter egg hunt.

By the time we get back to our landlord's yard—the yard itself and neighboring yards, the esplanade and the street has been transformed into a sizable impromptu car lot for black and white police cars. Sirens. Whirling lights. The static of police radios. Cars are backed over bushes and run up on the esplanade, each parked more haphazardly, more cattywampus than the

next. It is as if the seriousness or urgency of the event has unleashed a great deal of terrible parking.

4.

My father would scrape the loose change off his dresser before putting it into the pocket of his coveralls. He worked at DuPont on the Houston Ship Channel. I woke although for some reason I liked to pretend I was still asleep when he came in, peeled back the covers and, picking me up, laid me on a quilt on the other twin bed. He knew I was awake and I knew he knew and I liked all the knowing without having to say so, a joke, between us.

Wrapping me up, he would lift me to his shoulder and carry me out to his work car and lay me on the other frayed plaid seat. The headliner, the flannel or felt inner roof of the '47 Plymouth was stretched out, billowing down with the luff of a circus tent.

It was only a few blocks' drive to my aunt's house, but it felt like my father and I were off on some long adventurous trip alone together. Peeking out from the quilt, the pink light lifted evenly from the flat circular horizon beyond us and the raw paved streets with the new cluster of clapboard houses and the furthest end of this horizon, was the unamazing massive bank of millions of lights. The given horizon, I knew no other. At dawn the refinery lights were pink, I suppose I thought, suffusing with a pretty light like birthday candles. At night I pretended the largest petroleum chemical complex on the planet was a great fairy city.

But no. No metaphor will do. Metaphors unleash a playful power until myriad connections are made—it's not too much to call it love. The refineries simply are power—extending what we already are into space and time, sometimes quite beyond ourselves. Love and power don't know one another. They aren't even acquainted.

*

At night I sit out here and wait for the lost letters to rise. Surely that morning when the sprinklers came on, some of the typing washed off the blue pages and down into the spidery roots of the St. Augustine, washed down into

the fake built-up soil of the island—the dredge composed of old bones and dead trees and clocks and shovels and bridles. When the island was raised seventeen feet in 1905, God knows what people buried in the silt. No doubt the typing ink would have washed finally down into the sand, the original sandbar to seep, leak like motor oil out to the Gulf of Mexico.

I think, eventually, the sun will burn the ocean's face and ignite the invisible ink into intelligibility. The words will leap up one night like minnows flashing, leap up from what Charles Wright called, "the silvery alphabet of the sea."

Selected Episodes from Wartime Philippines on a Saturday Night

WARTIME PHILIPPINES

Netflix Studios BRUCE Productions

Philippine National Endowment Fund for Culture and the Arts

CASTING CALL

Calling all Filipino-Americans! Do you want to know about your grandparents' history? Do you want to know what it was like during the World War II Japanese Occupation? We are looking for participants in a reality documentary television series:

Must be of Filipino descent. At least 18 years of age. Knowledge of Filipino/Tagalog and other Filipino languages preferred but not required. Shooting in the Philippines will take 3 months.

If you are interested, please email castingwartimephilippines@ gmail.com with an audition tape answering these questions:

Why do you want to participate in Wartime Philippines?

What do you hope to learn from participating in Wartime Philippines?

Name: Francisco Dominguez

Sex: Male Age: 24

Hometown: Chicago, IL

Position: Artist

Name: Leonidas Dominguez

Sex: Male Age: 82 107

108

Hometown: Glencoe, IL

Position: Retired real-estate developer

Trailer #2: A Sneak Peek of the Barrio

Granddad tells us he came up with the idea himself. "It'll teach Kiko a few things," he growls into the microphone, accidentally revealing your embarrassing childhood nickname to the world and making sure none of us ever refer to you as "Francisco," the name which you go by as an adult sometime-artist. We always refer to your Granddad, the impressively named Leonidas Dominguez, as "Granddad" or "Mr. Dominguez" in the break-room at work or in the comments of Internet recaps.

"Just so you know," you say, "I was the one who suggested it. I saw the casting call on *Buzzfeed* or something."

You tell us you were not sure if Granddad, vigorous as he was at his advanced age, would pass, but he does. The casting director is near-apoplectic with joy. "A real survivor!" she tells us joyfully. "We were hoping to have at least one." And after she mentions that, we are glad, too, since your Granddad adds a gloss of authenticity to the show we accidentally find on Netflix while browsing on a slow Saturday night.

You look surprised, though not really, when the woman looks at you conspiratorially and says, "You know, we weren't sure if we were going to take people who don't speak the language, but Bruce decided that the current generation needs to know what it's like. Anyway, it's the Internet!" As if slapping the "Internet" on anything makes anything strange and possibly unworkable okay, but we roll with it. A couple of decades of grown men screaming at the sight of double rainbows on the Internet prime us for this.

This is how it works: This is a real, transcontinental affair, an attempt to preserve and present rapidly forgotten Filipino history to the young, smartphone-obsessed American-born youth by asking a bunch of Fil-Ams to live exactly like it was back in the Philippines during World War II. Bruce, an eccentric naturalized Filipino-American multimillionaire who goes by one name, like Madonna or Cher, tried to take the idea to major American television networks, but it was deemed too "niche," even for PBS, despite the abundance of 1900 Houses and Frontier Houses. Undeterred and possessing

boatloads of cash and similarly starstruck Filipino legislators in his pockets, he was able to convince Netflix to "appeal to a previously untapped audience (Title Card: *Do you know there are over 3.4 million Filipinos in the USA?* We sure didn't!) dying for representation of themselves onscreen."

You'll live like Granddad and his family and neighbors did when he was a boy, suffering the same privations: limited food, air sirens (but no real bombs 'cause duh, liability), squads of trigger-happy soldiers (sans real guns).

You, Kiko, think you can handle it. We can tell when you first appear on our screens. You talk about those similar shows on PBS: genteel Brits living during the Victorian Era, Americans roughing it in "Oregon Territory" as pretend-pioneers. It doesn't look so bad to you, we realize.

You say you like camping and hiking, and anyway, it's not like you had the money for luxuries until you moved into your Granddad's house, "bent but not broken," as you said by your stint in the Big City, trying to sell your spike-covered dildos and hairy televisions to elitist, uncomprehending art galleries. "They called me derivative," you say. "It's a *commentary*."

You tell us you can take care of Granddad. "I'll carry him on my back," you promise us, your skinny chest expanding into the manliness you want us to see.

From Agreement for Wartime Philippines Participants

[...] I understand that my participation comes with risks, including but not limited to illness, injury, and mental distress, for which I am releasing Producer from all claims and liabilities. Any and all disputes arising out of and in connection with this Agreement hereof shall be exclusively settled by binding arbitration [...]

Episode 1: Welcome to Villaguerra

After a grueling day-long journey by plane during which you record yourself on an approved camera, feverishly babbling that your feet's probably going to be in a coma forever, you arrive in Granddad's home island we immediately forget the name of. There, you are driven to a reconstructed barrio a couple of hours outside Manila called (unimaginatively for those of us who can understand any Spanish) Villaguerra. We discover this is not Granddad's native province. The narrator, a soothing British woman's voice, explains there are 81 provinces in the Philippines, spread over 7,641 islands, which we file away for Wednesday night trivia. See how much we're learning already?

"Who do these people think they are?" he demands. "Are Ilocanos like Kapampangans? Are Bicolanos like Cebuanos? And is that an Igorot?"

You tell us, red-faced, you wish your Granddad weren't so racist as we stare at a barely dressed man right out of *National Geographic* wandering around the outskirts of the barrio. We nod in sympathy, recalling our own grandparents, creaky dinosaurs from a less progressive era we shuffle to another room when they say something about the "homos."

We know you wish you knew more about the Philippines. You realize you're not even sure what all those words Granddad said are (we sure as hell don't know either). "Hell, why didn't I even Wikipedia this shit before I came?" you pant. Your iPhone's been taken away, and even if you had it, we seriously doubt there are enough towers around for you to try that app, when we scan the rolling fields with scattered trees that surround your village. We see you dig your hands in your pockets and stare mournfully in the distance. The crueler of us, the Baby Boomers, laugh at your Millennial ADHD. Sucker!

You stare at your surroundings. Potholed streets, palm trees, and chickens, goats, dogs, and cats padding through the dust. The buildings, though, are more solid than you, we, expect—there are even concrete buildings.

You do not get a concrete house, and Granddad still has to puff himself up like a rooster. "This is nothing. When I was young, we only had two rooms and ten people in our house."

"But you have only five brothers and sisters," you say.

"You forget. Your Lola Monet lived with us. And my Lolo—Lola Monet was his sister." ("Lolo" and "Lola" appear on the screen with a translation—grandfather and grandmother).

The house is sturdy enough, though, with a metal roof (which will later drive you crazy when it starts raining, which you rant about constantly to your one approved camera).

You feverishly wonder where the bathroom is, and then you discover you bathe in rainwater or river water and pee in an outhouse.

Your skin, our skin, used to running, filtered water, itches.

Your clothing isn't too bad, though. It's all 1940s wear, so no corsets or woven grass or whatever we thought you'd wear. Granddad, to your embarrassment, has to show you how to tie the tie on your one nice suit and at which angle you should wear the fedora to look fly, and then bitches at you about your shiny shoes, which rapidly become dusty in the unpaved streets.

"Some things never change," you tell us. We all nod in agreement.

Episode 2: Meet the Villagers

You get to know the people of the barrio slowly, with us. On-camera, you're encouraged to make comparisons between your old life and your new life. After all, this is educational not trash TV like those "hookers married to the rapper and that bakla on E!" as your unfortunately unenlightened Granddad puts it (some of us call him "Racist/Homophobic/Transphobic Granddad" while others point out that dude, he was born in 1928 and grew up without a freaking flush toilet in some godforsaken country). You are encouraged to complain, a little, about the meager food, the outdoor toilets, the sweat, the dirt, the fear, those awful soldiers (but not too much). You are slightly discouraged from talking smack about your neighbors, even if they deserve it, like how your neighbors, the Malubays, stole a recently slaughtered chicken, a rare rare prize, from your tiny yard one night, the fuckers (Though a little smack never hurt any ratings—we definitely don't mind it).

The first days, the producers set up a party for all five households that comprise the official barrio. Since this is supposed to mimic the early days of the Occupation, there aren't any of the dishes you're accustomed to seeing at the raucous Filipino events you grew up with, certainly no lechon roasting slowly on a spit, the skin crackling and bubbling golden-brown. We know this because you mention that, afterwards, with greater and greater frequency, how much you miss lechon or any meat, period, though you dabbled with vegetarianism before moving into Granddad's house.

But there is chicken and noodles and rice and piles of unfamiliar greens and bottles of fermented fish sauce and soy sauce, rice liquor, and everyone 112

is digging into the food with their hands, with gusto. This is the first time we notice there are no children, which later, we realize, makes sense, 'cause duh, liability.

One of them, whom we just learned is Mr. Delarosa, president of his Fil-Am organization in New Jersey, rises and snaps his fingers for attention. The novelty causes everyone to stop chattering.

Mr. Delarosa: "Nais naming sabibin, um, Kim nalulugod kami narito ng, no ang, pag-aaral aming kasayan yo."

Granddad: "What did you just say?"

Mr. Delarosa: "Ako nasiyahan narita, I mean, narito."

Granddad: "Your Tagalog is terrible. Just speak English!"

You: "Granddad!"

But we quickly come to agree with Granddad, since Mr. Delarosa and his wife, Kim, vice-president of their Fil-Am organization, continue to butcher Tagalog in their earnestness, so much so that even us, the non-Tagalog-speaking audience members, start muting every time they speak. Netflix helpfully adds subtitles in both English and Tagalog for all their dialogue. But this is later.

Meanwhile, you, Kiko, converse with the Malubays. At this point, the production company is allowing you to speak like the Millennials you are.

You: "So what do you do in the real world?"

Albert Malubay: "You know I auditioned for *The Real World* once. They picked another Asian that season."

Alicia Malubay: "It's okay, babe, you got that Law and Order gig after that."

You: "What do you do, Alicia?"

Alicia Malubay: "I'm a model. You know the Revlon campaign?" You: "...No?"

Alicia Malubay: "I was the inspiration for that."

We pause this to Google. Albert Malubay's IMDB page does include a stint on *Law and Order* among his three credits, which showed that he was that episode's corpse. Alicia Malubay's public Facebook profile says "model," but besides some pouty selfies on Instagram, no evidence of a modeling career exists. Some of us also comb through Revlon results on Google search and not one model looks anything like Alicia.

And this is when George Lim, The Professor, introduces himself. George Lim: "How much does everyone know about World War II?"

You: "Um, the Nazis?"

George Lim: "That was in Europe."

You: "I know that. Pearl Harbor?"

George Lim: "Better. But to give you an overview of the Pacific Theatre, I was asked to prepare a few notes..."

George Lim turns out to be an actual professor, from UT Austin's history department. The resident expert, the one who gathers everyone into the one-room schoolhouse to give periodic history lessons about the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, Japan's cotton-candy name for the turd that was the mid-twentieth century Japanese Empire. They, George tells us, thought it'd go down better when they started swarming over every country they could get troops in.

It didn't. And sometimes, we wish George would shut his trap, but some of us, the ones who like to believe they're getting an education out of this, appreciate his forays into explaining what's happening. The rest of us prefer it when he gets knocked around by the soldiers for teaching the wrong things, the parts that have nothing to do with how rad Japan is.

The last one we meet is Billy Hernandez, who even then exudes more slime than a slug. He complains loudly about finding sand in his rice when the camera first pans to him. We learn later, quickly, that he was assigned to be the village's sagdalista, a word we had to pronounce a few times before we manage it. We immediately hate him because he's a snitch, a local who interprets for the soldiers, even though some of us try to remind ourselves he is actually an accountant from Fresno.

From here, this episode, we pick our favorites, who we root for, though this isn't *Survivor* and the only prize is *knowing how your grandparents lived*. We guess who'll choke (most of us bet on the Delarosas, their toothpasteshiny teeth rapidly yellowing over the course of the series), who'll go axe-crazy (George, if the soldiers keep bothering him the way they do). We become addicted to watching everyone's every move. As for you?

There is camaraderie, but it's not right, you tell us. You band together because you all hate the soldiers. You gather in each other's little homes; you bitch about how hungry you are, how bone-tired, how you can't even remember your past life, the actual present, your real life.

But you realize that back in the twenty-first century, you would have hated all their fucking guts. We can see that, but we're thankfully separated from them via our laptop screens.

Episode 3: Meet the Soldiers

The soldiers introduce themselves to you and us when one hits you with his (fake?) gun and forces you to bow.

You're minding your own business when the news comes over the radio. The Americans (Your former occupiers, we learn with a twinge of guilt, because we weren't aware we ever owned you. Oops) have retreated, crushed like so many ants by the invading Japanese Army. You search through your meager stores of memory for what exactly that would entail (we do the same). You instinctively hurry back towards your new home.

Instead, you run smack into a whole squad of them as they march down the street, the newly terrified residents peeping at them through doors and windows. You, we, try to remember that they're probably just a bunch of under-employed actors they scooped from Tokyo, but they have guns.

You and we try to remind yourself, ourselves, they're probably high-quality toys. No harm.

Sneaking to an alley fails. They see you, and one glares in your direction. "Bow," he says in heavily accented English.

You stare dumbly, then he hits you with his gun. We see you reel, nearly tripping over a pothole, an errant chicken barely getting out of your way.

We don't know how painful it is, but you drop to your knees. Your forehead touches the ground, and when you stand back up when they're gone, you have dirt smudged on your face.

This your first encounter with the soldiers, and you never learn any of their names. We never do either. Some of us look away from them when we see them on screen, having an inkling of what they threaten with their clubs and guns. We judge the ones who eagerly inch closer til their noses touch their laptop screens, even when we, too, peek through our fingers.

Episode 5: Rice, Rice, Rice

You are always hungry.

You tell us that you never actually thought that the production company would hurt you.

It's a *simulation*, not the real thing. You never thought it would be *that* unpleasant.

But it is.

Your stomach is tearing itself apart for lack of food, you tell us. We try to imagine the hungriest we've ever been, our stomachs rumbling so loud we think people can hear across the room, and try (and fail) to quadruple that. There simply isn't enough of it, you say, and rice goes for way, way higher prices than you'd ever thought they would. You know for a fact that the soldiers confiscate any food trucked into town (we watch you when you ask the cameramen why the production crew even bothers; they say it's for verisimilitude).

Due to your Granddad's advanced age, he runs a little tailoring shop instead of farming or anything more strenuous. You did not know he was good at sewing—he grunts at you and mumbles that he had to learn a trade. Over voiceover, you recall for us all his immaculate clothes, as photos of him as a young man flash across the screen. Some of us giggle at how handsome this short, wrinkled turtle of a Filipino man once was.

You are his apprentice. Compared to others in the village, you're doing well. The shop is in front of the little house and you have the back-room for sleeping and cooking. But the pesos, even the centavos (Filipino currency, the text at the bottom of the screen informs us), go faster, faster than you'd ever thought. After you buy the rice (Granddad insists on this always), there is little left over, and that little won't pay for anything, maybe wilted vegetables at best. We grip our stomachs in sympathy and then realize we haven't ordered our Meat Lovers' pizza yet.

And those guys they got in there to play Japanese soldiers are bastards, each and every one. No, not true, some are a grayer shade of terrible (for verisimilitude!), but mostly, all they do is go around and shout and glare and threaten with whips and guns and sticks and swords.

You didn't think the production company would allow an actual public punishment but now, you wonder aloud if they're dying for an excuse for an execution. When you say that, our fingers itch to hit the "Play next" button, and we have to ball our hands into a fist to stop them.

He won't say it either, but we notice your Granddad is getting slower. He's a barrel-chested man, short but powerful. He boasts to us that in his youth, when he first came to America, he worked all sorts of jobs: busboy, taxi driver, mover, while he studied for his master's in economics at the University of Chicago.

Your Granddad has never talked so much to you. We can tell. At night, you're bone-tired, and you can't help but listen as your usually stoic-unless-lecturing-you Granddad (How we wince in memory of our own grandparents!) starts to speak, slowly until he becomes frantic with need. We armchair psychologists wonder if being so close to the war-torn past has triggered something deeply repressed, that these simulated wartime conditions make him want to unburden himself, as if his brain no longer rationally understands he's not in danger of dying.

"I had wanted to be a professor before meeting your Lola," he says one night over a meager dinner of rice and tiny salted fish, whose minuscule bones you swallow, the ones you once complained about on camera but presently rationalize as extra calcium. "She was a nurse, you know, studying to be one."

You hadn't. Lola had died before you were born, and your Dad had often said Granddad had gotten harder and more dried out, like petrified wood, afterwards, though you could never imagine a Granddad like the one right now, wrinkles softened with remembrance. You tell us this, and we feel fluttery, honored that you're sharing this private moment with us. We vow to cherish this memory among our own.

"It was too much at the time. I wanted to marry her. So I left school after my master's. Got a job keeping books for an apartment building. Bought some real estate and rented them out. Made money. All for her, so she could finish, so we could have a family. Have your father and then you."

You didn't know the old man could be so romantic. We blink away our tears and think of our partners, if we have them, and wonder: Would they ever do the same for me? Under these circumstances, poor in a strange land with a language that tangles in our throat? And try not to consider the answer.

Episode 7: What's My Name?

Your Granddad is stretching his aching, arthritic fingers (which you only realize because he surreptitiously takes modern-looking pills—he got a medical exemption from period doctoring, we figure) when he asks the unspoken question.

"You never call me Lolo. Why?"

You pause as you peer at the rice steaming on the finicky wood-burning stove. You have told us you've become an expert at this when at home, you barely even knew how to operate the automatic rice cooker. "I dunno," you say.

"It's more proper—to call me Lolo." Granddad frowns in thought.

You think about it. We speculate—American not Filipino? Um, he just looked like Granddad? You heard it from your peers and was like "Hey, that's what you call the old man that is not Dad?"

Before you can even answer, Granddad says, his eyes closed, "I haven't been always good to you, have I?" And we try to remember the last time our elders ever half-apologized for anything and pretend, for a moment, that Granddad is our grandparents, begging us to pardon them for their myriad crimes against us.

Episode 8: The World Watches Your Shame

You, we, don't believe the bastards, but they actually do it. George Lim is hauled to the town square and lashed.

No, that barely describes it. George Lim is caught passing out "dissident pamphlets" and then is whipped within sight of the broken-down town hall and the looming cross of the church until he turns corpse-pale, faints.

It's not real, we tell ourselves uneasily. You, Kiko, are just minding your own business, haggling for a meager pile of tiny fish. Your Granddad and nearly everyone else keeps correcting your pronunciation of what the fish is actually called, but your grasp of Tagalog is so poor that you don't even really bother to try. At any rate, you tell us you enjoy the haggling, as it makes you forget your grumbling stomach.

It's been three weeks, and you've lost more pounds than you thought would be possible in such a short amount of time. You crack a rambling,

desperate joke about diets we can't laugh at, though the most game, the most shameless, of us try.

But that's all forgotten when you see George Lim brought to the town square, already pale and trembling, and Billy Hernandez shouts out the man's crime. You turn red when you see the sagdalista. We have discovered, via casual Googling, that it was historically true, native Filipinos betraying their countrymen, serving the conquerors. From a distance of the modernday, we understand the impulse for self-preservation. That it's better to be a panting but breathing dogsbody for the men with guns than a breathless corpse buried in a secret spot in a field or worse, left out in public as a rotting example. From the closeness of the past, where we can practically taste the blood in the air, we see you telling us you hate the fucker's guts so much that you forget Billy Hernandez is merely an accountant from Fresno.

George is stripped of his shirt, tied to a post, and then the whipping begins.

We know, intellectually, they're not actually whipping him. They can't possibly be. That in real life, he'd be bleeding. At most, his skin is turning pink. They probably prepped him, told him to scream like he was dying. Maybe he did some Method shit, to get into the feeling of being whipped, that the production team told him to think of every oral history he's ever read, every interview he ever recorded.

But he's screaming, screaming so hard it feels like he's cutting the air to ribbons. And then Granddad is at your side, with his brown, wrinkled face getting pale, slack.

You're startled. We're startled. He's not supposed to be there. That's why you go to the market as much as you can. You're younger, stronger. You're not weighed with memories laced with memories of war. We know.

He's not supposed to be there.

He's staring at George Lim as he screams, his own mouth open. No sound is coming out.

You grab him then. Before he could collapse. Your own hands are rougher. From cooking and cleaning and cutting your fingers on scissors and needles, getting blood on the clothes, as your Granddad shouts at you, but they're as tough as they need to be for this moment.

"C'mon, Granddad," you whisper, hoping no one hears you, sees him (We do), but everyone's eyes are on George Lim. "You have to stand up. We

can't leave. They might catch us." The soldiers want you all to see them, to see them punish George. You understand this for real now. We see this.

But, you're young enough and unburdened enough, and you know well enough—kind of—none of this is real. We, too, know it's not possibly real, even as we frantically hit the fast-forward button on this scene.

But not your Granddad, who we still see collapsing in your arms, in slow-motion, sped-up, then paused.

Episode 11: The End Is Nigh?

We see your stomach is tearing itself into pieces. Food supplies are getting low, and the local market has barely any food. We learn during individual interviews that production is currently corresponding with the end of the war, 1944.

You, all of you, the Malubays, the Delarosas, George Lim, Billy Hernandez, Granddad, you, Kiko, wish the show was over, wish the war was over, wish it all was over.

The air is thicker. Tension travels from body to body, like how a wire carries electricity.

The soldiers are getting nervous, and they cover it up by screaming at everyone.

Again, we're not sure how much of this is real. The lines blur too much. Sometimes, you seem to forget your own name. That you're American. That you were born in the 1980s and that you grew up in abundance, the land of milk and honey.

You'd really go for milk and honey right now. We know. You're sick of rice more grit than grain, every tiny portion of tiny smelly fish, rotting wormy vegetables, shredded desiccated coconut. You tell us George Lim (who is whistling as he goes about his day, making your face turn red when you see him, because you know now it was all just an intellectual exercise for him) has been mentioning everyone would probably be slaughtering every dog and cat they could find at this point, and some of us hope (though not too fervently) that it's not the orange cat he's thinking of, the one we've gotten fond of who hangs around the empty, cracked fountain during the opening credits.

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You really want a Meat Lovers' pizza, with extra-extra sausage, you tell us with increasing frequency.

Your Granddad, meanwhile, lies in his tiny bed not moving very much. You are now schlepping all the orders around. Your seams are crooked, even with the sewing machine (you show us your handiwork so we're sure to know), but you're amazed at your ability to make something useful, for once. Your art school projects, your Marcel Duchamp-lite, cracked, blood-splattered bowls with your initials slapped on them, seem pathetic in comparison. After breaking a precious bowl when you're clumsily cooking in the kitchen area, you wish you could rewind, grab a bowl from your senior year at Columbia College that you covered in paint (not even real blood), give it a good scrubbing with sand, and serve tinola in it.

Bowls are hard to find, after all.

Episode 13: Bombs Away

This is what you finally do for your grandfather: You know how to light a fire, what kind of kindling to start with, feathered strips of newspaper, dried leaves and grasses, exactly how much breath is required to keep it alive. What kinds of things will make it spread.

One night, when no one is awake, you go to the soldiers' quarters, the nicest house in town, the capitán del barrio's house. The capitán has mysteriously disappeared, you were told in the beginning, in an attempt to get you in the Occupation mindset, a silly piece of theatre that, you tell us, makes you furious remembering it.

You manage to find some gasoline. You get a match.

The result is exactly what you expect, and while you're not an action-movie badass, you flip your middle finger off in the direction of what you hope are cameras as flames nibble at the house behind you. For all you know that night, no one actually ever sees, but we see you and burst into spontaneous applause, full of a brief patriotism we usually only ever feel for our own country, jingoism graciously shared with you, this lazy Saturday night we're so glad we stayed in for.

*

From Agreement for Wartime Philippines Participants

[...] I knowingly and freely consent to participating in additional promotional events up to a year after production is completed. [...]

*

Reunion Show: Postwar Confessions

But you do get caught. You and your grandfather, and that is the worst part, he hardly blinked when he was woken up. He stood dully in a thin undershirt and shorts, when it's explained you both had to leave. Some producer, a man in a Lacoste polo, thought to put a denim jacket over Granddad's shaking shoulders.

And that is an image that still runs on a loop in your memory, our memory, your grandfather just listening to some men in suits, men in expensive polo shirts, tell them that you had fucked up. You're just lucky that the house had an actual fire alarm (They justify this as psychological conditioning, creating haves and have-nots) so the soldiers got out with not a singe on their eyebrows. Granddad wouldn't even look at you.

And here you are now, trying to organize your thoughts, because thanks to some clause in fine print on your contracts, you both are required to appear on a reunion show and answer the questions of the audience. Us. Because no surprise, after your stunt especially, the hits on Netflix went way up. We, all of us, then discovered that the whole series was an exercise in humiliation and punishment, but since it was historical, it's a legitimate act of rubbernecking. So, we're eager to have a special, a follow-up to those people who suffered exactly like their grandparents did (or in Granddad's case, suffered exactly like he did when he was thirteen). Of course, we want to see the guy who tried to burn the bastard soldiers alive again.

You asked them to let Granddad off. They refused.

So you're both waiting in the wings. The other ex-villagers are standing off in the distance, in a huddle but still slightly spaced apart. They greeted you cordially but didn't take it beyond bland pleasantries. You can't really blame them; after you were kicked off the show, the next episode, which you

barely forced yourself to watch, you tell us, they were told you were a rebel. That you'd been plotting to take down the soldiers with some other rebels (you can't just be a garden-variety half-starved resentful asshole who finally cut loose in a big way), and you and your Granddad had been carted off to a prison camp. Oh, and that they were going to be punished for your crime with rations cut in half, an earlier stricter curfew, etc. You can't really blame them. Did they really want to remember that much collective suffering? Did they really want to be this-close-to-touching the embodied memories of that time?

You tell us, haltingly, how alone your Granddad often seemed to be while you were growing up, and you have to ask yourself if that's where that came from. Him not wanting to wallow in the past. Preferring to tell the world, Look at me now, the terrified, starving little boy from the barrio who made good, who's the big American man. He didn't tell us this, your Granddad, but we, some of us anyway, saw it.

And here, now, is your Granddad. For once, though, instead of a sharp, tailored suit, he's wearing a sheer snowy shirt over black pants ("Barong tagalog" helpfully flashes across the screen). The shirt is white and so so bright, and yet, he looks like a funeral walking.

You stand next to your Granddad tentatively. Since the show, you have spoken, possibly, even less. You tell us this with downcast eyes. We armchair psychologists once more speculate that Granddad, having once shown the soft underbelly under his shell, never wants to come out again.

But you can stand by him, at least. Your shoulders aren't even touching, but you, we, hear your Granddad murmur something under his breath.

"What?" you ask, but before you can ask him to elaborate (like we're all begging you to do), Bruce is calling you out, and the spotlight is shining hard in your face. We're telling you to come out, Kiko Dominguez. Our applause already swallows the stage.

And this is what you've been trying to figure out, this whole time, before this moment.

What are you going to say when we ask the inevitable question: Do you understand now?

Those words are bunched up in the back of your throat, when you take that first step into the blinding, devouring light, where our hungry eyes, our starving ears await.

Matthea Harvey

COMPETE-FOR-WHAT?

Five months in Lila decided it was all about the paintings on the walls. She'd remembered being asked during the interview sessions whether she ever dreamed about animals and if so, which ones. She'd told the producers about a recurring dream in which she was a large iguana standing on the subway platform waiting for a train. In the dream her ex-boyfriend from high school always asked her, "How does it feel to be a giant iguana?" and she'd reply, "I feel fast and fierce." None of the contestants could argue that there wasn't indeed a painting of an iguana in the women's powder room on the second floor, but then there was also a watercolor of a roadrunner and the landscape outside did look vaguely southwestern so it could have been just a decorating theme. The others didn't remember mentioning any dreams about animals except for Josh. His had been about a ladybug (he wouldn't go into details) and there were no ladybug paintings in the house though Lila did argue that the rec room decorating scheme was primarily black and red. The other artwork—an abstract pile of glued-together volcanic rock, what looked like a close-up photograph of Barbie's feet and a charcoal sketch of a portly man-didn't ring any bells.

Still, they all agreed to collaborate on the Interview Notebook, scrawling down any questions they could remember. Mostly these seemed pretty standard for reality shows: "Who is your favorite actor/actress?" "What sounds can't you stand?" "What can't you live without?" and "How do you deal with conflict?" (no surprise here—everyone except Fiona had replied with some version of "badly" and really Fiona's unruffled way of dealing with everything from the ant invasion to showering schedule violations had caused more than a few altercations... She was provokingly calm).

After Mariah spotted a cameraman over the fence with what she thought was "CFW" stitched on his bag, they started a second notebook with competing theories about the name of their show. Early contenders were "Curtains for Wally" (this was Shira's ex and no one else thought the whole show could be about her and her tortured relationship with her ex) and "Christian Food Workers" (possible, but when they made a meal for twenty

the same ten of them showed up at the dinner table and no one slipped in to cart away the extra enchiladas to the hungry and needy who surely lived somewhere outside the gates). They'd come up with a few plausible names, but when they had too much of the magically replenished tequila, they were prone to drunken flashes of insight ("Cunt Fuck-Wad" and "Crispy Fried Watermelon" both looked considerably worse in the light of morning).

Given that there were eight women and two men it was natural that they spent the first weeks, even months, thinking about pairing off. Were they supposed to make two happy harems of four women per man? Were some or all of them half-siblings via sperm donor being secretly nudged into incest? Were they supposed to do the opposite of all reality shows and ignore those of the opposite gender? For a week the women turned their backs on Josh and Zach whenever they walked into the room, which was great for Zach since he truly was an ass-man and was restful for Josh since he was still kinda pining for the girl he'd gone down on the night before he shipped off for the show. She'd made a hiccupping sound that haunted him to this day. Occasionally he'd fake-hiccup as a secret signal to her in case she was watching. But what would she be watching? A bunch of ten bewildered people with no purpose at all?

They all worked out daily (they were being filmed after all) which gave the place the air of a zoo full of animals who had devolved into obsessive repetitive behaviors. Sad jaguars jogging in place. A frenzied platypus swimming back and forth across its small aquarium. Sophie stopped exercising in month nine and spent much of her nights in the pantry closet munching on handfuls of M&Ms comforting herself with the idea that perhaps the "F" was for fat. They tried crafts too—there were plenty of pipe cleaners and glue and glitter in the crates by the pool table, but except for one birthday of bedazzled sweatpants and construction paper crowns, they never got very far. None of them were particularly good with their hands.

The women turned on Ashley because on her birthday she showed no embarrassment when the chanting "Are you 20... are you 21" went all the way up to "34?" She'd shimmied and wiggled through the whole process and didn't seem at all concerned about her age. They all thought that given her greying ovaries she should be trying harder with Josh and Zach and spending less time trying to tame the stray cat who inevitably turned up on Tunamelt Tuesdays. They ganged up on Thea next, who was reading her way through

the whole magenta-to-pink ombre pile of books in the living room. They called her Theocrites. She presented the process as one of self-improvement but of course she was hoping the key to the show was in those books. Sadly, the books really did seem chosen for the color of their spines... Her heart leapt when she moved from the peach-colored *Tobogganing on a Shoestring* to the sunset-spined *Inuit Traditions* but then the next book would seem entirely unrelated (*The Drama of the Gifted Child*). Alice in Wonderland was the only one she truly enjoyed and seemed to speak most to their situation. Privately she called Sarah "The Red Queen," less for any personality trait than for the fact that she loved Twizzlers and chess.

Years later people still talked about the day Thea cracked and started gnawing a throne for herself out of the books. Compete-For-What actually had a huge audience, which later helped with Josh's career as a life coach and seriously stymied Mariah and Shira's dreams of finding Mr. Right and meant that Lila couldn't go into a café without someone screaming, "I feel fast and fierce!" The show had a kind of sweet pit-of-the-stomach-isthat-all-there-is? appeal and who didn't secretly feel that way about life? The producers made bank on advertisements. Here was an audience searching for something. A new low-calorie beer? Stick-on rivets that made any nail polish seem impossibly chic? Special support hose? We watched because we saw ourselves in them-prettier versions of ourselves, we who sat all day at our computers sending emails back and forth, moving the laundry from the washer to the dryer, sometimes remembering to put fresh water in the dog bowl. We loved watching their minds whirring—their pebble-smooth faces baffled, discouraged, then surging with hope. They did our worrying for us. We were sad when they stopped showering and talking and just lay on the lawn until the producers drove up in a white van to intervene. We too wanted to know what the hell it was all for.

ADEQUACY

Many years ago, I had the mixed pleasure of living in a small town in Puget Sound with my then-husband. We are Korean people, which is not to say that we had sought each other out during our college years because we were both Korean, or that any aspect of our romance necessarily relied on our being Korean for its upkeep. And yet this quality grew into a kind of third person who lived with us. Not that this third creature was a premonition of the child we planned to have together, but which we never ended up having together. Nor was this particular spirit the ghost of our families' shared history of the Korean War. Really, though I name it Korean-ness here, it was more like a coincidence, and yet when it inevitably took shape, and his mother moved to our town, I was afraid of what we'd created between us.

You could say to yourself here, How could she not know what would happen? Didn't she herself grow up as Korean? And you'd be completely correct to pursue this line of questioning. I was not an orphan, though during my adolescence I had wanted to consider myself one. My relationship with my mother had been corrosive. For instance, at airports, when on first seeing me, she would say something like, "Did you wash your face today?" At twenty-nine, I still yearned for her approval.

His mother, on first meeting me during college, said that she was not sure what kind of family I had come from. She was scandalized by how I lay across the dark leather couch when we watched to together in their living room in Santa Cruz, even though he had said it was okay. She'd pulled me up by my arm, saying that I should sit up when older people were in the room. After sniffing my sleeve, she added that I should quit smoking. Her read of me had been so quick and sure that when she actually met my mother, a few months before the wedding, she apologized to her for misjudging me.

Traditionally, a Korean bride is taken to her new in-laws' house and at the same time repudiated by her own family. But it still struck me as weird when six years ago, *she*—during my short courtship and engagement with him, during which she apologized to my mother for having misjudged me—insisted that I think of her as *my mother*.

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Or if in my childhood home, my mother used to say, "Time to eat," and his mother says, "Eat," and he digs in, sometimes before I get to the table—well, I pretend not to hear her, even if I understand her Korean perfectly. She gestures at the food, and if I am not quick enough to take some food, puts it straightaway onto my plate, an invasion.

"Invasion. Really, Carter?" X repeats later. "You're so afraid of contamination, you don't even know it."

And this makes it horrible, right? Especially as I am not thinking contamination as much as not wanting my portion touched by a spoon that she's used to feed herself. This is a pointless self-saving effort if she's already tasted and stirred the boiling soup with the same spoon.

Or as I was saying about mother tongues—that my mother uses English while his uses Korean—one of my favorite places is the town's candy store where I can find gummy butterflies that are about the size of my tongue. If I go and buy a packet of six butterflies, the plastic bag tied with ribbon, what is my mother tongue to each butterfly—that particular and delicious insect moist and palpitating as it dissolves? My tongue is a thick organ, possibly the clumsiest part of my body, and I am shy about using it.

So during meals, when his mother puts the whole silver spoon into her mouth like a salver and the oval comes out clean—or that mother, when pouring soy sauce with minced garlic, green onions, and sesame seeds out of a repurposed jam jar—licks the run-off with a thick tongue, wetting the glass like a native slug would, except that slugs invest their whole souls into survival while her slug-tongue is only cleaning and shining the jar glass—well, when I mention this to X later, he is furious, saying she is the cleanest person he can imagine, which might be true the way she licks the glass clean. To me, she is not clean just because she is cleaning. This is the problem, as if saliva weren't a particular kind of carrier. He should know. He's a doctor. Nothing awful will *actually happen* as a result of my eating food she's touched with her used spoon.

I usually push my food to one side and eat dry things, and then she says, "You don't like my food." And he eats more of it, which may have been the point in the first place.

After a number of times and at a number of meals, I am embarrassed—or rude—for refusing her *affection* (his word).

Over time, and after many meals, considering that she wants me to like her, I say to him, "Let's see how it goes." This strikes me as some kind of quintessential statement of reason and fairness. He hears it as rejection. We have fought about it from the first time his mother asked me to eat her food to the most recent time when, after her husband died, she announced that she would not want to bother us. I should mention that she did first go through the courtesy and gesture of living for a short span with her daughter Helen in Vermont. Helen married for a second time, loved taking care of her mother, even offering a cupped hand, for example, if her mother had been chewing gum for too long.

The mother believes that Helen's husband, a French man who butters his bread before adding a slab of cheese to it, eats too much. Since she is an ascetic woman, she cannot stand the waste of money, never mind that her son-in-law loves the idea of being a certain kind of European, especially in contrast to being a certain kind of Korean, even if it benefits him to be served by both Helen and her mother, who don't eat much. Because the mother hates self-indulgence, never mind that her daughter and son-in-law were prepared to take her in forever, the mother had to escape.

I'd been waiting for his mother to strike. When she came to visit us last week, saying that she wasn't going back to Vermont, and didn't leave—well, I wasn't surprised. I also knew I could hold onto the result forever as some proof, not just that I'd been right in my dread of her. He and I had been living in a valley with shadows of poor him for some time. He feels blamed because he is blamed, and still has the nerve to say that if I were a better person, I would be nicer to his mother, which in some way, is a way of saying, if I were a better person, I would be more Korean, or if I were an actual Korean person, I would be a better person.

One afternoon, he picks me up at the library and we drive a few blocks over to the Oystercatcher to have lunch.

We own a station wagon, but the problem with her staying is not that we have only one car. The problem with her staying is that she doesn't ever go anywhere. Sure, we have enough room to house her. Our small, white clapboard cottage has three bedrooms and two baths. Our bedroom, as well as my study, crowd the second floor but we leave her complete control of the downstairs, never mind that she likes to wake up at 5 every morning and

eat her breakfast of soup and rice, the smells of her breakfast rising into our bedroom.

The problem with her staying with us is that I cannot work with her moving around or not moving around in the downstairs rooms. I usually leave my study room door open a crack but if she moves at all in the kitchen—re: hardwood floors—my door clicks against the frame. Not that she is aware of her reverberations. I can shut my door completely, or open my door completely, so that it catches on the latch in the molding, but the thought of having to do this infuriates me.

My study window has a view of an estuary on Puget Sound. When the tide goes out, revealing the silt floor—well, ever since she's been here, I've decided to work at the library. I thought I'd like to manage my schedule in this particular way, forcing myself outside early in the morning, and getting much of my translation work done before I can dodge it. This routine has grown tiresome after one week. When I told X that I don't like being in public places to work, he said she would only be with us temporarily. He's put her on a waiting list for a condo at a seaside condominium complex, but all of the units with pro-rated rents are occupied.

He is happy, touching my back when we walk into the restaurant. He points to the Reuben sandwich on the menu immediately, the joke being that we aren't eating her Korean food for once.

Then he says, "It's okay for you to work at home. She's not asking you to do anything. It's not even like she talks to you during the day."

This does make some sense. She and I don't talk to each other in the house. And yet I am suffering.

If only I could make a good argument, but I don't have an answer to the question of why I am suffering *exactly*. He did ask me if it would be okay for her to live with us temporarily. He did explain that we were her last resort and that otherwise, she would be utterly alone. And yet even if I admitted that I was a cruel and heartless person, and even if I rejected her directly, she would not change her course of action.

So after he's eaten the seared scallop special, and I finish the delicious sandwich—and yet my decision happens less distinctly than his leaving the table to go back to work. As if in one minute I had been trying to work with my study door shut completely, and in the next minute I came to town to eat a Reuben sandwich—well, my decision glides past, already decided. So I tell

myself that I will prepare not to eat Reuben sandwiches so often for lunch if I am really determined to be on my own.

As for the money involved, this is easy enough. We'll split as much as we have, which should be enough to get me to a place where I can make a move. Even if my immediate family doesn't think I know enough Korean to succeed, I've secured a contract to translate a poetry collection. Not that I am a materialist, but I've gotten an advance. Nor have I bothered to lie about it. X said it was great. We could save up his salary and live off mine. This sounded like a good idea at the time until I realized that his worth would grow and mine would be frittered away.

After he leaves to go back to work, I keep eating and feel sorry for having to advance my sense of sadness and victory. I can't start work again at the library for a good hour.

I ease into the work by reading Korean translations of Emily Dickinson poems. At poem 280–I felt a funeral in my brain—the Korean translator uses the word for *coffin* instead of *box*. Coffin gives too much away to the funeral. Box neutralizes funeral, as it should since the speaker is still alive.

I continue work on a poem titled 문 = Moon =

1/ The poet's surname

2/door

3/ celestial object

4/ Sino-Korean root word for literature.

So far, the poem says, That the day is clear as a mirror \slash Doesn't mean a thing.¹

Instead of writing, I draw a yellow moon on paper I fail to give the poem any honesty.
The process of beautifying—well, I am tired of poems that bluff Bored with flowers, day and night, birds
And songs of distraction
Hope, oar, children, even rocks are a bother.
I cut out a moon with scissors
And hang not a red one but gold
If you call me Moon (Moon)
A nameplate hung at the door,
I am Moon (poem), and so become a Moon (moon)
That rises as if with longing

Later, he'll pick me up again, and we'll go home to a dinner of *panchan*, all the vegetables she'd spent the day preparing for that moment when he'll eat it, as if he hasn't eaten a thing all day. She'll sit at the table as if she hasn't eaten either, the whole time cleaning the rims of the celadon bowls, if he drips soy sauce or sesame oil there, with her bare thumbs. When she wraps the shallow bowls in saran later—well, this is her mild improvement after I scolded that my mother *never* put used food back into jars with new food. The pickling can't kill *everything*, I've heard myself say.

Anyway, she started scrupulously wrapping leftovers in saran and later hand-washes the saran for further use, our bamboo dish rack now a kind of testament—in reflective and translucent surfaces—of her following my household directives.

My mother never—if I could count the number of times I've said that, even if I am not particularly proud of my mother. She has grown a bit slovenly over the years. For example, she cannot believe that the wet neck of a soy sauce bottle will leave a circle stain on the refrigerator shelf. If you multiply this oversight by # of condiment bottles—well, you get my meaning, or you might think that I've become nuts about cleanliness, which I hadn't been two years ago, before I slept with another man. We lived in Santa Fe during the affair; we left Santa Fe after the affair.

He had said, "You're killing me." But I didn't kill him really. Rather, he stayed with me, and I developed a cleaning habit. Watching my mother let go of her standards also gives me some sort of vicarious amusement from my gloom, and I say untrue things like my mother never when I know quite clearly what my mother does.

It's mid-October and as we approach winter in the Pacific Northwest, the sunlight dims at 4 p.m. The light that comes back at 9:30 a.m. is rather

A streetlamp lighting our grief. I prefer the red light district A search for love You, lonely and poor Opening this Moon (door) for free Today, clear as a mirror Doesn't mean a thing.

[Translated from "문," 양귀비꽃 머리네 꽂고 [Poppy in My Hair]. Minumsa, 2004, p.17.] similar to the light at noon and at 3:30, giving anyone the impression that nothing has changed.

Around the table, he and his mother hover. He eats and she doesn't eat, and there is some central meaning, as in he and she perform life when they sit down to food rations. The food has no real chance against them, even if they are not eating, or my cynicism diminishes my ability to see clearly. Only here we are, unable to escape the smell of garlic rising from her inhospitable hands.

2/ There is an orange box I'm thinking of, more red than yellow, and made of panels. If I look out from one side of the box—and yet, how does it open?—I can look down a cliff. At the same time, the train, of which my box is a member, begins to move along a very beautiful countryside which I have never seen other than from an airplane. I am far enough, high enough, to see that the land is split by rivers. Trees grow along these fissures. The air is thin and dries my face. The rest of my body is nothing compared to this tightness. In this way, I could be part of a circus and the container might be lined with hay, though I have no experience of loving hay, or loving farms, or being so dissociated from the rest of my body.

As the light changes, my box its own sunset, I go into darkness, which is not unlike my previous trip to Nepal during my college years. There, as with my current mode of transportation in shocks of color, such as

1/ a thumb mark on a woman's strong forehead that held in place grains of rice;

2/ a woven cloth at a town market where we stopped our trek to pick up supplies such as Cadbury chocolate bars; and

3/ the solitary bloom of an early magnolia—not the whole thing, just the edges—lonely as the fading edge in a thick forest—

You could say our weather *as box* is like a decaying file cabinet, an orange rust seeping through its corners. The metal framework that promises security despite its ugliness and rasping when dragged or opened—well, is this filing cabinet really a matter of the direct ribbons of grey atmosphere, or the day falling into dinner?

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In Nepal, a certain river that the tour guides and my group followed into mountains—we weren't spiraling upward to climb the grey mountain but the river sounded different at every turn. I played math formulas in my head and considered I'd be a math major when I went back to college. Nor did this idea stick because I wasn't confined to my plans then, other than to imagine that I could refer to myself as *she*. *Carter* would be happy to get a square of chocolate at the next break.

When my family had arrived in the United States during the 1970s, I had been given a choice of names—it would have been either Amy or Rosalynn, but I chose Carter in advance of rejecting other things.

Carter didn't have a perverse sense of humor, but would confess easily to things she'd done wrong. It was difficult for Carter to keep secrets.

Nor could she control any secret, such as her unhappiness.

More recently, when she tried to tell him more about the affair, he said, "All along I haven't trusted you."

Never mind that Carter married him after all.

3/ He and I often hike at the nature preserve. This time, we fight about halfway through the hike where the trail cuts down the side of the bluff to the beach. I can't remember how the fight starts but we have to keep the fight at a clip in order to finish it before we get to the rocky beach where we can't hear each other unless we're screaming.

"You can't keep anything to yourself," he says.

And it does seem to me then that if I open my mouth, the wind will spread it. As for whatever *it* is, he's right, in a way. The wind whips his face, but even after he closes his mouth, the air is talking to me and I don't appreciate how the air works on his side as a chorus.

Of course I have been saying that his mother is getting between us, but that isn't exactly how I'd put it. I said the house was strained, as if the very architecture of the house could respond to the tension of *only one week*—he repeats. So it turns out not to be a safe thing to say. Plus he says, *Enough*, as though I have been repeating myself. This feels completely Unfair since he hasn't listened, not that I use the word *ignore* to accuse him either.

So he says, "It's obvious that you think that."

"That we're broken, you mean?" I ask.

"You can use that word, if you want," he says.

We weave down the cris-crossing trails. In places, seed heads hang over the path. To get to the rocky beach, we fall through a series of fine sand drifts. Or really, the way he moves so fast—I cannot catch up, the newest problem being that she's cleaned out the toaster. We have a new rule about shaking out crumbs every day, or have to face her doing it for us, even though she doesn't use the toaster.

If I had been watching from a raft on the silky water, I might see us racing to the water as rolling apples. Nor could we go into the water because no one is really *there* to scoop us up. And if we were apples, it being Washington State, the shock of cold water would separate heated flesh from skin. I mean, there are different ways to flay an apple. My mother used to be able to peel a whole apple, keeping the skin in one long flat strip.

Whenever she did this, she would say, "My father said you could soften your hands by rubbing peels into them."

If I tried to pull on a peel to soften my hands, my mother would lift the apple away.

"Sorry," I'd say and she would shrug, offering me a quarter of peeled apple with a toothpick. "That's why I don't know how to mother you."

"But you are mothering me," I'd say.

"Not really mothering," she'd say, but of course my mother had been teaching me about saving my hands. So of course, when I found a moth burnt on the toaster coils, I didn't want to scrub it with a dry toothbrush. Nor did I want to experience dread every time I ate a piece of toast—the gaping mouth of this, the ringing decay in the toaster's teeth—so I threw the toaster away.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, when I'd confessed. He hadn't told me that they'd wanted the toaster for her new place, which would open up just a week later.

He said, "She wouldn't have minded cleaning the toaster," and then rescued it from the garbage for her.

On the beach, dead, seaweed cords overlap, never mind the territorial fights that must have happened between them underwater. In my mind, each had wanted to live freely. As for why their cemetery has to be ugly—well, unburied corpses usually give an impression of injustice. Especially with muted faces—

Carter went to a dark place that was not unlike a cave. Everything was underwater and yet without equipment, she was breathing. Carter could make out little strands of green but could

not locate the light source. She was myopic, and forced her face close to the wet line. She put the seaweed cord in her mouth, and found her way to a rock to which the whip had been attached. She'd reached the sandy bottom. From there, she climbed the whip. Its gelatinous pod tread water, and so did she.

So now while I chase my husband down the rocky beach—well, he's charging here and there like a whip among whips, yes?

To get ahead of me and to avoid me. This is humiliating enough, though we are alone with just the water and our one car ahead and the short drive home.

He says again, "You're killing me."

Surely a lie. He stands there plain as day. Over his shoulder, I notice a spotted flag of seaweed. Also, other small seaweed skins have been bleached. And his accusation is more like a call to commitment, while the chances of my killing him now are low.

THE DEMON EATER

Eating for Carolyn wasn't like eating for my other clients. When I saw her for the first time, backlit as she walked into the small French restaurant for our intake lunch, I wanted to tell her to turn around and leave. No, my darling, I wanted to say. Not my services, not you. Any ounce less of you would be a loss for the world.

She carried her weight with a particular loveliness, the firmness and density of a freshly kneaded boule. My blood began to pound, and I turned my face into a rigid mask as I stood up to shake her hand.

Her eyes traveled along the plane of my arms, the lines of my neck and face. "You're thin," she said.

"Yes," I replied. This was the hardest part, when a new client noticed my weight. No one wanted their surrogate eater to be a thin woman.

We sat across from each other, and I left my hands on the table, a stranger's hands, the nails painted pale pink. I never painted my nails in my old life. The color would have been coated with flour and crusted dough.

"I didn't think you'd be so thin," Carolyn said, pretending to clear something from her throat. "Where does it all go?"

"Honestly," I said, "I don't know."

Usually the clients said something about me being lucky, as if our value came from our lack. But Carolyn didn't say anything. She seemed nervous, smoothing the cloth napkin in her lap, studying the table. "So, how does this work?" she said, weaving her fingers together and leaving them in a knot. "I read through your website, but I don't think I understand."

That was my cue. I made eye contact with the waiter and nodded.

"It's easier if I just show you," I told her.

He brought a basket of bread, fresh and steaming in its cloth nest. Next to the basket, he placed a shallow dish of dark green olive oil. I added salt, balsamic vinegar, talking as I worked.

"Do you like bread?" I asked her.

"No," she said. "I mean, yes. I just try not to eat too much."

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I ripped a bite-sized chunk from the loaf, digging my thumb into its flesh. My throat thickened slightly. "You're going to have to touch me," I said, placing my left hand palm-up on the table.

I expected her to hesitate, but she grabbed my hand and clenched it, sending a charge up my arm and sweeping my mind blank. I pinched the bread to remind myself what I needed to do.

"Close your eyes," I told her. She looked around the restaurant. "No one is looking," I promised.

She breathed out through her teeth, dropping her lids. Watching her, I placed the oil-heavy bread against my tongue, a fruity, salty burst.

I watched the taste radiate away from me to her, transforming the rigidity of Carolyn's expression with sensation and wonder. Her lips pressed together, a tightening seal against the rising tide of pleasure.

Her eyes opened. "How..."

"I can't say," I said, swallowing the bread. Soggy and clinging, it had lost all flavor for me.

I let go of her hand and picked up the menu. "Now," I said, "tell me what you'd like to order."

*

Thursday night became Carolyn's night, a year's worth of dinners in a house built by her husband, not for her but for his first, now grown family. I ate for her in a kitchen that looked like a lifestyle catalog, salvaged marble slabs and distressed wood.

One spring evening, I parked my car in front of her house, the dogwoods blooming, thick petals blushing pink. I wondered who planted the trees, Carolyn or the first, older wife.

She opened the door before I reached the front steps.

"Were you waiting for me?" I asked, my expression lifting against my better judgment.

"No," she said, smiling. "Maybe." Barefoot, she wore a blue apron with vertical white stripes, a heel resting against bare ankle. Gray clay smudged the cream of her forearms, her skin bright against the dirt. She was a ceramic artist, her husband a carpenter, but they made a fortune designing objects for a sprawling household brand.

I followed Carolyn inside, pulled deeper into the smell of garlic and hot oil. Carolyn loved food. Before I'd lost my taste, I could feel her love in the dishes she made, the care of the ingredients, each bite brushed with her essence.

"I've never cooked with these before," Carolyn said, picking up a pale green swirl. I recognized it immediately: a garlic scape, shot up from the bulb and cut down before it could flower. "My friend gave them to me."

"Fantastic," I said. They were spread across the marble counter as if for a photo shoot. I picked one up, its skin dry and rubbery. "You can also make pesto with them," I said.

She squeezed my elbow. "I love how much you know about food," she said.

"I was a baker," I said, putting the scape back. "I went to culinary school."

"Wait, really?" she said. "You might be able to help me then." Carolyn dropped the scape and went to the pantry, bringing back a mason jar full of thick white goop. "Do you know what I should do with this?"

I recognized the starter immediately, reaching for the jar as if for an old friend. "Sourdough," I said. The lid cracked and popped as I twisted it off, pushing my nose into the yeasty citrus vapors.

"It always has this gray water on top of it," Carolyn said.

"So it's normal?"

"Yes, but maybe put in a little less water." I poured the hooch into the sink, scooping flour from a container and stirring it in with a wooden spoon. Before, sourdough had been my specialty. I could catch wild yeast from the air, revive the weakest of starters back to health.

I caught a flash of movement outside the window, a man walking across the grass. A flannel shirt, grizzled hair traveling downward into a wild, graying beard. Privately, I called Carolyn's husband the woodsman. He met my eye through the kitchen window, not missing a stride as he half-saluted me and disappeared into his workshop.

Carolyn checked the wall clock. "Well, shall we?" she said.

We sat side-by-side at the blond wooden table, close enough to feel each other's heat. Carolyn gripped my left hand, the sharp moons of her nails pressed against my palms. As I brought the first bite to my mouth, I glanced

at her, waiting for the taste to hit. She used to gasp at the flavor, but now I had to watch for the moment her jaw muscles went slack.

She made me eat two helpings, scraping the sauce up with the edge of my fork. By the end, her eyes were glazed, pupils huge from pleasure. "I'm sorry to make you eat so much," she said as she rinsed the dishes. "You must be stuffed."

"I'm happy to do it," I said, rubbing what should have been my full belly. "And everything was so delicious." I hadn't tasted anything, just mashed the gooey nothing in my mouth and tried not to gag.

I felt poured out, emptier instead of fuller, as I tucked Carolyn's check into my leather purse. Hitching the strap up my shoulder, I followed the flagstone steps across the lawn, thinking about something pointless, like a bath or some TV, before flickering out in the dim evening light.

The flickering felt like the drop at the beginning of a fall, except the fall was my entire body letting go, skin and muscles breaking loose as I lost my internal tug and gravity. The bonds between my molecules slipped into vapor, lost in a rush of ecstatic chaos until, just as suddenly, I snapped back, a solid woman kneeling on thin patches of grass.

When I got home, I turned on all the lights in my apartment, chasing out ghosts. A bath, I remembered. Hot water to remind me of my edges.

As the tub filled, I took off my clothes and looked at myself in the full-length mirror. When I shifted from side to side, I could see my ribs moving with me, the knobs of my pelvis flaring. I'd eaten so much just to become a hollow bowl, the food leaching something essential from me as it went.

*

On Monday, I went to Penn Medicine to see a resident clinician, a baby doctor, dully handsome like an eyeglass model.

"You've dropped a bit of weight since coming to see us," he said, tapping through my chart on his mini tablet.

"I know, that's why I'm here," I said. "I think something's wrong."

"Well, are you excessively dieting?"

"No," I said, shifting my sit bones on the edge of the plush examination table. "I would know if that was the problem."

"Well, sometimes our eating habits can be obscure to us," he said. "Why don't you walk me through a day of food?"

His head bobbed in neutral agreement as I went over breakfast but stopped when I got to lunch. "Wow," he said. "Are you sure you have the proportions right. Like this much?" He made a circle with his fingers.

"Yes," I said. "Like three of those."

"This is a delicate question, but are you purging afterwards? Like—" He tilted forward and mimed throwing up.

"No," I said. "I would know if that was the problem, too."

"This is very strange," he said, tapping the screen.

"Is it possible that I have a tapeworm or something?" I asked.

"It's unlikely that you got a tapeworm in Philadelphia, but not impossible," he said. "We'll run some bloodwork to check your thyroid, but honestly other than being underweight, you seem pretty healthy. Have you tried eating more protein?"

"I eat a lot of protein."

"Well, maybe try for the fattier stuff. Like don't just eat cheeseburgers, but you can go for the steak."

I could have told the young doctor about how I'd lost all my sense of taste, months of fading like color leaching from a photograph until it fizzled out entirely. But I stayed quiet. I didn't want to raise questions that I couldn't answer.

He drew some blood and sent it off for tests. Alone, I got dressed, patting the plump gauze taped inside my elbow.

*

I'd discovered my gift three years ago, back when I was still a baker. I'd gone over to my girlfriend Kris's apartment after an early morning shift, biking through the summer heat in a crust of flour and sweat. Kris made me a sandwich, frying bacon and an egg with sharp cheddar and bringing the food over on a plate as I napped on the couch. She wore cut-off shorts, frayed at the edges and smeared in bicycle grease, her skin deeply tan from riding and delivering messages all day. I put my hand on her thigh as I bit into the food, feeling her muscles stiffen underneath me.

"Do that again," she said.

"Do what?" I asked.

"Take a bite."

I did and watched as her face broke, the now-familiar shift, looking at me with pleasure and wonder and fear.

*

The idea to start eating for other women did not come from Kris, but from my culinary school friend, Julian. He worked as a personal chef, massaging kale for women who really wanted pork chops and heavy cream. If I ate for them, he said, I could make a fortune.

I resisted for a month, but then the bakery began to cut my hours and my bike was stolen. I couldn't get to work without a bike—the buses and trains didn't run that early—and I couldn't buy a new bike without my job.

I remember when I came home with that first personal check, written out with a silver fountain pen. The amount covered not just my salary at the bakery for one month, but for two.

Kris waited for me at her apartment. I held out the check as I walked in, telling her all that we could do. We'd go on vacation, I told her. I'd quit the bakery, have a normal schedule for a while. Maybe I would finally open a bakery of my own.

She got up from the couch, plucking the check from my hand. I waited for her to start laughing with me, to take my palms and run with me into our new future.

Instead, she pinched the edge of the paper with her fingers, holding it away from her. She asked me how I could smile like that, taking money from other women's fears. "Get out of my house," she said, releasing the pinch so the check fluttered to the floor. "I can't look at you. You're disgusting."

*

When I arrived for Carolyn's next appointment, the food wasn't ready yet, the first roast of lamb crisped black in the oven.

She was distracted, she explained, because the woodsman had surprised her, saying he wanted to have a baby. "I didn't even hear the timer go off," she said, pulling out the second roast. She shut the oven door with her hip, skin flushed with heat. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine," I said. I couldn't tell from her voice if the baby was good or bad news. "We could always eat ice cream," I tried to joke.

"That wouldn't be very interesting for you."

I took a sip of water. "Well, I can't even taste anything."

She stopped cutting up the lamb, putting the knife down on the marble. "Wait, really!"

The muscles at the base of my neck tightened. No, I realized too late. I shouldn't have said anything. I could feel it immediately, the way my reveal cracked some delicate gear.

"You can't taste when you eat for me? Is that how it always is?" she asked.

"No," I said. "It's something that happened recently. I'm getting it checked out." I kept my voice even, an illusion of control.

"Oh." She picked up a fork, spearing a piece of meat.

"Does this...bother you?" I asked as she brought the plate over, not looking at me.

"No," she said, the word a little too light to be true. "It's just...well, I thought it was an experience we were having together."

"Oh," I said, and a rush of words followed, something insufficient, born out of shock and sadness. Carolyn's face continued to look injured, until a flush of anger spread up my spine, spurred by an internal voice that always reminded me of Kris. Carolyn had my time, my taste. I'd lost everything. What right did she have, to look so hurt?

"It's a temporary problem," I said. "I'm working it out. Maybe I'll be able to taste the lamb," I said, pointing to the current meal.

"Right," she said, staring as if she didn't even recognize the meat.

We ate, and I could feel her light distraction, her fingers resting dry and unclenched on top of my palm. Even though the lamb was soaked in a lovely, heavy sauce, each bite seemed to stick in my throat, actively resisting ingestion. By the end, my whole body felt wrung out, my spine wilting over my hollow trunk.

When I got home, I tried to make myself eat more, melting triple cream brie on a piece of Italian-style bread. On my own, maybe I could will myself to taste again, to give my food the weight of pleasure so I could go back to being

solid. I didn't feel like I was losing flesh anymore, but like the density of what was left was changing, becoming indistinct from air.

*

Before our next meeting, Carolyn called. I was between appointments, lying on my couch and trying to summon the energy to make it to my next dinner.

"I'm so sorry," she said, "I forgot to tell you—Mitchell's having some high school friends over on Thursday night."

"Oh," I said, forgetting for a moment that Mitchell was the woodsman's real name. "That's fine. It's Monday. You won't have to pay the cancellation fee." Here was what I feared: a tapering off of our appointments, drifting towards the end.

But instead she said, "Actually—oh, I'm so sorry to ask this. Could I bring some food to your place? And have our session there? I'm not sure if you ever have appointments at home. I'd just—I'd prefer not to miss this week."

"My apartment?" I said, sitting up. I'd started renting my place on a baker's income, and even though I'd swapped out some furniture, it was still small and decorated the way I liked it, too many plants and junk store bottles.

"I'd pay you extra, of course, for the inconvenience," she said.

"No, no," I said. "You don't have to. It's a great idea. My place," I repeated. The thud of blood in my ears covered my voice so I missed my own nervous, stuttering cadence.

"Great," she confirmed, and I was so flustered that I almost hung up without giving her my address.

*

The last time I saw Kris was two years ago when she came to my apartment to pick up the last of her things. I'd stayed curled up on my ugly old armchair, turned in on myself in grief.

Kris only took the minimum, filling a small cardboard box. When she was done, she put the box on the coffee table and knelt on the ground by my chair, her face level with mine. She grabbed my hand, and I was too weary to fight her off. Besides, I still wanted her to touch me.

She talked for a while about female mystics, some reading she'd done online. I didn't really listen to her, letting her talk about the patriarchy and Belgium, until she pulled my attention back by squeezing hard, crushing my fingers. I thought she was about to call me the name she'd made up for me. The demon eater, she'd say, hurling the words like a stone.

But instead, she said, "The female mystics were thought to be so pure, they could make God appear in the mouths of other women. They would blow between their lips, and their tongues would flood with honey."

I turned my head, looking at her directly. She had an unusual intensity, her hair frizzed out around her face. "What does that have to do with me?"

She let my hand go, picked up her box. "I'm just trying to say I'm sorry."

I didn't understand, then, how the women featured into her apology. But as I cleaned my apartment for Carolyn's visit, the women returned to me, an echo as I wiped off the dust, the scum on the bathroom faucet. When I'd lost my taste, my beloved bread changing into ash, I thought Kris's rage was right. I'd become a monster, a fairytale creature caught under some curse. But maybe the curse came double-edged, part gift. Maybe, as Carolyn said, I could become something lucky.

*

"I'm sorry I'm late," Carolyn said when she arrived at my apartment, carrying a paper bag of what I assumed was takeout. "I forgot how bad parking is around here."

"I should have warned you," I said. I wondered how often Carolyn came into the city.

I'd braided my long hair, put on makeup, but I'd decided to dress more casually, a cotton T-shirt and jeans. Carolyn, on the other hand, looked as lovely as the day I'd met her, wearing a light knit top with an unpolished stone hanging from a rope around her neck.

She paced my apartment, looking at my art, my books, moving restlessly like a trapped feral cat. "I lived in a place like this," she said. "Before I was married."

"Well, you've had quite the upgrade," I couldn't stop myself from saying. "True," she said. "But I miss it."

She seemed lost in some reverie of who she had been. For a moment, I saw it too, a single woman covered in clay who didn't know where she was going.

"Do you want me to take your bag!" I asked, breaking the silence.

"Oh, wait, I wanted to show you." She put the bag down on my butcher block counter, taking out something wrapped in brown wax paper. "It's not my first loaf, but it's my first good loaf."

And there it was, a sourdough boule, the top crosshatched and covered in a crust of sesame seeds.

"It's lovely," I managed to say, and then I felt it, the bottoming out. Not a tingle, but a woosh, my body's atmosphere changing, and then I was gone.

When I came back, my body was on the couch, although I couldn't say if it had been there all along. Someone—Carolyn—must have moved me. She was sitting by my feet, and I could feel her warmth through my jeans.

"What happened?" I asked her.

"I'm not sure," she said. "You were here, and then you weren't. And then I reached for you and felt your arms."

I touched my forehead, my cheek, feeling my own heat. Carolyn brushed my skin with the back of her hand. "This is because you can't taste," she said.

"I think so," I said, letting my fingers drift against her wrist.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked. I shook my head.

She pulled her hand away, scanning me. I blushed, a full body heat, covered by the thickness of her gaze.

Carolyn got up from the couch, and I could hear her in my kitchen, looking for a knife, the clattering of plates and silverware. She opened my fridge, moving jars and objects as she searched.

When she returned, she had a thick slice of her bread on one of my plates, dressed in slabs of cold butter. Balancing the dish on her knees, she picked the bread up and grabbed my hand. "Close your eyes," she said.

I did, and the weight of her hand seemed heavier, the temperature hotter. Through her arm, I could feel the shifts in her body as she raised the slice towards her lips. Crunch, her teeth on the crust, and my body went limp as the bread's sourness broke over me in waves.

FALSE CHOICE

If only she had packing tape. If only she had a cut-up cantaloupe and a waffle weave shower curtain.

If only people wouldn't park their cars in the lot near her house and eat their fast food and open their doors and plunk their containers right there on the ground for the coyotes.

If only she had cork-soled sandals and a pair of palazzo pants.

Maybe she's still assembling herself, while those who seem to have it all are in fact passive, stagnant, spoiling.

Maybe she'll write a podcast...

There is always this tension: to crisply and with excruciating care replicate reality or to listen to the burr and hum of sentences and follow them to their sometimes illogical conclusions. But it's a false choice. To force logic into the shape of abandon, that's what she'd like to do.

In her little notebook a line from *Sleepless Nights* by Elizabeth Hardwick: "She was forever like one watched over by wakefulness in her deepest sleep."

To be aware, always, that she's sleeping...to be aware, always, that she's aware...that there's something *beyond* her, a skin outside her body, a shadow built by the walls of herself.

She remembers a girl from long ago who she'd see in the computer lab now and then—when she sat at a keyboard it was as if to meditation. To glimpse her in this one placid action—she became a symbol, reassuring, until one day she never saw the girl again, and then she became a symbol of something else.

Time's passing. How small the faces of her youth grow.

Often she assumes a happiness or contentment in other people that they do not, in fact, possess. Two of the couples she's compared her marriage to unfavorably have gotten divorced in the last year. Her husband likes to remind her of this.

If only her husband would hold her hand when they went on walks, or touch the small of her back when they entered restaurants. How lovely, a relationship predicated on one person treating the other like an invalid. Of course, invalids have to lie around all day and not do much.

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But the *minds* of invalids—roiled, fevered things swimming with visions while hers is made of to-do lists.

Brown mountains in the near distance. The sun a fist opening and closing, pumping light through the air.

In her little notebook, a line from Kate Chopin: "She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her."

One eye feasts, the other famines.

If only she'd ordered more pairs of nude-colored underwear. If only she'd had an apple and greens smoothie instead of candy corn.

She grew up with the Oprah Winfrey Show playing in the rec room, its revelations her childhood's revelations. She longed to be told that all would be well.

Highway noises slide through the night like beads on a wire. When it's cold outside, when the air is clear the engines of the unfortunates come right into her room and she rides with them in thrall to the tinfield spray of dashboard lights, the stench and smoke of the upholstery. Their faces are beautiful in the dark...

Being influenced, the poet W.S. Merwin says, isn't a matter of reading something on the page and trying to replicate it. It's a matter of listening with your body, taking the words inside you. The rhythm of sentences, their rushes and pauses, starts and stops, the chewy beauty of language—this is what I hope to bring to life with these readings.

-from an old syllabus

The plan was to read a poem or a passage from a story to her students at the beginning of each class. She never did. She doesn't remember now why she discarded the idea. She thinks of all the passages she didn't read and how Joan Didion said what's so hard about the first sentence is that you're stuck with it and how Flannery O'Connor said everything has to be subordinated to a whole which is not you and how Christos Ikonomou said he has to believe what he writes is true not real reality is different from truth and how Olga Tokarczuk said the narrated sin will be forgiven and the narrated life saved. She'd meant to say these things, too, if only how to be saved.

TELL THEM WHO YOU ARE

When it came time for Dr. Patel to say goodbye, Lydia wasn't sure if she should give him a hug or a handshake. After all, they had become almost-friends during her five-day hospital stay. Instead, Dr. Patel pressed a piece of paper into her hand with a peculiar sense of urgency.

"Call these people." Dr. Patel paused and then added, "They can help you. More than I can."

Lydia glanced down at the paper. There was only a phone number and a name. Marge Johnson with a Manhattan area code.

"She runs a kind of support group."

Lydia asked for more details.

"Trust me. Call her."

With that, Dr. Patel said the nurse would be coming by with her discharge papers and he looked forward to seeing Lydia in a week for her follow-up appointment. It all happened so quickly. Dr. Patel was there one minute. Gone, the next. All of her belongings were neatly folded in a brown-paper bag with handles that was deposited at the foot of her hospital bed by the attending nurse. And her roommate—the one who underwent throat surgery and was having trouble speaking—had been delivered to another wing of the hospital for further tests.

*

As she stepped out of the taxi, the red-bricked building on Avenue A looked vaguely familiar to Lydia: A fire escape zigzagged up its worn-out façade. On the second-floor landing, there was a small collection of terra-cotta pots filled with blooming geraniums. Lydia slipped her key into the front door and saw her name written in ballpoint pen on one of the aluminum mailboxes. She tried the smallest key and pulled open the small door to the small box. It was crammed with solicitations with her name and address visible through the see-through windows. There was an electricity bill and a phone bill. A

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recent issue of *National Geographic*. The cover story was about the rescue and rehabilitation of orphan elephants in Nairobi.

Inside, Lydia surveyed the smallish studio: A modest kitchen efficiency unit was built into one wall. A folded-up futon doubled as a loveseat. On the mantel of the nonworking fireplace, there was a black-and-white photo of a handsome man. He wore a stiff pair of jeans, a pearl-snap denim shirt, a cowboy hat, and a pair of boots. Lydia didn't recognize his face, but he had a smile that you couldn't turn away from.

Messages crowded her answering machine. Several people mentioned they had heard she was in the hospital and hoped everything was okay. One of the women said she was her mother, that she was worried when she hadn't heard from Lydia in several weeks. Lydia felt a free-floating feeling of irritation toward this woman, her claims of worry and concern.

In the kitchen, Lydia retrieved the paper from her pocket and smoothed it out on the narrow slab of Formica. It was the phone number written in Dr. Patel's barely legible chicken scratch. No get well soon. No call me for coffee. No nothing. Instead, just a phone number and the woman's name that sounded like a grandmother who lived out on Long Island, the kind of lady who knitted brightly colored patchwork sweaters for her many grandchildren for Christmas, attended church daily, and ate dinner every night on a TV tray, watching the local news and reruns of *I Love Lucy*. Lydia dialed the number, secretly hoping that it might ring the doctor's home and Dr. Patel would pick up on the other end. After the third ring, an older woman's voice played on the outgoing recording.

"This is Marge. If you know what's good for you, leave a message."

Faltering for a second, Lydia left her name and phone number, saying that Dr. Patel had recommended that she call. As soon as she hung up, Lydia wished that she hadn't left a message. Her phone rang right away.

"Who is this?" asked the old woman. "What do you want?"

"Lydia," she said. "My name is Lydia."

Her heart raced into her throat.

"Dr. Patel gave me your number."

"Why didn't you say that in the first place!"

Lydia thought she had mentioned in her message.

"I suppose you want to go to a meeting," she said. "Down, boy. Don't do that."

"Sorry," Marge continued. "Dog's drooling all over me."

There was a commotion in the background. Something clattered onto the floor.

"Goddamnit, stop it! Get down!" she said again. "Meet me at the corner of Sullivan and Houston at six-thirty."

"For what?"

"These doctors," she said. "Can't trust them as far as you can throw them."

Marge paused and then said, "Can I ask you one question?"

"I guess-"

"Is this a memory thing?"

"Dr. Patel said it'd get better-"

"Yeah, that's what they all say," she said with a cluck of her tongue. "They don't have a clue what they're talking about."

Lydia's ear felt hot against the phone's receiver.

"See you at six-thirty sharp," Marge said. "Write this all down in case you don't remember."

"Okay," Lydia said, writing down the address and time on the same piece of paper as Dr. Patel's chicken scratch.

"Terrific. Excellent," Marge said. "See you, Lydia."

With that, Marge hung up the phone with a slam. Lydia held onto the receiver until the other end started to sound its monotone beep-beep-beep and then the recording of the operator's mechanical voice kicked in. Your connection didn't go through. Please hang up and try again. Please hang up and try again.

*

As Lydia walked diagonally across the park, she fixed her gaze on the steady rhythm of her footfalls and thought about Dr. Patel. It was because of him that she was going to meet this stranger. If it were up to her, Lydia would just stay in her apartment. After all, she was still recovering (even though it wasn't entirely clear to her what she was recovering from). She needed her rest. She needed to take it easy. During her week in the hospital, Lydia had developed something of a crush on the young doctor—and when she returned for her follow-up appointment, she wanted to have all of the correct answers. *Marge*

was great! She gave me lots of tips! Things are starting to get better! I feel like my old self! Thank you! How can I repay you?!

When Lydia arrived at the corner of Sullivan and Houston, no one was there. She decided that she would give this so-called Marge lady ten more minutes and then retrace her route through Washington Square Park and down St. Mark's Place to her apartment on Avenue A. It seemed like a reasonable plan. Lydia lingered near a storefront window where lanky mannequins were dressed in skimpy, spangled mini-skirts and sleeveless cotton T-shirts in bright, blinking shades of Day-Glo. Mardi Gras beads of gold and amber dangled around their delicate necks.

"Lydia," yelled a woman from down the street. "Is that you?"

Lydia turned around. A rotund, wrinkled woman hauling several plastic bags shuffled in her direction. For a second, Lydia wanted to disappear. She glanced up at the anorexic mannequins frolicking in the window. Their blank, empty expressions offered her nothing.

"We're always the easy ones to spot in a crowd," Marge said as she made her way down the sidewalk.

Lydia looked around. She was the only one standing there except for a young couple walking a white fluffy dog on the opposite side of the street. Before Lydia knew it, the woman's arms were wrapped around her and she was squeezing Lydia so hard she thought one of her ribs might snap. She tried to catch her breath and took in a whiff of perfumed magnolias and cigarette smoke.

"How are you feeling?" Marge asked, finally releasing her. "Was Patel nice to you?"

Lydia nodded and then glanced up at the large, gothic church that stood next to the storefront with the mannequins. Its two towering spires looked as if they were puncturing the dwindling daylight right out of the sky. Marge descended the short flight of stairs and pulled open one of the heavy brown doors.

"Help me set up."

Lydia wasn't sure if this was an order or a request. She looked around the street. A small crush of young men rumbled down the sidewalk. Their voices were harsh, their guffaws loud. The door to the church slammed shut. Suddenly the boys surrounded her on all sides. One of their elbows brushed against her arm. Lydia felt like they might raise her on their shoulders at any second and carry her across the busy lanes of traffic on Houston. Instead, they rushed right by her. Another elbow bumped her abdomen.

"Watch it, bitch," said one of the boys.

Lydia hurried down the stairs and closed the door behind her. Marge scuffled through the cavernous space, arranging a dozen metal folding chairs into a loose circle. On the stage near the back of the room stood a Christmas tree with alternating strands of cranberries and popcorn draped on its sagging limbs. Clumps of metallic tinsel were hung here and there. Marge continued to arrange the chairs into a larger circle.

"The others should be here in a minute."

"Others?"

"Didn't Patel tell vou-"

Marge paused and looked up at Lydia, and for the first time Lydia noticed the old woman's eyes: They were the only part of Marge that looked young and alive. They were a deep chestnut color with tiny glints of illumination flickering around her charcoal-colored pupils, like bits and pieces of sunlight were trapped inside her eyes. The door to the basement flew open, and a couple of guys strolled in. They were old, too. In their fifties or sixties or seventies. Lydia couldn't tell which.

"Hey, Eddie," Marge yelled. "Start the coffee, will you."

"Yes madam," he said, saluting her as he walked toward the stage.

"Don't give me that madam bullshit."

"Who do we have here?" asked the other man.

He was slender. Salt-and-pepper sideburns trailed along his shallow, pockmarked cheeks.

"This is Lydia," she said. "She just got out."

He gave her a wink.

"Keep your distance, boys. You know how I feel about newcomers."

"You're going to like it here," he said to Lydia. "I know it."

"Don't scare her, Eddie," Marge said.

"Just sayin'," he said, shoving his hands into his pockets. "It looks like she's going to like it. That we might be able to help her."

These strange people reminded Lydia of somebody from someplace else, but she couldn't remember where. They looked like they belonged around a green-felt poker table with stacks of colored plastic chips and thin veils of smoke lifting up in front of their weathered faces with fat cigars perched in

between their yellow-stained fingers. The men looked like the kind of people who more inclined to cheat others rather than help them.

"Have a seat," Eddie said, pulling out one of the chairs for Lydia.

She sat down in the chair as Eddie made his way to the stage and then disappeared into the wings behind the heavy burgundy drapes. More people filed through the rear doors.

"We'll start in fifteen minutes," Marge said.

A woman with a line of silver studs perforating the outer rim of her left ear sat down next to Lydia. She wore all leather except for a charcoal gray V-neck sweater. A tattoo spread across her chest: Black-ink feathers soaked into the rounded skin that hugged the protruding ridges of her collarbone.

"My name is Stacey," she said. "What's yours?"

"Lydia."

It felt odd for Lydia to say her name aloud. The three syllables of her name tumbled in her mouth like foreign objects that didn't belong there.

"First time?" Stacey asked, pulling a thin stick of gum out of her purse, unwrapping it, and sliding it into her mouth.

Lydia noticed that a silver stud penetrated her tongue, too. A small gap yawned between her front teeth.

"Yeah-"

"Oh, this is a great meeting," she said.

Lydia wanted to ask Stacey why she was there, but then again she wasn't sure if she wanted to know.

"Did you come on your own?" Stacey asked. "Or did the hospital send you?"

"A doctor at the hospital," Lydia said. "He told me to call Marge."

"Cool," she said. "That's the way a lot of us get here."

More chairs were unfolded. Their metal feet scraped against the linoleum floor as other people began to set up a second and then a third tier of chairs around the already formed circle.

"You must have a good story."

"Can't remember-"

Lydia stared down her hands. They were shaking. Stacey rested a hand on top of Lydia's. Her fingertips were cold as if she had recently spent too much time in a walk-in freezer. Several oversize gothic rings seemed to weigh down her bony fingers.

"Just remember that we've all been where you've been," she said. "It's going to be okay. I promise."

Stacey lifted her hand.

"Claudia, you slut," she said to another woman who was walking toward her. "Why didn't you call me back!"

"Hey sweetie," the other woman said. "I forgot. You know how it is."

Claudia was dressed in a two-piece lavender business suit with a floral scarf tucked into her sharply angled lapels. Pearl studs dotted her pinkish earlobes. To Lydia, she looked like a woman with a high-paying job and an assistant outside the door of her office. An account executive at an advertising firm. Or a senior editor at a glossy fashion magazine. She had an expense account, a lofty office with an uninterrupted view of the Chrysler Building, and a boyfriend who sent her flowers even when it wasn't her birthday. Lydia knew these kinds of women from her job as a copy editor at a women's health magazine, which was housed in a very tall Madison Avenue skyscraper with many other magazines owned by the same company, and she frequently rode the elevator with these well-coiffed women: They wore high heels and wool scarves with the bold stripes that reminded others of their Ivy League alma mater. A subtle smile was often curled on their perfectly lipsticked lips. They looked clever without even uttering a word.

It struck Lydia as odd that Claudia and Stacey would be friends. They looked like they would run in different circles that wouldn't necessarily intersect, but here they were in the same church basement on the corner of Sullivan and Houston streets on a Friday night in early September of 1990. (For a moment, Lydia was proud of herself that she could remember this much.)

"Meet Lydia."

"Welcome," Claudia said, sitting down next to Stacey.

"Coffee ready?" asked another guy.

Lydia looked up at him. The guy was young. Or at least he was younger than most of the other people who had filtered into the church basement. He looked like he belonged in a dormitory of a boarding school, with his wrinkled button-down and baggy corduroys. His nose was shaped like a steep ski slope, and his eyes were the intense blue of an ocean. Lydia got the feeling that she had seen this guy somewhere else before, but once again she couldn't put her finger on where. Maybe he stood in line behind her at

the corner cart where she bought her coffee and donut each morning. Or at the public library on Fifth Avenue, where she liked to spend her Saturday afternoons, reading Victorian novels in the third-floor reading room with its celestial, cotton-candy-like clouds and tall shelves lined with the worn spines of countless books that had been held by countless strangers over the years.

"People, people, people."

It was Marge. She was yelling and banging one of the chairs against the floor.

"Time to start the meeting!"

Lydia didn't realize it, but while she was speaking to Stacey, at least forty more people had arrived. At the shrill sound of Marge's voice, the room fell silent with the exception of the gurgling coffee urn that sat on the card table on the stage. After a series of announcements, Marge introduced the young man, and everyone clapped enthusiastically.

"Hi," said the young man. "My name is Jed, and I'm an amnesiac."

For a second, Lydia felt embarrassed for Jed. What a loser, she thought. He can't even keep track of his own memory. But then she quickly realized that she was a loser, too. That she couldn't hold her memories either. A spark of shame lit up her chest. How had her life come to this—sitting in a dank basement listening to this guy tell his story about how he forgot things?

It had been eight years since Jed had lost his memory for the first time. He was twenty-two years old and had gotten in a bad wreck on his motorcycle on the FDR. He spent five weeks in the hospital before the doctors said it was okay for him to return home. But there was one problem, he said, he didn't remember where he lived. The group burst into howls and laughter. He also couldn't remember either one of his parents' names or where he was born. Jed ended up lying to the doctors and wandering the streets of the Lower East Side for hours before he spotted a familiar bodega. The man tending to the buckets of flowers waved at Jed, so he had a feeling that he must be close to his own apartment. He tried his keys in the front door of the building adjacent to the store—and it worked. Then, he tried it on every apartment door until one opened. When he stepped inside the apartment, a calico cat jumped into his arms. The crowd laughed again. Lydia didn't think it was funny at all.

Despite herself, she wanted to find out more: Was he a patient in the same hospital as she was? Was Dr. Patel his doctor, too? How long did it take for his memory to return? Did it ever return fully? Was he ever able to function like a normal person again? After Jed's story, different people shared from the circle. As they spoke about their broken relationships, broken children, and broken bones, Lydia stared at the different shoes: There were brand-new gym shoes, scuffed-up work boots, high-heel pumps, polished black lace-up shoes, threadbare high-top sneakers, a pair of L.L. Bean moccasins. The sight of the burnt-brown leather reminded Lydia of someone, but of course, she couldn't remember who. A woman in the second row was crying. A man sitting next to her placed his arm around her and gave the bony knob of her shoulder a squeeze. The hairline cracks between the linoleum tiles grew blurry. A cockroach skittered between a pair of high-tops. Lydia's stomach turned.

It was near the end of the meeting, and Marge asked if there were any announcements. The man with the sideburns announced that there was a dance on Saturday night at the church over on Second Avenue. All were welcome. Claudia told the group about a new meeting in the hospital at Twentieth Street and First Avenue that was looking for support. Then, Marge asked if there were any newcomers at the meeting. Stacey nudged her elbow into Lydia's side.

"Go ahead," she whispered. "Tell them who you are."

Without lifting her eyes, Lydia slowly raised her hand in the air.

"Lydia," Marge said.

"My name is Lydia," she managed to say. "It's my first time here."

A rollicking round of applause ensued. A few sharp whistles punctuated the raucous enthusiasm.

"Way to go, Lydia!" someone yelled.

She stared at the floor and then at the different pairs of shoes as the applause continued. The loud sounds seemed to be piling on top of her. Wave upon wave of clapping hands. All she wanted to do was stand up and leave and forget about these people. After all, she had fulfilled Dr. Patel's request. She had done what he had asked. Now, she was free to return home. Marge asked for a couple of people to wash coffee cups and put away chairs after the meeting. A few people volunteered. Then, everyone stood up and joined hands. Stacey grabbed Lydia's hand and squeezed it. She could feel

the edges of her heavy rings pressing into her fingers. A woman with close-cropped silver hair took Lydia's other hand.

Together, the group prayed. It was a prayer from Lydia's childhood that she had recited with her father before being tucked into bed, before he left for good. Instead of reciting the familiar words, she closed her eyes and listened to the strangers' collective voices occupy the basement. Their voices seemed to unify into something else altogether, like the warm harmony of a gospel choir or the swelling chirr of crickets at nightfall. And for a moment, Lydia believed that everything was going to be okay. Maybe Stacey was right. But that feeling of safety swiftly dissolved as soon as the prayer ended with a definitive Amen, and the room returned to the bustling, crowded musty basement that it once was.

"Call me," Stacey said, writing down her phone number on a piece of paper and handing it to Lydia. "I love hearing from newcomers."

Stacey disappeared into the crowd in all of her leather and silver. The click-click of her clunky motorcycle boots got swallowed into the overlapping voices of others. Lydia glanced around and saw Marge speaking with a man with a long gray beard and thin wire-rimmed glasses. He looked like he belonged in another century, one where there were no phones or cars or meetings for people who had lost their memories. Marge gesticulated her pudgy hands wildly in the air. Lydia collected her coat from the back of her chair and turned toward the door. She felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Welcome," said a short woman with short, brown hair. "My name is Dora."

"Hi," Lydia said, looking over Dora's shoulder to see if Marge was still talking to the ancient man.

"Was it really bad for you at the end?" Dora asked.

"No," Lydia heard herself saying. "I mean, I don't think so. I don't really remember."

"Of course, you don't," Dora said. "None of us do."

Her small eyes darted around the busy room as if she was looking for someone, and then, they settled back on Lydia.

"I've been coming here for three years, and it has changed my life," Dora continued. "I mean, I could barely get out of the house. Now, look at me: Three years later, I floss my teeth every night. It's a miracle."

"Floss your teeth?"

"You know, take better care of myself," Dora said. "I decided that my third year of continuous memory would be about remembering to floss every night. Hooray for flossing!"

"I gotta run."

"Come back," Dora said, her smile widening. "We're here every Friday night."

"I will," Lydia mumbled.

She turned on her heel and made for the double doors at the rear of the room. The pooled voices of the strangers grew louder. They laughed. They slapped each other on the back. They hugged each other. Just as Lydia touched the curved brass handle of the door, she heard a hey, you behind her. She turned around. It was the young man who had shared his story. Jed walked toward her.

"Where are ya going?"

Several people walked past him, squeezing his shoulder and then releasing it.

"Thanks for speaking," one guy said. "Great to hear you, buddy."

"Sure," Jed said. "You bet."

"I better-" Lydia started to say.

"Do you want to get a cup of coffee?" he asked. "I know a good place down the street."

"I can't-"

"We'll keep it short," he said. "I promise."

"I-"

"Terrific," he said, his eyes brightening. "Let me get my coat."

"Lydia-"

It was Marge, and all of her bags.

"I thought I lost you," she said.

Jed walked up behind her with a brown corduroy coat folded over his arm.

"Ready?"

Marge glanced at Jed and then looked over at Lydia again.

"Call me, Lydia," she said. "Really, anytime."

"Let's get out of here," said Jed. "Thanks for asking me to speak, Marge."

As they went out the door, Lydia turned around and took in Marge's sharp stare.

"This way," Jed said, as they crossed Houston and then walked halfway up the block of MacDougal before stepping into an Italian café with a pair of black-and-white-striped awnings that stretched over its storefront windows. The door jingled as Jed pulled it open. There were only two other couples sitting at the small, white-marbled round tables. To the right was a glassed-in freezer case of gelatos—stainless-steel troughs of pistachio, raspberry, chocolate-flecked vanilla, espresso. Clusters of frost collected in the far corners of the case. Lydia thought about her old view from the hospital room, the thin sheen of condensation that gathered in the corners of the broad window overlooking the nearby park. She wondered how Dr. Patel was doing, and the man with throat cancer. Did he get a new roommate already? Did the doctors find his voice yet?

Jed held up two fingers to the man behind the counter with the black bowtie and white apron tied around his waist. He nodded in the direction of the many empty tables. Jed navigated to a table in the far corner of the room, and Lydia followed after him. His corduroys were baggy and hung low from his hips. For a moment, he reminded her of a boy that she once had a crush on in high school: He was the captain of the varsity lacrosse team, but also had a reputation for being a stoner and always having a serious girlfriend. When she was a sophomore, he kissed Lydia for the first time at a party that eventually got broken up by the cops. They were standing near the edge of an illuminated swimming pool, and she could smell the chlorine lifting off its shadowy surface as he tugged her toward the bushes. Most of the other kids at the party were in the basement, playing quarters, and listening to The Doors' "People Are Strange." A thin crescent of a moon came and went underneath the passing bank of clouds. Then, the boy pressed his lips against Lydia's, gently slipping his tongue into her mouth. It was soft and warm. Like a tiny, purring kitten nestled inside her mouth. Then, he pulled away from her and said, I've been waiting to do that all night. Lydia still couldn't remember his name. She mostly remembered the kiss, the song, and the intermittent moonlight.

The waiter placed a pair of laminated menus in front of them.

"What's it going to be, Jed?" he asked. "The regular."

"Yeah," Jed said, looking over at Lydia, "but my friend here still needs time to decide."

"I'll have what he's having," she said, placing the menu on the table.

After the waiter delivered their mousses and cappuccinos, Jed began to tell Lydia more of his story. It turned out that he hadn't shared all of it during the meeting. Before the motorcycle accident, there were other episodes. Several. For some people, it was hard to hear all of the facts. Depending on the meeting, he told different versions.

"Most of the time you don't have much control over losing things," he said. "This isn't always the kind of story people want to hear."

Granted, other times, led couldn't remember all of the episodes, and just accepted it as a fundamental part of his condition. The first time occurred when Jed was fifteen years old and was playing soccer with his friends along the broad expanse of Coney Island and fell as he was going for a goal. He only remembered the definitive impact against the hard-packed sand and everything going black. He didn't remember his visit to the emergency room. He didn't remember the doctors and the nurses. He didn't remember the friendly x-ray technician who took multiple pictures of his bones and brain to ensure nothing was terribly wrong (it was just a concussion). The next thing Jed knew was he was lying on his best friend's bed staring up at the KISS and Led Zeppelin posters taped to the bedroom's ceiling, trying to remember his own last name and the date of his birthday. His friend told him again and again that he had taken a bad spill and the doctor had ordered that he not fall asleep so he wouldn't slip into a coma. Within a few days, Jed started to remember a few of the facts about his life-how his father had died of pancreatic cancer before he even knew him and his mother managed a small grocery store in the South Bronx-and the doctor had assured him that he was in the clear.

Jed's story reminded Lydia of her own hospital stay and all of Dr. Patel's questions. Even though she still didn't know many of the answers, she felt some sense of relief, knowing that she was sitting across the table from a person who went through something similar. She wasn't alone.

"Despite the program, things haven't gotten so much better."

"What do you mean?" Lydia asked.

"It's hard to stop myself from getting into situations where I end up forgetting stuff," he said, dipping a spoon into his mousse. "The good news is now it's been eleven months since the last incident. My longest stretch since my first meeting."

"What happened the last time?" Lydia asked, glancing down at her coffee.

Sprinkles of cinnamon sunk into the foamy stratum of milk, looking like miniature craters on another planet.

"Oh, I don't want to bore you."

"Tell me-"

"Just a fight with a couple of punks in Tompkins Square Park," he said. "It turns out one of the guys was carrying a metal pipe and he really clocked me."

"Geeesh-"

"Yeah, I ended up with a few stitches," Jed said, rubbing the back of his head. "They kept me in the hospital until I could remember my mother's name and my home state."

"Where are you from?" Lydia asked, thinking that if she changed the subject it would dissipate the heaviness that had begun to settle in her chest.

"New York."

"Manhattan?"

During her time in New York, Lydia had met very few people who were actually from the city. Everyone came from somewhere else, but regarded the city as their newly adopted hometown. Everyone claimed to be a New Yorker even though they weren't.

"The Bronx."

"What about you?" Jed asked, taking another bite of mousse. "Where are you from?"

"Outside of Detroit," she said. "Ann Arbor."

She and her mother had lived in a two-bedroom ranch house a short walk away from the elementary school that she attended. Her mother worked as a dental hygienist, cleaning other children's teeth. She often smelled like bubblegum fluoride, its sweet aroma lingering after her like a hungry bee. Every evening her mother would come home and heat up a TV dinner for Lydia, drink several glasses of wine, and then fall asleep on the couch while watching the late-night news about the war in Vietnam and the student protests roiling across the country. Some evenings, when the bottle of wine was emptied, there were the phone calls to former boyfriends with names like Mr. Puffer and Mr. Woodward (the string of men who came after Lydia's father) and eventually Lydia would end up unplugging the phone.

"Look at you," Jed said with a grin. "You remember some stuff. See, it's not so bad."

But Lydia didn't remember her street address, her old phone number, or the name of her sixth grade teacher. She felt old and pathetic. Jed stirred his coffee and took a sip. Suddenly, the mousse held no appeal to Lydia. She had enough of talking with this guy. Enough of the strange meeting filled with strange people. Maybe if she went home and got a good night's sleep, she would wake up to the person who she used to be.

"When did you get out of the hospital?" Jed asked.

"This morning."

At least, this distinct fact stayed on the tip of her tongue without swiftly slipping away.

"Wow, you really are new!"

Lydia's face reddened as she glanced down at her mousse. She had only taken one bite. Jed clinked his spoon against the sides of the dish with its single glass foot. Thin smears of chocolate stained the transparent sides.

"You haven't even touched yours."

She took another spoonful and the bitter sweetness smacked the back of her throat.

"Was it your first time?"

"What do you mean?"

"In the hospital?" Jed asked.

She didn't respond.

"Well, that's the reason most of us go to meetings: We can't stop it from happening again and again."

"Of course, it was my first time."

The feeling of heaviness morphed into agitation. What was with this guy? What did he want from her?

"Why would I go and make myself forget my life?" she asked. "I like my life. I want to remember it."

Lydia knew she was lying, but thought it sounded like a solid defense against Jed's argument. Even though she couldn't remember much of her childhood, there were a few stories that she told herself again and again. Her parents had divorced before she was six years old; an affair with a neighbor had been the catalyst for the final breakup. Lydia remembered going to the pet store with the neighbor and her daughter and her father. Together, they bought goldfish and guppies and elegant pairs of angelfish, and as the girls excitedly filled their oversize, octagon-shaped tanks in the kitchen her father

and the neighbor stole upstairs. *Feed the fish*, they yelled from the second floor. *Don't let the poor fish to starve*. Soon after her father moved out, Lydia returned home from school to find her fish tank toppled over in her bedroom, the fluorescent pebbles and the toy treasure chest and the old-fashioned diver scattered across the floor, the small fish already dead.

As she sat across from Jed in the café, Lydia rubbed the sore spot near her temple. Most of the bruising and swelling had diminished, but the achiness persisted. For a second, she felt the sensation of stony gravel pressing into her left cheek. A dampness materialized along her hairline.

"I need to leave."

"Don't you want your mousse?"

Lydia wiped her sweaty palms against her jeans. All of sudden she felt like she was going to retch.

"I need to go."

"Let me get the check."

Jed walked up to the counter and spoke to the man with the apron. Lydia's stomach turned. Acidic bile traveled from the pit of her stomach and up into her throat. She ran for the bathroom and locked the door behind her. Lydia lifted the seat of the toilet and threw up nothing.

Don't you know who I am? a man whispered into her ear. You don't remember me?

Someone knocked against the door. Lydia lay on the floor. The cool surface was a relief against her hot cheek. The small room spun and the cartoon-like map of Italy fell out of its lines.

"Lydia," someone was yelling. "Open up in there. Let me in."

*

The next time she woke up, Lydia was lying on a lumpy couch in a dark apartment. A teakettle whistled, and soft jazz whispered from the other side of the room. She tried to lift her head, but it ached too much. Several colored tapestries with golden embroidery and reflective silver eyelets lined the walls.

"Finally," a man said. "You're awake."

He sat down on the edge of the couch and lifted a damp washcloth from Lydia's forehead.

"I was worried about you."

Lydia knew that she had met the man recently, but couldn't remember his name. She wondered if she had picked him up and they had slept together. Lydia didn't think of herself as a drinker or a woman who picked up anonymous men at poorly lit bars, but these unpleasant episodes still happened. It was like a shadow version of herself took over while the other version of her usual self—the one who was more interested in commas, Willa Cather, and an ice-cold Coke—stood on the sidelines, hoping for the best (no contracted diseases or unwanted pregnancies). Lydia looked down and saw that she was still wearing her blouse and jeans. That was a good sign. She didn't see a condom wrapper on the nearby coffee table or carpet, and her femaleness didn't ache. These were good signs, too.

"Let me guess," he said. "You don't remember me—"

"I remember your face."

The man was handsome with azure-blue eyes and defined cheeks. He looked familiar like a second or third cousin that you saw once or twice a decade. Or a former soap opera actor who now worked as a waiter at a bistro on the Upper West Side.

"Jed," he said. "Jed Riley. We just met at the meeting. The one at the church on the corner of Sullivan and Houston."

"I remember you," Lydia said even though she didn't.

"It's okay if you don't," he said, wiping his hands on the washcloth. "I won't be offended."

Lydia closed her eyes again. Starbursts of yellow light exploded behind the darkened theater of her eyes. Her head smarted again.

"I made you a cup of tea."

Lydia felt the weight of Jed sitting on the couch. Even though she kept her eyes closed, she could feel him staring at her. Jazz music still played on the nearby radio. Something warm brushed against her arm. There, Lydia felt two fingers resting on her wrist. At first, the touch felt cool and colorless like an ice cube. Lydia opened her eyes. Jed's face was close to hers. She could see the field of brown stubble breaking through the pores of his skin. He rubbed the length of her forearm with his hand.

"Please," she said. "Please don't touch me."

The room started to spin again. Lydia leaned her head against the back of the couch. She closed her eyes again. A strange man was trying to talk to her as she walked through the park. He was old with a shadowy beard, rotten teeth, and grimy fingernails. His beige overcoat and loose-fitting jeans were stained and tattered. Lydia, it's me, he said. Before she took a second look, she knew from the sound of his voice that this homeless stranger standing before her was, in fact, her father. She couldn't bring herself to look into his watery eyes and his creased, dirt-stained face. Instead, she stared at the payement: Small eddies of dead leaves and nondescript pieces of trash swirled on the hard, gray ground. Car horns blared from the nearby street. A dog barked somewhere. Lydia and Jed sat in silence as she started to tell him the story about how she ran into her father near the chess players in Washington Square Park. It was the first time that she had seen him in twenty years, and he didn't look anything like his former, younger self. During all of these years, Lydia had held the photographic image of her father in her mind despite what her mother said about him (a compulsive gambler, a conniving thief, an ungrateful bastard). He was the strapping young man in his new shirt, cowboy hat, and boots. He was the successful businessman with a boundless and reckless spirit who couldn't stay in one place for long. He worked in big cities and made big money even though he rarely sent alimony checks. Lydia had made up other stories about him. He was a rock climber. He was a skydiver. He lived in an apartment somewhere high above the city.

As he continued to follow her, Lydia's father began to sob. He didn't mean to leave her. He had always intended to come back. She kept walking. Almost running. She had no idea what to say to him. And he kept following her and asking for her forgiveness. He was right at her heels. A scent of pine trees and rotten eggs glowed from him like an invisible halo. As soon as he reached for her forearm, Lydia began to fall through the air. Her foot had gotten caught on something. A tree root. A rock. A stranger's foot. It was during that moment that she slipped into darkness, like a trapdoor had opened in the cold ground and landed Lydia in the hospital bed next to the voiceless man.

When she finished her story, Jed held her hand. Lydia felt her breath moving through her. A slipstream gliding through a cracked-open transom. She took another deep breath. Lydia laid her cheek against the arm of the couch and closed her eyes. In her mind's eye, she saw another memory of her father. Together the three of them lived in a drab apartment complex in Oak Park, Michigan. He worked as a textbook salesman, going from apartment to apartment, house to house, knocking on strangers' doors only to be greeted

by a snarling dog or a worn-out housewife. This was before the affair with the neighbor. Before *feed the fish*. Often he would return to the apartment with the smell of liquor on his breath and cigarette smoke knitted into the tweed of his jacket, and then he would pass out in front of the television, soft porn casting shadows against his sad features. Other times, he would fly into rages, shattering a vodka bottle into countless pieces, and slapping Lydia's mother across the face. It happened more than once, leaving behind a faded flower of yellowish purple on her mother's cheek.

Lydia pulled the afghan up to her chin. She felt like she was beginning to understand what was being shared at the meeting, how memories often held an uneven quality, some usually burned brighter than others—and those were the ones that you held more closely over long stretches of time. It wasn't democratic—what we remembered and what we forgot, and that we had to tell our stories in order to remember them.

"Drink," Jed said, handing her the warm cup of tea. "Drink up." Lydia took a sip of tea. It tasted like diluted flowers. Outside, the sun had gone down, and a sliver of moon was visible through the metal bars of the window. In the distance, a mariachi band played on a tinny radio. And a few strangers cheered.

From Pain Studies

The Roof is the Head of the Body of the Building

On the Saturday soccer field, the six- to eight-year-olds are dropping like flies. Many team sports incorporate the art of the flop—a strategically exaggerated response to physical contact—as one among a handful of commonly played mind games pertaining to health and strength, but none quite as integrally as soccer. Spanish is the common language at the Eastside Y, but we don't speak it and this makes the drop and roll, the dry grass writhing harder to read.

Pain as autonomic reaction or pain as performance? Pain performed as advantage, seduction, evidence wholly forged or simply highlighted for easier viewing? Something happened or I want you to believe it did. Here, see it, let me help you. The act makes visible the invisible or invented, broadcasts what otherwise might remain private.

"What'd you do?" a colleague asks with a smile when he sees me cantilevering down the hall in a post-surgical boot. Over the course of several years he's barely spoken to me, has never inquired about anything, really. Something about the visible sign that points to pain, but in a fun athletic injury or human foible kind of way, invites comment, opens the door. My answer, toe surgery for congenital defect, leaves nowhere amusing for the conversation to go, so it ends. Given the opportunity, we'd rather not look at all. Compelled or invited to look, we quickly invite ourselves to look away.

The interaction brings to mind another from some years back with a different usually reticent male colleague. "When are you due?" he blurted out with an unmediated mix of incredulity, revulsion, and alarm upon seeing me eight months pregnant, lumbering up the stairs. For some conditions, there's no possibility of flopping. Invisibility has its price, but visibility does, too.

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Once over a period of weeks I invented a serial story for my son about a misfit band of underwater friends—an orphaned mermaid, an octopus into decorating, an immature beluga whale, and an implacable old turtle—who lived in the un-haunted part of the mermaid's castle left to her by her father. Every morning they breakfasted on food natural to their kind but repulsive to one other. By appointment each month they visited the mermaid's sister at the edge of a certain dock, both parties having traveled several days to get there, the underwater crew by sea, the no-longer-mermaid sister by land—years ago she had given up her tail for love of birdsong and forest. (She didn't regret her decision, but she did miss swimming, which, according to the bargain she had struck, was now forbidden.)

The gang's other adventures came by way of a treasure map leading them to secret alcoves within the ocean—kelp forest, whirlpool, birthplace of bubbles, source of darkness, origin of light—where its magical powers were stored. They also visited the beluga's mother, who missed him. One day, compelled to face the fear they lived with, they unlocked the scariest room in the haunted part of the castle and found there a tortured zombie-shark swimming in circles and thirsting for blood. I don't remember why I stopped telling the story.

Actually, I do. Over time, it became formulaic, almost procedural. I grew tired of it, I grew bored, so I'd take longer and longer breaks between installments, and then I'd forget where we'd left off, how we might again begin. I barely remember any of it now. Margo was the mermaid's name, the one who still lived in the sea. A reminder of how much passes through us, sheds off us, the fleeting nature of processes such as parenthood, such as pain? Two weeks into my time away, with much fanfare after only brief daily phone calls, I Skype with my son to tell him a bedtime story. Looking at each other, we both end up sad. It made a pain visible. Or, visible, we made a pain. Neither was helpful.

*

"Oh, I wish we still thought it was that, that was easy to explain," sighs my neurologist when I ask her for migraine's most current definition—if it's still based on vasoconstriction—a question I ask every few years so as to track, but not too closely, the ever-changing science. She's sitting in a lab coat on a

wheeled office chair, my chart in her hand and on the stainless-steel table in front of her, the dozen or so needles she's just used to inject precisely titrated doses of Onabotulinumtoxin A into my face and scalp, each one a wasp sting. It's important that she count, again, before disposing of them in the sharps container: this is a rigorously controlled procedure.

"We used to think it was the blood vessels in the brain narrowing or dilating or spasming. That was something people could picture. Now, at least according to the last conference I went to, they think it's an at least sixteen-phase neurological cascade ranging all the way from the brain stem to the pre-frontal cortex. To be honest," she continues, "I didn't really understand it. I could tell you more if I had the handout in front of me—there were some beautiful charts and images—I'll see if I can find it for you."

It took me years to try Botox (for migraine, I always feel compelled to say). Because it's expensive and was initially somewhat controversial, and also because it only works on very specific kinds of headaches, you have to jump through a significant number of hoops before you can be approved for treatment: careful documentation of the right kind of migraines and the right kind of failed attempts to treat them with the right kind of medications over the right length of time. I'd run the requisite course many times over, for years had been an "eligible candidate," but I shied away, uncertain about the results studies were showing and worried about potentially terrifying, albeit very rare, side-effects unable to be reversed simply by stopping a given pill. They say the medicine—a strong neurotoxin—is effective for three months, but accounting for its half-life, each dose haunts the body for considerably longer.

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Our cures are as many as they are elusive. Long have we needed them, long have we searched for them, our fickle, beloved cures. And how to judge if they're working? Taking up the vast space between miraculous good and hideous harm is the land of not quite being sure. I mean, maybe they're better? This month, I think, was better? Or, this month was bad but who knows how bad it would have been without [fill-in-the-blank]?

Sourcing widely, perhaps wildly, from his own far-flung travels, the august texts of his day, and deep wells of local folklore, in *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder—a 1st century Roman naturalist, author, and naval commander—

cataloged seemingly all the available knowledge of his age. Ranging from astronomy to the nature of man and war to flora and fauna the world over, his encyclopedic collection includes a panoply of both ailments and cures.

Himself a sufferer, Pliny mentions asthma only once in his magnum opus, at least according to the Penguin edition currently available—"Vinegar checks chronic coughs, catarrh of the throat, asthma, and shrinkage of the gums"—despite looming large in his own life. Whether foolishly indulging his curiosity or only having gone in hopes of rescuing a friend, Pliny died in Pompei during the eruption of Vesuvius when toxic fumes overcame his weak lungs. (His crew, whom he had instructed to tie pillows to their heads as protection from falling pumice, survived.)

Six entries address headache. Who doesn't get them: "inhabitants of India or Ethiopia who stand over seven feet tall, never spit, and never suffer headache, toothache, or pain in the eyes." What helps cure them: "raw cabbage in the morning combined with several other ingredients; a garland of pennyroyal" (which also protects the head from injury, cold, heat, and thirst); "a band of thalassaegle around the head; cutting the hair on the 17th and 29th of the month;" and this:

People say that if one pares a corn when a star is falling, it is very quickly cured, and one can relieve a pain in the head by applying a poultice from vinegar poured over door-hinges. Similarly, a rope used by someone who has hanged himself relieves headaches if tied round the temples.

"Isn't there anything they can *do*?" my father (a doctor) asks at the end of the conversation about how my headaches are, which we have almost every time he calls.

*

All good theories are falsifiable. In me. By me. But which? When? How? So consistent in their assertions and yet so unpredictable in how they act, meaning react—to medication, to the movements of the day—it's hard to know what I'm in for with any given migraine. "Sometimes I wake up with the pain at a 5," I say, resorting to the kind of scale I hate, "take one pill and

I'm fine for the day. Other times I wake up at a 5 and three pills later it's like I haven't taken anything." "Yeah," says my neurologist sympathetically. "We don't understand that. It probably depends on where you happen to be in the cascade."

We operate always within the blinkered confines of our current knowledge, a fish-eyed sphere of walled-off vision that reveals no walls until we bump up against them and even then, not always. Just recognizing the limitations of our view is often tremendously hard-won, but it's of limited use: even when we apprehend its outer edges, we can't see beyond them—we can barely imagine the boundary line shifting, let alone the wall budging loose.

I was four in the summer of 1976 when Bob Seger's "Night Moves" began its long run as a mainstay on FM radio.

I was a little too tall/Could've used a few pounds/Tight pants points hardly renown [sic]/She was black-haired beauty with big dark eyes/And points all her own sitting way up high/Way up firm and high...

Loving it from a pre-adolescent age, I was too young to comprehend the sexual nature of the lyrics, so I understood the teenage pair not as lovers, but as budding private-eyes sneaking off to practice their, you know, investigation stuff.

Out past the cornfields where the woods got heavy/Out in the back seat of my '60 Chevy/Working on mysteries without any clues/Workin' on our night moves...

Into the void created by my inability to read the data, I projected a version of it seamlessly transformed into something readable at just my level. Mishearing occurs in the ear but also in the mind.

Mis-seeing is even more abstruse. A feature of binocular vision is that each eye has a blind spot and together they compensate for this weakness. Collating input from two optic nerves, the brain fills in the empty space, hiding absence by projecting the known onto the unknown. Which is to say, we don't know what we don't see, literally. Through similar mechanisms,

without testing designed to isolate each eye, certain degenerative diseases can progress unchecked for a long time: a defect in the peripheral field often grows to be enormous before we perceive its presence. And when it does, when we do, it's never by looking at something straight on. We learn of our deficit by what blindsides us, what hits us, seemingly, from out of nowhere.

*

Example (good): "Have you found anything that increases the pain?" this massage therapist asks going over my intake form. My ear stutter-steps, almost hearing the more typical question, the one I expect her to ask, something along the lines of, "have you found anything that decreases it?" How unusual: instead of rushing in—good intentions, hubris, and blind-spots in tow—to see how she can make it better, she wants first to see how she can make it not worse.

Example (bad): This doctor believes he understands my "very serious condition" and is sure he has the cure. When my symptoms don't respond to his protocol, he tells me he's no longer convinced my "general feeling of malaise" has any underlying cause at all.

Example (bad): This holistic practitioner, frustrated by an increase in migraines coinciding with her care, looks meaningfully into my eyes and says, "You're going to have to find another way of expressing yourself."

Example (typical): This Pilates instructor interrupts our stretching to show me a reflexology point on my big toe. Digging into it mercilessly, she says this is how she aborts her own headaches no matter how bad and now she never gets them. Dutifully, I dig, and keep trying all week to see if this might be my stumbled upon miracle, too. She's visibly disappointed when I report back miracle-less.

Example (from the literature): This esteemed physician, in the foreword to another esteemed physician's book on migraine, offers an insider's point of view: "Because of the lack of full comprehension of the complexities and variabilities of a condition which is in every way fascinating in its phenomenology, many doctors are only too pleased when a patient, in desperation, takes himself off to practitioners of 'fringe medicine,' almost hoping that the results will be both disastrous and very costly." (William Gooddy)

Example (horse's mouth): "Nothing is more threatening to who you think you are than a patient with a problem you cannot solve." (Atul Gawande)

Conclusion (one of many): It's not only our own hope and fear that treacherously we navigate, it's lots of other people's, too.

*

Thought experiment is a dignified name for a frequently desperate process: what if, what if, what if? Not only the constant weighing of potential courses of action, their pros and cons, not only the necessary guesswork of what will be possible, reasonable—Can I stand up? Can I drive? Can I work today? How long before I'm able? Then, for how long will I be able?—but the magical thinking, too, the make-believe bargaining you can't help but do. More than anything it's a means of proving yourself to you, rehearsing how much you don't want this to be happening.

Would I cut off a hand? Yes, the left. Quit my dream job? As long as we had enough to eat. Give up having had my first love? Don't ask me that. Maybe. I guess so. Let harm come to my child? No. Give up poetry?

"That's good. That's unusual," muttered my most trusted doctor years ago seemingly to herself after testing the strength of my grip while I repeated certain phrases: I want to be healthy. I want to be sick. I want to be completely healthy. I want to be a little bit sick. In the hands of someone less expert, less compassionate, I would have refused. "No part of you seems to be identifying with your condition," she said briskly, "which is, for the most part, good. Frequently in long-term patients we see an identification develop which is important to address."

Sympathy likes a crisis: novelty, drama, limited duration, potential for heroics. Around crisis community springs up heartfelt and energetic, but time-limited—its crest is the beginning of its drop. Crisis passes and so do the pop-up structures it supports. It's probably evolutionary: chronic tends to bore us, all that persistent, unchanging need. Plus, crises arrive, demanding our attention! One way or another, when it comes to chronic most of us reach the outer limits of empathy's gravitational pull and then slip right on through. What, then, to do with a condition that is both: crisis and chronic, a kind of emergency set on endless if intermittent and variable repeat?

"I would take it from you if I could," my mother says over the phone, regularly.

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When the days pile up I start thinking about being dead—not suicide really, a fantasy instead: the pleasure of waking into a kind of bodiless-ness which is sometimes how the clearing (that formal feeling) feels when it finally does come. On the one hand, pain is isolating, makes you an island, makes you distant, makes you selfish, unable to spare your energy or even your concern. On the other hand it removes your armor, makes you vulnerable, shrinks distances, makes you more connected, more permeable than ever before. In pain, certain kinds of separation materialize, but others fall away. The thick glass walls of health invisibly buffering body and mind crack or, somehow, dissolve.

The homeless person begging change at the already cacophonous intersection is one of many things too many in the fraying state of worsening migraine, but there is also a slide inside the pain, and without choosing to, without thinking about it at all, I imagine her pain from within the shatter of my own, which is already intolerable even properly fed and cleanly clothed and fully housed, even well cared for. I project onto her my pain in her situation and though this is false—though I know I know nothing of who she is, how she feels, what she endures—in this way, in all its mistakenness, I imagine her. There is no wall. Instead, I'm everywhere skirting ledges over which things might calamitously fall.

Some ways of being alive are worse than not living—on this don't we all agree? I'm not guessing into the panhandler now, I'm talking about myself. It has always seemed obvious that without medication to control it, the pain would be too much. Mostly I imagine stepping from a roof, I'm not sure why. Maybe because it'd be breezy up there and sometimes a breath of cool, fresh air can provide a moment of relief from migraine's hot, pressing hand. Maybe because the roof is the head of the body of the building.

This isn't suicidal ideation and I'm not depressed. It's executive function functioning, a barely sketched strategic plan—only a little, just a hazy understanding with myself because I am one of the lucky unlucky, I am not without medication and mostly the medication does work. Eventually, it works. Still, I notice an anxiety while driving Texas highways that I've never

felt before. I'm not afraid of Boston's narrow, over-trafficked streets teeming with aggressive drivers. I've driven happily in Manhattan, San Francisco, Athens. But Austin's interstates terrify me a little in their sweeping expanses flung out to the sky. Something is off in the color of the asphalt, in the angle of the sun, but mostly it's the towering overpasses, over which you see only blue: the rickety roofs they imply.

*

Angor Animi: fear for the soul, sense of imminent dissolution

Cephalalgia: head pain, nothing more

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Winners of StoryQuarterly's 2019 Nonfiction Prize

Judged by Brian Blanchfield

Katherine Zlabek ACADEMIC DIALOGUE Winner

Anjoli Roy LITTLE RED BMW First Runner-up

Jeremiah Barker LAUNDRY Second Runnerup

ACADEMIC DIALOGUE

On the first day, he Googles her and tells the class that she really is a writer. He is sitting in the second row. He seems six or seven years older than the rest of the students, though this might be the beard.

"I write. I want to write. I put my poems up on my website."

He tells the class the address for his website. Repeats it. "No one visits. Maybe two people a day. I'm one of them."

*

He comes to her as she packs her books after the second class. "Can you tell me how to get published?"

"I can do that. I assume that, if everyone seems ready for it, we'll talk about it as a class, toward the end—"

"I don't care about them."

"I do."

"Yeah, that's fine. I can see that."

*

She had assigned a reading titled, "Kissing." He emails her.

"It's hard," he writes, "to get through this reading. I keep thinking of all my best kisses and listening to the songs that played while I was kissing."

The next day, in class, he asks why she hadn't replied.

*

"What are you doing now?" he asks. He lingers outside the hall until she finishes talking to students, and walks with her down the hallway and out the door.

"I'm meeting with a student."

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"I'm walking to the bus. It's a pain. My bike tire's shot. You know I ride a motorcycle?"

"You told me your helmet cost \$700."

"The bus is a pain."

"Good luck with the bike." She leaves him at the stop and continues to her office. A student waits for her outside.

While she speaks with the student, he walks by her office.

That night, she tells her partner that he had walked by her office, after saying he was grabbing the bus. She asks whether this is strange.

"A little," her partner says.

*

He writes her an email, telling her he likes her emails. She occasionally writes reminders to the class, additions to things she's mentioned in class. He tells her his bike tire was fixed, but that he'd wrecked the bike, and that he is thinking of her, a reading she had assigned, while in the ER. The nurses don't understand his jokes. The reading had been about the inability to communicate pain.

*

He comes into her office. "I read a great book yesterday."

"All of it?"

"The whole thing."

"That's great."

He takes her book out of his backpack, and she feels as though she has been cornered into a hanging trap.

"I love your hair in this photo. Look at your blonde bangs. Look at your eyes. The way you lean against the wall. The lace on your shirt. Can you sign it here, by your photo?"

"No. I'll sign it in the front."

"I can see that. That makes sense. Are these playing cards?"

"It's a story told through playing cards. It can be shuffled. You can tell it a lot of different ways."

"I used to be a magician, you know."

"I'm not surprised."

"See? Pick a card."

She looks at the stack of cards and wonders what she would do if any other student had asked her to pick a card. She tries to put a finger on exactly what makes this student different, and whether she would be able to articulate it without sounding either extreme or foolish: He thinks of me and likes the way I look in a photo taken a decade ago.

"Pick a card."

She picks a card.

"Let me guess. The eight of spades."

She does not ask him how he's done it.

He explains how he's done it. And then he does it again.

"The eight of spades is the card of ambition. No one knows what that word means anymore. I'm guessing you do."

She looks at him.

He comes around the desk and shows her how he's done it. She feels light-headed and tells herself these are only card tricks and that she's supposed to take an interest in the lives of students. They pay their tuition for the one-on-one connection.

She picks another card.

"What is it?"

"The two of diamonds."

When she looks up, the eight of spades is hanging between his teeth.

It is a simple card trick performed so that she realizes he will always be one step ahead of her, working in ways she will never understand.

"Let me sign this for you."

"Houdini is from your state you know."

"What?"

She cannot think of what to write.

"You wrote that in your book. Houdini is from your state."

"Yes. That's right."

She gives him the book.

"May the eight of spades always be on top. That's great, Professor."

She thinks she should not have signed the book.

•

After class that day, he asks her to join his theater class at a production over the weekend. It's a school event. Another professor will be there.

"I can't."

"Why? We can get you a ticket. There are extras."

"I'm busy. I'm going out of town with my partner."

They walk out of the classroom.

"What's that you're drinking?"

"Tea. I'm cutting back on caffeine."

"You're still getting caffeine."

"Less. I'm getting less."

They part at the bus stop.

*

The next class they begin to workshop short pieces.

A young student reads their piece. It is nicely done, and after some students comment and converse on it, she makes some observations.

"But you're not in it," he tells the student. "You're not anywhere in it."

Other students read their pieces. If they are vulnerable, if they have experienced pain, or fallen in love, he applauds—no matter the quality of the writing. He is the last in class to read his. He writes about being suicidal not very long ago, a friend he'd lost, the help he'd not received from the VA, a road trip that had given him some closure.

When he hands it in, she makes a copy.

*

She writes to the department chair about these concerns, but stops short of telling the chair how he makes her uncomfortable. It seems beside the point. She sends him an email, encouraging him to seek help, if he doesn't already have it. She sends him another email, with a link to help the school offers. She says the class is not the best and only place to share this. *This*, the pain of suicide, the fullness of his considerations. She is growing certain that he has already hung himself and that she waited too long to send help.

The website he mentions so often in class, the blog he keeps—she tries to remember what it's called. If he is crying for help, he might be crying there, too.

When she finds the website, there is a poem about her. In it, they eat shrimp lo mein and cupcakes. They lounge on the beach during their honeymoon. They look at one another and just know—something. There is a post about the way she writes class emails, and about the way she responds to his—the way she holds him off, telling him they can talk in class. He says he doesn't want to creep her out, but that he is going to date her once the term is over. He writes, "Why am I even saying this? It's not like she'll ever read this."

Her organs have been reduced to rocks—hardened, easily rattled, useless. She does not know whether to report this fantasy. Because she feels it is his private life, and is certain he is about to kill himself, she doesn't.

When she checks her school email, he has written back. "Two emails in one day. I'm flattered. I imagine you tossed and turned all night thinking about me. Even if you didn't, let me imagine." She writes back and tells him he is often inappropriate with her. That he takes a tone, and needs to stop. She is not sure she has ever been more frank with a man before, and she knows this is a failing of hers.

He writes back and apologizes. "You should know I respect you. I am who I am, and I don't want to be anyone else." She does not know what the second sentence means, as far as it concerns her. She reads the email a day later and realizes the first sentence also doesn't hold up.

The next week, he comes into her office before class to talk about publishing. He comes in so late, they have time only to walk to class together.

After the next class, he hurries away and then waits for her in the hall outside her office, in hiding. When she walks by, he leaps out toward her.

"Did I scare you?"

"No."

"I need to ask you a question."

"Okay."

She walks into her office and turns on the lamp. At the door, he says something inappropriate.

"You're probably going to say that was inappropriate."

"Yes."

"It wasn't. Ignore that I said any of that."

"That sounds best."

He takes a long time asking a question about a handout.

"Yes," she answers.

*

The next week, he leaves after class, and she takes her usual route back to her office, past the bus stop. She walks down the hallway and where the hallway intersects with another, he jumps out at her again.

"Did I scare you?"

"No."

"I have a meeting down the hall. The professor isn't in."

"You should probably wait for your professor."

"Nah. I'll just bother you for a while. She won't be back for an hour."

"There's a great space down the hall where you can work."

"I can't work. I'm too tired. I'm going to go home and take a nap after this."

"It's a great place to sit, too."

At her office, she drops her briefcase and kicks it into the corner. She takes a seat behind her desk.

"Do you feel okay about the essay due next week?"

"Sure. I'm straight As. Bet you didn't think that."

"I don't know why you wouldn't be."

"I procrastinate. I've been staying up late."

"Okay."

"I have a stalker. Her name is Kate. She's an ex."

"Are you safe?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm just worried about her."

"Why?"

"She must be unhappy if she's stalking my website. She's married."

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"If nothing is happening, I don't think you need to worry about it."
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"People sometimes call me Kathy, and they never call me Kate. You don't need to call me either."

"I know that. I should call you professor."

"That's a great option."

"I'm going to come by later and bother you."

"If you have something you'd like to ask about class, go ahead."

"Why aren't you going home yet?"

"I teach two more classes."

"I always think professors have only one class—the one with me in it. And only one student who matters."

"I teach all day."

"That's why you're never around when I come by."

"I work all day, here and in class."

"Do you really work all day?"

"Right through the weekends."

"You don't do anything for Kate?"

"What?"

"You need to do something for yourself. Have a beer with your breakfast. Take an hour."

"Why don't you go home and take that nap?"

"How'd you know I was going to nap?"

"You said so."

"So you do listen."

She begins to look at him. He won't accept her cues. It seems pointless to speak.

"You make great faces. Sometimes you just make faces."

She raises her eyebrows.

[&]quot;All the women I've been in love with have been Kates."

[&]quot;That's something."

[&]quot;Do people call you Kate?"

[&]quot;No."

[&]quot;They don't call you Kathy, do they?"

[&]quot;Sometimes."

[&]quot;I don't like it."

"I never have any idea what you're thinking about. I can't read your face. I don't understand you."

"I hope I make things clear in class."

"You're great in class. As soon as I can evaluate you, you're getting the best evaluation. You're my favorite woman."

She tries to empty her face of emotion.

"There it is again. That face."

She moves her papers from one side of the desk to the other again. She's been doing this since he approached her door. "Listen—"

"I'm going to bring my own pack of cards for you next time. I'll do some more card tricks for you. But I need my own cards."

*

A student emails with the subject line Red Flag, but it has already been waved.

*

The department chair comes into her office and closes the door. The chair asks whether she has anything to say about this student, besides the fact that he has been suicidal.

"He's been coming on to me." She says this slowly because she wonders whether this is the right answer. She knows it is true, but it may not be the right answer.

The chair says, "Another professor came to me. He told this professor that he was in love with you."

The chair knows people who have been in this situation, and those situations turned violent. And so the chair calls people, and the people contact her, and she sends the school the contemporaneous notes she'd been keeping about him, a PDF of his website, other pages a student had found and thought troubling.

*

After the school contacts him, he spends the next class aggressively flirting with young women—before, after, during any lull. She goes on about the

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business of conducting class. She wonders whether and what to say to the students with whom he's been flirting. It seems she should warn them, though she's not sure of what. His energies might have found the correct outlet.

She hands back assignments. He says, "Thanks for your comments, Professor Zlabek." He pauses. "I've never called you that before."

It was not a thoughtful pause, but an agitated pause. When he walks out the door, he spreads his index and middle fingers at his eyes and then at her eyes and then back to his. "I'm watching you," he says.

Immediately following this interaction, she feels relieved. They can have a sense of humor about the whole situation. But as the afternoon works its way into her evening classes, as she writes paragraphs on punctuation, an uneasiness spreads itself up and down her spine. At one point in class, she speaks quickly—she had to make a point, she was running out of time—and afterward she takes hold of a table, though she is sitting in a chair. It felt as though there'd been an earthquake.

One friend tells her to call the cops, because schools never do anything about these situations.

Another friend tells her about students who had sent videos of beheadings and beatings to their professors at this friend's school. The school had done nothing.

A different friend tells her that once her student does heroin—as he now threatens online to do, to get back at a nameless woman for not paying attention to him—it will be all over for him anyway. He won't care who she is for much longer. The difficult thing would be how to save his life.

A fellow professor says she's obviously being harassed, and that it says a lot about the things women put up with that she can't tell.

Campus security says that he hasn't harassed her. If he had, they'd be able to take him out of the class.

The school tells her to put a picture of him on her fridge, and to tell everyone in her household that if they see this man, they should call 911.

"It's just three numbers, but put it on speed dial," they say.

Before the next class, he stands outside her office door. "Boo," he says.

She starts.

"I got you that time."

She knows there is no reason for this to calm her. But the fact that she can see where he is makes her think nothing bad can happen.

"I was going to tell you I couldn't make it to class, but I decided I can."

"Alright."

"How was your weekend? See any good webpages?"

"I saw some interesting things."

"Oh yeah? How was your weekend?"

"Are you okay?"

"Aren't you going to ask me how I am?"

"I just did."

"Sorry." He is flustered. She hasn't seen that in him before. It gives her hope. He is sweaty and he fidgets.

They walk to class. She wonders if this is a method for making it seem that they are friends. She thinks that when other students do this, she is not bothered the way she is now. They talk about his paper topic, and she is loud and authoritative on the ideas he is working with. She wants there to be no whispering between them. He says he isn't ready to do his work. He says, no, he is ready. He is playing his mind games with her. She is comforted, thinking that if this is only mind games, she will be fine. If she can tell herself that he wants only to mess with her head, and not harm anyone, including himself, she can handle that.

In class, he is child-like and adamant—this way and that—about nearly everything. He is loud and boisterous toward his classmates, and they are unsure of how to react. There is a fire drill, and she wonders whether he has somehow arranged it.

As they flood out, he says, "I arranged this."

Students and teachers stand outside in the fall sun, making small talk, making no distinctions between themselves. He flirts with batches of girls and then she sees he is alone. She chats with a student about an essay. Asks a former student how life is going. She keeps separate from him. When they go back into the building, he makes another student give up a seat for him. The student takes a seat around the circle near her, and it is not clear until

later what has happened. "He did that?" she asks the student. "It wasn't a big deal," the student says.

Self-protection is not her strong suit. Her partner sometimes jokes about the times she was nearly raped and how she laughed her way through it, trying desperately to turn the situation ridiculous, which is not funny. So many things have happened and she chooses to ignore them wholly—and she, and they, often forget the things ever occurred.

*

He has a fat lip. He is—how will she later put it to campus security?—a bit more rude in class. She will say that his comments occupied a gray area. She blames her inability to tell whether or not something is appropriate on the many nights of workshopping she had witnessed throughout grad school. She blames it on the angry, high, tipsy men who wanted to fistfight over punctuation and verb tense.

A student comes to her after class and says there are more red flags. The student says the word *shooting*. That he has mentioned this on his website.

She goes back to her office and notifies the school and reads the webpage, in that order. He has posted a long, protracted threat in the shape of a rap. He details opening fire on his enemies, shooting heroin between his toes, bar fights. He calls someone a faggot. He spends a stanza talking about her, and calls his whole production a joke. By the time she has finished reading the rap, the poem, the threat, hitherto unknown forces in the school are activated. It is like summoning sunken ships from the ocean and hoping they are now seaworthy.

*

That night, she stacks her books into her bag. When she leaves, it will be the weekend. A security officer walks slowly past her office, walks down the hall, and doubles back. She says hello and the officer nods. The officer walks down the hallway in the other direction. When she leaves, she wants to ask whether the officer is here for her. Instead, she wishes the officer a good night. The officer asks whether she has locked her office door. She says she

has. "I'll check back there again in an hour." She wonders what he thinks will happen in her office.

*

It seems as though many years have passed, but it is only the next day. There are phone calls and emails, back and forth with the school. Her partner is out of town. She hears noises in the night. The heat has been broken, and the heating and cooling repairman shows up, high, at all hours of the night and simply walks, or tries to walk, into the house. The repairman has the same build as he does, and she will look up when there is a tap at the window and see him—not the repairman. This lasts for a week. The heat goes up to ninety degrees with the windows open. She is sleepless. Her pepper spray is on the bedside table and the dog pants in the corner as though sitting in the sun. Her brother once wanted her to get a pepper spray that shot like a gun and looked like a gun. This seems both then and now like a thing a person buys when that person does not properly understand fear. The weapons of fear are slight and easily hidden. They do not provoke another weapon. They are used while running away. She decides to walk around the house, which seems preferable to sitting up in bed. She imagines that, if he shows up at the door, she will make him a coffee. In that scenario, 911 would be on the way while they brokered peace.

*

The weekend is two days long, and it will be followed by the week, and then the cycle will repeat. There is not an hour his presence doesn't touch.

*

There are shifts. One night, she imagines inviting him in for coffee and enlightening him about boundaries. The next night, she imagines what it is like to be shot. Someone from the school asks her to list every offense he has committed, and what she said to stop him. This person, a director of security or a lead counselor, says nothing can be done about perceptions: they can't remove him from class until he is violent. Students write to her and tell her

that they can't sleep at night, they are afraid. A spouse begs a husband not to go to class. She is now responsible for making sure a number of children don't go parentless.

She can't remember doing a thing to stop him. But then, he didn't do anything in class. There was nothing to stop him from doing. The last two months felt like a long period of swatting at a fly. Swatting is not stopping. He flew sideways, evaded. The school asks what she said, how she made it clear his actions were inappropriate. It is difficult to convey how her every gesture was geared toward stopping him and also geared toward, as someone at the school suggested, not giving him attention or a reaction or commenting about or toward him. There are men who think women can render themselves infertile while being raped, and she senses something like that in this, some kind of blaming, though she is too sleepless to make the connections.

*

There is a pause. Someone recommends she move the class online. She moves one class period online and then another. One student has a history with trauma and stalking, and is vomiting, sleepless, struggling with PTSD. A swath of others seems not to know something is going on. There are administrators who have been raped and assaulted, and they want him to be held accountable, but he is elusive. Someone from the FBI, a friend of a friend, looks over the case and can't say there's anything to be worried about.

She arranges for campus security to be outside for a conference she is scheduled to hold with him in the classroom. But he arrives an hour early, at her office. He is not supposed to be alone with her. He spends some time pretending he does not understand the assignment. He then says, "You know I work alone, and right to the deadline." She has read precisely one assignment from him, and that was when she told him then that he was a strong writer.

"Tell me again I'm a good writer. I want to hear you say it again."

Detached from herself, she moves him through the conference, keeping all in line and to the book. The conference makes her feel that she is blindfolded and deaf. In her effort to ignore aspects of him, she is able to blot out the majority of his presence. As if to trigger her out of this ability, at one point, he uses the word *harassment* and watches her for a reaction. She

can't remember why he said it. It did not have to do with them—the group the school had made out of the two, and at the same time, it had everything to do with them.

He has been in the ER again. "I was offered Percocet twelve times. Eventually, I accepted it. Why not."

He begins to tell her about all the different drugs he's been offered by the doctors. In the palm of his hand there is a vial, and then it is gone and then it is in his other hand. "It's my sleight of hand," he says. He feels like a hallucination. And it is her job to teach the hallucination while reacting to nothing the hallucination says and keeping everyone safe. It is like locking a ghost in a cage—overwhelming and pointless and he knows this.

She reports all of this to campus security. Campus security asks her how he behaved. "He was himself," she says. By now, they know what this means.

*

It occurs to her that the school might think she is interested in him. Or that she is flattered by his advances. That would explain why they occasionally meet without her, or beyond her, on this subject—the subject of his presence in her class. It would account for why they tell her they had explained to him that there is no dating between faculty and students. She is the new person on campus. Most think she is younger than she is. When she meets with the various campus services about him, she is met by, "I don't know how long you've been teaching, but—" or "This will be good experience to have practice with, going forward." How can she convey to them that this is not new, neither is she to her position or the field, and that they are demeaning her in a way that is not dissimilar to the way he is demeaning her?

*

She is accustomed to hiding her irritations. She doesn't normalize them—she reduces them to nothing. Every offense is happenstance, un-acted, undone. "That is not really what happened," she says to her partner when past events are brought up. They are a couple that has experienced nothing traumatic.

*

The following Monday, she is sick. Her cough won't stop unless she's absolutely still. She leans back into her desk chair and takes notes from the desktop screen. He appears in her office door. He says he will probably be in class today. Asks her if she will be. She turns her head and says, "Yes," slowly. It feels like a trick: why wouldn't she be in class? His hair is cut and he seems sober, which is something the school has asked her to note. When she leaves her office ten minutes later, he is standing in the hallway, looking at a bulletin board that is empty, save for two flyers with type so big there is nothing that requires staring. He turns and looks at her. He doesn't say anything, or anything she can remember. Half of her expects him to jump out at her. She looks at him as she walks and wonders about the strength of her head cold. He shows up to class late. She is conferencing with students throughout the period, and she is shaken to tears from coughing. He tells her she looks pale. He tells her not to swallow her phlegm, that she needs to spit it out, like the lady she is. Students exchange places in front of her and she keeps them a safe distance from her. She wants to tell him not to worry about what happens in her mouth. This is either raunchy or the only appropriate thing to say, but she can't think clearly, one way or the other, and so she begins another conference.

When it is his turn to conference with her, he begins to talk about the way his topic has come together. "Serendipitously," he says. "I believe in serendipity. For instance, if I hadn't taken on a writing minor, I wouldn't have enrolled in this class. If I hadn't taken this class, we wouldn't have met." At the end of the period, students file out, until it is only him and another student. "Do you like my haircut?" he asks. She looks at him, and then asks the other student a question about the upcoming assignment.

*

The next day she works from home. She steams the house with a pot of boiling water and attempts to pretend school doesn't exist for a few hours. At intervals, she takes vitamins and honey and tea. At 6:00 that night, she receives an email from the dean. Parents called to say their daughter couldn't come to class anymore. The dean says that his blog is now only a picture of his genitalia. Campus security wants to know whether this has anything to do with a class assignment. She replies, "That has absolutely nothing to

2.00

do with my class." She feels the layers of insult grow deeper the longer she contemplates this question. Eventually, she decides to stop. There would be no end to it.

*

The class has gone online, that is the only thing they can do: the students can't be near him and the school can't remove him from class without something more black and white, something more like assault—they could be sued. There is a week, almost two, when she doesn't hear anything from him. It is easier, when she hasn't seen him in days, to forget the tumult and wonder why she's gotten sick in the first place, wonder why she is exhausted and behind. One Saturday, he emails and says that the class being online isn't doing it for him. He wants to speak to someone from the school about it. She emails him back on Monday morning and restates the benefits. She does not include the fact that she does it so the students can sleep in peace. Tuesday, he emails and says he'd like to schedule an appointment with her on Thursday. Thursday is Thanksgiving and she tells him school will be closed. He is upset. He says he doesn't want to work on his essay anymore. He supposes the next week will work. She will wait until the next day to reply. At school, there are rumors about felony charges on his record, extortion.

Essentially, she thinks he is troubled and hurting and harmless, and she also knows that she is wrong and that her thinking he is harmless is why she is a magnet for this type of man.

*

He is a student, and he needs his credit hours in his subject and she teaches this subject. There is one term that stretches ahead, followed by another. There are registration periods. His name appears on her rosters. The department chair asks whether she is okay with this. She replies that she has spent a lot of time, chatting with her partner, and that she thinks it can be fine if only these are moved from being night classes.

Her mother used to say to her, "Be a child of the day, and not the night"—an approximation of a Bible verse meant to protect her. The night or the day—neither had mattered. There wasn't much sleep to be found at either

time, and neither had either offered her more safety than the other. At one point, he emails and tells her he is sorry, but he is dropping her classes. She imagines him, finally exhausted from his meetings with Title IX and campus security, the dean and whoever else is hidden up the sleeve of the university.

When he comes into her office, he says he is dropping his writing minor.

She takes a deep breath and says it's normal to become burnt out, but even if he decides to drop the minor, he can still write a poem the next day. She wonders whether this is the right speech to make. The department is desperate for majors, and hoping for minors. She should be talking him into staying.

He says that he isn't exhausted, he's angry.

Then he spends some time saying he should do heroin, just to see what it's all about. And then she spends some time making it clear that this is a bad idea.

Later that day, a small group of students meet with her to go over final essays. It is a casual affair. He comes. He flips through a magazine and makes comments on the contents while the students talk organization. He looks at his phone and says that he is hungry. Later, that he is cold.

She tells him that he can leave if he wants to, of course.

He then names the students who were the most afraid of him. When will they meet with her? Where will they be? What day? What time?

She knows these are calculated questions. He wants never to be left behind. He tells her so in a final email, once the class is finished: if she knew he was struggling, why didn't she help him?

LITTLE RED BMW

Mom's fire-engine-red BMW with its black leather interior was her everything. She loved to rev her engine, leap toward the freeway.

"Gotta clean out the carburetor," she'd say through a tight, pleasured smile.

Maya and I would squeal in the backseat just like when Grandpa gassed the skiff beyond the no-whitewater signs when we went fishing. He'd curl the boat in eights. We'd knock into each other, skim little-kid fingers into rolling wake. When Mom floored it for the freeway, we'd flag our hands in hot desert air for the few seconds before she wound up all the windows.

With her permed and poofy Farrah Fawcett hair, jet-black stilettos, and red leather jacket, Mom wrapped her steering wheel in black leather. She rocked matching knuckle gloves. Before aspartame threatened to make her incontinent, a perpetual case of Diet Pepsi weighed down the trunk of the car. Once she got two speeding tickets, taking us to school and then picking us up, both in the same day.

"And I don't wanna hear about it again," she said when she was late getting us from school.

Maya and I, trusted confidantes, laughed behind our elementary-school hands in the backseat.

"You girls'll tell me when I start dressing too young for my age, right?" Her acrylics tapped a Beach Boys beat against that black leather steering wheel.

"You look like you're 30, Mom!" we shouted in unison. "You look like you're 26!"

She smiled at us in the rearview, said we were good girls.

She spent hours sewing us matching dresses or doing our hair. I would immediately get my outfit dirty—I loved the feeling of the mud in our backyard squelching between my toes and got used to being told to "freeze!" and "strip!" when she hosed me down before letting me back in the house. After hours of her careful fluffing, during which she'd tell us again and again what beautiful hair we had because ours held curls and a good teasing, unlike

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what she called her flat white people stuff, I'd slick down my crunchy overhair-sprayed hair, undoing all her labor. That never ceased to irritate her.

Mom was also kind of a rock star. When there was an emergency, whatever kind of emergency it was, she was the calm, commanding adult voice folks responded to. She was the someone in charge. In earthquakes it was "Doorway! Now!" When that motorcyclist turned a corner too fast and skidded across the street, leaving ribbons of blood and shredded leather, Mom pulled the hand brake and was halfway across the street before we finished asking out loud if he was all right.

"Bad road rash," she reported, shaking her head, when she came back to the car, still in emergency-room-nurse mode. "That's what happens when you don't wear leather all over," she said. She was chiding the guy from behind her closed car window. The guy's jeans exposed an angry calf smeared red and black.

"But is he gonna be okay?" I whimpered from the backseat. I, unlike Mom, was not good in a crisis.

"Oh yah," she said, tracking him as he walked his bike, tentatively, to the side of the road. "He's fine." She turned to face Maya and me in the backseat. "There's a reason we call motorcyclists organ donors," she said to us over her sunglasses. The we included us.

Maya and I nodded to show that we understood, even though I didn't.

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Mom's body didn't look like our bodies, and not just because she was Mom and we were kids. Once in a checkout line, I ran around the store chasing something or playing with Maya, and then latched onto her leg the way I always did, making a seat out of the top of her foot and pressing the soles of my feet on her strong, tapered ankles. I called to Maya somewhere before looking up, finally, and seeing that this leg did not belong to our mom.

"What!" Mom called over to me from the other register line. "Any white leg will do!" She laughed and the woman who I was clamped onto patted my head before I ran away.

But there were other things that set her body apart from our own. Hers, unlike mine after I was five or six, was always naked when we were home.

"Aaaaand, this is my parents' room," I said. The roof was the last stop on the tour we'd give our friends of our house, and it was my favorite stop, second maybe to the playhouse Mom and Grandpa built that chugged actual electricity down from our house because Grandpa used to work for the phone company and he knew how to do that kind of stuff—that always impressed. But upstairs we got to walk around on the roof. My school friend Sarah and I navigated the narrow steps upstairs to my parents' bedroom, our heads sprouting suddenly over the concrete banister. Though we had to be careful not to crush the exposed aluminum air ducts that snaked around the walkway, the view from the roof was the best. Our house sat on the top of a hill, half an acre of land flanking the front and half to the back. Being up there made me feel high up and everything was far away and full of possibility in a way that felt melancholy and romantic. I clutched this dramatic feeling close even as a kid, even as a first-grader.

"Mom! This is Sarah, from school!"

"Hi sweetheart," she said, not really hearing me. She was concentrating on fluffing her perm with a pick in the good light by the window, her pink nipples gesturing casually to the eucalyptus tree in our backyard.

My hand was on the doorknob that led out to the roof when I glanced back and saw Sarah frozen.

"C'mon," I said, not understanding why she was holding onto the banister like it was the side of a pool and she didn't know how to swim.

That's when Mom's eye locked with mine in the mirror. She registered for the first time a second small person at the stairwell, this one struck dumb by boobs and pubic hair.

"Anjie!" Mom said, darting to her closet, using her nickname for me that I'd later come to hate.

"What?" I said, still not understanding. I didn't know yet that other people's moms weren't always naked. Or that you weren't supposed to see someone *else's* mom naked. Ever.

I don't remember what I did with poor Sarah, but I'm pretty sure we never made it to the roof. I don't remember if anybody had a talk with her. If my mom talked to her mom. If the two of them, both nurses and therefore with the easy bond of army vets who'd fought in the same war together, just laughed about it. Probably not. I probably shrugged and ushered Sarah downstairs and handed her a Barbie that was naked too, which she probably

looked at and cried and cradled against her little body until it was time to go home. I'm pretty positive I laughed at Mom though—why was she acting like that when she was *always* naked?—and kept it moving.

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It was around this time that my sisters and I started to mess with Mom. Because, why was she always naked?

"When I was growing up, I had to look at *National Geographic* to see what adult bodies looked like," she'd say later in her defense. But wasn't it embarrassing enough that Dad was a gynecologist—a "woman's doctor," as he told me to tell folks if they asked? Wasn't the copy of *Our Bodies*, *Ourselves* that our parents gave us and left out in the open enough? No one was allowed to tease anybody for looking at that book or point out when it was missing from the shelf, which felt like more than enough good body-parenting to me even as a young person. Did we need Mom's naked one parading in front of us all the time too? As I approached middle school, her womanhood felt like an affront to the knots budding on my chest.

So, when she'd be traipsing across the living room, we'd start to call out neighbors' names, pretending like folks had walked up our long driveway to our kitchen's skimpy sliding glass door for a visit.

"Hey, Vladimir!" we'd call out in the direction of the kitchen, and Mom would dive behind the counter for protection.

"Not. Funny," she'd scold, panting, her acrylics digging into the couch.

This may have been around the same time that we, Mom's band of daughters, started finding her ridiculous in other ways. Even though her nurse's training made her badass in a crisis, her time in the ER made her "a little drama," to use my middle school words. "Don't pull that nose hair! You'll give yourself an aneurysm!" or "Leave that pimple alone or it'll infect your eye socket and you'll go blind!" or "Stop scratching that bite or you'll give yourself blood poisoning!" All of her commands ended in the same warning—that if we didn't listen, we'd die. We stopped listening. Instead, when we felt the familiar warnings revving up toward what was sure to be our imminent deaths, we'd interject, "Or what, Mom. We'll die!!" We'd crack each other up. She'd roll her eyes.

"You girls can say what you want. But I've seen it."

The thing is, with nearly two decades worth of experience in the ER, she probably had.

"Why would you move to New York?" she asked me when I told her I'd decided on NYU my senior year of high school. It was the spring of 2001. "Don't you know that if there was ever a terrorist attack, they'd hit New York first?"

I moved to New York at the end of August. As the story goes, of course, that time Mom was right.

There were other layers of advice Mom gave too that weren't as easily excused as the "or else you'll die" variety. When I became old enough to drink, she told me, "You're free, white, and 21, girl. The world is yours."

"But I'm *not* white, Mom," I said flatly from my crumbling uptown apartment in Inwood where I was calling her, Boriqua music blasting from the bodega downstairs.

"Sure you are. *Half*!" she said, like that was good enough. Like the world would read my brown skin that way if I said so. If I wanted to say so (which I didn't). I'd grown up as the lightest of my sisters and hated that, hated feeling that distance from my sisters and my dad, from my few brown friends who I identified more and more with. I didn't know the full weight of the phrase Mom had just said, but I knew it was a strange thing to say, especially considering what her and my dad's white-and-brown marriage seemed to mean to folks around them.

"See?" our oldest sister Joya's friends would say. "It's possible." They'd always look dreamy when they said this, waltzing through our house before our parents split up.

I was too little at the time to get what they were talking about, that those teenagers saw the promise of interracial love and harmony in our parents. I idolized and pestered and followed them around—trying desperately and ineffectually to wake them as only youngest sisters can from their beatific gazes. To them, the future was mixed and our parents were proof that everything from the everyday racism in our classrooms to the 1992 LA Uprising we'd later witness on TV would fall to the wayside if we all interracial married, loved, reproduced. Joya's friends, these teenagers, were the ones who felt the devastation of that broken promise when our parents split up, maybe even more than we did. Brown boys and white boys shaking their heads

under baseball caps that Maya and I would steal and sink like anchors in the backyard to make sure they'd come back to our house to retrieve them.

Once, when I asked Mom pointblank what she thought about marrying Dad, she said she thought brown babies were cuter than white babies.

"It's true," she insisted. "Have you ever seen a white newborn?" She scrunched up her nose. "Ugly."

I'd only seen Mom with white dudes after our dad, after she'd had her tubes tied right after giving birth to me. Had she really only gone for Dad because she wanted brown babies?

Then again, Mom wasn't alone in this desire. Dad was always talking about "hybrid vigor."

"Indians have been inbreeding for too long!" he'd say with a finger wagging at us. He cited the chronic health diseases that plagued the subcontinent, including heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure.

Had our parents genetically engineered us? If that was the case, my chronic ear, nose, and throat illnesses when I was a kid and the autoimmune conditions I developed as an adult sure felt like the punch line of a cruel joke wielded by mad scientist parents.

Still, at some point, I wondered if Mom had only married Dad for the babies.

"I knew he had a crush on me," she said, when I'd finally worked up the nerve to ask her how they'd met. "The head nurse said his *naris* would flare every time he'd walk by me. Even *she* knew. But I respected him," she added. "I only went out with men who I respected. I'd worked with him during his internal medicine rotation, and he was a good doctor. So when he did finally ask me out, I said yes."

When I pushed her for more details, she told me that they'd exchanged their first words at the dormitory pool that residents and nurses shared. She was wearing a tiny two-piece. (Of course.) He was watching her from across the water. (Of course.)

(Parents are so disgusting.)

"I don't even really remember doing this," she said in her own defense, adding that she'd been drinking down by the pool. "But I guess I sauntered by and threw my magazine at him on the way back up to my room."

The headline on the front cover said something like "All You Wanted to Know About Sex but Were Too Afraid to Ask."

"You've gotta know," she added, "this was a time when people were jumping each other's bones in broom closets, sweetie."

I stopped myself from dry heaving on my cell phone, which I was using to record her and that I'd placed between us on my step-dad's dining room table.

"Still, on our first date, he practically proposed," she said a little dreamily. "He asked me all these questions. Like a *job* interview," she added, not dreamily.

"I had ten different criteria," Dad said when I asked him about this later, a perpetual game blasting on his TV in the background. "I don't remember them all now. But I scored people one to five and your mother scored a four or five on all of them, so she was right up there. At the top of the list."

He is a mathematician's son. "What was on the list!" I asked him.

"Oh, come on!" he shouted at the TV. Somebody from UNC missed a basket.

"Dad?"

"Oh, being bright and independent," he said to the TV. "Being able to take care of oneself, change oil in the car." He folded his hands neatly on his belly, leaning back in his brown leather recliner.

"Changing oil was one of them?" I was laughing. "I don't even know how to do that!"

"I'm not sure your father knew how either," Mom added, when I went back to her again later on.

Their first date might have felt a bit like an interview, but clearly some of what Dad said worked.

"He practically moved in," Mom said, "when his wisdom teeth got infected. We'd been dating for a little while and he asked if he could stay with me at that point because he was in such bad shape. He never moved out."

I scribbled something in my notebook here, a prompt to try to explore the cave of this metaphor a bit more, something about a loss of wisdom meant infection, a loss of wisdom and moving in with Mom...? Something. I struggled a bit, then crossed it all out. *Too obvious*, I wrote in the margins.

They were married just a few years later.

"Why did you break up?" I asked Mom, even though I knew the stories of the cheating, the drinking, even though I remembered the yelling in the kitchen.

I flashed on the little girl rushing after her momma through the house, desperate for her hands. Those hands were now gripping bags packed up with the things her momma had kept in the computer room, where she'd been sleeping lately instead of in the room with Dad. The girl was crying and crying as she raced after her, trying to catch up with her, but her momma kept walking so fast, striding with legs so much longer than hers. The girl couldn't catch up even though she was running as fast as she could. It was like her momma was doing it on purpose. Is she leaving on purpose? The girl started yelling. Yelling yelling yelling, but her momma didn't stop. It was like she couldn't hear her. Momma! Momma? She watched her momma cross the doorway that led out of the house. She was now in the garage. The garage door was chugging open. The girl froze in the doorway to the garage even though she wanted to keep chasing her, to pound on her red car door, which had just closed with her momma now inside. But she wasn't supposed to cross the doorway if someone was driving in or out of the garage. If she did that, it wouldn't be safe, because she was so small. The driver might not see her. She could get hurt. Her momma had taught her that. If she crossed the doorway to pound on her momma's red door, her momma would be mad, and she didn't want her momma to be mad. She wanted her momma to stay. So she stood there like a good girl and screamed for her momma not to leave until it felt like her throat was bleeding. Don't go don't go PLEASE don't go!! But the car engine started and the BMW reversed. Cold eyes turned to look at a five-year-old. They both saw her and didn't. They looked through her. They checked the rearview mirror. She drove away. Mom drove away.

(Have I ever left that doorway?)

I held my own hands under the table. I struggled to bring myself to the present, to wipe the water blurring my eyes without breaking the rhythm of the story Mom was telling. Mom. Mom is right in front of me. We're talking about the divorce.

"I couldn't trust him anymore," she said, her chin shaking just so slightly. You couldn't trust him? I wanted to say, but didn't. How could she not have trusted him? Isn't it the one who cheats who can't be trusted? Isn't that, like, a rule or something?

"It was after this big investment that he made in all that damned *art*," she said. "I saw how our finances really were, how we were holding things

together with thread. And he just lied and lied to me about it. I couldn't stay once I knew that."

Concrete cups. Dad had invested in concrete cups. That was the most colorful investment mistake I could remember Dad making when we were kids. And, sure, I knew about some of the others—all the time shares nobody used anymore, the collection of old cars he was convinced would appreciate in value even long after they'd turned into decaying lawn ornaments—but I loved the idea of concrete cups. "They're compostable! Eco-friendly!" He pronounced eco like echo. Who wouldn't want to drink out of pumice stones? This investment in particular made me love Dad that much more, and I wasn't sure why. What a terrible and fantastic idea.

But, the art? I hadn't really thought about all the abstract pieces wallpapering our house, not unlike the pool or the tennis court Dad had put in, all the markers of new money first-generation wealth displayed like proof of that American Dream meant to lull eyes away from overdrawn accounts and unhappy marriages. I hadn't thought about how much that art must have cost, what that might have done to their savings.

"Your father could lose all of this at any moment," I remember Mom telling me when I was a kid. I looked around at our house as if for the first time, filled with an overwhelming mishmash of colorful objects from all of Dad's travels that made no sense all thrown together. I remember silently watching him that night disappear as he turned up the stairs to change out of his work clothes, and I felt so sorry for him. He could lose it all. Which, it translated in my kid's mind, meant he would.

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But, still, our parents had stuck together through the birth of my sisters, even as they weathered two miscarriages that resulted in the need for therapeutic D&Cs, or dilation and curettage, a surgical procedure that involves forcibly dilating the cervix six to nine millimeters and using a spoon-shaped tool to scrape or vacuum out the entire contents of the uterus after incomplete miscarriages. Six years after Joya was born, Maya came. It took a round of fertility drugs, but there she was, their angel baby. Our parents were so excited about her that Dad took off a year from his lecture circuit and stayed home to be with Mom.

I, born 22 months later, was a surprise bonus after the drugs. Dad couldn't stay home another year, though, and as the story goes, Mom resented it.

"He knew he wouldn't be there for your birth." These words, to temper the blame of the divorce. To show she wasn't the only one away. To explain why she drank during the pregnancy.

"She didn't do it during the day," Joya told me sometime around when I turned 18. "She had this special glass, and she'd wait to drink until after we'd all gone to bed. I'd hear her laugh change in the kitchen and knew she was drunk again."

This qualification, that she only drank at night, did nothing to assuage my fears of what her drinking may have done to me. After a childhood of feeling like folks were only nice to me because something was wrong with me—which I understood, when I was being rational, probably had more to do with my being one of the only brown kids at an otherwise white school than it did any undetectable-by-me cognitive impairment on my part—I had ammunition now, evidence of the cause of whatever it was that made me different. Mom drank while she was pregnant with me. What did that do to change my body? To make me sick? To make me less than I could have been? Was I so impacted I couldn't even tell what made me different? For the youngest in the family, the one who was always the last to know anything, I wasn't sure there was a more terrifying thought.

I'd been a sick kid. More than a decade after Joya first told me this, when I got really sick, I learned that Mom breastfed me for the first two weeks and then I'd been bottle fed after, likely on formula made with cow's milk, something I learned years later I was very allergic to. I ferreted out these details with a sureness that teaches us to hate our mothers, demanding answers that would give me a reason for why I was the only sick one with my two healthy sisters. I was colicky and had chronic ear infections that resulted in surgeries on my ears and sinuses. I struggled to hear and had a lot of pain that as a little person I just didn't understand. With the third set of tubes in my ears—these ones sewn in rather than the two sets of temporary ones my body had already pushed out—a mute beige fluid poured out of my right ear like the terrible and unexpected flash floods I learned about in fourth grade that were said to rip open Devil's Gate in the arroyo before Los Angeles paved its rivers, shackling fresh water in an impossibly long, sludgy, molded run to a gray ocean.

In Mrs. Johnson's class I had to get up again and again for tissues to mop up the flow, to keep it from spilling out of my right ear and down my neck during quiet work time. The other kids in class didn't understand why I could keep getting up and up like that when everyone else had to be still in their chairs.

"Because she has to!" Mrs. Johnson quipped and handed me the tissue box to keep on my desk. "Does it hurt, sweetie?" she asked me more quietly.

My body eventually pushed out those tubes too despite the stitches and I had to get them sewn back in again. Swimming and bath times during my childhood were never without wax in my ears. More muffling. Less hearing. It took years after my ear infections finally quit and my body had pushed out the last set of tubes and healed before I could finally dunk my head in the pool without fear of the chlorine I was convinced would bleach my brain.

"Our legs looked great," Mom said when I asked her what it was like to have such a sick baby. She was talking about the small trampoline they'd bounce on to make the constant rocking that colicky baby Anjoli required more feasible.

When I started speaking, my words were incomprehensible likely because my ears were so stuffed up from the phlegm-inducing dairy formula I was still consuming, I didn't know how to form my words. Maya became my translator.

No wonder Mom didn't want another kid after me.

"Looking back, it's clear it was food allergies," she said, shaking her head.

To this day, head colds that migrate up to my ears trigger the saddest feelings of isolation and despair.

But, at the same time, being sick had its perks. You got a lot of Mom attention then. I remember the Sudafeds she hid in ice cream to get around a gag reflex that was so bad Dad got used to grabbing me by the ankle and giving me a good shake to knock a perpetual lozenge out of my throat when I choked, again, during story time. Her warm hand on a hot forehead. The trips to the ear, nose, and throat doctors—just us. The silent steps of a trained nurse walking in and out of bedrooms to check on sleeping daughters.

"So when did the drinking start, Mom?" I asked tentatively.

This was a conversation we'd never had, Mom and me. I was home for winter break from Hawai'i, thirty-something, working on this collection of stories about our family, which everyone now knew I was collecting for my

dissertation. I'd interviewed Dad a lot by then and other family members with my cell phone recording each time. I never listened to the recordings after I made them. The actual recordings felt like more of an obstacle to storytelling than an aid. But, the presence of the ever-recording cell phone was ritual. More talkingstick than reference tool. More a careful reminder to whomever I was interviewing that the audience for these stories would be more than just me.

"Can you write down what you're doing your dissertation on again, sweetheart?" she'd asked me.

"Family stories," I'd written on the yellow pad she put in front of me. Because she still looked perplexed, I wrote "creative nonfiction stories" underneath that and then "a creative writing collection" in parentheses.

She took a breath. "I'd been drinking heavily since the beginning of the marriage," Mom said. "But not when I was pregnant with Joya or Maya." She may have looked at her hands when she said this. Or she may have said it casually, her gaze holding mine unbroken, seemingly without guilt.

"But you drank when you were pregnant with me," I said, angling my mouth toward my phone's microphone as if to turn up the volume.

She nodded.

"This is the first time we've talked about that," I said to her, my voice shaking, perhaps inaudibly.

The words hung heavy in still air as we both trailed off. I was losing my nerve.

"I never forgave myself," she said.

I felt my heart speed up. Was she going to say it now? Was she going to apologize for what she could have done to me? For what she did to me? For what that may or may not have meant for my body?

"When I invested all that money in the last of your dad's schemes. Damn it! I should've known. We lost all that money." She retreated deep into silence again.

The moment, lost on the breeze. I didn't chase after it. I watched it curl and break without me, as one might a wave. I let out a big sigh.

She was talking about Dad's latest investment that tanked. The oil fields in Oklahoma. The ultimate irony that, for a while anyway, before all that money was lost, our conservative dad was subsidizing his hippy offspring through big oil.

"So how'd you quit, Momma?" I asked. I was cautious, wanting so much not to hurt her even as I knew I needed to ask this, to get to some bottom of this. "The drinking," I prompted when it was clear from the confused look she was giving me that she didn't know what I was talking about. I'd remembered her going away for a bit when I was a kid. I remembered picking her up and she was in a wheelchair, looking weak and small. Dad warned us to keep our voices down, to be gentle with her, that she was sore. But I don't know if that was when she finished treatment, or if that was from her first round of plastic surgery—lipo, tummy tuck, boob lift. I just remember her looking...bruised.

She told me the story about the two-week clinic that she went away to that taught aversion therapy.

"It sounds like brainwashing," I said.

"Sure," she said. "Brainwashing works."

I imagined these words on a late-night infomercial and giggled to myself a little. Mom didn't notice.

They'd alternate treatment every other day. One day, they'd administer a truth serum and ask you if you wanted a drink.

"We were alcoholics," she said. "Of course we said yes."

And then they'd feed you your favorite drink. Mom's was 7Up and vodka.

"When you'd finished that one, they'd ask you if you wanted another. Of course we said yes, again. The thing about drinking though," Mom said, "is that you don't feel the bad after-affects, the hangover, until well after the initial buzz. So your body doesn't associate one with the other. Doesn't associate *booze* with *sick*."

"So this treatment closed the gap?"

"That's right."

"And each time they asked if you wanted a drink, you said yes. Every time you drank a drink, they injected you with a serum to make you vomit?"

She nodded. "We did this again and again, for that whole day," she said. "We were hooked up to IVs," she added, preempting the question she saw hanging on my lips about how their bodies could stand it.

On the other days, they'd do talk therapy to get to the root of why they were drinking in the first place.

After two weeks of this, Mom's aversion to alcohol in general and to her favorite drink in particular was so strong, she'd gag if she smelled 7Up even without the vodka.

"Hence all the Diet Pepsi," she added.

"But what made you decide to give up drinking? Did something *happen*?" I asked.

"It was a commercial!" she said, like she couldn't believe it either. "It was some late-night commercial that said something like, if your teen called to tell you they needed a ride home because their ride was drunk, would you be sober enough to pick them up? Something like that. The thing is, I knew I wouldn't be. If your sister called, I'd be too drunk to drive."

I thought about Joya, the gash between the two of them that had tentatively healed. What the divorce did to them, that wide gaping wound. How much Mom hurt Joya and how, all these years later, had never apologized for that either. In turn, Joya had hurt Mom so many years after that because of that lack of an apology. Joya didn't really apologize for that either. All these missed opportunities. All these waves crashing and crashing, and us bobbing around on the surface in ever-expanding circles.

"I missed your second birthday. That's when I went away," she said, looking genuinely sorry.

"You had to take care of yourself," I said.

"Did Dad know, all those years? About how much you drank?" I was thinking about how much he traveled. How much he wasn't home.

"Of course," she said. "I was like a corpse at night."

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I don't remember the day that Mom got rid of the BMW, but it was some time after the divorce, after the relationship with her first post-divorce boyfriend ended, when fixing it became more expensive than selling it. I remember Joya's boyfriend at the time—the nice one who was ten years older when she was still in high school—was horrified that she didn't at least sell it for parts. The car went to the mechanic and never came back to her prized circular driveway of clinker bricks. She ended up replacing it with something practical and boring: a two-door Saturn that, years later, she'd swap out for an immaculate and a so-silent-it-felt-like-sci-fi hybrid that didn't rev at all.

Laundry

I.

They vacated their spots, and all images reflect their absence. There was pleasure before their vacation, and also after, but the impression of their removal—like a hand pulled from wet concrete—lasts and will last, I hope, long after I, too, become impression. Grooves of one's mind, reverberations.

I admit I have a desire for memory and remembrance—to remember and be remembered. Death does not come to me. I am driven to death, or I drive to death, but not to erasure. Everything fades, though, dissolves like the muscles in my body after orgasm. We angle the camera away from ourselves, finally, or step out of the frame, or someone motions for us to get out of the shot. I have images—in my mind, for now; in albums, for now; in these descriptions, for now—but where are they, where are you? We hold forth, or withhold.

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Cigarette burn-holes found here: pillowcases, bed spreads, fitted sheets, blankets, mattresses, sofa cushions, armchair cushions, carpet, tablecloths, scattered papers on the coffee table, skin.

I watched this slow violence, and I knew if I said nothing, they would argue when the hole was found. Usually I woke him. Dad, wake up. You're nodding off. You're going to drop your cigarette again.

No, I'm not. I'm fine, buddy.

But occasionally, I watched his head, the ashes, his hand, the burning cigarette drop, all drop. Dad, you burnt another hole in the chair.

Why didn't you tell me?

Or: Mom, there's another hole. Look.

Dammit, Harold, wake your ass up. You're going to burn the whole fucking house down with us in it. Is that what you want?

Barker

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They would move the furniture around to cover the holes in the carpet, turn the pillows over, buy place-mats to hide the holes in the dining room tablecloth. If they couldn't cover a hole in the carpet because that would require moving the couch halfway into the dining room, say, then Dad would fray the carpet fibers using his always-on-hand box-cutter—surprising, really, how well this worked.

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Mom and I moved out and into a low-income apartment about three miles from our home. Mom's apartment friend showed me a hole—a smooth pink oval—in the roof of her mouth. I later learned this is called palatal perforation, or palatal necrosis. Cocaine numbs or inhibits proper blood and oxygen supply to the palate separating the oral and nasal cavities. Through a process called vasoconstriction, the palate erodes when, not getting enough oxygen, the blood vessels constrict and then close. My nose has a hole, too. Look. I can't fucking eat right anymore. I'm going to die if I don't quit this mess. She was pregnant with twins when she showed me these holes.

About five years before Mom and I left, Dad accidentally ran over Mom's left foot with his red Dodge pick-up.

Muscles in her foot atrophied, and nerve endings flickered off like a once-bright tungsten filament in a burnt-out lightbulb. With time, physical therapy, and numerous foot braces, she walked with her normal gait, though less confidently. Finding shoes to fit her thinner foot without buying two

pairs irked her more than the dead nerves. *I can't find any damn shoes that fit*, so she'd swap a larger shoe for a smaller one and sales clerks never noticed.

*

Straws, preferably plastic, found here: pants pockets, sock drawers, shoes, tool shed cabinets, the front yard, shirt pockets, pencil cases, backs of closets, and under car seats and cushions and rugs. Rolled-up dollar bills make for good straws in a pinch, when the high cannot wait and your son took the straws from your jeans pocket before you left for work this morning.

I made a kind of game of finding Dad's straws. I found one straw behind a concrete column below our house. Rats went there to die, and I pictured him surreptitiously getting high below while I sat in my room above. I hated him more each time I found a straw, the powder in the tunnel. I thought he was choosing his addiction over me. He refused rehabilitation because *I have to work, somebody needs to pay the bills around here.* I begged him, and in my naivety, I couldn't see his self-imprisonment as anything more than betrayal.



I loved him, though, and when I saw him relaxing into a high, I reproached him tenderly. Even in my anger I recognized his pain and hoped some sleep would help. Maybe tomorrow he would wake up free.

But holes within holes make holes make holes. What is this continuous ripping, falling, pricking, piercing? The punctum: the sting, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice (Barthes).

What is the punctum of this performance?

*

We were going to church one night, I don't remember why, when Mom knocked on the bathroom door.

I'm in here, Dad said.

Why is the door locked? What are you doing?

Using the bathroom.

Why is the door locked?

I'll be out in a minute.

What the fuck are you doing?

I heard the murmurings of an argument, but I didn't leave my room to bear full witness until I heard the wood-cracking *wham* of the door. I'd heard this when, about a year before, Dad tore the bathroom door from its frame to catch Mom. I'd trailed him into the room to see the end of a shotgun in her mouth, and I trailed her into the bathroom then to see Dad's guilty body, culpability sculpting him, his movements. He was pulling his hand from his back pocket.

What the fuck were you doing? She grabbed his arm.

Get off me. Get off.

We're going to church tonight, and look at yourself. Look at you. He rushed through the living room and kitchen and exited through the back door. We followed. Bodies were shoved away, jostled. I was inflicted without any hands on me.



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I stood immobile just inside the door and watched Mom wrest the ersatz straw—a rolled one-dollar bill—from his pocket. The sound of summer beyond the scene, expanding. The act of my looking away.

*

Distracted and soporific, Dad pulled out too far at an intersection less than a mile from the apartment Mom and I moved into. I was in the car. He fractured a few ribs, and I broke my nose, which wasn't adjusted until three years later because insurance wouldn't cover it the night of the wreck. This was his seventh totaled car in six years.

Maybe a week later, Get off me, Diane, you're hurting me. He sobbed, apologized for another totaled car, but she struck his braced ribcage, pressed her weight into his diaphragm.

March 2001, Plymouth Breeze July 2003, Dodge September 2003, Dodge November 2003, GMC May 2004, Chevrolet August 2004, Chevrolet March 2007, Chevrolet

In a notebook listing the vehicles bought, sold, traded, and totaled throughout their marriage, Mom wrote, All wrecks will be off his insurance records in May 2007. An impossible calculus.

Our pain began to lose its specificity, became innominate; my pain became colors, hues, inky smudges flecked with violets, blues, pale reds.

*

Three months after the wreck, I visited my aunt in Pennsylvania, and on June 27, 2007, Mom found Dad lifeless at the entrance of our former home—main door open, screen door closed. His Oakland Raiders baseball cap lay, neatly domed, just ahead of his feet.

Mom said she needed to get out of this state, so we moved to Pennsylvania two months after what his toxicology report calls his Accident, which was his overdose on oxycodone, methadone, citalopram, mirtazapine, and diazepam.

*

Bluewell, the Internet tells me of my hometown, is unincorporated. Situated between Bluefield and Bramwell, Bluewell is a portmanteau, a middle-place—a popcorn kernel fallen between seats at a theater, say, or the gap the kernel fell into. I lived down a "holler," which is a hole or hollowed out space, in a gray aluminum-paneled trailer, though, four years into my life, the trailer was removed and a quaint but respectable double-wide with burgundy shutters—the decorative type—was built there.



I dropped the "g" from words ending in -ing, but I've since learned this "g-dropping" is a misnomer. The "g" is replaced, not dropped. The alveolar nasal replaces the velar nasal. Absences perceived, but unreal—they misfire.

Or: absences are available for the taking. In physics, a hole of a semiconductor is a missing electron, or a space were an electron *could* go, so in one sense of the term, a hole is a potentiality, a placeholder. The hole makes the electron's movement possible. More often I want to discover rather than cover the hole.

II.

Mom's mom, my Nanny, is a looming figure in this story: she pervades. She is the salve and the wound, depending. She is the unfortunate co-star in my first remembered dream, which I couldn't direct. We are running from a large brown bear, fierce and bloodthirsty, a grotesque reimagining of Smokey or Little Bear. We hold hands, sprinting across an open plain, but the massive creature—whose size fantastically increases as its distance from us collapses—swipes. She falls hard, and I turn once and flee the scene. She hadn't instructed me to escape, so in a shameful reversal, I awoke feeling as if I had mauled Nanny myself.

Thin pale face, thin brown-gray hair, thin average figure. Her body and life have been an attenuation, yet, in my eyes, never diminished by her trimming. For so long, I rejected any notion she could break, even after she fell one Black Friday—early, before the unreal, insane sales—on a dew-damp leaf and fractured her left humerus. Even after Mom blocked her calls and prohibited my talking to her because your Nanny runs her mouth to everybody about whatever I'm doing, and you can't keep your mouth shut when you talk to her.

Every Sunday morning when I was a kid, from about age two to five, Nanny would pick me up for church in Pocahontas, Virginia, a poor small town and a poor small Pentecostal church. We were holy rollers. The congregants spoke in tongues, baptized in the Holy Ghost. They laid hands on each other and thought they would fly away O glory. Nanny rattled her tambourine while I held the hymnal high for us to read and sing together. She taught me the cadence of Spirit-led melodies, our bones and souls shaking. I remember the smell of Pine Sol on the wooden pews, of mildew spreading in the damp corners. After the worship segment of the service, Nanny would take me, my two cousins, and other children to a classroom behind the pulpit to learn about Jesus and Moses and Noah and Elijah and Elisha and the screaming and weeping prophets of old. Jesus loves me, yes, I know, we sang. She brought us mustard seeds, exemplars of faith's miracle, and we made crucifix bookmarks. She gave me a framework from which to understand my small world. He forgives us our sins. He makes us whole, she said. Occasionally the kids wouldn't have Sunday School, and we would sit with the adults during the preacher's sermon. I carry none of these sermons with me, but I carry the heat, the memory of heat. The pulpit was a theater of anger, or desire. The first time I heard tongues-speech, I mimicked it to Nanny. What does shammalamabacha mean?

Don't ever make fun or mock the language of God. You'll know one day. God has a special language for you, too. Prepare your heart.

As I aged, for aging is not for the old alone, my church attendance became both itinerant and desultory. I didn't go often because Mom didn't want to fraternize with the hypocrites. Look at your Uncle. He claims he's a Christian, but then look at the way he acts. So materialistic. He went to Walmart the other day, bought one of those DVD converters, used it, and then returned it two weeks later claiming it didn't work. Dad was more ambivalent about the hypocrites: he wanted to belong somewhere.

When I forfeited porn—my *stumbling block*—in high school, I became more devout. I returned, and praying and reading Scripture was my way to disentangle my ambivalences about Dad's death, Mom's move to Oklahoma, my sexuality—everything. I claimed a spiritual relationship with God, not a religion. Religion was for two-faced, drunk, and cussing Catholics going, only on holidays, to Mass, whatever *that* was: that is, their religion was a relation to culture, not to God.

I went to an Assemblies of God youth camp twice, junior and senior years of high school. I will say nothing new about this religious phenomenon because, unfortunately, the clichés are true. Youth camp, at least for certain Pentecostals, is a triptych. The first panel is anxiety, cafeteria food, and salvation. The second panel illustrates the power of God, athletic prowess, and hormones. The kids speak in tongues and French kiss in desolate places. The third panel depicts a paean to spiritual hegemony. Future missionaries and preachers are asked to step forward, to embrace God's calling.

The Spirit knocked me out once for several hours. Everyone had left the church by the time I got up. When I walked away, I stepped out of a kind of mist in the shape of my body. The Spirit hovered there, my aunt recounted.

The Spirit baptized me my second Youth Camp. Some youths were slain by the Spirit, falling to the floor catatonic. Pastors were walking around, pressing *down* on kids' heads. The effervescence was maddening, enlivening. I shook. Speaking in tongues was a quaking, loosening experience. God held my tremulous body and called out to me. I prayed with my special language, a spiritual gift, for hours that night.

I no longer speak in tongues, but I remember the warmth in my chest and on my tongue. *Glossolalia*, did you come from my depths or from God, *ex nihilo*? From the void, surplus.

*

Dead bodies, eventually, speak—they sound the alarm, blow the whistle.

In six years, drug wholesalers showered the state with 780 million hydrocodone and oxycodone pills, while 1,728 West Virginians fatally overdosed on those two painkillers.

The unfettered shipments amount to 433 pain pills for every man, woman and child in West Virginia (Eric Eyre, Charleston Gazette-Mail).

This data, culled from previously sealed drug shipment and sales records from 2007 to 2012, revealed Mercer County, my county of origin, as making the top-ten list for fatal overdoses by painkillers. The medical examiner reported Dad's fatal overdose—one of 1,728. This is not the somewhere he wanted to belong.

*

Her intake of so many and various narcotics caused Mom to seize. She would get up from her bed, black out, and mid-fall, bash her head against the corner of a dresser. I became hyperaware of any loud noises, as I suspected they indicated another fall. I had a procedure: wet a washcloth and get an ammonia inhalant, find her, elevate her head slightly if possible, crush the smelling salts at her nostrils, and wet her forehead. Often the seizures lasted

more than a couple minutes, and I would implore her to wake up, Mom, please wake up, don't die. I need you. Please, Mom, wake up. I would sob, holding her tremulous body, and eventually, she would come to. To seize is to take possession of, but her shaking felt like a letting go, a giving up. Perhaps she was giving herself to her body, allowing her body to take possession of her control. Though, how culpable is the body if the drug compounds effect a host of bodily reactions? If the mind is body, and the mind-body chooses to inhale crushed Percocet, Xanax, Ambien, and OxyContin, then who or what is blameworthy? I could blame "the system" that makes drug abuse appealing, but to strip Mom's mind-body of agency seems disingenuous. What does it mean to take more than what is given, and what does it mean to kill pain? I'm missing the mark.

 $III.^1$

Oh my God, Mommy. I've never seen so many lights before. When Mom was a kid, four or five, she said this to Nanny as they were driving by Blacksburg, Virginia. Nanny said Mom was wearing the fuzzy blue coat we'd just bought her for winter.

What if some people cannot get better, if the universal arc of redemption is, indeed, not universal?

I could point here and there, to this situation and to that anecdote, and act as if her death came as a surprise and the only way to understand it would be gathering all the evidence and explaining her death away, but the truth as I see it is this: stepping off from the washer on September 8, 2015, Mom hanged herself in the laundry room. Yet this, even this, is only a fragment of the truth.

Catharsis fails. Therapy fails. Writing fails. Remembrance fails.

¹ I really don't even know where to start this letter.

Suicide resists explanation for many reasons but primarily for its making impossible our asking the self-ender how or why they committed to the task. Committed to, not committed, is an important distinction, at least for me. I can imagine how she did it—though I choose not to attend to these images—and why she did it—she said often, *I'm not living, just existing*—but I cannot ask her how or why she came to the decision.

Similarly, Mom moved to Miami, Oklahoma, on Thanksgiving Day, 2008, for love, or:

escape adventure nothing masochism freedom stability life abandonment sex financial help everything happiness dependence action change self-actualization independence death.

A few months after moving, she and her partner married in Iowa, one of sixteen states in 2009 where same-sex marriage was legal. Meanwhile, I lived with my aunt in Pennsylvania until I graduated high school.² After a difficult transition from West Virginia to Pennsylvania, I had finally settled and refused to uproot again, but also: I said, I accept you but do not approve of your lifestyle, which spins off from hate the sin, not the sinner. Living with Mom and her wife, I thought, would be approving of sin, the sum total of her "lifestyle."

I never suspected Mom of being closeted because nothing she did or said led me to question her heterosexuality. More the reverse: she had two extramarital affairs with men, though admittedly these affairs were more for the supposed American birthright of upward mobility than sexual attraction. When Dad was being a pussy by, say, not requesting a refund when at a restaurant his meal came garnished with an oily hair, Mom would intervene, complaining loudly enough for other diners to take extra notice of their food. Your Dad would have just sat there and ate it or picked it out without saying anything. I've got more balls than he does, though, and I'm not just going to sit there and eat the cook's hair. Good to save some money, anyway. Hair in restaurant fare is a blessing, and how

could I not think she was only heterosexual if she *got more balls* than Dad? We laughed at her gall and enjoyed our free meal.

But unknowable, we masquerade and dissemble through life. Sometimes we need to; sometimes we refuse to. Etc.

Just as Dad's death freed Mom from heteronormativity, Mom's suicide freed me from Christianity's circumscription of my body, its alleged limits and legitimacy. I came out to my partner before marrying her, but my then monogamous marriage subsumed my bisexuality. The death of Mom's body prompted a reckoning with mine. I was doing this work before, slowly, but this was a push.

I built what I thought was an intractable theological bulwark around the marriage bed. People like me, I thought, had unfair burdens. Their righteousness before God necessitated abstinence or another version of self-denial. Scripture or pastor didn't just tell me so. I translated Hebrew and perused a diverse set of biblical commentaries. I spent hours with Paul and Jesus, reflecting and praying. My biblical hermeneutic re: the homosexual question wasn't hackneyed or borrowed from my grandparents: mine was an articulate position. I justified this smearing of specific human experience under the banner of God's absolute truth.

Mom did not accept herself, in part, because my family and I ran roughshod over her identity. I'm pained by my having believed homosexuality was a lifestyle choice, or that I could accept her without approving of her identity, as if I could make her body abject yet still love her properly. But, through her, I was talking back to myself. I joined the lineage of sons who scapegoat their mothers.³

Perhaps her suicide poisoned the ideological roots extending deep into my conscience. Or: her suicide flipped the iceberg of my subconscious. Or: her suicide exposed a false-consciousness. A *pharamakon* for my self-

³ I should have waited till you graduated, then pursued my happiness. I guess I was being selfish.

denial, ironized. Her self-destruction made space, or revealed space, for my self-acceptance.

But spinning a martyrdom from her suicide seems also a form of self-aggrandizement.

I said her suicide freed me, but her suicide has captivated me, captivates me still. There is no absolute freedom from it, and in truth, I do not desire absolute freedom from it, or anything else, because the consequence of absolute freedom is destruction. I do want the freedom to choose my freedoms in context, freedom from certain oppressions in order to perform certain duties. But what duty, if any, do I have to Mom, to her suicide; to Dad, to his overdose? What duty, if any, does anyone have to the memory of the lost?

Nanny tells me to call her more often because *you're all I have left of your Mom, you are a part of her,* but this seems to me more like elision than representation, that my relationship to Mom defines me, sets my value. I represent her death—our family's loss of her, her loss to us—but I don't want this representation to eclipse my specific life. An example of eclipse: Dad's grave marker reads, "A1C US AIR FORCE," but he served in the Air Force four years—and was discharged due to misconduct. Perhaps we have no duty to the dead, only to the living, but all persons, deceased or not, contain, or did contain, multitudes (reminder).

Mom was not the suicide, the borderline, or the mother. Dad was not the divorcee, the overdose, or the father. Identinarianism performs an injustice to the myriad selves we hold, until we don't, so perhaps the primary duty we have to our dead is just memory. For me, remembering his overdose and her suicide requires a close seeing of how their deaths impress upon not only my consciousness but also the collective consciousness—this is a tired postmodern move. But their deaths remind me, and perhaps us, that living, or living in the United States, is sometimes for some people not worth it.

Two days after Mom died, her body was brought from the coroner's office in Tulsa to the funeral home in Miami. The funeral director called saying they had her body back, did I want to see her before cremation? I walked into the

room, my knees quivering as they had when I approached Dad's casket more than seven years ago.

Look at her, look away, repeat; step forward, step away, repeat. I was an insect sensing danger ahead and attempting to navigate the space between us. Her body was covered by a royal blue blanket, exposed to the light of the room only from the neck up. I kissed her forehead.⁴ A line of purple-blue bruises speckled across her neck described her last decision.⁵ Her death certificate, which I'm holding now, reads the cause of death as *asphyxia by hanging*.

I was in the back seat of my aunt's mini-van going to a popular amusement park in Pennsylvania when I read my first suicide story, J. D. Salinger's famous, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." The casual last line, Then he went over and sat down on the unoccupied twin bed, looked at the girl, aimed the pistol, and fired a bullet through his right temple, flummoxed me. Closing the book, I felt the van swerve. Right up to the his in that sentence, I expected his murdering the girl on the bed. The story ached for her death—but then diverted. In that sentence, the gun moves from girl to reader to the young man, and I was discomfited in my consent to be a target. The Ortgies calibre 7.65 automatic temporarily aimed at me was another outburst of annihilation (Barthes, again).

After Mom's auto-conclusion, my thoughts returned to Dad, as if he had ever left. Perhaps Accident was inaccurate. The hallucination of my quiet grief depicted an alternative death for him: perhaps he had killed himself, too. No one provided me with the details of his death, so in the space of non-memory, I composed a new threnody for him.

I had gifted Dad a pocket-sized Bible. Thumbing through it, I discovered he had made only one notation among a thousand thin pages. He highlighted Psalm 6 in yellow. I am weary with moaning; / every night I flood my bed with tears; / I drench my couch with my weeping. / My eye wastes away because of grief; / it grows weak because of all my foes. Mom showed me his call history from that

- 4 Always know I love you with all my heart.
- 5 I have failed you and failed in life altogether.

late June night. Clenching his chest from cardiac arrest and leaning against the screen door, he dialed 51 at 11:56pm and 91 at 11:57pm.

There were many gaps in my recollection of Dad's death, but Nanny bore witness to his body. Removing sighs, pregnant pauses, and clarifying questions, this is her account:

Your Mom, Dad, your half-brother, and your Mom's apartment friend were over at your apartment getting high throughout the day before. They put all their pills together and placed them in a bowl in the middle of the living room table. They found the ones they wanted and got high. Your brother's daughter, about five or six years old, was there, but sometime during the day your half-brother brought her home and then came back to the apartment. They did more drugs, but close to eleven, your Mom and Dad got into an argument and your Mom asked your Dad to leave. She was standing at the doorway watching him leave when he turned around. She hated to love this story, your Mom. He turned and asked her if she knew how much he loved her.

"How much?" she asked.

He pinched his index finger and thumb together. "Not much, then," she said.

"No," he said. "It means so nothing can get in between us."

After this, your half-brother took your Dad home, and about noon the next day your Mom, half-brother, your half-brother's daughter, and your Mom's apartment friend's five-year-old son left the apartment to check on your Dad. He didn't answer when your Mom and half-brother called several times that morning. Your half-brother left a weird voicemail, though. He said, "Dad, why aren't you answering? Are you not breathing anymore, or what?"

Your Mom found your Dad at the door first. Your half-brother called me, and I rushed down immediately. By the time I got there, your half-brother was gone. He left to take the kids back. The ambulance and police came. They suspected foul play because of certain things, so they took his body away for an autopsy. There were about eleven or twelve empty bottles of cleaning supplies on the island in the kitchen, and your Dad's briefcase lay opened on the dining room table, papers scattered

everywhere. The dining room chairs were pulled out from the table and left in the hallway. The kitchen floor was sticky. I don't know what it was. The woman who did the autopsy said the body had been moved, that he had died about midnight. But your half-brother said he dropped your Dad off around one. Your uncle said he heard your Mom's car pull into the driveway around one. He said that someone in a white T-shirt dragged your Dad's body into the house and then left and went to the other neighbor's trailer. The person in the white T-shirt was probably your half-brother, but your uncle's not sure.

After your Dad's body was taken away, your Mom and I went to the apartment, and in your room, on your bed, were your half-brother's clothes, folded. Your mom's apartment friend left a note on the clothes. "Washed your clothes for you. Love you," it said.

There was a police investigation that lasted just a couple days. The opioid crisis was just getting started here and the police ended the investigation, dismissing his death as just another overdose.

The bottles on the kitchen island, the sticky floor, the chairs in the hallway, the man in the white T-shirt, the note on my bed, the existence of a police investigation. I had not known these details. Thirteen then, twenty-three when I began writing this—ten years passed between Dad's living body and mine.⁶

After Mom moved to Oklahoma, I wrote her several letters even though we talked on the phone several times a week. We'll always be together, just look at the stars, I wrote. One night, looking up at the night sky, I told Mom and Dad that the line of three stars—right there, pointing—was us. Using the World Wide Web, I ascertained this line was a belt, Orion's, supergiants among other supergiants forming the constellation Orion.⁷ Is pointing at or within the infinite pointing at nothing, or everything?

2.32

⁶ I see you are growing up and being a man on your own. I guess you had to grow up fast, and once again, that's my fault.

⁷ My life is pointless, I feel so alone, and I know the choices I have made are all my fault.

Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama has an affinity for the infinite. Using polka dots, she casts what she calls infinity nets. Her infinity rooms such as *Infinity Mirrored Room—The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away*, decorated with countless flickering LED lights, are without referents. The viewer experiences and is the infinite; the viewer is insignificant, finite, a void inside a void, just there and amid other infinities.⁸

When I studied biblical Hebrew in college, I would read and re-read the first chapters of Genesis aloud to coax the malaise from my body. The words and their rhythms, to me, were vivid, physical, of flesh. I plunged my hands in the earth, and the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. I liked this hovering, this void, this deep. I would not fill it, at least not yet.

Close your eyes, and extend your index finger, bending the others' tips to your palm. Lift the finger to your forehead, bring it within a millimeter of your skin, and hover. Feel the heat from your finger's tip. Imagine a pulse beneath the skin, muscle, skull.

Religion avoided Mom, or she avoided it.⁹ When she died, I refused appointing a pastor to give a eulogy, or some generalizing homily. I have a humanities degree, I thought. No need to have some adherent to an ideology she mistrusted recite banalities. Before a small gathering of the family in Nanny's living room, I conducted a small memorial service. I spoke on spiritual blindness and the movement from death to life. In a beautiful passage in the Book of John, chapter nine, Jesus spits on dirt, makes mud, rubs it in a blind man's eyes, and instructs him to wash the mud away. The man cleans the caked-in earth from his eyes, and miraculously, he sees. Despite ridicule and slander from the Pharisees, the formerly blind man maintains that a man named Jesus healed him. The mud, in my interpretation, hearkens to the creation of man from mud in Genesis: And a mist was going up from the land

⁸ I want you to know that no matter what you're faced with in life, you hold your head up high! I believe in you, son, you will go far in life, if I don't know too much, I know that for a fact.

⁹ I made my bed so I guess I should lie in it.

and was watering the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground. Jesus spread primordial mud on this blind man's eyes and healed him physically and spiritually. He saw, and then bore witness to his miracle.

Is a room being filled with water sinking? Am I sinking in the room being filled with water? To sink is to submerge.¹⁰ Why does containment feel both empty and full? We are led to believe that there is more for us, that self-knowledge is achievable, desirable, but self-knowledge, let alone knowledge of others, is impossible. We must work the cages in which our circumstances—genetics, geography, education, home life—situate us.

Mom did not have much time with her biological father. When she was three, he was in the Army, and he and a friend brutally assaulted another comrade, who, to this day, is an "invalid." Her father was sentenced to twenty years in prison but was released on good behavior after eight. Nanny only visited him in prison once—and did not see him again. During his trial, according to Mom's biological sister, who received this detail from her father's mother, her father *played with the chains around his ankle* throughout the proceedings.

After my speech at the memorial service, my uncle asked if I had considered a pastoral career. Why did I feel as if I had failed Mom in that moment?¹¹ In my remarks, I asked, Why did Mom's two sisters, though not without their own difficult situations, come out on the better end, at least as they saw it? Our workings of the trap are relative. Sometimes, for some, sight hurts.¹²

The first, famed line of Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* is a reckoning. *Il n'y a qu'un probleme philosphique vraiment serieux: c'est le suicide.* There is but one truly serious philosophical problem: that is suicide. Other philosophical questions are secondary and tertiary to determining if life is worth living. The question of suicide is certainly foundational, but the relative assessment of a

- 10 I just don't want to live anymore.
- 11 I am so sick of life in general.
- 12 Everything I seem to do isn't good enough for no one.

valuable life seems to confuse the determining of a worthwhile one. What if my neighbor's life is worth living but mine is not? Who decides the value of a life, and what are the terms of such valuation? Whose decision matters? Why is the unlived life worth mourning? Is there a hierarchy of grief—a stillbirth more deserving of sorrow than a suicide?

Nature is indifferent, though plunderable, susceptible to our collective actions, and these actions, though not blameworthy individually, are creating an uninhabitable space for this our civilization, our civility.

Dale Jamieson argues for an ethical expansion, a commonplace morality, if we are to defer or deflect climatic devastation. We must learn to think abstractly, acknowledging the accumulation of our individual actions as fashioning miserable lives for future generations. Our ineptitude for abstract thought, though, precludes concrete responses to abstract harm: we cannot smell carbon dioxide or feel the effect of a Delaware-sized glacial calving. This we is also the problem, for some bear immediate, or nearly immediate, witness to global warming. To learn abstraction requires scrupulous observation, but when confronted with a Jackson Pollock or Kandinsky, my two-year old drew something similar on our countertop the other day. Indeed, abstraction is the primary criticism of Edward Burtynsky's disorienting photographs of oil fields in Texas or salt pans in India or dams in China. His abstract photographs, they say, disallow ecological care or environmental awareness because what am I even looking at, but more interesting to me is what has rendered "us" incapable of attending to abstraction. This age-old conundrum lingers in American politics. Which is worse: abortion or the conditions that give rise to abortion. Which is worse: global warming or humanity's exploitations of the planet. Which is worse: suicide or what has constituted a person's life.

Mom would have had more had she had more, and though her possessions filled only one room in our apartment, I felt I had enough.¹³ Before I had her "effects" moved to me, I wanted everything. She was reduced, I thought, to her belongings, so in having them I would have her. Though aware of this subterfuge, I told myself I couldn't move on (another deceit) until I had her

pillowcases and souvenir t-shirts and NASCAR memorabilia and the cedar chests in which she collected her past. Of course, when the movers lay every trash bag and box in our office, I wanted it all gone. Psychoanalysts say home reflects consciousness-cluttered home, cluttered mind-so what's to say of my consciousness when Mom's things blocked the hallway and crowded the office and storage closets? Laced with the violence of her suicide, her stuff haunted, constituted a shade of malevolence. The invasion of her baggage compelled my disturbing engagement with suicide—with hers and with the permissibility of mine. Every day for several months seemed warped, so how to write about this relation between her suicide mind and mine without distortion? Recent research has made justifiable the belief in the Werther effect-that one suicide can license another, can infect-and I felt this tilt toward versions of nihilism (self-annihilation, moral nihilism, existential nihilism...). Who was I now who could be shaving and too easily begin imagining making serial, horizontal cuts down my ankle? Who was I now who thought self-harm necessary to my grief, or relief? Reader, I am no longer here, but who am I now to have felt these delusions?

In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, The Savage, rejecter of hedonism and speaker of Shakespeare, is overcome by the self-indulgent, state-controlled masses of utopic London and hangs himself. Reading his self-ending nearly four years after Dad's death, in high school, I felt sick. Mr. Savage's was the first suicide I recalled when my aunt told me how Mom died. *Slowly, very slowly, like two unhurried compass needles, the feet turned towards the right; north, north-east, east, south-east, south, south-south-west; then paused, and, after a few seconds, turned as unhurriedly back towards the left. South-south-west, south, south-east, east... As much as one can enjoy a passage of literary suicide, I like this turning, this circling, which is all we, or I, can do when thinking about it.¹⁴*

Writing this, I am abstraction, abstracted, and abstracting. In A Sorrow Beyond Dreams, his devastating memoir about his mother's life and suicide, Peter Handke says he set out to write about her two months after her death before falling back into the dull speechlessness with which I reacted to the news of her suicide.

¹⁴ Please don't ever blame yourself for my actions. I'm the screw up, not you. Just be happy, love life, and make something out of yourself.

Referencing Handke, Maggie Nelson, in *The Red Parts*, hurriedly recorded the details of her aunt Jane's reopened murder case and the suspect's trial in order to transform myself or my material into an aesthetic object. Dad died more than ten years ago and Mom more than three, so I suppose I should have this dull speechlessness—and admittedly, I do, in part—but for the sake of a record and of giving my feeling a form, I've written this account, which is my own.

I've felt that I should love the story of Dad's holding his fingers together and his so nothing can get in between us line—on its way to becoming family lore, no doubt—but its sweetness notwithstanding, there was already always a third thing between them, between us all. Between his fingers was Nothing, or nothingness, which, it seems to me, is death. Death, in life, always already separates—no, connects—us because one side of the relation must die first.

What with her seizures and visible slipping into self-destruction—the seizures, the falling, the bruises, the drinking, the affairs—I expected Mom to die first. Dad was recovering himself, in my view, returning to an equilibrium I couldn't exactly remember any longer. But the deputy chief medical examiner weighed his heart at 360 grams, and patchy areas of atherosclerosis of the right and left coronary arteries result in terminal compromise with maximal 85% and 90% stenosis respectively (toxicology report). I endure the mystery of his death. It seems his heart could have taken it without the atherosclerosis. In that moment, though—the moment of his Accident—his heart couldn't take it, "it" being the prescribed medications and "it" being something more?

With some shame but no apology, I write his body, her body—not over, but in between and through—because facts are corpses and truths are living bodies, and I want both.¹⁵

THE HOTEL KIRILOV

I had never seen an ad for the Hotel Kirilov. This puzzled and intrigued me. I couldn't understand how any business, much less a hotel, could survive in New York without advertising. Perhaps I'd misread the hotel's address in Celine's email (I hadn't), or she had somehow misspelled it. But when I finally saw it on Google Maps it looked gray and old like a refugee from the Middle Ages. Its oddly lettered logo also looked old, yet strangely dignified. I didn't remember Celine being particularly frugal, quite the contrary. On vacations she especially loved to spend money. It was me who was the careful one and inevitably she'd tell me at some point on our trips, "you only live once," and I'd invariably give in.

I wish I'd listened more carefully when she told me about why she wanted our reunion to be at such a bizarre hotel, but I was too excited about the prospect of seeing her for the first time in nearly three years. Though I'd never told her, because I knew she'd never felt the same way, I considered her the love of my thirty-one-year-old life. I think she was sad when we broke up, but I was devastated.

*

"This way sir," the doorman said as he opened the oversized door and I stepped into the equally enormous lobby that seemed to be filled with a kind of mist. Yet everyone was concentrating on their task at hand so completely as if they didn't notice the mist at all.

Of course, I wasn't really that interested in assessing the hotel or its employees. I was really hoping to somehow see Celine by chance. Our phone call last night, though not without ambivalence, was mostly successful, but it hadn't resulted in my staying with her for the night. The next day she wanted to spend with her sister (discouraging but I could certainly understand), but she did sound encouraging on the phone that night as she once again asked me to meet her at the hotel.

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Like an invisible twin I wasn't aware of, the doorman had apparently abandoned his post and walked the fifty to seventy-five feet with me to the registration desk, as if I might otherwise get lost.

"Good evening Mr. Prokoviev," said the whale-like heavily bearded desk clerk. I wondered how he knew my name, but then realized Celine must have told him.

"Welcome to the Hotel Kirilov. Now please tell me how I can be of service to you?"

"Thank you. I'm here to meet Celine St. Cloud."

He gave me an astonished look, though it only lasted a second. I did my best to look away as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Yes, yes, of course, I'll call her right now and tell her you've arrived. In the meantime, why don't you sit down in our lobby?" he said in a slightly Russian accent.

"Thanks very much," I said, seeing nothing like a sofa, until at last I realized he meant the overstuffed green chair near the lobby's exit. Still, I was glad to sit in the predictably lumpy chair since I'd been on my feet all day.

I looked at my watch. She was late as she often was. It was a way she could feel powerful by reminding me, as if I needed to be reminded, that I would never stop waiting for her, because she had ended things between us. Why then did she still continue to mistreat me? She thought I was contributing too much to her feelings of hopelessness, she once said. A perpetual graduate student of Russian Literature, Celine said I reminded her of Prince Myshkin, the greatest idiot in Russian literary history. She said I had an unconscious need to humiliate myself, although in the end she conceded that all her relationships had ended torturously, probably because of her extremely possessive father who had "unnatural feelings" towards her.

My cell phone began to ring. "Where are you?" she said.

"In the lobby."

"But I told you to meet me in my room. I told Ivan to..."

"Who's Ivan?"

"The guy at the front desk. God, everything's so hopeless."

"So there was a little misunderstanding. The main thing is I'm here now, and very eager to see you."

"Did you get reservations anywhere? Did you make any plans?"

"No. You were always much better at that than me," I said, my heart beating wildly, as I anticipated another volley of criticism. Luckily my answer seemed to please her.

"Meet me at the Kirilov Café. It's on the first floor. You can't miss it."

"But I thought you wanted me to meet you at your room."

"That moment has passed, as all moments do."

She was wearing a simple black dress which managed to hide her figure. She wasn't wearing any makeup either. I tried to remember if she dressed like this during our relationship but I couldn't really recall, and kept expecting her to say she had to change her clothes.

"So, here is the Kirilov Café. Isn't it charming the way it suddenly yet unobtrusively surrounds us? It's as if it's always been a part of us like the way the wind and the stars are part of us if we'd only accept them."

Her verbal eruption was surprising enough, but I was even more surprised by the slight smile that played about her lips. Though I was thrilled to see her and dreamed about having a second chance, I also noticed there was something off about her. She seemed both nervous and withdrawn. "What is it?" I finally said.

"I'm just a little shocked frankly, that you don't know who Kirilov is."

"But literature isn't my field. You're the brilliant literary one. Is he that famous?"

"You still a businessman?" she asked, unable to hide her sarcasm. It was as if she'd just asked me if I were still robbing banks.

I looked at her lake-blue eyes—preternaturally glassy yet compelling as beautiful things always are.

"You're not answering me."

"Sorry, yes. Still editing ads, not even helping to write them."

She shrugged. "Kirilov is a seminal character in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Possessed*, sometimes translated as "The Devils." Hear of it?"

"Yes, but I haven't read it, I'm sorry to say."

"Unbelievable, and yet typical," she said, pounding her little fist on the table.

"I'd certainly love to hear about him from you, though."

"Didn't I tell you I wanted to meet you here after our phone call last night?" I felt a stab of pain at her reluctance to use the word "date."

"Yes, of course."

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"I guess it was foolish of me to think you would at least google the hotel to find out why I had picked it. Especially since you haven't even read the book."

This time I shrugged, as if I had borrowed the gesture from her.

"How many books by Dostoyevsky have you read?" she asked.

"Just Crime and Punishment and Notes from the Underground."

"Not even The Brothers," she muttered to herself.

I was beginning to get angry and wondered if she would once again beat me to the verbal punch.

"Look, I'm sorry if I'm being a bitch about this," she said.

"Not at all," I said, making a dismissive gesture with my hand, a gesture that I worried was too feminine.

"Anyway, do you really want to learn about Kirilov?"

"Of course. Absolutely."

She looked around herself as if she were about to tell me the deepest secret of her soul before she finally started to speak.

"Kirilov is the most important character in *The Possessed* and actually he's probably the most important character in world literature."

"Really? More so than Hamlet, or..."

"Hamlet plays with ideas, Kirilov lives them. Instead of confronting the world with his ideology, Hamlet withdraws from it endlessly, the better to jerk off in splendid isolation where he can excite himself with his fantasy revenge against Claudius. Of course, he waits too long and when he finally does think he has a clear chance thrusts his hyper-engorged sword/dick into the darkness only to discover, as Oedipus did before him, that he's killed the wrong man. Kirilov, on the other hand, is completely unconfused and acts accordingly. He announces that there is no God, and that his suicide, which god can't prevent, will prove not only that god is dead but that he, Kirilov, will be the only free man in the world."

I looked at her in astonishment. I didn't know if her interpretation of the scene made sense or not, but it revealed a kind of analytic intelligence I'd never before associated with her.

"So what are your thoughts?"

I laughed a little to stall for time.

"Or are you, like most of your intellectual brothers, just thinking with your dick and wishing you'd tried a bit harder to please it when I told you to meet me in my room?"

"I feel like this is a trick question."

"I don't have time for trick questions."

"Okay. Maybe you want to find out if I have a soul or can only..."

"Think with your dick?"

"Yeah, something like that. But you've known me for over a year now. Don't you think you should know the answer to that by now?" She thought for a moment. I loved looking at her face while she was thinking about something.

"Not necessarily, I've been wrong before about my father, for example, but actually, I really wanted to talk to you about the hotel."

"This hotel?"

"Of course. What other place could I mean? I wrote you three letters about it and tried to ask you about it."

"I never got any letters," I said.

"You're not fucking with me now?"

"Unfortunately not."

"This is bad, really bad."

"What is?"

She gave me a devastatingly serious look.

Mercifully, she abruptly changed the subject. "So no one ever told you anything about this hotel?"

"You mean its history?"

"Or more importantly its ideology?"

"I have never heard of the hotel before our telephone talk last night."

The color which had drained from her face slowly returned which I judged to be a good sign.

"Disappointing, again, and somehow predictable. How would you like to go to a lecture on just this subject—the purpose of the Hotel Kirilov?"

"Sure. Where is it?"

"In the Grand Salon of the hotel, on the top floor. If we don't dilly-dally we should just make it," she said, standing up and compelling me to look at her body that was both voluptuous and lithe in its cat-like movements.

"So are these lectures always in the hotel?"

"Everything is in the hotel."

•

The meeting was held in The Leader's penthouse. There were perhaps fifty people there, though the thickening mist made it difficult to get an accurate count. As one might have expected, the penthouse was sparsely furnished, with short wooden chairs one might typically see at an elementary school. The Leader, who addressed us from a slightly elevated stage, was dressed in a frayed t-shirt and gray pants. He was average height and thin, and had a vacant kind of look, as if he'd been a prisoner of war for years. He didn't try to liven his speech with any jokes either. When I mentioned this to Celine she ignored me, and barely responded when I held her hand. Instead, her attention remained completely on him.

The Leader spoke of big things but in a little voice. He did, however, make big sweeping gestures with his arms and occasionally his fingers, too. These spontaneous movements were the most compelling part of his presentation. When I looked again at Celine, she had an ecstatic expression. Was I missing something that the rest of the spellbound audience was getting? When I finally looked away from her I saw Ivan from the front desk holding hands with the doorman in the row just to my left.

There was no music during the Leader's lecture, nor was there any played before or after the somber address. At least I thought it was somber, so I retained very little of its content, and couldn't seem to get a clear sense of its overarching point. (Of course, my mind was preoccupied with Celine and what exactly I should say to her when this dreary lecture finally ended.) There were some phrases of the Leader that I remembered. Phrases that seemed to emerge from the subtly thickening mist that made it difficult to totally dismiss him.

"Infinity is the fog the God-addicts cling to," our leader said, dismissing the little time we live in between life and death as our "grand illusion." He spoke as if "the construction of man's consciousness"—seeing everything in term of cause and effect—was "God's ultimate revenge." With one riddle he eternally silenced his critics. The riddle was "How can there always have been something, but how could there ever have been nothing?" There was a collective murmuring after the Leader's riddle as if a psalm from the Bible had just been sung. Meanwhile, Celine looked enthralled, not about me of course, but in direct response to the Leader's metaphysical bloviating. She

had not been tempted to look at me once, not even after one of the Leader's rare and predictably weak attempts at humor.

"Incredible, wasn't it?" she said, as we followed the rest of the haphazardly dressed audience out of the theater.

"Yes, incredible..."

"Let's go back to my room?" she said, suddenly gripping my hand, which immediately began vibrating like a fish squirming on the sand. I had no idea what to say, so simply tried to enjoy the preternaturally strong grip of her hand.

When we got in the elevator another extraordinarily large man with a thick black walrus mustache snuck a look at Celine, then cleared his throat ostensibly so she would notice him.

"Hi Otto," she said, more relieved than cheerful.

He bowed rather than say hello. Then he looked closely at Celine.

"Well," he said. "Did you get your clearance yet?"

"Yes, Otto, it's finally happened. I found out less than an hour ago."

So that was what she got so excited about after Otto stopped for a moment to whisper something in her ear.

"Congratulations," he said as his face seemed to vibrate. "Of course I hoped this would be my time."

"It's bad luck to hope, Otto, and worse luck to dream."

In her room, Celine lit one of two discreet candles and I felt encouraged enough to take off my pants on the smallish part of the bed she wasn't occupying.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"Following your lead."

"But I've been cleared."

"Cleared?"

"Yeah, cleared of all social, metaphysical *and* sexual compulsions. Free of history and the stinking earth. No more kings and no more lying." She paused to give me a hard look. "And no more imaginary God that Kirilov already killed almost 100 years ago. Didn't they tell you ANY of this stuff?"

I shrugged.

"Human error," I said rather dryly. She slammed the door then began to speak in a kind of furious whisper.

"So you didn't come here to do a Kirilov?"

"If by that you mean suicide, the answer is no."

"Then why did you come?"

"Because you invited me and if you'd invited me to Istanbul I would have gone there."

She smiled briefly in the half dark before lambasting me again.

"You are not supposed to be here. It is totally forbidden. Apparently you are as the Americans never tire of saying, 'sincere.' The Hotel Kirilov is...wait, can I trust you? Anyway, it's too late not to. For some reason, by some chance, you have stumbled into the world's leading psychologically oriented institute of euthanasia. Our purpose and identity, needless to say, are top secret."

"Then why did you invite me here?"

She suddenly looked helpless.

"I don't know why, I thought you wanted to Kirilov. In your letters you seemed to want it."

"I misinterpreted your letters too. Maybe we should have emailed or taken longer on the phone."

"But I did want to see you. I wanted you to be the last person I'd see."

"So could you evaluate my performance?"

"Everything's a performance or a review to you."

A series of memories paraded through my mind at a tremendous speed. It occurred to me that instead of wisdom or even insight, Americans deified speed and despite her faux Franco/Russian presentation of self, she was as American as a piece of apple pie. She turned and showed me her peerless profile. I was well aware that she held all the cards in the relationship yet when I saw her profile, or even just brushing her teeth it didn't seem to matter, any more than when I saw the Mona Lisa in its rather pedestrian frame in the Louvre.

"So let me be sure I understand this. This isn't really a hotel. Its real purpose is to help people who want to die."

"I never said dying was easy. People have tremendous fear that inhibits them from doing what they really want."

"Which is to die?" Now it was apparently her turn to shrug.

"In some cases, yes. After all, death is the end of cruelty."

Not in your case, I thought.

"And while they're making their decision, does the Leader or anyone from the hotel try to influence their decision?"

"You know, if someone told the police about the Hotel Kirilov we could all get in a lot of trouble," she noted. "Yet our success ratio is in the high nineties. We have a suitcase full of thank you letters."

"Who writes the letters, the life insurance companies? Now there's an industry one can feel proud supporting."

"The grateful relatives and loved ones write the letters. Often they come to visit us afterwards."

"Sweet," I said.

"Sarcasm doesn't become you, Andrew."

"And death in no way becomes you."

I remembered searching through her desk one morning while she slept and finding scented love poems that I'd always either thought or at least hoped were about me.

Meanwhile, Celine was watching me closely.

"Obviously we've had a massive amount of miscommunication here," she said.

"Obviously."

"I really did think you understood my letters."

"Perhaps your letters were clearer than I realized, maybe I didn't want to understand what they were saying."

"Even when I gave you the Leader's autobiography?"

"He was just another guru to me. We used to laugh at people like him."

"Even when I told you he was going to adopt me?"

"I was happy for you."

"No you weren't, you were jealous."

"Okay, I was a little jealous, I won't deny it. And then I also didn't trust him—how could I after what your father did to you."

"The Leader is my real father."

"And he wants you to die? And by the way, is he planning to die too?"

"You're getting a little nosey considering you don't even believe in Kirilov."

"I thought you were speaking metaphorically, just like I hope you're speaking metaphorically about dying now."

"No, I'm not."

"In the last letter you said you still loved me. Why would you want to die now?"

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"Death doesn't destroy love. It creates it."

I looked at her closely for a few seconds, thinking about the hotel, and then a terrible fear rushed through me.

"Does everyone who works here, Otto and Ivan, and the doorman—are they all Kirilovs?"

For the first time since I'd known her she looked away from me guiltily.

"And if they are, does that mean when they get cleared—which is what I thought your uptown rivals the Scientologists were—"

"Oh don't compare us to them; they're just a bunch of money hungry blood suckers."

"All the more reason not to use their terminology. Anyway. When it's their turn to go who replaces them?"

Again she turned away with the same guilty look.

"Never mind, I think I figured it out."

"We search hard and vet carefully."

"And what if you change your mind?"

"No one does."

"Hamlet does."

"Hamlet does but Kirilovs don't. We aren't weak-minded people."

"Still, you said yourself that it's a very difficult issue so sooner or later someone will change their mind and leave the hotel. What happens then?"

"No one leaves the hotel."

"But that's preposterous."

"The Leader decides what's preposterous."

"So without explaining any of this, you take me here without giving me the right, the freedom to say no."

"It's extremely obvious that you want to die."

"And what made you think this?"

"I've always thought so. There wasn't any one revelatory moment. I mean you've lost at everything. And then, despite all my efforts, you failed with me, too. Believe me, you said you wished you were dead at least a hundred times to me." (To me it was a typical New Yorker's expression.)

"Celine, you need to be in your room now. The Leader may be communicating with you at any moment." It was Otto, the ubiquitous elevator man who appeared as suddenly and silently as a cloud.

"Goodbye," she said simply and earnestly before immediately losing interest in me.

Otto and I walked behind her in silence towards the abandoned elevator.

Then the elevator opened. I remembered her ineffable face—her eyes so hopeful and her almost carefree lips parted in a smile that she used to have in the first months we were together. Meanwhile, in the horror of the present, I could still hear Celine gushing about her imminent death. "It's wonderful," she said, in a voice that was half whispered, half sung. I felt a great sadness, but then my basic survival mechanism kicked in again.

"I'm going," I said.

"What?"

"I want to live."

"Stupid coward."

"I pray that you come with me."

"I made my decision months ago."

"Why? So you can worship your 'Leader'? Tell me, do his teachings involve money or just sex?"

She looked at me with outraged eyes like Medusa. Then she reached for a gun that I hadn't noticed before. I dove off my little portion of the bed, saw she was no longer pointing the gun at me but continued running, then half-running, until I was essentially walking at a normal speed. I felt that she'd already passed into a different realm and wondered if the best thing would be to chase after her. But then I very quickly realized that Celine had done an unforgivably horrible thing to me and that the hotel and Celine were both insane. And since no one was allowed to leave the hotel until the time came for their Kirilov, anyone from the hotel would soon be after me.

"Celine," I yelled. "How could you do this to me?"

At last the dull gold of the elevator appeared before me, but just before it stopped I began running until I reached a snakelike flight of stairs that looked like someone plucked them from a fairytale. The mist was rising again, almost covering the carpeted stairs as if it were drifting snow. On the walls were various photographs of the Leader. In one, he was shaking hands with Dr. Kevorkian, the patron saint of assisted suicide. It was odd. I'd always admired him as a man of high principle. I just didn't want him to mistakenly think I wanted his help. I also remember Celine telling me that once you were in the

hotel you couldn't leave it until you were truly lucid and ready to die. Only then would you find out when and how you would be assisted.

I continued running, but not the way a human would run. More like a fusion of a bird and a snake.

"Stop!" someone shouted, his voice like a military command. I stopped and turned. A man was pointing a rifle at me.

"Why are you running down the forbidden stairs?"

"I didn't know they were forbidden."

"But you have already used the elevator."

"Yes, with Otto," I said to sound familiar. "I guess Otto is a little slow tonight."

"Otto is never slow. You will come with me now."

"What's your name?" I asked rather brazenly.

"Jack," he said, even more brazenly. "That was the last question you will ask me. However you will answer a number of our questions."

"Of course."

"What are you doing in the hotel?"

"Visiting a guest."

"What is the guest's name?"

I figured that by now, whatever process she was going through, dead or alive, there was a good chance she was beyond recall.

"Celine St. Cloud." My knowledge of her name seemed to stun Jack.

"Really?" he said, seemingly against his will. I sensed that they had probably had some kind of relationship. Funny how the doomed become erotically charged again like teenagers. I took advantage of the few seconds he wasn't watching me to frantically look for escape routes. There weren't any, but I did notice that the curtain of mist behind us was starting to rise and solidify into sudden snow.

"Are we going to die in the snow?" I asked. "Is that what the Leader has planned for us?"

"It's not our place to question the Leader's vision. He has a different plan for all of us." $\ \ \,$

I looked at the snow that was still rising. Then I saw it—a giant wave of batlike creatures—part human, I suppose, because they were singing ecstatically, some of them screeching the single word "Kirilov." Though Jack ordered me not to look, I stared as intensely as I ever had at anything until I saw the flying profile of Celine, still peerless among the damned.

"If you resist me again, I will have to kill you," Jack said.

"I thought only the Leader made those decisions."

"Don't be insolent. We have gone to a great deal of trouble to give you a worthy death. Don't ruin it with your sophomoric attempts at humor."

"But I never asked to die. I knew nothing about the hotel or Kirilov. I just came to visit Celine."

"Who spent many hours on your behalf, trying to get you cleared, trying harder for you than she ever did for herself." He turned his head for a moment to wipe away a tear or two. "Now follow me. From this moment, there will be no more communication between us."

I continued to look at the spot of sky where I'd last seen Celine but it was like a chaotic dream of snow.

"When you're dead you don't even know you're dead," Celine once said to me. Death is for the living, I thought, while still flying. In Celine's case, her death was from me, and perhaps also from her monstrous father as well. I still don't know if I'm dead or not. If I knew, I would tell you.

JASON ZENCKA

Junior

How is he supposed to recognize Ben?

The options in the bookstore café are limited...the guy in the button-down shirt with the bad fade? No—he's with the freckly lady in the long dress. Maybe the ponytailed, professor-looking dude reading a magazine? Sensing Henry watching him, he raises his head and smiles before returning to his article. Too friendly, Henry thinks.

There.

The guy drinking tea behind the pile of books. The one who looks like he pulled his look from the "IT guy takes a personal day" bin—cargo shorts, bulky running sneakers with white tube socks, bedhead. When he meets Henry's eye he coolly holds his gaze and nods.

"Hey," Henry says, reaching his table. "I'm Henry."

Ben smiles, shakes his hand. "I knew you'd find me."

He wears a black shirt with a grizzly bear on it, the fabric faded to a chalky translucence. When he sees Henry eyeing it he laughs, pinches the fabric at his collarbone between his thumb and forefinger.

"I was probably your age when I got this shirt."

Henry hopes the sound he's made resembles a laugh. He's having trouble matching this beaky, boyish face to the knowing voice on an Internet message board he's stayed up late all week devouring.

"Well," Ben says, gesturing to his table. Henry sits down opposite him. "You've come this far. I'm impressed. Let me ask you, did you first find the monster on Sinkwhole.com?"

Henry glances at the adjacent table—a toddler squirms as his mother uses a napkin to wipe chocolate from his face. Ben looks, too.

"People don't hear what they can't handle, Henry."

Henry nods and focuses on a muffin wrapper Ben has torn to shreds. No, he explains. He'd heard of the monster before—though he doesn't remember where, exactly. He'd been coming across snippets of information for a while now. But he didn't take any of it seriously until earlier this year when he started doing his own research online.

2.56

Henry's teachers have pointed out that he has trouble looking people in the eye, so he's impressed that Ben keeps his gaze trained on Henry as he speaks.

"Well, it's a difficult thing, learning about the monster that emerges from the bowels of the earth to chew men and women to gristle and ribbon their souls with its claws. I mean—" Ben affects a nasally teacher voice. "—it's difficult." He laughs. But his smile drops as he scoots his chair toward Henry. "Still—there's power in information. I believe that. Or it's better to see the world for what it is, anyway. So few people do. Maybe one in fifteen million."

He scans the café, breathing in through his teeth, nodding towards the rows of books beyond the island of napkins and creamers.

"So much knowledge, so much noise. Tell me your thoughts on the Portland theater slaying of '07."

Henry sits up straight, prepared.

"Well," he says, "there's a lot to question, you know, in the official story. I've read the police reports and the Hans Wiza interview—so lots of, you know, inconsistencies." He stumbles on this last word. "The gun calibers and the—the—"

"Timeline," he nods.

"Right. They say it could be staged. I know there are theories that people staged it to discredit believers or something."

"Very good, Henry. And the video?"

Henry looks at Ben.

"Have you seen the video?"

Henry shrugs. "I haven't been able to."

With a hammy theatricality Ben draws his cell phone from his pants pocket and waggles it in the air between two fingers. The screen is cracked and Henry can see the back is held on with duct tape.

Ben smiles, revealing a gap between his two front teeth.

"Would you like to?"

*

The video is blurry, and there's no fixed camera position—one of the terms Henry copied down from the book on filmmaking he stole this fall from the school library. The point-of-view jumps all over the place, as if someone were dragging the camera around on a leash. The audio mostly consists of screaming, although every few seconds Henry can hear what sounds like a lawnmower being primed in a bathtub.

"Wait for it," Ben says, leaning closer with the phone. He's in the driver's seat of his car; Henry is in the passenger's. They're parked in the shade of a truck in the pet store lot next to the bookstore. "Okay!" he says, stopping the video. "See that?"

Henry looks at the screenshot. The image is a smear of color and movement—in the right hand corner a pixelated spurt of red arcs past the frame's edge.

"It's okay," Ben whispers. "It took me a minute, too, my first time."

The skin at the back of Henry's neck contracts and a tingling rises from his diaphragm.

"It's—it," he says. The knowledge enters Henry as if it's being pumped through the air conditioning. A split-second later the monster's shape becomes visible on the screen, rising toward Henry like a 3D stereoscopic image.

"That's right," Ben says, pointing with his middle finger. "The mouth, right there—liver spots on the pink fleshy underside of the lips—the outline of the mandibles. And here—right here." He thumps the screen with the tip of his finger twice so that the video starts and stops again. Henry jumps at the screaming that blasts into the upper registers of the phone's volume capability. Ben laughs softly. "Cilia, Henry. Now the images here square perfectly with the testimony Ginny Littlepage gave to the Waupaca County Sheriff's Department exactly two weeks prior to the creation of this video. She is the first to specifically mention a 'stringy beard'—read: cilia—in a visual description of the monster, and she is very detailed. I've verified the dates on the police reports and video metadata, Henry. And remember that the Littlepage account wasn't circulated widely on the Internet for another three years."

Ben's car, some kind of sedan, is old and cluttered with fast food boxes and library audiobooks. A compact disc hangs from his rearview mirror by a piece of clear dental floss. Ben presses the screen again and the video continues, though now the camera has been dropped onto the floor—the shot is all linoleum and ruby-colored tributaries of blood. He stops the video after a few more seconds and slides the phone into his pants pocket.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

"I'm not sure."

He smiles. "It's a good news/bad news kind of feeling, right? You're in the real world now." He puts his hand on Henry's shoulder and squeezes. "Good news is you're not there alone. You have a phone?"

Henry shakes his head.

"But you have your own computer?"

"My mom said I could have one or the other."

"Hmm," he says, "smart lady." He reaches over Henry and pops open the glove compartment, grabs a pad of paper and a golf pencil. "This," he says, scribbling against the steering wheel, "is the email address I'm going to use from now on. Look for it. I'm going to send you some links. Basic stuff for now. No Deep Web just yet. Meet again?"

Henry nods.

"Okay, then." Ben seems completely at ease with silence. He doesn't break eye contact. "You need a ride?"

"I brought my bike," Henry says. It seems to him that Ben has gotten larger, his edges more definite, as if the D&D gamemaster look is a front, a mask he wears to hide his terrible knowledge from the idiots and the big box shoppers around him. Henry opens the door and steps out. "Okay, see you."

Ben begins to drive away before Henry has fully closed the passenger door.

*

At home Henry drops his bike at the front door, which is open—he heard his sister's cartoons from halfway down the block. Inside, he flips couch cushions until he finds the television remote. When he finally gets the TV off, the room is dark and quiet. "Daisy! You home!"

"Junior!" Henry's sister shouts from her bedroom, but it's Henry's mom's boyfriend Ozzie who steps into the living room. He wears blue jeans and a "COOK WITH LOVE" t-shirt; half of his hair appears to be in some kind of braid. A second later, Daisy runs into the living room and throws her arms around Henry's legs, dragging him noisily onto the floor.

"Easy, kid," he says, extracting himself from her limb by limb. "You left your show on."

"¿Qué onda, Quique?" Ozzie says. He's in his forties, short and trim and hip, but he speaks in a flutey godfather rasp. In the two years since he began dating Henry's mom, Ozzie has given Henry sadistically few reasons to hate him. He draws Henry into a quick hug. "It's Saturday, where you been?"

Henry squints at Ozzie's hair.

"Ah," he laughs. "Your hermanita likes to make me up like a princesa. No me molesta."

"How long have you been here?"

Ozzie shrugs. "A few hours. I opened the restaurant this morning, then came here. What have you been doing?"

"Bookstore."

"¡Eso! Good for you. Make your mama proud."

Henry closes the front door and sits on the arm of the couch.

"How is she?"

"She's weak, kid. Está durmiendo. Bad day, maybe. I don't know. You should say 'hi."

Henry nods. Daisy is pulling violently on his wrist.

"What's up, kid?"

She draws him down to where she can whisper in his ear. "We found a nature animal in the backyard."

"Yeah?" Henry says. "Cool." A musky smell streams from the bedroom he and Daisy share—he turns to Ozzie.

"Are you smoking?"

"It's good for the chronic fatigue."

Henry rolls his eyes. Like his mom is ever going to try it.

"¿Querés...?" Ozzie says. "You want some?"

"I'm straight-edge, Ozzie."

Now it's Ozzie's turn to roll his eyes.

"Don't be too much like your mother, Quique. The stress is what makes her sick."

Daisy is already dragging Ozzie back to the bedroom as Henry steps out the front door. He picks up his bike, ready to take it out back and into the basement, where he locks it up when he's not riding it. But instead he steps onto the pedal and pushes back out to the street. His mom needs to rest; if he talks to her now he'll just keep her awake.

Though the truth is probably simpler, he thinks, as he shoots a guilty look back to the house: He doesn't want to be there.

*

The next week, Ben invites Henry to a meeting. For days, Ben has been sending Henry links to videos, message boards, and wikis—most all of them about the monster, though there are a few funny memes mixed in. Henry has ripped out the first few pages of his filmmaking notebook and written the words "MONSTER: QUESTIONS" on the top of what is now the first page. His notes are scattershot. Mostly he just records what he doesn't want to—or can't—forget. While he waits for Ben to pick him up, he looks over what he has so far.

Method of killing: Claws? Teeth? Prehensil (sp?) tail with barbs? Poison causes pain? Death lasts minutes (Colorado) hours (Texas, Alabama) days (Kansas)

Victims random? Targeting avoidable?

March 2, 2008—shopping mall in colorado—7 deaths

April 02-farmers market, D.C. severd heads. pics destroyed. (FBI?)

verified casualties since 2000: 1390 (+ or - 150 (Russia)), peak attack year-2013

Elementary school in Oklahoma, 94—too early? Monster ageless? Or created by man (govt?) Reasons?

Ben pulls up just about the time that Ozzie has made dinner. Leaving the house on a school night is something Henry never would have gotten away with when his mom was healthier, but today she has fallen asleep just after four.

"¿Y ese quién es?" Ozzie says. He uses Henry's mom's wooden spoon to stir salsa blanca in a small stovepot, stopping to peek out the front blinds at Ben's car.

"It's my teacher," Henry says, the words arranging themselves automatically before he knew he'd decided to lie.

Ozzie turns to Henry. "¿Ese tipo? ¿En serio?"

"Don't worry about it." Henry opens the front door. "I'll be back soon."

"Don't you want dinner first?" Ozzie yells, but his words are blotted out in the slamming of the door.

The drive is almost forty-five minutes. Ben says the meeting is being held at a church, but the building they park behind looks more like a shuttered office building; grass pokes up through the asphalt in the parking lot. When they arrive in the air conditioner-less basement, the meeting has already started. They sit in the back row next to a heavyset young man, college-age, with glasses and green hair. There are nine people in the room, including Ben and Henry, spread throughout an array of about fifty chairs. The green-haired young man smiles at Ben as they sit down.

"...because we are Inquirers..." The man speaking is bald with a Santa Claus beard. He ratchets up the tenor of his voice to emphasize certain words. "...we aren't defined by what we know, but rather what we *know* that we *don't* know. We don't have all the answers about what's going on with *three hundred deaths* in the past two years. With reported sightings up almost *eight hundred percent* since 2007. Nobody in this room would claim to know what's behind everything. But that isn't to say we don't want answers, or that we're not willing to be *ornery*"—a short, sour laugh rises from the audience—"to get them. When need be."

Half-hearted applause alights through the room, and the man begins passing out sheets of paper.

"Let's review the minutes from our last meeting."

As he speaks, the young man next to Henry taps his shoulder.

"You came with Ben?"

His face is dark and acne-scarred. He's big where Henry is small—he might have seventy pounds on him—but they're both small-waisted and boxy with broad shoulders.

He nods.

"Ben's something else," he says. "You're really lucky."

Henry nods. Would a thank-you be weird here? Henry decides it would.

The meeting lasts almost three hours. There is some debate as to whether a mall shooting in Ohio needs more authentication before it's treated as a canonical incident. A pale woman wearing an overlarge wool cardigan—crazy in this heat—keeps trying to talk about monster references in the Bible and other religious texts, but the room has little patience for her. There's a lot of government talk—complicity, coverups—one mustached man in a Twins cap yells the words "Who stands to gain?" several times throughout the night.

Towards the end of the meeting, Raj, the boy next to Henry, meekly questions whether research into the monster might be dangerous in itself.

"How do we know that looking for the monster—even *talking* about the monster—doesn't attract its attention?" she says. "Maybe there are people who really do know, you know, *things*—or more things than us—but the things they know is that it's better to keep your head down and not attract attention."

"The only thing that attracts the monster," barks a white-haired man in the front row, "is impurity. The monster is punishment."

Next to Henry, Ben signals the moderator, who nods to him.

"Okay, Frank, thank you. The chair recognizes Ben."

"Thank you," Ben says. He stands up slowly and takes time to meet each person's gaze for a moment before speaking. He has been mostly silent throughout the meeting, though at various points several people in the room have offered him a respectful nod. "Why," he begins, raising his voice to a pitch that indicates quotation marks. "...do people get attacked by the monster?" He raises an eyebrow. "Because they're bad. 'Well, how do we know they're bad, Ben?' Because the monster got them. We've asked this question week after week since we first learned of the monster's existence. And why shouldn't we? We want protection. We want a promise that if we stand a certain way, that if we guard our hearts against certain thoughts, that if we do this, or don't do that, the monster will not sniff us out, will not find us, will not develop a taste for our specific flesh. Enough!" Ben screams so that several people flinch in their seats. "Looking for criteria—for a rhyme and a reason to the monster's methods—is a fool's game. History is littered with the bones of decent, misunderstood people who the monster literally ate for breakfast."

Ben grabs the back of his chair so he can make a space for himself to move out of the aisle. He lowers his voice and traces a path around the rows of chairs toward the front of the room.

"What is the monster above all else?" he asks.

After a moment of nervous silence, someone says, "A murderer." "A demon," says another. "A conspiracy." "A killing machine."

"A *thief.*" Ben says the word with a teacherly gentleness. "He steals. people's. lives. Not by killing, mind you—but by transforming lives into things that the ordinary people of the world won't talk about, won't see. The life of a person eaten by the monster—a good life, maybe, a life which may have been held precious by a small number of good people—becomes chewed up and

regurgitated as a ghoulish bedtime story whispered by a few brave strangers. *The monster. is. a thief.* A city bus or a virus can kill you; the monster stains the story of your life. He makes you hideous. Then he takes you from the world forever."

A few minutes later, the meeting is over.

*

"They're idiots," Ben says in the car on the way home. After the meeting ended, a few group members cornered Ben, either to litigate minor points or to grill him on some obscure counter-example. Henry watched Ben fidget through their questions, only making fleeting eye contact, growing irritable when contradicted. "It's so hard to rise above your surroundings, you know? Nights like this make me seriously entertain the whole monster-is-people theory. You've read about that one?"

"You mean, like, that it's all made up? Conspiracy theory stuff?"

"No, not—" Ben shakes his head. "Some professor in Montana wrote a treatise on it. He says that the monster exists, actually and literally, but it is people. Like, ontologically."

"You mean like possession?"

"No, the monster *IS* people. It's still the monster—snarling, rapacious, all that. But—on an atomic level, I mean—it's people. You get it?"

"I think so."

He sighs as they pass a sign welcoming them to the city. In the pulsing glow of the highway lamps, Henry sees Ben hasn't shaved in a few days.

"So what would be worse then? To be consumed by the monster? Or to, you know, *BE* the monster?"

"That's my exit, remember?"

"Oops. Missed it. I'll get the next one."

Ben takes the next exit, but parks on a dead-end street by the park a few blocks from Henry's house. He turns off the car.

"You see it, Henry," he says. "You know that, right? You see what others don't."

Ben has laid his hand on Henry's thigh, which he massages in slow pulses.

"My dad was murdered," Henry says, a shudder overtaking him after he has spoken. Henry was only eleven when his father was killed. The

few shameful details he knows—a stabbing, his body found half-naked one morning in an alley near Lake Street in an area known for street prostitution—he's lifted from the Internet or from older cousins. His mom had already been sick for a year when his father died; within six months of his death she brought Ozzie, the teacher from her rec center cooking class, home for dinner for the first time. Since then, Henry has moved from private to public school. None of his current classmates know about his father's death.

Ben keeps his eyes fixed on the road. He draws his hand from Henry's leg and rests it on the steering wheel.

"No way. Like, just now?"

"A few years ago." He loosens the clasp on the details he has stowed away deep within him. He lists them for Ben in a breathless purge. "They never arrested anybody, or, you know, solved the case."

"Well, there you go." Ben taps the steering wheel emphatically with his middle finger. "Most police departments couldn't solve a murder if it was broadcast live on the news. Incompetence is a lot of it, but there's corruption, too, even down to the local level. We don't even have a lot of reliable census data. So many things we assume are true are things we're just too lazy to do anything about. I personally don't trust the information in police reports until I've verified them independently. You live with your mother then?"

"My mom and my sister," Henry says. "And her boyfriend, sometimes. He's from Argentina. A few blocks that way, I think."

Ben nods and runs his hand over his mouth.

"You might look into the Westmoreland case," he says. "You know that one?"

"That's the one in-"

"Texas. A family. Red-blooded, wholesome types, part of the community. God-fearing and all that. Of course, the newspapers argued they were secret Satanists. Or something—caught up in in drug trade, maybe."

He fixes his eyes on Henry.

"The monster killed Trevor last. The boy. Unzipped him from stem to sternum. Then ate his organs. Nonessential first, one by one, over the course of hours."

Ben's eyes sparkle in the amber glow of the streetlight. It takes Henry a moment to realize they are rimmed with tears. "This is all assembled after the

fact, of course, from the mother's testimony, coupled with coroner's reports and various insider accounts. Still."

Ben sniffs loudly and looks out at the street. A sickly sweet feeling is pooling in Henry's gut—in the yellow glow of streetlights he sees the wiry black hair that peeks up through Ben's tshirt, covers the back of his hands and his knuckles. Even in the dark, the dandruff on Ben's tshirt is visible. Henry feels he is about to realize something about Ben, something that their age difference has hidden from him. He feels it in brief and slippery bursts of clarity, like a familiar object grasped through cloth.

"I can walk from here," Henry says. He opens the car door. "Thanks."

"Cool," Ben says, his eyes calm, still trained on Henry's. Henry attempts a smile, then turns and leaves the car, stepping into the night. He is almost across the park when he hears Ben turn the ignition and drive away.

*

It's after midnight when Henry walks in the front door, slips his shoes off and tries to pad silently through the dark toward the room he shares with his sister. When he hears the squirming of something shifting its weight on the La-Z-Boy behind him, he freezes. He turns quickly, swinging his backpack wide—one of his mom's figurines falls from its perch on the shelf beside him and cracks at his feet. He can see a hunched figure—his brain rifles through shapes like index cards as he tries to place the silhouette in front of him.

"¿Dónde estabas?"

Henry exhales.

"Wow, Ozzie. What are you doing?"

"Decime. Where were you?"

"I told you. With my teacher."

Ozzie flips on the overhead light. Next to his chair are three empty bottles.

"No me digas cualquier verdura, Quique. Tell me the truth."

Don't tell me some vegetable, Henry. The Spanish Henry has picked up despite himself from Ozzie is idiomatic and fanciful—his teachers at school often correct him, even though Ozzie assures him he's on his way to sounding like a porteño.

"Chill," says Henry. "You're gonna wake up the house."

"Estamos solos, Quique." Ozzie looks up at Henry. "Your mother's in the hospital." $\ensuremath{\mathsf{N}}$

Henry listens—a fan is on in another room. He hears the whir of the refrigerator.

"She couldn't wake up. The ambulance came."

"Is she okay? Where's Daisy?"

"At the hospital, with your tía Emily."

Henry squints at the clock. Almost twelve-fifteen. He must have been gone for close to five hours. He staggers back onto the couch.

"No se ha despertado. They don't know why."

"Why aren't you there?"

"I came to find you."

He sits on the arm of the couch opposite Ozzie.

"¿Quién es ese hombre, Quique? Decime la verdad."

"I told you. He's my teacher."

Ozzie turns his head to the wall as if he's smelled something foul.

"He's more like a tutor. Or a-we're like in the same club."

They are both quiet for several moments.

"No soy tu viejo. It is not fair that your father is not here. He did not deserve a death like that."

Once again, Henry feels a sickly warmth rising in him, a soft feeling that wavers between sweet and rotten. He wants to be somewhere, anywhere else.

"I am helping your mother to be more strong. I want to make this happen. Pero until it does, you are the man of the house, ¿entendés? Your mother needs you. Daisy, too. I love this family. Pero you can give them a strength I cannot."

Henry stares at the blur of the carpet; he can feel Ozzie's eyes on him.

"I read your computer."

Henry looks up. "You what?"

"You left your password in your desk."

Henry slides from the arm of the couch to the cushion. Ozzie uses Henry's computer from time to time—Henry knows this. But Ozzie never clears his search history and Henry has been reading what little he can understand of his emails for about a year now. It never occurred to him that Ozzie might be spying on him. He tries to inventory what Ozzie might have seen.

"There are many strange things there."

"It's-no-I was just-"

Ozzie holds both hands up. "Basta. I shouldn't have looked. Pero...tené cuidado. Go see your mother, Henry. I can't drive you."

Henry wavers for a moment, the words surging past his lips before he can catch them.

"What about your son?"

Ozzie's eyes briefly go wide.

"Que lo parió," he mutters.

"I read your email. I didn't tell my mom because she was sick, but when she wakes up I will, and we'll never have to see you again."

Ozzie laughs softly and runs his hands slowly through his hair.

"Tell her when she wakes up. She knows. She has always known, but it's good you look out for her. Perdoname, I should have told you." He looks searchingly at Henry. "Bueno. I should have told you. I am sorry."

Henry can tell by Ozzie's face he is telling the truth. He hates that he knows Ozzie well enough to read him like this, hates knowing that Ozzie's failure to share this with Henry earlier is something he genuinely regrets. He walks past Ozzie and into his room.

When he has slammed the door, he crouches on the balls of his feet, grabs two fistfuls of his hair. Is his mother dying? Half the doctors she sees don't even believe in chronic fatigue syndrome. Can you die from something that doesn't exist? And Daisy? Henry almost falls over when he imagines his sister waking up to paramedics in the house, a gurney bearing their mother banging noisily through the hallway.

He throws open the desk drawer to grab his bus card. Instead he sees the scrap of paper where he had written his password. He flips open his computer and logs in. His email is still open. There's already a message from Ben—he must have sent it from his phone. He slams the computer closed, throws it in his backpack, and leaves through the back door.

*

For the next week, Henry goes from school to the hospital. The doctors say his mother could wake up any minute. He can remember a time when he believed that she loved him more than anyone else in the world, more than anyone else probably ever would, and he is surprised to realize he still believes that. When he's alone in the room with her he whispers to her, shares with her what he knows about the monster. He is afraid she cannot hear him. He is afraid she can.

Ozzie cooks their meals as usual, and offers to help them with their homework. Henry can tell that in his halfcocked enthusiasm he often leads Daisy to write down the wrong answer. Henry thinks about explaining this, but he is afraid to speak to Ozzie now. He emails Ben several times over the next few days, but Henry doesn't hear from Ben at all; he can find no trace of him on the Sinkwhole.com message board. Henry carries his computer with him in his backpack now. He changes—and then memorizes—his password. Once he has copied by hand into his notebook the last email Ben sent, he deletes it from his inbox.

"Henry," it reads. "Some argue that all victims of the monster privately accept their fate in their final moments. That even as their flesh is stripped by the monster's claws and their minds are scorched by fear, a miraculous sense of peace descends upon them. Beautiful music plays as their souls are gently loosened from the mooring of their bodies, are held close by some tender cosmic force, and fed warm milk. Of course, I am drawn to this theory. But how can one know for sure?"

When a week has passed, Henry goes to his school library and prints off directions to the church. He arrives late to the meeting—by bike it takes him three hours to get there. He stays in the basement long enough to catch a few darting looks, though no one will meet his eye. He leaves when he sees Ben isn't there.

He is wrestling with his bike lock when the door opens behind him. Raj, who he sat next to the previous week, has followed him outside.

"You hear?" he asks.

Henry frowns.

"Ben got arrested."

Henry lets go of his bike lock and stands up straight.

"What? Why?"

"Some computer thing. They took a bunch of stuff from his house."

Henry searches Raj's face. The smile he gifted Henry last week is gone. "I don't get it. Why!"

"Did he find you online?" Raj cocks his head at Henry, his thumbs in the pockets of his sweatpants. Henry nods. "Me, too. You know he's the one that brought me here? Three years ago."

Raj holds Henry's gaze without speaking.

"He stopped hanging with me last year."

Henry nods slowly. An idea is taking shape in Henry's mind, but he cannot take hold of it for more than a moment.

"Do you know when he's getting out?"

"Not soon. People in there are saying he's really in it this time." Raj nods back at the church. "Wanna go back?"

"What time is it?"

"I dunno. Late."

Henry finally wrenches his bike lock open and climbs on his bike.

"He told me about you," Henry lies. "Ben told me everything. I know all of it." He pedals away without saying goodbye.

It's already dark out. Does Henry know more or less than he did a month ago? Does he know what he doesn't know? In his mind, he sees the neighborhoods he has to bike through to get to his house, but he isn't afraid.

He's angry.

He's angry at the monster and at the police and at the idiots back in that church basement. He's angry at Raj and he's angry at Ben. He's angry at the doctors who say his mom might wake up any day, at the nurses whose fingers linger sympathetically on her skin as they check her IV. He's angry at Ozzie. He's angry at his father. He is so so so angry at his mother. He is so angry he is huge. Pedaling through the dark, Henry feels a flash of pity for all the people who haven't met him yet, who haven't seen him coming, who don't even know what to fear.

IN THE LAND OF THE MIGHTY DINGOES

"Pepper," says Cliff.

I'm lying on the couch in my apartment reading a long novel about a German writer with an Italian name. It's a warm breezy day, so I have the door to my balcony open. Cliff and Pepper live downstairs.

"Pepper, that's enough," Cliff says, but it's not enough for Pepper.

"Yipyipyipyipyip," says Pepper. She's a dog filled with complaints, but without nouns and verbs, I can't help her. Nor it seems can Cliff.

I won't lie to you. I hate Pepper, just as I hate Thumper upstairs, who gets up at 2 a.m., 4 a.m., and 6 a.m. to micturate, a lovely verb I picked up from my husband, who in turn picked it up from his father, who was a Medieval scholar, and used to send my husband and his brother into hysterics with his use of old-fashioned verbs. Now there's a problem to talk to your therapist about, I thought when he first complained to me about his father, but since I was a newlywed and my first object was to keep the river of excellent sex flowing my way, I tamped down the sarcasm that had been the most sophisticated rhetorical mode used in my own dear family. Not only does Thumper micturate, he flushes every time and treads to and from the bed as if he were channeling a herd of wildebeests on the African savannah instead of covering the ten or fifteen feet to the toilet and back. I think a lot about Mr. Thumper in the wee hours of the morning before I slip back into dreamland. I've never seen him, so I imagine a big guy, with size twenty-six feet, though, of course, he could be a big woman or even a little shrimp with a walnut-sized bladder and feet the size of a basketball player.

I don't really hate Pepper. I know from *Animal Planet* she hasn't been taught that her master, Cliff, is the alpha dog, though perhaps Cliff with his poly-cotton khakis, plaid shirts and the soft little stomach he accentuates with a thick leather belt has trouble believing this, too. Cliff introduced himself the first day I moved into The Haciendas, an apartment complex in Houston where my company has exiled me for four months. He was walking Pepper at the time, a little short-haired dog with sharp ears and a tail that curled up in a question mark.

"Are you moving in?" Cliff asked.

I was carrying a box labeled "Kitchen," but I decided not to exercise my sharp tongue. Whenever I've been unable to do this, disaster has always followed like cholera after micturation in drinking water.

"I'm upstairs at the end of the hall," I said, giving him the smile I've practiced for years. The trick is to crinkle your eyes and tilt your head at a slight angle.

"I'm Cliff," he said, and put out his hand, which I shook the best I could given I was holding a large box.

"And who is this?" I asked. People always like it when you ask about their pets and children, usually in that order.

"Pepper," he said. Pepper's ears perked up at the sound of her name. She looked me over and right away sized me up as someone who would kick her if she tried to bite me.

"She looks really smart," I said.

"Oh, she is," Cliff said beaming, but I wasn't fooling Pepper. She walked over to sniff a puddle of urine that had pooled under a lamppost.

"There's a wine and cheese party every Friday in the lobby," Cliff said with his arm stretched out to the full extent of the leash. Pepper was ready to go. "Don't miss it," he said over his shoulder as Pepper pulled him away. "It's really fun."

I smiled and tilted my head. I know the kind of party he's talking about: cheap California wines that sour your stomach and little cubes of what my sister calls rat cheese with toothpicks stuck in the center. If the hosts are going all out, the toothpicks will have red cellophane flags glued to the top. What Cliff thinks such a party could hold for him, I can't imagine. I'm sure it's Pepper who likes to go so she can check out ankles. A wine and cheese party makes me feel like a butcher at a lambs' convention, and now that I've decided to improve myself, I can't see throwing temptation in my own path.

I'll tell you who Pepper hates, the two dingoes that live in the house across the street from The Haciendas. I call them dingoes, but I don't know anything about dogs. They look like Pepper, but Pepper on serious steroids. Houston has no zoning laws, so you see architectural mashups all over the city. The dingoes live in the weirdest of the three houses I can see from my balcony. It's set on an angle at the back of the lot. It's not a double-wide, but whoever built it looks as if he took a double-wide as his inspiration. It's white

with a corrugated tin roof and lime green lattice across the entire facade. The lot is surrounded by a seven-foot-high chain link fence, and in case you don't get the idea, there's a sign: Private Property. Between the road and the fence is a slab of cement with room for three Texas-sized vehicles. However, I've never seen any cars parked there, because there's a chain partitioning the cement driveway from the sidewalk.

Draped on the chain are maybe twenty or thirty Mardi Gras bead necklaces. I'd just love to know the story behind that festive touch.

My favorite part of this place is the tool shed at the far back corner of the lot. Every afternoon after work, the dingoes' master unlocks the door and fools around in this shed for about an hour. While he's there the dingoes run around sniffing the grass and each other's behinds, an activity that seems to lose none of its allure no matter how many times they do it. I'm sure I'm not the first person to imagine how perfect this tool shed would be for an ax murderer, though to be fair, the dingoes' master hasn't given me any indication he has blood-thirsty proclivities except for very well-developed forearms. I mean, this guy makes Popeye look like a stick man.

Next to Chez Dingo is an ordinary white cottage with a carport, a little rundown, but not shabby, and next to the cottage is an ultra modern three-story architectural gem with two Lexuses and a Mercedes parked out front. At two in the morning when I have exhausted the possibilities surrounding the identity of Thumper, I sometimes contemplate the owners' choice of this particular spot for their dream house. The most likely scenario is that the architect's grandmother's house was on the lot, and he ripped it down to build his masterpiece. There are no windows on the dingo side of the house, so any theories about a bereaved grandson building there so he could catch the murderer of his beloved bubbe are idle speculation.

Thumper's home. No mystery about his comings and goings. Last night when I was talking to my husband on the phone, he said, "What in God's name was that? It sounds like someone's trying break into your apartment."

"Oh, that's Thumper," I said.

Right, you thought my husband dumped me years ago, but you would be incorrect about that. I still can't believe I found someone who can stand to be in the same room with me for more than twenty minutes. I know I'd leave if I could. He's flying in to visit me next weekend. He's going to a dermatologists' conference in Las Vegas, and he's coming here afterwards. I'm really looking

forward to his visit, because right now the only places I go are work, Whole Foods, and my yoga classes. I will tell you that yoga has saved my life. I go into class swinging a baseball bat or slicing the air with razors and come out two hours later purring like a little fluffy kitten. I'd go every day, but my teacher says I should try to establish my own practice. What does she think I do at 4 a.m.? All that's on TV are infomercials. How many erectile dysfunction kits does a girl need? The one I'm fascinated by is the erectile pump. I'd love to know how that works, but not enough to shell out the \$49.95 or even google it. What I really hate are the Time-Life compilations. For a while they were really pushing the arena rock set, whatever arena rock is. I've noticed a template they all use—black or white, rock or easy-listening. They get someone who was a low-level player in the day and couple him with a late-thirties overthe-hill starlet. Have those girls ever mastered the art of the fake smile.

I even considered ordering the rhythm and blues CDs. When I was fourteen and practicing my smile, I was also teaching myself to dance to these very songs: "Ain't to Proud to Beg," "Money Honey," "In the Midnight Hour." Standing in front of the mirror on the back of my bedroom door and practicing the dance moves I'd seen on *Soul Train*—it doesn't get much better than that.

I feel the same about yoga, though there's no mirror or music involved. There is something magic about moving your body in space and time, but different from walking to the refrigerator to see what's to eat. You need a system. Dance is a system. Yoga is a system. If Pepper were my dog, I'd have her in dog training toot sweet, as my mother says. Pepper would be walking beside me without a leash like the good dogs I saw in Berlin following their slim blond mistresses. Pepper could learn something from those bitches.

The phone rings. I put a bookmark between page 256 and 257, and walk across the room.

It's Terrence.

"Hi, Terrence," I say in my most pleasant voice. He is my boss for four months, which is how long I think it will take our big boss Maury to forgive me and call me back to Miami and say all is forgiven. I love Terrence. You can tell someone tore his heart out and stomped on it, and he learned from the experience. Most people don't. They just go through life making the same stupid mistakes. I divide all human beings into two categories: those who can learn and those who can't. Terrence is tall and has a grey beard that's

trimmed like Charles I's in all those paintings by Van Dyke, but, of course, his hair is shorter. I have taken to calling him Charles, which he doesn't seem to mind even though Charles was executed. Unlike Terrence, Charles I didn't learn from his mistakes.

I want to be the kind of person who can learn. IQ isn't my problem. It's something else. I'm irritable, but I've stopped drinking coffee, so I'm not so likely to rip out the throat of anyone who, what? Says something that doesn't fit into my particular system, which is a glorious and multifaceted construction that is ever changing, like a coral reef fed by the runoff of psychedelic fertilizers.

"Carol," says Terrence in his soft cultivated voice. "I hate to bother you at home, but something has come up."

"That's what I'm here for, Terrence. That's why Maury sent me to Houston."

"It's Marcie. She's in the hospital."

I don't say anything. I'm reviewing how much I don't like Marcie, and I'm trying to block all happy thoughts of Marcie trussed up in traction or with a bandage around her head and blood oozing out of a bullet hole through her third eye. Oops, a couple got through. I'm like a hockey goalie blocking pucks from my own mind.

"What happened?" I ask.

"I don't know if I should," Terrence stammers.

"That's okay," I say. "You don't have to tell me."

I don't know what it is, but all you have to say is don't tell me, and 99% of the time the other person will set land speed records for spilling the beans.

"She took a whole bottle of pills," he says.

I wait a minute. Terrence is a thinker. He often needs a little time to macrame his thoughts into a coherent table runner. I am left blocking thoughts of Marcie, who is head lawyer in our little pocket of hell. She's one of those women who sets up high school wherever she goes.

My theory is people who bomb out in high school the first time around often set it up later so they can triumph. That's our Marcie. All I can say is she must have been too weird for even the greasers in high school. Now she is the chief mean girl in our office. Her hair is a kind of red that only comes out of a bottle in your own bathroom. Unless she's a secret gambler, she makes enough to go to a professional hairdresser. Plus she has the ugliest hands I've

ever seen. She's been biting her nails with such determination for forty-plus years that the tips are clubbed, and the actual nails are a ragged quarter inch with frayed cuticles. She talks about how ugly they are all the time just so you can't forget and go on to other topics of contemplation. However, she's a barracuda in the courtroom, and because of club-fingered Marcie Maury is in Paris now and not in a cell in the federal penitentiary system.

"Maury said you were good in a crisis," Terrence says after a pause.

I picture Maury, the Jewfro he had in college now cropped close and his fierce intelligent eyes a little gluey. Maury's in Paris on his honeymoon. I have his itinerary taped to the wall by my phone. I designed a ten-day trip, which I'm sure he'll cut short if I know my guy, but I'm hoping he gets in a good five or six days before he bolts. I even found a friend for Deirdre, his bride, someone who will take her to lunch at three-star restaurants and shopping, which is the only reason she married Maury. Oops again.

"Maury said you'd know what to do," Terrence says.

"Have you called her husband?"

Terrence is thinking again, so I walk over to the window. The trees between me and the dingoes are beginning to leaf out. In a month I'll be looking at a wall of green.

"He's in Kenya."

"What the hell is he doing there?"

"I think he left Marcie for his assistant."

"You think?"

"I'm sure. They're in Kenya on a safari."

Which I'm sure Marcie is paying for. Her husband is one of those guys who pretends to work. My father was one, so I can spot them in seconds flat. They love to tell you about their real estate schemes or investment opportunities. It's an instant tipoff. My dad was great. "Hi, I'm Jim Thornton," he'd say. "I'm in estate planning." The only thing my dad was good at was looking fabulous in a suit. The guy could really wear clothes. It was enough for my mother, but she's a special case. The assistants didn't seem to bother her either, though that's not exactly what they were called way back then. "What's a twat?" my sister asked one day when she was eight and I was ten. I thought it must be one of those portmanteau words I'd just read about in *Through the Looking Glass*. Twin and bat? Two and sat?

"I think it's something about a girl," my sister said. She was always quicker about sex than I was, which is probably why she's been married four times. I was slow, I'll admit it. Nancy even started her period before I did, which she thought was a big deal though I didn't give a shit. I still don't see the glamour in bleeding between your legs once a month. I want to tear my hair out and start screaming when women go on about the moon goddess. Menstruation is such a colossal waste of time.

"Terrence, what do you think we should do?"

"Someone has to go to the hospital," he says.

Pepper is yipping again and throwing herself against the screen door. I almost feel sorry for Cliff.

"Would that someone be me?"

"You're a woman," Terrence says, stammering again. He might as well have said, "You're a tablecloth."

"That I am," I say, looking back at my book. I was hoping to get a big chunk read today. I'm thinking of trying Proust again. I've read Swann's Way a couple of times, but I haven't gotten any farther. I love a long book, and Proust has to be one of the longest novels if you don't count those Trollope series, and I don't because they're like eating candy. Whenever I'm really down I read The Eustace Diamonds, and the sun starts shining again. I put my novel in the Kenyan bag I've carried since college and head out the door and drive to the hospital. Houston's not a bad place. I love the Vietnamese restaurants, but I miss Miami. Even the Spanish is different. It sounds slower and stupider compared to Miami's hyper-caffeinated Cubans, not that I speak much Spanish beyond "hola" and "enchilada."

At the hospital Marcie's in her room sitting in a beige plastic chair rolling an unfiltered cigarette between her clubbed fingers. I knock at the door, and she looks up through her orange hair. When she sees it's me, her face falls apart a little more than it already has. The left cheek looks like soft serve ice cream on a July afternoon.

"Oh, my God," she says.

"Yeah," I say and sit in the other beige chair.

"What did you do to Maury?" She's doing tricks with the cigarette now, rolling it over the back of her hand with her fingers. Maury told me her father was a roustabout on the oil rigs in Louisiana. I could see him teaching his little girl tricks with cigarettes.

"It might have been when I told him Deirdre was only marrying him for his money."

"It's not the first time," she said, not taking her eyes off the cigarette.

"Deirdre was there." I'd been drunk, and I think I thought it would come out as a joke, but, of course, it didn't. But it wasn't that. Maury's so rich everyone's after his money, even me, and I've known him since he was a philosophy major and we both had rooms in a communal house that was condemned the year after we graduated. I've been working for Maury since he opened his office in Miami. I'm there because I'm the only one who will tell Maury when he's full of shit which is not all that often. I should quit and finish my dissertation on Bellini, but my Italian's so rusty now I'd have to start over. It makes my head hurt just thinking about it. I also said Deirdre wasn't good-looking enough for the kind of settlement he was going to have to pay when she left him. Deirdre thinks she's Ava Gardner, or she would if she knew who Ava Gardner was.

"So Deirdre sent you here?"

"She told him if he didn't fire me the wedding was off."

"He fired you?" This puts a little sparkle back in her eyes.

"Nah, he just told me to come here until she cools off."

"How long do you think that'll take?"

"I don't know. Maybe four months."

"How long do you think the marriage will last?"

"Maybe four months."

She scrunches her mouth up, so all the wrinkles around her lips look like the crevices in an eroded Southwestern landscape.

"How long did Miss Miami Beach last?" she asks.

"Almost a year, but Deirdre is greedier than Miss Miami Beach. I was sorry to see her go. I think she loved Maury a little."

Marcie puts the cigarette back in the pack. "They said I could go home if someone would stay with me."

Terrence, you old scallywag, now I see the way the wind blows. I take a deep breath. "Do you want to go home?"

"Not really, but I don't want to stay here." Her hair has a metallic sheen that the fluorescent lights are turning green, a kind of algae color that I have only seen in the Wonders of the Deep Viewmaster I still have at home in Miami. I have a huge collection of slides, which I used to look at after school

and fantasize about all the places I'd go when I brushed the dust of Florida off my flip flops. I sign Marcie out and drive her home through the late March streets.

She gives me directions as I drive. I've only been to her place once to drop off some papers. She had a big party right after I moved to Houston, but she didn't invite me, which was fine, but she made it a point to talk about it when I was around. She lives near the Galleria in a condo that has a two-storey indoor garden with a waterfall in the living room and couches that cost more than the gross national product of some countries. Everything is sage and grey, the same color as Marcie's skin.

"I need a drink," she says as soon as the door closes.

I'm not going to say no. She pulls open the door of a stainless steel behemoth and pours us both a hefty glass of Greco di Tufo. She drains hers in seconds flat, and then refills her glass. Her face settles down. It doesn't match her green couches quite as much, and her eyes straighten out, and the lines around her mouth plump up a bit.

"I hate this place," she says sitting down on the couch. A plate glass window overlooks a deep ravine.

I sit on a chair across from the indoor garden. I can feel my novel vibrating in my Kikiyu bag. I sip my wine and feel the vertebrae in my neck loosening. I've always been a cheap drunk.

"It's all Nick," she says, drains her glass again, and throws it against the rock formation the waterfall is trickling down. Her face is slipping again, the weathered skin of her cheeks is like melted wax. I wonder if she ever eats a piece of fruit. She has the look of someone who doesn't think about food. My husband, the dermatologist, says he can spot older women who have eaten fresh fruit and vegetables all their lives. Marcie needs twenty years of apples in the worst way.

I walk to the kitchen and open the glass cabinet. Why would someone spend so much on glasses she'll throw against her indoor waterfall but stand over the bathroom sink and use Lady Clairol?

I open the refrigerator and take out the wine. There is no food unless you count condiments. Oh, Marcie has a full array of mustard and soy sauce, but no food that would resurrect the melting of her skin. I pour her a healthy glass of wine and take it back to the hanging gardens of Babylon.

"Marcie, let's get something to eat."

She looks at me with a dull brown gaze. She was probably thinking about her husband on safari with his assistant, antelopes and zebras loping alongside the Range Rover driven by a native guide.

"I'm not hungry," she says.

"Well, I am, and I think we should get out of here. I'm too drunk to drive, so I'm calling a taxi."

"I can drive," says Marcie, sitting up, putting on her courtroom face. Sure, she can. Marcie has chugged two more glasses than I have. There is no way I'm getting in a car with myself, much less someone who's drunk and just had a bottle of pills pumped out of her stomach.

"Let's go to that Mexican place on Westheimer," I say. My plan is to drink margaritas until Marcie passes out and I can tuck her safely into bed.

The taxi honks while Marcie is still arguing about driving.

"What do you know," I say with the fakest of fake smiles. "He's already here."

I pull Marcie off the couch. For such a skinny gal, she's heavy. I send a little telepathic message to Maury in Paris. See what I do to keep you out of the IRS gulag?

The taxi driver is one of those grey guys with a salt-and-pepper beard, a loner or a man with a wife who has gotten used to living with someone who can't work with other people.

"Hey, ladies," he says as he jumps out and opens the door for Marcie. "How's it going?"

"Never better," I say and hop in behind him and tell him where we're going.

"I love that place," he says. "Their enchiladas are outta sight."

The taxi smells like Pine-Sol sprayed over dried vomit. It's sweet in all the wrong ways.

"For a Saturday, it was slow," he says getting behind the wheel. "I was just about ready to go home and watch an Elvis movie when I got your call."

"Which one?"

"Huh?" He pulls out on Westheimer. Marcie is slumped with her face against the car's window.

"Which Elvis movie?"

"I don't know. I got copies of all of them."

"Viva Las Vegas is my personal favorite," I say. Marcie groans beside me.

"Yeah," he says. "That's a good one."

"Ann-Margret," I shake my head. "Elvis didn't have many leading ladies who could go toe-to-toe with him."

"You've got to be kidding," Marcie mutters.

"What?" I say to her. "You don't like Elvis? What kind of American are you?"

Getting out of Marcie's gorgeous mausoleum is making me feel kind of giddy, like dancing to *Soul Train*. The street lights are shimmering, and it's beginning to rain. I look at the identifying card of the driver: Jim Thornton. It's my dad's name. Oh, my God. I hope it's not an omen. My poor dad, he could be driving a taxi, except he's dead, and I don't remember him having a soft spot for the King, but who knows? Maybe one of his twats was president of the Miami chapter of the Elvis Fan Club or, even better, the Ann-Margret Fan Club.

"Did you know," I say to Jim Thornton, "the reason Elvis never toured Europe?"

He looks at me in the rear view mirror.

"Colonel Tom Parker didn't have a passport," I say.

"Was he a Nazi?"

"I think it was something criminal." But I can't help thinking—wouldn't it be great if Elvis had been managed by an ex-Gestapo? Sometimes the world is just too beautiful for words.

Marcie's snoring in the seat beside me, little guttural rumblings erupting into snorts.

"Your friend's out," Jim says.

"Can you just drive around for a while? She just got out of the hospital, and I think a nap will do her good."

"Should I head to the restaurant?"

"Sure. We have to eat."

Jim Thornton goes the long way, but we end up at the restaurant in what seems like no time though my watch tells a different story. Marcie's still asleep. Jim pulls into the parking lot.

"I'll turn off the meter," he says.

"Don't. I'm on an expense account. She'll wake up soon."

I see his eyes brighten in the rearview mirror. It may be raining but his night is looking up, and he isn't even watching Elvis gyrate by a pool.

"Have you ever been to Vegas?" he asks me. The rain's coming down hard, and thunder is rumbling in the distance.

"Not for years. I drove through once during college on a cross-country trip."

"It's a lot of fun, even if you don't gamble. My wife likes to see the shows. We saw that Beatles thing, and all the big chefs have restaurants."

"I'm over the big chefs. I've never had a good meal at a Mario Batali restaurant. It's like Italian cuisine on steroids." I think of the dingoes in the house across the street from my apartment and wonder who their master is carving up tonight.

Marcie wakes up after about ten minutes.

"Where are we?" She rubs her eyes like a kid.

"Ready for a margarita?" I say and pay Jim Thornton.

He hands me a card. "When you're finished, give me a call, and I'll come pick you up."

"Great," I say and get out of the car. He's probably hoping Marcie will take another hundred-dollar nap.

It's still early, so the restaurant's not packed. The hostess is in her twenties and has perfect makeup. Her eyeliner is thick and wouldn't look out of place on a Matisse odalisque. She's dressed like a Matisse, too, in a flowing magenta jacket with black flowers. She takes us to a booth, and I order margaritas as soon as our waitress appears.

"What are we doing?" Marcie asks.

"You aren't going to feel better sitting at home getting drunk. Getting drunk in public is always a better choice."

"I'm never going to feel better."

"That may be, but when you have a couple of enchiladas under your belt, you will feel 28 percent better."

"That's pretty fucking precise," Marcie says. The light in the restaurant is doing nothing for her skin.

"I like to think in numbers. They're so much crisper than words."

"Maury told me one time you're the best-read person he knows."

"I'm the only person he knows who reads."

Thank God, the waitress shows up with the margaritas. They're in stemmed glasses that probably hold twenty ounces each.

"I didn't want salt," says Marcie.

"You need the electrolytes." I have no idea what I am talking about, but I find that scientific words can buy you a little time. It works, because Marcie puts a wrinkly lip to the salted rim of her glass and takes a big swig. I haven't looked at the menu, but I take Jim Thornton's tip and order enchiladas. Marcie has peeled a straw and is mainlining her margarita. What am I going to do with her? I can't leave her alone. I don't know where she's stashed her drugs. Maybe I could call her husband in Africa. He'd know. I should hate the guy, but I can't. I want to get away from Marcie, too.

The band is warming up in an alcove by the front window. There's a guitarist who looks a little like Elton John but thirty pounds lighter and a guy with a set of big bongo drums. The hostess has left the front desk and is chatting with them. Beyond the window the rain is coming down like it wants to drown the world. The street lights and the neon of the restaurant sign are refracted through the water. This kind of light always makes me think of Christmas or Mardi Gras, but those two holidays are months behind me. The only one on the horizon is the Fourth of July. I could always get Jim Thornton to drop Marcie back at the hospital.

The guitarist is playing the opening chords of "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," one of the best songs ever written. I'm still upset about Marvin Gaye's father killing him. I'm grateful my father didn't kill me, though I doubt he ever thought about me enough to contemplate murder. I know he thought more about his clothes. Last time I visited my mother I opened my dad's walk-in closet in their bedroom and saw she has maintained it like a suit museum, the floor lined with all his Italian shoes, the little wooden forms nestled inside them. I stepped in the closet and closed the door. Even after five years it still smelled like my dad.

I glance at Marcie. She's looking a little truculent, like a teenage girl out with her mother, who has a big handbag on her lap and needs to lose a few pounds. I feel bad for all the times my mother took me out, when I wanted to be somewhere else. I'm sure she had better things to do than take me shopping or to lunch. I make a vow to call her and thank her for all the dresses she bought me and all the times she told me I was beautiful when my face was covered with pimples and my hair looked like an experiment out of Dr. Frankenstein's lab. I also vow to buy Pepper a doggy chew. Maybe I should buy some for the dingoes, but their master might take it as an invitation to

chop me up into little pieces. I don't know much, but I know I don't want to end up in that shed. I look at my watch. It's six twenty-nine. The night looms ahead of me like an excursion to hell. I think of Dante when he spots Satan buried up to his waist in ice, chomping down on Brutus and Cassius. I don't want to end up there, either.

What I do want is to walk out the door of the restaurant into the rain, into the neon shimmering in the puddles and keep walking down I-10 across that bridge over the bayous past Beaumont and Lake Charles with their alien oil refineries shimmering like the mother ship in the distance, past Baton Rouge until I end up at my house in Coconut Grove. I'll open the door, and my husband will be lying on the couch reading *The New York Times* or a medical journal devoted to skin diseases.

"Hey," he'll say. "Where did you come from?"

I'll go to the kitchen and boil water for a cup of tea and rummage through the pantry, but it will be filled with man snacks. In the living room I'll put on my forty-five of "Chain of Fools" and start dancing. If I'm lucky, he'll get up and dance with me. It'll still be raining, but the days of the fake smiles will be far away. In Texas. Or the land of the mighty dingoes. Or wherever it is I am.

How Should We Remember Him?

Jeanne imagined it was the new jiggle under her arms. Perhaps it was the way her thighs now slapped together when she walked. Or maybe it was because the gulf between forty-three and sixty-two had shortened considerably, and senior citizenship was a quick boat ride away. Something had her out of sorts that morning, and the arrival of Grandpa Isaac's social security check did little to abate the feeling. Jeanne sighed, shuffling the envelope in with the rest of the mail. She promised herself the check would make it to her grandpa's account this time.

Jeanne busied herself in the kitchen making breakfast. Two days before Grandpa Isaac's 130th birthday and she suddenly had one extra mouth to feed. She tried to act grateful when her daughter, Rhiannon, had shown up last night with no phone call and two packed carry-ons she expected Jeanne to haul up the steps.

Jeanne leaned over the counter to peer into the living room. Rhiannon was sprawled on an air mattress Jeanne had lugged down from the attic. The younger woman slept face first into the pillows, legs poking out of the thick, mint green comforter. Her suitcases were open and clothes were strewn about like the room was her own personal closet. She looked entirely too comfortable.

The vibration in her pocket startled her. It was an unknown number. "Hello?" she said.

"Jeanne Lloyd? This is Rachel Mead from the Guinness Book of World Records committee, I'm following up on the verification proc—"

"No interviews."

"Ms. Lloyd, I'm just—"

"No interviews. No tests. No visitors."

"You're being very unreasonable, Ms. Lloyd. You cannot just claim oldest living human with no proof."

"We have proof," she said. End call. Committees, scientists, doctors, and journalists had been calling nonstop ever since an article Rhiannon had written about Grandpa Isaac had gone viral several months ago. They'd

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always kept his age under wraps, wary that the media circus would get out of control. Their family was content with just the local popularity. Apparently, Rhiannon hadn't gotten that memo.

The phone rang again. She rubbed her forehead.

Jeanne placed breakfast on the dining room table. She grabbed a key ring from her purse, as well as a cup of black coffee she prepared, and hurried upstairs. It wouldn't do to keep him waiting.

Grandpa Isaac's door was at the end of the hallway on the second floor. Jeanne had thought it impractical for such an elderly man to room on anything but the first floor, but her mother had insisted that it was the only room available. Besides, her mother and father were also old and got along just fine on the third floor.

Grandpa Isaac's door had a rusted jimmy proof deadbolt and a standard padlock. She slid the keys into their respective locks and the door gave way with ease. The room was a mixture of stale air and lavender oil. He rested in the center of his king-sized bed, eyes shut, peacefully dreaming. What did 129-year-olds dream of? A whole lifetime? Or had they dreamed all there was to dream at that point? Maybe Grandpa Isaac saw absolutely nothing beneath his eyelids.

Jeanne set his cold coffee down on the bedside table and traced the wrinkled canvas of his face. The skin underneath her fingertips was stiff and smooth. It held a grayish cast to it with weathered spots of brown and red peppering the skin. He made no indication that he was aware his granddaughter was in the room.

She rested a hand on his forehead. It, too, was cold. "Two days until your birthday. 130 years, what a record." Jeanne took the cup of coffee and emptied it in his bathroom sink, then set it back on the table so that it would be within reach. Even if he couldn't consume it, the ritual was comforting. She changed his sheets, fluffed his pillow, and cleaned the nonexistent mess. On her way out, she picked up yesterday's coffee cup. The way Jeanne saw it, she didn't think she'd ever want to live to 130.

Her body had barely exited his room when Rhiannon appeared like a curse. She slammed the door shut.

"Is Gramps awake?" Rhiannon said, breathless.

Jeanne took her in, noting her reddened cheeks and the way beads of frost seemed to bind strands of kinky brown hair. She was dressed in a light pullover hoodie and yoga pants. The edges of her shoes were caked with dirt and grass. She must have gone out for a run while Jeanne was in the room. Jeanne locked the door and stuffed the key ring into her pocket.

"Why do you lock him in? Is he sick or something?" asked Rhiannon.

Jeanne grabbed her elbow and pulled the girl down the hall. "Don't worry about it. Your great-grandpa is just an odd man scared of the modern world. He likes the security."

Rhiannon stopped and yanked her arm out of Jeanne's grip. "Mom, I came to celebrate his birthday and I can't even say hello?" She started back for his door, but Jeanne blocked her path.

When Rhiannon was younger, she'd loved carrying around a pen and one of Jeanne's notepads, pretending to be a reporter. Jeanne had found the whole thing adorable and often encouraged her by allowing interviews about her spaghetti and meatballs and her favorite shampoo. She'd even joined Rhiannon in solving various mysteries, like The Kitchen Flooding of '06, The Case of the Missing Barbie Arm, and The Mysterious Wig-Snatcher of East Paxton Presbyterian Church. Now that Rhiannon was much older and a real journalist, it seemed less cute and more invasive.

"You can meet him at the party. He won't want any visitors until then, especially interviews."

Rhiannon didn't have the decency to look embarrassed by her transparency. "I'm sure he'd make exceptions for the great-granddaughter he's never met before."

Jeanne shook her head. "Grandpa Isaac's from a different time. You'd only scare him."

Rhiannon stared at her like she had five heads. Jeanne would have given anything for an extra one right about now. "Why? Because I'm black?"

"Biracial." They were heading toward an old and dangerous argument. Jeanne was too middle-aged, too suburban, and too white. After her first year of college—now clothed in Kente cloth and talking about blackness and identity and microaggressions—Jeanne's inability to braid her was racist, the town she raised Rhiannon in was racist (obviously Jeanne should have raised her daughter somewhere diverse), and Jeanne's parents were racist (no arguments there). Her lack of knowledge on Rhiannon's father was the worst offense; Rhiannon had called it cliché. Jeanne was exhausted. "It is what it is," is all she said.

They stared at each other, waiting for the other to break. Rhiannon broke contact first. "Whatever," she muttered.

Jeanne watched her daughter stomp downstairs, then followed after her.

Everyone had gathered around the table in their usual spots, except for Rhiannon, who had stolen hers. Jeanne sat down in the empty seat next to her father.

On the other side of the table, her mother—who had always insisted that she be referred to as Mother or Agnes—picked at her eggs like they were diseased. She allowed the yolk to spill over the side of the plate and onto the table. If the woman lived to be 130, Jeanne knew she was cursed.

She caught a glimpse of a letter sitting atop the stack she'd grabbed from earlier. "Grandpa Isaac's social security check came," she said. "I thought we could use it to find a place to cater his birthday party." She'd call Marty's, she decided. She loved their Cajun food—the catfish was divine. And Grandpa Isaac had babysat the owner's mother a long long time ago.

"Shouldn't Grandpa Isaac have a say in his own money?" Rhiannon piped in.

Agnes waved away her question. "This is for him. I'm sure he won't mind. I might use a little to get my nails done, too." Agnes held up a hand so everyone could see the state of her fingers. "Donna Marie Fields is coming over."

Rhiannon crossed her arms. "Lovely of you to spend his money on yourself."

"Listen, dear. Your great-grandfather is a generous man. You'll understand when you meet him," Agnes said.

"He's too racist to meet me."

Agnes' fork clattered to her plate. She stared at Rhiannon wide-eyed, mouth formed into a perfect 'o' shape. "Who in God's name told you that?"

Rhiannon gaze landed on Jeanne, and she could feel the eyes of everyone at the table weighing down on her.

"Why would you say that about my father?" Jeanne's mother loved taking ownership of things when she was upset—her father, her house, her cooking set, her car, her vintage coat. Her favorite pastime was reminding her daughter of how little she had.

Jeanne pinched the bridge of her nose. "I didn't say he was a racist. I said he came from a different time." This was Rhiannon's favorite pastime. Twisting words to make herself the victim.

Agnes visibly relaxed. "Well that's true. You know, he never much cared for the Mexicans that lived next door to us when I was young." She turned to Rhiannon. "But family is family. He'll love you all the same. I should ask him for some new earrings, too..."

Jeanne cringed. Rhiannon looked even more put-out. She stood abruptly and stalked away from the table, leaving her plate half-eaten.

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Marty's, owned by a man named Anthony, agreed to do the catering. It hadn't taken much to convince him. Business hadn't been good ever since that Texas Roadhouse opened up off the highway.

"Just another favor you'll owe me," he chuckled, and Jeanne hated the sound. "How's the Isaac situation?" he asked. He sounded out-of-breath. Jeanne couldn't imagine what strenuous activity he'd been doing before she called. There were rumors that he was messing around with that young high school teacher, Ms. Something-or-other, with the long legs and vibrant red hair. Jeanne ran her fingers through her graying brown locks.

"The usual. He just lies in bed mostly."

She heard him snort. "Probably ain't much to do given his predicament. What's left?"

Jeanne could think of a million things she'd do at one hundred and thirty. Publish a memoir, smoke a joint on top of her mother's grave (God forbid she set a new record and lived until one hundred and sixty), travel to France, tell Rhiannon who her father was (if only she could figure that one out herself). She certainly wouldn't be holed up in some room.

Anthony droned on, but Jeanne thought she could hear something in the background—a female voice. Was Ms. Something-or-other there now, long-legged and short-skirted and blouse unbuttoned just past the point of decency? What did she even see in a fat, chipped tooth, balding, divorced guy like Anthony "Marty" Fuller?

"Listen, you free sometime? I got a menu I been wanting to test out, if you're interested."

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"Maybe some other time," she said. She couldn't tell if he was asking her on a date or if he wanted the expert opinion of someone who clearly ate too much in her spare time.

She asked everyone if they wanted anything one last time before heading out. Rhiannon said "a new family." Well, too bad. Jeanne couldn't buy miracles.

*

Highgrove was the type of town where every building had an unofficial nondescript name: The Store, The Gas Station, The Bank, The Restaurant. With a population of less than 5,000, everyone knew everyone, which meant everyone knew everyone else's business. An impracticality that Jeanne hated about small town living, but she stomached it for the comforting solitude. Big cities were too crowded, full of blank-faced people shoving past without a care for those around them. The gossiping prattle of Mrs. Zalesski, wife of the owner of The Store, was a small price to pay.

She said goodbye to the woman no less than four times before the older woman released her claws and allowed Jeanne to continue shopping. Shoppers stopped her throughout the store, forcing her to engage in useless pleasantries. Nonstop questions about Grandpa Isaac and the party. She offered up sympathetic smiles and excuses to the people not invited. The truth was, most of them simply weren't on the "up and up" as her mother liked to say. And mother only wanted up and upers at the party.

*

When Jeanne returned home from The Store, Grandpa Isaac was right where she'd left him. She fluffed his pillow and pulled the sheets higher.

"You know, I do so much for this family."

Grandpa Isaac said nothing. She dug into the plastic bag and pulled out a small rectangular box. *Punch Drunk 590*, the label read. The woman gracing the cover possessed a head full of thick, luscious red hair. Her face was thin and angular, skin smooth, and lips so plump that Jeanne licked at her own thin lips. She'd meant to grab her usual *Bronze Sugarboo 110*, but, like a magnet, she'd been drawn to this new shade.

"There might be a news crew at the party, I don't know. I told them no, but no one listens to anyone these days. Either way, I don't want to look fat and old on camera."

She pulled out a wrinkled dress from the bag and smoothed it over the bed. The Little Boutique tucked away beside The Store had called to her, as it did every day, and today she'd given up and wandered inside. The store clerk had recommended it immediately, a modest knee length A-line dress with a tulle skirt. Jeanne wanted it in white, but the clerk admonished her, saying that she was hosting a party, not a wedding. Jeanne left the store with it in robin's egg blue.

She held it up for him to see. "Does it look too young?"

His silence was a no. She needed everything for his party to be perfect, hair, dress, food, decorations. A lot of people from town were coming, and she knew what they thought—poor Jeanne, never married and holed up in her parents' house taking care of two generations of elders. Poor Jeanne, who got knocked up at eighteen by some random guy she didn't know. Poor Jeanne, who didn't go to college and was as large as a house and twice as dumb. She was tired of being Poor Jeanne.

Her phone rang again, and she hit "end call" without checking. Jeanne grabbed the box of dye and headed for the bathroom. She would ask Rhiannon later if there was an app to block unknown numbers.

*

The day of the party arrived, and Jeanne woke with a splitting headache. *Punch Drunk 590* still angered her scalp two days later. It turned out a beautiful wine color that was worth the rash on her head.

She gave her scalp a good massage and set off downstairs to make breakfast. Her body stopped as she took in Rhiannon and her mother sitting at the dining table like old chums. "You two are up early," she said.

Rhiannon looked up. Her hair laid flat in rows and rows of braids that started at her forehead and crept back to the nape of her neck. When had she learned that? The young woman sported bold black lipstick and large, gold hoop earrings. Even her skin was very dark, taking on an orange tinge. When had she started using spray tans?

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"I'm just teaching my granddaughter about her family history," said her mother. She held a familiar binder, and Jeanne refrained from rolling her eyes. That scrapbook was the family bible, containing birth records, immigration forms, event tickets, and pieces of fabric from people long dead that Jeanne didn't care about.

The mother licked her fingertips and turned a page. "Can you believe what she told me last night? Said she didn't have a history. Like her great-great-great grandparents, Awstin and Bronwyn, didn't sail to America on a little rinky-dink boat and..."

Jeanne tuned her out. The family origin story was one she had heard many times, from childhood to adulthood.

"Our family has been here for six generations. Six! You're not like those other little hoodlums running around with no culture. We're Welsh."

Bitter laughter threatened to escape her lips, so she kept them firmly sealed. What was Welsh about them? Sure, Agnes had the records to prove it, but they were no more Welsh than garlic bread was Italian. What was wrong with being good ol' American?

"Hoodlum?" Anger brewed in Rhiannon's voice.

"Oh, you know what I meant," said Agnes. "You should be proud of your heritage."

"Why would I be proud of colonizers?"

Jeanne didn't quite understand what this meant, but her mother took offense anyway. The two argued back and forth. She could have told the older woman to give up. It didn't matter how much history or pictures or culture the old crone had on her side, she wouldn't win against Rhiannon's \$30,000 liberal education.

"Fuck!"

The two stopped their bickering to catch Jeanne clutching her hand. She had leaned on the burner she forgot she had turned on. An angry white blister in the shape of a half-circle covered her palm. "Fuck," she said again because it felt good. She ran the wound under lukewarm water, wincing at the stinging pain that shot through her hand.

A moment later, Rhiannon appeared by her side, first aid kit in hand. "Give me your hand." She dabbed Neosporin on the wound and carefully bandaged it with some gauze. Up close, Jeanne could make out the freckles

she tried to hide under layers of foundation and tanner. At least she still had something of Jeanne's.

This was the closest she'd been to Rhiannon in years. After that first year away, Jeanne's touch had become repulsive.

Don't do it, she thought to herself. Don't don't don't. But the tears were already rolling down her cheeks. Rhiannon backed away in alarm.

"No!" Jeanne used her good hand to grasp onto the younger girl's arm. "Don't. Just...stay."

Rhiannon looked at her like she was crazy, but she didn't care. She pulled her into a tight hug, ignoring the stinging in her hand.

"Mom?"

Jeanne squeezed harder. She didn't give a rat's ass that her mother was watching, judging with those beady blue eyes. This was *her* daughter, and she wasn't letting anyone take her away.

Just one moment. One brief moment. She thought she felt the girl lean into the embrace, all tension cleared away. Then she said, "Seriously, what's with you!" Rhiannon squirmed out of her grasp. They regarded each other, and just like that, the tension and the awkwardness returned.

"You know, you can't just go around touching people without their consent." Rhiannon folded her arms across her chest. Jeanne noted that they were still small, just like hers.

"You're my daughter," was all she said.

*

Jeanne stuffed her phone deep inside her closet. She tried to be polite to the first few callers—a reporter, another representative from Guinness, and an eight-year-old little girl writing a report who sounded suspiciously like an adult man. But they kept coming. The wound on her hand ached. She didn't have time for this nonsense. Of course, her parents weren't lifting a damn finger.

The party started at noon; the first guests arrived at 10:00 AM. She opened the door to let in Mr. and Mrs. Royce from down the street. The couple bustled in unaware of the massive faux pas they were committing. Mrs. Royce complimented her hair color, and despite her frustration, a knot loosened in her stomach. She supplied them with drinks and snacks, then

settled them into her father's Man-Den, otherwise known as the basement, ignoring the look he sent her.

If Mr. and Mrs. Royce were any indication, more people would begin to trickle in and she was still dressed in her pajamas. As she passed Grandpa Isaac's door, she froze. Crap. Jeanne had forgotten to bring him his morning cup of coffee. Crap crap crap.

She rushed back to the kitchen and brewed a cup. Grandpa Isaac gave no reaction when she set it down on his nightstand, several hours too late. "I'm sorry," Jeanne whispered. She left without another word.

The robin's egg blue dress was waiting in her closet. The dress fell over her with ease. Usually Jeanne had to fight and struggle to get dresses on—her hips were always too wide or her shoulders too broad—but it was as if it was made specifically for her. Her breath stalled when she looked in the mirror. It really was a good color. Light and delicate. *Punch Drunk 590* contrasted perfectly against the dress. She could almost see herself as one of the beautiful women that decorated the covers of her mother's magazines. It was a bit shorter than expected, but a little leg never hurt anyone. She bent forward to check and see how far it rose up. Not too bad.

Marty's catering team arrived at 11:45 AM, after Jeanne had already crammed as many people as she could into the Man-Den. Anthony's pimply-faced son only shrugged when she yelled that they were late.

"So where are we setting up?" His tone suggested he was bored. What was it with young people and being *bored* of all things, like the best years of your life were anything to scoff at?

She showed them to the backyard. "Use that long strip of tables over there."

The setup came straight from an episode she'd seen on HGTV, with some minor adjustments. The gold streamers the perky host used struck Jeanne as tacky and inappropriate for a 130-year-old's birthday party. She'd invested in some beautiful string lightbulb sets off of Amazon and hung them from tree to tree. In the morning, her mother had called it ambitious. Jeanne decided to take it as a compliment.

The smell of the food was intoxicating. Her mouth watered at the sight of gumbo, sausage jambalaya, Cajun crab legs and more she couldn't identify. She removed herself from the area. No food until all the other guests had a plate.

The news crew arrived at 1:00. She watched the van pull up to the front of the house. A young woman in a neatly pressed black skirt-suit slid out of the passenger side, along with an equally young cameraman. They were too far away for Jeanne to make out their facial expressions, but she imagined the curl of the young blonde's lip when she took in the average, middle class architecture, the kitsch stone cats decorating the front lawn that her mother had collected over the decades, the peeling avocado and lilac porch, and the miniature one-eyed drunk Santa with his pants around his ankles that sat on the window stoop. Her parents were proof that, in the age of home decorating

"Why are you lurking around like a weirdo?" Rhiannon's voice snatched her back to the present. The young woman squinted to see what had Jeanne so preoccupied. "Damn, you got reporters to show up? Grandpa really is a little celebrity." The girl must have noted Jeanne's tense posture because she said, "Relax. They're just here for what we in journalism call a fluff piece."

shows, taste could not be taught.

There it was again, the condescension. Why, wasn't it just a miracle that the benevolent Rhiannon showed up to educate her simple mind?

Jeanne shook her head. The bitterness crept in far too frequently as of late. Really, whose fault was it but her own that Rhiannon was prone to being a condescending twat at times?

"Of course, my piece would be much better if you let me interview him," said Rhiannon. She wore a low-cut top and Jeanne noticed a black smudge on her left shoulder. She narrowed her eyes for a better look—it wasn't a smudge but a neatly-lined black fist. In small type beneath it were the words "rise up." Rhiannon noted her staring and frowned.

"You're not going to throw a bitch fit are you? I got this three years ago."

"Don't swear," Jeanne said on reflex. That was how Rhiannon wanted her to act—the outraged, behind the times mom. She wouldn't give the girl that satisfaction.

"It looks great." The news crew was close to the front door. "Will you go and grab my purse from my room? I want to freshen up my lipstick if I'm going to be on camera."

Her daughter shook her head with an annoyed sigh, the black braids swaying ever so slightly. But she complied.

The crew had set up on the porch. Up close, she could see how pretty the reporter was, with her sun-kissed blonde hair and impossibly straight white teeth. She could have been Rhiannon's age. She could have been her daughter. So why was Jeanne reminded of the girls in high school who had told her she could benefit from one or two eating disorders?

"Smells like shit," she heard the reporter say. The woman bent down to where Jeanne knew drunken, naked Santa rested. "Can we get this crap out of the shot?"

The young man shoved the ornament into the far corner of the porch. Then he knocked on the door. Jeanne counted to ten. Rhiannon hadn't returned with her purse yet.

At ten, she opened the front door. The reporter stared down at her with a frozen half-smile. "Madison Brooks with MKV News. We're here to do a feature story on Isaac Hughes, the oldest man in the world."

"Live in five minutes," said the cameraman.

Jeanne stared into the red dot on the camera. How many pounds did cameras add? Ten? Twenty? A dampness began forming under her arms and she squeezed them tight to her sides. "I-I'm sorry. We said no interviews."

The reporter was quick as cyanide. "Please don't be alarmed Mrs...?"

"Ms. Jeanne Lloyd."

"Ms. Lloyd. You're his granddaughter, correct?"

Jeanne could only manage a simple nod.

"Perfect. We're here to simply do a piece on Mr. Hughes. Would you like to provide us with some interesting facts about Mr. Hughes?"

"We said no interviews." Jeanne was beginning to feel like a damn parrot.

Madison Brooks of MKV News stared down with that same immovable smile, porcelain teeth made brighter by the high sun. How many girls had seen that smile as they rushed to the bathroom to remove everything from their stomachs? "There's no need to be afraid Ms. Lloyd. I understand there's a party going on. Perhaps we could talk to someone else?"

"Live in one minute."

Jeanne didn't want to look, but she was positive the sweat under her arms had bled through the little blue dress. Where was Rhiannon with that damn purse? The red dot of the camera bore into her.

"Just a few short questions and then we'll talk to another guest." Madison Brooks pulled Jeanne out of the doorway. The reporter stared at the camera intently with that same smile, so Jeanne tried to do the same, though she couldn't feel her mouth move from the panicked frown that had appeared earlier.

The reporter mouthed, "On."

They stood still for a few seconds, then the reporter said. "Thank you, Tom. I'm outside Isaac Hughes's residence. Mr. Hughes claims the title of oldest man in the world, and oldest human to ever live. Today is his 130th birthday. I'm here with Jeanne Lloyd, his granddaughter. Jeanne, as his birthday gets underway, how do you plan to celebrate 130 years of life!"

The lens of the camera threatened to devour her whole. The pit stains had to be down to her ankles by now. She swallowed several times against the lump in her throat. And then she slammed the door shut behind her.

Something loud pounded her ears like rushing water. The whole world fell away, but the voice of Madison Brooks through the drywall was clear.

"Well, uh, Tom, unfortunately some people are very shy about being on camera." Tom must have said something witty on the other end because Madison Brooks laughed. "Too true, Tom. Now let's move to the festivities around back and, uh, perhaps we can find someone who can speak to Mr. Hughes' life and achievements."

She could hear their retreating footsteps, and slowly, the flood in her ears lessened. The distant pounding of the party returned—some inoffensive playlist Rhiannon had picked off of Spotify. Where the hell was Rhiannon, anyway? She called for her. No response. Gripping the railing of the stairs, she took a few tentative steps up. Her body was a bundle of tightly coiled nerves that had yet to relax. The ache from the burn in her hand returned.

"I hope you're not going through my stuff again!"

But the upstairs was silent. When she reached the top, she found Grandpa Isaac's door propped open. Shoving the door open, she found Rhiannon standing over Grandpa Isaac's bed. She looked up, and that face, the lovely one that Jeanne used to kiss to sleep every night, was tight and unreadable.

"Rhiannon," she said, then stopped herself. What was there to say?

The girl shoved Grandpa Isaac's head. It rolled to the side and made a loud *thunk* as it hit the wooden floorboard. "This is a fucking mannequin." Jeanne said, "I told you to get my purse."

"You left the fucking key in the front pocket. He's a goddamn *doll*." The younger woman's eyes were bright red, her cheeks flushing a dark purple against the spray tan, like a bruise.

"Language. You shouldn't have come in here." Jeanne shut the door behind her, striding to the other side of the room and picking up the head. She tucked it back into the cover. The artist, a lovely Cuban man with a shop near The Store, had done an excellent job at recreating Grandpa Isaac's likeness with the fiberglass. She remembered crying when he unveiled the head. The old man hadn't even looked that good when he was alive.

"You told me he was racist and it turns out that he isn't even real!"

"It's easier this way." All the fight in Jeanne had dried up after that disaster of an interview downstairs. She'd let Rhiannon yell at her, abuse her, pummel her with her fists until the girl calmed down. And then they would talk, like adults.

"Easier?" Rhiannon scoffed. Then her eyes widened. "You're profiting off a dead man." She laughed, but it wasn't the light, bubbly laughter Jeanne remembered from early morning tickles. It was something hollow, broken. Her daughter continued to laugh until she was crying. "This," she paused, "this might be the whitest thing you've ever done."

How could Jeanne explain? How would she begin to tell Rhiannon that it was never her intention to pretend Grandpa Isaac was alive and—relatively—well? Should she tell Rhiannon that when she first moved in, the month after her daughter started her freshman year of college, her grandfather had been alive? He could no longer walk or speak, but he smiled benignly whenever his cataract-filled eyes landed on Jeanne. His favorite grandchild, he used to say. All she had to do was care for him, because her own parents were too old themselves. In exchange, she got free housing and a monthly stipend from his social security checks. Her mother had insisted he didn't mind, and wouldn't she know her own father best? The stipend wasn't much, but it allowed Jeanne to give Rhiannon small allowances for her first semester. It allowed her to for once not feel like the useless, poor mom.

Or should she tell Rhiannon that Grandpa Isaac had gone and died a few months later. Properly died. She noticed by the way he didn't wake to the smell of his favorite cup of coffee. Or how he hadn't smiled that wide, toothless smile when she fluffed his pillow. She checked his pulse. Nothing. She held a finger beneath his nose, feeling for the faintest breath, but none

came. Jeanne emptied his coffee cup in the sink and returned downstairs. His check sat at the top of the mail pile.

Rhiannon had wanted to go to some multicultural pride parade a few states away and one plane ticket was \$350. Maybe she should tell Rhiannon that she couldn't stand the look of disappointment when she told the girl they couldn't afford it. So she called up Anthony "Marty" Fuller, and he'd showed up with a shovel. It took him two days of huffing and puffing to dig the six-foot grave in the backyard. By then, the smell had set in, but she paid him a large cut of the check, and he dumped the body in and filled it back up.

Or she should she tell Rhiannon about how her parents said nothing? She'd made some lame excuse involving a new flowerbed as the reason for the hole and they swallowed the lie easily. They never questioned why Grandpa Isaac no longer came down for family time or why Jeanne had installed locks on the door. Her mother acted morose throughout the month, until the next check came, and suddenly her spirits were lifted. And so were Jeanne's, because Rhiannon had squealed, "I love you, mom" when she had called to buy the plane ticket.

Jeanne should have told Rhiannon this. She didn't. Instead, she said, "I did what I thought was right."

She left her daughter there. A few guests milled about downstairs, but the music from the party had drowned out the revelations from above, and they smiled pleasantly when Jeanne appeared. They complimented her on the party and her dress and the lovely shade of *Punch Drunk* 590.

There were no news crews amidst the backyard festivities. Relieved, she fixed herself a plate of everything, for once not caring if anyone saw. When she bit into the jambalaya, it tasted like heaven. Someone jostled her, and she whipped around, ready to devour their head for almost causing her to drop her precious plate. It was Anthony "Marty" Fuller. He leaned his ruddy, weather-beaten face close to hers, and she could smell his mouthwash. Something minty.

"Looks like your Ma's feeling sentimental." He indicated to something past her.

Through a break in the crowd, she could see her mother. She sat on the ground near a flowerbed. She held two cups of coffee. One for her, and one for the flowers.

BECAUSE NO ONE SAYS, "LOOK INTO THE DARKNESS"

Scientists predict that the empty spaces of the universe are mostly filled with hidden energy, dark matter—a lurking, unseen weight that affects every star, every solar system. But we see nothing, feel nothing. And so we forget. On the highway in Connecticut, a dented blue car weaves and swerves across the dashed line in front of my car. The blonde man who is driving pulls in close, retreats, pulls behind me and hovers, then speeds up alongside me, motions for me to pull over. He is yelling and I do not make eye contact.

When I finally see two police cruisers on the side of the highway, I pull off, and he does, too. "That man is following me!" I tell an officer. He instructs me to stop shaking. Asks for my license and registration, says, "That man wants your insurance information. You hit him." My car is undented. I have no idea why this man is accusing me. Snow covers the median like shifting flustered dunes, and all around us, the roads are wet and the color of far-off passing ships. My registration is expired, and attached to a state I have not lived in for three years. The officer says, "I am trying to determine if you were fleeing an accident scene." He says, "We'll be in touch with our findings." When I finally get back to my apartment, my mother calls from Ohio to tell me about a handsome man who moved in to the trailer next-door. "For all you know," I say, "I only date lawnmowers, or refrigerators." She sighs, explains, "You're not getting any younger," and we leave it like that. Somewhere in Connecticut, I lose my jacket. It simply floats away. I am staying at an artist colony, not connecting to the other artists, but still making desperate, jolting attempts. Every friendship, every positive interaction, I've come to believe, is like spotting a mountain lion, a rare and glittering animal in the wild. It will end, and I will go back to the underbrush and stare at the thicket, the tree trunks for hours, days, years before another moment manifests with complete unpredictability. Like a comet swiping the sky; you can stay up all night waiting, but if the light, the moon, the

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clouds—things you can't possibly control—aren't in the right position, you might miss it anyway. It is like catching fireflies.

*

Back home, the older man I am dating struggles to keep an erection. He says, "Put my balls in your mouth." He is kind. He says please. And I begin to get that feeling—I am leaving myself, floating, observing the scene below me. After he finishes, I curl up tightly on the couch, and he says, "Feeling cold?" "Yes," I say. "Feeling cold." His age is transmissible. I wonder if I will have to spend the next twenty years with his balls in my mouth. As though I am a male anglerfish attaching to the female, slowly being absorbed into a small vestigial organ. I have no permanent address. I drive to my parents' house four states away to get a new license, new registration-to fix my mistakes. My mother says, "Just tell the officer you didn't understand!" The sky is the color of wine dropped so low there is nothing below it. A few cars passing, shushing in the wet snow. "They think I am a criminal," I say. "I could go to jail." This is how a seemingly innocent action suddenly reduces the surface temperature of your entire existence, blackening the world high and wide as a city, like a starspot. Scientists say that these black spots usually arise in pairs with opposite magnetic polarities. That they travel on the surface of stars at relative speeds, and eventually, simply-like everything-disappear the same way they came in. And then you're not sure what you saw in the first place. When I tell this to my father, he says, "I think you're being a bit dramatic." I have always felt like a Mayatroshka doll—these layers unpeeling, leading to a tiny empty vessel at the center.

When I begin to feel this way, I read about people with real problems: water allergies, Morgellons Syndrome, cold urticaria, music-induced seizures, bones that don't stop growing. I email a friend about the double slit experiment in quantum physics—if you watch which opening a particle of light passes instead of a wavelength. You manifest reality. This friend writes back, "Double Slit sounds like a bad porno." Then we laugh. We lighten. We list them out.

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A high school friend, at a traffic stop, was found in possession of a small bag of heroin, but she was not charged with this crime until seven months later. "The police are not coming for you," an acquaintance says, when I use this example as a reference point. "There's no evidence that you committed any crimes." But I lied about so many things, that my lies sprouted new lies, like broken lobes of cactuses dropped into sand. The vehicle was unregistered. My license was from a different state. The words insurance fraud keep tumbling through my head. Something I had not previously considered when I was committing it. I sit by windows and watch the grey sky like the heavy wing of a pigeon, widening. I cry at imagined tragedies, an alive seagull settling upon the body of a dead seagull, picking at a tendon. A small girl who drops a clay animal on the floor of a grocery, her mother shouting, "I told you not to bring it. Now look what you've done." There are people who have easier lives, people for who whom love has never been an impossible, overturned ship—a tunneling creature that leaves abscesses, holes with the intensity of C4 explosions. These people talk about nail art. They talk about Lindt chocolates, Instagram, wool sweaters. It never goes beyond the frozen, safe surface. I read a passage from a poem: "In a field, I am the absence of field. This is always the case. Wherever I am, I am what is missing." The days are grey and merge into each other like highways, like toll roads. Living should not be this difficult. I watch porn. I don't feel anything. I try to come.

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I go to the apartment of a businessman in Pittsburgh, a man I had once briefly dated. I have nowhere to sleep that night. He says, "You look nice." He says, "Take off your clothes." When he slaps me, it is hard. I feel it radiate, spread like a sunset. "I'll do it for as long as I want," he says. "You don't get to tell me to stop." When he leaves for work, I wash his dishes, fold his blankets. I miss friends I never had, mourn the loss of parking lots, of micro-beads, of apartments I lived in for three, four, months. I wonder why I lack an ability to connect in healthy, meaningful ways. In the local paper, I read about a man who leaves his infant in a hot car while he shops at the Adultmart.

¹ Strand, Mark. "Keeping Things Whole." In Selected Poems. New York: Knopf, 2002.

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Another who cashes \$3,000 in bad checks. Neither goes to jail. A woman in Texas, however, is sentenced to five years in federal prison for voting in the presidential election when she was barred from doing so. I imagine myself in prison, weaving my hair into friendship bracelets, creating an exfoliant with toothpaste and hand soap. I cannot trust my emotions. They spread and retract, lurk in odd corners. I watch porn about an officer bargaining with two beautiful bank robbers in a getaway car. All of the breasts are round and stacked like oranges. "They have bred chickens to have larger breasts," a friend tells me in an email. "So large they cannot stand upright on their own." I have a desire to stand upright on my own, I tell her. But with the first small mishap, I dissolve like invisible ink, like a wave of light pulsing against a curtain, bending through a prism. Spreading until there are five, six versions of me, projected against a wall, none of which hold any weight.

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The truth is, I did see it happen. That blue car behind me, suddenly like a bowling ball gliding into a shallow gutter, scraping against the guardrail. But I was not the cause or the effect. And so I kept driving, not fleeing, just following the slow entropy of highway traffic east towards the ocean. And somehow, this driver had gotten back onto the road, dragging the crumpled wing of his vehicle to hunt me down. "Do you like to be degraded?" the businessman says, when he arrives back at his apartment, finds me reading a magazine on the couch. No one has ever spit on me before. I tell him I might be going to jail. I use the terms the officer used: "fleeing an accident scene." I say, "insurance fraud." "When?" he says. "Now?" I say, "Here," handing him a condom. He hits me again, on the back of the thighs, then kisses everywhere that he's touched. He says, "Are you dying for human connection? Is that what you need?" In the morning, he pulls on a navy uniform, tells me to sleep as long as I like. Outside, seven inches of snow has fallen overnight, piled overtop the smoking, electric city. I walk a mile into downtown to visit my ex-boyfriend and we shovel snow from his walk and nothing else happens.

*

Back in Connecticut, it remains below freezing for weeks at a time. People crowd and flutter into conversations that hold little weight: how to fry fish, how to mix bread dough. There are weeks when I remain convinced that I am invisible, as though invisibility is a position one can take, like sides in a debate. The other artists move through gallery spaces and say hello to each other warmly, kindly. I wonder if my loneliness is palpable, an electromagnetic force field repelling everything that approaches. I think about the photoelectric effect, how shining a light upon certain items can expel electrons. I imagine the sun heating my own body in a horizontal column along the beach, expelling me to a sister planet, somewhere light and loose and easy. My ex-boyfriendthe only man I've ever loved—is in Cincinnati with his new girlfriend for the weekend, a woman who has hair the color of marigolds, eyes like a glass doll. They are probably having clean, neat sex in a hotel bed. She probably makes beautiful light staccato notes as she orgasms. This ex-boyfriend dreams of having many children, a replica of his own childhood, some type of matchbox re-modeling. "Children are a lot of work," I tell him, and he replies, "I would be a great father. I deserve that chance." I want to have a child-thick and budding inside of me. But then what? I send a message to the businessman, but he responds with the least possible effort, a fixed and solid wall. Later, I look up porn about a woman who is attracted to a man who wants her to feel shame. I feel her shame, my shame, shame stacked upon shame like measuring cups, one inside the other, all tucked neatly into the drawer of my body, until I am positive, in this moment, my orgasm is a wave of red light.

*

I don't sleep. I don't eat. My insurance company insists: "This is a case that will eventually go to arbitration." My vehicle has no indentations, no outward marks of a collision of any kind, and this is a good sign. "I would have beaten the driver's ass," a friend says in an email. "You should sue him for false allegations." By now my lies have set up apartment complexes, strip malls, some kind of permanent fixtures, and everywhere around me, I expulse urgency like a star, a satellite, at odd moments, scorching anything in a mile radius. "I think I might be going to jail," I confess to strangers. People sideeye me, back away slowly. At the colony, I sit in a room full of artists and feel heat spread over me like a sudden radiation shift, a storm, a starspot. I cannot

breathe, cannot remain in this place, feel tears welling about losses from years ago, as though suddenly I have shifted into the fifth dimension, a room of drawers of experiences in which I am everywhere all at once, like standing in the four corners: Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, but tripling, quadrupling. "I'm worried about you," one of the artists says. I regress quickly, like a receding tide, into someone I can't recognize. Sometimes they text me: "Are you still awake?" but when I text back in the morning, they no longer have anything to say. I stare at the blank screen for a long time before going back to work. There are entire weeks when I see no one but strangers, and the sky, the ocean, the roads, the houses are all bundled into a tidy grey package. I read about fish odor syndrome, the body's abnormal build-up of trimethylamine. I read about a boy who began growing teeth on his back, his legs, everything calcifying. The way I see it, my rejections grow tiny rejection wings. That's just how rejection works. At a certain point, people can spot your calcifications and what you excrete, like an aerial view of the earth, a pale blue dot, creased and etched. I watch porn that I do not like. I refuse to drive my car.

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Internet articles offer easy, airy instructions for self-improvement: Be positive. Be professional. Be yourself. Be better. Be confident. Be honest. Be fabulous. Be vulnerable. Have good boundaries. Everything in contradictory knotted piles. It is true that I have never been able to handle stress—I crumple quickly, like papier mâché piñatas doused in water. I was raised crooked, slanted. There were years of that—watching the air in a room to predict the sudden shifts. And I became good at it, good at absorbing an impact. Once, when I was eleven, my screaming mother had dragged me into the bathroom by the wrist. I'd left a drinking glass on the counter and my young brother had knocked it over, shattering it. "You cannot even do the simplest thing," my mother yelled to me. "Now look at what you've done." She handed me an empty grocery bag, and when I cried, sobbed, she'd said, "You're too old to act this way," and marched out. And the glass, it spread across the sink like a twinkling afterlife, a wormhole offering safe travel to a distant, alternate world. Every piece, every shard, I tossed into the bag so that the glass was simultaneously together and also permanently fragmented. It's like this: a car that is hit by another car, or a guardrail, or a pile of plowed snow will show dents, whether it was at fault or not. A dent changes the volume of an object, what it is capable of carrying inside of it, what it can be filled with. And then, you can only work with whatever space is left.

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Back in Connecticut, I tell the older man that I can no longer sleep with him, cannot see a relationship of any sort between us. "It's so gloomy here in the winter. I was afraid the weather would get to ya," he says. "And all that silly car stress." I turn away. "It's not the weather." I say, "You would watch my soul dying, and monitor the intricate death process with a microscope. You would turn it into a scientific study. You would write a journal article about it." He pauses. "You don't have a soul," he replies, fastening his jacket, ushering me out the door. "No one does." We walk amongst moss, dropped lichen, crushed pinecones. I tell him I found a job at a plant nursery, for once I leave the colony.

He announces that he has won an award from the biology department, that he's up for tenure this year. My body wilts, lessens like breath on a window. "It's not a competition," I finally say. As it grows dark, each fat star drops low like a torch, a fireball shot out over the ocean. Many days pass where I see no one. It is too difficult to forge connections, like a blindfolded and handcuffed person who is navigating paper mazes. Porn bores me.

Everyone says, "Yes! Yes!" with nasal, falsified voices. They moan like seagulls, like waves slapping a rotted dock. I imagine a life with the businessman: a penthouse apartment, a maid who visits twice a week, tidy boxed meals. I do not believe he is capable of loving me. If he does reach out, he asks simple, banal questions: "Did you make it back okay?" and "How was the hotel?" I send overeager responses, uncontrollable need. I want to see what drags itself out of the darkness.

*

Eustress sounds a lot like mistress, but is actually a positive form of stress, a motivating urgency that does more good than harm. If eustress were a color, it would probably be claret. Distress, on the other hand, would be cerulean,

something untamed. I imagine these stresses all lit up, like a DDR board, like activated cop lights, whirling. I still have not heard from the state police. "No news is good news," my father says when he calls. I walk to the apartment of a painter, who has invited me over for a drink. We sit on a pier overlooking the bay, swap stories about Los Angeles, where we both once lived. She tells me that everyone's an asshole, all of the time, no matter where you are. She says, "I always hated the insiders anyway-they all become so smug, so selfassured." Afterwards, she hugs me tight and hard and calls me "lovey." The other artists at the community all seem to share a sense of belonging, one that is as obsolete to me as volcanoes, as coral reefs. Things I cannot see or touch or feel, and never have. These artists move in a tight, neat pack, come from dinner together, head to gallery openings together. They all wave and say hello politely, discuss amongst themselves their plans to cook clam chowder, their family vacations to Europe, a hike down the beach. Normal things that normal people do. Everywhere I go I am on the lookout for the blonde man with the blue car: the bar, the gas station, the post office. These feelings of being hunted, hated, I remind myself, they're just feelings. A therapist once told me, "All these overwhelming thoughts, they don't actually mean much. They're just thoughts." I don't hear from the businessman again. I could reach out, but imagine our exchange to be like a completed purchase at a convenience store. I send a message to my ex-boyfriend, a video with peepers chirping in a thick black swamp, which reminds me of home. He writes back, "I know you can make it until spring." He is the only constant thing in my life. I jerk off to this thought. There are fetishes for everything: balloon-popping, toe-sucking, cake-sitting, leaf-plucking, nasolingus, biting into a grape, breaking a glass. There is even activasty—arousal to the sun's hot rays. In this way, I go through the motions.

*

At my eye exam, the optometrist says, "Hello, how are you today," not at all interested in my response. He tells me to rest my chin here, and here, and here. "I have incredibly dry eyes," I confess. "I wake up in the middle of the night and they ache." He nods, says, "Cover your left eye and read the bottom line please." His bare thumbs press against my eyelids. His face is an inch from mine, peering into my optic disc, saying, "Look into the

light. Now look into the light." Afterwards, with dilated pupils, I scour the local paper's Police Beat to see if my name is mentioned. I check the mail. I wait. At night, the high fructose corn syrup from the soda, booze begins to break down, kick-starts my brain like lawnmower blades. I ruminate over each conversation I've had in the past twenty-four hours, and whether I offended or bored or stifled anyone with a comment or action. I don't sleep. Even in May, the days are a strangled grey and wingless. After the final gallery exhibit, I hug the other artists goodbye. "Have a good summer," I say to one, and she replies, "Oh God. You're like a yearbook or something. Have a good fall. Have a good winter. And the next winter after." I never quite understand what people want. When I was still dating my ex-boyfriend, I'd written MINE on his chest with black sharpie, at his request. But I never really believed that he was ever mine. When I feel like this, I try to stack my thoughts from small to large: the room, the colony, the continent, the earth, the solar system, etc. I think about the bigger picture. All of the organic matter on earth most likely came from outer space in the first place. The entire universe shares its organic compounds in a similar way to middle-schoolers passing notes, spreading rumors—through meteors, space collisions, hot debris. Even our own earth-matter on the spaceships we send to different planets may flake off and change the course of that planet's existence. There's comfort in that. I visit the painter again, and we sit on her porch, watching the day slough off pieces of itself until it's just a cold absence, filled and yet un-fillable. "Some years are just lemons, like cars," she says. "All you can do is save up for the next one." I walk home, notice my lost jacket slung over a mailbox in an alley. I put it on and I keep walking.

WHISTLING IN THE DARK

On our third date, just after we've clinked glasses at this lovely Italian restaurant in a strip mall, Tad leans forward, his tie narrowly missing the flame from the candle on the table. He whispers, "Do you have a rape fantasy?"

I put down my \$8.99 house wine. I look over at his soft feathery hair, glowing in the light of the mini-chandelier dangling over our booth. I liked his online profile because his username didn't have "daddy" or "69" in it. I liked that the photos didn't show him holding the line of a dead fish he'd hooked or the bloody antlers of a deer he'd shot. I liked that he didn't post a picture of himself where another body had clearly been cut out. I liked that he had asked me lots of questions—Where I grew up, what Netflix series I'm into, my shoe size. He seemed safe, an ordinary guy with slight limp who lived at home with his mom. "Of course, I have a rape fantasy," I say. "I have many. Which one do you want?" He clutches his napkin. I begin.

In my most common rape fantasy, I am startled awake from a dream about auditioning for a part in *Annie*. I've forgotten to memorize the lyrics for "It's a Hard Knock Life," so it's really a stressful dream and almost a relief to wake up and find myself pinned to my bed by a strange man. I can smell him (armpit sweat, pastrami), but I can't see him, because I have those light blocking drapes from Bed, Bath & Beyond. He presses a sharpish object to my jugular vein. I can't tell if it's a knife or a fork or some other utensil. "Don't move," he says. He garbles something else. I can't really understand him because he's wearing a ski mask. I squint for details to tell the police later. Husky voice, thin wrists, possibly a lisp. I have read a lot about how witnesses do really badly in lineups, so I'm trying to pay attention.

He pushes my knees apart, but what he doesn't know is that I've been taking Zumba classes for the last three months and so my leg muscles are super strong. I trap his legs with mine and flip over, a trick I learned in Girl

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Scout Camp to earn my Rape Readiness badge. He hits the floor, scaring the cat.

This buys me enough time to grab the bedside lamp and bash it against his temple. While he's out cold, I bind him up with a bungee cord and pantyhose. I wait until the last second to remove his ski mask. I'm shocked to discover that he's handsome, in a creepy kind of way with a mat of gelled blond hair, as if he prepared for the rape like you would a date. Turns out that what he was holding to my throat was a pair of tongs.

The second he comes to, he starts to cry. "I'm so sorry," he says. "This is my first time. I have thought about doing this for a while, but I never imagined it would go this way."

He looks a bit like my cousin Johnny, who raises ferrets and can never hold down a job. "Well, you tried, at least. That shows initiative."

"I'm such a loser!" he says, and if he could hit himself in the face, he probably would.

"You could try something else."

He shrugs. "I'm not interested in anything else."

We chat for a while. I untie him, and we sit cross-legged on the blue and white afghan my grandma knitted. It's meant for the burn victims of Shriners Hospital, but I got it instead. My rapist wears one red sock and one brown sock. "I've been watching you," he says. "Well, watching this block of apartments. It's better," he explains, "to have options."

"Oh, okay, so I'm not the only one?"

"No, but you were my first choice."

I want to ask why, but then it might seem like I'm fishing for compliments. "Who are the other ones?" I say, feigning indifference. "The redhead lady?"

"I thought about her but she has a pit bull."

"Don't worry about him. He's such a submissive. He's all show." Secretly, I am pleased to be singled out.

"But let's figure you out," I say. I encourage him to take up a hobby like kickboxing or sword swallowing. "You could be so much more," I tell him, which is one of my favorite lines from the movie *Pretty Woman*. It's that scene after Richard Gere's character has fucked the prostitute, played by Julia Roberts' character, and they're both lying in bed in the afterglow of paid sex.

He says, "Thanks, and uh, get your screen window fixed, willya?" We both laugh at that, and, for a second, it seems like we might hug, but then

both think better of it. I let him out of the apartment, lock the door, and then run to the window to watch him move away down the sidewalk. I lean out on the windowsill, and the moonlight throws him into bright relief. As he's crossing the street, I yell, "You forgot your ski mask!" He turns to wave back at me and doesn't see the semi-truck coming, and it flattens him. It's sad but not tragic, because they're never really rehabilitated, not really.

Tad has ordered another drink. He takes a quick sip. "That's very specific," he says. "You're in the arts, right? You like to make stuff up." I am wrestling with the menu. It's one of those huge glossy kind with photos of the dishes, chunks of mysterious meat smeared in cream. "Oh, my, what to choose?"

He clears his throat. "I can't tell if you're kidding or—"

"I'm not kidding," I say. I like the way his hair looks in the candle light, as if it's standing on end. "I have others."

The doorbell rings and I decide to answer it because I am expecting a package from Amazon. It's a sweatshirt. I don't really need it, but it has a funny saying on it ("I wouldn't be caught dead in this sweatshirt"). Because it's a delivery I'm expecting, I open the door. In this fantasy, sometimes, it's not a delivery guy, it's the creepy man with the ponytail who lives below me. Or my exboyfriend, Shane. Or that new hire from IT who I said hi to once.

The point is not who rang the bell, the point is that I answer the door. I answer the door and I let the guy in and he tries to rape me. I open the door and he wedges his big khaki UPS thigh in to push the door open even farther. I answer the door and he puts a pistol to my temple. I look out through the peephole and go, *He looks familiar*, and then I open the door and he breaks my nose with his fist. When it happens, a part of me thinks, *Did he do that on accident?* Because I know this person and he never seemed violent to me.

I answer the door and it's a cop. He says, "Ma'am, there have been a series of attacks in your neighborhood. Are you aware of this issue?"

I say, "Uh, no."

I'm not going to let him in, because you can't trust anyone, but then he says, "I need you to identify some photos for me. It could help us catch this guy before he rapes again."

I open the door.

The next part is where I know I am going to be raped in my own home, so that I will have to move, which is another undiscussed consequence of rape. "Got rape?" Should be the slogan of a moving company specializing in helping women after an attack.

In this rape fantasy, I have a can of Mace. I aim it at his face and spray, but nothing comes out, because guess what? I've had the Mace since 1997 and it has expired. Like, who checks these things? You can only be so vigilant. I drop the Mace and try that thing where I pretend I'm having a seizure. That doesn't work because I keep hitting my head on the linoleum. When he pins me to the floor, I try to get ahold of his balls, but he's got one hand protecting them and the other one covering my mouth. I took a self-defense course once ten years ago, but nothing sticks. There's no ready acronym for how to defend against rape like PUSH IT IN (pull under slash howl irritate tug ingratiate [k] neel). I just know I'm going to end up in the trunk of a car, where I've also been told that there are ways to escape. You're supposed to kick out the tail light and pray that a cop pulls the guy over, or you're supposed to somehow drill a hole through the steel of the car body and get your hand out so you can wave to the people behind you. Well, and if the guy is going to tie you up with ropes, you do this thing that horses do when they don't want the saddle on their backs—you puff out your stomach and body, so the ropes will have slack later, but is this something you can do with your wrists and ankles? Swell them up by the sheer force of will?

Other strategies: I tell the rapist I have AIDS and brain cancer. I shrug. I'm like, "Go ahead, do it. I'm going to die anyway. I hope you don't catch what I have." I pee my pants. I shit my pants. I foam at the mouth and roll around on the ground making barking sounds. I yell, "Fire!" I yell, "Incoming!" I say my name over and over and over again to remind him that I am a human person. I tell him my dog just died and I can't take one more bad thing. I pretend to be dead already, unless, keeping one eye slightly open, I determine that he's into that kind of thing. I fight like hell, I use the heel of my hand to break his nose. I gouge out his eyes with my car keys, though wondering, do eyes gouge out or gouge in? I don't fully understand the eye gouging part.

I possibly don't blow the rape whistle because it's really loud and seems super dramatic. I act as though I like it, encouraging him, "Oh yeah exactly that, this is what I've always wanted." We call this one the reverse psychology

approach since they always say rape isn't about sex, it's about power and control. If I tell him I want to do it just like this but with me on top, he might lose his erection. And then he might slash my throat, but maybe not. FYI, except for the pretending to enjoy the assault (I came up with that one on my own), the rest are all techniques I learned in junior high.

The appetizer plate is empty, except for the empty shrimp exoskeletons. You have to be careful how you eat things around men. Like, for example, with the shrimp appetizer, I don't eat it like I would at home, which would be to wantonly suck the shrimp out of its shell with a slurping noise. Instead, I bite into it and pull discreetly to remove the dead shrimp—anything to avoid being viewed as some whore who would just go down on you in a second.

Felicity, the waitress, comes over. "Have ya'll decided what you'd like for your main course?" I tell her that I have, and order the lasagna.

Tad goes, "Uh..."

"He'll have the spaghetti Bolognese," I say with a wink.

"I hope you don't think that all men are like that," he leans forward. He reaches for my hand, sees my face, and grabs a piece of bread instead.

"Oh, I know that," I say. "You're mostly decent folk. It's just that we women have to be careful, because it's almost always someone you know."

Tad says, "I meant to compliment you on your cardigan."

"Thank you." I say. For this date, I confide, I've chosen a conservative outfit. You want to look pretty, but not slutty, because if you are raped and/or murdered, that will be all anyone talks about. What was she doing in that cut off shirt and those short denim shorts? Why did she have on so much black eyeliner, not to mention the push up bra and stripper heels? I usually opt for sensible shoes from Clarks, though they make me look a social worker. A social worker with a trust fund. I keep the makeup minimal, only because it's so exhausting to put on makeup every day.

If my rape is going to take place on a first or second date, I've likely worn a pair of nice jeans and a cardigan. I'll have on decent underwear, on the off chance that we end up liking each other. For this date with Tad, I'm wearing peek-a-boo black lace but also athletic socks so that I can give myself a chance to pause before I go too far.

If I get raped after a late night at work, I'll be wearing a straight skirt and button up blouse, and comfortable flats. It will probably be my boss who does it. His name is John Smithsonian.

If I am raped on an airplane, I'll have on stretch pants and a comfortable shirt and cardigan. The rapist will most likely be the bearded guy I'm sitting next to, the one who wants the middle seat, whose arms and legs keep spreading out while I try to condense my body into a smaller and smaller space until I am more or less suctioned up against the tiny window. In these moments, I imagine someone outside in the air, looking in at my face pressed there, mouth in an Edward Munch silent "oh" of despair.

If I'm going to get raped at a church, it likely means I'm either attending a wedding or a funeral, since I don't otherwise find myself in church. I'll be easy to catch then, because those events always require heels and I'll be forced to take itty-bitty steps. If the best man is going to rape me at the wedding reception, he's probably seen my dance moves and knows I have some coordination but not a lot, and that I have had several glasses of wine and so will be easier to get into a small broom closet. Just tell me there's a puppy in there and I'm yours.

If I'm going to get raped at a job interview, I've likely got on a two-piece suit jacket and skirt and dress shirt from Ann Taylor Loft, or else jacket and dress and high heels. I will be more susceptible to being caught at that point too, because really, who rapes someone at a job interview? Would it be in the rest room and instigated by someone from the maintenance staff? Or would it be like in *Fifty Shades of Rape* where the millionaire interviewee finds me beyond perfect for his S&M fantasy and so follows me into the bathroom?

If I'm going to get raped on TV, it could be any number of shows, but most certainly I could be Victim #1 on Law & Order SVU. I've already been raped, because it's a whole show about rape.

In this episode, we focus mostly on the perpetrator and somewhat on me, if only to determine if I am lying about the rape. Even though this happens in fewer than one percent of rape cases, the show portrays lying as occurring half the time. Sometimes, I'm a gymnast, or a missing teen, or a Syrian prostitute, or a patient with Alzheimer's, or a beauty pageant toddler, or a drunk sorority girl, or a retarded girl from a group home, or a girl with one leg who has gone missing (the girl, not the leg).

The only thing to know about this show is that there will always be a twist. It's not who you initially think it is. The rapist is really...The twin brother, the sister in law with a basting tool, the handsome, married cop, the ex-husband's new boyfriend, the gynecologist, the dentist's son, the drippy guy who didn't fit in. That is the rape fantasy of television where all of the perps get caught, and the rape is part of a larger scheme, not an act of violence so common that it has its own series.

Tad has folded his knife and fork neatly over his plate. His napkin too is crushed into a tight ball on top of his unfinished meat sauce. He's looking beyond me, into the restaurant, eyes searching.

"Well, I think we should call it a night," he says, almost standing.

"Have a seat," I suggest. Not in a mean way. Just firm, with authority.

He flinches just as Felicity appears at our table. "Dessert anyone?" Tad excuses himself and hurries towards the men's room. Felicity leans over the table. She wears a tight black t-shirt that accentuates her breasts. In white cursive letters across the front, it reads, *Eat at Hot Mama's*. "Look," she says, "I can tell you guys are on your first date."

"Third," I say.

"Okay, third. He seems like a nice guy, but I just want you to know he comes here a lot. With dates, I mean."

"Like how often?"

"Once a week?"

I fake a chortle, which isn't easy to do, chortling. "Oh, whatevs," I say. "I don't even know if I like him."

I tell her about this time I was at a frat party. My friend has had too much to drink and she vomited on herself, but I got there the moment before the guy, Tim Thompson, was able to rip off her clothes. I threw the DEK paddle at him and it winged on his head, knocking him from the bed and my friend and I got away. In the fantasy, we told everyone about the attempted rape. We don't call it sexual assault which sounds like someone got a little rough during sex. We tell our neighbors, the minister at church, the local paper, the police, our parents, CNN. And the rapist gets kicked out of his frat, and goes away for a long, long time and justice is served.

Except that didn't happen. Not quite like that anyway.

He's back from the bathroom and his face looks fresher and also redder, like he splashed water on it and patted it dry with a scratchy paper towel.

I tell him about what's really on my mind (since he asked), which isn't so much a fantasy as it is something I can't get out of my head. I'm in high school sitting next to my crush, John Dubos, in the front seat of his dad's purple Chevy Impala. Instead of taking me home after seeing *The English Patient*, he's taken me to the high school parking lot, which looks different in the dark, like an entirely new place. I can see the glow of the bleachers in the dark and the Y of the football field goal posts like other men standing in the field, watching.

He puts the car into park and says, "I've been waiting all night to do this." He lunges for me, his tongue down my throat, his hands on my brandnew cashmere baby pink GAP sweater, and I try to imagine it is romantic—his desire for me is such a huge, unwieldy thing, like the love in the movie where the two characters must have one another on a sandy beach before the guy goes down in a puddle jumper plane and gets burned within an inch of his life. They don't go into details, but you can just imagine his skin peels off as easy as skin off a grape. I'm trying to imagine this as something from the movie, but my thigh is wedged against the gear shift and my skirt is twisted up. A drop of John Dubos' sweat plops on my forehead. He pulls at my hand, bringing it to his khaki Dockers (also from the GAP?) and before you know it, it's out, this thing I've never seen, but only read about in romance novels, where they never describe it like this. This looks vaguely like the sea anemone we studied in Mr. Moon's biology class, with its wavy white stalk. John pushes me against the door so my head bangs against the glass. His hands are up my skirt and I'm thinking, Oh, god, what kind of underwear am I wearing? Having not prepared properly for this moment of my de-virginizing, I'm blushing to think that they're the kind that go all the way up to the waist. He doesn't seem to care, because off they go, ripped in half, and he's panting like some kind of animal in pain, puffs of air coming out that smell like popcorn. He's saving, "You like this? Huh? You like this?"

And I do not like it, but I like him, and I want him to like me. Which is why I don't exactly understand the next thing I do. I reach below the sea anemone and grab the sac there, again like some kind of creature from underwater, a jellyfish maybe. I squeeze the jellyfish as hard as I can. He goes still and then lets out a shriek as high and loud as a whistle. He rocks away from me, doubled over, knocking his lovely head against the steering wheel.

While he's recovering, I yank open the car door and start running. I am happy I wore Keds because I can sprint out of the parking lot without looking back. In school on Monday, and forever after, he avoids me and I think, Maybe we were meant to fall in love and I ruined it.

It's late and the restaurant has emptied. Tad says, "Did that happen to you?"

I might be attracted to him. I could bring him home. It would probably be okay. "Who's to say?"

The check sits on the table. Tad clears his throat. "I get your point of view. I get it. I have sisters."

"You do?"

"Yeah, and I worry about them all the time," he shakes his head. "I think...I wonder if I've ever..."

"Oh, you have," I tell him. I have folded the red paper placemat into a flower shape, the kind you can open and close with your fingers. I present it to him.

He takes it and it nearly catches fire on the now dim flame. Just to show him how progressive I am, I let him pay the bill.

I pat my lips with my napkin and ask to be excused. He says, "What? I mean, yeah, you don't need my permission."

Instead of going to the ladies' room, I slip out of the back door of the kitchen into the alleyway, where the busboys are smoking near the dumpster. "Hey," I say.

"Hey," they say.

Here is where I could have a fantasy about an almost gang-bang rape where we end up instead playing dice and talking about what we were like in middle school. We're not all that different, I think, holding my keys laced between my fingers. I whistle a show tune as I walk—this is another one from *Annie*—to show anyone who might be watching how not afraid I am.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Jeremiah Barker is a nonfiction writer from Chicago, IL. He is an MA + MFA candidate in Northwestern University's Litowitz Creative Writing Graduate Program and is currently at work on a collection of essays that address, among other topics, queer relationality and trauma, the racialization of the U.S. opioid epidemic, the metaphorics of addiction, and bisexual embodiment.

Brian Blanchfield is the author of three books of prose and poetry, including *Proxies: Essays Near Knowing*, a book of nonfiction that is part cultural close reading, part autobiographical reckoning. The recipient of book awards and artist grants from the Whiting Foundation, the Academy of American Poets, and the Howard Foundation, his poems and essays have appeared recently in *The Oxford American*, *Harper's*, *BOMB*, *Brick*, and the Wesleyan anthology *American Poets in the 21st Century*. He teaches creative writing at the University of Idaho and the Bennington Writing Seminars, and lives with his partner, the poet John Myers, in Moscow, Idaho.

SAM BOYER is a writer from Rockville, Maryland. He recently earned an MFA from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin, where he specialized in screenwriting and fiction.

RICHARD BURGIN is the author of three novels and nine story collections including, most recently, *Don't Think* and his selected stories, *A Thousand Natural Shocks*. His stories have won five Pushcart Prizes. His collection *The Identity Club* was selected as one of the 40 best books of fiction of the last decade. He is the founding editor of the literary journal *Boulevard*.

Anna Cabe's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bitch Media, Terraform, storySouth, The Toast, SmokeLong Quarterly, Joyland,* and *Fairy Tale Review,* among others. She received her MFA in fiction from Indiana University and was formerly the nonfiction editor for *Indiana Review*. She most recently was a 2018-2019 Fulbright Fellow in the Philippines.

EMIL DEANDREIS received an MFA from San Francisco State University. He's published two books, *Beyond Folly* (Blue Cubicle Press, 2013) and *Hard To Grip* (Schaffner Press, 2017), which was a Foreward Review INDY Finalist. He teaches English at College of San Mateo, and lives in the Bay Area with his wife.

Pam Diamond received an MFA from the Creative Writing Program of the University of Houston where she was awarded two Barthelme Fellowships and a Michener scholarship. Chapters of her environmental epic, *Possum*, *a novel* received a Texas PEN Award and the McGinnis-Ritchie Award for fiction and have been published in *Southwest Review*, *Gulf Coast* and elsewhere, and the novel is a finalist for the James Jones First Novel Fellowship. Her fiction was selected for two Top Twenty-five mentions in recent *Glimmer Train* fiction opens.

SHANGYANG FANG grew up in Chengdu, China. He writes poems both in English and Chinese. After completing his undergraduate degree in Civil Engineering at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, he is currently a Poetry Fellow at the Michener Center for Writers.

SCOTT GLODEN was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio. His stories have appeared in American Short Fiction, Glimmer Train, the Chicago Tribune's Nelson Algren Awards, The Masters Review, and Southern Humanities Review. He holds a Master's degree in Public Policy from Carnegie Mellon, and lives in New Orleans.

BARBARA HAMBY'S book of linked stories, *Lester Higata's* 20th *Century*, won the 2010 Iowa Short Fiction Award and was published by the University of Iowa Press. Her stories have recently appeared in *Boston Review*, *Shenandoah*, and *Five Points*.

MATTHEA HARVEY'S most recent book is *If the Tabloids Are True What Are You?* She is currently working on abook about clouds.

TERRANCE HARVEY is currently incarcerated. He is enrolled in the Pen City Writers program and is the recipient of a PCW fellowship from the University

of Texas at Austin. A loving father of two and an ardent voice dying to shout in the literary world, he is a man pushed by hope.

RACHEL HENG is the author of the novel, Suicide Club (Henry Holt, 2018), which was featured as a best summer read by outlets such as The Irish Times, ELLE, Gizmodo, NYLON, and Bustle and will be translated into ten languages worldwide. Her short fiction has received a Pushcart Prize Special Mention and Prairie Schooner's Jane Geske Award, and has appeared or is forthcoming in Glimmer Train, Guernica, McSweeney's Quarterly, Kenyon Review and elsewhere.

Bruce Holbert is the author of *Lonesome Animals* and *The Hour of Lead* in 2014 (both Counterpoint), which won the Washington State Book Award 2015. Holbert's new novel, *Whiskey*, was published by Farrar Straus & Giroux in March 2018.

Taisia Kitaiskaia, a recipient of fellowships from the James A. Michener Center for Writers and The Corporation of Yaddo, is the author of *Literary Witches: A Celebration of Magical Women Writers* (Hachette/Seal Press), a collaboration with artist Katy Horan; *Ask Baba Yaga: Otherworldly Advice for Everyday Troubles* and its forthcoming follow-up, *Ask Baba Yaga: Poetic Remedies for Troubled Times* (Andrews McMeel); and the forthcoming *The Nightgown and Other Poems* (Deep Vellum).

AIMEE LABRIE writes short fiction and is working on a novel. Her first short story collection, Wonderful Girl, was chosen as the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Fiction. Her stories have appeared in Zoetrope, Pleiades, Beloit Fiction Journal, Minnesota Review, Iron Horse Literary Review, Permafrost, and other literary journals. She lives in Princeton, NJ and teaches creative writing at Rutgers University.

J. Vera Lee wrote "Adequacy" as part of a short story collection/dissertation to earn her doctorate in English at UH Mānoa. Her work has appeared recently in *Asymptote* and *New American Writing* and is forthcoming in *Nat. Brut.* She works as a cataloging librarian at the Honolulu Museum of Art.

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LISA OLSTEIN is the author of four poetry collections, most recently, *Late Empire*. Her book-length lyric essay, *Pain Studies*, will be published in spring 2020. She teaches at the University of Texas at Austin.

Tracey Rose Peyton is currently an MFA candidate at the Michener Center for Writers. Her short fiction has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Guernica*, and elsewhere.

Christa Romanosky is a native of Northern Appalachia. Her work has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *The Kenyon Review Online*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and elsewhere. She has held previous fellowships with the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center and The James Merrill House. She is a current fiction fellow with the Tulsa Artist Fellowship.

ANJOLI ROY teaches high school in Honolulu. With a PhD in English from UH Manoa, she is also a VONA alum. Her award-winning and nominated works include "Tigers, Woman, Eels: A family Narrative" (winner of a COG Page to Screen Award judged by Gish Jen), "Birthing Ancestors" (nominated for Best of the Net and Pushcart prizes) and "Love Letter to Kurseong" (third-place winner of an Ian MacMillan Creative Nonfiction Award). Anjoli is founder and cohost of "It's Lit," a podcast that features writers to love and the music their work plays best around and has showcased more than 100 writers to date.

ALYSSA SONGSIRIDEJ is a writer and editor living in Cambridge, MA. Her writing can be found in *The Offing*, *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, and *QWERTY Magazine*, and has been honored by the Ragdale Foundation, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the Vermont Studio Center, and the Ucross Foundation. She is also editor-in-chief of *Storyscape Journal*.

NAFISSA THOMPSON-SPIRES earned a PhD in English from Vanderbilt University and an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in McSweeney's "The Organist," The Paris Review Daily, Dissent, Buzzfeed Books, The White Review, and other publications. She currently works as an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing. Her first book, Heads of the Colored People, was longlisted for the 2018

National Book Award, the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Award, and the Aspen Words Literary Prize; was a finalist for the Kirkus Prize and Los Angeles Times Book Prize for first fiction; and has won the PEN Open Book Award, the Los Angeles Times Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction, and an Audie Award. She is also the recipient of a 2019 Whiting Award.

MORGAN THOMAS is a writer from the Gulf Coast. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Electric Literature*, *The Greensboro Review*, the *Ploughshares* Blog, and elsewhere.

ANAH TILLAR spent the first half of her life flitting through the east coast states and the second half living on the hippy side of Colorado. She holds a BA in English from the University of Northern Colorado. Her work has appeared in *Firewords* and *The Crucible*. She currently lives in Virginia and is an MFA candidate in fiction at Hollins University.

CORINNA VALLIANATOS is the author of the story collection My Escapee, winner of the Grace Paley Prize for Short Fiction and New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice. Her fiction has appeared in Tin House, McSweeney's, A Public Space, The Kenyon Review, and elsewhere, and her novel, The Beforeland, will be published in Fall 2020. She lives in Claremont, CA.

S. KIRK WALSH'S debut novel, *The Elephant of Belfast*, will be published by Counterpoint Press in 2021. Her work has appeared in *Guernica*, *Electric Literature*, the *New York Times Book Review*, *Longreads*, and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, among others. She lives in Austin, Texas, and is the founder of Austin Bat Cave, a writing and tutoring center for kids that provides free writing workshops throughout the city. Walsh is currently at work on a novel about Detroit, Michigan.

Born and raised in Pittsburgh, PA, LEAH YACKNIN-DAWSON lives in Austin. She recently earned an MFA from the New Writers Project at the University of Texas at Austin, where she now teaches creative writing. Leah is the recipient of the Fania Kruger Fellowship, a finalist for *Glimmer Train*'s Very Short Fiction Contest and semi-finalist for American Short Fiction's Short(er) Fiction Contest.

JASON ZENCKA writes and teaches in Syracuse, NY, where he lives with his wife, Florencia Lauria. His story "Catacombs" opens the 2018 Pushcart Prize Anthology.

KATHERINE ZLABEK'S story collection, WHEN, winner of The Journal's 2018 Non/Fiction Collection Prize, is forthcoming from the OSU Press in Fall 2019. Her stories and essays have appeared in Boulevard, The Kenyon Review, Ninth Letter, and other journals. Ricochet Editions published her chapbook, LET THE RIVERS CLAP THEIR HANDS, in 2015. She currently teaches writing and literature in Washington, DC.

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