SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2013

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Sixfold is a collaborative, democratic, completely writer-voted journal. The writers who upload their manuscripts vote to select the prize-winning manuscripts and the short stories and poetry published in each issue. All participating writers' equally weighted votes act as the editor, instead of the usual editorial decision-making organization of one or a few judges, editors, or select editorial board.

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Sarah Einstein

Walking and Falling

You're walking.
And you don't always realize it, but you're always falling.
With each step you fall forward slightly.
And then catch yourself from falling.
Over and over, you're falling.
And then catching yourself from falling.
And this is how you can be walking and falling at the same time.
—Laurie Anderson

The steady *thump thump thump* of the headboard was replaced by a less rhythmic, more insistent, knocking on the ceiling. Leo slumped back into the pillows and sighed.

"I'm sorry. It's my crazy upstairs neighbor," he said, shrugging up at Emily. "If I turn on the stereo, she pounds on the floor. If I turn on the TV, she pounds on the floor. I fell once, and she pounded on the floor at the crashing sound I made as I hit my head on the coffee table. Sometimes, even if I'm just sitting around reading a book and nothing at all is turned on, she pounds on the floor."

"Really?" Emily took one of the pillows from behind Leo's head and tucked it between the headboard and the wall, then resumed her bouncing. "Wow. You're fifty years old and you still have to worry about being too loud for the neighbor?" She laughed and sped up a little, her dreads dangling over his chest, their little bells like wind chimes that sounded in time with her movements.

"Well, it's the first time she's had the opportunity to complain about this particular sort of noise," Leo said. "I moved in here two years ago, right after Joy and I got divorced, and, honestly, you're the first person . . . " He wasn't sure how to end his sentence, so he let it trail off. He was tempted to just to tell her the truth. *You're the first person I've slept with since I got divorced, which also means you're the first person I've slept with since my dick stopped working.* But he couldn't say that, because for all Emily knew, his dick was working just fine. So he pretended, instead, to be really into the fucking

and let his words trail off.

Emily sat up, bracing herself against the bars of his hospital bed and making little circles with her hips. *This isn't bad,* thought Leo, *but it's also not exactly sex. It's like porn, or a lap dance, or like the memory of sex, but not my memory. The memory of someone who would have dated a girl like this back in college, maybe.* She was so much younger than he, twenty-six. Three years older than his daughter Rebecca, though he tried not to think about that. Leo watched as Emily rocked back and forth. She looked like the girls who had danced near the stage at the reggae festivals he'd gone to as a young man. He'd admired those girls the way, he supposed, everyone admired pretty girls who were free with themselves and whose wildness seemed more feral than crazy. But he hadn't wanted to get to know them or imagined they would have much interest in a guy like him; a guy who wore khakis and blue oxford cloth shirts to classes in finance and accounting. Besides, he was already dating Joy then. She'd called those girls "earth cookies," laughed at their unshaven legs and said they'd be sorry when they were older that they hadn't worn bras.

Emily took his right hand and brought it to her breast, holding it there a second and then reaching out again for the rail of his bed. Leo tried to hold her nipple between his thumb and the curled fingers of his hand. He focused on the shard of crystal that hung between her breasts from a dirty braid of embroidery thread, watching it sway, but doing anything at all with his hands these days required more concentration than he could muster and, after a second or two, he had to let his hand drop back onto the bed. He watched her closely then, trying to decide if her excitement was genuine or theatrical.

Joy had always said the sex was still good, even after the MS had limited their options so that she always had to be on top, a position she hadn't liked much. She'd said she didn't mind the Caverject, although he knew she disliked needles and, as time went on, was less and less willing to give him the injection, insisting it would be fine if they just cuddled. And, because he didn't really think it was the needle Joy had come to mind, he didn't do it himself. But Leo hadn't wanted Emily to know about the Caverject, and so had gone into the bathroom

and given himself the injection in the side of his penis. It had been tricky; his hands didn't want to do such delicate things, but he'd succeeded. Now he watched the clock. It had taken about ten minutes for the shot to take effect, and that had been half an hour ago. He was on the downside of this erection and began to worry that it would fade soon.

Leo reached out and laid his hands on Emily's thighs. He tried to remember the moments of urgency just before an orgasm, the noises he had made, how he'd moved when he and Joy had made love in the old days, so that he could recreate that now. In the weeks since it had begun to seem this would happen—that he and Emily would end up in his bed one afternoon when she came to deliver the pot he bought from her because it eased his muscle spasms and, if he were honest, some of his boredom—Leo had been practicing. He'd lain in bed at night, composing a series of moans and hurried breathing that he hoped would convince Emily he'd come, but quietly so as not to rouse his neighbor. He had already told her that he didn't produce much ejaculate, explaining it in the same rush of breath in which he had told her he'd once been pretty well-hung but the MS had somehow stolen centimeters from his cock along with everything else it had taken from him. It was something he found himself explaining to almost everyone who saw him naked: nurses, doctors, even sometimes the aides who came on weekdays to help him bathe, dress, and get his meals, though only if they were young men or old women. When the healthcare agency sent girls, and usually they sent girls, he kept quiet and pretended that somehow his nakedness with them was not *real* nakedness. To acknowledge it and face their clinical disinterest would have been a deeper sort of humiliation

The clock showed half-past the hour and Leo decided it was time to start the ruse. He began to moan, to breathe heavily, and then—unexpectedly, unstoppably—to chuckle. At first, it was a self-conscious giggle, but it grew into a full on, raucous belly laugh. Emily stopped her rocking, leaned down so that her dreadlocks surrounded him in a patchouli-scented curtain, and looked at him sideways.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Leo said, trying to catch his breath. "It's just . . ." The laughter had him now, and for a few more

seconds he couldn't stop to speak. Emily flopped over onto the bed beside him. His manufactured erection stood alone like the punch line to his private joke. "Look," Leo said at last. "I really like you. I really liked . . . this. But it wasn't real. I mean, it *was* real, but it wasn't what it seemed." He turned onto his side and covered himself with an old burgundy afghan. "I had to give myself a shot just to get hard, and although it felt good, what you were doing, it was in a sort of distant way." He took her hand and trailed her fingers over his lips. "You're a beautiful young woman, but my body just doesn't work like that any more." He tried to read her face, but she just smiled as if it were nothing.

"Okay," she said and then tossed the pillow she'd earlier used as a baffle back onto the bed and, turning one of her long, tanned legs to the side, banged the headboard hard against the wall until Leo was afraid she would leave a hole in the drywall. "Oh yeah, man! That's it. Do it just like that. Don't stop. Just like that. Oh, fuck yeah, Leo!" Emily moaned and brought her headboard drum solo to a crescendo.

"Uhm, what the hell?" Leo stared at her in bemusement.

"For the crazy lady upstairs," Emily said. She laughed. "Because you know she's sitting up there, perfectly still, trying to hear everything just so she can complain about it later to the condo manager. Crazy upstairs neighbors always do." Then she turned and grabbed a bottle of water from the nightstand, one he'd left half empty there the night before, opened it, and took a long drink. "You want some?"

Leo took the bottle. "Thank you," he said, though he wasn't thanking her for the water but for having safeguarded his pride. He held the bottle to his lips and drained it.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, because he didn't know what else to offer her.

"I'm starving," she said. And then, as if it was information he would need in the future, "I'm always starving after sex." He liked the way she said it, the way it suggested that even though she knew everything now, she still wanted to be in his bed. But it also scared him. If this became something, how would he explain it to Rebecca, to Joy? Emily was the sort of person from whom they had consciously kept themselves apart. He tried to imagine introducing her. "This is Emily, my

new girlfriend. We met because I buy pot from her." It struck him as a funny that, even now, his dick was still getting him in trouble.

"There are some gorgeous strawberries in the fridge, and some melon." Leo began to turn himself toward the edge of the bed.

"Why don't I get them?" Emily asked and then, without waiting for an answer, got out of bed. Her body was long and thin. Leo watched the tension in her thigh muscles as she stood, the way her calf flexed and relaxed as she stretched. He admired her beauty, but it was a bittersweet admiration. He hated to watch people walk.

In the kitchen, he could hear her opening the refrigerator, rooting around in the drawers and cabinets for a plate, a knife. She was singing to herself, although he was certain he must have been mishearing the words: *And the beer I had for breakfast, silver bullet to the brain. And the beer I had for lunch was a bottle of Night Train. And the beer I had for dinner was my crazy neighbor's pills, we had to sit down on skateboards just to make it down the hill.* It dawned on Leo just how young twenty-six really was. Or could be. He was married and working toward junior partner in his law firm at twenty- six. Listening to Emily sing, he thought that she sounded like Rebecca when she was a teenager obsessed with Smash Mouth and would sit for hours in her room, replaying that God-damned song about walking on the sun until he couldn't stand it any longer and would make an excuse to drive to the store or back to the office just to get away from the endless repetition of it. How he missed that song now, and Becky in her old room that she had insisted on painting a hideous combination of black and purple in the old house that Joy had insisted on buying even though it was more room than they needed or, really, could afford. He missed having other people around to insist on things he didn't really want: missed the opportunities for giving in to them, for largesse, for generosity. Now, Joy lived in an even bigger house that her new husband could not afford. Becky was finishing her third year in law school. She'd followed in his footsteps, first NYU and then Columbia. She rarely had time to come up from the city and visit, but she called almost every night to ask how he was and

tell him about her day. She turned aside his questions about birthday presents or offers to send her cash, saying only *I'm fine, Dad, and you need to be careful with your money*. He missed the days when she would whine for things she would forget almost as soon as they were bought and thought of him as a man of limitless resources.

Joy had left him because of the MS. She had never tried to hide it. He thought back to the day when her engagement ring had fallen down the drain of the bathroom sink and, unable to hold the pipe wrench himself, he'd talked her through taking off the trap so she could recover it. At the time, it had reminded him of the first years of their marriage, when they were poor and in love and had to do everything for themselves. Taking apart the sink had made him believe they were partners again, like in the old days. Later, Joy told him that was the day she knew she was leaving. She was, she said, too old and too tired to be both the husband and the wife in this marriage. Sometimes he managed to hate her for that, but more often he understood why she had to go. He imagined that Joy would be dubious about Emily's reasons for being here; would tell him to be sure he kept his wallet hidden and counted the silver when she left. He wished he could stop thinking of her.

Emily returned, balancing a plate of cut fruit in one hand and carrying a bottle of chardonnay he had forgotten was in the refrigerator in the other. It seemed early in the day for wine, barely four o'clock, but it also seemed like a lovely thing to lie in bed on a Saturday afternoon with a pretty young girl and a glass of wine. Resting the plate on his belly, she climbed in beside him and poured a third of the bottle into a single tumbler.

"I couldn't carry two glasses. I hope you don't mind sharing one," she said, and then took a long drink before passing the glass to him.

"I don't mind at all," he said and took a very small sip. The wine could make him tired and he did not want to be tired just now. While he held the glass, Emily got the big, woven bag she carried from the floor and dug around in it for a while, finally producing a dented Altoids tin. She opened it and took out a half-smoked joint and a lighter.

"Hey, wait!" Leo moved so quickly to stop her that he up-

set the plate on his stomach and scattered berries and melon across the comforter. "You can't smoke that in here."

"What do you mean, I can't smoke this in here?" Emily put the roach back in the tin and gathered the fruit. "I mean, you *buy* this shit from me."

"Yes, but I don't smoke it." Leo gestured toward the ceiling. "The last thing I need is for her to call the management company and tell them I'm smoking pot. I eat it. I make Leary Biscuits."

"What are Leary Biscuits?" Emily took another long drink of wine and fiddled with her lighter, turning the wheel over and over with her thumb. "You take a cracker, put a small bud of pot on it, then put some cheese on top and microwave it. It's named for Timothy Leary. He swore by them when he was posting on the web about dying from cancer."

"Seriously? If I knew you were doing that, I'd have brought you cheaper stuff. You're wasting your money and some really great smoke." Emily put the lighter and tin back in her bag and pulled out her camera.

"Can I take some shots of you?" She unscrewed the lens cap and walked backward toward the window.

"What?" Leo burrowed further down into the comforter. "Are you kidding? Now?"

Emily laughed. "Yes, now," she said, but she let the camera dangle from its strap around her wrist. "There is something beautiful about you in the rumpled bed, a little flushed. Something . . ." and for a moment she hesitated, as if she wasn't sure she should say the rest. "Something unexpected."

Emily had told Leo she moved to New York hoping to become a photographer, paying her way by selling the weed her brother grew back in Kentucky. Prices being what they were in the city, and particularly out here in the suburbs, she made enough to afford a one-room walk-up in Queens on her half of the take. Early on, she'd been in a few shows, but she figured out pretty quickly that galleries were only interested in showing the work she did that made Kentucky look like it hadn't changed since Dorothea Lange got famous photographing hollow-cheeked women surrounded by half-naked children on hardscrabble farms during the Depression. "The thing is," she had told him, "it really doesn't look like that any more. It's

still poor, but since Wal-Mart, poor doesn't look any different in Hazard Hollow than it does anywhere else. Nobody wants to see the pictures of what it's really like." She was close to giving up and going home, she'd said, but the money from the weed was still better here than any job she could get back in Harlan.

"So, what, you've decided to go from Dorothea Lange to Diane Arbus?" Leo asked angrily. He suddenly felt put on display. "Put the camera away. Please." He knew he sounded too harsh, and that she hadn't meant to insult him. "Come and sit down."

Emily put the camera back in her bag and flopped down beside him. "You're right. I'm sorry." She stretched out and rested her head against his hip, gazing up at him. "People keep telling me my work is cliché. But look at me, I am a fucking cliché." She ran a hand through her dreads. "Hillbilly. Hippie chick. Drug dealer. Another hack trying to make it big in New York."

"That's not true," Leo assured her. It occurred to him then that maybe he could help. He knew people; the wife of an old business associate who ran a gallery in Montauk, a college friend who was the creative director at one of the big ad agencies in the city. He began to see how he might be of use to her, though he wasn't yet ready to say so. He wanted to know that she was here because she enjoyed his company, not because he might be able to open some doors.

"I guess it doesn't matter. I'm making it okay on what I earn from the weed and from shooting bar mitzvahs and weddings when I can get the work."

"But you can't do that forever," Leo said, although he wasn't certain it was true. His friends didn't include any drug dealers. He had no idea what she could do, or for how long she could do it, so he added, "Can you?"

"No, probably not. Not unless the country gets a whole lot less uptight and legalizes weed, at least for people like you."

People like you stung, and Leo winced. But he had just been thinking about people like her: people who came to New York with more dream than talent, people from places like small town Kentucky, people who sold pot, dropped the g's from their gerunds, said *you all*. He ran his hand along the inside

of her leg, up her thigh, and just looked at her for a moment.

For months, Emily had stopped by every other Saturday between noon and one o'clock. She would ring the doorbell and then, because after the first time she visited Leo decided he didn't want his neighbors seeing her on his doorstep for the five or so minutes it took for him to get from his lift chair to the front door, let herself in through the door he left unlocked. The transactions were quick and formal, and then she was on her way, leaving his apartment smelling of patchouli. But after a while, things changed. At first, it was just that she would linger, ask about the photographs on his mantle and how his week had gone. Sometimes he would offer her a soda or, if there was baseball on TV, a beer. They were both Mets fans, which she said surprised her. She'd thought everyone in Westchester cheered for the Yankees. Sometimes she'd stay for an inning or two.

Then one day she started her visit by putting on the kettle and brewing a pot of nettle tea because she had, she said, read on the Internet that nettles were good for people with MS. He had been so surprised that she had read up on this that he hadn't known what to say. He was touched, if dubious about the real value of the tea. Neither Rebecca nor Joy would ever have thought to do this small, lovely thing.

After that visit, he noticed she started to dress up a little. Instead of ripped jeans and old T-shirts, she wore long, tiered skirts and gauzy blouses with no bra and she would bend over him, letting his gaze settle on her breasts, when she gave him the little baggie full of pot. They would sit in his den for a while, sometimes listening to music she brought, other times looking at books of photography he had ordered from Amazon just to show her. Gordon Parks, Jack Delano, Alfred Stieglitz. It was clear they were flirting with each other, and although it was unexpected, Leo wasn't about to scrutinize this gift from the Universe too closely. So he'd asked his doctor for a dose of Caverject and, in a move he'd been planning for weeks, pulled her close and kissed her full on the lips when she'd bent with his tea this afternoon.

Now, looking at her, he realized that he although he'd carefully planned everything leading up to this moment, he had given no thought at all to what might happen after the sex was

over and they lay together in bed, the question of whether or not this was the start of something hanging over their heads.

"Why are you here?" he asked her.

"What do you mean? I come here every other Saturday. It's our arrangement." "No, I mean, why are you in bed with me?" Leo was afraid to hear her answer, but without it he didn't know what to do next.

"Because you treat me like a real person," Emily said. "You talk to me. You order books by photographers you admire just to show me." She tapped at the string of silver bells tied around her ankle. Their ringing reminded him of the sound of a Tibetan prayer wheel. "Most people just want to get their weed and get rid of me."

Leo stroked her thigh. In a moment of too much clarity, he saw the ways in which his days and hers were alike, how they were both aimless and mostly alone. He felt a new tenderness toward her that he suspected was akin to pity. And, although he hated the pity of others, it was a thrill to feel it in himself for someone else.

"You know, if you don't mind helping me get dressed, there is a restaurant I'd really like to take you to," he said suddenly. "A little French place that just opened up in town. It might be a little dressy . . ." For a moment, Leo wrestled with his own snobbish tendencies. But he looked at her there, on the bed, and saw that no matter what she wore, she was a beautiful young woman. He was a lucky man to have enjoyed the afternoon with her, so he decided not to care what his neighbors would think when they saw the two of them together, he in his Brooks Brothers suit and the ugly black Crocs that were the only shoes he could wear anymore because his feet were so swollen, she in her peasant blouse and old Keds high tops. Let them have propriety. He would take beauty in whatever form it offered itself to him.

Emily raised herself up on one arm and asked, "Are you really sure? I like you, but this is enough. You don't have to take me out."

"But I want to take you out," Leo said. He gestured to the plate of ruined fruit on the nightstand. "This place has great food, and you're always starving after sex. I wouldn't be a gentleman if I didn't feed you." He laughed to let her know that he

was joking, though he wasn't certain that he was. As soon as he'd said the word *gentleman,* he realized he had the chance to be one again. Not a patient or a client or an old friend on hard times, but a man who could choose to be a stand-up guy or just another asshole who took what Emily had to give and then hurried her out the door.

In the driveway, Leo handed Emily the keys to the BMW. "Let's take my car. It's not good for it to sit here without being driven." He didn't know, though, if he was showing off for her or embarrassed to pull up in front of the restaurant in her old pick-up truck with its peacenik bumper stickers and amoeba-shaped patches of Bondo.

As soon as the Emily slid the key into the ignition, the car radio blared *Come Together.* "I hate the Beatles, mostly," she said. "But I like the really late, psychedelic stuff." And suddenly, they were both singing along, loudly and out of tune. *He got feet down below his knee. Hold you in his armchair you can feel his disease. Come together, right now, over me.*

Leo thought about telling her that John Lennon had written this song for Timothy Leary. He wanted to explain the whole history of it, about how he had been diagnosed with MS around the same time Leary was documenting the minutia of his dying on the Web. That's where he'd learned about the Leary Biscuits, and that the old LSD guru had wanted his head frozen but, at the last minute, changed his mind and decided to be cremated instead. Leary's ashes had been shot into orbit, along with those of twenty- three other people, and circled the earth for six years before they fell back toward the ground, burning up on reentry. He wanted to tell her how he'd read about all of this just as he was learning to live with the knowledge that he had MS but hadn't yet developed any debilitating symptoms, didn't even really know what the diagnosis meant. He had paid careful attention to the deliberate way in which Leary had orchestrated his own dying, and this had lead him to make certain crucial decisions about what he did, and did not, want for himself. Buying the pot from her was part of a plan he'd formed a long time ago. Back then, he had said he didn't want to live beyond the point where he couldn't take care of himself, but all of that had changed as he'd slowly lost the ability to walk without a walker, to cook for himself,

to even dress or shower without assistance. He wanted to tell her that the worse his symptoms got, the more he wanted to outlive them, but there were days when he wasn't certain why. Empty, lonely days when it seemed that all he did was not give up. He was tempted to wonder aloud if maybe she were going to change all that, and to say that he'd decided he didn't care what Becky or Joy or the people at the restaurant would think of her. But she was singing in the simple, unselfconscious voice of a child and it occurred to him then that if he wanted to keep her around, some truths, some hopes, he would have to keep to himself.

Emily pointed up through the windshield at a hand clutching a partially drawn curtain above them. "Crazy Lady at twelve o'clock," she said and then raised her middle finger, not so much in the direction of the window, but as if she were flipping off the whole world. She laughed, then backed out of the driveway fast enough to leave behind a black skid mark and the smell of burning rubber. Leo could see his neighbor reach for her phone. Because he couldn't raise his middle finger separate from his others any longer, he just waved and smiled.

Jessica Bryant Klagmann

In the Forgotten Corner of the World

Most nights he just starts screaming. She hears him, his voice hailing from over the trees to where she's sitting on the back porch. He yells out the beautiful words he collects throughout the day and she is too far away to make them out, but they lead her to three assumptions about him anyway: whatever they are, the words are important to someone, even if that someone is only him. He finds something, pure pleasure or comfort maybe, in saying them. He likes the way it feels, the vibration of sound, hovering just before leaving his mouth. She imagines the words, plays around with choosing the ones *she* finds pleasing. One day, walking the road that connects their cabins, she might confess the game and ask if any of her guesses were right.

Other nights she hears only coughing, then dry heaving. She pictures him sitting in his driveway by the fire pit, hunched over with a paper bag between his knees. A habit of drinking too much, maybe. The sky darkens in distinctly changing shades until reaching dusky light and then bouncing back to brightness. It seems, on these nights, that his voice has left him, that it would still project the words if it could. It tries, with urgency, and fails. What comes out is guttural, impatient, pained. It's a sorrowful, messy language.

On this night, the smoke from the wildfires still lingers over the hills and his voice sounds muffled, as if the air is too full already. She is sitting on her back deck with a mason jar half filled with wine. Though it is supposedly still summer, August, she wears a wool hat, either because the temperature continues to drop at night or because the habit makes her feel secure. She thinks she hears the word "blackberry" and says it too, in her head, over and over, before picking up the jar and taking it inside. She imagines it must be close to midnight, but the sun doesn't go down and trying to guess the time is useless.

The paper prints another story about her missing husband. Each time she is reminded of what she already knows. That he may not be coming back. That it is probably hopeless. But there is something new in the writing this time. Something different from the other articles. Something the police had neglected to mention when they spoke, just days ago. Things are not what they seem, the paper suggests. This time, the writer is skeptical, even suspicious.

It has been months since his disappearance, when the smells of nature were still locked under a shell of hard-packed snow and when morning ice fog still hovered over the pavement. Then spring breakup had come and gone and the world dried out again and here Alaska was, facing a new winter with a sun that flirts with setting but still refuses.

His ice-fishing trips occurred yearly and the terms were simple. He would go. She would stay in Boston.

This time was different. Once she hadn't heard from him—once enough time had gone by for her to begin worrying—she had impulsively followed him. Not knowing exactly what she was getting into or where he was, other than the name of the town where he had started out: Fairbanks. Thinking her presence alone might draw him back. Thinking they would find him somewhere. Who knows, maybe even alive. But they hadn't, and the summer had felt compressed and now it dwindles and this woman—this journalist—has the nerve to suggest that maybe he had *intentionally* gone missing.

Her stomach turns at the thought of him out there somewhere doing God knows what. And if he is, then what has she become? A joke? A story? One notecard tacked onto his timeline?

She has seen the name Reed on the mailbox by the main road, and she adopts it as the screamer's name. Early walkers, living at opposite ends of the same road. Hers, the quietest of dead ends—her neighbors, black spruce and redpolls.

When they cross paths on the road they talk briefly and only about things that don't matter, or things that wouldn't matter anywhere else in the world. She does not tell him about herself, why she is here, or that she is waiting for something, someone.

He says, “I’m going to break an ankle one of these days. Isn’t someone supposed to fill in these potholes?”

She shrugs. “Your landlord, maybe. Mine. The city.”

“We’re the forgotten corner of the world here. The annex. Anyway, I guess I don’t know that I’d want them gone. I could see myself missing them after. And then there wouldn’t be the puddles either.”

The front pockets of his sweatshirt are full with the bulk of what she imagines are stones or sticks or something else he has picked up along the road. He is a gatherer, a collector of whatever catches his eye.

“That’s optimistic,” she says, looking straight into his green eyes because they are never focused on hers and that makes it safe. “But I’ll give up the puddles in favor of my ankles.”

She is learning—this is Alaska. But it is not the Alaska she imagined, the one of postcards and brochures, sparkling with glaciers and purple sunsets. This is the Interior. There is burning spruce. The sky is orange, as if aflame. It is not pretty. It is not what she expected when she stuffed what she could, on a whim, in a backpack and hopped a plane. A twenty-four hour trip that left her weary enough to not care about the ramshackle state of the cabin she’d rented over the phone. Or the fact that her eyes had skipped over the key word—“dry”—which meant she’d have an outhouse and would be boiling dish water and finding somewhere else to shower.

Here, the common has become extraordinary; the fantastic, boring.

He tucks his hands into his jeans and looks off to the side of the road. She’s okay with the moments of distraction now and then. When they talk, his eyes trace the top of her head, her straight bangs, long brown hair, bony shoulders. The eyes always stop at her hands as if not knowing where to go once reaching her fingertips. She wonders about the line between her face and the trees behind her, how often his eyes wander back and forth over it, from one territory to the other. If the image he sees before him is two-dimensional. If he knows the meaning of boundaries.

The yellow butterflies linger. The swallowtails. *Papilio glaucus*. They gather around the patchy water on the road, rubbing wings. A jittery and absentminded congregation.

There is a great expanse of land here. An abundance that outweighs them. The space stretching between people is—or should be—by nature, much greater than anywhere else she has known. But still, it is too easy sometimes, to get too close. She brushes up against the rough edges of others more often than she is comfortable with.

"That thing they do," she says, pointing to the butterflies. "It's called 'puddling' I guess."

"No shit," he says, drawing out the words. A statement, not a question, as if it seems impossible. He smiles, delighted.

"No shit," she answers.

He whispers the word twice, cataloguing it, and then says, "That's so appropriate. I'm floored. Here's one: eudaemonia."

"Sounds like a disease."

"And yet it's practically the opposite. This entire road is currently in a sweet state of eudaemonia. Think about it." Then he hands her a rock from his pocket, nothing particularly special, and she nods in response. His fingers are dirty. He turns to go.

She says, "Let's keep the puddles. Boots next time."

He doesn't look back, just raises a fist high above his head and shakes it like he's rooting for her team. She repeats "eudaemonia" to herself four or five times and decides it is still not a beautiful word. The rock stays hidden in her hand until she is standing in her own driveway. Home. Quiet. She looks at it—oval and dark and speckled with bits of mica, the kind of rock that probably looks much more glamorous underwater but loses its shine when it dries—and brings it inside for the windowsill.

She sits outside on these nights and rests her feet on the dog's back and watches the woods and there is nothing else she is responsible for. She doesn't owe anything to anyone. There are no cabins behind hers, only wild blueberry bushes, more than a few abandoned trucks, and a rusting sled-dog kennel. Twisted chicken wire and trampled circles of dirt where the dogs must have run themselves ragged in a frenzy once upon a time. The road leading away is at her back, a desolate mile. Only four other cabins, and she rarely sees anyone unless she makes the effort. The only sound, be-

sides the trumpets of the migrating sandhill cranes, is his voice snaking through the trees.

Her husband had tried to get her to jog with him every morning. He would get up before the sun and put on his shorts and sneakers before she even had time to brush her teeth. He'd plead with her from the other room where he was already stretching his calves, but she only ever stood in the doorway, mouth full of toothpaste, and shook her head. She had always been a walker.

And now, finally, she is here running after him, in a place meant to be taken in slowly and quietly. A place that lets you settle on your own pace and length of stride.

That morning she had taken the dog out earlier than usual, craving a bit of silence. Her coffee went with her on the road and she spent her time thinking about simple things—her slow feet moving and the intentional tromping through of puddles. It was just before Reed's driveway that she saw him perched on his toes at the edge of the road, peering up into a tree. One hand rested on the trunk. His heels touched the ground and he spoke as if they were already mid-conversation.

"I've been meaning to ask you this," he'd said. "Sounds weird. I don't know. But are you into swamps?"

She had looked at him, perplexed. "That's something you've been meaning to ask me?"

"Let me try again. How much would you say you like swamps? Would you call yourself a swamp-walker? How likely is one to find you knee-deep in the mud?"

She had shrugged. "Well. I'm not adverse to the squishiness."

"What about whiskey in your coffee? How much would you say you like that?" He'd taken a flask from his back pocket.

"I'd say they go hand in hand pretty well," she'd said, smiling and holding out her mug.

He had repeated the series—swamps, whiskey, coffee, the perfect combination—and told her he was on his way to the bog to pick blueberries. It sounded something like an invitation, but she ignored it and he didn't say anything more forward other than to mention a bonfire at his cabin later that evening.

"I don't know if I have time," she'd said. "But I'll do my ut-

most."

The dog belongs to her husband, but she is growing used to its reliance on her. He follows at her heels, while she carries three things awkwardly: a pan of cornbread, the same album she brings whenever she is invited somewhere, and a bottle of Wild Turkey. The sky is waves of intense orange that bleed upward into yellow and then dark blue directly overhead.

She is walking alone again, as she had in her first weeks, before they met. Before they exchanged daily greetings and before she began to notice his voice each night. Before she put two and two together.

Something moves off to her right, but by the time her eyes focus it has disappeared. There are only the gaps between trees, tall grass, and a towering piece of heavy machinery—its purpose unknown—left to rust. It has been sitting there all summer, a great mess of greasy pipes and cords strangling it. As if they are against it, instead of part of its being and vital to its movement. Without any doubt, she knows it was a moose she saw and doesn't feel as if she has missed out on a moment bonding with nature, with this place. She sees them everywhere now, roaming streets and yards as free as people do.

His fire pit is already blazing when she gets there and he has trampled through the brush around his cabin and dragged out piles of wood to burn. Reed is poking a piece of fish around a frying pan with one hand, using the shaky other to pour whiskey into a coffee mug. His aim falters when he sees her and it trickles down the side.

They fry halibut in beer batter and drink whiskey sours. It never gets dark but the moon is clear and the air begins to cool. He gets a flannel blanket for them and spreads it on the rocky driveway in front of the fire pit. To keep herself from pulling obsessively at the fabric, she gets up to put on some music.

The number of plants inside his cabin surprises her. He seems so scattered most of the time, she has never imagined him responsibly caring for anything. She puts on *The Last Waltz* and turns the speakers toward the window screen.

Through the window she watches him adjust the blanket and poke at the fire a few times. He tilts her mug of whiskey and peers into it, but it is still almost full so he puts it back in place and stretches his legs out and waits.

They lie on their backs and listen to The Band and sit up now and again to sip their drinks and pat the dog on the back.

"That is my favorite name in the world," he says, when "Evangeline" comes on. "It's a perfect name, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I've never met a single person with that name," she says, picking bits of ash from her sweater and tossing them to the ground.

"Well of course not," he says. "Neither have I. But fiction's a damned fine thing isn't it?"

"It should be. Why would anyone ever *create* something ugly on purpose?"

"That orange color in the sky. I don't know what to call it. I've never been able to describe it, but it really deserves some describing."

She scans the horizon and knows exactly which shade he is referring to. It is a Creamsicle. It is the outer edges of a sunflower petal. "I don't know either," she says. "And I'm generally alright with words. When I got here last winter, just before breakup, the world seemed tilted. That's something I don't know how to describe either. That feeling."

He nods. She feels him absorbing everything. "Yes. When it's forty below and nothing seems quite right. Everything is perfectly clear—it's so goddamn cold it's clear—but you feel hypnotized and dazed. And dizzy."

"There's a man who went missing last winter."

"I read about it," he says. "That happens."

"I think maybe he was feeling it too. Like the world was slanted somehow. Not quite making sense."

"It's a common feeling. A common situation. Overestimating yourself, underestimating this vast place that could swallow you whole without even a hiccup. We really need to be more in awe. This song reminds me of my childhood," he tells her. "We'd go on these excruciating road trips to Nova Scotia and my parents would always make us sing along with this old music. It wasn't so old back then I guess. Now I sing all the time. In my house, in the woods, in bars."

She is not as interested as she thinks she should be, and she wonders why she lied and said she didn't know if she had the time for this, when the only thing she has is time. Why she couldn't just admit the truth and say it out loud—the fact that they both have time is no reason they should have to spend it talking to one another.

Chickadees madly flit in and out of the trees above them. Collecting and storing—in caches all over the place—the food they'll need to make it through the approaching winter. Their constant state of acrobatics is overwhelming. Their energy exhausting.

It is two in the morning when she wakes up, the fire out, remembering only that the chickadees had made her feel nauseous and that she had tilted her head back, then eased herself to the ground. Another blanket is draped over her, the hood of her sweatshirt covering her face. Her eyes itch and the color of the sky is disorienting. She moves and finds that he is right beside her, also half covered by a blanket. His hand is on her hip. Half asleep, he says she should lie back down.

"I need to go home," she says, pushing her hood back.

"I'll go with you."

She insists there is no need, she lives half a mile away. He should go back to sleep. He says he doesn't blame her for wanting to walk home alone under such a magnificently eerie light. His encouragement is all too intimate.

The dog follows her down the driveway, swaying almost drunkenly. When she looks back she sees Reed is lying back down exactly as he was, not even bothering to pull the blanket over him.

When she gets home, the door is propped half open, but the dog still squeezes through the place where the screen has been pulled away from the frame—an entryway that makes her cabin a welcome retreat for other dogs in the neighborhood.

Everything is saturated with wildfire smoke. She knows he is sleeping, and for once, the night is entirely silent.

In the morning she sees there is a message on her machine. An apologetic voice tells her that they've located him, living down in Juneau with a woman named Gladys. The man—not

any of the officers she's spoken to before—says he's sorry repeatedly, in between sentences: "I'm sorry. We just managed to reach him. I'm sorry. Do you know this woman? I'm sorry, I shouldn't ask questions to your machine." Before he hangs up he says, "My name is Lang, by the way. Please call me if you need to."

He sounds as if he genuinely wants her to call him. He sounds as sorry as if he has committed the offense himself.

Something in her wrestles to be reckless. Knock on Reed's door and tell him everything about her life and her purpose here. How that purpose no longer exists. Then cry or scream or seduce him indifferently. That is what people do in these situations.

Her husband, the perpetual runner, the incessant mover, liked to use the word *ora*. A word his Italian grandmother taught him when he was young, a word that meant "now." He'd zip by the living room while she was reading in an armchair and insist they go out and do something. Anything at all, as long as there was action involved. A swim, a skiing lesson, a county fair. *Come on, let's go out. Time is too short. Ora, ora!*

This is how she remembers it. And this is what she remembers now, in the moment she learns she has not moved quickly enough.

She doesn't call the officer. She climbs the stairs to the loft, goes back to bed, and sleeps until evening.

When she goes outside she finds that Reed has been there and left a bird's nest sitting on the tree stump at the end of her driveway. It is filled with rose hips, the remnants of summer. She drives to the bar to do her laundry—as mundane a thing as she can think to do—intending to have a beer while her clothes swirl in the almost clean water next door. She has two, along with a steak sandwich and potatoes, while the dog sleeps at her feet. She passes him peanuts from time to time and he licks her fingers. Other dogs are snoring on the floor or the porch. The dim light—the only light in the place—comes from the open door.

With the last of her cash, she buys a lottery ticket and when she begins scratching at it with her fingernails, the man next to her slides a quarter across the counter. He doesn't turn

from watching the baseball game on the television hanging above the bar.

"Nothing?" he asks when she taps his shoulder to return the coin.

"Not surprising," she says, dropping the quarter into his thick hand. He leans forward over the bar and asks the bartender for another ticket. He slaps it on the counter in front of her, along with the quarter, and says, "You can keep that." Then he turns back to the game.

Photos wallpaper the walls. Women in frayed jeans standing by rivers and men in dirty Carhartts holding up game. Moose strippings and fish guttings. Dog teams panting in the packed snow, their mouths wide open—some caught by the camera mid-leap.

She tucks the card into her pocket and waits until she is outside to scratch it.

She pushes the bag of clean laundry into the narrow back seat of the cab. When she starts the truck, the dog smears his nose on the windshield in anticipation. Leaning back in the seat, she holds the card against the steering wheel and scrapes off the greasy film. The radio plays a bluegrass band. She holds the card up to make sure she hasn't won, then slips it through the barely open window onto the pavement.

The puddles on the road have dried, leaving divots of cracked dirt. She walks to his cabin, but Reed is not home. His driveway has not been cleaned up. Blankets lie crumpled in the dirt, cigarette butts and empty beer cans litter the fire pit.

The door is unlocked and she pokes around more adventurously than the night before. There are worn books and letters and photographs placed indiscriminately on his shelves and tacked to his walls. There is one of a girl, wearing a scarf around her black hair and a tutu-like skirt. She is holding a paint roller and the wall behind her is half white, half blue—an uneven streak of a line between the two colors.

She peeks into a box on the floor, full of letters. They have all come from the same person, someone named Morgan. She wonders if Morgan is the girl in the photo or his brother or a friend from another time. Not knowing leaves her uncom-

fortably jealous.

On the kitchen counter there are liquor bottles and boxes of pasta and a ceramic bowl overflowing with gray ash, a graveyard of cigarette butts. The sink is full of dishes and his blue five-gallon jug of water is dripping evenly. One trickle every three seconds. Wasteful. She turns the nozzle as far as it will go to stop it.

On the shelf by the door, as she turns the handle to leave, she notices a scattered pile of sticky notes. Each poses some variation of the question, "Do you like swamps?" She tears a note from the blank pad and scribbles the word *ora* on it and leaves it stuck to the front of his door.

She is halfway home and long before he is near, she hears his motorcycle coming down the road. His headlights—unnecessary as they are—eventually shine on the road and trees alternately, bouncing in synch with the bike as he rounds a corner and slows to a stop.

"Let's take a ride," he says. "Just to your end of the road. Not because you need one. Just because it's especially nice right now."

"I was gone today," she says, feeling it is important to have an excuse, but not sure for what.

"Hmm. Me too. Was thinking of playing an open mic in town and changed my mind by the time I got there. But hey, you're back."

"Yeah. I'm back. Why'd you change your mind?" She almost mentions his voice, his nightly yelling, but doesn't know if he means to be heard.

"Not really feeling up to it," he says, clasping his hands and stretching his arms above his head. He yawns. "Too much on my mind."

"Yeah. Me too."

"Well, hop on and we won't talk. Get our heads blank." He taps his temple.

He doesn't mention the bird's nest. He doesn't mention the note left on his door.

"In there," he says, pointing to the saddlebags strapped to the bike. "I've got beers, if you're interested." The two bottles clink as she pulls them out and hands one to him, and she swings her leg over the seat and climbs on behind him. He

passes a lighter over his shoulder for opening the beer, and she tries several times before succeeding.

It's hard to sense time passing here. It seems late, but how things seem isn't always how they are. Not here. Everything is changing. The sky is a little darker a little earlier than the day before. And it's going to get colder soon. Much, much colder. It's going to come on without any warning, though they will nonetheless be expecting it. It will feel like being warned a sucker punch is coming, but not knowing the moment when. And, holding their breath, the only option will be to adapt and learn how to make the hardness of living here as much a joy as the bright, burning summers.

"Listen," she says. "I want to tell you something. The man that went missing. He's my husband. He was my husband."

The wind blows his hair into her face. She sips her beer and tries to read expression in the parts of his face she can see. Ears, cheeks, jaw. She isn't sure if he heard her. Looking back at the dog chasing them, she opens her mouth to call its name and pretends she said nothing.

But suddenly he's yelling over the sound of the engine, and at first she doesn't know what he is saying. He screams it again and again, gaining volume each time, like he's forgotten she is there behind him. And then it's clear: *ora*. He shouts at the sky, over and over until hoarse, as if he is searching for something even more beautiful. *Ora, ora, ora*. Until the word is no longer delicate, but monstrous and uncompromising.

She understands now, this is a word like every other word. He keeps going on like this, night after night, because he searches and is defeated. Because he knows there will always be something more beautiful than whatever exists now and that these failed beautiful things are perfect too, in their isolation.

She's glad for the burning spruce and the smell of smoke and the constant light of now. Glad she never hears her name being called into the night. Glad her name is not Evangeline or some other beautiful word. It's Jordana.

He shuts off the bike when a moose emerges from the woods to their right and walks directly in their path. They glide silently. The bike slows on its own. The dog stops too—abrupt and rigid—and stares. On point. They sit on the motorcycle

and watch the moose move silently, her dark coat catching the fading sunlight, her muscles churning. Ash falls on her forehead from fires burning thirty miles away. She is nothing unusual. She thinks she's invisible.

Melanie Unruh

Bend, Convolute, Curve

A contortionist came to entertain the children for Jenny Uhlman's ninth birthday. Though her parents had wanted a clown or a magician, or really anyone who wouldn't frighten the other kids, Jenny had insisted on a contortionist. When they asked her why, Jenny, who kept *Roget's Thesaurus of Words and Phrases* on her bedside table, said she found them *captivating*. Mr. and Mrs. Uhlman assumed this would be another of Jenny's intense but short-lived fixations, much like the moths, the hypnosis, the sari-making. But they also understood that their daughter was dead set on a grotesque acrobat being the main event at her party. After some debate about briefing the other kids' parents, the Uhlmans ultimately decided not to bring it up. It had been a hard year since Jenny lost her hand; the last thing she needed was to have no one come to her birthday party.

And so, Jenny's parents reluctantly did their own research on the man she had found on MySpace. Mrs. Uhlman was nearly sick when she saw his photographs—his feet resting beside his head, his torso twisted completely around so that his head appeared to be screwed on backwards, his entire body folded up inside a mini fridge.

He was called Salt.

Mr. Uhlman was in charge of contacting the performer, of checking his references. Salt said he was new to children's parties, but had done plenty of performances. He'd worked for a traveling circus and even had a few parts in small films.

Could he entertain kids? Smile? Do tricks that would interest a young audience without inciting controversy and parental concern? Could he do other things, say, juggle?

Salt agreed he could do it all.

"That's a strange name, Salt," Mr. Uhlman commented. "If you don't mind me asking, how did you get it?"

They obviously hadn't read his profile too carefully. "Because I'm the human pretzel."

Mr. Uhlman groaned inwardly. "I see," he said.

Jenny was so elated when her parents told her Salt was confirmed for the party, she might have clapped if she still had her right hand.

Her classmates were generally nice to her, although some made fun of her or avoided her altogether. Some clever kid had given her the nickname *Wristy*. There were no synonyms in her thesaurus for *amputee*. Jenny understood that for her whole life, people would stare at her and she would be a spectacle. In public, strangers gawked and nudged each other. And yet, she never went to great lengths to hide her stump.

Though she'd accepted that people would always fixate on her, more than anything she was bothered by the fact that the subject of their engrossment was an absence. If she was going to be a freak show, she wanted it to be because of a skill, not a perceived deficit. As a contortionist, she could be *Jenny, the One-Handed Wonder*. As far as she could tell from her research—conducted via YouTube, MySpace, and a book she'd found at the library called *Anatomy of Stretching*—a good number of the moves didn't require two hands. And so long as she had full use of one, the stump could serve for additional balance. Jenny stayed up late each night, stretching, doing splits, warming up her muscles for what was to come. Several moths still lingered in her bedroom, beating their brown bodies against the window panes while she lay prone on the floor reciting synonyms for the verb contort: *bend, convolute, curve, deform, gnarl, knot, misshape, torture, twist, warp, wind, wrench, writhe*.

The Uhlmans were paying Salt $75 for an hour of his time. He would do a thirty-minute performance followed by a thirty-minute Q and A. How Jenny even constructed this set-up eluded her parents.

When Salt arrived, he was smaller than he'd appeared in the photos, barefoot and clad in a simple blue unitard. A fake Burberry scarf was knotted at his throat. He could have been mistaken for an adolescent boy from a distance. Up close, though, his deep five o'clock shadow betrayed his thirty-six years. What people first noticed about him, when he wasn't twisted into some odd shape or another, was his pale blue eyes. As she was leaving him, his wife Martha commented

that she would miss his eyes more than anything else.

For Jenny's party, in addition to his small Plexiglas box, Salt had brought red and yellow juggling balls, as Mr. Uhlman requested. The kids were already staring. Salt wiped his sweaty palms on his unitard, which wasn't too absorbent. It was unclear if Jenny had told her guests why he was there or what he was going to do. They whispered to each other about his attire and the "weird empty fish tank" he set aside.

When Jenny Uhlman shook Salt's hand, he noticed three things: she had an intense grip, she held eye contact the entire time, and she shook with her left hand because the right was missing. The stub that remained looked fairly new, baby pink skin folded together like a candle sunken in on itself. *Poor kid*, he thought. Her parents told him she had requested him, so he figured she was a little off, but he never considered she might be disabled. Was that even the right word? All those p.c. Nazis were always changing the terminology. You probably had to say "differently abled" now, although that term seemed to apply more to people like him, who could make the human body do things equally alarming and enthralling to the general public.

Unsmiling, Jenny said, "It's nice to meet you. Did you bring music?"

He shook his head. Salt was trying to forget about music. Martha had stolen his iPod when she split, leaving him with only *The Essential John Denver* and a Harry Connick Jr. Christmas album.

"I've got some picked out," the girl continued.

Jenny Uhlman had hair the color of white corn, cut so that it skimmed the tops of her delicate shoulder blades when she walked. She had a blank but beautiful face, and her eyes were large and brown with wispy lashes. Her father's hair was the same ghostly color.

Below skylit vaulted ceilings, the walls were decorated with needlepoints of yuccas and casitas, photographs of White Sands, and watercolors of the Sandias and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Through the window, he could see the actual Sandias in the distance. Weren't rich people supposed to be tapped into exotic, inaccessible art?

There were eight children in the room, including Jenny

Uhlman. Five girls and three boys. Although they were all symmetrical and whole, none of the girls was nearly as pretty as Jenny. One girl had an unfortunate pageboy haircut; another wore a perpetual scowl; the other two had on so much make-up they looked like pageant kids. The boys huddled close on a brown leather love seat, playing with a cell phone. The only one who stood out in their group was the chubby one with carroty red hair, so covered in freckles he almost looked tan. The boys sat on the left side of the room, the girls on the right. Of the two groups, Salt wondered which would enjoy him more. He would have guessed the boys, but Jenny skewed the numbers.

Salt was a little high. He felt guilty being stoned at a child's birthday party, but he often smoked before shows to relax and make his muscles more pliant. No one seemed to notice. He'd used eye drops, but if anyone asked, he would claim allergies, citing tumbleweed and cottonwood, desert dwellers' favorite allergen scapegoats. Salt couldn't afford to lose this job because after paying his rent this month, he had no money left for food.

He worried the young audience could see through him. Did they know he would rather be doing anything else, if only he could figure out what that was? He often had the sensation that his real life was out there somewhere just waiting for him to claim it.

But a job was a job and now he had to focus. First he removed his scarf, his small scrap of fashion and dignity. He wriggled his toes, his feet sinking deep into the plush beige carpet. It was softer than his mattress and probably cost more than what he made in a whole year. He tried to imagine what it must've been like to be an only child in such a household. Jenny would be denied nothing in life. For his own birthdays as a kid, there had been cake, but no parties and certainly no performers, unless you counted his Aunt Lurlene's drunken Bible readings. Salt inhaled and stretched his arms overhead.

"What's he gonna do?" someone whispered.

Jenny pointed a slender remote in the air and hit a series of buttons. Salt thought he recognized the song that began playing. Some rapper. At the first words, there was no mistaking the voice. In front of a captive audience of incredulous fourth

graders, Salt was lowering himself into a chest stand, to the strains of Kanye West.

While Salt was fretting that the parents would blame him for the music, The Ulhmans stood in the doorway, peering not at Salt, but at the faces of their daughter's friends. Would they tell their parents that Jenny was listening to rap music, even if it was the "clean" version? Jenny's parents knew they were too permissive with their daughter. But after what had happened, neither was willing to deny her much.

"Do you think he can juggle with his feet?" Jessica Caley whispered to Sonya Jimenez.

Jenny rolled her eyes. *Amateurs.* But then she wondered . . . could he?

The room was large, but the audience sat only a few feet from Salt. Though he'd never had any problems with control, now he was hyperaware of his body, trying not to bump into any kids. There was also the possibility that they could smell the weed on him. Febreze could only do so much. Salt got down on his stomach, took hold of his feet, and rolled the length of the room in a move he called The Angular Human Ball.

He stood again and faced away from the crowd. Slowly he began to turn the upper half of his body around, until he was facing forward with his feet pointing backwards.

"Holy shit!" a boy in a Dodgers jersey cried out. The other boys laughed. Salt resumed a normal stance. Then, balancing on his left leg, he lifted and bent the right in towards his body, tucked the foot under his chin, and began to juggle. The little girls squealed. The scowling girl covered her face with her hands, but then peeked out through the cracks in her fingers.

The music, which had a sluggish, angry vibe to it, went well with Salt's high. These kids were pretty alright. No tears, at least. He'd expected at least one crier in this crowd. Back on his feet, Salt put his arms behind his back and drew them around the front of his body until they met and clasped together.

The Uhlmans were uncomfortable, but they kept quiet about it. Salt's half hour performance was moving briskly along. Of course, then that left Jenny's Q and A session. God

only knew what that would entail, or how long it would actually go on. Nothing and no one could deter Jenny from something that interested her.

Salt finished his act with his trademark move: folding himself up into the Plexiglas case. It wasn't terribly difficult, but audiences ate it up. He made exaggerated movements, extending each body part before he tucked it in, and condensed himself into a compact wedge of a man. When he grasped the lid with the tips of his fingers and pulled the case shut, the children broke into wild applause. Someone whistled.

While Salt extricated himself from the box, Jenny turned off the music and asked her mother to get him some water. Mrs. Uhlman returned with the glass before Salt was fully out of the box and she hovered over him, shifting the water from one hand to the other. Free of his container at last, Salt thanked her for the drink and gulped it down.

"Alright." Jenny perched on the edge of the coffee table. "Does anyone have any questions for Mr. Salt?"

"Please, it's just Salt."

Jenny wondered what his name had been before.

"Were you ever in the circus?" said Tyler Gruet.

"For awhile."

"What did your parents say when you started being a . . . twisted man?" Jessica Caley asked, stroking her blond pigtails.

"They were cool with it," Salt lied. The truth was that his parents had died in a fire when he was four, years before he started practicing contortion. His Aunt Lurlene, who had raised him, called what he did unnatural and blasphemous. As if the Bible ever said *Thou shalt not contort thyself.*

"Could you perform your act with one hand?" Jenny asked. She imagined joining him, calling herself Clove because Pepper was just too *prosaic.*

Salt thought about it. There were several moves that required both hands for gripping or leverage, but really, he could probably make do with just one. It sounded like a challenge.

The kids giggled at Jenny, whose gaze was locked on Salt. And then he realized what she was asking. Could *she* learn to do what he did?

He wasn't sure what to say to this desperate little slip of a girl. Was she somehow under the impression that contortionism was glamorous and well-paying? Maybe if you were in Cirque du Soleil, but those assholes had rejected him years ago. Solo gigs like Jenny's party were few and far between, and usually he had to supplement his income with manual labor. But then again, what sort of glamour or success could this child with one hand ever hope to achieve anyway? She would be ostracized. He could already see the cruelty and disgust brewing in the eyes of the other children, her invited guests, who didn't really seem as if they wanted to be there.

"Please, Salt," Jenny urged. "Could you?"

Wordlessly, Salt lay down on his stomach. Then, using only his left hand—he made certain not to use the right—he lifted himself up until his whole body was parallel with the floor, balancing on just his palm.

Jenny Uhlman's smile was so genuine, her parents were taken aback.

"Hey, Wristy could do that," Kevin Maloney yelled, his prepubescent voice gleeful.

Everyone in the room looked at him and then at Jenny. Salt raised himself up all the way so that he was doing a one-armed handstand. Surely this would draw some attention.

But Jenny Uhlman was at her breaking point. She marched over to orange-haired Kevin Maloney, her face even more expressionless than usual. Kevin rolled his eyes, as if to imply that he wasn't afraid of her. Jenny poked him in the arm with her pink stump. Kevin laughed. She did it again. Kevin continued to act unfazed. Everyone in the room was rooted in place. For Salt, that meant he was upside down, watching the little girl with one hand repeatedly poke the rude boy with her stump.

"Imbecile," Jenny said, jabbing him harder. "Cretin, pinhead, simpleton, dullard."

She was tireless. Kevin tried to back away, but the love seat he sat on was up against the wall. The other children were in an uproar, crying out for Jenny to stop. They seized the juggling balls and threw them at her, the red and yellow plastic smacking her in the shoulders, the back of the head. Mrs. Uhlman ran to Jenny and tried to pull her off Kevin,

but Jenny resisted, pressing her stump forward, now into his freckled chin. "Ignoramus," she hissed.

"Yeah, well, you're a freak," Kevin screamed at her. "The only reason any of us even came was cause our parents felt bad for you!"

Mr. Uhlman helped his wife pry their daughter away from Kevin Maloney, who was now furiously wiping at his arms and face, saying he had to get off all her "dead hand cooties."

One of the other little boys yelled, "Your party was Cirque du So Lame!" and then kicked Salt in his supporting arm before running for the far side of the room. It felt as though Salt was falling in slow motion, the carpet moving towards him instead of the other way around. He was hard pressed to topple gracefully because, despite knowing how to fall, he wasn't used to being knocked down.

As soon as he hit the floor, Salt was sober. He rolled onto his side and observed the scene before him, a riot in miniature. Several children clutched the juggling balls, poised to throw them if necessary. The girl with the blond pig-tails kept shrieking, "I hate you," to no one in particular. The third boy, not the one who'd made fun of Jenny and not the one who'd kicked Salt, was eating a dark glob of food out of his hand. Somewhere in the midst of all of this he had snuck into the kitchen and taken a fistful of chocolate birthday cake. A dark-haired little girl was crying, her make-up running down her cheeks so that she looked like a sad clown from a paint-by-number. The freckled boy cupped his hands around his mouth like a megaphone and announced that he was going to call his dad's lawyer.

The Uhlmans had assumed if there was going to be a problem, if parents were to be called, it would be because of Salt, the grown man in the unitard who did abnormal things with his body. But it was Jenny who had initiated the downward spiral of her own party. One by one, the children without cell phones—three had their own—went to the kitchen to call home, asking their parents to come pick them up right away. During Kevin's phone call, he used the phrase "bat-shit crazy," which elicited a few giggles from the otherwise silent group. The Uhlmans escorted Jenny's disgruntled guests to the front porch, where they were buffeted by sharp gusts of

chilly spring air as they waited for the caravan of annoyed parents, now summoned back from their free afternoons.

Jenny sat on the love seat, Salt on the floor. He had to say something to this girl, to this child he'd first aspired to envy. "I think that was the most audience participation I've ever seen," he said, surveying the beige carpet, which was littered with juggling balls and cake crumbs. When Jenny didn't respond, he continued, "You forgot to call him a prick."

She shrugged. "I don't care about him."

"They say redheads will be extinct soon," Salt noted. Martha had red hair. He enjoyed thinking of her going the way of the passenger pigeon, the woolly mammoth, the dodo.

Jenny let out a small laugh.

"Seriously, you shouldn't pay any attention to that stupid kid."

Jenny turned to him. "Do you think I could ever be a contortionist?"

"Sure," Salt said. "Why not?"

"Will you teach me?"

"Uh, I don't think that's a good idea."

This girl really wanted to do what he did? There might have been a time when he had loved it, before those spectral yearnings for something else began to creep up on him. But being a teacher, even of this thing he did every day, had certainly never crossed his mind.

"Why not? I want to learn and you need money," Jenny said pointedly.

Salt raised his eyebrows. "I do?"

"I saw your car. It's like four different colors. People only drive those kinds of cars when they're *destitute*."

"Destitute? Well, thanks."

"So will you train me then?"

"I dunno if your parents—"

"You want to know how I lost my hand?"

The question felt like a trap. Did she really want to tell him or was she just testing him somehow? "That's okay," he said.

Jenny pretended not to hear him. She had never needed to tell the story before because everyone already seemed to know it, as though her amputated limb itself had come to them and explained the situation. It felt strange for her to put

into words what she never had before.

"We went up to Lake Tahoe last summer with my parents' new speedboat," she began. As soon as she started recounting the story, Jenny could feel the cool wind on her face and smell the sunscreen her mother had slathered on her. "We'd been out on the lake for a couple of hours and my parents got into this ghastly fight. One of them threw a pair of sunglasses over the bow. Even if you ask them now—don't, by the way—they each say the other did it. Anyway, I climbed onto the front of the boat, following the sunglasses. They were just sitting there on the edge of the bow. I reached for them."

Jenny studied the blue veins in her wrist, pumping blood to nowhere.

"Another boat cut right in front of us—my dad still says it's a travesty we never figured out who it was—and made this huge wake. When we hit it, I fell overboard."

"Did the boat . . . " Salt coughed. "Did the boat chop off your hand?"

Jenny wondered if it would have been more accurate to say chopped *up*, since everyone seemed to think that was what had become of it. "The prop did," she said, nodding.

"Are you serious?" Salt asked. Tears rolled down Jenny's cheeks, but otherwise her demeanor remained unchanged.

"I lost a bunch of blood and passed out. Without my life vest, they say I would've drowned. My parents have a major guilt complex about it now, so unless I try to set myself on fire, they've got this whole *laissez faire* thing with me."

"Do you ever still feel it? Your hand?"

"I kind of wish I did," she murmured. Spurred on by overheard conversations between her doctors and parents, she read all about the "phantom limb" phenomenon, and was dejected that it didn't seem to apply to her. She had no mysterious pain or itches she couldn't scratch, no tangible memories of what it felt like to touch two hands together. There had been a half-hearted expedition to retrieve the hand from the lake, but no one seemed too eager to search the deep, shadowy water for what would surely be a mangled, useless scrap of flesh. Sometimes Jenny imagined that the remnants of her hand had been eaten by an ancient lake monster, and the creature would spend the rest of its life searching for the

source of this delicacy.

The room was hot and quiet, save for the sound of the wind scraping at the windows.

Salt passed Jenny his scarf. She gazed at it with uncertainty until he gestured to her tear-stained cheeks. Wordlessly, Jenny wiped her eyes and nose on it.

"So you think they'd let me teach you?" Salt asked. Jenny nodded.

"Even after that thing with freckle-face?"

She grinned. "Especially after that. Why do you think I invited him?"

Salt shook his head.

"So what about the other kids? Will it be weird now?"

"Them? They're all too *obtuse* to be my real friends anyway."

"I'm not cheap, you know," Salt said.

"My parents have this boat in storage they've been meaning to sell," Jenny said wryly.

Salt nodded. Without a word, he stood, balanced on one leg, and proceeded to lift the other leg in the air, until he'd tucked it into a triangle alongside his head, his torso arcing into a half-moon shape. He used his left hand to hold the leg in place, while his right arm hung free for balance.

Jenny stood beside him and tried to manipulate her leg the way he had.

"See, here's the trick," Salt said.

Just then, Jenny's parents entered the room. Their daughter and the contortionist had their backs to the doorway. Mr. and Mrs. Uhlman watched as Salt explained to Jenny how to work towards the position. "It's going to take some time," he said. "You won't be able to do this overnight, if ever."

They looked so strange together: Salt in his blue spandex, Jenny in her black leggings and sweater dress, an unfamiliar brown plaid scarf around her neck, each balancing on one leg, Jenny's truncated arm extended in the air like a pink torch. The Uhlmans wondered if their daughter would really be able to do the strange things they'd seen this man do in their own living room. Or maybe this was just another phase, and Jenny would quickly abandon her dreams of contortionism.

The Uhlmans continued their quiet observance, each holding on for dear life to the other's hand.

Aliya Amirh Tyus-Barnwell

Love and Marriage

We came to her small village of square concrete buildings to treat her father. The household compound looked like any run-down ranch in the Southwest of the US and many others outside Harib city limits. The main residence was constructed of gray siding glowing gold in the sun. Topped by a plain chimney and a TV satellite, it faced the aluminum-plank courtyard gate flanked by three cinderblock outbuildings and a corrugated tin shed where goats trimmed parched shrubs. I heard a generator chugging when Patrick turned off the motor of our battered compact.

The ceilings were high, the doorways low, draped with thick cotton in patterns of burgundy and green. Her father lay on a stripped mattress with a bevy of women swathed in abayas hovering around him. The women parted like a cotton sea.

The father, introduced as Mr. Nafari, had broken his leg. Sometimes people explained the occurrence behind crippling injuries or gunshot wounds when they called us. Sometimes they didn't. We're doctors, not inquisitors.

"Mr. Nafari, we are here from the clinic." Patrick always introduced us this way. Him and me and our assistant Mo, a young man from San'a with more practical medical knowledge than most third-year residents in the States. He nodded at Mr. Nafari as he prepped him. "We are going to give you a shot for the pain, then we will set your leg." Of late-middling age, perhaps fifteen years my senior, Mr. Nafari sweated through a plaid shirt while he grunted quick affirmatives and ground his teeth.

Mo laid out the equipment. I gave him morphine; Mo and I held his shoulders as Patrick set the bone. Mr. Nafari cursed Patrick heartily until Mo gave him another morphine shot.

As Patrick prepared to cast his leg, one of the women pulled my sleeve, said, "Can you look at my daughter-in-law too? She is ill."

I nodded and ducked out of the room, following her across

a courtyard of hard-packed dirt. Members of the household wavered in doorways like drape closures and leaned from the square casements, peering through the midday heat to watch me—the westerner in button-fly Levis and New Balance sneakers with a mere paisley scarf to cover her hair, and that in shades of blue—walk to the separate square structure where the women of the rural household lived. In the dim interior spread heavily with rugs, a baby cried from the corner, a newborn from the tenor of the wails. I could smell infection, not strongly, but a faint, underlying odor emanated from the bed.

I pushed back the scarf that covered my hair as women can do when no men are present, and knelt next to the girl stretched out on a foot-high pallet. She couldn't have been more than fourteen. My first time wasn't until I was sixteen.

I spoke quietly to the girl, "Is that your son, there?" The infant calmed, the girl managed to nod.

"Yes, that is her son Ahmad." The voice was high, but spoke clear Arabic. A girl no older than eleven spared me a glance as she peered over my shoulder. A beautiful unblemished soul with perfect skin; eyes round and green and somehow familiar. Like Natalia before the leukemia. She smelled like cinnamon. Her shoulders were so small. I pursed a smile and covered the teenager, my exam complete. "He is a month tomorrow," the younger girl said.

"Was it a long birth?" Pain flickered across her face like a shadow cast by a flame-drawn moth. The elder girl nodded. "Do you want more children?"

The teenager cast her large eyes at the baby supported confidently in the younger girl's arms. She nodded again, but stiffly and slowly, as though a hand moved the back of her head. The mother-in-law perched in the corner.

The exam revealed a fistula, likely from prolonged pressure of the baby against the wall of the uterus. I pressed my lips together to keep from scolding the mother-in-law. It seemed she cared, at least somewhat. After all, she brought me to look at the girl. The baby resumed wailing and one of the older women swept across the room and laid the boy on a changing table too tall for the cinnamon girl, who disappeared back into the courtyard.

I turned to the mother-in-law. “She needs a small surgery.” My Arabic was always a bit stilted. “Can you bring her to the clinic tomorrow?”

The mother-in-law permitted her considerable brows to stitch, though I could not be sure why or at whom she was angry. She took a step toward the bed, as if to ascertain for herself what was wrong. I stretched and leaned slightly to the side, blocking her advance.

“Can she nurse?” The mother-in-law’s voice was a porous stone; hard, but I could hear wind whistling through the holes. She was not the first Yemeni matron I’d met.

“Yes. But she cannot bring the baby tomorrow, and she cannot eat after midnight tonight.”

The matron nodded but her attention, like mine, was drawn to a growing commotion outside. High pitched voices, and the scratchy splatter of thrown dirt. They screamed in Arabic, a jumble I barely made out:

“Shut your mouth!”

“Kasi, Kasi,”—in singsong—“Soon to be wife, a fat man’s wife!”

“Shut your mouth or I’ll fill it with dirt.”

On the ground the young girl, Kasi, forced dirt into the mouth of a boy a little older than she, her skirt a net pinning his legs and giving him little leverage.

“Kasi, the fat man’s wife, the old man’s wife. How long before she is old and fat, like Ndarjan her husband?”

“You little turd!”

I knew Ndarjan, and my stomach revolted; I swallowed, forcing bile back to my gut. He lived two villages south—or at least an overweight man five years my senior with the surname Ndarjan lived two villages south. We treated him for secondary syphilis. I swallowed again. There must be more than one man named Ndarjan.

“Count down the months! Fat old Kasi, married away!”

Finally the matron reached the pair, grabbed Kasi by the arm and hoisted her off of the boy. He spit out dirt and small pebbles around laughter.

“Quiet!” The matron’s voice was a thunderclap, the gathered family members backed under awnings in front of the compound buildings, afraid of the storm. With her free hand

she yanked up the laughing, dirty boy and gave him a sound slap on the butt.

"Your sister needs no teasing! And Leneah needs to rest, the doctor says."

Here the matron's eyes darted at me and the boy's followed, then flinched from the threat implied by the matron's tightening grip. Kasi paid no attention to any clandestine glances or significant looks and said loudly, "I will not marry fat old Ndarjan! Not in August, not in May, not ever." She spoke with a finality that belied her age.

"His fat belly will crush you."

Kasi picked up a rock with her free hand and threw it at her brother. The matron gave Kasi's arm a good yank and spanked the boy again twice.

I'd heard rumors of child marriages. I'd heard sometimes the girl-bride cries—screams in protest—and needs to be carried to meet her groom. Non-relatives are not invited. Patrick and I had no wish to know about such weddings; we can't judge custom too harshly, even outlawed custom. If we knew, we might be honor-bound to report it, and if we did, they might not trust us enough to come to us for help.

My eyes rested on the beautiful girl, but I did not see her. I saw Natalia then, and Robert bending over my maternity bed, Robert bouncing Natalia on his knee. I thought of Robert and our daughter who would never marry the man or woman of her choosing, or live alone in a house full of cats.

Then Kasi noticed me. Her eyes searched mine, mine hers. I had never met a child bride in the last months of her engagement. Only later, for difficult childbirths and the aftereffects.

The matron gave Kasi's arm another firm shake and began to haul them to the doorway behind me, saying, "Children. Always playing too rough and too loud."

Robert once told me my eyes hide little. I met this woman's glance as she passed me and she looked away quickly. I knelt, stopping Kasi by putting my hands on her shoulders, arresting the matron's progress if she wished to hold onto her. The child's hands were scraped; she'd likely fallen on them. I fished antiseptic spray out of my bag, squirted each palm and wiped away the grit.

"Try to keep the scrapes clean until they heal."

Then I stood, keeping my back turned as the matron hustled her away.

I stumbled back to the room where Patrick was just finishing with the cast. He noticed my face and flashed an expression of concern, but wrapped things up with his usual smoothness. Soon back in the car, we glided down the paved road to Harib.

"What happened back there?"

"Another obstetric fistula. I didn't ask how old she was this time." I paused, glanced in the rearview at Mo, short for Mohammed. This was his culture too, and I usually saved my gripes for when Patrick I were alone. Patrick, this once, ignored the hint. He had a fondness for Mo that sometimes made me inexplicably jealous.

"Is Ndarjan a common name?" I asked Mo, continuing in English, a note of hope in my voice.

Mo snorted and replied in Arabic, "No. Why?"

"Well," I continued, "There was another girl, maybe ten or eleven. She was fighting her brother for teasing her about getting married. But it's *who* she's getting married to."

A moment of silence then Mo gasped, "The one we treated for syphilis a month ago? Disgusting."

Relieved, I admitted, "I'm not sure it's the same man. I don't want to jump to conclusions, but I thought I would be sick."

"A child to a child, that is one thing, but this is another entirely. What are we going to do?" Mo sounded sincerely distressed.

"Do about what?" Patrick raised an eyebrow.

"If you are certain they are marrying the girl off underage, should we not report them?" Mo sounded angry, reproachful. My heart swelled. I wanted to cheer for Mo: for being stronger than I was and so much more than I judged him. How had I thought so poorly of him after eight long months?

"Why don't we talk about this tomorrow, after we've all gotten some sleep?" I could tell Patrick did not want to talk about it at all.

Mo said, "You are supposed to dine with me tonight, remember? Ruth has already begun cooking."

"We wouldn't want to disappoint Ruth." I smiled a little as I said it, to put them at ease, to make them feel I'd relaxed.

Ruth did actually relax me with her excellent cooking and company. She spoke English well and helped me with my Arabic. When we found ourselves together, we behaved like sisters. She was a bit older than Mo—she counted him as her second husband—closer to my age. I slurped up her lamb ogdat, wiping the bowl clean with her fresh-baked flat bread.

"So what's this Mo tells me about a syphilis patient?" We sat in the kitchen drinking black tea with cloves while Patrick and Mo lay around smoking pipes in the living room. He must have mentioned it in the moments they were alone. I relished my forgetfulness, the taste of lamb.

"This young girl has to marry him. And he's got to be older than we are."

"You mean older than the mountains?" Ruth chuckled.

"Yes, old as the ground, and just as broad."

She laughed outright. "Why don't you report them? Country people, they're slow to change."

"You know if we do they'll never call us again. They won't trust us."

"You think they trust you now?"

My mouth hung open but I didn't sip my tea.

"Probably not. I want to help her, but it wouldn't be real help to report her family."

"You want to tell the mother about his syphilis?"

"Illegal. Besides, I'm not even certain it's the same man."

"And if it is?"

"I think her family might thank me, but his wouldn't." We both sought solace and answers in the tea. "She still has a few months. Maybe he'll get run over by a camel."

She laughed heartily again, slammed the table with her hand. "You Americans and your racist jokes. *I* hope he gets run over by a tank."

"Quiet, wife and woman! We are supposed to be the loud ones!" Mo called from the other room.

We smothered our giggles like schoolgirls. Then I sobered, seizing the opportunity to ask a question I'd always held back before. "How did you manage to get out of your first marriage?"

"He died." She shrugged when I asked how and answered, "Something he ate."

Robert still pressed the argument for me to come home, denied that something was broken if I preferred shared-living in a Yemeni suburb to nuptial cohabitation in New York. We each had our secrets; I doubted I discovered all of his.

"We should try again," was his favorite refrain, "while there's still time." Like I was already menopausal. I was still in my early thirties. Well, 34.

I didn't tell him I'd read the e-mails from Eva, didn't remind him not to use the same passwords for everything.

The night after I met Kasi, I called Robert. Twice. Even with the difference in time, he should have been home. I left a message on the second call, and tried not to sound passive-aggressive when I said, "Hope everything is okay."

The computer beckoned. I opened his e-mail again and there, in the archive, an exchange between him and Eva:

Eva_Mitchum71@hotmail.com to RobertTTanner@att.net
Subject: Italian
Meet you tonight at 9? Fresco by Scotto?

RobertTTanner@att.net to: Eva_Mitchum71@hotmail.com
Subject: RE: Italian
Mmmm lobster risotto. Can't wait.

He couldn't wait.

He'd painted over the pale yellow of Natalia's room right after I left. Behr's Pastel Sunflower. He ripped the decorative child's prints from the moldings, stripped the wood. He turned our daughter's room, so carefully planned, into a den. Said the living room felt too large in the empty apartment. I had never seen his new den. I would need to face the den and wonder if Eva had ever drawn him out of it, sleep in the bed and wonder if Eva ever slept there. If even that sanctity had been broken.

In the morning I called again.

"Honey it's so good to hear your voice." He sounded so sincere.

"I . . ." I wanted to tell him I missed him. "I was thinking about what you said, about another child."

He waited. He still knew me, knew I needed time to make

my point.

"And I wondered if you'd consider adoption."

"Katie . . ."

"If I come home."

Silence. Then, "I'd consider anything if you came home."

"It's just an idea. There are so many girls who need homes."

"You're sure you don't want to see what a little bit of us can make? I always wanted a baby version of myself."

He was trying to be cute while saying he wanted a boy this time. Cute fades over transcontinental phone lines, lessens exponentially every time it bounces off a satellite.

"We did see. Adopting a daughter wouldn't prevent us from having another child later."

"It's always later with you. What if, god forbid, something bad happens? What if later it's impossible?"

"God, Robert, something bad already happened! I don't know. Tomorrow isn't promised to any of us, especially here—"

"All the more reason for you to come home."

"My contract's not up for a few months."

"You shouldn't have renewed."

I didn't want to bring up Eva or my snooping—not that the latter mattered as much to me as it did to him. "Listen, Patrick's calling. I think we've got an emergency patient."

"Sorry to hear that."

That night I dreamed of cinnamon in a child's room with yellow paint.

Morning brought me to the kitchen table in a daze. Patrick already made coffee.

"Morning, doll."

I grumbled an unintelligible retort.

"Sleep that well?"

"I can't stop thinking about that girl."

"Thinking what?"

"Natalia would have been about her age." Patrick didn't say 'I'm sorry.' He knew I'd hated hearing it for years. Finally I said, "I dreamed she was my daughter."

"But," Patrick said as gently as he could, "I'm sure she already has a mother."

"Well, soon she'll have a mother-in-law."

"Not for some months yet. The cast should come off around

then, and we can check in on him a couple of times, monitor the healing."

"Maybe I shouldn't go with you."

"That's true."

Leneah, the young mother, arrived for her surgery, which we performed easily; it was routine to us. The mother-in-law and two aunts accompanied her. I came out to them while she recovered from the anesthesia.

"Everything went smoothly. She is still sleeping and will wake soon. But . . ." here I paused. To what fate would I doom this girl if I told her mother-in-law that she should bear no more children? What use would the girl be in household eyes? Her husband, wherever or whoever he was, might take pity on her. Her first was a boy, after all. Or they all might make her suffer.

Law does not always control the secrets doctors keep. Normally I would tell the parents, discuss everything with the family. Of course, if I said nothing, the girl would be expected to have more children.

". . . She was too young to have this child." I couldn't resist scolding, even in my stilted Arabic. "She should not have another for at least three years. This was a serious injury." She needed time to heal, time to grow. I wanted to say ten years.

Understanding dawned on the mother-in-law's face, her eyes softened. "It's true. She was young when she came to us. I hope you will come to check on her," she said. I nodded and smiled.

We did return to the remote compound three weeks later to check on the fistula. The young mother was in bed with her baby nursing happily, five pounds heavier. Kasi, my cinnamon girl served as her nursemaid.

"She has been eating twice as much porridge in the mornings. Mother says she will get fat, and Jofe will not want her anymore. But she keeps giving her big bowls and sweetbreads in between meals." She looked up at me smiling, and I basked in it. "I think she is trying to make her fat."

I grinned at her, tore my eyes away. "Why would she do that?"

"So her son will leave Leneah alone and pay more attention to his first wife. Besides, Leneah did her duty; her first son

is a boy."

I never heard a child talk that way about duty before.

"Yes, Leneah definitely served him well, gave him a lot." I could not keep the bitterness out of my tone.

Kasi nodded solemnly. "But I do not care. I will be good in other ways. They will see. Get a job, send money."

"Send?"

Her eyes darted up at me, but she did not reply to my surprise.

"What do you want to do?" I asked, meaning so many things.

"Leave here. Maybe, become a teacher."

This silenced me a moment. I imagined the steps she would have to take to achieve higher education, both literally and figuratively. Would she travel alone to the nearest grade school?

"Have you ever been to the city? To San'a?" I took my time packing up.

"Yes, my family went to a wedding, it was a great party."

"What did you think of it?"

"Of the wedding?"

"No, of the city."

"Oh, it was amazing! The buildings look like art."

I found it beautiful too. Many of the buildings have impressively ornate façades. "It is one of the oldest cities in the world, did you know that? Will you go there?"

"If I have to. I would rather go to Britain or the US, where women drive."

I slipped her my card, one side in Arabic. I hoped that she could read. "Call me if you ever need a doctor."

She put the card in her pocket as I left some more antibiotics with Leneah and her mother-in-law.

This is a dream. I repeated the phrase in my head, each syllable carefully enunciated by my inner voice. To think of this girl's future is a dream. Wake up.

Next night, I called Robert again. He answered one ring before the machine.

"Hi! Have you . . . hold on a sec."

In the background music played. It sounded like my old

Peggy Lee vinyl. A female voice spoke, but it wasn't her sultry tone. Was he relaxing in the living room with *her*, playing *her* music I used to have to fight him to play?

He returned to the phone, said, "Have you thought about what you want to do?"

"Yes, but whose voice was that?"

"Oh, just a friend from work."

They did work together, unfortunately, so there were always excuses for them to run into each other. There was a time when I wouldn't have asked any further questions, but I had heard brutal, all-encompassing truth. In my mind I stooped and picked up a rock, so many within reach.

"Really, who? None of the guys at the office are into jazz."

"Uh, it's Eva, actually. We were just going over the quarterlies."

"You play Peggy Lee for all your finance meetings?"

He cleared his throat. "Well, the guys don't have your good taste. So what did you decide?"

"I want to come home. If Eva won't be there."

He forced a chuckle, it sounded like a cough. "Of course not, why would she be?" Before I could insert a sarcastic comment, he finished, "I'm so glad you want to come back."

"Not immediately. As soon as Patrick can work out a replacement."

"Of course," but this response was an octave lower than the prior. In the background I could hear knocking over a muffled female tone. My knees lost their strength, suddenly I felt thirsty and tired.

"You know what, I'll let you go back to your quarterlies." I wished it was just quarterly. I hung up.

Patrick appeared in the doorway at the sound of receiver meeting cradle.

"How's Robert doing?"

"He's well taken care of."

Patrick squeezed my arm. His hands matched his six-foot-three frame, large and toughened. Warm.

"It's my night to make dinner."

We each played our roles. We had two glasses of wine each, a rarity for us—as foreigners, we were allowed to bring two bottles into the country.

"What are we celebrating?"

"The freedom to drink wine," I said, and tossed back the last of my glass.

When he offered me a massage as he had so many times before, this time I didn't say no.

Our first kiss felt delicate, exploratory. The later ones were passionate and strong. He carried me to the bed, pulling off my cotton layers slowly, in amazement. Our intimacy was sudden, forceful. It had been so long, for me. I did love Patrick in a way, though I could never say the words, so as I welcomed him into me I encouraged him to savor this one time, as I did.

Afterwards, we lay awake watching each other. Patrick's fresh pine eyes tilted at an anxious angle. He finally got up the courage to ask, "Why now?"

I replied, "I'm not going to renew. I need to go back to the States."

He blinked. Sadness warped the curl at the corners of his lips. "Robert is a very lucky man."

"I want to bring Kasi with me."

He laughed, and I almost snapped at him the way I would have at Robert. How quickly I fell into old habits.

"I'm serious."

His laugh turned into a cough. "Even if the idea wasn't completely crazy, how do you know she really wants to go?"

"We've spoken."

"You say it like you had some serious consultation with her. She's eleven. She can't be expected to make such a serious decision."

"Her father made one for her and expects her to abide by it soon. And besides, she may be planning to run away alone."

Patrick swallowed loudly against the crickets.

"There's got to be some aid group that can help," I continued.

"I can think of one, but I doubt they can do much without her father's permission."

"Well, we have to do something." I stared at him.

"Are you talking about kidnapping?" He sat up.

"I didn't say that. But if she really wanted to go . . . if I *were*?

Patrick drew a long sigh. "You're being crazy, you know.

This is crazy."

"I know. Yes. I'm just being irrational. I know that. But Kasi is special."

"Jesus, you sound like her mother." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Every child holds all the possibilities for the future in their little hands. You're getting personal. I warned you, you can't get personal. People here won't think more of you. And imagine the damage to the Association's reputation. They'll say we're a group of child thieves."

"That's horrible." I never thought seriously of the damage I would cause, so I said, "But what about the women who want more for their daughters? And besides, I'll be gone, so what do I care what anyone around here thinks?"

Patrick tensed, but I forced a smile and tugged on him until he relaxed. Behind my smile I remembered the matron, and as I moved closer to Patrick I thought of slim shoulders in a yellow room.

"And the Association? Can I point out again this is crazy? What about your reputation? What about mine?"

I considered my answer carefully. Patrick had been with the Association for over a decade. "You could say you terminated my contract because I mentioned my plan to you, and that I went ahead without your knowledge."

"Wow. You're seriously considering this."

"No," I said, but my thoughts rose above my life before I met Kasi, moving around the Association like mist, cooling my pillow as I drifted into sleep. I spared no tears for reputation: mine, Patrick's, or the Association's. I wondered what Robert would think when I told him about her. I wanted to live the dream.

In my dream Kasi has never seen a plane up close in person, let alone taken two international flights. I have never taken a private plane before, so it's a first for both of us. She doesn't cry, despite the pain in her ears, despite leaving all she knows. I give her a piece of gum.

"Chew it hard, it helps your ears pop."

"Wow, gum!"

I give her the whole pack.

In the morning I woke next to Patrick. He stared up at the ceiling, granted me a corner of his eye.

"Did you dream about her?"

I forced a smile. "I'm going back. I wasn't just saying that."

"Were you just saying everything else?"

". . . Yes. I just . . . I miss her." Not Kasi. I didn't sit at Kasi's bedside as she wasted away, rubbing Vaseline on the sores to either side of her nostrils. I didn't know the color of Kasi's bedroom.

"I know," Patrick said, but how could he?

In the dream Robert meets us at the airport. I keep my sunglasses on when we kiss, better that I keep him at arm's length at that moment. I cannot gush "I love you" until we have it out. But I am back. When he sees Kasi he sees Natalia at my side, his eyebrows freeze in peaks that form more wrinkles than I remember. It makes him look wise, distinguished. When she extends her tiny hand to shake his, a grin creeps over his face, and I know he loves her too.

In reality Robert did meet me at JFK, but I was not cool and collected. I laid my head on his chest and cried, and he hugged me and cried. But even after he turned the den back into a nursery, I dreamed of cinnamon and sunflower paint.

Charles J. Alden

Rani

Rani stood by the bedroom door and strained to hear her husband's voice on the other side. A 500-minute calling card lasted only two weeks anymore. Two years, three years back, Gopal's voice was stronger on the telephone, arguing with them. Defending her. Now his tone was quieter, with longer intervals on his end. Rani could not hear the words but knew how the debate was evolving. Gopal's parents would be pushing him to send her back to her family and find someone more suitable. Undamaged. She knew the fate of the unfit wives in the rural areas, of the accidental kitchen fires with propane cans, but that was not the way of Gopal's family. They were educated, they were enlightened, they would just put her on an airplane. Were they persuading him, had they already made other arrangements? Rani had learned not to ask, not to interfere in family business. As if she were no longer part of the family.

Gopal would be concerned first about appearances, and as an afterthought about fairness. Rani knew not to question if hearts could grow cold; her stepmother had shown her very well what a business relatives were. And she knew her fate was in Gopal's hands; where she would live would depend on whether he chose to keep her or discard her. That was the way of life and it was understood. She would cook and wash and kneel for her husband's pleasure, and whether he thanked her or caressed her or turned away without a word when he was finished did not matter as long as he permitted her to stay under his roof.

It had not always been this way. In the first days Gopal was gentle and caring with her. Still just a boy, she had thought, a boy she had seen only twice before their wedding. On Gopal's second visit to Rani's house her father accepted his proposal, and three weeks later father spent half a year's salary for the ceremonies, jewelry, and hosting 200 guests for three days. Gopal's family looked at Rani like a rug at the market, appraising her and whispering to each other. Two days after the

ceremonies ended the new couple were on a plane to Minneapolis.

Rani accepted without question the rightness of fate that had brought her halfway around the world. She had been allowed to go to university as a gift, as a luxury even, but she was trained from the start what her occupation must be: she would tend and obey a suitable husband, maintain an honorable house, and bear his children and especially his sons. The house of her parents would no longer be her home; his family was to be her family. Rani learned to cook the way Gopal liked, with more garlic and less chilies than she might have preferred. She kept his clothes and shoes and living space spotless, she learned to kneel in the position he liked when he wanted to take her, she kept silent when he criticized her. Her destiny was to be together with this man who had been a stranger until the day before they were engaged.

During that first summer Rani walked hand in hand with her new husband, soaking in the evening warmth in the strange new country, marveling at the clean cement sidewalks that lined both sides of every street. Gopal was so careful to help her step up and down the three inches as they crossed each curb. They talked then, about everything, about his extended family in Jaipur and her home in Delhi, about her real mother and university days, about the peonies and lilies-of-the-valley blooming by the edges of the stucco houses where six months earlier snowdrifts had piled up almost to the windowsills. And always they talked about another new life forming and starting to protrude under her sari. "Surely it is a boy," Gopal explained. "When the belly protrudes it is a boy, when it is flatter it is a girl. It is the same with chicken eggs, you can tell what is inside just from the outside shape."

"And what does the electrical engineer know of such things?" she laughed. "The city boy knows as much about chicken farming as a man knows about being pregnant." She could still tease him then. "Oh! Surely it is a boy! No good daughter would kick her mother like just now."

During that summer life in the new country was an adventure full of promise. Gopal had his degree from an American university, now a job in telecommunications; she was a young wife with a family to come. He would rise with the company,

and already they were looking farther ahead: there would be a house, a large house with several small bedrooms and guest rooms for when the parents would visit, there would be travel to the Grand Canyon and Europe, there would be a piano and soccer and (something they never imagined) ice skates for the little ones, and searches for the best schools and colleges later.

But all that changed in an instant, but not exactly at that instant. Rani wished she could tear that moment from her mind and live in amnesia, but instead it grew and grew until it drowned out every other thought. It was the weekend before Labor Day, the festival of Ganesh Chaturthi, and the Hindu community from 50 miles around gathered at Hudson on the St. Croix, just across the Wisconsin border, to celebrate the birthday of the elephant-headed boy. The taste of cashew and mango sweets lingered in their mouths as they rode home in the dark on the back road past Stillwater. Gopal was humming one of the songs from the day, a theme from a film that was popular the year they were married, and Rani was drowsing. They were descending a hill when Gopal shouted "Oh shit!" as the white car in front of them braked and skidded. Amid the sound of shrieking tires and metal smashing plastic a bright cloud flashed in Rani's vision and struck her with a hammer blow, and everything went black. When she awoke Gopal was calling her name in her left ear and two flashlights were shining through the front and passenger windows. A white plastic film lay across her lap and her head and whole body ached. She was nearly doubled over in pain as the police untangled the air bag and led her to the police car. She heard a woman screaming in the distance and saw flashing lights surrounding the upended white car, no longer on the road but in a creek bed off to the side. A stabbing pain pierced her midsection and she was shivering as the police car sped away. She remembered Gopal was sitting in the back, holding her hands, when she fell unconscious again.

The next days were a haze of pain, bright lights, and foggy drowsiness. Faces appeared and disappeared over her, sometimes Gopal, sometimes masked nurses. Voices floated in and out of her hearing as she was wheeled from one room to another. Amid the swirling and fading images, one phrase

stood clear and clutched her heart. “She lost the baby.” Other words came from above, not connected to any person in view. “Are you all right? You’ll be all right. Can you walk now? Can you raise your arms? Can you see this? Can you hear me? Yes, you’re going to be all right.”

Gopal sat by her side and told her she would be all right, and she never could have loved him more. The doctors told her she would be all right, the cheery Filipina nurses told her she would be all right. See, she was up and around now. She was going to be all right now. Gopal held her hands and talked reassuringly, but a hint of doubt flickered in the back of his eyes. They had taken a loss, a big loss. It was a boy, the doctor told them. Would have been a boy. Would have been. “We can try again,” said Gopal. “As long as you’re all right, that’s the important thing.”

Rani was back on her feet in a week, and in another week the bruises on her face were gone. She walked and cooked, and dared Gopal to play tennis with her. And at nighttime she proved to him that she still was vigorous. She was all right again.

Except she wasn’t going to be all right. It wasn’t until months later that she learned the diagnosis. There was a little tear, a small separation of tissue. The Korean doctor was proud to be able to name it, a connection between this and that. “You can’t even feel it, there won’t be any danger of bleeding. You will be fine. Except that pregnancy won’t be possible now. Otherwise you can do anything.”

Rani had completed her degree in computer science with honors. She could play four of the Chopin nocturnes from memory and repair her own saris with needle and thread. She had cooked for her father for three years after they had to let the servants go, and now she cooked and cleaned and maintained the apartment for Gopal better than two servants together could have managed. Or so he said once, in that first year. She was sure she could drive if Gopal would permit her to learn, she could read three languages (though the college French was shakier than her English and Hindi), and twice as many codes. I can do anything, she thought, anything at all. Except the one thing that everyone wanted from her.

Rani cried for a week. At first Gopal tried to comfort her,

but Rani could feel he didn't want to touch her shoulders. She could not be a mother, she could not give sons. She was damaged, useless. It was not her fault, she cried into her pillow, it was not anybody's fault, it was just fate. Gopal said nothing. He did not blame or criticize her, not then. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, Gopal drew back from her. Conversations became shorter and shorter, until they reached the limit of a simple yes or no. The accounts of family adventures were replaced with the details of household maintenance; what needed to be washed next, which bills were due. Plans for houses or family visits or Europe were not discussed. Gopal's job became more demanding; he needed to spend more time at the office, sometimes staying through suppertime. Finally Rani got permission to seek a job herself, and the reason was understood if unspoken. Because there was no point in a childless woman staying around the apartment all day.

Now Rani filled her days with work. It was better to be busy than to think. She rose before dawn, laid out Gopal's clothes for the day, and prepared breakfast quietly, lest she disturb her sleeping husband. Rani stood by the table with her palms pressed together when Gopal entered the kitchen. "Good morning, *pati-dewa*," Rani used the formal term of respect for her husband. He grunted and sat down at the table. He examined the spotless fork, wiped an imaginary mote from one of the tines, and began eating, his eyes fastened on the newspaper. Once he had started, Rani took her seat and sipped spoonfuls of her porridge while she watched Gopal eat. When his coffee cup was half empty she got up and refilled it; that was the amount he wanted for the morning, not two whole cups. After he folded the paper and set it aside, she asked, "Is everyone well back home?"

Gopal glanced up. "They're all fine. Everyone is fine *there*." The extra emphasis reminded her of what she was never allowed to forget, that whatever problems or inadequacies there were in the family, they did not come from his side. Gopal finished his breakfast without another word, checked his hair in the hallway mirror and put the Tupperware lunch bowl into his briefcase. Rani stood by the door and waited for him to pass by. In the first years there would always be one more kiss in the morning to complete the night before. Gopal

looked at his watch and said, "Call the Anands and tell them we will not be coming on Thursday. I will be going to Chicago Wednesday and won't be back until late the next night." Rani watched the door close and let her breath out.

Rani did not need to bother with putting on makeup or selecting jewelry for her workplace. Gopal had said there was no reason a woman should try to make herself attractive for other men besides her husband. Rani finished with the linens and hurried through the hallway, past the closed door of Gopal's home office. That room had been designated for a different purpose once, but when it became clear that it would not be a nursery Gopal removed the small furniture and installed his computers there. Rani did not go into that room anymore, even to clean.

Every morning Rani rode a half-empty bus to downtown. So different from the packed buses of Delhi, with brave boys hanging off the roofs while inside the standing passengers pressed together in a solid, steaming mass and strange hands had slid across Rani's thighs and buttocks while she held her arms tightly folded across her breasts and heard whispered, leering invitations from undetermined points behind her. Such "Eve-teasing" was just innocent play by low-class boys, it meant nothing, said the male teachers and even her father. The same teachers who wanted to expel Chandrika as a whore for posting her photo in a one-piece bathing suit in the all-university online beauty contest. Rani shook off the memory and looked away as they passed the Hiawatha elementary school.

At eight on the dot Rani was at her cubicle in the basement of the brick fortress that was the Social Security's regional data processing center. The cloth-covered square, eight feet on a side, was not her prison but her refuge. The beige walls were bare except for a calendar with Shahrukh Khan and Preity Zinta gazing at each other in a scene from *Veer Zara*. She had a desk, a chair, and a computer monitor, her window onto the world. Every two weeks her paycheck was signed over for Gopal to deposit, but that did not trouble her. Rani heard her co-workers' complaints about salary and hours and lack of promotion filtering through the cloth walls, but she did not reply. Rani had been in her cubicle longer than most

of the tattooed American children sitting around her and still drew a smaller salary than them, but she loved her job fiercely. This little square, beneath the steam pipes and ventilation duct in the basement of a converted warehouse half a world away from her birthplace, was the one fragment of space that was truly hers alone.

At lunchtime she examined the sticker with a red owl, the symbol of the grocery store chain, on the red American apple sitting on her desk. *Ullu*, her stepmother had called her, owl. *Ullu* meant both owl and stupid, and her stepmother never failed to let her know how useless she was. Who would marry a lazy girl who kept her nose in books rather than helping out around the house? A girl who needed a rap across the shoulder with a stick to wake her up. If anyone had said the bright dark eyes behind her black-framed owl glasses were beautiful, she would have thought they were mocking her. In the movies the university girls being serenaded were full bodied, ripe and tall and fair, like the Kashmiris. Rani was barely over five feet tall and thin, not like the daughter of a merchant. Being slim was not a sign of beauty, it was a mark of poverty.

Rani turned the apple around. If the sticker was Delhi, she was now on the opposite side. Here the owl was the symbol of wisdom. She had come halfway around the earth, and now in this little box she lived in a world of symbols and code and numerical applications. Would she be sent back to the other side, where it was midnight now, returned in shame to wash her stepmother's pots?

During the daytime she could stay occupied with the Java code and folding databases into a master matrix, but today, intruding into those thoughts, was the conversation she could not escape hearing through her cloth wall. Two of the American girls, both younger than her and each married scarcely two years, were debating the best way to manage their divorces. Rani could not believe her ears. What problems did these girls have? A promised vacation was postponed? The man mentioned the name of a previous girlfriend? Now these girls, on their own, without consulting their relatives, were deciding to discard their marriages because they were judging their husbands were not sufficiently committed? And

they were calculating what sort of financial package they should receive?

Rani was still holding the apple with the red owl sticker looking back at her. Foolish girl, she told herself, you can run halfway around the world but never escape the fate that is destined for you. Happiness is not yours to create or to seek out. If it does not come to you, you cannot chase it down, no matter how fast you run. She set the uneaten apple on the shelf above her monitor and returned to merging the spreadsheets from the past month's claim entries.

That night after clearing the dishes Rani packed Gopal's suitcase for the next morning and thought about her own day coming up. Gopal traveled on business almost every month, and in the first years his absence for more than one night was almost unbearable. This time, the thought of his being away for a day was a relief, a chance for her to breathe, to stand or sit without straining her ears for the impatient clearing of a throat that meant a chore had gone untended, that a paper or an article of clothing was out of place. In the early days Gopal was not that way; when he was just leaving bachelorhood he was as careless with his laundry as a child—or a male student—and he had marveled at Rani's precision. Now he was as watchful as a hawk, and Rani knew why. It was not that he cared about his socks or the flatware, but he was gathering evidence, cataloging her missteps or deficiencies, to justify to himself the decision that was being forced on him. If she could not be held to blame for her main defect, if that were too unfair, other failings needed to be discovered.

Rani laid out Gopal's clothes for the next day, and on the nightstand on her side of the bed she set out the black slacks and black and white pullover sweater she usually wore on Wednesdays. She followed her customary routine, aware of Gopal's notice of the slightest details. Except for holidays or going to temple she now wore Western clothes; saris and sandals were impossible in the Minnesota snow and ice. But tomorrow would be the start of summer and other things would be possible. Rani looked in the bathroom mirror. It had taken her awhile to get used to wearing her hair shorter and swept up on the sides rather than in a single plait down her back. Gopal had liked the more modern look, and Rani was sur-

prised to discover her head was free of a tugging pressure and weight. Plus it helped keep her ears warm. What would the people back home think if they saw me looking this way? she thought, and then she shivered. She might learn the answer soon enough.

In the morning Rani repeated the breakfast ritual while Gopal looked at his airplane ticket for a third time. A horn sounded from the street, a signal from the airport taxi, and Gopal set his cup down and rose and put on his jacket, picked up his suitcase and briefcase and let himself out the front door. No goodbye kiss anymore, thought Rani.

When the sound of the taxi had faded, Rani hurried to her chores. Everything must be in order. The dishes were cleaned and back on the shelves, the food returned to the pantry and the refrigerator, the countertops and tables were bare and gleaming. She dialed her work number twice and hung up before the second ring, then took a breath and the third time waited for the Center's answering system to play its recorded message and menu. She pushed button five and worked to keep her voice calm. "This is Rani Agarwal of Data Processing. I'm sorry, I will not be in today." She hung up quickly before offering an excuse. She had never taken a day of sick leave and was entitled to, but still she wanted to keep things orderly.

Although she had bathed in the evening, Rani stepped into the shower, faced the showerhead and gave each faucet handle a quick half turn. She stood still as the dozen needle sprays struck her face, the first rush icy, then gradually warming. She closed her eyes and willed the full stream to bore into the middle of her forehead, if only it could, and let the holy purifying waters rush through and cleanse her of the memory that stayed in her brain like a piece of broken glass. That evening of Ganesh Chaturthi, the happiest celebration of the year. An hour earlier everything was so joyous, even her serious husband was like a child. Then in a moment it was all gone. Rani stood facing the stream for ten minutes, until the warm water was exhausted and she began to shiver. There was no healing, no relief—as if this filtered and chlorinated and piped American liquid had all of the spirit of living flowing water driven from it, and all it could do was supply tears

for her now. It would have been just the same if she had died then too, she thought. Maybe better. It would be easier for her husband's family if he were just a widower.

Wrapped in a towel, she searched the bottom drawer of the dresser. The wedding jewelry was still in the cloth bag beside the emerald sari and the passports. Was it only five years ago that she had worn these? One by one she fastened the gold ornaments, the tikka across her forehead, the gold flower nath on the side of her nose, the ruby earrings matching the pendant of the necklace, three rings of bracelets on each wrist, and the tinkling anklets. Three months of father's salary for these ornaments on that day of glory. She turned back and forth in front of the mirror on the closet door, then stood on tiptoe and raised her arms over her head. She had never looked at herself this way, naked except for her jewelry, but now she saw the vision she had presented to Gopal that night. She brushed the thought from her mind—that was another time, another life, when the world was right side up. Carefully she wrapped and pleated her sari and pinned the pollu over her shoulder, then she adjusted her hair and finally applied the vermillion bindi between her eyebrows. She set her purse and keys by the telephone. Everything in the apartment was in place for Gopal's return.

After the winter months of leaden gray skies and snowdrifts, followed by the dirty slush of April and the buffeting prairie winds of May, the once-frozen city glowed clean and calm and radiant on the day of the summer solstice. The longest day of the year was still only early spring in this northern climate and the apple trees and azaleas were just starting to bloom. White-haired Swedish women peered through their venetian blinds and clucked at the sight of the tiny woman in green and gold walking along the grassy median of the parkway, her wrists and ankles tinkling. Rani followed the path they had strolled that first summer, past the Longfellow library on Hiawatha Avenue to the familiar entrance to Minnehaha Park, heedless of the stares from the passing automobiles.

On some days she and Gopal had picked their way down the three flights of uneven rocky steps to view the falls from the grassy field below, but today she stayed at the upper level

and walked along the path parallel to the nearly dry creek. In spring when the snows were melting the stream rippled and the falls rushed in torrents, and in winter the falls froze solid, forming giant stalactites of ice that hung from the edge of the cliff all the way to the bottom like a giant crystal wall. But by the summertime the flow was reduced to a trickle, a small curtain of beads more like a leaking faucet than a plunging cataract. At a shady crossing an arched stone bridge overlooked a statue of the young lovers, Hiawatha carrying Minnehaha in his arms across the stream. This was the place Rani loved the most, and she smiled at the thought—here she was an Indian woman who would never be famous and should not be living, standing before a statue of an Indian woman who was not Indian and had never lived. Minnehaha was no princess, but just a fanciful creation by the white settlers to romanticize the aboriginal natives after they had exterminated most of them. In every way things were upside down on this side of the world.

An iron fence bordered the creek to keep children from playing near the falls, but children are resourceful, and Rani noticed a small gap where the fence met the bridge, too large for a man to fit through, but just wide enough for a slim woman who held her breath. Rani edged through the opening slowly, careful not to catch her trailing pollu on the protruding fence, and laid her sandals on a flat rock underneath the bridge. Barefoot she picked her way like a deer along the damp stones of the creek bed, her emerald dress and gold ornaments dappled by the patches of sunlight and shade filtering through the canopy of aspen and elm and oak branches that blanketed the stream. There was scarcely enough water to make a ripple now, and the only sound of her motion was an occasional laughing tinkle from her anklets. Rani approached the edge of the falls and could see the stream below wending its way to join the Mississippi half a mile distant. At the edge of the falls enough water merged from twenty different side streams to make a puddle that cooled the bottom of her feet without covering her toes. Rani bent at the waist and leaned over the edge and saw two boys, no more than twelve years old, wading waist-deep and chasing a river carp that had gotten trapped in the shallow pool directly below her. Her toes

clutched the wet stones, slick with moss, and she stood back up and surveyed the panorama laid out before her. Overhead cottony mounds of clouds marched across the robin's-egg sky in parallel with their shadows crossing the grassy fields speckled with picnickers and sunbathers. Directly ahead a ribbon of stream led from the pool through the woods and on to the river that shone as a blue-gray haze filtering through the trees below her. Every other minute the scene faded or brightened as the sun dueled the crossing clouds.

Rani pressed her palms together, with the tips of her forefingers just touching her lips, and tried to see the river beyond the trees. Her mind raced. Was everything out of place here, or was it just she who was out of place? Could she return to her father's house, could she be accepted back after all they had paid to be rid of her? What awaits there? Would she be allowed in the house to join her stepmother's servants or would she be sent out like a widow, bad luck for anyone even to let her hand touch them?

She looked back down at the pool, sixty feet below, at the fish now swimming undisturbed by the American boys. Even this fish has a home, she thought, but where is my home? Beyond that pool, straight through the earth, on the other side is the holy Ganges. There is my home. My mother and grandmother, and all their mothers before them, bathed in that river and blessed it with their ashes. If they want me to fly back there I will go willingly. Rani leaned forward and peered down again at the pool, now barely shimmering, and saw her reflection looking up, beckoning, welcoming. All the waters in the world flowed from the same source and all returned to their source. She could go home where she belonged and make things right. Rani took a breath and bowed to Lord Krishna.

The sunbathers on the grassy picnic grounds were watching a mother hawk from the river cliffs soar and dip as it taught her baby bobbing above her how to fly. Over by the falls, unnoticed, a green leaf fluttered and sparkled in the breeze as it floated towards the water below. Rani felt at peace now, the order of her world was restored, now everything would be all right. She stood straight and rose, palms pressed together, the clouds beneath her feet, the wind brushing her face, as she rushed upwards ever upwards, to burst outwards from the holy water like a leaping fish.

Ann Minnett

Offerings

Marshall's been dead for a year, but this morning I scrambled two eggs out of old habit—one for him, one for me. Lapses like that shake me up, make me wonder how long Janie and Mac will tolerate my living alone if they find out.

So Marshall's spirit and I went for a calming drive in the '82 Ford pickup that he drove for thirty years. We rumbled through nearby neighborhoods—my spotted hand rubbing the sun-bleached dash and Marshall witnessing from fraying plaid seats and palm-polished shifter. Just this morning when I hoisted my arthritic hips up and onto the seat, his baritone had chided as always, *Heave ho, Alida*.

The kids want me to give the truck to my great-grandson, but I won't do it.

Heading home, we idled at a stop light on the south bridge over Meadow Creek. A collection of found objects from our neighborhood had taken shape between the cement embankment and underside of the north bridge, maybe thirty yards away. The camp was hidden by railings and greenery, except to those of us who sat higher and bothered to look.

Whoever lived there didn't call attention to himself or cause trouble. If anything, he or they hid. I supposed our quiet neighborhood, Meadow Creek itself, offered safety from crowded homeless shelters or freeway tunnels downtown.

Movement straight ahead distracted me.

A heavy-set teenager's bare knees pumped above a child's bicycle handlebars. He approached on the sidewalk, the front wheel jerking side to side until he reached a slope and coasted past me at eye level. When his shoulder brushed the wing mirror, he smirked but stared straight ahead. His hair spiked over a tanned face, shiny with grime.

He dropped into the creek bed and disappeared.

"So that's who lives there," I said.

Meadow Creek runs behind our house. It's home to mosquitoes that thrive in stagnant pools, rats that eat my bird

seed no matter what I do to prevent it, and raccoons that rip siding off the eaves looking for shelter in our attic. Marshall saw a scrawny coyote lope out of the creek bed one morning before dawn. We both witnessed four baby armadillos scatter from under our patio and disappear over the bank. But mostly our bend of the creek is at the mercy of quick floods that wedge neighbors' trash in exposed roots of our willow trees. I've found garden hoses there, Styrofoam cups, tons of plastic bags knotted around dog turds (Marshall's term, not mine).

Marshall wouldn't approve of the way I've let it go. Poison ivy vines thicker than my wrist twine up the creek willows now. I rarely walk back there these days. Meadow Creek is a painted mural on my sliding glass doors. It backs the weathered Adirondack chair where Marshall often inhaled cigars, swearing he didn't.

Well. One thought leads to another now, doesn't it. What would Janie and Mac think of that?

Within days I spotted the teenager on my walk. He was walking, too, no bicycle in sight. He shuffled in my direction, head down, arms churning like a washing machine. He wore boots without laces and boxy shorts that looked square, cut off at his knees. He took up the whole sidewalk.

Marshall would have swung his long arms, clearing a wide berth for his own body, challenging this kid for right of way.

I stepped aside saying, "Good morning."

He kept walking, said nothing.

God knows why I turned around and shouted, "Are you all right?"

"What?"

"Are you all right?"

He shrugged but didn't look all right to me. Scratches lined hairless forearms, and scabs dotted what I could see of his legs below baggy shorts.

Poison ivy!

"Me? Sure." He smiled, straightened taller, summoning a brighter version of himself for the benefit of an old woman.

I asked, "Where do you live?"

Marshall would have asked that question. Honestly, sometimes I feel like Marshall has possessed me. Like I'm sup-

posed to carry on his part of our team's work.

The teenager pointed over my head, toward the bridges. "Over there."

Anyone who spends time with teenagers knows that his was an odd response. Most would have told me to get lost or worse. More likely I'd have been ignored. Plus, it's a fact that teenagers in this neighborhood never walk anywhere and certainly not alone. If, on the rare occasion they stretch their legs, ear plugs hang from their ears to avoid talking to the likes of me.

So when this scruffy kid ambled on, I studied him. Probably sixteen, my great-grandson's age, and he wasn't going anywhere.

Even *I* was walking toward three thousand steps.

Not a minute later I saw a tall, skinny figure across the street, so dark that his skin blended into the neck and sleeves of his black shirt. Sun in my face prevented me from distinguishing his features, but his long stride accentuated continual head swiveling—up, down, up again. I wasn't surprised that he ignored me. Since he remained across the street, I kept quiet, but after he passed, I spun around to see that those two paced one another. Stocky white teenager led from a block away, sauntering, arms swaying. Tall black fellow glided at a safe distance behind.

Smart. Together, they'd be noticed around here.

Inspiration struck by the time I reached home. *Give some of Marshall's clothes to those homeless boys.* I gathered three shirts and a can of bug spray into a fancy Nordstrom's shopping bag so large that my donation appeared skimpy, barely covering the bottom.

I started over.

Into the shiny bag I layered: a pair of walking shoes; four oranges; a flannel blanket (they'd need it eventually); and a box of crackers. I stashed the full bag in the coat closet, just in case Janie dropped by. I fretted for hours and by late afternoon had doubts. First of all, the bag would look out of place on the weedy slope of the north bridge. Or someone less deserving might steal it. Worse, a mechanic at Quick Lube next to the bridge or even the homeless boys themselves might see me leave the bag there, and I wanted to remain anonymous.

At dusk Marshall's pickup lurched in second gear toward Meadow Creek, giving me a shadowy view of the familiar barricade under the north bridge. Their home.

I lost my nerve and sped home.

All the next day I worried until Marshall's angry voice said, *For God's sake, Alida, just load it up and drop it off!* Decisively impatient with me, as always.

That evening I pulled myself together and patted the charged cell phone in my pocket at least five times before backing out of the garage. Marshall's Astros cap rested on the bench seat for luck. Between shifts from second to third gear my fingertips skimmed across his sweat stains commingled with my own from gardening. I planned to wear it and hide my white hair.

A sticky note waited on the kitchen counter, just in case:

6:40 pm Tuesday

I've gone to the north bridge over Meadow Creek to give the homeless boys some food and clothes. Call 911 if you find this!—Mom

Marshall understood, but Janie wouldn't approve of my adventure.

Despite a dim memory of the trip, I can say that the north bridge encampment was quiet. I aimed to follow the rut where the teenager disappeared on his bike but quickly found it too steep for my old knees. So I heaved the bag into deep weeds, out of view from the traffic above.

When I pulled into my garage a few minutes later, Marshall's hat rested forgotten on the passenger seat. So much for stealth or camouflage.

Marshall and I never covered windows along the back overlooking the creek because dense foliage obscured the view from houses on the other side. However, for the first time in thirty-six years, I felt a little exposed and locked my doors and closed all blinds facing the street.

I'd been pacing with excitement, unable to sit still, when the phone rang. Janie wanted to know how I filled my day. (*Wouldn't you like to know.)* Did I eat dinner? (*Too excited.)*

What did I have? I lied and said "chicken-rice casserole."

Janie expects me to fail at single life without her father.

Once her grilling subsided, I hung up and called Mac in California. He's not much of a talker, like his dad, so I told him, "The gardens are flourishing, and everything is great. I'm feeling super, thanks for asking."

The call reminded me of when three-year-old Mac hollered from his bedroom, "I'm not doing anything, Mama," after giving himself a haircut.

Well, Mac, I wasn't doing anything.

I thought of nothing but the homeless boys and their grim lives under the bridge. Did they find the bag? Did they see me? I began to understand why arsonists return to watch the fires they set. When I gave in and drove by their encampment the following morning, it looked unchanged, although the bag was gone.

Marshall and I often donated to Salvation Army, but this was different. I'd seen the boys who claimed my Nordstrom's bag. I knew who'd wear Marshall's clothes and eat my food.

We shared a connection, those boys and me.

Naturally, I did it again. I should have been ashamed to use another Nordstrom's bag, but I wanted the boys to know that the gifts came from the same person.

Janie calls such thinking "ego."

I smoothed Marshall's clothing into the bag and added cans of beans and chili and an old can opener—just in case. It weighed a ton, the handles dug into my fingers, but I dragged it along the weedy path at twilight, this time without dilly-dallying. When I turned to leave, something scraped across concrete followed by an Indian war hoop out of a Hollywood western. Several deep voices laughed. More than two. The noises hurried me up the rutted path to Marshall's Ford, but no one followed me.

I slept poorly and woke up during a dream in which I was a breathless child running up basement stairs in the dark. I was terrified of unseen hands grabbing at my ankles. I lay in bed, gasping and contemplating my actions of the past two days. If I were thirty years younger . . . If Marshall were alive . . . If my eyesight were sharper . . . Then, as long as Janie

doesn't find out . . .

A breeze caught my robe when I stepped out to get the newspaper. Unfamiliar clinking over my shoulder signaled straggly wind chimes drooping from the Japanese maple. Some threads blew freely, metal pieces hung from others. A piece of paper fluttered at the end of one thread. THANK YOU was written in clotted pen.

Marshall shouted in my head, *Christ! They know where we live!*

The wind chimes dangled in the courtyard for hours while I pondered what to do. Eventually, I placed the tangled strands on our patio table in the backyard, planning to hide them away later—a memento of my adventure.

The wind chimes hung by my kitchen window the next morning, and it scared me. Why is the backyard so much more intimate than the front?

By 5:00 p.m., my doors held new deadbolts, and I moved myself upstairs to the guestroom despite the pain of climbing them. Grasping a flashlight in the dark evoked another time of huddling alone with lights off. Last Halloween. Travis had shouted, "Hey, Mrs. Reynolds. Do you know who I am?" from behind fangs and vampire make-up. I dropped a Snickers into his jack-o-lantern, guessing names of fictitious little boys, like Marshall had done the year before. He laughed, "No! It's Travis!" That night I waited for Travis and his dad to fade down my walk before turning off the porch lights, and I cried in the dark while our doorbell rang and rang.

Don't get me wrong. I did not cry while hiding upstairs, although tears might have broken the tension. It crossed my mind that Mac and Janie were right about my inability to live alone.

I fell asleep, bothered that the wind chimes dangled by the kitchen window, and awoke fretting. What if Janie saw them? I should take them down. But what if the teenager looked to find them gone? Since I didn't want to hurt his feelings, I left the gift untouched and concocted a story to tell Janie if and when she spotted them.

And she did.

Janie and I were having tea when she noticed the wind chimes. She leaned over the sink for a closer look. "Mom, what's that?"

I said, "Oh. Travis, the little boy next door, gave me that." I'd also developed an elaborate story about helping Travis with a gardening project for Cub Scouts, if Janie had questions. I knew not to volunteer information unless she asked.

"It's kind of tacky," she said. "But sweet. You going to leave it there?"

"For a while," I said. "It *does* make a nice sound in the breeze." I rinsed my cup, and she stepped out the back door, saving me from changing the subject.

Janie unwound the hose and turned on the faucet before I joined her outside. She often waters my hanging baskets, and I wish she wouldn't. I didn't fuss at her, but I like watering my plants myself.

"What's all this?" she asked.

God, I hate that tone. She keeps me on guard with her questions, expecting me to slip up.

Janie pointed to the patio table, distractedly wasting water on the walkway instead of showering my flowers. My daughter had noticed a spiral of river rocks encircling a pot of begonias. Stones trailed out to form a question mark about a foot long.

Something new!

"Hmm?" I bought time.

"These rocks," she said, still pointing.

"Oh, *those* rocks. I thought that you meant the table and chairs. You'll remember that we bought the patio furniture before your dad got sick." You see, there's an art to evasion. "Yes. The rocks!"

She waited for me to answer her question.

I said, "Aren't they lovely?"

"What are you doing, Mom . . . making a Zen garden?" To my relief, she smiled.

"You know. It relaxes me." An accurate statement.

She seemed to accept it and started watering the hanging baskets.

Truth to tell, I've collected rocks my whole life. My kids

grew up with small baskets of rocks throughout our house, gathered on vacations and either hand-carted or mailed back home to myself. You can imagine what Marshall thought about that! Even now, finger shaped stones from Montana's Flathead Valley appear to swim across my kitchen window sill like a school of pale green fish. Mica, in jagged chunks from Colorado, sparkles throughout my flowerbeds.

Did the homeless boys know that rocks make me happy? Their design suggested as much, signaling a charming invitation to play.

Call me intrigued.

I left a sealed box (sorry, rats!) of juice, cookies, peanut butter, and bread beside the stone spiral. I wrote *North Bridge—Meadow Creek* on top with permanent marker.

The boys took the box during the night, stacking four flat rocks in its place.

And so it went.

The boys and I have exchanged gifts in this way for several days now. At first I shopped for them and remained content upstairs, knowing that they'd take my gifts by morning. They never bothered me, and each morning I had the pleasure of finding smooth river rocks piled in clumps or aligned in waves across the patio. The display resembled a stream bubbling into shallow pools.

On the drive home from Safeway today, the grimy teenager was leaning against the bridge rail where I first noticed him. He had on Marshall's striped polo shirt—one with a stitched logo that Marshall found pretentious and refused to wear. I glanced at groceries on the passenger seat next to me and longed to stop, hand this teenager the food. I wanted to chat, maybe learn his name.

But we don't have that kind of relationship, so I drove past him, slowly. He pretended to ignore the Ford.

And it wasn't enough for me.

Tonight I'm watching from Marshall's recliner with a throw tucked around me for camouflage. I must have dozed off because I wake as two moonlit figures, the stocky teen and a child, trot away toward the creek. He carries the box I left for them, but they hesitate, both glancing toward my house.

A long braid whips with the motion, an earring catches faint light. The smaller person is light skinned, but definitely shows the ripe shape of pregnancy.

A third figure approaches the sliding door not ten feet away from me. He pulls stones from deep pockets, kneels, and lays a trail down my patio steps. He, a stooped man I don't recognize, peers into the glass. Moonlight glints off Marshall's jacket, which this man wears with collar up. He stares above my right shoulder and flicks his wrist below Marshall's cuff. Surely he can't see me in the shadows, but he nods deferentially, and I shrink into the chair, holding my breath.

He trudges to the creek bank where the others wait. All three hop into a gnarly pit behind my crepe myrtles, surefooted like creek critters we've watched for years.

A tinge of sunrise appears through the trees before I'll move from Marshall's chair. I'm stiff from tense waiting for light and take a moment to straighten, gain my balance.

I will not touch the rocks—I never do. I do check that the latest trail down my steps allows me to pass. Yes, it does.

The growing maze reminds me of ancient art, mysteries without answers. Marshall would hate that part, but I'm all right with not knowing.

The newspaper thumps against my front door, but I stay put, preferring to dream with eyes open than squint at fine print. Meadow Creek, a leafy shortcut between the bridges and my home, is so lovely. Dangerously alive.

Then I remember there's a girl now.

She'll need a few things.

Amy Foster

Cripple Creek

Ken should have known it wasn't going to be this easy. He should've known it months ago when his wife woke up feckless and cheerful the day after the appointment, making jokes about his chin and nose, her teeth and eyes. Apologizing for being damaged goods as she swatted him with a towel while he shaved. Should've known it when he came home that same evening to find her telling her mother all about it, spewing the acronyms of hormones and blood tests, running off numbers and statistics like she was quoting something she'd heard on public radio. She had laughed and then would intermittently go very quiet, comforting her own mother with, "it's all right. I'm ok, I swear," while she put all of those books in a cardboard box marked "Free" in large, black ink letters on the flap where they would sit at the end of the driveway, watching him pull off to work each morning, the pile dwindling, until, finally, they were gone.

But when he came home on a March evening to a dark house and no sounds of pans banging around the kitchen, he knew the worst, the inevitable, had come. She'd left him.

Ken set his gym bag that doubled as a briefcase by the door, his keys in the wooden bowl on the plant stand under the mail slot. He tossed his coat over the couch, and the cat, sleeping on the arm by the window, woke, stretched with a gape-mouthed yawn and jumped up to curl back into a doze on Ken's coat, settling onto the permanent swirl of grey fur that occupied the left arm and side.

Trying to absorb his wife's departure, Ken lifted a hand to pet Miles' ears. "Evil prince," he said, softly whispering the cat's pet name. His wife's pet name for the cat, which Ken had pilfered, and she eventually stopped using. He was not sure he could move farther than this.

From upstairs came a sound, a single, muted note and then the scuffing of a chair. A door opened.

"Up here," Lori's voice fell through the slats of the stairwell.

Ken's knees nearly went out from under him. Not gone, not gone, he repeated as he climbed the steps. Not gone.

The door to the second bedroom, what they jokingly called her study and never referred to as the baby's room anymore, was slightly open, letting a widening shaft of light fall across the pale pine floor. Another note floated out to him. A single note, played on a stringed instrument.

Inside, Lori sat in her workday clothes: black skirt, grey suit jacket, and hose. Hair still pulled back in a tight pony tail that made her look older and sterner. The buttons of her white linen shirt were opened down to her stomach, revealing a matronly beige bra, and her shoeless feet were crossed at the ankles under the dining room chair she had hauled up from below. To the side stood a black, gleaming music stand with the price tag dangling from the ledge where a book with large print and diagrams lay open to the first page. And on her lap sat a banjo.

She plucked a single string and grinned up at him as the sound faded into the room.

"Pretty neat, huh?" she said, turning a page in the book on the stand and looking from the hand hovering over the strings, up to her fingers fumbling at the neck, to the book, and back again. Finally, she plucked another string and her face cracked into a smile.

Ken rubbed the back of his neck with his palm. "Neat," he said. He stood there for a minute, watching her go through the same ritual again—look to book, then right hand, then left, then book, and pluck! "I'll get dinner going?" he said, and when there was no answer, he turned to leave.

Lori's voice followed him like an afterthought. "I'll be down soon. I just want to get through the next page."

While boiling spaghetti and warming sauce from a jar, Ken decided he wouldn't badger Lori about this. Badger—the word she used when he thought they were just talking. He decided this would be her thing and he'd let her tell him about it in her own good time. That lasted until the second slice of garlicked bread.

"So," he began, "a banjo."

Lori tore off a hunk of bread and popped it all in her mouth, cheeks bulging as she chewed with large masticating pumps.

"Yup," she said.

He waited. Miles jumped onto the table, and together they shooed him away, synchronized, both saying "Miles, down!" in the same deep, stern tone and flicking their hands at him as though to swat him, though they never had. Miles only gazed at the empty gesture, flattened out his ears, and jumped down, running off as if late for an appointment.

This was the moment when Lori, affecting her interpretation of Miles' voice, would exclaim, "Oh my god! It's nearly seven and I'm not on the window ledge!" Then they'd both laugh at the superficial imperiousness of felines.

Instead, Lori began stacking their plates, though Ken's fork was in the middle of winding his pasta from his mound. "The banjo," she said. She stood at the sink with her back to Ken's back. "I figure I've got the time now."

This was the most she had ever said about what happened those few months ago at the fertility clinic. At least this was the most she'd ever said to him about it. To her family, her mother and sisters, she had gone into detail, discussing hormones like they were psychedelic drugs and listing levels like Olympic scores: "A five-point-oh in FSH is good, but anything much higher and it's game over. With AMH, you've even less wiggle room." When her family would push her to consider treatments, she only ever responded with "Oh, no, that's not for us." She would talk like that with him around, though her voice might drop or her chin, hair falling like a shade to hide her profile, but never with him directly. With him, she never brought it up and he never asked. His mother still broached the subject now and then, asking if they'd thought about "other options" and talking brightly, disaffectedly about a young couple from their church who adopted twin boys from Ethiopia. But when he replied "I'm not sure she's ready yet," his mother told him to let it be. "Let her pick her own time," his mother would say, and Ken would nod, though his mother couldn't see that over the phone, and their conversation would drift to other topics, like his work editing for the city magazine or his father's retirement or how his youngest brother was doing with his theatre design program, all to avoid stating outright that there never would be "a time." As deeply certain as they, especially Lori, had been that this

would come easily, naturally for them, so too was the depth into which she had fallen when they learned, crammed tightly in the doctor's office, their knees nearly touching the doctor's knees, that it would only ever be so much dust materializing into a twister in a field before all those particles drifted apart on the next breeze.

Lori turned back from the sink, gave a shrug and an impish grin. "Oh, I don't know. I'm just messing around," she said. She left the dishes to soak and went back upstairs to pluck and twang on her banjo in her crumpled suit until she drifted into their bedroom long after Ken had tired of waiting up for her.

"I'm just messing around" became the theme song for the next season of their lives. After the first six-week banjo course at the community college, Ken had asked if she was going to keep it up, to which Lori replied "Oh, I don't know. I'm just messing around." After the second class, this one called Intermediate and comprised of the same instructor and largely the same group, he'd asked the same thing, to which she'd replied the same.

As spring gained traction, Lori took to walking to the acoustic music store on Hawthorne to look through their banjo method books, their straps. She took off whole days at work to do this. She came home talking about different styles and makes of banjos, about the banjos made from old cigar boxes, and banjos that could be electrified to amplify their sound. She would stare wistfully at the small shed in the back yard and say that one day she might turn that into a workshop and make her own banjo, make hundreds of them. She printed off brochures and checked into prices for a Grand Ole Opry trip.

She took to picking up banjos at thrift stores and pawn shops. She couldn't pass even the greasiest pawn broker without going in to see if they happened to have a banjo. And if they did, she couldn't leave without buying it. It wasn't that Ken begrudged her these impulses or was tight-fisted; they'd always had plenty between them and always would. He simply had difficulty understanding why his normally frugal wife saw the need for a dozen banjos in various states of displayability. If he should ask, always casually, how much her

newest banjo cost, her response was always "Less than a crib" or "less than a changing table." Always in terms of that other thing but without ever actually talking *about* the other thing.

She became proficient. Her fingers danced over the five strings, playing forward rolls, backward rolls, alternating rolls. Pinches, hammer ons, and slides. Ken's mouth became populated with words both foreign and homey.

She took off in the evenings to meet her banjo buddies at the same acoustic store that doubled as a live venue with a full bar and old pine chairs set around small wooden tables, like some kind of bluegrass speak-easy. Ken went with her a couple times, but after a while decided to attend only on weekends when there was no work the day after, no stacks of papers he needed to plow through while his mind still reeled from the frantic pace of too many banjos, too many mandolins, too many fiddles fighting for a place in the bluegrass jam pulsing through his mind.

And so spring gave way to summer, with its warm, sly heat and evenings spent on the porch. After two classes, Lori had become a central member of a core group that continued to meet once the classes were over, replacing the few friends they had had. They began coming over on weekends once a month, and then more frequently, to drink wine and play their banjos, someone occasionally bringing a guitar or a kazoo for the hell of it. Lori searched out an old djembe from the attic that they had bought on a trip to Kenya, their last major trip before they intended to start a family and vacations would become distant dreams of theme parks with grown adults dressed up like cartoon characters. Looking at the drum that particular night, the first night it had been brought down, Ken's mind fell into the memories of those two weeks: days spent in a lift-top jeep, scanning the horizon for elephants and giraffes; evenings spent eating chapatis and stews, drinking Tusker and Nile, already reminiscing about the very trip they were on and imagining themselves bringing their children back someday, as though the future were more real to them than the present, a distant orb of light they couldn't get to fast enough. Now, the drum sat out in the front room as though standing in command of the two battalions of thrift-store banjos fanning out to each side.

And so, it was not unusual when Ken turned onto his street on an exceptionally warm evening at the end of July to find it populated with a spackling of cars and trucks, mostly run-down and decorated with pro-banjo bumper stickers, which said Lori's banjo buddies had dropped in. One said "In my heaven, cherubs play banjos" and another "If God were a musician, Scruggs would be Jesus." It never ceased to amaze him that banjo players were both largely religious and atheistic at the same time. Lori hadn't called to let him know about the impromptu meet-up like she normally did, and it surprised him to discover that he didn't really mind that much, even though it had been a long day and he was rarely fond of company. It would save him from loitering around on the sidewalk out front, hoping one of the neighbors would appear to water their lawns and engage in a few short spasms of speech.

Inside, he put his bag by the door and slipped his shoes off with the toe of one foot pressed tight to the heel of the other, leaving them there in that fashion, touching, but not side by side. He followed the smell of take-out through the front room to the kitchen and beyond. The sliding door was standing wide open, though it was hotter outside than in, even this late in the evening. On the wooden deck that opened to their narrow but long back yard, Lori sat on the wooden railing, her legs swinging, feet bare. She was sharing a cigarette with the only other girl in the group, an amazingly tall, though skinny woman with short, blue hair who was Lori's age and named Something-Jo. Ken found an endless source of amusement that a girl banjo player was named Billie-Jo or Bobbie-Jo or Susie-Jo.

Lori held out her hand when she saw Ken peering into the opened white boxes on the counter, her fingers wiggling at him as the cigarette swiveled precariously between her knuckles. "Kenny!" she called, delighted. This was the only thing about Lori that Ken found both lovable and hatable at the same time: no matter if she liked you or not, Lori was always glad to see you. It made it impossible to tell where you really stood.

The rest of the group comprised a motley crew of three more men in various stages of aging who had found their passion for the banjo in the same spring as his wife, the only con-

necting factor to how these people could possibly end up on his porch on a summer's evening.

Ken took down a plate, the last clean one, from the cabinet and began dishing up rice and korma and tikka masala and naan. All the cold beers in the fridge were gone, so he had to pluck a warm one from the box by the stove and remind himself to put more in after he ate.

On the porch, everyone was tuning up. Rex and Dave sat on the two Adirondack chairs Lori had insisted their porch needed, while Josh opened up a camping chair that had as many bumper stickers stuck to it as any of the cars outside. He motioned for Ken to take that chair and slung his banjo over his shoulder, kneeling in between Rex and Dave to get his banjo resonating just right with theirs.

Ken nodded, raised his beer, and sat. "Salut," he said.

Lori and the other woman smoked the cigarette right down to the filter, then stubbed it out on the back of the porch railing, where the small black burn mark would be visible from the other side. There were a trail of them, in fact, at varying heights along the back of the rails, depending on where the women had sat, how many they had smoked, and who had stubbed it out. Looking at them from a distance when he mowed or completed other, hopefully nascent, yard work, the marks reminded Ken of the sheet music he used to read for high school band—all whole or half notes, except for the occasional quarter or eighth where multiple cigarettes had been snuffed on one post. He was amazed that he could still read music, though his fingers had long ago forgotten how to play the trumpet that sat tarnishing in the attic.

Though he hated the sight of those black ovals, and that one day a buyer might negotiate a lower price because of them—an odd thought since he and Lori had always talked about this place as their "forever home"—those marks-cum-notes seemed to form an anthem that might make their lives fall into place if only they could figure out which key it was in.

Ken finished his beer and had another, forgetting again to restock the fridge so that the next round might be chilled. By the end of that one, night had settled across their shoulders. The light over the stove issued a soft glow through the still-open sliding door, dancing across the steel strings of banjos

and flashing across Dave's glasses and Rex's lone diamond earring. As it got late, the players all took off their steel picks and strummed with just their fingertips to keep the noise under reportable levels. Josh sometimes took out a yellow and green kazoo from his pocket and hummed along in it until he made himself laugh too hard to continue.

Lori always counted off. Without even a word as to what they were about to play, she offered the count like a prayer, "and a-one, two, three, four," then picked up a round of rolls. Within a measure or two, the rest had picked up the tune and joined in with their own renditions. The songs were familiar, tunes he'd heard Lori play in endless variation for the last half dozen months. Each player brought something new, a different spin. Rex liked to play a lot of pinches. Dave killed the hammer-ons. Josh played clean and fast, adding in runs where you least expected them. Something-Jo played high on the neck, giving all their jams a soprano lilt. And Lori kept the pace. She strummed the first note of her rolls hard, reining the others in, calling them back to her, pulling them into her orbit and holding them there.

Ken had had too many beers, too many warm ones, and he lolled between drunk and nauseous like a rickety boat at sea. Looking out into the backyard, two small apparitions began walking toward them from the depths of the property line, where a very small, dusty creek ran between the houses, ending in a drain at the road. He was so drunk that he began to believe they were the ghosts of their children, haunting the place where their souls should have found corporeal sanctuary. Ken began to rise from his chair, a look of horror screwing his mouth into a rictus of fear and rage, until they put their faces up to the porch slats and grabbed hold with two grubby hands. Not apparitions—children!

Something-Jo slung the banjo off her shoulder and leant it against the arm of Ken's chair, kneeling down in front of the children, their faces level as she knelt and they stood, each on one side of the anthem railing. She spoke to them softly, licked her thumb and wiped away something on the younger child's face. The other child pretended disgust, though Ken imagined that what he really felt was disappointment that it was not he who would be blessed by spit on a mother's warm

finger.

The other four continued to play, but the pace lagged. Rex and Dave began to miss. Josh started picking out a different tune, his face bent low over the strings, as he plucked softly. They stopped. Joined again, but could not follow Lori's haphazard pace. Finally all the banjos died away, Lori's fingers occasionally slipping across a string but not to any tune or rhythm, discordant notes drifting out into the night like lone icebergs.

"Sorry," Something-Jo said, a smile belying her apology. She mumbled something about their father's turn to have them and a shrug. Then, "got to get these guys home and cleaned up." She turned to Ken. "Thanks for letting them play in your creek," she said.

"Anytime," Ken said. It was the normal thing to say, but odd because he hadn't even known they were there until he mistook them for the ghosts of his own children, and off-kilter because it had never occurred to him that any of the people who occupied his porch randomly might have children waiting for them at home, and certainly not Something-Jo with her wild hair, endless smoking, and humorous tales of one-night stands. He had never really thought about it being *his* creek before, either, but just *a* creek that ran behind all the houses on this block, and yet he liked the sense of ownership that it could be his and something that he could offer to quarter-sized versions of himself as a playground.

Lori seemed frozen, hands hovering over the strings, as she stared at Something-Jo and her two children gathering their things and exiting through the side gate, Something-Jo swatting at their backs and bottoms to release the dust. It seemed impossible to Ken that she did not know they were there, but perhaps she had forgotten, caught up in the food and company and hours of picking that became a veil falling over her tear-weary eyes. Rex and Dave and Josh rose and left as well, their trucks and hatchbacks bumbling to life on the street in front of their house.

Ken started to load the plates into the dishwasher, but couldn't finish. He was suddenly more tired than he had ever been before, and all his parts—hands, feet, head—felt disconnected from the rest of him. He could see two hands clutch-

ing at the cream ceramic plate, but he could not answer with any certainty that they belonged to him.

He climbed the stairs, eventually crawling up the last few, needing his hands to pull him along. He showered, again with a sense that he was being washed, not washing himself. He fell into the bed, too hot to slide under the sheets. Through the window, solitary notes rose into the night, each deliberately and slowly plucked.

That night, Lori pulled Ken to her. She lay on her side, facing the open window, her back to him, but she pulled him against her, wrapping his arm around her waist. She slid a hand down the front of his boxers and made him hard. He tried to turn her onto her back, but she resisted, and instead slipped the band of his boxers down and pulled her underwear to the side, arching her back as she guided him in.

Their movements were truncated and furtive, the space to maneuver in limited and restrictive. Ken grunted into her hair as he made his shallow thrusts, and she moaned softly into his forearm, which she had draped across her neck and jaw. Her fingers danced along the soft inner skin of his arm as the tips rolled forward and back, alternating rolls, playing a song he almost thought he could hear resonating from his body.

He came first but kept going, wanting her orgasm more than his own, but unable to hold on. It had been so long. He grew soft and she moved her hips forward until he fell out, then nestled back against his body.

"It's all right," she said, when he reached down to touch her with his fingers. "Just hold me."

And he did. But though he held her body there tight against him in the same position as which they'd made love for the first time in as long as he could remember, he sensed that she was far, far away, soaring out through the window, up above the city—to the mountain or the beach, perhaps—out away from him and their house and the crippled banjos in the living room and the broken-dreams djembe and the anthem she would never play for him though he could have read the notes, could have transcribed them into chords for her to play back to his waiting ears.

Amy Dodgen

A General Rule

My father's instructions were very clear: Ronald's diaper should be changed five times a day, as a general rule. Once before breakfast. Once before lunch. Two times before dinner. And then once before bed. He'd typed the instructions carefully in the letter he gave me last week as he lay dying at St. Luke's Cornwall Hospital. He added a handwritten note at the bottom in his neat block letters reminding me that the five-a-day rule is always subject to change, circumstances depending. With Ronald it helps to be flexible.

I finished reading the letter for the second time, folded it, tossed it on the bed. The four-poster had the same tasseled white bedspread on it I used as a teenager. Everything else in the room was the same, too. The silky sheer drapes around the windows and the red chili-pepper lights dangling from the ceiling. Black and white photos of me with friends from high school I hadn't seen since moving to New York City ten years ago. The clipping from the *Newburgh Times Herald-Record*, once crisp and white, now faded and golden, announcing my acceptance to Barnard College.

It was time to leave for the cemetery. I walked downstairs, pausing at a collection of photographs my father had arranged on a table in the living room. Front and center was a shot of Ronald and me taken when we were children. Ronald was tall for an eleven-year-old, standing with his legs stiff and planted wide apart, his chest pushed out slightly, the way little boys will pose when they want to appear older and tougher. One hand clutched a hammer. The other rested protectively on my shoulder. I was eight, skinny, shy, wearing a rainbow-striped tank top and shorts. I remembered Dad taking that picture; our faces look eager to please, but a little guarded, too. His temper was unpredictable for a while after Mom's accident.

The photo didn't show it, but Ronald and I were posing in front of a tree house. The summer after Mom died, Ronald

built it in the vacant lot down the street from our house using lumber he filched from a construction site. I can remember Ronald checking out a book from the library on construction and then sketching out a picture on notebook paper before he got started. He bought nails from the hardware store with money from his allowance, got the hammer out of Dad's old tool box, and worked on the damn thing for at least two months. I brought him nails, helped carry boards, and sat under the tree watching as he patiently hammered wood together. When he was done, we had a fairly sturdy platform high in the leaves and a crude ladder made out of stray boards hammered to the trunk of the tree.

Ronald normally helped me climb the ladder to the tree house, but one Sunday at the end of the summer, he and his friend Greg Brown were sitting up there smoking cigarettes. "Go away, Danielle, go play with Daddy," Ronald called down to me when I asked to come up. I didn't listen and tried to climb the ladder alone. I almost made it all the way, too, but I lost my footing towards the top. With hands grasping frantically at splintering wood, I fell backwards about ten feet down to the grass. I didn't break any bones, but I'd gouged my leg on a branch when I landed, and you could tell it needed stitches by the amount of blood pouring out. I couldn't walk and I was wailing, so Ronald picked me up and carried me ten blocks to the hospital. He called our father when we got there.

I set the photo down, took a deep breath, and walked into the kitchen. Ronald and the live-in nurse, Kathy, were sitting at the table in the breakfast nook. Dad hired Kathy on a temporary basis last year when he started chemo treatments.

"Good morning," I said lightly. I never knew how to act around Kathy (friend, family member, hired help?) with her drab grey tops and sensible polyester slacks. She knew my brother better than I did, now.

"Morning," Kathy said. "Are you almost ready to go?"

"Almost," I said. I sat down next to Ronald, who was staring at the flowers at the center of the table. "Hey Ronald, I was just looking at that picture of you and me in front of the tree house you built," I said. "You remember that, don't you?"

He didn't reply, of course. He hadn't spoken in something

like three years. I made myself look at his face again, at his body. His hair looked like it was falling out. You could see his scalp through the tiny, greasy strands, and he had a moustache like my dad's. His lips were red and drool was coming out of his mouth and snot was on the moustache. His eyes were still the same bright blue, but now one crossed inward while the other one faced straight ahead, and they were unfocused. I didn't think he was really seeing anything. His body was drawn into itself, his thin, waxy arms folded into an X over his torso, the wrists limp, the deteriorated legs slanted off to one side. His whole body looked unused, broken. Kathy had dressed him in brown pants and a blue golf shirt. A scuffed brown leather belt was loosely fastened about his waist, cinched with the large, gaudy, western belt buckle Mom had given him for his tenth birthday. Ronald always wore the belt; it was included in Dad's letter of instructions.

Kathy stood at the counter now, drying dishes, her back to us. "You shouldn't put so much pressure on him to remember things. You know he can't," she said. "I just talk to him about the normal, everyday things that we do. It's better for him that way."

Ignoring her, I stood up and began pushing Ronald's wheelchair's down the ramp to the garage. I climbed into a bucket seat in the back of Dad's van and watched as Kathy expertly strapped his chair into place with a series of complicated belts and latches. "You okay there, Ron?" I asked. Ronald just stared at his hands vacantly and didn't look up at me. I wondered if he knew where he was, if he even knew I was there.

I was in high school when Ronald first started hearing the voices. He had just graduated and was attending community college in town. He wanted to study science, maybe even go to med school one day. Then I came home from a football game at about 11:30 one Friday night. I found Dad on the sofa downstairs in the dark. He was wearing boxers and a white t-shirt with yellow stains under the sleeves. His arms were still muscled from his years as a contractor, but for the first time ever, he seemed like an old man to me, with his thick glasses and bony knees and the scent of the Vick's he rubbed on his chest in the winter. "What's the matter?" I asked. His fists were clenched and it looked like he had been crying.

"It's your brother," he said. "I yelled at him, shook him. Jesus, I even smacked him. Nothing helps. I don't know what to do, Danielle."

Just then I heard an odd cackle from Ronald's room, a sound like a hysterical hen. The cackling was followed by loud shouts.

"Who's up there with him at this hour?" I asked.

"No one," he said. "No one."

Upstairs, Ronald was sitting on his bed, legs crossed. The room was dark and the news was on the TV, but the sound was muted. The room smelled ripe, sweaty, a combination of old perspiration and something sour and meaty, like a package of rotting raw liver I once found behind a butcher shop. Ronald ignored me when I asked him what was wrong. As I stood there and watched him, he occasionally burst into fits of giggles. "Are you stoned?" I asked finally.

"Did you know Iraq is really in Afghanistan?" he said, but he looked away from me as he said it and I had the feeling he wasn't really talking to me. "No, it's in China," he continued, "where the kitties are. Imagine what Mr. Kansas will say when he finds out about that one!" He babbled on about kitties and bunnies and strange men in black baseball caps holding machine guns. I just stood there, looking on wordlessly, trying not to breathe the smell in too deeply. Eventually I got the creeps and closed the door.

"Go to sleep," I remember telling my father downstairs. "He'll be okay."

At the cemetery, about fifty folding metal chairs had been set up on a square of fake grass next to my father's coffin and the adjacent hole in the ground. I was surprised by the number of chairs; I had expected a smaller gathering. The seats were filling up, and I could see even more mourners coming over from the parking lot. They walked over the carefully tended green grass, wet and bright and shocking next to the overcast sky, the mist, the black clothing. Ronald and I were the only family members. Dad's relatives were all dead and Mom had been estranged from hers. Simone, one of Dad's best friends, stopped me on my way to the gravesite to administer a damp hug. I shivered as I arranged myself in

one of the folding chairs in the front row, and Kathy wheeled Ronald up next to where I sat. Kathy stayed for the funeral (friend, family member, hired help?), taking a seat behind Ronald's chair. My stomach hurt and I hoped I would not have to vomit.

When Dad was first diagnosed with cancer a year ago, I'd looked into bringing Ronald into Manhattan to live with me. I made an appointment at the Meitzer Support Center, a nonprofit organization for schizophrenics and their families, to see what it would take to outfit my condo in Washington Heights for someone like Ronald. "Well, first of all, you'll need a personal nurse, at the very least," said Ms. Wilson. She was the head counselor. "If he's truly catatonic, everything will have to be done for him," she continued. "Baths, feedings, brushing his teeth, exercising his limbs, changing diapers, taking him for walks. Everything. It will be like having a newborn baby, only you'll quickly find he's a lot heavier than a newborn." She had chuckled knowingly and, I thought, inappropriately, at this point. "And then there will be weekly visits to the doctors, both a psychiatrist and a primary care physician. Honestly, I don't see how your father handled this all by himself. This is no job for a single person."

The service was short. The eulogy was delivered by Herb Simms, Simone's husband, and then Reverend Haley said a few words and led a prayer. Two men, gravediggers, I suppose, waited at a respectful distance until the end, then we watched as they lowered Dad's casket into the hole next to the fake grass. I glanced at Ronald once or twice to see how he was taking it, but he still seemed to be off in his own world.

After the funeral, Simone and Herb had everyone over to their house for coffee and food. They had been friends with my parents for as long as I could remember. Simone was my mother's best friend growing up, and when she died, Simone had more or less adopted my father as an additional family member. She was a tall, big-boned woman who always wore polyester wrap dresses with garish flower prints. Her hair was gray, greasy, and unkempt, and the bottoms of her front teeth were stained nicotine yellow. Simone chain-smoked, and when she talked it was in a hoarse, mannish voice that made my throat hurt. I tried to forgive her all these qualities,

since I knew she had been a big help to my father and Ronald after I moved away, but it was hard.

"So, how's life treating you in the big city?" she asked me as I helped her plate up cookies in her smoky, linoleum-floored kitchen.

"Fine," I said.

"Dating anyone?" she asked.

"Nope," I said, concentrating on arranging ginger snaps in a perfect circle on a white plate. Actually, I was seeing someone. His name was Dan, and he was another attorney at my firm. He was a junior partner in the intellectual property division. I only saw him on Sunday afternoons, when his wife took their kids to visit the in-laws in New Jersey. I saw no reason to go into any of this with Simone.

"I guess Newburgh's no place for someone like you," Simone said. "Did your father ever tell you he lived a summer in Brooklyn? Right before he met your mother?"

"Yeah, he loved to talk about that time," I said, trying to conceal my surprise. I never knew Dad had lived anywhere but Newburgh.

"He was happy to have you kids, though, and he loved your Mom," Simone said. "But he was always unsettled, you know? Searching. It's weird, but the thing with Ronald, as crappy as this may sound to you, it kind of settled him. Made him calmer, somehow."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"The stories he told me! I don't know how he did it. Having to clean up after him like he was a baby. He told me the first time he had to change Ronald's diaper, and it was full of shit, he cried, did you know that?"

I took a tiny bite of cookie, nodded, willed Simone to stop talking.

"Richard took him to the Orange Psychiatric Institute," Simone continued. "After he was diagnosed. And after he stopped talking. Because that's what the psychiatrist here told him to do. Commit him. Commit him to the loony ward. He wasn't sure, but he wanted to do what's best for Ronald. And maybe he wanted to see if the doctors up there could fix him, I don't know. I went with him, for moral support. They took us on a tour while we were there. It was like hell. Full of

zombie people, everyone had dead eyes. And it stank in there. Everyone's shit and piss and medicine, all combined. We sat down with the doctors to talk after the tour. As soon as they started talking electroshock therapy, like it was a good option for Ronald, that was the last straw for your father. He couldn't stand leaving him there. 'No one's putting any son of mine in an institution,' Richard said to me that day. 'Over my dead body.'"

My cell phone interrupted Simone, its bright digital chirp out of place in her old-fashioned kitchen. I glanced at the number. It was Julie, the partner I worked for. "I'll be right back," I said and walked into the hallway. "Hello?"

"Danielle, I know this is a really bad time for you," Julie said. "I just wanted to see if you could possibly come into the office tomorrow afternoon. We're meeting with the people from the Pratt Corporation, and we really need you there for the contract negotiations. Around four o'clock?"

"Sure," I answered automatically, without thinking. "I'll be there."

"So, what are you going to do?" Simone asked me once I'd hung up and walked back into the kitchen. "What are you going to do about Ronald?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Yes, you do," Simone said, her mouth twisted in a sour line. "Your father said you would take him with you to the city, but I knew better."

"Well, what would you do?" I said quietly. "What if I asked you to take him? You and Herb. Would you like that?" I stood up, bile in my throat swelling like lava out of a volcano. Simone just looked at me with wide cow eyes that were at once empty and reproachful. Then she turned her back to me, picked up a carafe of coffee, and started for the door. I sat back down at the table and rested my head on a placemat. Simone faced me again before she left.

"You'd have help, you know," she said. "Your father and brother have a lot of friends in this town. Which you would know, if you had ever taken the time to visit. How many times have you been back down here since you moved to the city? Three times? Maybe four?"

I didn't answer.

"Go on back to the city, Danielle. Go back to whatever life you've made for yourself there."

I left her then, pushing past her and walking back into the living room. Kathy had positioned Ronald next to the fireplace, where Herb had started a blaze. It was the only cheerful spot in the room, amid the mourners, amid the black. Kathy wasn't mingling. She sat next to Ronald, talking to him quietly and eating cheese straws off of a pink plate.

"Are you ready to leave?" I asked Kathy.

She nodded. I watched as she set her plate down, bundled Ronald up, wheeled him to the van. When we were back at the house, I thought about the briefcase upstairs in my old room. In it was a list of four institutions for the mentally ill, all highly recommended by Ms. Wilson from the Meitzer Center. The Orange Psychiatric Institute was number three on the list. I had planned on visiting two of them tomorrow, but now it would have to wait until next weekend. A wave of nausea washed over me and I thought I would go upstairs and lie down.

Before I climbed the stairs, I bent down to give Ronald a half-hug, his snotty mustache tickling my cheek. I inadvertently inhaled the meaty sour smell that was still there, albeit subdued, despite my efforts to keep a little distance. Ronald's arms came up unexpectedly, jerkily, pulling me closer before I could move away. I could hear Kathy's voice in the background, yelling at him to let me go, but Ronald held me until I heard a rumbling noise from deep in his throat. The rumble turned into a whisper.

"Remember, Danielle," Ronald whispered. "I do remember."

I put my arms around him fully, looked upwards, squeezed my eyes shut. I could no longer smell anything, but I could feel his warm, sweaty cheek pressed against mine. "It's okay, Brother," I said. "It's going to be okay."

Joseph Hill

Skin

His father came in the door and slumped down at the head of the table. Jesse watched him plop his spoon in the macaroni, light a cigarette and let out a long drag of smoke. Jesse scraped the last bit of cheese from his bowl and brought the plate to the sink, dropped it in the yellowing dish water. Bubbles splashed in the air as it sank below the surface.

"You expect your momma to wash that? You know she's working in her room tonight," his father said. Jesse took a sponge and scrubbed his plate clean. "You're gonna be with me tonight, boy. Go change out of them school clothes. Put on something your momma ain't gonna be pissed about getting dirty."

Jesse walked to his room, the sounds of arias coming from his mother's study, the pause as the music ended. His mother hummed as she changed the record. The clack-clack of the typewriter as the record started again and the zing as she finished a page.

His father knocked at his door, the .22 in one hand, the long stick with the fork at the end in the other. He sat on Jesse's bed and smoothed out the sheets with his long gnarled fingers. Jesse slid into a pair of blue jeans, a T-shirt and hand-me-down boots.

"Them snakes ain't gonna hunt themselves, boy. The church is expecting us to have them by tomorrow morning," his father said as he chambered the rounds in the .22, the click as he turned the safety on.

The truck smelled like damp gunpowder as Jesse climbed in, the empty .22 shells under his feet. Jesse knew that his father took potshots out the window, at mailboxes, at deer, at road signs. The headlights shined over the bare spindly trunks of pines at the edge of their yard, the reaching and near leafless branches of the oaks. He remembered his father telling him as spring came that the drought was going to be so bad this year that the trees would never regain their leaves

after winter.

"You gonna remember to be calm, boy? You get all riled up, you gonna get the snakes all riled up." Jesse nodded in the dark as his father backed up, the only light in the house the glow of the lamp in the window of his mother's study. She took a puff from her cigarette and lifted the glass of white wine to her lips, one hand always on the keys of the typewriter.

Jesse recalled the first night that his mother went into that room. The way that she called him, asked him to bring the cold bottle from the fridge. She made him open the corkscrew, drive it into the cork and pour the wine into the glass for her. She couldn't stop writing at the moment, she said as she told him how to get the bottle open.

The dirt road was off the highway. His father cut the truck off, got his things and unlatched the gate. Jesse followed behind, his flashlight bouncing over his father as he strode past the tall pines and sweet gums. They walked down the thin brown trail that led through the trees, Jesse keeping the flashlight on the ground in front of him.

"Them snakes ain't going to be too active at night. We most likely ain't gonna have no trouble unless we step right on top of one. Just make sure you step loudly, boy, so they know we're coming." His father handed his stick to Jesse at the creek's edge.

Jesse thought about the one morning he watched his mother use the hoe to beat a rat snake to death in the back yard. His father came home later and hung the dead snake over the fence line that separated the yard from the trees. "A warning to any others," he had said.

His father jumped across the deep cut of a creek. Jesse slipped on the creek bank, clutching at the wet soil. He grabbed Jesse's wrist and pulled him back up.

Jesse crouched down on his knees and shined the flashlight down as his father ran his stick through the slow moving water. There were no thin wavy lines in the creek, no long slither of black bodies.

Jesse had a dog once, the two of them down by a creek, playing in the water, Jesse screaming as he saw the thin wavy line trailing them. His father ran with the gun from the house, yanking Jesse out of the water and carried him crying

out of the woods, his mother clutching the porch railing as she watched. Their arms around him as they rode into town. His shoulder pulled out of socket they learned later at the hospital, the dog already bit, dead by the time they returned home. His father took the stiff dog, buried it somewhere in the yard, the brown mound smooth now when Jesse looked for it, the dirt firmly patted down. Jesse came out to the grave alone later, stood at its edge and wrote the dog's name in the wet earth.

"The cottonmouth don't really live in the water," his father said. "But the best way to catch it is in the water so it can't strike." He picked up a rock, skipping it down the meager creek. "Sometimes if you stir up the water, they show up."

His father walked back into the woods as Jesse followed him down the game trail, the cloven hoof prints of the deer, the scarred tree branches where they had been rubbing their antlers. Jesse's feet stirred up the leaves, the scent of the loamy earth rising up. His father reached out with his stick, rummaged in the leaves and held the thin gossamer white casing up to the light.

"Skin. This one shed recently. Probably around here somewhere. Remember to step loud, boy," he said, holding the skin out to Jesse. He put the skin into the picnic basket he carried as his father walked on. He bent down to the ground as Jesse ran up close.

"Be still, boy," his father said, his arm held out, grabbing Jesse by the shoulder. Jesse wanted to ask him for how long, wanted to shine the flashlight at his face in the darkness. He felt the clench of the fingers around his collar bone and stood silent.

"Looks like something here." The leaves shook as his father turned them. The mouth open and closed as the snake shrunk in on itself. His father took the stick, pinned the head to the ground, and with his other hand, grabbed the body. The mouth stretched impossibly wide. The tongue flicked as it darted out, forking towards Jesse, to his father. His fingers around the middle of the snake.

"You get all that, boy?" His father asked, picking up the .22 from the ground. "You gonna try next time?"

Jesse nodded, the strike of the snake against the lid of the

picnic basket. He felt the snake move in the basket and wanted to open the box, to reach in, to ask the snake what was to become of it. He wanted to hold it up to his face and feel the rasp of the tongue against his skin.

"It's all frazzled out now," his father said, opening the lid. The two of them looked in at the snake curled in one of the corners, the lisp of the tongue in and out, the eyes silver in the moonlight. "That's how them snake handlers do it."

He took Jesse's hand, reaching inside the basket. Jesse's fingers brushed the scales, the snake inert. His father grabbed the snake around the middle and lifted it out of the basket.

"Thing's all worn out. Won't give a shit what we do to it. It's like a rabbit in the headlights," he said. "All it can do is flick that tongue in and out and stare at you."

Jesse pushed aside the pile of leaves at the curve of the game trail. He saw the snake, the skin feeling all rubber and soft underneath as he prodded it with the stick. His father directed the light at the gray skin and dark stripings. Jesse pinned the snake's head to the ground with the stick and reached down with his other hand, the thrashing of the body as the snake moved, the leaves flying up, floating slowly down. His father kept the flashlight on the head, the white cotton of the mouth swollen and snapping.

The snake's mouth gouged the dirt and the leaves, the cotton white gone in the filth. Jesse's hand around the snake's body, sliding up and down the cold skin, clenching and unclenching as the snake moved. The snake wound and unwound against his forearm. The little hard shapes under the skin of the last meal the snake ate.

His father's long arm came quick out of darkness and clutched the snake about its throat. The little fangs as it bit down on air, the jaw retracting as the snake tried once more. He took the snake from Jesse, snapped it through the air, the soft whip like crack. The snake dangled then, near exhausted from his father's hands. The mouth slowly open and closed, the barely audible click of the teeth against one another.

"If you whip them fast enough," his father said, "the head will fly off." Jesse imagined the snake's head flying through the air, coming to rest against a pine tree and wondered just how long it would continue to snap open and closed. If he

found it and reattached it, would the snake slither off as one whole thing or would it lay there flopping in the grass, two distinct parts, until the life went out of it?

Jesse and his father forced the snake down into the basket against the cold hard lump of the other snake in the corner. They both let go at the same time, listened to the snake strike the wooden lid. Jesse shook the basket, listened to both snakes still into silence.

"Keep an eye on the head the next time," he said. His father leaned back against an oak tree, the thick and leafy branches keeping out the moonlight. The glow of his face as he lit a cigarette. He poured some coffee out in the small cup and added a splash from the flask. Jesse coughed after his first sip from the cup, drank the rest of it slower.

His father smoked two cigarettes, the night silent except for the slither of the snakes in the picnic basket. Twigs broke out there in the woods as something moved through the trees. Jesse shined the flashlight in the darkness, the trees casting lost and distorted shadows as he moved the light back and forth.

"Probably a deer, or a raccoon. Most animals only hunt at night," his father said.

Five more snakes before the night was out. They spooked a deer as they walked out of the trees back to the truck, the shot after the brown antlers already far gone. The last deer his father shot in the middle of a freeze in winter, the house and the refrigerator not big enough to store it, the deer sitting for four days before he gave up trying to butcher the meat himself. The deer was frozen as Jesse walked behind his father as he tugged the deer into the woods behind their house. When he had the dog, the two of them would stumble onto the carcass, Jesse poking into the decaying flesh with a pine branch, wondering just how long it would take until the maggots were done, until nothing was left but perfect bone.

The hot breeze blew in through the open windows of the house and then lay heavy and still in the rooms. His father walked through the hall, the soft knock on his mother's door. The typewriter stilled as his mother spoke, the tinkle of the wine glass as she held it to the lip of the bottle. The

words, “not now, not tonight,” came to Jesse in the dark of his bedroom.

The snakes still lay in the picnic basket on the back porch, the occasional rustle, the soft strike as they launched themselves against the wood. Jesse heard the loud clomp of his father’s shoes on the porch as he gave the box one last shake, his solitary plop into bed later. The flick of his lighter just audible under the click-clack of the typewriter.

Jesse walked out there in darkness, opened the lid to the picnic basket and looked down at the snakes. He shook and shook the box before they finally stilled again. He reached in and pulled out the long white skin, saw how it still formed what it once was and took it back with him to his room. He wrapped it in his father’s discarded newspaper and wedged it under his mattress.

His father’s callused hands on his shoulders, the red eye of the cigarette in the purple darkness of predawn as he shook him awake. He held out a cup of coffee to Jesse.

“Ain’t too strong. I put some milk and sugar in it. Like your momma takes it.” Jesse gulped deep at the coffee, his father holding out the same clothes for him from last night. He sat on the bed while Jesse changed.

They got stuck on the muddy dirt road that led to the church. His father wedged two by fours under the wheels, the mud churning as Jesse tried to push. The muck in his face when the truck lurched forward and he fell.

The men in suits all sat on the cracked steps of the church when they pulled up. They all rose from the church steps, walked inside when they saw Jesse and his father.

“Got stuck in the mud,” his father said to their backs. The last one in the black suit nodded as he closed the door of the church, Jesse and his father left standing in front of an empty porch. The wooden box out front tied with a rawhide thong, the white of the shed snake skins inside. The snakes curled into dark concentric circles when they opened the picnic basket. His father shook the basket as the snakes plopped out, unwound into the box at the church steps.

Jesse’s father sat on the steps, the old and green wood creaking under him. Jesse tried to dust the mud off himself

as his father grabbed his hands and pulled him close.

"Don't worry about it, boy. It's just dirt. Come right out, later. Take a dip in the lake on the way home," he said, lighting a cigarette and leaning back against the steps. "Long night, huh, boy?" Jesse nodded, the door to the church opening.

"Charles, gonna have to ask you to leave," the man in the black suit said. "You know how this works. The same every week. You leave them snakes, I get you the money later," the man in the black suit flicked mud off the porch steps with the edge of his shoe. The pomaded heads in the spare light of the church just inside, the other men sitting in the pews.

"Got my boy with me this time. 10 years old and caught his first snake. Two years younger than when I did it. Fat old cottonmouth," his father said.

"You leave the snakes, Charles. We pay you good for them snakes, but you leave the snakes. You can't come in, you can't sit here. You put the snakes in that box and you get gone," the man in the black suit said.

"We come back on Sunday? See what you do with them snakes?" His father asked.

"You know the snake-catcher ain't welcome at worship. Your father wasn't welcome, you ain't welcome, your boy ain't welcome," the man said, the slam as the door closed. His father tossed the half-lit cigarette at the door. The morning sun hit the box where they dumped the snakes, the rustle as the snakes warmed up.

They pulled off at the lake on the way home. His father stood in his boxers, the water just over his chest and thin knobby arms as he stared down at his hands under the surface. Jesse swam around his father, touching bottom, his toes against the hardness of tree roots, the spongy mud. Jesse laid back, the water coming over his eyes, and looked up at him through a brown haze. His father wet his hands, placed them over his face.

Jesse wanted his father to pick him up high over his head, to throw him, to send him with a giant splash into the water, the slight pain in his stomach as he belly-flopped, his father pulling him up to do it again and again.

His father dove under the water, the white of his boxers billowing around him as he swam. Jesse paddled after him,

his toes just barely scraping the bottom. He turned back and sat in the shallows, watching him climb up on the pier that floated in the middle of the lake.

"Dad," Jesse called once, twice, three times before his father dove off the pier and swam back.

The typewriter was silent when Jesse woke on Sunday morning. His father in his bedroom again, holding out a different set of clothes, the fabric freshly ironed, stiff as Jesse put it on. His father cinched up a tie way too big, stuffed the excess into Jesse's shirt. He dug into the can of pomade, rubbed it between his hands and swept Jesse's hair back from his face.

His father slowly drove through the woods this time, the bump and jolt over the dirt road, the splash through the puddles from last night's rain as the heavy tree branches scraped against the roof.

Others walked through the pine trees on the path alongside the dirt road, the galoshes thick with mud. His father stopped for the first family they came across, asked if they wanted a lift. The stare from the family as he put the truck back into gear and drove on.

Jesse heard singing from inside the church as his father parked the truck, shut off the engine. The families trod out of the woods and walked up the stairs, the hands running over the box they put the snakes in. The door shut after the last one out of the woods.

"Smooth down your hair, boy," his father said, looking in the rear-view mirror, pressing his fingers against his mustache. He reached over and once more cinched up Jesse's tie.

The leather thong lay in mud beside the empty box by the front stairs. White skins sat in the bottom of the box. His father held the wooden door open for Jesse, the creak as he closed it after them. A few bent heads rose and turned to look at them at the back. His father nudged Jesse into one of the last rows and grabbed his hand as they bowed their heads.

The rough grasp of fingers in his from the person next to him, the palm lined with grit and sand. Words echoed from the people around him, his father trying to mimic their murmuring, the words lost and garbled as Jesse struggled to hear.

The people still stood once the prayer ended.

Jesse peeked through the cracks in the crowd, looked out from the end of the pew. The wooden floor polished smooth from steps up and down the center aisle. The man in the black suit spoke, the clap of his hands together.

"I don't know how many times I've told this, but what did Jesus say to his disciples in Mark 16:14?"

The people shouted the name of "Jesus," of "Praise Him." The man in the black suit bent down, grabbed the box in front of the pulpit. The ebb and flow of his voice and the pauses, the cries from the men and women around Jesse.

The man in the black suit held the box over his head, shaking it in circles. The snakes woke, the dull thud under the voices as the snakes struck and re-struck the box.

"Ain't got no rattlers," the man in the black suit said, the sigh coming from the crowd, "Got us a mighty big cottonmouth though. Gonna take a lot of spirit to lay hands on it."

The cottonmouth's teeth nearly snapped Jesse's face two nights ago. He wondered about the feel of poison coursing through him, wanted to know if it would make him feel as good as the wine made his mother feel, if the pain would turn into something good. The way his shoulder hurt at first and then felt so good as they dosed him with medicine at the hospital.

The other men in suits passed the bowl around, the greasy dollars, the sweaty coins clinking against one another as it went from hand to hand. His father lay in a single crisp dollar and sent it on.

"Jee-sus! Jee-sus! You want some Jee-sus?" The man in the black suit fell back against the pulpit, his arm clutching the wooden railing, the unknown words shouting from his mouth. His eyes rolled back in his head. Jesse watched the people leave the pews, the traces of mud in their footsteps.

His father pulled his hand.

"Come on, boy," he said. The calluses smooth with sweat.

"I don't want to," Jesse said. The tight set of his father's jaw as he bent down to Jesse, ground Jesse's fingers against one another.

"You don't want to see what they gonna do with that snake you caught?"

The others in their pew pushed against them. His father's hand left his, the dark eyes as he looked back as he followed the line to the pulpit. Jesse thought of his mother back in that dark house, rising from bed this morning, stumbling down to the empty study, placing herself again in front of the typewriter. He remembered how he used to watch her, nestled in a chair in the corner in those days when she kept the door open. The long fingers as she stretched them, ran them through her long black hair and finally bent down to the keys.

The foam came from the mouth of the man in the black suit as he spoke in gibberish, his hands running over the hard curves of the people that passed in front of him. His touch ran through the hair of women, pressing into the faces of the men, running over the broad chests, the slim bosoms. Each of them bent down to the box of snakes, looked in, ran their hands over the wood.

"Who shall be the first?" The man in the black suit asked as the line inched forward, the ones that already passed back in their seats, sitting down and swaying, all of them speaking in a unison of unknown words.

His father fell to his knees in front of the box of the snakes, picking it up and shaking it above his head. He held his eye to one of the air holes, staring in at the snakes. Jesse sat alone in his pew, patting his hair down, brushing the pomade-tinged sweat from his forehead, trying to remember how his mother use to smooth his hair out, how she patted the cowlick down until it finally stayed in place, humming to herself.

His father released the latch, the babble stilling. His arm was in the box, the limp snake in his hands as he pulled it out. The cottonmouth that Jesse caught. The head swayed back and forth as he held it up, let the tail wrap around his wrist. He made eye contact with the snake, his head following the snake, bobbing back and forth as the snake moved.

The snake snapped once, the undulation of the jaw as the snake tried to bite again, the fangs coming together on empty air. His father jerked the snake back each time, the drone of the voices rising and falling when the snake tried to strike.

The grasp of hands around his father as the crowd reached out for the snake. They pulled the snake's tail from his wrist and took his fingers from around the middle of the snake.

The snake passed from hand to hand in the crowd. The snake coiled around shoulders, around skinny arms, around balding, stringy-haired heads.

"The book says demons, the book says serpents. Only by taking hold of them, can we send them back! Show them that the un-sinned strikes down evil, stares it in the face and says," the man in the black suit said, the spit spewing from his mouth. The crowd repeated the words jee-sus-jee-sus-jee-sus. His father stood in front of the pulpit now, another snake in the hands of the man in the black suit.

"Cast thee out!" He struck his father on the forehead, the snake wrapped around his wrist, Jesse rising from his seat as his father fell. "Cast thee out!" The man in the black suit said once more, bending down to his father, his open palm on his father's face, the snake hanging from his shoulders. He pulled him up, his fingers pressed in his father's eyes. "The un-sinned sees the sinned every time, snake-catcher!" The last shove back, his father stumbling as the crowd hissed. His father bounced from person to person as they pushed him down the aisle, through the open wooden door.

Jesse sat there and watched the door shut after his father. The snakes were all out of the box now, the passage of them through the pews. Jesse ran his fingers over the giant cottonmouth when it came to him, the snake limp now, lifeless and exhausted. He touched the small indention between the eyes, felt the small gray flick of the tongue against his face. He remembered about cracking the snake like a whip, thought of standing and sending the head flying across the room, the jaw clasping open and shut as the snake slowly died.

They took the snake from him then, the woman next to him draping it over her chest, coiling it around her head, the snake's jaw opening and closing ever so slow.

His father waited in the truck when Jesse came outside. The click as he pushed in the cigarette lighter.

"The snakes all worn out," Jesse said. "Them people did whatever they wanted with them."

His father nodded as he started the truck and backed up through the mud. Jesse stared at the thin white coat of paint on the church, the high pale cross blending in with the pine trees. There must have been a man who painted that thing

once they put it up there, Jesse thought. The wind must have swayed him back and forth, the needles from the pine trees scratching his face. The painter must have looked down when he finished and saw all those smiling faces, all those people who were so glad he was done. Those same people who waited at the bottom as he climbed down, their arms reaching out to help with the last few steps.

His father told Jesse to go check on his mother when they pulled in their driveway. Jesse looked back as he opened the door to the house and saw his father sitting in the truck smoking.

The blinds to his mother's room were already drawn. The house was silent, missing the loud clack-clack-zing of her typewriter. The door to her room was locked when he tried it.

He heard the record player volume rise as he walked away, the footfalls of her bare feet as she paced the room. "An idea doesn't always just come," she told him once as he flipped through the same picture book, knowing the words before he saw the outlines of their bare shapes. "Sometimes you got to wait for it to strike." Jesse watched her pace eight more times before she finally sat in front of the typewriter.

He went to his room and pulled the milky-white snake skin out from under the mattress. Back on the porch, he sat down by the empty picnic basket. He stretched out the skin until it enclosed his arm.

Jesse waved his arm back and forth while he sat there, the crisp rattle of the shed skin against his own skin. He watched his father out in the truck as he smoked cigarette after cigarette and flicked the butts out into the yard. He saw his mother through the kitchen window, at the sink finally, her hands in the dish water, her head bent to the task.

Jesse held his hand up, the arm still encased in shed scales. He made his fist into a jaw, the arch of his fingers again and again as he attacked the air. He turned to his parents as they looked away from him, his father to the woods, his mother to the sudsy dishes and struck them each, his tongue flicking back and forth at the edge of his lips.

Lisa E. Balvanz

Dream-Work

Some people believe everything I say; this is a mistake. I'm not the kind of girl you can trust to tell you the truth. I was raised on *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Learned that I should love myself for who I am, that it's okay to be different, that I can do whatever I want if I try hard enough. I work at a Kum 'n Go in podunk, Iowa. Maybe Mister Rogers was wrong.

So now you're getting this picture of me in your mind. Sure, I've got the nose ring, tattoos, dyed hair that changes every week. You see me and you think, maybe I'm a stoner, a drunk, been knocked up a couple times, maybe had abortions, maybe left the kids at home alone because I can't afford day care—or worse—they're with my mother.

I'm not any of those things. I tried pot once. I'm allergic. My whole throat swelled up until I couldn't breathe.

Imagine shopping for a wedding dress in the middle of nowhere. There are churches to get married in everywhere, but the closest wedding shop is an hour away, and if we don't find something there, the next place will be in a whole other state. It's on the edge of a town so small that if you sneezed while you were driving, you'd miss it. Low slung, stucco building snuggled up against the edge of a soybean field. The place isn't fancy on the outside, just huge windows to look through and see all the latest styles. It doesn't have to be; it serves the bridal needs of three counties by word of mouth alone.

Inside, I find myself standing in the dress of my dreams. Nicely fitted with extra fabric that wrinkles down the whole front. My small rose tattoo is visible, my first, and lies just beside the left shoulder strap. The skirt of the dress fills out with a short train.

My mother is glaring at me, eyes squinting. "It's too plain," she says. "It's not what you want."

What do you say to your mother when she completely

doesn't understand you? *I'm getting this dress, Mom. It's the dress of my freaking dreams.* I say, "I like it," and smile a little.

"No, you need something with more on it. Some lace or beading or something."

I'm not getting a dress so people will look at the beading. "I look good in this, Mom. Don't you think it looks good on me? It makes my waist look smaller."

"It makes your hips look huge."

The dress of my freaking dreams.

If the dress wasn't two hundred dollars more than I have to spend on it, I'd buy it. Mom shuts her purse, and we leave the shop with nothing. The wind blows dirt in my eyes on the way to the car.

Lance is older, has long orange hair and a scruffy beard to match. He owns a labradoodle, takes him for walks every morning after breakfast and at night before he goes to bed. Mom thinks I'm throwing my life away with him, but I feel like that labradoodle's gotta mean something.

He's eighteen inches taller than me. I don't even come up to his shoulder. When I hug him, it's like hugging my dad was when I was kid.

Not like that comparison means much to me. My dad hasn't been around the last few years. I remember he used to smell like grease and motor oil. I remember him most clearly outside under the shade of the maple tree, leaning over the hood of his pick-up, so his butt is the prominent feature in my mind. It wasn't the best-looking butt you've ever seen, but it did its job just fine. Probably the image of his butt doesn't say good things to you, so you can stick with thinking about how his hugs were, if you want.

Lance says I should keep a journal of my dreams. He believes that dreams tell us things: what we're worried about, what really matters to us. Stuff we won't admit to ourselves. He tells me about his, but they're pretty normal. He forgets his pants on our wedding day. He's fighting with some guys at work and falls off the roof. He loses Bethany, his labradoodle.

"I got you a journal." He hands me a cloth-covered book with blank pages.

"I prefer lined paper," I tell him. What I won't tell him: *I don't have anything to write.*

"This way you can jot down pictures too, if you want." He moves to tuck his hair behind his ear, though it's already there.

"Good idea." I smile, trying to make it look genuine, and kiss him.

It works. He smiles back.

He's sitting on a bench outside the library, watching me as I walk home from work. He's leaning on his cane a bit, looks like he's thinking about standing up, been thinking for awhile but hasn't gotten there. He's got a big bag beside him, a pair of old-school red and blue bowling shoes with their laces tied round the handles. Man, the old guy probably thinks it's 1988.

This is the busiest street in town, and I'll tell you, it's not busy. You've got the library, a small grocery store, consignment shop, and local soda fountain that have always been there. There are other store buildings, but the businesses come and go, leaving empty shells behind. Inside, maybe one shelf, a rickety chair. Right now there's a photography studio that just opened up, and a bookstore that's going out of business. Across the street from the library is a boarded up bowling alley, paint peeling off the side of the building. That's where the old man's attention is. The place has been closed for a few years now, but the sign still says the hours and announces *New leagues starting in September!*

He reaches out his hand to stop me from walking away.

"Are the leagues still forming?" he asks.

I'm surprised he can read the sign all the way across the street. His glasses are thick as Olympic medals.

"That's what the sign says." I move to walk away, and he waves his arm again.

"When does the bowling alley say it closes?" he asks. "I can't read the hours."

I squint in the direction of the door. Not sure why, but I tell him the truth. "8:00. Unless there's a league going."

"What time is it?" he asks.

"Uh." I glance at my watch. It says 3:57. "8:30," I tell him.

"Oh." he frowns, his body settling down a little into the bench.

The bell tower rings at the Catholic church a few blocks over, counting the hours. He looks off towards the sound, as if he can see it, blinks every time it rings. One blink. Two blinks. Three blinks. Four. He keeps looking for awhile, keeps his eyes wide open, huge through those thick lenses.

"Think it's broken?" he finally says.

This guy is a keeper for sure. "Could be," I say.

"Well, I better head home then."

I walk off, and when I look back a block later, he's got his rear in the air, suspended, knees wobbling, trying to get that last umph to stand up. If there's a bowling ball in that bag, I don't know how he managed to carry it.

I haven't written anything in the journal. Lance tells me I should try every morning. I'm pretty sure he thinks I'm not trying, but I sit there with my pen for fifteen minutes every morning after the alarm goes off, tapping it against the paper, wishing I had something to write. Lance says it doesn't have to be long. It can be anything. He says the more I do it, the more will come to me.

I'm considering making something up. I could start with a word: *Running. Sadness. Pineapples*. Thinking of pineapples makes me hungry. I close the journal and head to the kitchen to dig up some breakfast.

Lance is a construction worker. It's not the classiest work, but he enjoys doing things with his hands. His favorite part is putting the frame up, nailing all those two-by-fours together to make a wall, lifting it up, a house coming like magic out of nothing. He complains on the days when they have to put in insulation or shingle the roofs, but he never complains about putting those first two by fours together. It's what he's wanted to do since he was in diapers.

"So, besides Kum 'n Go and marrying me," Lance says one day, "what do you want to do in life?"

I roll my eyes at him.

"No, really," he says. "I'm being serious. You've never told me. What are your dreams? What do you want to do when you

grow up?"

"Do I have to have them?" I ask.

"What did you want to be when you were a kid?"

I shrug. "Violet Beaureguarde?"

"What?"

"I mean, she got to chew gum *all the time*. My parents hated how I smacked it when I chewed, so they took it away whenever we went places, or at mealtimes, or when watching TV, doing homework. Pretty much whenever they were in the room, I guess. Yeah." I nod.

He shakes his head.

"How about a mother? Every little girl wants to have kids, right?"

"Definitely not a mother," I tell him.

"So nothing, really."

"Nothing. Really."

Once I told my mother maybe I'd be a ballerina. I was chubby at the time, and Mom was kind enough to remind me I didn't have the body for it. I said I was thinking about being a journalist. Mom said I would have to talk to strangers, and as I'd just developed an unreasonable fear of people I didn't know from watching too many cop shows, I scratched that idea. I didn't even get the chance to suggest that I become a firefighter. When Mom heard we were going to tour the fire station, she told me to appreciate those people, because they could die, burnt to a cinder, trying to save my life.

Tomorrow I will write in my dream journal: *Mother burst into flames. It was my fault. I was sorry because we were in the garden and it set the petunias on fire.*

Mother and I used to get along. Except for the fact that my dad was never around, we were the picture-perfect family. I wanted to make her proud. She was proud. She came to every play, every sporting event, every silly little booster-club meeting. She supported her daughter, and she made sure everyone else knew it. Remnants of those days lie around the house. Pictures hanging in the hallway or sitting above the fireplace feature us both smiling, her arms around me.

It didn't start with Lance. I told Mom I was thinking about joining the Air Force. I was nearing the end of high school,

and it was time to get serious about my future. I was thinking I could learn to fly, then maybe dust cornfields. Did I want to join the Air Force? No. But you got to learn to fly somewhere. Apparently, girls don't join the Air Force, or the Marines, the Army, the National Guard. Life just went downhill from there—Mom telling me what she thinks I want, me denying it.

I don't know what I want. Maybe I don't want *the dress of my freaking dreams*. Maybe I don't want the roast beef for the reception or the little floral centerpieces we picked for the tables. Maybe silver and blue weren't the colors we should have gone with. Sometimes I wonder if I even really want Lance or if I've latched onto him because he is the only one who really cares to know what I want. I wonder if I ever really knew what I wanted, and I can't remember how I knew when I knew what I wanted, if I knew.

Lance says our dreams tell us things. If I could remember my dreams, maybe I could make sense of this. When I wake up, I don't remember them. I don't remember them.

Today when I walk past the old man, he doesn't say anything to me. Doesn't nod, doesn't raise his hand to grab my arm. He's just staring straight ahead at the bowling alley, leaning his cane against his knee, tapping it on his bag. Just staring and tapping, making his shoes dance as they dangle on their strings.

"You made it over there yet?" I ask.

Tap, tap, tap. "Nah," he says. "Been thinking about my wife's key lime pie."

Tap, tap, tap.

Okay . . .

I start to walk on, but he stops tapping and turns to look at me, so I wait.

"She doesn't make it anymore," he tells me. "Doesn't make anything anymore. We just eat those TV dinners. I'd cook myself, but I never learned how, and it's hard to stand long with the arthritis in my knees."

I nod, not sure what he expects me to say to this.

"Anyway," he continues, "would you mind helping me get to the bowling alley?"

He's already trying to stand up, stuck in that awkward po-

sition with his rear in the air. “You can grab my bag and hand it to me when I get up.”

I reluctantly pick up the bag and wait. It’s not very heavy. I’d guess he has an eight-pound ball, maybe even a seven. It would have to be on the light side, if he has any chance of actually bowling with it.

Here I am, standing, holding the bag. I feel weird about it, so I hold it out in front of me. I’m not really comfortable becoming a part of his life, even as small a part as the girl who picks up his bowling bag and helps him walk across the street. The sooner I can get out of this situation, the better.

It has to be a full three-and-a-half minutes that he’s stuck in that position, and I, therefore, in mine. Finally, he gives a grunt and straightens up to his full height. He’s not actually much taller than me, and it feels strange to be next to a man without that difference.

He taps his cane on the ground a couple times, chuckles, then reaches over to me. Rather than grabbing the bag, however, he puts his free arm through mine, leaning on me for support. The link between us is established, whether I like it or not. We begin the jaunt across.

Now, of course, I’m in trouble. Once we get a bit closer, it’ll be pretty obvious that the place has been closed for awhile. Right now the guy is concentrating too much on walking to notice anything though. He walks with confidence, I’ll give him that. Shoulders thrust back, head up, slow and steady, but he’s not gonna let anyone get in his way. We’re so slow that even on this quiet street three cars have to stop and wait for us. He nods to them in turn.

He steps carefully up on the curb, and then we’re across. He heaves a sigh of relief, pauses just for a minute as he breathes in deep.

“Feels good to stretch my legs,” he says. “But what’s this?” He waves his cane at the door. “Looks like they’re closed.”

“Hmm.” I drop his arm, though I’m still carrying his bag, and walk over to the doors, peering inside. “Looks like they’ve been closed for awhile. This place isn’t in good shape.”

I can’t believe he hasn’t realized what a liar I am.

He shakes his head, looks down at the ground. “I don’t understand. The boys and I just played last night. I bowled 270.”

I don't look at him, shift my weight.

"Well," he starts to turn around, "you'll have to help me back."

What can I do? I can't just leave him here, on the wrong side of the street, far away from his bench. So I guide him across the street again, a little slower but just as confident, and when I look over once to be sure a car is going to stop before it hits us, I notice a twitch in his eye, a little moisture.

I write: *I dreamt I was at the wedding. The old man was there. I'd invited him. I called him Wayne. I helped him sit down, already in my wedding dress, an ugly, cream one my mother wanted me to get that's covered with flowers made of chiffon. Lance wasn't there yet, so it was okay that I was in the church sanctuary. No one else was in the room. I sat him on a pew in the middle, close enough that he could see, but leaving enough room for my family in front of him. I went back to the changing rooms where my mother helped me finish doing my hair and put on my veil. Everything looked funny through the white. We went out to do the wedding and everything was pretty normal, except that Bethany was the ring bearer.*

Lance looks dashing in his tux. I realize my dad is giving me away. I hug him, think of how it's like hugging Lance. When I get up to Lance, I grab his hand. There's music, a Bible reading, a sermon, typical wedding stuff. Then we get to the vows. Lance says "I do." Then it's my turn. "I do." Wayne is shouting. He stands up from his seat. No longer needs his cane. "You lie!" he yells. "You don't mean it!" He's wearing his bowling shoes. He's waving his cane in the air over everyone's heads and coming towards me. "You don't know what I think, old man!" I say to him. Lance lets go of my hand. Wayne is still walking towards me, waving his cane, and I duck.

I realize I switched verb tense halfway through. I think there are too many details for it to be believable. It's too much of a jump from the last one, doesn't build up quite right. I think about what I'd take out. I can't decide. It all needs to be there, I'm sure about it, but I don't know why.

Plus, it's in pen. I can't take it back now.

When I see the old man today, I decide to sit by him. I just go over and sit by him, as if I do it every day. He's looking across at the bowling alley still, and he doesn't turn to look at me when I sit down, but he nods in greeting like he expected it.

I'm not sure where to go from here, not sure what I'd intended to do past this point of sitting. So we sit in silence for awhile, just looking, listening to the cars pass, the dying leaves rustling on the trees.

"I didn't think I'd see you here again," I say.

"I used to be a pro," he says.

I nod, as if I have known this forever.

"My wife says my mind is going." He sniffs, rubs his nose.

I think about how many things I have left to do. The long list of assignments my mother has made for me to finish preparations for the wedding.

"Do you want to go?" I shift on the bench, turning towards him. "What I mean is, there's another bowling alley just a town over. We could go if you want."

He nods.

I run the ten blocks to my house. Mom isn't home, and I'm glad I don't have to explain why I'm taking her car.

When I return to the library to pick the old man up, I help him stand up, grab his bag. It's a bit of a struggle to get him into the car because he has to lean down. On the ride there, he tells me about his pro bowling career. He remembers all the details of every game—every spare, every strike, the way he threw the ball and how he should have fixed it.

His bowling ball is hard for him to lift, even though it's only seven pounds. I try to convince him to use one from the bowling alley, one of the lighter balls for children in neon green or orange, but he won't hear of it. He moves slowly up to the line, pulls his arm back, and sends the ball down the aisle. The throw lacks speed and energy, but makes up for what it's missing in aim and grace. It hits the right pocket and knocks down seven pins. When he turns around to wait for his ball, he's smiling. I realize I have never seen him smile before.

I don't know whether he knows that I lied to him earlier or if he thinks that it was his mind playing tricks on him. I wish I had never said those things.

I'm working another long shift at Kum 'n Go, a place that's OK part-time, but I never wanted to stand behind a counter all day, watching people fill their cars with gas, selling them cigarettes and booze. We're just off the highway, so half the people who come in are just passing through the cornfields, dazed, and ready for a change in scenery. They buy candy bars and pop, and I have to clean up after them when their kids leave a mess in the bathroom.

I'm putting money in the cash drawer, unrolling the crumpled bills the last guy handed me to pay for his gas, when the bell above the door rings. It's Lance. I've been thinking about him all day, how I would tell him. He smiles at me and heads back to the coolers to grab a V8 before coming up to the counter.

"How's it going today, lady?" he asks, setting the drink down. He's been painting at work and his shirt and arms are covered in dry splatters.

"Same old, same old," I say. "Couple of kids tried to lift some ice cream sandwiches." I grab the bottle to scan it.

"But you and your eagle eyes saved the day. Did they take off running?" He hands me his cash, flat and neat from being in his wallet.

"Bicycles," I say, "but you know I tackled them. Next time they'll go to Casey's."

"How many?"

"Just two. Scrawny little troublemakers."

I give him his two cents change. Now's the time. *I'm leaving, Lance*. The drink's condensation chills my hand as I push it across the counter towards him. His warm, speckled hand brushes mine as he grabs it.

"Call me when you get home?" he asks.

I lean over to kiss his cheek. "Of course."

I'm only in South Dakota because Lance made me. I wouldn't have minded too much if it were just the two of us, but he said my mother had to come. He said it nicely, as if he were insisting and thought it was the polite thing to do. I know it was my mother's idea. She's afraid if she leaves us alone we'll get jiggy before the wedding. *Please, mother.*

The waterfall is beautiful, anyway. The fall's a little taller

than Lance, maybe ten feet, and only a few feet wide. The water is clear—I mean, crystal clear. You can make out every slick brown rock behind the cascade, even where the liquid bashes against the edges, slides over the rock like silk.

Lance isn't saying anything. I'm not saying anything. Mom starts saying something, but Lance shushes her.

Awe is attractive on Lance. His mouth is halfway open, and his eyes are bright. I think he feels a connection to the earth in this moment. If we were talking, he'd ask if I feel it too. He'd insist you can't not feel it, being surrounded by the growing leaves, the sweet-smelling air. I don't know if I feel it.

I just want to listen to the waterfall. It's not a huge, gushing sound like those big ones. This one's soft, quiet, even calmer than if you were filling up your bathtub. More like a shower, more like constant rain. It's quiet enough you can hear the wind too, the rustling of leaves, the flap of birds' wings as they sweep just over our heads, chirping to each other.

"This is a place I know myself," Lance says. He says it low and quiet and I don't mind because it blends in, becomes part of what's around us. Lance is part of what's around us, with his hiking boots and cargo pants, backpack, 80's-style headband to keep the hair out of his face. He doesn't leave a footprint in the soft mud like I do, doesn't break branches off the trees, but gently glides through, steps lightly. I don't know how to travel with him. I feel clumsy and awkward and all kinds of damaging to what's around me.

Truth be told, I don't even know how we're standing here together right now. I don't understand how our paths not only crossed, but managed to intertwine. If you'd asked me what kind of man I wanted to marry three years ago, before I met him, I would not have described Lance. For starters, he would not have orange hair. The orange isn't actually that bad really—it's the pasty skin that goes with orange hair I don't like. And, if you'd asked me, he'd have to like watching stuff blow up. Not actually blowing stuff up, necessarily, just watching it happen. Instead of this making ourselves one with nature thing. Above all, he'd have to hate my mother.

"Lance, you know I love you, right?" I take his hand.

"Yeah," he says. "I love you, too. That's why we're getting married."

I can't help smiling, feeling a little bit better.

"You worried about something?" he asks.

"No," I lie.

This is the best I can do. I hope it's enough. I can't tell you the truth, even if I wanted to. I'm not sure I even know what truth is. Time keeps moving on and I think, maybe someday I'll get it. Maybe someday I'll understand Lance, my mother, that old man. Maybe someday I'll remember my dreams.

I stare at the waterfall. I feel the warmth of Lance's hand in mine. I shift my weight and the mud squishes around my shoes. The water keeps flowing down the edge, the wedding keeps drawing nearer, the old man comes repeatedly to his bench by the library and stares at the empty bowling alley, my dream journal continues to get filled with made-up tales, and I can't stop any of it. I take a deep breath and walk over next to the waterfall. The water splashes on my face where it flicks off of rock, speckles my pants as it bounces off the stream at the bottom. I put my hand into the cool, falling water, feel it bounce off my knuckles, slide down my fingers and jump off. Close my eyes and try to stay here. It will only be a moment before my mother starts talking again. I can't stop any of it, and I can't seem to fix myself, and I just try to keep up with the rest.

Ellen Darion

Monument

I didn't see it happen, just my brother Adam suddenly flat on his stomach, Steven Lasky's knee in his back, Jimmy Ianelli's enormous hands on the back of his head, trying to push his face into the open manhole. It was the manhole they had dragged the cover from a few minutes earlier so they could try to retrieve Jimmy's keys, which had fallen through the grate during a game of keep away, a game Adam had not even started—I know because I was watching, it was Steven who first grabbed the keys, Steven who now had his knees in my brother's back and was saying "Go fish, shithead," while Jimmy tried to wrestle Adam's head through the manhole opening and Adam twisted in his grip, yelling "Get the fuck off me!" again and again, cries that were alternately clear when his head was above ground and muffled when he was yelling into the sewer, his voice echoing in the mossy chamber that led to the tunnels full of rainwater and rats and garbage and the flushings of every toilet in New York City as I stood on the dirt not two feet away and could not say a word. Jimmy Ianelli had one mammoth arm hooked around Adam's shoulders now and was steering his head through the hole with the other, grunting "You dropped them, Levine, you find them: *I want my fucking keys*."

"How am I supposed to get your keys if you're holding my arms down, asshole?"

"That's your problem," Jimmy said, pushing Adam's neck down harder. "Wanna go for a swim?"

I watched my brother's head disappear again and stood there paralyzed, the way it was in my dreams when I couldn't stop my mother from getting into the elevator I knew was going to crash to the bottom of the shaft, when I couldn't stop the guy with the gun from shooting my father, when I knew the man with the knife who was dragging me into the alley was going to kill me, but I couldn't wake myself up to save anyone's life, not even my own.

They let Adam up again, his face smeared with dirt now. I didn't know if the water on his face came from the sewer or was tears or if the dirt was from the walls of the sewer or just from the ground, though it was black, blacker than the dirt on which I stood, black as the tar Adam was lying on and his tormenters were crouching on and the manhole was sunk into, but it wasn't tar, it was whatever foul substance clung to the walls and the bottom of the sewer.

In some other part of my brain—the part that had not cemented my feet to the ground beneath them so that I now stood open-mouthed, squinting against the glare off the Hudson at three boys writhing and flailing around an open manhole on Riverside Drive—I imagined myself inching backwards up the hill for a running start, then planting a mighty kick in the small of Jimmy's back, so hard it would make him let go of Adam, from surprise if not from pain or fear. Then Adam would throw off Steven and we would run up the hill to our apartment building and Jimmy could drown himself in the sewer if he wanted his keys so badly. I imagined this happening but remained rooted to the spot, looking from Adam and Steven and Jimmy to our building less than a block away, where, if my father would just look out the living room window, he'd see what I was seeing and come down and stop it. Except I knew he wouldn't, because he was in the bedroom putting up brackets for a new set of shelves.

"You know, Levine," Jimmy said. "You stink. You need a bath." He looked at me. "Hey Dara, don't you think your brother needs a bath?"

"He needs you to leave him alone," I said to the grass.

"Nah," Jimmy said. He moved to push Adam's head into the hole again. "He needs a bath."

"Jimmy," Steven said. "It's not going to work. We need a net or something."

"All I need is my keys," Jimmy said. "Where the fuck am I gonna get a net?"

"We have one," I said quickly. I pictured my father's long-handled net dangling from the ceiling of his closet, next to the green rubber hip boots I was sure were part of a monster when I was younger. The net was the monster's head. I started to cry.

"Aw, now they're both crying," Jimmy said.

"You'll be crying too when your ass gets kicked for losing your keys," Adam said from the ground.

"Levine," Jimmy said, "I am tired of hearing your voice." He turned to Steven. "Are you tired of hearing his voice?"

"Yeah," Steven said uncertainly.

"Hold his head," Jimmy ordered. Steven moved behind Adam and got him in a choke hold while Jimmy started picking up everything in sight—grass, twigs, dirt, candy wrappers, cigarette butts. I stepped back in disbelief as Jimmy shoved this all in Adam's mouth. Adam was coughing and spitting and jerking his head wildly, but Steven held on and Jimmy kept shoveling things down his throat. I was twisting with Adam, every muscle clenched, holding my breath and tossing my head—until I realized I was moving. I was moving. One foot was off the ground. In the split second before I bolted I knew why I hadn't done it before: I was afraid that if I left they would do something worse. I thought that as long as I was still there nothing really bad would happen. But now I knew, as I tried to get Adam to look at me and then saw that he was keeping his eyes screwed shut against the dirt Jimmy kept throwing at him, that this was something worse. Adam was gagging and thrashing his legs all over the place and my being there was not making any difference. I turned and ran.

They wouldn't chase me, I guessed, because they'd have to let Adam up to do it. I tore up the grassy hill, the marble stairs that were part of the Fireman's Monument at the end of our block, across the street without looking for cars, and into the lobby where the elevator was on eight so I ran up the five flights of stairs two and three at a time to arrive, leaning on our doorbell, panting and thinking *Daddy Daddy Daddy Daddy Daddy open the door*. My father came to the door with a hammer in his hand. When he saw my face he didn't say a word, didn't stop to tell my mother he was leaving, he just ran with me to the stairs. "They're beating up Adam," I managed between breaths. "They're making him eat garbage. They're trying to put his head in the sewer." My father was almost a flight ahead of me now, but I caught up with him in the lobby, when he realized he was still carrying his hammer and dropped it on a chair.

We could see them as soon as we got out the door. They were up at the monument now, but we kept running, as though Adam were still in immediate danger, although apparently he wasn't. He sat on the back of a park bench at the foot of the stairs, sniffling, his face pale and filthy, his lips and tongue working, searching out little pieces of whatever was still in his mouth and spitting them out. He wouldn't look up, and neither did Jimmy, who stood about halfway up the marble stairs, leaning against the stone wall that formed one side of the monument. Steven slouched on the far end of the bench Adam was on.

My father stood in front of Adam. "Are you all right?"

Adam nodded. "They're the ones who are in trouble." He looked at Jimmy and Steven. I couldn't figure out why they were still there, unless they had threatened Adam with more of the same if he said anything. But *I* had told, as they had to know I would. Maybe they had just figured out there was no place to go. My father knew their names, their parents, where they lived, where they went to school. He would have found them.

My father put his hands on his hips. "What happened here?" he asked.

"These morons tried to kill me," Adam said. "That's what happened."

My father repeated his question, looking at Jimmy and Steven. "I said, what happened here?"

"He dropped my keys down the sewer," Jimmy said.

"So you put his head in the sewer and made him eat dirt."

Silence. And in that silence I began to breathe normally again. It was over. Adam was not going to choke to death and Jimmy and Steven were not going to make me watch while he did it. My father was here. We were all right now.

But my father wasn't leaving.

"I asked you a question," he said, moving up the stairs until he was standing on the same step as Jimmy. "Did you put my son's head in the sewer and make him eat dirt?" He pronounced each word slowly, as if he were talking to someone hard of hearing, or someone he thought wasn't very smart. The muscles in his neck were jumping.

"We were just fooling around," Jimmy mumbled.

"You were just fooling around," my father repeated. "You were just fooling around." He sounded like a machine. "Well suppose you and I just fool around," my father said, his fist shooting forward, grabbing Jimmy Ianelli by the collar of his polo shirt. He backed Jimmy up against the stone wall. "Like this?" my father said, leaning on Jimmy's chest. "Is this how you were fooling around?" Jimmy swallowed. I looked at Adam, who looked back at me for the first time since Jimmy's keys went down the sewer. My father had never raised a hand to either of us. And now he had Jimmy Ianelli squashed up against the wall so he could barely breathe. He had Jimmy's collar in one hand and his other palm on Jimmy's chest. My father looked like he wanted to put Jimmy through that stone wall. He could do it, too, or something close enough. He had held the Golden Gloves city title when he was in high school; Adam had the trophy on his bookshelf. I looked over at Adam again. There was some color back in his face, and he was watching this scene with interest.

My father looked like he was playing Statue. His face was deep red and his neck muscles were still twitching but otherwise he seemed frozen in place: both knees bent, one foot slightly ahead of the other on the marble step, the fist into which Jimmy Ianelli's collar was clenched white at the knuckles and the palm against Jimmy's chest rigid as stone. My father was using all of his willpower to keep from hitting Jimmy Ianelli, and I wasn't sure it was enough. He wanted to hurt Jimmy. He wanted to make him pay. He wanted to smash Jimmy's head into that stone wall. I didn't know then that Adam had almost died of salmonella when he was three years old, some rare strain the hospital couldn't identify until Adam had run a fever of 105 for six days and was literally sweating to death, shaking with fever and hallucinations so persistent that he didn't even know his parents were in the room, watching him burn and sweat his way to total dehydration. He got it, the doctors thought, from sucking on his mittens or eating dirty snow. Now someone had made him eat dirt again.

I didn't know any of that. I just knew that my father wanted to spread Jimmy all over the paved brick we were standing on and that he was coming closer to doing it every second

that passed. I thought of Kevin Whalen, of what his blood had looked like, spreading a dark stain on the bricks after he fell off this same wall that Jimmy was backed up against, ending up in a body cast for months. I looked at Adam. His eyes were wide: anxious, expectant, eager, like he was watching an exciting scene in some movie. Jimmy was the pale one now. His face was the color of the stone wall behind him. My father still held his frozen pose. It was like we were all under a spell, except I wasn't.

I stepped up and touched my father's sleeve. He turned his head. His eyes were bullets of hate. It was the hate he felt for Jimmy, but now he was looking at me. My father's veins pounded beneath my fingertips. I felt the muscles of his forearm, hard as bone. I didn't know this man. The fury in his eyes could have burned right through the marble steps on which we stood. I saw the man with the gun there, and the man who severed the elevator cables. I saw Kevin Whalen lying on the ground. I saw the man with the knife in the alley. I touched my tongue to the roof of my mouth and I said "No."

After a moment my father shrugged my hand off his arm. He flexed his fingers on Jimmy Ianelli's chest. "Okay," he said softly, dropping his right hand. He straightened up, still holding Jimmy's collar balled up in his left fist. "Okay." He let out a long breath, then opened his fist so abruptly that Jimmy stumbled down a couple of steps before regaining his balance. My father faced me then, and he looked like himself again, except he looked very tired, almost old. In the time it took for me to blink he had moved to Adam, put an arm around his shoulders. "Come on," he said, steering Adam up the stairs. "Let's go home."

We left the monument. My father and brother walked ahead. My father said something about calling the doctor just in case Adam had swallowed anything that could be really dangerous. "I didn't swallow anything," Adam said. "I'm fine." In the lobby of our building, I saw my father's hammer on the chair by the front door. I picked it up, tapping its head lightly against my palm. I liked the weight of it in my hands. I pressed my fingertips against the edges of the claw, testing its sharpness.

"Let's go, Dara," my father called. "The elevator's here."

"I'm taking the stairs," I said. Climbing, I slapped the hammer into my palm again and again. I liked the sound it made against my skin. For each flight I slapped a little harder, trying to see how far I could go before it really hurt. When I got to our front door, my palm was red and stinging.

Erin Flanagan

The Learning Theory

Meg tucks her coffee mug in the crook of her arm as she unlocks her office door, a permanent stain on the inner elbow of all her work clothes. Stacey, her neighbor one office over, slips the mug out of Meg's arm and takes a sip as Meg drops her backpack on her chair.

"You're here early," Stacey says and Meg bites back her irritation. What Stacey means is she's on time.

"It was Martin's night with Nella so I only had to get myself out the door."

"That's right," Stacey says, leaning against Meg's door frame, Meg's coffee still warming her hands. "Did you do anything fun last night?"

"Ate popcorn for dinner. Went to bed. What about you?" In actuality, Meg stayed up past three watching reruns of abusive reality TV. Her insomnia is now clear on her face, her eyes sunken, the skin at the sockets dark and papery. The popcorn wasn't for dinner but a late-night snack after dinner, chased with a few glasses of wine to help her sleep.

"Yoga, then book club."

Meg has to keep from rolling her eyes, saying: *what, no time to adopt a puppy?* Stacey is fresh out of graduate school and only six months into this job at Daybreak, a day treatment office for juvenile sex offenders. Meg pulls a box of Kleenex out of her bag and replaces the near-empty carton by her client chairs. She checks her calendar. First appointment: Jerrod Greek—as if she's forgotten, as if she wasn't up watching TV until the middle of the night thinking how the stories she hears in life could easily qualify for a show, only her clients are too ugly to pass as entertainment. She began working with juvie sex offenders eight years ago when she completed her MSW, a caseload she regards as one of the most difficult in social work, although her friends in HIV/AIDS and children services feel the same.

Jerrod knocks on the door frame and Stacey scoots to the

side. Meg wants to tell Stacey to stand her ground, to not move over because it sends a message to Jerrod that he's calling the shots. What the hell kind of training has Stacey received anyway? Doesn't she know it's a battleground here? That every move needs to be strategic? Jesus, no wonder so many men see women as the weaker sex.

"Hey, Ms. Meg," Jerrod says and Meg looks pointedly at Stacey—*my session is starting*—until Stacey hands over Meg's coffee cup and returns to her own office. Jerrod flops into one of the two client chairs, the door left open. He knows by now she's not allowed behind closed doors with clients.

"How's your week been?" she asks and Jerrod shrugs.

"About the same."

"Same how?"

He tells her about an incident at his friend Hector's house—something about a female cousin, or maybe just a friend, showing up without panties on under her skirt. The story is hard to follow and not very interesting, but Meg gathers that Hector said the girl was baiting him, showing her snatch in hopes of getting it popped. "Is that what you think too?" she asks. "That the girl was baiting you?"

"Me? No. I just think she's a skank." Meg takes this as a good sign: he doesn't think everything revolves around him. It's one of the first things she looks for in empathy training, one of the treatment programs she follows along with anger management, cognitive restructuring, and social and interpersonal skills training. Much of it comes down to the learning theory and providing a new environment and thinking patterns to emulate. Often it works, but these days it seems to less and less. Already she thinks Jerrod is an unpromising case. She's worked with him for a few months now after he was sent to her for finger-banging a girl in his sister's third-grade class in front of two of his friends.

They talk about how things are going at school both socially and academically, how things are with Jerrod's father whom he sees on Tuesday nights when Dad comes to the aunt's house for dinner. Jerrod's aunt has two kids of her own—a junior in high school and a freshman in college, both boys or Jerrod wouldn't have been placed there—and at the same time Meg honors the woman's decision, she thinks she's an idiot for

putting her own kids in danger. The learning theory works in both directions. Meg's not surprised though that someone would take Jerrod in; he's a disturbed boy, that's obvious, but he's also funny and quick, charming in a way you don't often see in teenage boys. He has a soft spot for word play and a boyish handsomeness Meg can see her daughter Nella falling for. His running joke with Meg is to use phallic sounding words in conversation, one of the few things that still amuses her about her job even if, or maybe because, it's somewhat inappropriate. Dictation, the thrust of his argument, getting discharged from the hospital. At the end of his session today he says, "I'm glad you're my therapist. You keep me from going off half-cocked."

"I saw that one coming," she says as she adds her notes from the session to his file.

He pauses and smiles. "Nice."

Meg makes it through two more sessions, her hangover receding to little more than a throb behind her left eye, then closes up some paperwork on clients she is glad not to see any more—two boys, both hopeless cases. The numbers show that treatment is more effective than many might guess, with recidivism low compared to nonsexual crimes, but Meg figures someone is cooking the books. These boys come in honestly with no idea that what they were doing was wrong. They know it's wrong to rob or murder someone, but forcing their sister to have sex or raping a neighbor girl? Somehow that's a blurry moral line, behavior passed down from uncles and fathers and brothers. Meg knows their own abuse doesn't excuse the behavior, and besides, she isn't in the business of excusing behaviors, she's in the business of changing them. In therapy she sees a side of the boys that is both horrifying and innocent. She tells them, *when you force boys and girls to perform sexual acts with you it hurts them both emotionally and physically*, and these boys look at her slack-jawed and say, "Really? But I did it and came out just fine."

She heats an expired can of soup in the break room, sitting down to her crappy lunch as Stacey comes in with a pita full of greens and something that smells horrible in a Pyrex dish. "Cabbage," she says. "I used the microwave on the second

floor so I wouldn't stink up the room but I guess it followed me."

"That seems hostile to the second floor," Meg says.

Stacey ignores the comment and settles at Meg's table even though there are three more and all are empty. "How's Nella doing?" she asks and Meg gives her a brief update. When Stacey was hired, Meg did the polite thing and invited her over for dinner to welcome her to the agency. She regretted it immediately, watching her sixteen-year-old daughter bond with her co-worker only seven years older, a girl who wears stretchy pants whenever she isn't at work because she actually works out, not because all of her real pants cut her off at the waistband.

"She called me the other day, you know," Stacey says and Meg puts down her spoon. "Things are heating up with Zach. She said she asked you to take her to Planned Parenthood and you said no."

"Is that any business of yours?" Meg asks and Stacey keeps her face calm and composed.

"It is now because Nella called me."

Meg knows it was wrong not to take her daughter—she should thank her lucky stars she has a kid who is responsible and trust her with the decision—but Jesus Christ, this is her *child*. Nella isn't old enough to be making this kind of substantial decision; Meg is thirty-seven and under-qualified. She knows Nella's boyfriend, even likes him, but that doesn't meant she wanted him fucking her daughter. She likes Jerrod too, for god's sake.

Stacey continues. "I know it's not my place but I think you should take her."

"Is that what you'd tell your client?"

"No. I'd help her weigh the pros and cons. But if anyone should know the difference between how social workers treat their friends and family versus their clients, it's you." Meg knows all about the lines between the job and the home life. She let Martin hit her when they were married, and more than a few drunken nights in their fourteen-year run constituted rape. Who knows. It was a hazy time. For the most part those days are as separate from her as the kitchen sink, no more measure of her worth than a road sign. "You work with sex

offenders," Stacey continues, "yet you won't even take your daughter for birth control pills."

"Of course I'm going to take her," Meg says, crumbling a Saltine to dust on top of her soup. "I was caught off guard, that's all. Regardless, it's not your business."

"I don't know why you're so rude to me. I'm only trying to help. You know," Stacey says, her head cocked critically. "Sometimes you're just not very nice."

"I didn't know it was part of my job to be nice."

"I'm not talking about your job, I'm talking about *you*."

"Is there a difference?" Meg says it to be obstinate, but there's a ring of truth. Who is she without this job, and if she hates her job so much, what does that say? There was a time when she'd wake before the alarm went off, humming in the shower while the coffee brewed. Was it just that her life with Martin had been good back then? It feels like more than that. She knows all about burnout, every social worker does, but this feels worse. Not just a case of the job blues, but a black sludge that is creeping into every crevice of her life, something sticky and heavy, drowning her. She is more than a woman burned out on her job, but a woman who wants to burn everyone else down, too. No wonder she hates Stacey, all gleaming and new and optimistic. It's like working with that new car smell burning inside her nostrils, or with a golden retriever as a colleague.

Stacey begins talking again but Meg gathers her dirty soup bowl and sets it unrinsed in the sink, almost knocking her chair over as she bolts for the door.

"Fine," Stacey says. "We don't need to be friends if you don't want to."

"I don't want to," Meg says and turns around to see Stacey's eyes fill with tears. Meg snorts. If she's enough to make Stacey cry, what must her clients do to her?

Meg and Martin met when she was nineteen. Marty was working at a garage, Meg at a jewelry store in the mall. She wore blouses straining at the buttons and he came in one weekend to buy a cheap locket for his mother and Meg was the one, tottering in her heels, to help him pick it out. They began dating a few weeks later after he kept stopping

by, bringing her slushies from Orange Julius and fries from Steak and Shake, his hands chapped red but clean, the grease still caught under his nails. "You can't have this much jewelry to buy," she teased him, and he said there was something else shiny he was after. A few months after she moved in, which was only a few weeks after they began dating, she found the locket from his mother bunched in the back of a bathroom drawer, the chain knotted. She never had the heart to ask him what happened; most likely it had been for a girlfriend and he asked for it back when they broke up. Meg remembers thinking how glad she was he never gave it to her, that he didn't forget who sold it to him in the first place. Early on he never called her names beyond what she knew, from her own childhood, were acceptable forms of castigation. She wonders how her standards got so low that she'd date and eventually marry a man because he never called her worse that what she was, that he was kind enough not to re-gift her another woman's jewelry.

That night she listens at Nella's bedroom door for her daughter's breathing. When Nella was a baby, Meg would pray for her to fall asleep, and as soon as she did, Meg would have to sit on her hands so as not to wake her daughter back up to make sure everything was still okay. When Nella was two, she awoke to find her mother's face an inch from her own—Meg suspended above her, listening for breathing. Had this happened to Meg she would have screamed in terror—waking to a face so close—but Nella had stared at her calmly as if to say, *where else would you be?* and quickly fell back asleep. Over dinner that night Meg had told Nella she'd call her gynecologist and set up an appointment. Nella's reaction was to throw her arms around her mom's neck and kiss her with a cartoonish smack. "Thank you thank you thank you!" she said, the same reaction Nella gave only a few short years ago when Meg finally bought her an iPod.

As a teenager, Nella sleeps with the door closed but Meg is consumed with the dormant fear her daughter has died in the night. It's almost four a.m. and Meg hasn't been to sleep yet. Her heartbeat accelerates and her palms leak sweat as she closes her eyes, images flashing of her daughter, strangled in her damp sheets, hair across her face, her chest still. Meg re-

sists as long as she can before opening the door. Nella is lying on her back, one knee cocked, a faint wet spot illuminated by her mouth from the hallway light. Her chest moves up, then down. Up, then down. Meg closes the door, but with the door closed once again, there's no guarantee Nella's still breathing. And if she's not, there's nothing Meg can do about it anyway.

The next morning Meg gets Nella off to school after promising once again to call her ob-gyn. Then Meg calls in sick to work, the sixth time in a month. She calls just before eight, before anyone will be answering phones at the agency, resisting the urge to frog up her voice and make herself sound congested. She is an adult; if she needs to call in sick she can. Most of the social workers she knows take mental-health days every eight months or so, but six days in a month is unheard of. She knows the rules well enough to not take three days in a row, although it's tempting. The only thing that will get her back the following day is knowing that the fallout of being backed up in cases wouldn't be worth it. Still, today. She can't face it—anal rape stories involving four-year-olds; vaginal penetration of an infant with a Barbie head; a preteen boy telling her that at his first sleepover he thought he'd offended his friend's parents because the father didn't come in and butt-fuck him. In the morning he apologized to his friend and that's how he ended up in her office. She hangs up the phone and switches on the coffee pot before remembering she forgot to make it the night before. She unplugs the pot and goes back to bed, crawling in deep. In the past when she's taken sick days, she's done something to treat herself—driven a town over and browsed bookstores with an expensive coffee in her hand, or slipped into a matinee by herself and ordered a popcorn, a Diet Coke snuck in her purse. Now all she wants is to sleep, or at least try to. Now all she wants is to be able to turn off her head, to not think about those awful boys.

The next day she meets with Jerrod again. "You were gone yesterday. Feel better?"

"I do."

He pushes his feet against the backside of her desk and pulls the front legs of his chair off the ground. It's something

she's asked him not to do at least a dozen times, but today she just watches the chair lift up, rocking back and forth in a hypnotic fashion.

"I'm not going to rag on about it," he says. "But yesterday I was seeing red I was so mad you missed our session."

"That's enough," Meg says. "Period." And Jerrod laughs.

He then starts in on the normal bullshit about what's going on at home with his aunt—the oldest boy is home for a three-day weekend and he and Jerrod are having territory issues—and Meg looks out her one office window to the parking lot at the back of the building. It's late fall, the leaves wet on the ground in the disgusting consistency of paper mache. She remembers doing paper mache projects with Nella when she was a child, back when she was just starting school. Hard to believe there were boys in the world even then that wanted to fuck her daughter. Some days Meg thinks nothing good can happen anymore, that it's a miracle she makes it home everyday without getting assaulted or raped, working in this environment as little more than a paid babysitter.

She blinks and looks from the window to Jerrod, aware suddenly that the room has grown quiet. "Did you even hear me?" he says and, by rote she says, "Tell me more about that," an answer in therapy that's appropriate ninety percent of the time.

"You want me to tell you more about how I want to move to Alabama and be part of the Crimson Tide? You're not even listening to me, Ms. Meg."

"Maybe you should stop playing games and say something important." She closes the manila file on her desk, her hands shaking. "Stop wasting my time until you're ready to really start."

Jerrod shakes his head. "Jesus, you really are on the rag."

Toward the end of the day, Nicole, Meg's supervisor, calls Meg into her office and asks her if she'll take a seat. It's not really a question although no one would call it a demand. Meg sits down.

"Feeling better?" Nicole asks.

"Yes," Meg says, keeping her eyes locked on Nicole's, no wavering. She won't blink first; she has done nothing wrong.

"I'm glad," Nicole says and stares back—an old social worker trick: if you stare long enough, the client will have to speak—but Meg holds her ground until they are bordering on the ridiculous, the silence like a live thing in the room. Nicole breaks first and Meg has to work at not smiling. "You've missed a lot of work in the last few weeks," Nicole says and holds up a hand to let Meg know she doesn't need her excuse. "We all need a break, I understand that, and if you're sick I hope you're feeling better. What I want to talk to you about, Meg, are Javier and Michael's cases. You closed both of these in the last week just shy of four months of treatment."

Meg squirms a bit in her seat. "Yes?"

"You know the protocol," Nicole continues. "Four months is the absolute minimum we allow, and in the past you've worked with clients at least eight months on average before moving them on."

"I've been doing this long enough I know what's going to happen," Meg says. "These boys aren't making any progress, never will. End of story."

"Two cases in a row?" Nicole says, her eyes in a skeptical squint. Meg feels her stomach drop, a reminder of last night's wine.

"Are you saying I've behaved unethically?"

"I'm saying you can see it from where you're standing." Meg stares at her, dumbfounded. "And while it certainly isn't an ethical violation, I noticed you skipped the birthday potlucks the last two months."

"You can't hold that against me."

"I'm *not* holding that against you. I'm saying, as a friend and a colleague, I'm worried about you. This isn't the easiest line of work we're in." But what Meg hears is that Nicole can handle it but doesn't think Meg can. There was a time when Meg kept her worlds separate, when she was able to leave work at the end of the day and go to the grocery store like a normal person, but now all she sees is danger. A bag boy helping an old woman to the car could easily push her in the back seat and rape her; the skeevy manager who helps a teenage cashier by bagging groceries isn't running an efficient ship but grooming. Everyone is a victim and a perpetrator, it's just a matter of where you are in the food chain at any given mo-

ment.

"Maybe I'm just burned out," Meg says, although she doubts that's the case. She's felt burn-out in the past—on and off for most of her career, in fact—and that's when the matinee and bookstore came into play. Now these just seem like more useless ways to spend time.

"Could be," Nicole says, but she doesn't look convinced either. "You need to keep an eye on this, Meg. While I don't like to see you detaching from others, and I hate to not get my hands on your famous Greek salad every month, I'm most concerned with the service to our clients. It's unacceptable to be closing cases that aren't ready." She holds up a finger. "Unacceptable, not unethical, but like I said, you can see it from here. Do you understand this warning?"

"Yes," Meg says, and under her breath on the way out whispers, "Bitch."

At home, Nella is lounging on the couch, a piece of hair twirling aimlessly around her finger, caught in a helpless loop. "Hey," she says to her mom. "Did you call about my appointment?"

"I did," she lies. "The computers were down so they couldn't schedule anything right then. I would have called back in the afternoon, but my day filled up."

Nella slumps back toward the TV and Meg comes up behind her to squeeze Nella's shoulder, impressed when her daughter doesn't jump but also leery of a girl grown so relaxed.

"What's for dinner?" Nella asks and Meg grips her car keys until she feels an individual key dig into the palm of her hand. Nella was supposed to cook tonight; Meg can make a big deal about this or not, she reminds herself.

"Why don't we order a pizza?"

To her surprise, Nella turns around with a smile on her face. "Can we go out for Chinese?"

"Sure. Whatever. You pick."

Nella jumps up. "I should forget to make dinner more often."

"So you knew it was your turn?"

Nella waivers then comes over with another of her cartoon smacks, Meg laughing. It's not until Meg looks down that she

realizes Nella has swiped her car keys.

At the restaurant, Nella pulls the chopsticks from the paper tube, breaks them apart, and rubs them together. "This always reminds me of crickets," she says. "Their legs?" It's just the kind of inane, chatty thing she rarely says to Meg since Martin moved out.

"I always think of wishbones," Meg says. She smiles at her daughter and unfolds the cloth napkin meticulously into her lap. She used to think of wishbones, but now what she imagines are girls snapped in half. "So," she begins, and Nella holds up a hand.

"I don't want to talk about it, okay?"

"I was going to ask you what you're thinking of ordering."

"No you weren't. You want to talk about my sex life. I can see it on your face."

Meg tries to deny it, but what's the use? Honestly, she'd rather talk about food. "Have you and Zach discussed this?"

"What, like, out loud?"

"Yes, out loud. Did you think I meant over texts?"

Nella shrugs again. "We discuss a lot of things that way. Yesterday he helped me with my algebra homework over text."

"Did you get it right?"

"I haven't gotten it back yet."

"What I mean, Nella, is have you discussed this as two rational adults?"

"You keep telling me I'm not an adult. I'm only fifteen."

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, we've discussed it."

"And you've weighed all the pros and cons? You've discussed the possibility of pregnancy or STDs? And you've discussed that you still need to use a condom in addition to the pill to be sure you're protected?"

"We discussed whole hazmat suits, does that make you happy? We're thinking florescent orange, or maybe silver. That might be easier to accessorize with a handbag."

"Your sarcasm isn't helping."

"It's not? Are you sure?"

The young Chinese woman comes over and bows as she places their platters of Mala Chicken and Kung Pao Shrimp on the table, as well as a communal bowl of rice. "Everything

look fine?" she says, her voice barely above a whisper, staring at the food as if expecting it to answer. *No wonder women get raped*, Meg thinks, and feels an immediate wave of nausea rip through her stomach.

"Excuse me," she says and throws her napkin on the chair, barely making it into the restroom stall before throwing up what's left of her undigested lunch. No wonder women get raped? It's so incredibly hostile, so incredibly wrong. It is like someone else has wormed its way into her head and created the thought.

Awhile later she comes back and Nella sets down her chopsticks. "I was getting worried," she says and Meg points at Nella's plate, the food half gone.

"I can tell."

"Listen," Nella begins as Meg slides in her seat. "I appreciate you being all concerned about the sex decision, but to tell you the truth, the virgin ship has sailed. We did it the first time a few days ago—and yes, we used a condom—and we decided if it's going to be a regular thing we should get back up."

"I'm just wondering what you did to get yourself in this situation in the first place," Meg says. "What kind of signals you've been putting out."

Nella drops her chopsticks. "That sounds an awful lot like victim blame." Raised by a social worker, she knows all the terms.

"So you're say you're a victim?"

"No, I'm saying you are acting like a therapist, not a mom, and a shitty therapist at that." Meg still hasn't touched her food and signals to the stupid waitress for a to-go box. Her daughter is right.

On the way home though, Meg can't stop herself from warning, "He says it's back up, but mark my words: in a few weeks he's going to start in on the it-feels-so-much-better-without-a-condom-talk, the if-you-really-loved-me-you'd-let-me-go-bareback crap."

Nella looks out the window. "When'd you get so jaded, Mom? Not every man's a shithead you know."

"Two weeks," Meg repeats. "And all you're giving him won't be enough."

Meg gets up early to finish making the Greek salad, her "famous Greek salad," although there's really nothing special beyond the homemade croutons she salvages from crusty bread. Nicole acts like Meg created the whole idea of Greek salad instead of giving credit to the Greeks, which irritates Meg more than it should. *What doesn't?* she thinks as she crumbles extra feta on the greens to make it extra famous.

At the office, Nicole beams at the bowl in Meg's hands, a look Meg finds so condescending she wants to slap it off her boss's face. Stacey comes by, clapping together just the tips of her fingers. "The famous Greek salad!" she says and follows Meg into her office. "I got a text from Nella this morning saying you're getting her the pills. She's a smart kid. You're doing the right thing."

Meg has to busy herself at her desk, straightening a pile of papers to keep herself from hurdling a stapler at Stacey's head. "I know she's a smart kid. I raised her."

"I'm just saying. I'm sure it's hard to hear your daughter's sexually active but you're doing what you can to help her grow into a mature and responsible woman."

Meg stills the papers in her hand. "How long have you known Nella and Zach have been having sex?"

"A few weeks?" Stacey says. "A month? Maybe two?"

There's a knock at the door. Jerrod. "Can I talk to you for a second?" he asks and Stacey steps back two, three times to let him in Meg's office.

"We don't have an appointment," Meg says and Jerrod closes the door behind him. "Keep that open," she says, but he ignores her.

"It's an emergency," he says. "Remember that girl I told you about at Hector's? The skank? I think I might like her, like, like her-like her. How'm I supposed to ask a girl out on a date?"

Meg feels her throat closing up, adrenaline shooting through her chest like a brush fire. "You need to open that door, please," she repeats.

"You hearing me?" Jerrod says. "I like this girl. Or lady. I don't even know what to call her. Am I supposed to take her to the movies and shit?"

Meg sits down to keep the room from spinning, her eyes closed. "What do you like about her?"

What *don't* I like? She listens to the same kind of music as me and you can see her thong out the top of her jeans. Last night I was at Hector's playing video games and when she bent over in front of the TV I blew my load in my pants. *Bam!* Just like that. Didn't even see it coming. I'm telling you, I *love* her."

Meg opens her eyes. Outside the window, a dog trots through the parking lot, ribs so thin Meg can see them from her chair. She looks at Jerrod, his handsome young face. "If you really like this girl, stay away from her. You're not ready to be dating anyone. It's only going to lead to trouble with a boy like you."

Jerrod shakes his head. "I hear you, Ms. Meg. I wouldn't trust me either." He opens the door and Meg feels the hall air rush in like a hot breeze. "Guess that goes to show I don't like her as much as I think, because I'm still going to ask her out."

Meg comes home that night to an empty house and a note from Nella: *over at dad's—staying the night*. Meg thinks to call Martin and confirm, but what will it prove if she's right or wrong? Either she's a bad mother for doubting her daughter, or she's a bad mother because her daughter is out having sex. She pours a glass of wine and drinks it standing up in the kitchen, then pours another an inch from the rim. She kicks off her heavy shoes and sits down on the couch with the TV on, still dressed in her ten-year-old blazer and a too-tight pair of slacks. She should buy some new clothes, try to do something with her hair. Stacey had the audacity a few months ago to suggest Meg try internet dating and thinking about that now, Stacey budding into her life, makes Meg wish someone would teach Stacey a lesson about boundaries. *Bitch*, she thinks. *Stupid cunt*. She lays her head on the sofa arm, her eyes so heavy she feels them water and burn under the weight of her lids.

Sometime later, against the glow of the TV, Meg hears an unidentifiable sound somewhere in the house, pulling her from sleep that's been days coming. The engine of her heart starts up, a quick jolt of pain in her head. She's certain the noise

came from upstairs, maybe a door slamming shut. She grabs the phone off the coffee table and dials 911 as she stands at the bottom of the stairs, no doubt in her mind there is someone in the house. She tells the dispatch operator someone's broken in. Jerrod flashes in her mind, his unexpected visit today. Or maybe it's Zach looking for Nella, or Martin looking for her. She explains she is a social worker working with juvenile sex offenders and she has a teenage girl in the house. She sees Jerrod rocking on the two hind legs of his chair—back and forth, back and forth—telling her with guileless sincerity that all women, starting with girls, deserve what they get. She takes a step up the stairs.

The operator tells her to stay where she is, she'll send a nearby police officer immediately, but Meg is already in the upstairs hallway, the phone in her hand, her damp blazer stuck to her back. She opens Nella's door and the bed is empty, the sheets twisted and cascading to the floor. Meg rushes to the window and flings it open, sure she'll see Nella's lifeless body in the grass one story down. Jerrod has done this. Marty has done this. Zach has done this. If she could only calm down she could think straight.

She runs down the steps and out of the house, her stomach twisting as the red and blue lights begin to circle the neighborhood, casting all the houses in a blurbly red and blue. The officers shut off the lights. Meg tries to breathe, tries to lift the invisible weight from her chest. Two more men. Why are they here? What good can they do?

"Are you the one who called?" one of the officers asks, and Meg backs up, holding the phone out like a weapon.

"Get away from me!" she yells. "Don't you touch me!"

"Ma'am," he says calmly, and his hand moves to his holster. From the corner of her eye, she sees the other approaching her house. They are all of the same country, all of the same tribe.

"Nella," she yells. "Nella, can you hear me?"

There is nothing, only silence. Nella has already gone missing. Meg has raised Nella to question logic, to trust the thread of unease worming its way through her stomach, but what good will that do in the face of something as utterly convincing as a man? Meg puts her hand on her chest, unable to

breathe. Her legs weaken and she collapses to the ground. One of the officers enters her house as the other rushes toward her, kneeling on the pavement, his face above hers as he shines a small flashlight in her eyes.

In his shadow she can imagine Zach kneeling over Nella, or maybe it's Jerrod, his face an inch from her daughter's. Nella, foolish Nella, will smile into his mouth as if to say, *where else would you be?* Meg knows she should stand up, run, try to find her daughter, but what would be the point? The flashlight snaps off and Meg's world goes black, just one more stupid girl getting what's coming to her.

Walter Bowne

Roots

I unraveled another stick of gum. "This is just too ridiculous."

"We didn't go through all this crap today just to cradle our 'nads," he replied.

"No, Seth, really," I said, chomping conspicuously. "I can't. Not again."

"That's too bad," Seth said, "because two men are needed tonight." He twitched like a racehorse in the starting gate. After a guttural cleansing, he sailed a lugy out the window. "And one's right here. Let's do this!"

He guzzled the remains of his Monster, wiped his mouth in the crook of his arm, and then darted from the red minivan. When I heard the edge of the old shovel rub against the spade, I realized Seth was serious. I skulked out from my seat, my butt sore. The captive was in the back, swaddled in a tattered light brown beach blanket. Each gripping an end, we heaved the behemoth, the weight of an average man, if the man was round and woody and spindly, spilling dirt, mulch, root, and worm onto that dark, desolate street—evidence that surely would convict us as shrubbery thieves.

The ordeal with the azalea started four or five weeks ago—a month prior to bloom time. One Friday afternoon in the middle of the spring semester, Mother had summoned me home from college with an emergency. She was a fleshy woman, divorced for more years than married, with brown hair, a thin mouth, and pale, freckled skin. She usually wore a one-size-too-small cotton sweatshirt of various pastels with kittens or floral patterns or hearts. But that night of the summons she was too distressed to even dress up, surprising me in faded pink pajamas and worn blue slippers. She peered over the top of her spotted wire glasses, cradling for comfort the crimson container of cheese doodles. "Here's dinner," she said hurriedly, handing me a fistful of doodles. "Now have a

seat so I can tell you the problem. Seth knows already."

At twenty-four, Seth was three years older than me. My not-really stepbrother inhabited my basement. His blind obedience seemed so simple. As a soldier, with the command from a whistle, he would be the first out of the trench, which never made sense because he really had no ambition. The basement arrangement had lasted for almost a year. I didn't like his dad, but what did that matter? Most of the guys my mom dated were losers. When I arrived that evening, Seth tried to hug me, but I backed off and offered him some pound cake. He was the accelerator, and I was the brake. Taller than me by four inches, Seth was sturdier and darker, with shallow cheeks and a bronze exterior. In a wrestling match he would pin me, sure, but he was uncomplicated like microwave popcorn—press a button and step back. Now he rocked at the head of the dining room table.

This was the emergency: Uncle Reggie sold the estate. Now the ashes of my grandparents belonged to some crazy old lady. "I didn't see this coming," my mom said.

"We'll get it back for you, Ma," Seth said. "Don't worry."

He didn't acknowledge the kick from underneath the table. He was jittery even then, a dog waiting for a tossed Frisbee.

There was no agreement in the real estate contract to "extradite the azalea from the premises." The old woman who bought Uncle Reggie's property was a retired nursery specialist. She even cited the azalea as a unique specimen that would "showcase God's radiance" come spring.

"Uncle Reggie was always a douche bag," I said. Mom slapped my wrist. That's one maxim that eternally abides with my family: any unpleasant truths about family are fine as long as they remain quiet, but those same truths are quickly denied as blasphemy if ever spoken.

The ashes of my grandmother had been held until the death of my grandfather. Aunt Betty, the wife of my mother's oldest brother, Nathan, claimed she heard the whispered deathbed wish of my grandmother. As legend persists, my grandmother wanted her ashes mixed with her husband's and then sprinkled on the azalea bush in her backyard. The azalea was the centerpiece of the yard, especially in the spring, and Mom-Mom, with her Irish white hair and soft skin, was

personified in that plant. The azalea thrived in that acre of paradise, maintaining its grace amidst the concrete wilds of Southwest Philadelphia. The azalea grew ten paces from the eternal rusty-squeaking-slamming back door—the yard a testament from bygone days of backyard baseball, homemade lemonade, clotheslines, and pigeon coops. When my grandfather died, his homestead was sold, and so we dug up the azalea and planted it at Uncle Nathan's house. There was a ceremony, private and intimate and pagan. My family doesn't have the courage to commit to any charge of religious affiliation. And maybe it's the reason no one can say goodbye. If there's no heaven, at least there's this azalea. I wrote a eulogy where I compared the roots to the strong roots of the family. But would these roots withstand constant battering and picking of shovels?

Then five years later, Uncle Nathan died and Aunt Betty soon remarried and moved to Arizona. So the azalea was moved once again; this time to the middle son, Uncle Reggie, who felt obligated to shelter the wandering tombstone. Obligation burrows deep in my family. The spot on his estate was lovely: atop a rolling hill that wandered serenely down to a creek under vestiges of mountain laurel, dogwood, forsythia, and wild wisteria that hung from the trees as a purple curtain. I never asked my mother why she didn't elect to plant the azalea.

"And let's just say we do get the bush," I said. "What happens then when something happens to you?"

"And you want your poor mother in her grave already?"

"Why can't you be on Ma's side for once?" Seth said.

"Technically, I'm the only one of *Ma's* side," I said. "Aren't you just a boarder?"

"I'm here everyday taking care of the place, you know."

I gazed around the cluttered room with the dust bunnies. It was always my responsibility to keep up the home, to dust the stuff, to dust around the stuff, and to manage the stuff that would never be used again. When you're nine, and the only man in the house, you become The Man of the House, but it's only the laboring part of Man. I never made any man-like decisions. Even now I was neutered. Maybe that's one reason I didn't like coming home. There was love in my house, for

sure, but it was suffocating love.

"Will you be able to do this for me?" Mom asked, handing me five one hundred dollar bills.

"Sure, I'll do what I can."

"What if she wants six Benjamins?" Seth asked. "May I raise the stakes?"

"Then we're all crazy," I said. "It's a damn azalea. Not the Tree of Knowledge."

"You don't seem to understand the situation," Seth said, slowly twirling the hairs in his nose, pulling and plucking. "This damn azalea means everything to Ma."

He was right, of course, but why did it mean everything?

The azalea was planted around the back of the house in a secluded alcove surrounded in a wreath of white impatiens. But we decided on the front door. While walking nervously along the serpentine stone pathway, now cleared of crabgrass with the cracks filled, my nose tingling with grass spores, I hoped that this would really be no big deal. It may have been easy to say a polite no over the phone, but to say no while face-to-face with two honest-to-goodness young men on the behalf of a distraught mother, well, that took nerves of granite.

Seth and I had gazed stupidly at the red door. It had been freshly painted. Someone had used cheap brushes because filaments of the brush were woven vertically into the paint. It was probably cheap Uncle Reggie.

"You knock," Seth said.

"Why should I knock?"

"The dude with the money has the power," Seth said. "And aren't you in charge of this situation?"

I nodded reluctantly and rang the doorbell. Seth pushed the bell two more times.

"What the hell you doing?"

"She's old," Seth said, "Maybe she can't hear it. Anyway, I love Westminster."

"Ringing it three times won't make it louder," I replied.

"Let's just take the bush now," Seth said, walking away.

"No, we need to handle this the proper way."

I gazed around the yard. Seth slipped off and gazed into

windows. There were several cars parked around the back, back by the azalea, back across the wooden bridge that ran over a stream. There was a tan Nissan Altima with Maryland plates with a bumper sticker for the Azalea Society of America.

"They're all around the back," Seth called, "A whole mess of 'em!"

I imagined a gaggle of these grayhairs clustered arm-in-arm around the azalea like some ancient ritual at Stonehenge. I was the infidel attempting to steal the cornerstone of their religion. What Mom wanted me to do seemed sacrilegious. At least I didn't have to make the first gesture as an older woman approached cautiously, away from the gazebo where six or seven other women sipped tea from white chinaware. She wore a sky-blue frock with wide white collar with a white necklace. Her hair was short and white, with a wave up the front, about two inches stretched. With her hands folded in front, she smiled as she approached Seth. In an eerie way she reminded me of my mom-mom.

"Can I help you boys some?"

Seth pointed to me and said, "He'll talk to you all about it."

I apologized for interrupting her soiree—a deliberate word that signaled I was a gentleman.

"You're here to steal my azalea bush!" she declared in a tone decidedly removed from my mom-mom.

Seth nodded with his tongue pressed into his cheek and muttered, "That's right."

I waved my hands furiously, approaching her, pleading, "No, no, not steal. No even to take. We don't have the right to take."

"I knew it," she said. "I knew it."

"Listen, my mother is quite distraught at not having the azalea."

"Well, then she should have discussed the matter with her brother," the lady said, her face reddening. "If she doesn't have proper relations with her sibling, it's no concern of mine."

"My Uncle Reggie, is, well . . ."

"Your Uncle Reggie is a tool," the woman said. "But that's your hardware, not mine."

"But her mother and father, my, my . . . Mom-mom and

Pop-pop are buried . . .” I brought out my iTouch to show her pictures of me in a bunny outfit in front of the azalea. Another one was of grandma pushing my mother on a swing when my mother was three. The azalea’s in the background, but then the old lady declared, “Well, you can lay a wreath now and again, and say prayers, as I would think that’s right and proper, but . . .”

The confrontation excited Seth. He pointed to my pants. “We have money,” he said. “We’ll pay you for the bush.”

She was walking away now. She waved her hands back and forth, emphasizing the “plant was not for sale.”

Seth searched my back pocket for my wallet. Like a satire of modern dance, we foxtrotted for control of the wallet in front of the azalea.

“We can offer five hundred dollars!” Seth shouted. “Five hundred dollars for a bush!”

“If you boys had enough tomfoolery, then you best be on your way.”

Back in the minivan, tired and embarrassed, I offered a post-op with Seth. He said it would just break ma’s heart not to have that bush. “We could threaten her,” Seth suggested.

“Indeed,” I said.

“To spite her, we could lather that bitch up with Round-Up.”

“The plant or the old lady?” I asked.

“We could come back every day and pray, and she’ll get so tired of our worshipfulness, she’ll just break down and give us the damn bush,” Seth said.

“Are you prepared to convert and drive an hour up here every day?”

“If that’s what it takes,” Seth said.

Then after about a half an hour, we decided to scour the area for a replacement azalea. Since it would’ve been fruitless to find a replacement in a garden center, we drove through old neighborhoods with homes at least fifty years old. We found a few viable alternatives, but the color leaf was wrong or the shape was wrong or the size was just wrong. And then of course we didn’t know if the homeowner would agree to allow us to rip open a garden. After all, it could’ve been some-

one's grave as well—or the grave of some dead pet turtle. So we had lunch. My mom had packed us each a hearty sandwich of turkey and cheese on pita, and it was at Tyler State Park that we discovered a replica for our beloved azalea. Seth paid the two landscapers in the park one hundred dollars each for us to pose as landscapers and thereby effectively digging up the azalea in a remote section of the park. We placed the azalea in the back of the minivan and zipped back to Uncle Reggie's. This time the lady was in her front yard bidding her final guest goodbye.

"If you boys don't stop pestering me," she said, "I'm gonna have to call the cops."

"Just take a look at what we have for you," Seth said out the window.

The lady walked toward the street where her driveway began. I opened the hatch and dirt trickled out. I pulled on the blanket, and I heard it rip. My hands and arms had turned a different ethnicity from digging, but I was proud of how much of the root ball we were able to extract.

"We can swap," Seth said. "This one's a dead ringer."

She inspected the leaves. "And it'll be dead soon if you don't water it! Where did you boys get this? Where did you boys *steal* this fine azalea from?"

"We paid someone two hundred dollars to take the bush," Seth said.

"What was his name?" she asked.

"What?"

"What was his name? she asked, enunciating each syllable.

"Diego," Seth replied.

"Diego? What? Where was the property? What road? What town?"

Seth stuttered, not able to lie fast enough. I stepped in and apologized. I promised I wouldn't bother her again. I promised to replant the bush ASAP. It would be a shame to kill one of God's green living wonders. She said she was leaving soon for a trip to visit her son in South Carolina, and she didn't want us moseying around her yard while she was gone, which was rather stupid for her to tell us, but maybe it was rather stupid for us to even consider swapping without her knowing. After all, she knew all about azaleas, as she was the found-

ing member of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Chapter of the Azalea Society of America. She introduced us to Mrs. Simmons, who had driven up from Bethesda, Maryland, to help her start the chapter. I reached out to shake, but my hands were filthy, and I rubbed them on my tan shorts. As we drove off, Seth fuming at "the old bitty," she called out to make sure we placed that "beauty of an azalea back in the earth where it belonged."

So I drove back to Tyler State Park and parked by the concession stand. I filled my red thermos full of water and watered the azalea, soaking the plant and the blanket. Meanwhile, Seth had the idea of swapping the bushes at midnight. "That old bag wouldn't know we did anything. The two are so alike."

"What?" I replied. "Are you that stupid? She's the authority on azaleas. She'll know we switched the bushes?"

"Even if she does," he said, "how could she find us? And if she could, do you think she'd really press charges against someone who just switched bushes? The cops would laugh at her."

I picked up the shovel and told him to get back inside the van. I was going to re-plant the bush. But then a cop car appeared in the parking lot, and I decided that we'd better split. What would he make of two young men watering an unearthed azalea in the parking lot in an out-of-state minivan? So after dinner at the diner and two brown ales, we drove back to Uncle Reggie's. But first we stopped at Home Depot to buy mulch. Earlier in the day Seth was smart enough to steal some mulch from around the azalea bush. Part of me thought that some of Mom-mom and Pop-pop lingered in the front pocket of Seth's jeans.

So there we were, at midnight, carrying the substitute azalea. We made sure we hurried. I tripped on the curb and lost my balance. The shrub fell on my ankle. Some of the mulch tumbled on top of me. I then smelled the mint and sneezed—a sneeze that could've tripped security alarms. Oh, those allergies. I ripped the wild mint from the bush and told Seth that it was impossible to stop the growth of wild mint. I dug into the ball of the bush and ripped out a large root with

numerous tumors.

"That old lady will sure catch of whiff of that," I said.

"We'll just have to rip it all out," he said. "Then we'll make herbal tea."

"You don't understand," I said, peddling my feet back and forth, my back aching. I told Seth to drop the damn plant. I needed to rest and think. Seth rushed back to the van to fetch the shovels while I sat beside the azalea. Why was I doing this? I was no thief. I was just a serious scholar trying to keep a seriously depressed mother from stepping into the dark side. Why did I resent my mother so much? The azalea wasn't the cause of Mom's weariness. I didn't know the cause of her unhappiness. Divorcing Dad didn't make her happy. It didn't make any of us happy. Perhaps the divorce reshaped the puzzle pieces—and we were all doomed to remain disconnected. Of course when Dad died, the puzzle would always remain incomplete. I grimaced. It was a trite analogy. I then pictured the painting that hung in my grandparents' house, that now hangs in my own house, like so many artifacts from that era past, of the boy with the cowboy hat riding the red tricycle in a huge backyard, eternally waving his kerchief at us. The mischievous grin seemed to mock us all. "It's so good to be young," he seems to saying.

All I knew was that I couldn't swap the poor lady's azalea. After all, the lady loved the azalea. Perhaps she was doing us a favor. I was thinking this as Seth passed me with the shovel and rake. That's when the alarms sounded and the lights around the house flashed and then the water sprinklers gushed. We screamed. Seth tore after the van while I frantically pulled the azalea across the driveway, leaving a trail of dirt and mulch. Before anyone showed up, we were able to load the azalea into the van. The inside of the van smelled like a flooded nursery.

"What a rush!" Seth said.

"That's all you have to say?"

"So what do we do now?"

"We drive home and dump the damn thing in that hole you made in the backyard."

"Do we tell her it's not the right one?"

I just nodded my head and wiped my nose on my jacket.

Seth laughed. “Oh, you lying sack of shit.”

And that’s what we did. We got home at one in the morning. I switched on the back porch light, and we planted the azalea by the concrete planter that came from Mom-mom’s backyard. Begonias used to grow there in hearty compost. Around the planter, I would play fickle Zeus with my magnifying glass, burning bodies of red ants, then zapping the bodies of black ants, and then scorching the grass around the killing fields of Troy. Mom-mom would kiss me on the head, would tell me to be careful with playing God, and would pour me a nectar of sparkling lemonade. What would she tell me now? Was I playing God? The outer lip of the planter was now cracked. Seth had been using it for an ashtray. Because smoking was never allowed in my house, all the men my mom dated after her divorce also used it as an ashtray. Me, I don’t smoke. I’m just a two-pack-a-day gum chewer, a leftover, my mother claims, from my oral fixation stage. It seems I bit my mom hard on the nipple while nursing and my mom’s sudden pain and recoil traumatized me.

Seth stopped to smoke a butt. He ran the garden hose into the hole and kept the roots wet while I piled on soil. Except for weeds tolerant of Weed-B-Gon, nothing grew in my mom’s postage-stamp backyard. I don’t know how many times I told her that one bag of one dollar topsoil won’t grow anything. I knew enough to keep the top of the ball exposed by at least two inches. Then we mulched the azalea. Mom never heard us. At least she never came down.

“Do you feel bad lying to your own mother?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, collapsing in the rusty chaise lounge.

Seth smoked another cigarette. I fumbled for another stick of spearmint. “My dad and your Ma,” he said. “They haven’t been getting along too well.”

“I kind of thought so,” I said. “But how would I know?”

“If anything happens, do you think we’d still hang out?”

“Do we hang out now?” I asked.

“You should see your mom more, you know.”

“I know,” I said.

“How come you don’t come around?”

Seth probably smoked another cigarette while I thought of his question. I pictured my mother in the upstairs bathroom, listening. That's what I would do. As a boy I would lay down, my ear inches away from the kitchen corner or tucked under the lip of the locked door, and eavesdrop; I learned so much of the adult world, but I was powerless in that world; I remember the moment when she told my grandmother she was leaving my father.

"I'm still a child in this house," I told Seth. "I don't like feeling like a child."

Seth nodded. "You chew loudly."

"I can't help it. Just ask Freud."

For four weeks my mother never suspected anything. At least she never let on. Maybe she couldn't bear to think of her own son as a liar. Life for me went back to normal; I went back to college and Seth went back to the basement. But during those four weeks, the plant wasn't doing well. When the plant bloomed, Mom compared pictures to the plant. The color of the bloom was wrong. My mother had difficulty asking me the question: "Was this the right bush?"

She knew it wasn't right. Soon the surrogate plant died. My shame led me back to the old lady at Uncle Reggie's. I knocked on her door.

"Where's your brother?" she asked.

"He's not my brother, or even my step-brother," I said. "I don't know what to call him."

She nodded. "You left some tools here," she said.

"I'm sorry about all that," I said. "And you were right, the azalea did die."

She had large oval glasses rimmed in light red. She wore eggshell earrings. It was the middle of the afternoon, and she looked proper and sane, a sensible aesthete.

"There are azaleas in Japan that are hundreds of years old," she said.

"I saw a bonsai of an azalea once," I said. "It was old. I'm not sure where."

"Longwood Gardens," she said.

"Yeah, my mother sang there with the choir at Christmas and my grandma was there, and it was shortly after that she

died. They both had angelic voices."

She walked around me and closed the red door. She walked down the stone path toward the azalea. I followed. The azalea was in full bloom: five petals of soft pink. I asked her the Latin name of the bush.

"R. serpyllifolium," she said. She showed me a branch. "This is called the green calyx. It's at the base. There are generally five petals, five or more stamens, and one pistil, at least on the Higasa and Kobai."

I laughed. "My mother just likes it because it's pretty in the spring."

She nodded, but I knew she knew there was more to the azalea than beauty. I walked around the azalea and recalled my own memories: racing headlong around the bush until dizzy, flushing rabbits from the bush and inspecting the den, watching the bees in an orgiastic dance in the satin-like sheets of the blooms. Not a bad way to spend a day, or an eternity.

"So why did you come back?" she asked.

"To see what I could do for my mother."

She walked into her shed and came back with a pair of garden scissors and a container filled with water. "This is what I can do for you," she said. "I can give you a clipping that will grow roots, and soon you'll be able to plant the clipping in acid-loving soil, and with proper care, you'll have the plant again."

"That would be nice," I said.

Then she told me that she thought about us more than I realized. She didn't want the plant moved again because it may not be able to take the stress, but she said that she would bequeath the azalea in her will to us, and so we could have the azalea back. I nodded, thinking it was a generous offer, and it was more than I would've done considering the stress we gave her. I thanked her and gave her a hug and wished her the best for her Azalea Society. I took the clipping back to college. When I washed dishes, I examined the roots in the Newcastle Brown bottle. It became quite the conversation piece. I kept the secret from Mom. I don't know why. I just didn't want to rip open the wound again. Maybe I didn't want her to remain chained to the memories. If the azalea was so important, why

didn't she take it? Why was she the last in line? Perhaps the azalea represented marriage in the ideal—stability, love, and eternity. It was what her parents possessed, but escaped her. Maybe she didn't feel worthy of the azalea until she realized she was the last.

It was soon after that I came back with the clipping that Mom broke up with that live-in boyfriend. Seth moved out with his dad. I didn't ask for the details. I was used to the revolving door of my mother's relationships. The head of the table was once again mine, but I never sat there again. Mom asked me why.

"The view is better from this side," I said. "I can see out through the window."

During the summer I went back to Tyler State Park where we had stolen the azalea. It was there I planted the clipping—love duplicated. It would be my own shrine. And as far as the azalea at Uncle Reggie's, well, I think it should remain there. The roots could use the rest.

Chris Tarry

Dairy Barn Angel

Everyone was so into Angel. He drove this car with purple undercarriage lights and fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror. His girl Francine was with him sometimes, her arm hanging out the car window like she owned his ass. But there were lots of other girls. That one from the neighborhood with the low-cut number and the chick with braces he said cut him a few times but was totally worth it.

If Angel got the shoes with the badass stripe, I got the shoes with the badass stripe. If he got some huge belt buckle that said his name all surrounded in sparkling jewels, I got one too but with my name instead.

When he walked down the street there was always a centipede of little kids trailing him just so they could say they went to the store with Angel. I even had a picture of the dude in my wallet; this fake baseball card thing the moms from the neighborhood put together after he pitched a perfect game against Southey in the sixth grade.

Angel and I worked at Dairy Barn, which was like Dairy Queen but bigger. Fifty-five flavors and a few extras Angel made up himself. "Watch me mix raspberry and Oreo cookie," he'd tell a gang of kids hanging on his every word. He worked behind the counter like some kind of ice-cream scientist. "When you mix them real good, it looks like . . . BRAINS!" He'd yell and the kids would clap like he was a magician who'd just sawed his assistant in half and pulled away the sheet. He always made sure to flick a little bit on a few standing close. It made me think of that sign I saw at Sea World that time Grandpa took me when I was a kid: *Splash Zone!*

On Fridays after work, me and Angel would go for drinks at Gunners. We were only eighteen but since Angel was dogging half the girls in the place no one ever asked us for I.D. After that we'd drive his car around the neighborhood like it was a glowing dance party and whenever we pulled over, there would be at least three girls leaning their Boom Booms

in through the window. From what Angel told me, Francine thought he worked late on Fridays and I could never figure out how he kept that story going, but Angel was magic like that. At the end of the night, he would drop me a few blocks from Francine's apartment and I'd walk the three miles home so the two of them could get down to whatever it was they got down to. Sometimes on the walk I'd fantasize about being Angel. I'd picture myself driving his car, the windows rolled down, that sub-bass from the stereo shaking the Plymouth right down to its bolts. And of course there'd be a honey in the passenger seat looking all fine. She'd tell me where to take her and I'd drive her there just so everyone could see me cruising through town like Angel.

After he missed that first shift at Dairy Barn I didn't think much about it because there was Dairy Barn time and there was Angel time. *I* tried not showing up once and the owner Vince suspended me for a week and said that my ass would be grass if I ever pulled some shit like that again. Whenever Angel missed, Vince would stand by the window watching for him like a lost puppy and not say anything when he finally rolled in.

When the cops found Angel's car parked at the airport, that's when everyone started to worry. I didn't figure much about it because Angel was always telling me about how he was going to sneak away to Puerto Rico one day to live with his dad.

"You should see the chicas down there, Robbie," he'd say. "Like every one of them got a TV show and being sexy is numero uno." I think I'm the only person he ever told that he missed his dad. Though, now that I think about it, maybe he told Francine too.

She came into Dairy Barn the day after they found the car. There was a line out the door because Vince had stayed up all night coming up with this custom flavor called Angel Swirl. People were buying it up like crazy so I didn't see her come in. When I finally looked up, she was beside the Coke machine rolling her hair between her fingers and chewing on a piece of gum like it was her last meal on Earth. She gave me this "can-I-see-you-outside" look, so I got someone to cover for me at the register.

We walked out back next to the dumpsters and as I watched her spit out her gum and light up a smoke, I got real excited because this was Angel's girl and she'd never said shit to me before.

"Hi, Robbie," she said. Her wrist was cocked back and holding a cigarette like she was waiting for a tray of dishes. "You Angel's friend right?"

"Sure." I rubbed ice cream from my hands, hardly believing she remembered my name. I'd met her once. That time at work when I dropped a bucket on my foot and Angel said, "Damn, Dog! I think you might lose the nail. You won't be walking home tonight." He told Vince we were leaving early and helped me outside and told me to get in the backseat because we had to stop and pick up Francine first.

"Franny, this is Roberto," he'd said to her when she got in. She turned to him and said, "He ain't with us all night, is he?" and Angel leaned over and whispered something to her I couldn't hear. She laughed and looked into the backseat like she just learned something about me and that one thing was as much as she ever needed to know. As Angel slammed the car into gear, Francine rolled down her window and rested that arm of hers on the edge. When we got to my place she didn't move to let me out. It was Angel who got out and helped me up the sidewalk to my front door.

So, we were out behind the ice cream shop and Francine said, "The police might be around asking when you seen Angel last."

"Okay," I said.

"You know when that was?" she asked.

I didn't want to tell her the truth because she was acting all hot and giving me this look like no girl had ever given me before. The truth would have laid her out—that Angel dropped me off on his way to her house on Friday just after making me sit at the side of the road while he got a rub out in the car from some girl he picked up at Gunners.

But Francine had this look and it was a hot look, but also kind of nervous, because she was hauling on her cigarette like she couldn't wait to get on to the next one so I just said, "Friday."

"Friday. Friday," she repeated under her breath.

"Friday," I said again because it was all I could think to say. I was totally bad around girls and Angel usually did the talking.

"Okay, thanks Robbie." She dropped her smoke and pushed past me, her perfume dangling behind her as she walked toward the street.

It took a few days for the cops to work their way around to me. When they knocked on the door, Grandpa answered and pointed his cane at one of them and said they weren't taking his boy alive. "Easy, Old Man," I said, and helped him back into his usual spot on the couch. "He gets like this," I said to the cops, and they asked if we could talk somewhere private.

"Is it just you and him?" they asked on the way to the kitchen. I told them that it had been me and Grandpa since as far back as I could remember. They wanted to know when I'd seen Angel last, so I told the whole story about Gunners and the hand-job at the side of the road, and how he dropped me off in the usual spot and how as far as I knew he'd been on his way to Francine's. They asked me how I got home that night and I told them that I walked like I do every Friday night.

"What is that, three miles?" one of them said, and then Grandpa started making all this racket in the other room so I had to go see what was up.

"Anyone with you on the walk home?" they said as I turned to leave.

"Just me," I said and then Grandpa really started wailing about some thing or another, so the cops thanked me and said they would let themselves out.

"I think he went to Puerto Rico to live with his dad," I said as they were leaving.

"We're looking into that," they said.

After a week there were so many flyers around the neighborhood with pictures of Angel you'd think there was nothing else going on in the world. Vince set up a special fund from the sale of Angel Swirl, told everyone he was already up to three grand, and offered a reward for information on Angel's whereabouts. Down at Kroger's they put little boxes with Angel's face on them near the register so everyone could toss in whatever change they had after buying groceries.

Vince told me the same group of mothers that got together on Angel's baseball card back in sixth grade were sewing him a quilt. A few kids came into the store and asked if I could do that thing where I mix the ice cream and come up with some story like Angel did. I gave it my best, but when no one clapped I told them the only flavors we got were what's on the board and they walked out.

That night I stayed around a little longer helping Vince mop up. I could tell we were both hoping Angel might walk through the door and say some shit like he always said—*Had you pussies worried didn't I?*—and we'd all laugh and Vince would tell him about the three grand and then me and Angel would head to Gunners. Vince kicked me out when Angel didn't show and told me not to be late to work in the morning, so I got my stuff together and walked home.

"What are *you* doing home on a Friday night?" Grandpa asked me when I got in.

"How's that your business?" I said and he reached over and whacked me with the end of his cane. After I made dinner we were sitting on the couch with the TV trays in front of us when the doorbell rang. "Don't just sit there, Boy," Grandpa said. "Answer it!"

Francine was in heels and wearing this short skirt and had a smoke dangling between her fingers. "You know where I live?" I said.

"Can I come in? It's kinda cold out here."

I let her into the house and when Grandpa saw her he stood up from the couch like he was suddenly twenty years old. "Amadeo Podereo," he said holding out his hand. "You know my grandson?"

"Roberto and I go back," she said shaking his hand.

"Would you like something to drink?" I said to Francine.

Grandpa interrupted, "That would be nice, Boy. Bring us something to drink." He patted a spot on the couch and told Francine to sit down. I went into the kitchen and poured two glasses of water with ice. When I came back Francine was next to Grandpa smoking another cigarette. I put the water on the coffee table and said, "He doesn't like cigarette smoke."

"Relax, Boy!" Grandpa said to me. "You'd think the kid never had a guest before," he said looking at Francine and put his

hand on her knee. She smiled and didn't move it.

It took an hour for Grandpa to fall asleep. The three of us sat around watching his favorite show, his hand on Francine's leg the whole time like it was glued there. I went into the kitchen to get some more water and when I turned around Francine was right there all up in my shit, so close I could smell her perfume, the same stuff she'd been wearing that day behind Dairy Barn.

"Your Grandpa is nice," she said, running her fingernails lightly down my arm. "I looked after mine for years. He died last year."

"More water?" I said. She took the glass out of my hand and placed it on the kitchen counter.

"Where's your room?" she asked.

"Upstairs," I said, pointing toward the stairs. "Second room on the left." She took my hand and led me there. I sat on the bed and watched as she cased my room. She looked at my Star Wars posters on the wall, the Transformer comforter on my bed.

"A little young for you, isn't it?" she said as she sat down next to me. She looked at my feet. "You have the same shoes Angel had," she said and moved in a little closer. "And the same belt buckle, too. You guys get some kind of special deal or something?" She laughed and tugged at my belt and the thing came undone faster than I'd ever managed it. She'd pushed me onto my back and before I knew it she had my jeans rolled down and I was in her mouth. *So this is what it's like*, I thought. Angel always said blow jobs were the best and that when I got my first I'd think so too.

It must have been like fifteen seconds when Francine looked up at me and said, "So quick?" I was all embarrassed and jumped off the bed and did up my pants.

"Sorry."

Francine laughed. She got up, kicked her heels into the middle of my room, pulled off her skirt and climbed under the covers. "Mind if I stay here tonight?"

"Okay," I said walking toward the door.

"No, with you, stupid." She pulled the comforter back and motioned for me to crawl in next to her. "Take off the shoes and belt," she said, "and turn off the light."

I took off my shoes and threw my belt on the floor. After I turned off the light I pulled off my jeans and crawled into bed next to her. She ran her hand down my stomach and into my underwear. “Is this nice?” she said and I said it was. “If I tell you what to do, will you do it?” she said, and I said I would. She grabbed my shoulders and gently pushed me under the blanket.

In the morning I came downstairs and Francine already had Grandpa fed and dressed. He looked ten years younger and they were sitting quietly at the kitchen table reading the paper like they’d been doing it every morning for a hundred years. I had on my Dairy Barn uniform, so she asked me if I was on my way to work. “Yeah,” I said.

“I’m going to stay and get cleaned up,” she said.

“Okay,” I said. “Can you give him his pills? They’re in the cabinet above the fridge.”

“I’ll show you where they are,” Grandpa said to Francine. She smiled, got up and gave me a kiss on the cheek before disappearing back upstairs. Grandpa looked up over his paper and said, “Special girl you have there.”

It felt strange walking to work knowing I’d had Angel’s girl. When Francine came in to Dairy Barn that afternoon and brought me lunch, Vince gave me this look like, *What the fuck is going on?* so I had to play it cool. She stayed over again that night and this time we did stuff I’d only seen in magazines.

“Am I as good as Angel?” I said when she was almost asleep.

“Yeah baby, sure, you’re as good as Angel. Bedtime now,” she said.

The cops came into Dairy Barn the next day. I was stirring Vince’s secret ingredient into a batch of Angel Swirl when they asked me if they could have a word with me in the back.

“Francine insists she was with you the night Angel disappeared,” said one of the cops reading from his notebook. “She says she walked home with you that evening.”

My mind was doing this crazy-ass dance. Just before the cops walked in I’d been thinking how I could still smell Francine on my skin, that perfume of hers, so sweet that I just blurted it out. “She was.” I said. “With me, I mean.”

“And the reason you didn’t tell us earlier?” The cop said.

“We didn’t want Angel to find out,” I said, hoping I didn’t

sound as unconvincing as I thought I did.

"She knew about the other women, Roberto," the cop said.

"The other women?" I said.

He read from his notebook. "'While Angel was with the girl I waited outside the car for them to finish.' Your words," he said, holding up the notebook so I could see.

"She was with me," I said. "She's my girl."

One cop stifled a laugh while the other one wrote stuff down in his notebook. "Stay close to home," one of them said. "We'll need to talk to you again."

When I asked Francine about it later she was in the middle of getting Grandpa ready for bed. "Can you hand me his comb," she said. Grandpa was sitting in his room all dressed in some fancy PJ's that I forgot he even owned. I couldn't remember the last time he'd spent the night in his own bed and not on the couch like he usually did.

"How did you get him upstairs?" I asked.

"Gently," she said. "I've put an old man to bed so many times I've lost count." She ran the comb though Grandpa's hair in long wet strokes and he sat there with this glazed look in his eyes. She pulled away the covers of his bed and helped him underneath. She placed his cane next to the nightstand and told him it was there in case he needed it during the night. Then she kissed him on the forehead and Grandpa was asleep in seconds with the happiest look on his face I'd ever seen.

"You're really good with him," I said. She pulled me into the hallway and closed the door.

"Mom told me I should have been a nurse," she said. "Angel never understood how much care I got in me." She tugged at my belt buckle and licked me under the chin. "I remember that time I first met you in Angel's car," she said.

"Really?"

"How do you think I knew where you lived?" She dragged me into the middle of my room, slid off my shirt and started kissing my chest. "All the other girls love this chest as much as me?"

"The other girls?" I said. She slid my pants down so they were around my knees, reached her hand down there, and started going to town.

"I love you, Francine," I said.

"I know," she said.

Six months later there was still no sign of Angel. The news stations stopped talking about his disappearance. The flyers were gone. At Kroger's the boxes with his picture on the front were taken down and the money was given to who knows where. Vince bought the quilt the neighborhood moms knitted and hung it on the wall at Dairy Barn next to a blown up picture of that baseball card with Angel on the front. The cops had me and Francine down to the station a few more times, they even pulled Grandpa aside once when they came by the house asking more questions.

"She was with him when they came home that night," he told them. "It's the God's honest truth. I remember it like it was yesterday."

Francine took better care of Grandpa than I ever did. And he loved it, you could tell, because I hadn't ever seen him lie like that to anyone before.

Angel told me once that when you fall in love with someone the rest of the world falls away.

"Do you love, Francine?" I remember asking him.

"You can't love a girl like, Francine," he told me. "Because it's never enough."

The Angel Swirl sales dropped off and when I asked Vince what he planned to do with all the money he said, "You think those doors stay open by themselves?" Francine was pretty much living with me and Grandpa full time by then and I was working doubles because she said she needed nice things for when the baby came. When I mentioned to her about how I thought there might be better things out there than Dairy Barn, she said our kid needed his daddy to have a job, not dreams. "Dreams don't put a ring on this finger," she said to me. So I asked Vince for more hours and he said, "I hear paternity tests go for fifteen bucks these days." But he still gave me the hours.

When Francine and I were alone in my bed, her head all nestled into my shoulder, I would place my hand on her stomach and feel the baby kick. "Did you feel that?" she'd say and I would say yes and she'd pull me on top of her and I'd do

everything she'd taught me to do exactly the way she'd taught me to do it.

When the baby finally came, there was still no Angel and everything had pretty much quieted down with the cops like Francine said it would. We had a christening for the baby and Francine invited a bunch of friends. They passed the baby around like he was some kind of toy and said, "He's an angel! He's an absolute angel." A few of them laughed when Francine shot them a look.

There were a few reports that Angel had been spotted in Puerto Rico. His dad had been calling Vince at Dairy Barn, trying to collect the reward money.

"What if he comes back?" I asked Francine when it was just her and me and the sleeping baby. "He ain't coming back," she said, and put her finger to my lips.

The wedding was on the top of this super-green hill outside the city. Grandpa was there in his wheelchair, Francine had dressed him up in this expensive white suit she had me buy. I asked Vince to come but he said something about Dairy Barn not running itself, so other than Grandpa I didn't have anyone there. Francine looked seriously sexy in the dress I'd bought her. The priest called us to the makeshift altar and pretty soon he was saying, "Do you take this woman," and I was saying, "Yes, I do," and Francine's girlfriends clapped. He said, "You may kiss the bride," so I did, and when Francine tried to pull away I held her there a little longer. Because I was more Angel in that moment than I'd ever been. And I wanted it to last.

Gordon MacKinney

Death of a Motor City Talk Jock

Two-thirty in the morning and the radio station's caller board was still blinking. Ever since the wildcat strike—unauthorized by the national union—had begun in the fall, it seemed every autoworker in Detroit had something to say. A few callers volunteered their names, but most voices on the line remained anonymous, fearing reprisal from either the company or the union. Regardless, they wanted their turn on the town's audio soapbox, WBTL, *The Bolt*, 960 on the AM dial.

The radio host, shirtsleeves rolled to mid-forearm, shoulders rounded, a graying ponytail draped over his collar, pressed his paunch against the edge of the desk and leaned into a tabletop microphone. "I'm Rocky Rhodes, and whether you choose to picket or punch it, I'll be here to take your calls until six a.m. Jack Frost's nipping at your nose, with overnight lows going negatory, so cuddle up with a good friend and keep it tuned to The Bolt all night and all day, workin' the line or on your own time, up high or down low, get the lowdown right here . . . with local news and local views. Back for more of your calls after these messages." Rocky waved to his sound engineer, who sat beyond the soundproof glass, and rolled back from the desk, pleased.

Like many shows since the strike began, tonight's had word-of-mouth buzz, enough rage or soul-baring to boost listenership with each passing hour. Rocky knew his audience well. He'd spent twenty-six years behind the microphones. Of each of the 10,000-watt station's many incarnations, Rocky's favorite was the most recent: all talk radio, all the time, and all about auto assembly and the men and women who got the job done. What could be better in a town where two of three radio listeners owed their livelihoods to the building of cars?

Six months after switching to the talk format, good fortune had paid a visit like a spring robin. The burger franchise across the street from the plant folded. The Bolt's own-

er snapped up the building and moved in the broadcasting equipment.

Now, the big windows that once displayed Burger Chef posters gave an unobscured view of workers coming and going through the main gate, and gave the station's key demographic a view of *talk jocks* as they steamed up the microphone.

Over the years, listenership climbed. Rocky became a local celebrity. *What's the word?* became his very own catchphrase. The Rocky Rhodes Show from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. had the highest ratings. The dual effect of drink and darkness tore down the walls of inhibition and lubed the tongue of any assembler with pent-up frustration about his ball-buster foreman. Third-shift workers tuned in, desperate for distraction from the tedium of their all-night duties.

Talk jocks like Rocky were master chefs, whipping up fresh dishes from the basic ingredients of human emotion: rage, desperation and hope. When a caller would lose himself recounting a battle with man or machine, the seven-second delay would shield listeners from splatters of profanity. In such moments, Rocky could feel his audience leaning closer to their radios.

He'd developed a sixth sense for detecting when a caller was holding back. He'd prod with talk of brotherhood: *Don't your fellow workers deserve to know?* He'd light a fire with core values: *When did you know you had to take a stand?*

Then came the strike, and things got complicated. Without the clarity of an official UAW sanction, the wildcat action split the town between picketers and punchers and left the worker to choose a side.

Strikers painted a familiar picture: the downtrodden everyday hero just wanted to get the job done for a fair wage, but he was undermined by moneygrubbing overlords. The punchers countered: wildcatters were on a floating island, out of a paycheck and out of the brotherhood. If the gamble were to fail, they would be cast adrift forever.

The station's owner had been clear: "Both sides pay the rent."

Rocky looked across the street to the main entrance. It had been closed for weeks now, the sliding steel gate joined at the

center by a ridiculously thick chain, a symbol of the company's might. During the days, strikers in knitted hats and wool coats paraded with their signs, taking breaks to warm their hands over oil drum fires. But now, in the wee hours of the night, the strikers had gone home.

He pressed a spent cigarette into the ashtray, which doubled as a clock, filling to capacity by sunup. He thought of his mother, now gone eight years and four months, the woman on the only picture in his wallet. She'd hated the smokes. If he were to find himself unemployed like so many of his listeners, he'd chuck the Camels out of respect for her wishes. But for now, he liked the Jack Palance gravitas smoking gave his voice. He'd never worked the line nor carried a union card, but he had the pipes of a man who'd paid his dues.

A lone figure in a hooded parka trudged down the street toting a large protest sign. Rocky shook another Camel from the pack and tapped the filter end on the desktop. The man, his back turned, positioned his sign in front of the oversized chain and reached to tie the upper corners to the fence. Nice touch, Rocky thought, covering up that God-awful chain. The man appeared to be in no great hurry, taking time to secure the sign well.

The security guards would have it down before daybreak. Affixing strike propaganda to company property was forbidden. But the defiant gesture sent a stronger message than the painted words, which read *Roll All Managers' Heads*. The guy had guts, talking brass like that. A caller with such spirit could start a fire at the top of a show and Rocky could fan the ensuing flames of debate until first light.

What a great dramatic moment: the impassioned worker venturing out alone in numbing cold to post his crudely painted sign. Rocky decided to kick off his next segment with the story and give it a David-and-Goliath spin. He thought of that old poster from his high school days of a mouse in the shadow of an attacking hawk, talons extended for the kill. But as a last ballsy act of defiance, the mouse flew a bird of its own: a middle finger.

Rocky thought of all the hawks from high school, and imagined the sweet satisfaction of holding his flip-off digit an inch from their upturned noses. At Lincoln High, he'd dwelled in

the underworld like HG Wells' Morlocks. He'd been an audiovisual guy, wheeling projection carts from classroom to classroom as invisibly as Mr. Jim, the black janitor. Back then, Rocky was grateful for anonymity. To be noticed was to be ridiculed, untouchable and unlikable.

Earlier that month two members of the high school's Radio Club had visited the station. Rocky recognized in his guests the frightened creature that had been Stuart Tomlinson, the name on Rocky's driver's license. One kid was skinny like Rocky used to be. The other kid had Don Knotts eyes and no chin. Both responded to questions with the word burps and awkward silences of someone who'd suffered self-inflicted verbal gaffes since entering the public school system.

But they came out from behind their defenses when they saw the equipment, fridge-sized transmitters and consoles with more knobs and dials than a plane's cockpit. Rocky remembered escaping to the school's audiovisual supply room, a place the popular kids wouldn't be caught dead in. He remembered the smell of solder, 4-in-1 oil and scorched dust on vacuum tubes. Most of all, he remembered the relief.

Rocky watched the students, with their bad haircuts and scrawny necks, as they marveled. He wanted to grab them by the shoulders and say *I know you race between classes like a sniper has a bead on you. I know you'd rather tear out your own fingernails than set up projectors for the football team, the players' eyes on your back as they compete to be the cruelest, their put-downs like lashes from a leather whip. I know what you'll* never *tell, that in those moments, with an ache behind your breastbone, you see your mother's face. You're glad she'll never know how they torment you, but you still wish she'd whisk you away.*

Of course Rocky hadn't said any of these things. Instead, he showed the boys around the studio and extended more courtesy than they'd ever known. In their moments together, he'd enjoyed their admiration a bit too much, which now made him feel guilty.

He tapped off a dangling ash and raised his eyes to the plate glass window. The man in the parka was gone.

Beyond the glass, the audio engineer counted down with his fingers until the ON AIR sign lighted above Rocky's head.

"We have, um, Joe calling," Rocky said cheerfully, "Hey Joe, you're on The Bolt. What's the word?"

"Let's talk about privacy," said a faraway voice. "Does the company have the right to know who's fucking who?"

Saved again by the seven-second delay, the sound engineer intercepted the FCC violation without raising an eyebrow. The station's jingle played only long enough to obscure the profanity.

"Let's keep a lid on the four-letter words, my friend," Rocky said, "but your point remains. You think the company crossed a line?"

"They practically cavity-search guys showing up for work, and now they're going through lockers. You think that's right, Rocky?"

The caller's voice sounded distant and tinny, and accompanied by a steady buzz like an old neon sign. Rocky touched his ear as he made eye contact with his engineer who shrugged and looked bored.

Disguised voices had become more common since the strike. Callers would hold their noses, cover the mouthpiece with a handkerchief, or speak through a cut-out milk carton. Rocky didn't care what they did as long as they sliced open a vein on the air and bled bright red emotion.

"The company claims it's a security measure because of the bomb threats," Rocky said. A pro-union underground organization that called itself Ram's Head had sent threatening notes to the plant manager. "You don't buy it?"

"It's pure intimidation, just like sixty years ago. They call it union busting."

"You seem to know your history."

"Now let's say they don't find a UAW pamphlet in some guy's lunchbox. Instead they find a love note from his girlfriend. You think they'll fold it up neatly and put it right back under the PB&J where they found it? Hell no. They'll drool over every sexy word. Where's the dignity in that, Rocky?"

Through the distortion, the voice was more air than vocal cord, controlled and cyclic, hitting a peak with the word *dig-*

nity and floating down like a leaf.

Rocky had dealt with every character imaginable over the years, and he could handle them. There was the fry cook who accused his wife on the air of banging their pastor. And there was the newly unemployed and despondent tradesman, clicking the cylinder on a revolver next to the phone's mouthpiece.

But Joe—probably a made-up name—kept putting the question back to Rocky. That was unusual. The talk jock kept it moving. "Let's hear from listeners who share—"

"Some manager signed off on those locker searches. His head oughta roll, don't you think, Rocky?"

What? Rocky connected the dots. He met the engineer's eyes and pointed a thumb toward the street. The engineer nodded and scratched his chin.

"Joe, did you just hang a sign on the front gate of the plant?"

"Yes I did. Would you please read it aloud for the benefit of your audience?"

"Fair enough. Hey everybody, I'm looking at a cardboard sign, maybe a few feet square, that says *Roll All Managers' Heads*. Now Joe, that's pretty intense, man. Anger like that comes from the soul. What sent you out on a brass monkey night? Something to get off your chest?"

"I'm angry, Rocky. How can anyone not be? How can anyone sit on a fence in times like these? Which side are you on, Rocky?"

"You're not alone, my friend. Many workers are feeling—"

"No, I'm talking about *you*, Rocky. How do you sleep when good men and women are having their dignity trampled by greedy bosses who oughta have their heads on pikes along the street like lamp posts?"

A switch flipped in Rocky's mind. Joe had entered dangerous territory by mentioning violence, whether metaphorical or not. The talk jock faced a decision. He could drop the caller now, leaving the danger hanging in the airwaves, or keep him on the line and try to defuse the situation. The engineer passed an index finger across his throat. Rocky flashed an open hand and spoke. "No one should get hurt because of this strike, don't you think, Joe?"

"Name one great struggle for the working man that didn't spill blood. March 7, 1932: company thugs shot and killed

four autoworkers over in Dearborn. Maybe it's our turn, huh Rocky?"

The engineer grabbed the phone and began punching digits.

Rocky decided to try to keep Joe on the air, at least until the police could get involved. "That group, er, Ram's Head . . . they made threats, but what good did it do? Now everyone's suspicious, as if every worker has a bomb in his coat. We don't want that."

Joe paused before responding. The dead space made Rocky uneasy. "Very clever, Rocky. You figured out my poster faster than I thought you would."

Rocky massaged his temples, confused. He looked out the window and read the sign again. Then it became clear. The initials of the first three words, followed by . . .

"You're Ram's Head," Rocky declared softly, his throat suddenly dry. He muted his microphone, fumbled for his cup and took a gulp of lukewarm coffee.

"One of many, and our numbers are growing. Tell the listeners how you feel now, Rocky?"

The talk jock desperately wanted to be asking the questions instead of receiving them, but he couldn't focus. "Many people don't think you're for real."

"That's about to change."

"Meaning what?"

Another unsettling pause. "Rocky, do me a favor and maybe save a life."

Rocky's stomach flipped, like when you thought you'd reached the bottom of a staircase but one step remained.

Joe continued. "Look out that fast food window of yours and tell me if anyone's walking along the street. I can't see from where I am."

The engineer looked pale, telephone handset to his ear, lips moving fast. Rocky picked up the microphone and cleared the cord from the edge of the desk. The equipment felt cold and wet in his hands. He walked to the floor-to-ceiling glass and peered in both directions.

"The street's clear. Why do you want to know?"

"Because I don't want any of my brothers to get hurt by the explosion."

Rocky felt unable to breathe. His next words were almost a whisper. “W-what about me?”

But before Joe could answer, Joe’s sign, and the gate on which it was hung, blew up.

When Rocky was a child, his mother told him he couldn’t fly. Birds, bats and even some squirrels could fly, but people could not.

Of course, it was too soon for her to know the truth.

The glass passed around him as if it were wax paper. He lifted off, his arms angled back like the wings of an F-15. He’d gained so much weight over the years, but now—oh!—if she could see him. She’d purse her lips at something so daring, yet inside she’d be proud of him, flying free with none of the old worries about his place among people. He looked down at them now, with their cars and struggles and black rooftops.

Mother used to quote Browning: *My sun sets to rise again*. Rocky raised his eyes to his future bright, the sky brilliant white from a distant dot on the horizon, all framed by roiling black clouds. A rumble reverberated from a heavenly burst and spidered red lightning like varicose veins on an old woman’s leg. Streamers of red satin softly swayed, their ends attached somewhere above. His arms brushed the crimson strips and rippled the parallel lines. For a moment, he felt he was doing it wrong.

Nobody taught us how to fly, and nobody taught us how to die. But all along there’d been a right way to leave behind this mortal coil, if only we weren’t so late to learn. He twisted his body until he could pass between the ribbons without touching them, his wing-limbs gently leading his torso, light as a leaf.

Christopher Cervelloni

Tipping Superman

Superman stood in the plaza outside the theater, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a cowboy-style handkerchief. A Chinese woman passed, arm-in-arm with her daughter. He nodded heroically. The older woman clutched her daughter tighter and sped her brisk steps. Superman tucked the kerchief into the folds of his spandex shirt, where it ruffled and bumped around his waistline. He propped his fisted hands on his hips and puffed his chest as he inhaled. The young girl smiled and gave a little wave.

A tap on his shoulder turned him to face a blonde wearing a straight-brimmed Dodgers hat, a ponytail pouring out the back and a smear of sunscreen below her right ear. She held up her camera. "Can I get a picture with you?" she asked.

"Most certainly," Superman said. He fanned out his fingers, displaying a small roll of cash thumbed into his palm. "We work on tips if that's all right." Like a magician, he cupped his hands and the money vanished.

"Oh, yeah . . . sure," the blonde said. She handed the camera to her friend, a chubby woman whose rotund midriff hung her T-shirt like a tablecloth over a table. She had cut the crew-neck collar into a V and Superman could see her slumping cleavage. She giggled as she took the camera and snapped the shot.

"Thank you so much," the blonde said. Superman smiled and told her it was his pleasure. The blonde walked away without giving a tip and Superman sighed and dropped his shoulders for a moment, remembered his role, and stood heroically once again.

Three more women all asked the same favor, and to each he flashed his cash roll. From one he earned a dollar, the husband pulling the money from his wallet as the wife reviewed the digital photo on her camera. She took the dollar from her husband and handed it the extra foot to Superman. He thanked them and they thanked him and Superman added

the bill to his roll.

Batman approached him as a customer departed. “Want to grab some lunch, Dale?” He pulled back a rubbery leather sleeve and looked at his watch. “Slow morning. Might as well grab something now before the afternoon crowd comes.”

As they left the plaza in front of the theater, Batman opened a yellow plastic box on his utility belt and withdrew a pack of cigarettes. From another box, he brought out a black lighter stamped with his yellow insignia. “You shouldn’t smoke, Carl,” Superman said.

“Oh, don’t give me that healthy lungs shit. My ex-wife gave it to me all the time.”

“I don’t mean it like that. I mean it’s not in character. You’re not Batman when you smoke because Batman doesn’t smoke. You’re Carl when you smoke.”

“Well fuck it I’m on break.”

“There really is no break when you’re wearing the costume.”

Batman looked at Superman, pausing the cigarette halfway to his mouth, lighter ready to burn. But Superman could not discern an expression underneath the mask and make-up. He remained silent and Batman lit up as they walked. Batman stomped the cigarette butt outside the fast-food restaurant. They both ordered hamburgers.

As Superman took the last bite of his sandwich, an elderly man approached the table. “May I?” he asked, holding up a camera and pointing to it.

“Certainly,” Superman said. He stood up and leaned down to put his arm around the man. Batman put a second elbow on the table and stuffed a French fry in his mouth and watched the old man hand the camera to his wife. She counted to three aloud and there was a pause while an orange light blinked. Then a white flash. Superman and the elderly man thanked each other again and the couple left and Superman resumed his seat.

“You should have charged them,” Batman said as he stuck a ketchup-soaked fry into his mouth. “You can’t be a sucker like that.”

“Mr. Incredible got arrested for soliciting last week.”

“’Cause he’s a fucking retard and did it to a cop.”

“It was an undercover cop. It could have been anyone and

it could happen to us."

"He was inside the sidewalk line. He was on private property and he knew it. I still say," Batman chomped his food, "that he's a fucking retard. There's a fucking groove in the sidewalk. You can see it. Anyone can see it. How did he miss it? He went right past it and solicited to a cop." Batman motioned to the recently photographed couple. "You think that old man was a cop with his wife?" He pointed to Superman's fries spread out on the wrapper. "You gonna eat the burnt crispy ones?"

"No."

Batman snatched a few blackened bits of potato. He dipped them in ketchup, soaking his finger tips and tilted his head back to drop them in his mouth. He licked his fingers. "You know, we should go on strike."

"Strike? As in we stop working?"

"Is there another kind? Yeah. We should strike."

"If I stop working, I stop getting paid. Besides, it's not that bad."

"Not that bad? We get paid, what, a couple of bucks an hour? For the services we provide for these people, we're underpaid and under-appreciated and they need to know it."

"If I stop, some other Superman—or a Batman for that matter—might come along."

"See, that's bull. You look like the real Superman. Christopher Reeves and shit. And I do a pretty good Batman. Lots of people tell me I look like Keaton. We got what they want. It's not just any guy can dress up in some tights and be us. Look at me," he stood up, held out his arms and rotated slowly. "Know how much this suit cost me altogether? About three grand. Yeah, that's right. Three grand for this suit. But it looks fucking incredible, right? So no guy is going to come drop that much money if I'm gone for a couple of days. And look at you," Batman sat back down, picking at the last of Superman's fries, "you telling me some other punk is gonna take your spot if you're gone for a few days? No, man. No." He dropped the fries in his mouth and leaned forward and hammered his index finger on the table. "We got to strike."

"People strike because they have demands."

"We'll demand that people pay us. How many times you get

stiffed today?"

"About ten or so."

"And how much you get tipped?"

Superman reached into his spandex and withdrew his roll. He counted. "About twenty-five."

"So that's like . . ." Batman's eyes rolled up while he calculated, "a twenty-percent increase in your salary."

"It's illegal to solicit services for money. We'd be like the prostitutes off S— Boulevard, just without sex."

"I'm not saying we change the law or break the law. I'm just saying we need to make people aware there's an etiquette. That's all. We bring tourists to this town. Time we were compensated for it."

"Well, you figure it out," Superman stood up, and crushed his wrapper in his hands, "and let me know how it would work and I'll consider it." He picked up his cup, sucking the gurgling last sips from his drink. "But for now, the eleven o'clock show lets out in a few minutes and I don't want to miss the crowd." Batman left his tray on the table and followed Superman out.

The theater, like all the actors it housed on rolled film, looked bigger on the silver screen than in real life. Images of its historic front came rife with nighttime spotlights illuminating red carpets and well-dressed fans waiting for their celebrities to stroll through and sign autographs and pose for pictures. In the summer daylight and without the carpeting, its shabby red front stood out against the adjacent rows of nondescript second-hand stores and convenient grocers. The sun turned the pavement into a hotplate and tourists skittered and swarmed like disoriented bees. The passing tourists churned through; thousands of solids moving together like a fluid. In the midst of the throng stood the superheroes. Superman and Batman with Wonder Woman and Spiderman and others not so iconic. In the morning a few cartoons, Goofy or Buzz Lightyear. But a short time under the mask in the city's heat usually sent those men home dehydrated.

The heat did not slow the tourists nor Superman's smile nor Batman's discontent. Before the crowds gathered, the men meandered in the plaza in front of the theater, walking as

with a purpose, then abruptly turning and looping back the way they had come. They would pose with a tourist, saying "We work on tips" and posing again and repeating "We work on tips" and holding out their rolls of low-denomination bills. The tourists marched through like lost lemmings and Superman always tried to create a small line of customers. Lines set precedent. When new tourists entered the plaza, they saw the attraction—not the tall blue suit and red cape, but the line that curved around him. When the man ahead tipped, the man behind did likewise, thinking payment is protocol. But if the tipping stopped, it took an overt cash exchange to restart the crowd.

While Superman smiled into each camera and thanked and smiled and thanked again, he kept the line at the forefront of his mind. It was a delicate balance. Too long a line discouraged those waiting at its end. He kept a long line short—dismissing people faster, cutting handshakes shorter and addressing the next-ups sooner. He kept short lines long—agreeing to a second picture or asking people where they were from. On good days, Superman took home two hundred dollars. On regular days, he made much less.

"Stupid fuckers," Batman said. He had removed his mask as he left the plaza with Superman. "I swear they don't get that this is a job."

"How much?"

"Seventy-five bucks. All day for a shitty-ass seventy-five bucks."

"There's that premiere here this Friday," Superman said. "You going to that?"

"No." Batman said. He lit a cigarette. "It's too crowded and no one even cares that you're there. I went to one awhile back and not a single person asked for a photo. A completely worthless Friday. They're all morons."

"I'm not going for work. I want more autographs. I have seventeen already."

"Good luck. If you can even get anywhere close to the people. Those things suck."

"What are you going to do?" Superman meant it as a rhetorical question; a verbal shrug.

"Strike is what I'm going to do. I already talked to Sarah

and Andrew and—"

"Which one is Andrew?"

"He's the Hulk. They're with me. We think we're going to start on Saturday. After the premiere."

"I don't know . . ."

"You got to be in on this, Dale. You can't be out there alone. That defeats the purpose. Those fucking tourists got to know that we're freelance. Most think we work for the theater. We got to let them know we're not just their little playthings for their fucking pictures."

"Still . . . giving up a weekend is tough. Money's the best on the weekend."

"The money is shit every day of the week. Come on, Dale. You're doing this."

"I'll have to think about it."

"Well you just think about this: You probably made less money and took more pictures than I did today. You telling me that's fair? You telling me you don't mind it when people use you like that? It ain't right, Dale. It just fucking ain't right."

They parted ways on A— street. Batman walked backwards a few steps, pointed at Superman and said, "Think about it. We're doing it this weekend." He flicked his cigarette butt into the street and left Superman.

Superman had read something somewhere that a man set up a bagel station in office buildings. The man left the bagels out, unguarded, with a jar for people to pay. The honor system. People paid and the man made a living from it—except during Christmas season and other minor holidays. People, the article said, are more inclined to think it's a gift when it's a holiday, so they don't pay for it. To Superman, every day was someone's holiday; everyone expected their free bagel. The tourists paid for a flight. They paid for a hotel. They paid for food. And he was the full can of soda, the HBO, or the basket of bread—another free perk in the whole experience. The whole city thrived on the concept that people felt like they were rich and cared-for here; the beloved-though-unknown celebrity. Money left the tourists pockets with the same abandon and freedom as the millionaires' across town. He was

just another vacationer's street-act peddling the same dream.

His girlfriend Carol had not listened to nor understood Superman's explanation of the bagel allegory. She had only said, "What do bagels have to do with it? You're not a breakfast food and you don't walk around with a jar for people to drop money into. You're not a panhandler. And I think a strike is stupid and you're not doing it." She pulled the jug of milk from the fridge. "You don't make enough money as it is and now you want to stop working? Ridiculous. How many other people will be right there to take your spot? How many people will even know you're gone? How many people won't come to the theater because you're not there? Don't think you're so big and important." She poured herself a glass. "You're an actor. You said it yourself: sometimes you have to take the roles that aren't so great just so you can get your name out there. So . . . go get your name out there."

"Fine," Superman said. Carol leaned over the kitchen counter and kissed his cheek. "How was your day?" he asked.

Carol moved to the microwave and popped open door before the timer buzzed and followed Superman's segue into a detailed analysis of a fellow co-worker. The couple sat down to their re-heated dinner. They held hands as they said prayers and Carol turned on the television and the couple laughed at a sitcom. In bed that night, Superman lay awake debating options and strategies for the strike while Carol, believing the matter resolved, slept.

He awoke at nine the next morning and made coffee. He ate and drank and read the newspaper in front of the bowl of dyed-blue milk. He held the whole paper up in front of his face—never folding it back on itself or removing an inserted inner page—scanning the first few paragraphs of each article until he grew uninterested in the details. Carol sat on the other side of his periodical, spooning her cereal into her mouth as she glanced over a magazine she had spread out on the table before her. When she finished, she pulled his paper down and kissed him on the forehead.

"I was thinking about the strike last night and—" he said.

"No." Carol stopped at the door and looked back. "It's settled. You're not doing it."

She left and Superman took a leisurely shower. Dressed in

his costume. Gelled his hair straight back. Zipped up his red boots. Checked himself thoroughly in the mirror. Then he left.

From the moment he stepped from his apartment on the seventh floor, he puffed his chest, shoulders back, chin to the sky, a confident-but-not-vain smile and a forced deepness in his tone. As he exited the building, he held the door for a woman entering and nodded heroically. She rolled her eyes as she passed through the door. The usual car horns, high-fives and "Hey, Superman" shouts accompanied him to the plaza. To each he held his hand high, either to be met by a smiling pedestrian or to acknowledge and thank a honking car for its attention.

Batman paced in front of the theater. The first movie did not start for another few minutes and the dearth of a crowd put a noticeable anxiety in his steps.

"I don't even know why I come here before noon," Batman said. He raised his arms with a shrug and let them drop. They slapped against his rubber suit. "A dollar. Been here a fucking hour and I've got a dollar."

"It could be nothing. At least it's that."

"At least it's that? Would you listen to yourself? You—"

Superman elbowed Batman as a couple approached and Batman shut up and they both smiled at the approaching pair. The man was the only tourist in the plaza wearing long pants and long sleeves. His wife wore hiking boots. "You with?" the man said in a broken European accent. "Camera? Me?" He wiggled his index finger; the universal sign for picture. The woman held up her camera and pointed to it, oscillating the camera through Superman, Batman, and her husband.

"Most certainly," Superman said. "We work on tips if that's okay?" He fanned his fingers to show his small roll of bills.

"Oh yes, okay. Okay," The man said. He tucked himself under Superman's and Batman's arms. They held the smiles while the wife turned the camera on, focused and snapped. The superheroes stood still while man and wife swapped. Another awkward pause and more foreign language and smiling.

"Thank you, thank you," the woman said. She smiled more and waved goodbye. The man did likewise. They wandered away, taking photos of the theater from obscure angles and

without premeditation; lost souls happy in purgatory.

"I think we need to start asking for money up front." Batman surveyed the plaza. "That was some bullshit right there."

"They're not even from America. They barely spoke English. Sometimes you just have to let it go."

"Yeah, whatever. I'll let it go when I'm not living in a shithole apartment in a shithole city and dealing with shithole people." Batman pointed to three young men entering the plaza. "See these guys?" He did not lower his voice. "Five bucks says they ask for a picture with one of us and don't give us a dime. College boys out on break or some shit. Rich kids with mommy and daddy's credit cards and they won't give a fucking dollar. You just watch."

A boy in a popped-collar polo approached the idle superheroes. "You guys cool if we take a picture with you?" He chewed a piece of gum with a small sucking sound. Superman noticed a churlish curve to the boy's smile, like he was participating in a prank. His two accomplices stood a few feet behind, one with a camera at the ready.

"Certainly," Superman said. "We work on tips if that's okay." He held out his hand, his thumb palming the money, and then the money was gone from sight.

"We work on tips," Batman said. His tone was gruff. "Get it? Tips?" He held up several folded bills pinched between thumb and forefinger. He waved the bills in the boys face and the boy craned his neck back.

"Yeah, I get it. Can I just take the picture?"

Batman and Superman encircled the boy. Superman put hands against his hips and looked above the camera, his face full of pensive bravado as if danger called him in the distance. Batman held out his fists like a turn-of-the-century pugilist and tightened his lips. The boy held out the forefinger and pinky on each hand, opened his mouth and dropped out his tongue. The photographer snapped the shot.

"Thanks, bro."

As the boy walked away, Batman called out to him. "Hey, dipshit. How about a tip?"

The boy turned around. His two friends shared his look of surprise. "What?" he said, recalcitrance in his voice.

"A tip." Batman took a step towards them. "You know. Like

paying someone for services given."

"Yo, Adam West," the boy said, "you spent all of five seconds standing there while my friend," he emphasized the pronouns, "took a picture of me on my camera. A cardboard cutout could have done your job." The boy started to walk away.

From their previous interactions, Superman developed prescience to Batman's anger. Batman clenched his fists at his hips. His arms went stiff straight, his back rigid and the tension disguised under the rubbery suit. Superman saw Batman assume the position, holding his own fists down as if they were a separate part of the body; a rogue faction inciting insurrection. Superman stepped forward and put his hand on Batman's shoulder.

"Carl . . ." Superman said. Batman ripped his shoulder free of Superman's hand and followed the boy.

"Hey, kid," he called out. When the boy turned, Batman's fist came up fast and the boy was on the ground before Superman registered the movement. Batman stood over the boy, whose nose showed the first trickle of blood. "You little shit." The boy looked up wide-eyed and seemed unaware of how he had arrived on the ground. "We work for our money unlike you assholes. Fuck you if you think you're so special. Stand up if you think you're better than me." The boy on the ground and his friends on their feet stared. Batman waited for a response but none came. The boy leaned up on one elbow and pinched his nose with his free hand. "That's what I thought." Batman spat. It hit the boy's shirt.

Superman froze. He felt the weight of the crowd, their eyes on him and not on the assailing Batman or the bloodied youth: the wounded boy's friends, the eyewitnesses close at hand, the flow of moviegoers coming from the theater, the passengers' eyes in the passing cars, the tourists watching the conflict like any other reality show, a security guard stepping from the entrance of the theater and shielding his eyes in the sun.

"Carl . . ." Superman grabbed Batman's bicep and pulled him back. Batman jerked his arm free of Superman's loose grip and stomped through the plaza and disappeared around the corner. Superman stooped to the fallen boy and held out his hand. The boy swatted at Superman and Superman

stepped back and shielded with his hands; a weak instinctual defense. The boy said, "Fuck off," with a pinched-nose buzz. The other boys retrieved their fallen friend and a woman came from the crowd to hand them a small bag of tissues. Superman fled as the security guard arrived.

Superman stood with the throng waiting outside the theater, a head taller than the majority of on-lookers, and his cape catching the breeze and whipping adjacent torsos. Police barricades kept the crowds leashed from the street and the red carpet. A line of limousines filed down the street and from them emerged well-dressed attractive people, their importance measured by the number of flashbulbs firing and the volume of cheers as their feet extended from the vehicle.

Superman held a small autograph book in one hand and a felt-tipped marker in the other. As actors stepped from their limousines, Superman, in the cacophony of the crowd, shouted their first names and held out his autograph book and pen. None chose him for their signature largess. During a lull, as he leaned against the metal partition, he felt a tap on his shoulder, rough and deliberate. A police officer curled his finger indicating Superman was to follow. They squeezed past the tight-packed bodies. Superman recognized the officer. The security guard he had seen in the plaza the day before. The one to advance in his direction before he ran, and Superman suspected arrest. But the man did not seem motivated to action and his face betrayed annoyance, not retribution or justice. He was friendly but phlegmatic, polite but officious.

"Sorry, Superman. New rules. Not allowed during a premiere." He pointed to the S on Superman's chest.

"But I'm not here for work." He held up the autograph book and the pen.

"Sorry, man. Rules are rules."

"But I'm here as a private citizen. I'm just trying to . . ."

"Go home and take the costume off and then come back. You want to be here, you come dressed like everyone else."

"It's not a law. I would have heard about it if . . ."

"The theater is private property. They don't allow it anymore."

"I'm not on private property. Look." He pointed down to grooved cement; a military demarcation line. "I'm on the sidewalk side of the line. It's public property."

"Not tonight it's not."

"This is ridiculous. I'm . . ."

He stopped, waiting to be interrupted. The police officer looked at Superman expectantly. His eyebrows up to say, "And?" Superman dropped his shoulders and left. Only its seventeen celebrity signatures stopped him from slamming the book into a garbage can. Half a block away he heard a large eruption from the crowd and knew that he had missed his eighteenth.

The next morning he awoke at the same time and followed his same routine. Carol kissed him goodbye and he went to his closet to dress. He pulled one of the four blue costumes from the rack. He looked at it a moment, pensive and reticent; a penurious customer contemplating an expensive purchase. He returned the hanger to the bar and pushed aside the costumes, relegating them to a dark corner of the closet. He lifted out a T-shirt and pulled it over his head. It discomfited him to wear loose-fitting boxers and mesh shorts. Outside in the heat, his T-shirt seemed incredibly loose. The air on his knees and through his leg hair felt refreshingly ticklish.

Superman had not been to the plaza without his costume since he first moved to the city. That had been three years ago with Carol. They had made it a point to visit the theater even though they had no plans to see the movie playing—they went for the iconography not functionality. They took a picture together with the theater backdrop, Superman wrapping Carol in one arm and extending his other with the camera pointed back at them. They had to take several. The first picture caught only Superman, the second only Carol. Then mixed varieties of the tops of their heads or of their lower chins and necks. It was Batman who approached and volunteered his photographic services. Carol had slapped Superman playfully when she saw their first well-framed photograph ruined because Superman stuck out his tongue and was giving her bunny ears. After one more picture and a dollar for Batman, they left with a perfectly aligned picture and an idea for a job.

For their anniversary—after the first few months of Superman's employment outside the theater—it was a self-taken, misaligned picture he chose to frame and wrap.

Superman sauntered around the plaza. Blending into the ambling congregation unsettled him. As Superman, people had always watched him. Looked at him. Even if they did not want a picture. Even if they were just passing by, he caught everyone's attention. Without his cape, he was a mere tourist. He was one of the many there to take pictures and buy an expensive movie ticket and overpriced candy and tell friends they had been there.

"Hey, Dale," a voice called. Superman did not recognize Batman at first. He wore light blue jeans that tapered down and ended at white hightops. Without the padding of his costume, Batman's hips and calves looked thin and brittle. Without the black eye make-up, he lost the intimidating countenance. "What are you doing here, man?" He patted Superman's back. "Crazy isn't it?"

"What's crazy?"

"Look around? What don't you see?" Batman held out a hand, as if demonstrating that one day this kingdom would all be his.

"No superheroes," Superman said. He had not noticed their absence, only felt his own.

"No fucking superheroes. We fucking did it, man. All of them. They're all on board."

Superman scanned the crowd. People posed for pictures below the theater's bright-lit sign or by the main entrance. Some pointed to the attraction. Some made funny faces. Girls posed as Charlie's Angels and boys held up their Rock-On hands. Others stood excitedly in line at the ticket office.

"Why are you here now?" Superman asked.

"I'm just making sure no one breaks their agreement. And to make sure no one thinks they can just come and take our spots." He paused for a second. "Why are you here?"

"I . . ." Superman did not know why. He had always come here. Every day. For years. It felt unnatural to wake up and not dress for work. He never thought about coming. He just came. "I . . . came to see the movie."

Batman turned pensive, as if he were contemplating an

enigma neither had the cognition to solve. “Ever been inside before?” he asked.

“No. You?”

“No.”

“Want to come with me?” Superman asked.

“Fuck it. Might as well.” He clapped Superman on the back again.

Superman stood with Batman to buy his ticket for the movie. Metal barriers, disjointed and stacked, sat in a corner, the only remnants from the premiere the night before. The spotlights and red carpet had long since gone. The celebrities had watched their movie and departed; perfunctory appearances and disinterested goodbye waves.

Superman did not enjoy the movie. Batman laughed at few scenes.

On their way out, a tourist stopped them. “Excuse me, sir,” the young man said. He held up a camera. “Would you mind taking a picture of my girlfriend and me?” Superman smiled and said “Certainly” and stopped himself from saying, “We work on tips” as routine had inculcated him. He took the camera and the young man ran back a few paces and put his arm around his girlfriend. “And can you get the whole theater in the background?” The young man leaned in and gave the girl a quick peck on the neck. The girl pinched her cheek to her shoulder and giggled. Superman brought the camera to his eye. Through the viewfinder he framed the couple in the center and filled the background with the red front façade of the theater. They were so idealistic, the couple. So happy to be at the theater in the ninety-degree heat. To be with one another and spending money as if it would never run out. “You get it?” the young man asked after Superman had held the camera to his face for several seconds. Superman pushed the button. The display screen showed the man taking a step toward Superman and the camera, his mouth half-open, his arm letting go of the girl.

“Yeah, I got it.” He handed him the camera. “Enjoy your vacation. Thanks again,” he said, another force of habit. Superman ignored the snide remark from Batman as they walked away from the couple huddling together to see their new memory.

Daniel C. Bryant

Atlantis

"German short-haired pointer."

Murray turned to Cal.

"Used to have one," Cal went on. "Or Greta did. She hunted, you know. Greta."

They were reclining in parallel lounge chairs on the deck of Murray's parents' cottage. It was early evening, a breeze beginning to roughen the lake out by Atlantis, the tiny island his mother—"the professor"—had so named. Closer in, near where they'd been swimming, the dog's head just broke the surface.

"You getting cold?" Murray asked.

"You don't care about the dog?"

"I don't care about the wife."

Murray stood, picked up their empties, and went inside. In the bedroom he hoisted his duffel up onto the unmade bed and groped through it until he came to his flannel shirt. He watched himself in the bureau mirror, pulling the shirt on and buttoning the lower buttons, adjusting the collar, then combing his fingers through his still-wet hair. His parents' mirror, this was, rough-framed, reflector of who knows what all those summers ago.

On his way back outside he stopped to pull Cal's windbreaker from the clothes littering the living room floor.

"Her name was David," Cal said as Murray sat back down.

"*Her* name?"

"The bitch's. Greta's sense of humor."

The dog, the apex now of a long V in smoother water, was nearing the shore. His quick coughs broke the silence and as he got closer they could see he had something—a ball, it looked like—in his mouth. Someone must have thrown it for him, probably from the dock of the cottage next door.

"Sure you're not cold?" Murray stroked the back of Cal's forearm and offered the jacket. "You're all goose-bumpy."

"Cutis anserina."

"Cutest what?"

"Anserina. What we call them in medicine. Little erections, actually. Hair hard-ons. From back when we all had fur."

"Cool."

Almost a year, now, they'd known each other, since that autumn afternoon when Cal had wandered into Murray's furniture-making shop, and still Murray didn't know how to take those medicalisms of his. Were they information? Boasts? Both? He couldn't imagine springing a "miter joint" or a "spline" on Cal when Cal commented on one of his pieces. But maybe that was the way it was to be with them, the roles relationships like theirs implied.

"You know those people?" Cal asked.

"Those people."

"Yeah. Next door."

Murray looked through the trees to where Cal finally pointed, but didn't see anyone at first. "Millers, must be. George and Rose. Had that cottage forever. Way before us anyway."

"They know? About you?"

"How would they? My folks don't even know."

"'Cause *you* know, sweetheart. That's how people know."

What a very Cal sort of thing to say. A doctor, an intensivist he called himself, who handled the sickest hospital patients, Cal had learned to reduce that desperate world to residual truths, no matter the consequences. He's brain dead and, sorry, but we can't fix that. Guess I'm gay, Greta, and, sorry, but I'm outta here. With woodworking, on the other hand, there was just the wood.

"There he goes again."

Murray looked: the dog, snout held high, was paddling back out past the canoe tied to the end of the Millers' dock. And this time, through the trees, Murray could see by the diving board the one who must have thrown the ball—Kevin, the middle Miller. He was wearing yacht-club white pants and a striped shirt. And sitting on the board beside him, tan legs crossed, holding up a wine glass as if toasting the view, a young woman.

Fantasy fit for his mother, this was—man and woman on dock, setting sun, iconic calls of loons. Monogamous, those loons, she would explain in anthropology-speak. For life.

Their first summer at the lake, when he was thirteen, she had packed picnic lunches for him and Sherrie, Kevin's sister, to take to Atlantis. She had driven them the twelve miles to the movies in town, given them extra money, extra time, for sodas and talk afterward. Yet he'd often suspected that that fantasy might have been why—in the paradoxical way of fantasies—he'd wandered down to the Millers' dock one night when Sherrie had turned in early. Might have been why, without a word, he had lain down next to Kevin on the smooth, still-warm planks. Might have been why he had stayed there pretending to watch for shooting stars, all the while thrilling to the close heat of a body so safely, so deliciously like his own. Why, finally, and most fantastically, he had reached for Kevin's hand and triggered the punch that ended all contact with the Millers. The punch that still burned his cheek whenever the memory resurfaced.

"Going after those two loons," Cal was saying.

"Where?" Murray pushed his glasses in tighter, the memory away.

"Those are loons, aren't they? By that little island? Divers, the Brits call them."

Hard as he tried, Murray couldn't make out anything, but he had no doubt they were there. He had seen and heard loons on the lake every summer he'd come, and he and Cal had heard their mournful warble the previous night. Not, Cal had said, a commentary on their love-making, he hoped.

"Better not be loons," Cal added. In a moment he stood. "Actually, I do feel a bit of coolth coming on."

They headed back inside, into the bathroom, and pulled off their trunks. Murray could see that, thanks no doubt to the chill, Cal wasn't stiff at all. That was a relief: he was still sore from last night, and anyway he wasn't finished with the loons.

"Better not be?"

"Yeah. For the dog's sake. Say, you look good in skin. Anybody ever tell you that?"

"Let me get us some towels."

When Murray returned, Cal was standing at the toilet. He shook off the last drops and flushed. The water pump rumbled behind the wall.

"Pointers aren't sheepdogs," Cal said, stepping into the shower stall and pulling the plastic curtain behind him. "They're bird dogs. Gun dogs. But they're still bred to focus. We were in England this time? Lake District?"

His words were lost in the sudden drum of water against the metal sides of the stall. This rustic shower was nowhere near as civilized as the big, Italian marble one in Cal's condo. There they could bathe together easily, talking and laughing in the billowing steam as they lathered each other with Cal's exotic soaps.

Minutes later Cal stepped out, his black hair pasted to his high forehead, water coursing down his torso, down his long legs and now slightly swollen member to pool on the linoleum. Murray handed him a towel and stepped into the stall himself. He washed quickly, expecting the curtain to be snapped back any minute.

"So you were in England . . ." he said as he began to dry off.

"With Greta. Last time we slept together. One of our better fucks, actually. Anyway, that part of England is wall-to-wall sheep. More sheep than rocks. Ever been there?"

"Never. Never left Orono 'til I was nine. When we moved down to Portland."

"Well, let me tell you, they're everywhere. And it's sheepdogs look after them. Amazing animals. Heat-seek right onto 'em. They say you're driving and you see a sheepdog crouched in a field you better stop quick, 'cause that dog might smash right into the car he's so focused on his sheep. Right into it. Bam! Like that."

Murray flinched at the smack of Cal's fist in his palm. "Impressive," he said, his cheek already burning.

They walked into the bedroom, straightened the bedclothes, and began dressing.

"Love that cedar attar," Cal said, tipping his head back and sniffing loudly. "But my point is—no pun intended—pointers aren't crazy as sheepdogs. Ours wasn't anyway. Got run over, but not her fault. That I know of."

"Sorry, Cal."

"Yeah. Shitty. 'Bout killed Greta. So, town for pizza before the main event?"

"Sounds good," Murray said, though it didn't, not just yet

anyway.

When they walked back outside, the sky had gone indigo and starry. A crescent moon tilted low above the black saw tooth of the Canadian shore. Next door, lights flickered through the intervening leaves and the throb of a musical bass could just be heard. The dock was empty.

Cal strode across the yard toward the car. Murray held back, then walked to the far edge of the deck. He looked out across the lake. Even though it was a Saturday, there was no sign of life anywhere—no boats, no jet skies. Not even any lights on the Canadian side. It was a timeless northern Maine evening like the ones he'd spent there all those years ago: mother with a pile of galleys to edit, father with his flies and his Scotch, sister sequestered with her Harlequins. And he, whittling a chain out of driftwood, trying to remember, as link broke free from link, just what exactly had happened there on the Millers' dock that night.

A splash, ripples, a silver V.

"Cal!"

"What?"

"C'm'ere a minute."

The car door slammed. He heard the slap of sandals on the deck, smelt soap as Cal leaned in close to look where Murray was pointing.

"Oh yeah. Him, all right. You got a 'scope or anything?"

Murray ran back into the living room. In the wicker basket by the chimney, among the board games, the lures and batteries and paperbacks, he found his mother's old opera glasses.

"This is all we've got," he said, back on the deck.

Cal worked the focus wheel as he scanned back and forth. "Oh, there they are! Way the hell out."

Murray took the binoculars, but he couldn't seem to orient himself until he took off his own glasses and pressed the eyepieces in close. There, beyond the silhouette of Atlantis, he finally saw them, two loons, their necks black quotation marks against the dark water.

He put his glasses back on. "The dog after them?"

"Nothing else out there."

"What should we do?"

"Get pizza. Get laid. C'mon."

"He can't swim all that way, Cal. And back."

"He'll turn around. Or there's that island. What'd your mom call it?"

"I thought you were worried about the dog."

Cal held out his keys and jingled them. Murray turned and saw the V's arms lengthen and glisten as the dog moved steadily away.

"You're so worried," Cal said, "go next door. Their dog, right?"

But Murray already had his sandals off, his shorts.

The water, when he hit it, was colder than before. It stopped his breath, but he fought his way forward until with a gasp he fell into a rhythmic, splashless crawl. With each lift of his right arm, each suck of air, he strained to see Atlantis' skyline.

It was his mother who had taught him to swim, breathe out under water so he'd be ready for the next intake of air—Don't panic!—when he turned his head to the side. His mother who, once they started coming to the cottage, had made him do laps back and forth between two birch tree markers before he settled down on the dock to sunbathe or whittle or read. She'd said comfort in the water could save his life some day, the way it had hers that time in the Indian Ocean. Another of her fantasies, but maybe she was right. He really should have kept in practice, kept in shape, taken up running and weights the way Cal had: already he was winded.

He stopped to tread water and scan back and forth across the surface. But no matter how he blinked and wiped his eyes, the world stayed a dark, moonless blur: no glasses. Now how would he ever find a dog in all these acres of water? And if he did, what would he do with him? Would he be able to drag him to safety? Would the dog fight, determined as Cal's sheepdogs to follow nature no matter where she led?

His panting eased; he could hear music over the slosh of waves, a faint shout.

"Here, boy!" he called, spending as little breath as possible.

He switched to breast stroke, parting the water in front of him in slow arcs. Each time he rose to breathe he stared ahead for some sign of movement, but there was nothing but the chop, the darkness, sudden veins of cold. All he could tell

was that to his right now he was almost in line with Atlantis. Could the dog have made it there? If so, he was safe. If not . . . . He had to keep going, keep looking. For his own sake, it almost seemed, as much as the dog's.

Atlantis was as far as any of them had swum over the years, and then, at his mother's insistence, only in groups of three—one in trouble, one to stay with him, one to swim for help. Rule of three, she said. Find it with hunters, gatherers, warrior groups, corporations . . . . And the waters beyond were deep—80 feet on the charts—the part of the lake where the big salmon lived, where his father told his fish story while he searched his tackle box for the heavy lead line.

A wave slammed his face. He coughed, afraid to inhale. Don't panic! Don't panic! Little breaths. Little pants.

Like the dog returning with the ball. The dog he didn't even know the name of, the breed of. Why hadn't he just done what Cal, residual truth Cal, said he should do—walk next door?

He had to relax. He let himself sink a couple of feet, then beat back toward the surface, hands feathering at his sides. An easy breath, another descent. Y camp. Skinny dipping. That slow bob up and down, warm, silky water caressing you everywhere. You could do it for hours. Up and down. Up and down. All those summer buddies. The pleasure of survival. The survival of pleasure. Though what did he know, back then, of either? What did they?

But the dog. Treading again he revolved slowly, blinked and spat. The shadow of Atlantis was there but out of place, moved somewhere behind him now when he wasn't paying attention. That's what she'd said: it moved, or sank. Disappeared into the depths of its own myth. Or, no, he'd swum past it, set a record he'd never sought or now she'd ever know.

In the distance a warble, an echo shivering in the air the way he now shivered in the water. Still just as far away. Were the loons alarmed, keeping their distance, luring like sirens?

He dog-paddled. Another splash in the face. Down and up again. But with each drop his legs reached deeper into the cold; his arms grew flimsier. The disgust of slime, of scales and claws.

Fathom! That was the word, the word his father had used: I can't fathom it, Murray. I just can't fathom it. He had to

rise. He had to have air, wherever that was. Handfuls and armloads of water and then finally lungfuls of pure darkness. He gasped and lunged, dragging the entire lake upward and forward, until, stumbling, he fell hard.

The tiny island had no real beach. When he and Sherrie had canoed there it was always a challenge to find a proper place to eat, some boulder, some broad tree root where they could sit, bare feet in the water, basket between them, and dole out the sandwiches, the chips and drinks, cookies and fruit, his mother had so carefully prepared. This time, though, solid ground was proper enough. As his head cleared, he crawled from the rocky water's edge to a mossy rise, curled and hugged his shaking. His breathing slowed.

"Doggie," he whispered hoarsely, as if he shouldn't be overheard. Silence, but for the sense of distant music, of lapping. He sat up, then stood. He called louder, slapping his thigh, "Here, boy! C'mon. Good boy."

As if in answer, a faraway call. Cal? Should be Cal, but he wasn't ready to answer. Not yet. He was still listening. No rustle of branches, no panting, no tinkle of tags. The dog was still out there somewhere, driven, oblivious. No point in trying to find him again. That's the way of nature, what Cal would say anyway. The image of the dog's watery suffering and death would fade as all memories do.

He sat back down. Music, still, and light from the Millers', must be. A little more rest, and he might try to swim back. He didn't need Cal now. Just a branch, driftwood.

Not all memories do fade, though. Not that of Kevin's heat on that long-ago dock. Of his fist. Sherrie's two-word note the next day—"I understand." His fear of talking to her again because what if she did while he didn't? Marcia, Lisa in the back seat of his mother's convertible, Will and Lance in the locker room, college lasting six months because there was only one subject he cared about and no professors, no courses, for that. No, not those memories. Their kind don't fade. They mustn't. What would be left of us if they did?

"Murray!" Cal's voice all right, closer, and closer to anger this time: "Murray!"

"Over here! The end!" He waved his arms over his head.

Dark motion on the water, becoming shapes.

"Jesus, man, we been looking all over." Cal dragged the prow of a canoe up into the undergrowth. He grabbed Murray by the arm, then whipped off his jacket and wrapped it around Murray's shoulders, embracing him in warmth.

"You were after the dog, Murr?"

Murray looked past Cal toward the voice. Whiteness glowed in the stern of the canoe: Kevin's trousers.

"Yeah. Yeah. The dog."

"Shoulda come over," Kevin went on. "Like your friend here. Take the canoe. You could've . . . ."

"Yeah," Murray said again. "Guess so. You get him?"

"Who?" Cal asked.

"The dog. You get the dog?"

"Oh, he came back," Kevin answered. "He always does."

"They're good swimmers, those pointers."

"Yeah, Cal, so you said." Murray pulled the jacket tighter around himself, waded over to the canoe and stepped in. It lurched at his weight, dropping him quickly onto the ribs.

Cal pushed off until the scraping stopped, climbed into the bow and started paddling. "Get you back to the cottage," he called out. "Warmed up. You're hypothermic, you know."

"Right," Murray said. "Hypothermic. Get you every time."

"Say," Kevin said from behind him, "why don't you guys come over for a drink? My sister Sherrie and a couple friends are up and . . . ."

"Alcohol's not such a good idea when . . . ."

"Sure, Kevin," Murray interrupted. "Could use a drink."

The two men paddled in silent unison, the canoe thrusting forward with each stroke. Beyond the curve of Cal's back and the rhythm of his powerful arms, Murray could just distinguish the dark suggestion of shoreline, blurred light. How close they already seemed.

"By the way," Kevin called out behind him, "I'm Kevin. Kevin Miller. My folks' place, where we're staying."

"Cal," Cal answered over his shoulder, not breaking rhythm. "Cal Peebles."

Murray turned. "Cal used to be my lover, Kevin. How you guys been, anyway?"

Jane Deon

Sledding

That weak February sun is hitting my eyes through the windshield as we head north on Route 12 toward Holly's house. Nothing out the window but dirty snow bank, leafless trees, and shadows that can't catch us.

Holly is my mom's friend from way back, but they haven't seen each other in a while. At the beginning of the year, Holly moved back to Vermont from California—her marriage went to shit, or fell apart, as my mom would put it. And she's got her kid, Jason, which is why I'm coming along. She's got another kid too, Mark, but he's at college. Jason's got something wrong with his legs, born that way, walks with crutches. We're the same age, sixteen, so according to my mom we have the whole world in common. Right. I'm dragged along on this excursion because she thinks it would be good for me. I'm dreading this whole day. It's quiet in the car now. I slammed the door when I got in, and my mom's sharp "Katie, please" still echoes off the dashboard.

"You have to think of other people, not just yourself," she says now.

"I'm not selfish."

My mom almost laughs. "What's your definition of selfish, then? Because it seems to me these days you fit the traditional one pretty good. Missing school? It's all about you. Helping around the house? Nope, you're busy up in your room. Leaving and not telling me where you're going? Check. Calling to say you'll be home late? Not a chance. Thinking of me, at all, at any time?"

She isn't yelling at me. And if I have to be honest I would say all those things were true, but she just doesn't understand the reason behind them. I just want time on my own, especially in February.

"So you're going to be nice to Holly and you're going to be amiable to Jason." She takes her eyes off the road to look at me for a moment.

"What about Mark? The normal one?"

"I can't believe you just said that. What's wrong with you? Is that how I raised you?"

"That's not what I meant. It's just, what does Jason do all day? He can't go anywhere, or do anything."

"Lord have mercy," my mom says. "Can't you just do this one thing for me?"

She said the same thing when Mr. Tanner called her down to my high school. I'd been skipping classes, math and science. Tanner and I argued about that a little. He has these glasses that make his eyes look like they're kind of bulging out of his head. When he takes them off he looks normal, but most everyone knows him as Bug Eyes. It's stupid, sure, but for the most part everyone likes him so they don't call him something worse.

I sat in the hard plastic chair across from his desk. Stuff on his desk: coffee mug, blue, with pens stuck in it, papers. One of those giant flat calendars. The last bell of the day rang and through the office window I watched the rest of the students leave. My best friend Sarah saw me through the glass and stopped long enough to make a face. She'd call me later. I looked at my sneakers. The left lace was coming untied, one end working its way out. The left ear of the bunny, I thought. That was my dad, teaching me how to tie my shoes. Bunny ears. Make them tight so they don't fall off.

"It's not something to be smiling at," Tanner said.

That's when I saw my mom, could almost hear her heels click-clacking on the white and gray linoleum. She was at the doorway in an instant, barely even knocked before Tanner waved her in. She was on her cell phone. Her curly hair was pulled back, pinned in places, and she had gold hoop earrings on. My mom always wore jeans. Jeans and heels, leaving her boots in the car. A green turtle neck sweater that day, too. Her jacket was unzipped, and her leather gloves were threatening to jump out of the pockets. She slipped the phone into her purse.

"Mr. Tanner," she said. Then, "Katie?" A question filled with frustration and resignation, all in one word.

I shrugged. "I just don't like the classes."

"I just don't like them?" My mom repeated. "And why have I only heard about this skipping now?"

Tanner waited for me to speak.

"I deleted the messages," I said. "When they call to tell you I'm not here. I call from my cell and delete the messages at home." She had to admit it was a little bit genius. Just a little. But none of that crossed her face.

"You'll go to all your classes from now on," my mom said. She hadn't even sat down. "And if you have to you'll repeat everything. That's life." She said that a lot, that's life. She said that about my father, too. That's life, Katie. Some people you can count on, some people you can't. "Anything else?"

She had that look like she had somewhere else to be. But it was late afternoon, nearly the end of the work day. She must be mad because she got called out of work. She works at one of the private medical offices in town, scheduling patients, telling them how much they have to pay, keeping everything organized. I've seen her at work, her desk in front of shelves of color coded files, though she says most of it's on the computer now. But I like those files, everything in its place.

"No," Tanner said.

We walked out of the office, down the linoleum hallway. As we got to the car my mom held out her hand. She hadn't said anything else to me yet.

"Give me the phone." That was it. That was the tone, the you-are-on-thin-ice + I'm-so-mad-I-could-cry = do-what-I-say-or-shit-will-really-start-flying tone.

I fished the phone out of my jeans pocket. She clenched it in her hand, then deposited it into her bag.

As she opened the driver's side door she said, "Christ, Katie, can't you just go to school? Can't you just do this one thing for me?" She started the ignition. "No friends over, no going out."

I didn't even have to ask her for how long.

"Until I say so," she said.

And we were off, one more silent car ride home.

Holly's house is small, a Cape with a little garage off to one side. The front yard isn't much to look at, mostly driveway and dirty snow. There's a front porch with nothing on it now but empty planters and a snow shovel. I can see curtains

in the windows, white curtains on the bottom floor, some darker color upstairs. The siding is white, but it looks like it needs to be repainted. As mom puts the car in park, the front door opens, and the woman I assume is Holly steps out onto the porch. She's got this big smile.

I climb out of the car, watching where I put my feet down, but there's no ice in the driveway. I stand for a minute, stalling, fumbling with the zipper on my jacket even though it's only a few steps to the house and there's really no point in zipping it. Mom has already crossed to the front porch, given Holly a hug. Besides the smile, she's got on this gray sweatshirt that says *San Diego California*, and her brown hair is tumbling down her back. I've never seen anybody with such long hair. She beckons me up the front porch stairs and gives me a hug.

"Look at you!" she says. "All grown up." Even though she's never met me before. She smells like cinnamon. About Mom and Holly, here's what she told me. They were friends in high school, and then went to NYU together. My mom always liked science, took those kind of courses in college, but Holly liked literature and philosophy. Mom was always more practical, I guess. Mom likes to say that she lives in the real world, you know? Holly had bigger dreams, wanted to be a writer and a teacher, make a difference in the world. That phrase always makes me roll my eyes.

So they went through college, and then they got married, and Holly ended up moving out to California with her husband. Mom stayed here in Vermont. Holly's first kid, Mark, turned out fine, but a couple of years later when Jason was born, they knew something was wrong. Mom and Holly talked on the phone a lot when I was in elementary school. I even started calling her Aunt Holly even though I'd never met her. My mom flew out to California a couple of times, more often during middle school. She would come back and talk about how wonderfully Jason was doing, about how he was making so much progress, about how Holly was so strong to be handling all of it practically all on her own. I guess the husband was checked out, even then.

"Goodness, well let's get inside where it's warm," Holly says. We follow.

Just inside there are hooks for jackets on the hallway wall, and I pull my jacket off and hang it up. I start to follow my mom into the other room, but she gives me a look that says remember to take off your boots. So I bend down, grabbing at the laces with cold fingers, using the toe of one foot to press on the heal of the other, forcing the boot off. My hair falls into my eyes, and when I finally get my boots off and look up there's a guy leaning against the wall, watching me.

"You could untie your boots," he says. "Just saying, you know, that could be easier." He smiles. He's got dark hair and dark eyes, and I can see a little bit of Holly in his face. But really I think he must look more like his father, whoever that was. He's leaning on two crutches, but turns quickly when he hears his mom call.

"Jason, Katie, come on and get some tea. I've got coffee, too."

"Well," he says. "Come on."

I follow him in my socked feet through the living room and into the kitchen. He moves quickly, and I wonder if it's grace or confidence or just familiarity with this house. The kitchen is warm, the oven's been on, and there are a pile of sticky buns on a plate in the middle of the kitchen table. My mom and Holly are already sitting down, steam from tea cups rising up towards the ceiling.

"How was the drive up?" Holly asks.

"No trouble at all," my mom says. "It didn't snow the other day, like they said it would, so everything was clear."

Holly sees me standing hesitantly near the table. "Let me make the introductions." She laughs. "It's a little silly, now, but Katie this Jason, and Jason, Katie. Did you know you guys almost share a birthday? Just about a month apart. Isn't that funny?"

I smile. "Nice to meet you."

"Sure," he says.

I try not to stare at the crutches.

"Have a seat, guys," Holly says. "Have some food."

I pull out a chair and sit down.

"Jason, you just look wonderful," my mom says. "I feel like I haven't seen you guys in ages." She's almost beaming.

"Thanks," he says. He leans the crutches against the wall

and sits across from me.

"Tell me," my mom says, "How's school going? How are you classes? Are you still interested in meteorology?"

"Sure," he says. "Everything's going really good. The school is fine, and I like my teachers. I have a few AP classes so that keeps me pretty busy." He takes a bite of sticky bun. "Definitely still interested in meteorology. And, man, the weather here is so different than California. I wasn't sure I'd be able to deal with all this snow."

"Do you mean with the crutches?" I can just imagine him slipping, breaking his neck. "I mean, you could probably sink into the snow or go flying on the ice. The black ice especially." There is silence for a moment. My mom's smile seems frozen. I look down into my mug of tea. I should probably take the tea bag out or it will be too strong.

Jason regards me quizzically for a moment, maybe amused. Then he continues, "I actually kind of like it, the snow. It's just different, having to put on five layers in the morning."

My mom recovers. They keep talking. They talk about Mark, about how he's doing at college. They talk more about Jason and his aspirations. They talk about the flight, the move, the real estate agent. Like I said before, I've never known anyone who couldn't walk right, and I keep wanting to somehow get a look at his legs. I wonder if I can touch him under the table with my foot. I decide against it, but I wonder if his legs look like my broken arm did. I was ten years old, jumped off a swing. By the time the cast came off my arm looked small and shriveled next to the good one, and I was so scared that it would never be normal again. The cast came off when my dad had already left. My parents' divorce came through, and I've calculated this, during fifth grade earth science at about eleven in the morning, in February. That was when my dad signed everything, us, all away. That was the moment he chose his other family, the one I've never met.

Jason's got dark hair and those brown eyes, like I noticed before, but as he talks to my mom I start to notice other things about him. He's still got some freckles left over from California, sprinkled across the bridge of his nose and the tops of his cheeks. He gestures a lot with his hands, making his points bigger. And when he's listening he puts one fist under his chin

while he takes in everything else with his ears and eyes.

I notice the tea kettle is empty. So does my mom. "Katie, start some more tea, please."

"I don't want anymore," I say. I sound like a six year old, and I know it. I want my phone back. I want to text Sarah, to commiserate on Facebook, to send a tweet to the world: *stuck in woods, cornered by #angrymother, hope fading fast. survival unlikely. send #help b4 it's 2 late.*

"Katie." The tone is there again.

"I don't want to stay here and play happy family." I'm in for it now, and I know it. I stand up. Holly looks concerned.

"This is not what I asked from you." My mom does not want to make a scene. She doesn't want to fight with me, not here. Her face is pained, her lips stretched tight, everything she doesn't say out loud she says with her eyes. And then Jason stands up.

"Why don't we go watch some television," he says.

I stare my mother down in the silence, stare past her out the window above the sink. They have a sloping backyard, a hill that runs down into a little bit of forest, the forest kind of separating one lot from another. And the mountains rise up again in the distance. I bet if you watch a sunset from the back porch, watch the sun melt on a clear day behind, slowly behind, those mountains, that would be something.

My eyes meet Jason's for a minute, and I wonder what he sees in my face. I watch him with his crutches. He picks them up so easily and moves so quickly it almost seems like an act, like maybe he doesn't really need them. "Come on," he says, and I follow him out, leaving something cold and biting in the air behind me.

The living room is comfortable, with two chairs and sofa. There's a television in the corner, and the sofa faces it. I sit down on the sofa, Jason leans his crutches against the side of it, and sits down next to me. For a moment we look at the blank television screen instead of looking at each other.

"Want to see what's on?" he says.

"Sure," I say.

He grabs the remote and the television flicks on.

"We just get three channels," he says. "Only three with the antenna."

"You don't have cable?"

"No, it doesn't run up here. Satellite service sucks too, I checked into it."

I groan in my head. It takes fifteen seconds to flip through all three channels. He leaves it on the last one. It's the end of a sports talk show, something about hockey.

I steal a couple of glances at his legs while he's busy with the remote. I guess they seem normal, but it's hard to tell. I mean, they don't seem shorter than normal, or too skinny, or anything like that. But it is hard to tell. He's just wearing regular jeans, jeans and a sweater. I guess I kind of imagined him as an invalid, that he'd be walking around in hospital clothes, hospital robes, something like that.

He notices me looking at his legs.

"I'm sorry," I say, quickly. If only my mom were here. She's always telling me to apologize.

"Don't worry about it."

"It's just," and here I go again. I can't stop myself from talking. "Are they shriveled? Like, no muscle?"

Jason doesn't answer, but reaches down and starts to roll up his jeans. There's something almost illicit in it, like he's undressing for me. I feel the color start to rise in my cheeks at the thought. I peer at his flesh. He's rolled the jeans up mid-calf, they won't go much further. His leg looks like any other leg, the ankle a bit bony, the curve of his calf disappearing under the jeans, the same dark hair, even some leftover tan from California. Without asking him I put my hand, palm down, on the exposed skin. It's warm, and I let it rest there for a second.

"Don't tickle me, now," he says.

Embarrassed, I pull my hand away quickly.

The sports talk show has changed to some kind of X Games, and skiers are flying down this hill, taking jumps, flipping in the air, landing upright. It switches to snowboarders, who seem to be doing the same thing.

I look at Jason, watch him watching this.

"It's pretty cool," he says.

"Yeah," I say.

"Do you ski?"

"No, not really. I mean, not since about the fourth grade.

I think that's the last time I went skiing. My dad took me, chaperoning a school trip."

"He left you guys."

I'm surprised he knows that.

"Yeah."

"That's shitty," he says. "My dad did the same thing. You miss him?"

I nod. "But he didn't choose me."

"Or your mom."

It's funny, but I hadn't felt it that way, really. Not until now. I look back at the television, but I see my mom in the kitchen just a few minutes ago, that look on her face. I feel Jason watching me, but then he turns back to the TV again, too.

"How is it?" he asks.

"How's what?"

"The skiing."

"It's okay."

"Oh." He sounds disappointed, like he wanted to hear something more exciting.

"It's kind of scary at first," I say. "Takes a lot of balance, and then when you start going fast, things get kind of crazy." I feel like I'm saying all the wrong things. I start at the beginning. "You've got to take the chairlift up, you know?"

He's looking at me like he's interested.

"So, I mean first, you strap on your skies and ski boots, and then you have to wait in line, and when it's finally your turn you have to be ready as the chairlift comes around. Because it doesn't stop moving, you see. You just have to be ready to sit at just the right moment. And then, all of a sudden, you're being lifted up, and you have to pull down the metal bar to keep you from falling out. Kind of like a roller coaster."

Can he go on roller coasters? I keep going, afraid now of the silence. I can still feel his warm skin on my palm. "So you have to jump off at the right time too, when it gets to the top, after you go up and over all these other skiers and the mountain. It seemed really high to me at the time, but I don't know, maybe it's not, really. Maybe I just remember it that way."

"It sounds fun," he says. "Cold but fun."

"Sure. Cold but fun."

The event has switched to a bobsled race, the men, or maybe

they're women, hunched over and careening down the track.

"Sledding is great, too," I say. "It's not as crazy as skiing, but I always liked it. My dad used to take me sledding when I was a kid."

"Yeah?"

I nod.

"Hey," Jason says. "I think there's a sled out in the garage. I saw one in there when we moved in, and nobody's thrown it out yet. Mark wanted to keep it, but of course he hasn't used it."

"Um," I say. "Okay."

"Let's get it."

"And do what?"

"Go sledding."

I look at the crutches. "I don't know."

"Come on."

We head out to the hallway, pull on our boots and gloves and jackets. Mom and Holly are laughing in the kitchen. I suppose she's forgotten about me. I wonder if I'm doing the right thing.

I hold the front door open for him, and he goes out first. I close it quietly. We cross the driveway over to the garage. The snow is crunching under my feet, and I'm worried about ice I can't see. I look at Jason but he's not worried. He's smiling. The garage has one of those automatic doors, but Jason says to go ahead and just give it a tug, it will pull up on its own. So I tug, and push up, and with a little bit of a creak the door starts to move upwards. The garage is bigger than it looked from the outside.

"Is all of this your stuff?"

"No," Jason says. "We just haven't cleared it out yet."

There are boxes and bins, an old bicycle bereft of its tires, other assorted junk, empty cans of motor oil. It's dark except for the daylight casting our shadows in front of us. I look across the floor, looking for the sled. Then Jason points up, and I see it. One of those cheap red plastic ones that you can get from any hardware store, the rectangular kind, not the circle kind. I reach up for it, but I can't reach it. Jason steps forward.

"I'll give you a boost."

I look skeptical.

"I can stand, you know. I can walk too, just not so easily." He almost sounds offended, but then he smiles.

He stands behind me, and then I feel his hands on my waist. He's able to lift me just a few inches, and just for a moment, but it's long enough. The sled is hung up by a string that's caught over a nail. I tug it down. With the sled under my arm, we back out of the garage. I remember that the kitchen window looks over the hill, and if my mom sees me I'm never going to hear the end of it.

Pristine snow covers the backyard, fresh and untouched. My boots sink in almost up to the top. There's about a foot of it on the ground here. It's the good sledding kind, light and a little bit icy, not so wet that the sled will just sink into it and not go anywhere. I look at Jason, see how he's getting along with the crutches. He doesn't seem to have a care in the world. We reach the top of the hill, and I'm starting to get a little excited in a silly, eight year old girl kind of way. I'm going sledding, something I haven't done in ages. We stand side by side and look down towards the little woods at the bottom of the hill.

"Well, Captain," he says, "you're the expert. What do you think?"

His breath comes out in a little cloud. It's cold out here.

"Looks pretty good to me. As long you stop before you hit the trees. You might have to bail out."

We've adopted a kind of official tone, something we've both put on spontaneously. "So," he says. "What's the procedure?"

"It goes like this," I say, and put the sled front facing towards the bottom of the hill, holding it steady with the pressure of my foot on the string.

"And then?"

"And then you jump in, push off, and hope for the best. You can try and steer, but it's not guaranteed."

"Got it."

He drops the crutches into the snow. Standing up on his own, he stands taller. He looks almost athletic, definitely determined. The tips of his ears are going red from the cold.

"Are you up for this?" I ask.

"Definitely."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry about it. It'll be fine. Trust me."

"I don't know," I say. I watch my own breath disappear in front of me.

"Trust me," he says again. "You can steer. You've got the experience. It'll be fine. It'll be fun."

I take a moment to think about it.

"You've got to get in the back."

"Yes ma'am."

I sit at the front of the sled, digging my heels into the snow to keep it from moving while Jason gets situated in the back.

"Got to put your legs all the way in," I say.

He does, using his hands to help him, and in a moment they're right where they should be, straight along either side of the sled, straddling me. It's a child's sized sled, really, and I'm almost sitting on top of him. His legs are touching mine now, and then I feel his hands on my shoulders. Something warm and giddy gets a grip on my insides. I like the feeling.

"Now hold on."

He lets go of my shoulders and grabs both sides of the sled.

I push off.

The hill is a fast one. I can sense that right from the start. My legs are bent at the knee, and I hold one side of the sled with each hand. The sled is grating against the icy top layer of snow, picking up speed. Jason is yelling "Go, go!" into my left ear.

"Lean forward!"

He does, and I do too, and we pick up more speed. We're weaving back and forth a bit, left to right, trying to get the balance right. That sun is still trying to soften the snow, to no avail. I feel a lightness I haven't felt in a while, like the feeling you get when you go too fast over a dip in the road, and something in your gut lifts up for a minute, and it's strange but wonderful. I'm laughing, and Jason is laughing behind me. I let out a shriek as we weave again, and that's when I hear the back door slam.

"Katie! Jason!"

It's either mom or Holly but neither of us turns around to see. The trees are looming up there, and from this angle there seems to be more of them than from the top of the hill. We

keep gaining speed.

"We're going to have to bail out!" I shout.

"When?"

"Not just yet!"

We hang on a little longer.

"Katie!" Again from somewhere behind us. It seems very far behind us.

"On three!" I say to Jason.

That maple has us in its sights.

We count together, and then he bails left and I bail right. I end up rolling over, snow filling up my boots, going down the back of my jacket. I track its cold all the way to the waistband of my jeans. But I don't mind. I don't mind anything right now, not Tanner, not my mom, not my dad being gone.

I push up so I'm sitting upright, and watch the sled meet the maple. It bounces lightly off the trunk, all the power of us gone from it, bright red plastic against the white snow against the brown tree. I flop back onto my back and have one more look at the sky. Mom and Holly are coming down the hill now. I can hear Jason calling to me, "Let's go again before they get down here!"

I'd like that. I turn my head and I can see Jason trying to get to his knees in the snow, having a little trouble. "I'll be right there," I call to him. I stand up and walk down towards the trees, following the lighter impression of the sled. I grab it by the string, then turn around, starting towards Jason, and the two of us together will go back up the hill.

Justin J. Murphy

The Petrology of South Dakota

Dickwad hadn't shaved in four days. He rubbed the blonde whiskers on his chin between his thumb and fingers, then hoisted his beat-up, army-green duffel bag over his shoulder.

"What's with that scrawny little beard," I asked him. I wasn't one to talk about appearances. I had added twenty pounds to my gut in recent months. I crossed my arms above my gut, and flexed my biceps as if to draw his eyes somewhere else, just like the roses in a painting I saw once in a coffee table book.

"It started raining four days ago." He moved past me out the front door of his home in the orange groves of Santa Paula and into the gray sky as if all questions in the world could have been answered by that phrase.

"What the hell does that mean?" I stared at the orange blossoms, little white petals drooping and collapsing under the dew of morning. They had no fragrance today.

He turned around with a smirk, a shy little smile that every girl had fallen for so far, his teeth perfectly aligned by superior genetics. "After the first rain of autumn, I don't shave again until that day the next year. It's a family tradition." He closed his eyes, tilted his head back, and stuck out his tongue, catching the first drop of rain that morning. Dickwad had a gift for predicting weather. It was as if his head was some human weather balloon, and his brain the helium.

"When did that tradition start?"

"1892." He walked down the creaking wooden stairs from the porch of his little house, past the eggplant and squash in the vegetable garden in his front yard. He pushed the button on the trunk of his car and opened it.

His car wasn't as old as we were. His grandfather purchased it the same year Dickwad's sister was born. I guess his grandfather had forgiven the Germans by then, or just wanted a car that told the temperature outside.

At twenty-six years old, both the car and Dickwad's sister

were in pristine condition. The navy-blue paint hugged the rear lights and fenders of the car in the same manner Dickwad's sister's jeans hugged her ass and thighs. Most of the times I had seen her, she had a lollipop in her mouth. Her tongue changed colors every day, like a chameleon covered in saliva and sugar. She sat in the backseat staring aimlessly through the windshield. She could have been thinking about losing her virginity that awkward night eleven years ago.

"What are we waiting for?" she said lightly through the window at her brother. "You're always twenty minutes late for everything."

Dickwad nodded back towards me. "He isn't doing shit. He's just standing there."

I lit a cigarette and waved at Dickwad's sister. She didn't wave back. She moved her eyes back to her invisible thoughts in the windshield and gently twirled a Blow-Pop into her mouth.

Dickwad came back up the stairs to the porch and grabbed my backpack. "You ready?" His veins popped out from his forearm, a subtle muscular preview to the rest of his body that would have been a turn-on to a girl.

"You look like Don Johnson in Miami Vice," I said to him.

Dickwad hated being compared to anyone besides his grandfather, especially Don Johnson. It was his fault. He dressed up like Sonny Crockett for Halloween twenty-two years ago, and still hadn't lived it down. He wore a pink T-shirt and a white linen suit with sunglasses. That's when I first called him Dickwad. His parents had died that spring.

"You look like a chubby coloring book," he responded.

I stared down past the tattoos on my arms to the beer belly hovering above my belt. It had gotten bigger since I started popping pain-killers like Tic Tacs. Eleven years ago, my belly didn't exist. It pressed up squarely to his sister's and rode along on it like a pirate ship on her virgin sea. I flicked my cigarette at Dickwad. "Whatever you say, Donny boy." I was glad he hadn't said anything about my teeth. I hadn't had a professional cleaning in nine years. I didn't have the money. My ex-girlfriend told me my teeth looked like kernels of corn the day we broke up. I told her I had slept with someone else, even though I hadn't.

The interior of Dickwad's car was always in order. His compact-disc cases were neatly stacked on the center console, the floor mats were spotless, and the leather upholstery smelled like it had just been rubbed with an oil treatment. He Armor-Alled his dashboard weekly, waxed the paint bi-monthly, and checked the air pressure of his tires with a small tool that his grandfather had given to him, his initials engraved on the metallic handle, "W.P."

I watched from the passenger seat as he dropped down below the fender of the car. "How's the tire pressure, Dickwad? Are the PSI's in order? We don't want to crash and die. Are you sure we're safe?" I yelled through the foggy glass.

"Suck it," he said back. He had his traditions. That was certain.

I stared in the rear-view mirror, watching his sister wrap her tongue around her lollipop, thinking of that night eleven years ago. It was a cold night, October 31st 1999. She had just come home from trick-or-treating with her friends. Her tongue, from so many years of wrestling with lollipops, was the strongest muscle on her body. Her breath smelled like Peppermint Schnapps.

"Why are you staring at me?" Dickwad's sister asked.

I didn't answer.

When Dickwad had finished checking all four tires, he sat down in the driver's seat and started the engine.

"Finally," I said.

"The rear driver's side is a little low. Let's say our three Hail Mary's," he responded.

Dickwad bowed his head and closed his eyes. "Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . ." The steam from his exhaust pipe sailed out from the car. We headed west towards Highway 101, Santa Paula disappearing behind mountains of oak and orange trees. We watched California pass through our windows like an unwinding roll of film, the ocean on our left, an opaque gray seamlessly blending into the sky.

We stopped once to use the bathroom and get gasoline in San Jose. Outside the bathroom door, I could hear Dickwad's sister's piss streaming out of her, carving into the toilet water. I wondered if she was still shaved down there. The bathroom door opened.

"The toilet doesn't flush," she said as she passed me by.

I stared into the toilet bowl and added a tint of deep yellow to her pale mustard aquatic canvas. Like the colors on Renoir's palette, our fluids mixed divinely. If it wasn't for Dickwad, I wouldn't have known who Renoir was. I wouldn't have had anything to think about staring down at a bowl of urine.

Outside of Eureka, Dickwad nodded his head at the storm clouds that brought darkness to the sky an hour early. "It wouldn't be a road trip without thunder."

Thunder struck a moment later. Dickwad dropped one of his hands from the 10 and 2 position on the steering wheel and sighed. "It seemed like back in the eighties whenever we had thunderstorms the power would go out. My grandfather would light oil lanterns for us to see by, then bundle me up in a blanket, make some hot cocoa, and take me outside to watch the lightning."

I contemplated the feeling of being wrapped in a blanket. It seemed like it would have felt nice. "My grandfather used to pound whiskey and tell me stories about hanging Japs upside-down from trees and leaving them to die during The War." I paused for a moment to think about the stinking line of people that had fucked each other until I was born. We were a royal family of idiocy. Although they were family, I didn't really know any of them.

"We all have our stories." Dickwad pushed a hand through his silky hair.

"You got any Dave Matthews Band in here?" I asked. Don Johnson and Dave Mathews were small episodes of Dickwad's life he could never run away from. Luckily, he grew out of both after he lost his virginity. I lit a cigarette.

"Can you believe he used to listen to that shit?" Dickwad's sister laughed, unwrapping another Blow-Pop and pressing it deep into her cheek. "My brother used to be so lame."

"You can't smoke in here," Dickwad said. He flicked the cigarette from my lips. "I don't want my leather to smell like a Moose Lodge."

Dickwad only said one word over the next two hours. "Lightning." The sky flashed.

At a motel outside Crescent City near the Oregon border,

Dickwad stood before two doors with the numbers 11 and 12 on them. “I’ll take this one. You two take that one.”

Dickwad never wanted anyone around him when he slept. He had made that error in judgment when we were younger. I had made him pay for his mistake by doing everything possible to a sleeping friend to make his morning miserable. I never tea-bagged him though. That seemed gay.

“You want us to share a room?” I looked down at his sister’s ass from the corner of my eye.

“Yeah. She snores. I trust you,” Dickwad said.

Dickwad sat on his bed in the yellow light of the motel room reading a new book. I don’t have X-ray vision. I suppose that Dickwad’s ability to sense weather was somewhat like my ability to tell you what people are doing when I can’t see them. For instance, the book he was reading was by Joan Didion. I didn’t know who she was. She was probably some feminist, knowing Dickwad. He was the smartest guy I knew. If his grandfather hadn’t died, he might have even gone to college. Being a master electrician paid his grandfather’s mortgage. Still, I felt sorry for his brain. It must have been like being veal.

It didn’t take long for Dickwad’s sister to turn me on. All she had to say was, “I’m gonna take a shower.” I could hear her fumbling with the doorknob inside the bathroom, trying to work the lock. Then she sighed. I heard her bra hit the ground, then a soft cottony whisper as her underwear dropped to the tile. The shower knobs squeaked. Steam began to pour out from underneath the door. I wish I could say that she immediately started masturbating. But she didn’t. She rinsed her face first. Then she stared down at her vagina. Maybe it was too hairy for her. She washed the crack of her ass, then sat down in the tub and started to think. She could have been thinking about the last time she saw her mother. She could almost feel the woman’s cold lipstick stuck to her cheek. She sat there unmoving, taking short breaths.

I hadn’t noticed the three semi-trucks parked outside of the motel. Looking out the streaked window, I could see one of the truckers smoking a cigarette and tapping a tire with the toe of his cowboy boot. He didn’t have a handlebar mustache, or a mustard-yellow trucker hat on. Instead, he wore

a burgundy tie and a pair of tight brown trousers, his testicles split in half by the crotch seam. A neon pink light across the highway blinked in his misty eyes. It read, "The Landing Strip." There weren't any windows on the building. He pulled a small flask from inside his coat pocket, took a pull, then tucked it back in. He didn't need to look both ways before he crossed the wet two-lane highway. It was dark. No one else was coming.

Dickwad's sister emerged from the shower with a towel wrapped around her breasts. The towel wasn't very wide. It looked like an empty banner that hadn't been sloganized yet. I tried to think of something to write across it. The bottom of her butt cheeks barely dropped out from under the white cotton as she passed by me. She pointed her ass towards the window away from my eyes and pulled on a pair of underwear. They were an aquamarine color, much like her eyes. She slid into bed with her towel on, pulled the covers up to her chin, then pulled the towel off. "Goodnight," she said.

I fell asleep with Dickwad's sister blinking through my mind. I was no sloganeer. I wasn't much of anything.

Dickwad knocked on our door early in the morning.

"Can you get it?" his sister asked. "I'm naked."

Aside from the whiskers on his face, Dickwad's skin looked fresh, like an advertisement for expensive aftershave. He had already taken a shower and held in his hand two pieces of toast and a cup of coffee. "You kids ready to hit the road?" He threw a piece of toast at his sister, then handed me the coffee and the other piece. "It's got margarine on it already." Everything he did was just like his grandfather. Even the way he treated his sister. She ate the toast off of the mangy comforter just like his great aunt.

Oregon had a distinct taste to it. I had never tasted another state before. I had been to Las Vegas, Nevada, twice in my life, but Vegas had no taste. If it had a taste, I wasn't aware of it. Maybe I didn't want it to have a taste. I think it would have tasted like a condom.

I stared out the window at the evergreen trees and watched as small waterfalls fell from jagged cliffs. The rocks were covered in a soft green moss so that the boulders looked like gi-

ant emeralds. My mother told me I had emerald eyes once. I liked her sometimes. Even though she never bailed me out of jail. "I didn't do it," I told her once before.

"You guys taste that?" I asked.

"Taste what?" Dickwad said.

"This state tastes like something," I said.

Dickwad nodded his head in agreement, cracking his window another inch. "That taste, my friend, is the taste of freedom. What the United States used to taste like."

His sister shook her head. "Smells like pine trees to me." Her mouth was too full of cherry-flavored lollipops to taste anything else.

"Chem-trail," Dickwad said pointing up into the overcast sky. "Cloud seeding." Dickwad shook his head. "Here comes the rain." He turned the windshield wipers on, and shot me a concerned look. "Roll up your window. I don't want the mind serum they put in the rainwater to touch us." Dickwad pushed his hair over his ears, as if trying to block an entrance.

It stopped raining by the time we hit the Idaho border. At a truck stop in Nyssa, I listened to Dickwad's sister unzip her jeans and piss into a toilet bowl again.

"This toilet flushes," she said to me. She smiled this time when she passed.

I looked in the bathroom mirror while I washed my hands. I wasn't a bad-looking guy, aside from my teeth. I walked out of the bathroom without flushing and wandered around the mart, blending in with the potato chips and novelty shirts. I stuck a package of Crest Whitening Strips into my pocket and walked out of the market without looking back. Whenever I looked back, I got caught. "I didn't do it," I would say. No one ever believed me.

I watched the sign that read "Welcome to Wyoming" pass by in the headlights of Dickwad's car. I thought about the last time I had read the word "Wyoming." I couldn't remember. Wyoming.

"Custer's last stand," I said to no one in particular. "Unlucky bastard."

"Custer was a fascist," his sister said.

"The Battle of Little Big Horn took place in Montana, not Wyoming," Dickwad said.

"You barely finished high school," his sister replied.

Dickwad didn't have anything else to say. We all knew he sacrificed straight A's for keeping his depleted family together. He turned the channel on the radio until he found a station playing big-band music. "They just don't play it like this any more, do they?" The song remained the same until we finally stopped to sleep.

The motel that night looked exactly like the one in Crescent City, except for that it was in Wyoming. The sky looked bigger. There was a bar across the street that advertised "Ice Cold Beer."

Dickwad read Joan. He kept his socks on and curled up into his pillows with a smile on his face. He drank a decaffeinated cup of coffee. He didn't want to stay up all night.

I watched Dickwad's sister move around the room. She seemed like a woman now.

"I'm gonna take a shower," she said. Her undergarments hit the floor. The shower knobs creaked. She sat down in the tub, letting the water run down her face like counterfeit tears. She might have been thinking about how lonely she felt that day she got her period for the first time. Her vagina was hairier.

With my legs dangling over the bed, I thought about what I would say to Dickwad's sister this time when she got out of the shower. That basketball player in high school had waited for his girlfriend to come out of the shower with a balloon tied around his dick. But he was a basketball player. He probably seemed cool.

I pulled off my clothes and got into my bed. I hadn't slept naked since my last girlfriend, twenty pounds ago. The shower turned off. Dickwad's sister came out with her towel on, steam rising from her skin. This time she said, "Close your eyes." I could hear the towel drop to the dirty carpet. Then her warm body hit the mattress and the sheets slid up to her chin. "You can open them now."

I opened my eyes. She was in her bed. Her eyes were closed.

"Goodnight," she said.

"Goodnight," I said back.

I waited for her to start snoring before I rummaged through my jeans pocket, removing the whitening strips. I pressed them into my teeth. They didn't have much taste to them. I

popped a painkiller into my belly and fell asleep thinking of her body, sweet, unused, at 15 years old. Her tongue tasted like a synthetic grape, like a flavored condom. I assume.

In the morning, the phone rang.

"Can you get that, I'm naked," Dickwad's sister said.

"So am I," I said.

"Ewww," she replied. "Close your eyes."

I could hear the plastic mold of the earpiece lift from the body of the telephone.

"Hello?" There was a pause. I could hear her feet shift towards me. She looked at me and her eyes went soft for a moment. It didn't matter that I could not see. She shifted her hips like a woman after a glass of wine. "It's Dickwad." She dropped the phone on the table. "You can open your eyes." I caught a glimpse of her ass as she passed me on the way to the bathroom. She had tan lines where her bra straps had been.

"Yeah?" I said into the phone.

Dickwad combed his hair in the mirror and slid his grandfather's wristwatch over his long slender fingers. "I spoke to a woman out in Watertown a few minutes ago," he said.

"What did she say?" I asked

"She said she's heard of 'a rock out in the middle of nowhere' before," he replied.

"Nice," I said.

"Yeah," he remarked.

"Where is nowhere?" I asked.

"She doesn't know."

I stared at my teeth in the mirror. The only thing separating Dickwad and I from a face to face conversation was a couple inch-thick pieces of drywall. "Too bad," I said.

"Yeah. You want some toast?" he asked.

After we hung up, Dickwad smiled to himself. He smiled like his grandfather had been reborn in front of him. He twirled the keys to the car around his index finger, then fired an invisible pistol at his reflection. He made a sound with his mouth that could have represented a bullet or a punctured tire.

I didn't catch the sign that read "South Dakota 1 Mile." I was too busy thinking about Dickwad's sister. I decided I

would go on a diet, stop taking pills. “I think I’m gonna be a vegetarian,” I said out loud.

Dickwad smiled. “I’m telling you, it’s the only way to live. You’ll feel good again, I promise.” He dropped his hand to my knee and jiggled my leg. I felt around in my pocket for the remaining two whitening strips.

Dickwad’s sister hadn’t eaten yet that day. “I’m hungry,” she said.

At a burger joint off the highway, I ordered a Caesar Salad. The brown vinyl booth squeaked underneath my palms. I think I was cold. That was why I was sitting on my hands.

“Caesar salads aren’t vegetarian,” Dickwad said.

“We don’t have any croutons,” the waitress added.

Dickwad wiped the bright red lipstick left by another customer off of his coffee mug and ordered a grilled cheese sandwich. His sister got a cheeseburger. She ate half of it, bloody juices running down her chin, before I got a hard-on.

When the waitress returned with our check, Dickwad smiled. She hated her job, but she couldn’t resist his smile. His teeth were like white lotus flowers. His mouth was like a perfect Hindu shrine. I had seen a picture of one before.

“You ever hear of a rock out in the middle of nowhere near Watertown with the name William Parkman chiseled into it?” Dickwad asked the waitress.

“No, she said, “I can’t say that I have.”

Dickwad left her a tip only a dickwad would leave for a lipstick-stained coffee cup and a sandwich made with American cheese and expired margarine.

We reached Watertown at around 5 p.m. Dickwad insisted that we head to the local bar and have a few beers on him. Maybe we would run into someone who knew where the rock was.

The bar was already silent, but it reached a level of silence unfathomable as we walked in the door. Dickwad’s sister was the only human with breasts. Dickwad and I were the only two men not wearing a down vest and a mustache.

I have never heard much about bears in South Dakota. They seemed like creatures that remained loyal to Alaska and Montana. Nonetheless, a stuffed grizzly stood in a large corner behind the bar, a sign hung from his paw, “86 is a four

letter word."

"Isn't 'bear' a four letter word?" I said to Dickwad's sister.

"Yeah," she said.

"That's not what it means," Dickwad said to both of us.

We ordered three Budweiser's from an old bartender who wore a purple heart pinned to his flannel shirt.

"I don't want a beer," Dickwad's sister said, sliding between us at the bar. "Gimmee a blueberry press," she said to the bartender.

The bartender didn't say a word. He didn't move. It was as if the last five seconds had not happened. Perhaps the phrase "blueberry press" was a sort of time machine. Dickwad and I stared at the head of a stuffed moose above the head of the stuffed bartender and waited. He slid two Budweiser's in front of us and pushed the pomade through his yellow-gray hair.

"We don't have any blueberries here."

Dickwad's sister pulled a lollipop with a blue wrapper from her pocket. "Just make it a vodka on the rocks."

Dickwad wrapped his arm around me and took a deep breath. The stench of the brown carpet and faux wooden walls caked in cigarette smoke and dead skin cells must have burned his lungs. "This looks like a place my grandfather would have liked if he were still alive today," he said. "He was in the Knights of Columbus you know."

The white stripes on an American Flag draped above the main wall of the room had been stained yellow from years of smoky nicotine. The Monday Night Football game on the television was barely visible between the static. The bartender fidgeted with the antennas.

"Why don't you just get one of them Jap TV's?" someone said. The bartender turned red. His purple heart thumped. It got quiet again.

"Shoot. I didn't bring snow chains," Dickwad said.

We got up to go outside and catch snowflakes on our tongue. The bartender joined us in the cold for a cigarette. Out from behind the bar, he looked as if he would almost smile.

"Where you kids from?" he asked.

"California," Dickwad said.

"What brings you to Watertown?" the bartender asked.

"We're looking for a rock," Dickwad's sister said.

The bartender nodded his head. I think he knew what we were talking about. But I can't read minds.

"Ever heard of a William Parkman?" Dickwad asked.

"No sir," the bartender said. Then he crushed his cigarette underneath his shoes even though it wasn't finished.

We stumbled towards the motel in town. Dickwad's sister put her hand around my waist to keep her balance, then quickly pulled it away. No one slipped on the icy sidewalk. I thought that was interesting.

Inside the motel office, Dickwad stared at the sleeping face of the elderly desk attendant. He gently pressed down on the small silver bell, a faint chime bringing her back from her travels halfway to death.

"How can I help you young folks?" she asked.

"We'd like two rooms for the evening," Dickwad said.

As Dickwad put his credit card down, he stopped, inspecting the woman's wrinkles. Her face looked like a tree trunk that had been cut in half. "How old are you, if you don't mind my asking?"

The woman smiled and straightened her spine. "I'll be ninety-two on Thursday."

"You don't look a day over thirty," Dickwad said.

The woman used what was left of her blood supply to blush.

"You ever hear of a rock somewhere in these parts with William Parkman's name on it?" Dickwad inquired.

The old woman's eyes blinked slowly. "Yes," she said. "As a matter of fact, I have."

"Do you know where it is?" Dickwad asked.

She fumbled around with the room keys. "Oh I don't know. I think it's north of here, out on the old Barksdale ranch."

"Much obliged, my darling," Dickwad said. He raised the woman's hand to his lips, and kissed her varicose veins.

In his motel room, Dickwad put his Joan Didion book down and laid on his back. He closed his eyes. He could have been thinking about his grandfather's home in Santa Paula, moving psychically through each room, running his fingertips across the man's big walnut desk, his steel filing cabinets, the yellow-flowered wallpaper in the kitchen, the brown carpet in the living room, sticking his nose in the roses in the front

yard. Perhaps he had not wanted childhood to end. Maybe it was only in adulthood that he contemplated what a bad hand he had been dealt.

I kept my socks on. I thought it was a bit cold in my room, even with the heater on.

"I'm gonna take a shower," Dickwad's sister said. She closed the bathroom door, but did not bother locking it. I heard her bra hit the ground, but not her underwear. The door opened back up. She covered her breasts, a small amount of yellow light glowing behind her.

"Will you sit in here with me while I take a shower?" she asked.

"Sure," I said.

I laid down on my back on the pale pink tile floor, pressed a whitening strip to my teeth, and pushed a hand-towel behind my head for a pillow. I liked listening to the water fall from the shower to the tub. It was like an artificial waterfall. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine all the places I wished I had been.

I could hear her butt cheeks splash against the tub as she sat down. I stared at the shower curtain looking for her silhouette, but found only my shadow. She ran two fingers down between her legs. I touched myself through my jeans. It didn't take me long to come, thinking of the places I had been on her body. The water turned off. I opened my eyes to a cloud of steam. She stepped out of the shower and over my head, hot water dripping from her buttocks onto my chin.

"Goodnight" she said.

Dickwad woke us up at sunrise that morning. We hadn't bothered to lock the door the night before. He stood there staring at us in each of our beds. Maybe he felt like a father for the first time.

"Up and at em," he yelled, shaking our legs with each of his hands. "It's time to find the rock!" He handed me a beer. "To the rock!" He pressed his bottle to mine.

Dickwad's sister sat in her bed, up to her neck in covers. I took a sip, then passed it to her.

"Thank you," she said.

In the car, Dickwad popped a Mozart cassette into the tape

deck and began playing an imaginary violin as he steered through the melting snow with his knees. I could feel the tires giving way to the ice as he weaved down the long narrow highway towards the Barksdale ranch. He pulled another beer from the bucket in the backseat and began to hum along to the piece.

"This is my favorite," he said. "Wolfgang." The back tires swerved a little more. His sister leaned forward, but did not say anything. She might have been worried that her words would add extra weight to the rear of the car, just enough to send us into an embankment of snowy death.

"You got snow tires on this car?" I asked. I didn't want to die, but sometimes Dickwad said he did.

"Nope," Dickwad said. "Sun's coming out."

I put on my sunglasses. His sister began squinting.

The Barksdale ranch was hardly a "ranch" anymore. What was once an impressive homestead was now a few splinters of scattered wood. The only structure left standing was an outhouse with a rope attached to it.

Dickwad inspected the frail latrine, opening and closing the limp door. "My grandfather told me that when a blizzard would come through and you had to use the can, you had to follow the rope from the front door to the outhouse, otherwise you could get lost and die. Zero visibility you know."

We stood staring out across the Great Plains, 325 acres that at one time had belonged to someone named Barksdale. Maybe he was an engineer with Great Northern. He probably had a nice mustache.

"Finding that rock out here is the equivalent of finding that outhouse without a rope in a blizzard," I said.

Dickwad nodded his head. "You're probably right." He picked up the rope attached to the outhouse and began walking.

We followed along behind him. I was amazed at how big his feet were. My little feet sunk snugly into his snowy footprints, and his sister's into mine.

"I want to thank you guys for coming out here with me," Dickwad said. "It means a lot to me."

"I liked your grandfather," I said. "I would have done the same thing."

Dickwad kept tugging at the rope hoping to find something attached to the end of it, but only more rope slid through his hands as we wandered further away from the road.

I turned around to see if Dickwad's sister was all right. She walked solemnly in the snow with her head down, but this time, without a lollipop. She could have been thinking about the last time she made love. It wasn't her idea. She was too drunk to stop it.

"Holy shit," Dickwad said.

Gray clouds began to move in. I looked up waiting for something to happen in the sky, but instead, Dickwad dropped the rope, and began running towards a large object in the middle of the white field.

His sister and I ran after him. Next to an abandoned set of railroad tracks that once led people towards lovers and their future stood a large rock, the name "William Parkman" chiseled into it, the date "11-04-32" underneath it.

William Parkman III dropped to his knees and ran his long slender fingers across the numbers and letters. A tear froze in the corner of his eye. "It's gonna snow pretty hard," he said.

I had never seen a blizzard before. It only took a few moments for the snow to collapse upon us like a dump-truck full of icy white. We sat down next to each other in the snow, pressing our bodies together for warmth. I smiled.

Dickwad's sister looked at me. "Your teeth look yellow," she said.

There were no other colors in the world except for my yellow teeth and the stark white of a South Dakota blizzard. I fondled the last whitening strip in my pocket. "I have to go to the bathroom," I said.

"Don't get lost," Dickwad said.

I stood up and began following the rope through the snow. Dickwad and his sister sat silently, their heads pressed together, their bodies dissolving behind a curtain of white. Maybe they were thinking of their parents and their grandfather, how everyone around them seemed to die.

I opened the door to the outhouse and pulled a knife from my pocket. I pressed the tip of the blade into the wood. "Chris Duke 11-04-10." I wondered if someone someday, a grandson or a widow, would care enough about me to come find this outhouse. I unzipped my pants. It was yellow. I was cold.

Contributor Notes

Charles Alden received a doctorate in biophysics from Purdue University and lives in Durham, North Carolina. His work has appeared in *The Pedestal*, *Writer's Digest*, *The MacGuffin*, *The Urban Hiker*, and *The World and I*. Once national junior chess champion, he also runs with the Carolina Godiva Track Club.

Lisa E. Balvanz I originally started writing "Dream-Work" as an exercise in voice. Previously, I had written mostly third person narratives, and I wanted to experiment with writing a first-person narrator with a voice that was very different from my own. Though this is now one of my older stories, it was instrumental in pushing my craft to a new level. It remains one of my favorite stories, and I'm happy it's found a home in *Sixfold.*

Walter T. Bowne recently won the New Jersey Wordsmith Competition for his humorous essay "Omission." Other humor pieces have appeared in *The Satirist*, *The Yellow Ham,* and *Monkey Bicycle.* His fiction has appeared in *Inkwell Journal*, *Essays and Fictions*, *Philadelphia Stories*, and *Weird NJ*. He lives with his wife and two daughters in Cherry Hill, NJ. He teaches English and journalism at Eastern High School in Voorhees, NJ.

Daniel Bryant's short fiction has appeared in *Nimrod*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Hospital Drive*, *Madison Review*, *Silk Road,* and *Crab Orchard Review*. He has also published poetry and essays in a variety of literary and medical magazines, and his novel *May We Waken One by One*, about a radicalized West African, still languishes on his hard drive.

Christopher Cervelloni is a writer, skier and teacher. And not always in that order. He is currently an MFA candidate at Rutgers. You can read his blog and his other published works at www.BlueSquareWriter.wordpress.com

Ellen Darion lives and writes in Somerville, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *Epoch*, *McCall's*, and other publications.

Jane Deon grew up in Vermont's North East Kingdom and studied creative writing in the MFA program at Florida International University in Miami, Florida. She is now a writer and teacher in Boston, Massachusetts.

Amy Dodgen earned a BA in English from Columbia University and is working on her second novel. Her work has appeared in *Gargoyle* and *Flying*, among other publications. When she's not writing, she works as a pilot for a major airline. She currently lives in Atlanta with her husband and young daughters.

Sarah Einstein is a PhD candidate at Ohio University in Creative Nonfiction. Her work has appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *PANK*, *Fringe*, and other journals, has been anthologized by *Creative Nonfiction* and Best of the Net, and has been awarded a Pushcart Prize. She is also the Managing Editor of *Brevity*.

Erin Flanagan is the author of the short story collections *The Usual Mistakes* and *It's Not Going to Kill You, and Other Stories*, both published by the University of Nebraska Press. Her most recent work appears in *Prairie Schooner, Missouri Review, Colorado Review*, and elsewhere. She is an associate professor of English at Wright State University in Dayton, OH.

Amy Foster is a writer and instructor living in Portland, Oregon. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Queens University of Charlotte in 2009. When not writing or reading or teaching, she is a mother to Jane, a wife to Sarah, a knitter, a gardener, a hiker, a dog belly-patter, and a (very) novice banjo player.

Joseph Hill is a part-time bike mechanic and a part-time home brewer. He is only a writer when there are no more bikes to fix and no more beers to brew.

Jessica Bryant Klagmann was born in New Hampshire and raised by an herbalist mother and a farmer/beekeeper father. She received an MFA from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where she was also fortunate enough to acquire a haunted truck, an adventurous husband, and a too-adventurous dog. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Hippocampus Magazine*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Written River: A Journal of Eco-Poetics*, and elsewhere.

Gordon MacKinney has been a monthly newspaper columnist since 2006 (*Fort Collins Coloradoan* and the *Denver Post*). He has a Harvard MBA with undergrad degree from Miami University of Ohio. He's a father of five—ages 6 through 18—and an entrepreneur and co-owner of a 16-year-old marketing communications agency, www.lightsourcecreative.com. Learn more at www.gmackinney.com.

Ann Minnett lives in beautiful NW Montana with her husband. She's set aside a career in developmental psychology to incorporate what she's learned into her fiction. The idea for "Offerings" grew from observing a discrete community of people who inhabited the creek beds near her former home in Dallas. She recently published her first novel, *Burden of Breath*.

Justin J. Murphy was born in London in 1980 and relocated to Los Angeles, CA, not too long after. He is the cofounder of The Easy Writers copywriting service, and recently completed his first novel, *Let Me Tell You How It Isn't*. His writing has appeared in various journals, including *The Café Review, Epicenter, Wilderness House Review, Red Sky, and Right Hand Pointing*.

Chris Tarry is a Canadian writer and musician living in Brooklyn. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Literary Review, On Spec, The G.W. Review, PANK, Bull Men's Fiction, Monkeybicycle,* and elsewhere. Chris holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of British Columbia, and his debut story collection, *How To Carry Bigfoot Home*, is forthcoming from Red Hen Press in March 2015. Chris is also a four-time Juno Award winner (the Canadian Grammy), and one of New York's most sought-after bass players.

Aliya Amirh Tyus-Barnwell has had fantasy picked up along *Storyhighway,* interpretations of myths in *Expanded Horizons,* and literary fiction published by *Evergreen Review,* where she later worked. Currently at work on a sword and soul novel, she lives and writes in NYC. Child marriage is a violation of human rights, though is still customary in many middle-eastern and north-African countries. As fiction has often made plain, the institute *can* be disparaged.

Melanie Unruh received an MFA in fiction from the University of New Mexico. Her work has appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *Post Road*, *Echo Ink Review*, *Pear Noir!*, *Philadelphia Stories*, and *The Inside Mag*. Her first novel, *At the Rim of Vision*, was a semi-finalist for the 2011 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award in the YA category. She is currently at work on the second. She lives in Albuquerque with her fiancé and their two cats.