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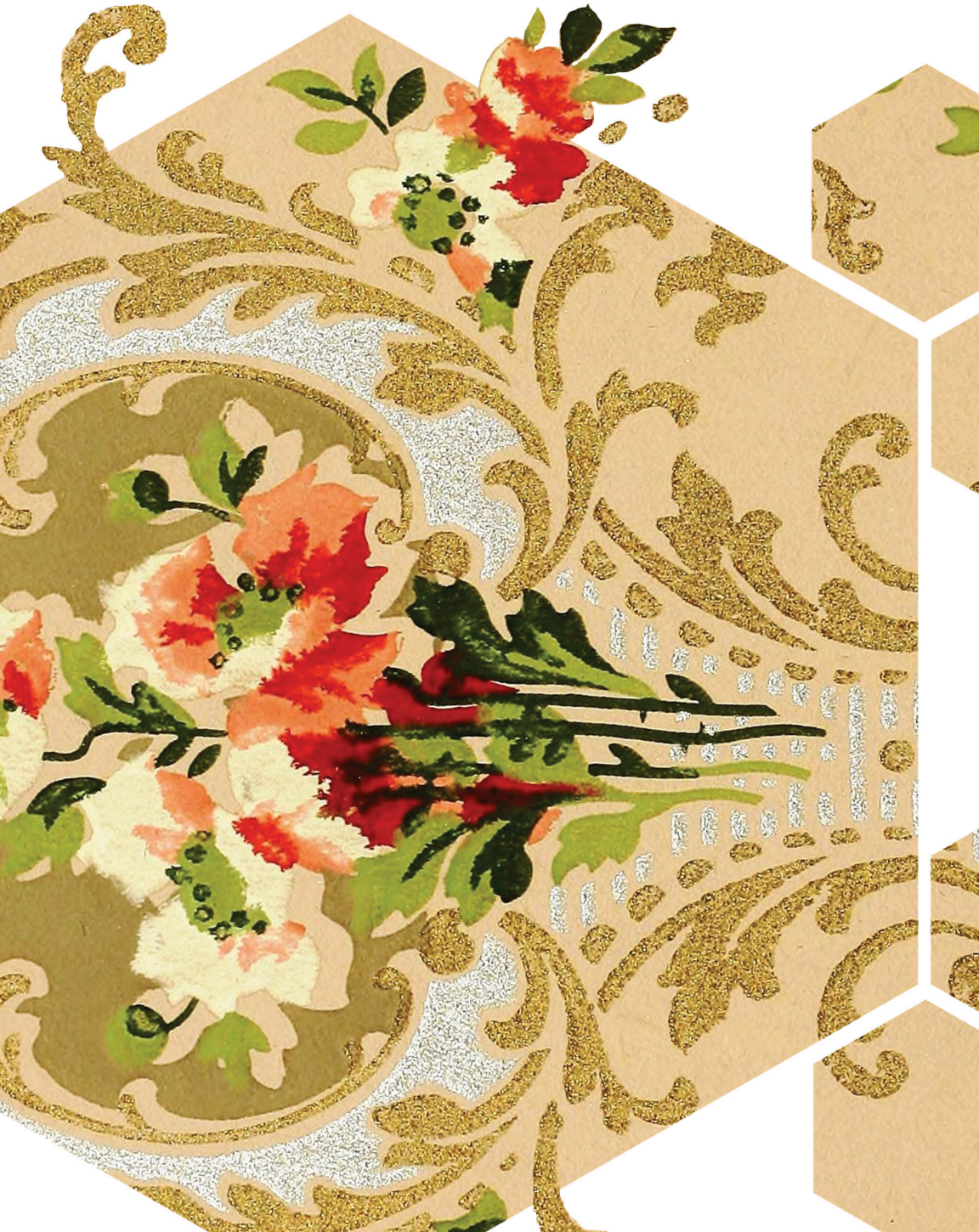
FICTION FALL 2013



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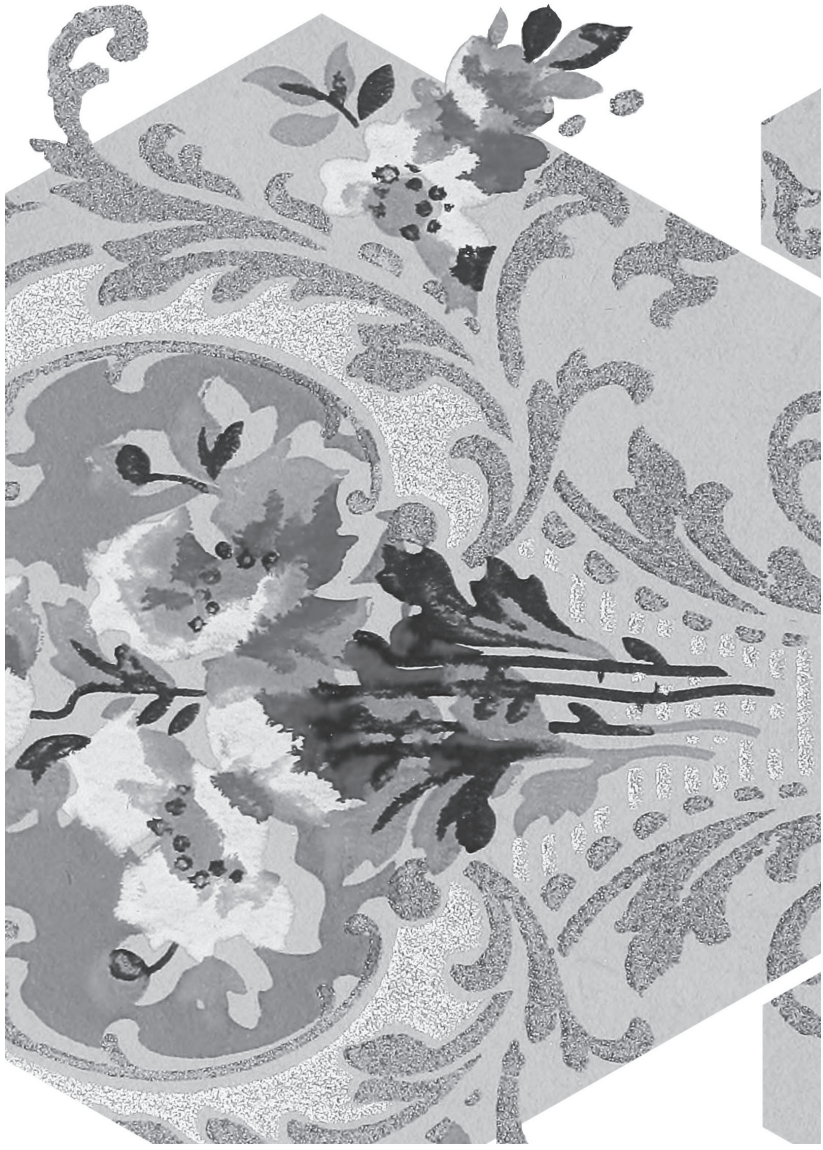

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FICTION FALL 2013
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Slater Welte

What Made Us Leave

Saturday morning I am out gardening, turning the back bed, getting ready for fruits and vegetables, when I find the hand. It is a large hand, mammoth, something belonging to a giant, a side-show freak, maybe a Cro-Magnon or Big Foot. I use the hoe to turn it over so the palm is up top.

I have never found a hand in my garden before. Dead birds, yes, a dead squirrel, but nothing like this. My garden is kept clean. It is my oasis from family, work, and life, where worries abate and time can stand still, providing me with the brief interlude needed to calm my busy mind. I am very careful to keep my beds clear of any pests or animals. Even my wife and daughter aren't allowed too near. I am known in the neighborhood for my roses and tulips and during the summer my tomatoes and strawberries. And here I have this human hand.

Well, time certainly stands still now. 9:47, Saturday morning. My daughter has a Little League game at eleven and after the game we will go to Skeeters with the team and have hamburgers and hot dogs. If my daughter goes off to a friend's house my wife and I will either make love or go shopping, taking advantage of our time alone. For dinner we have chicken marinating in the refrigerator. It has been, until this minute, a typical Saturday in our family.

A huge hand with fat fingers and a thumb the size of a regular penis, the lines on its palm resemble valleys and rivers, the knuckles ball-bearings. I touch at it with my hoe. The nails are manicured, reflecting the morning sun. At the wrist, where the hand has been severed, I find ants moving in and out, beginning to congregate around the edges. Ah, there they are. I will have to dose the bed with organic ant killer before spreading out the compost.

I hear a small gasp behind me. My daughter, dressed in her team uniform, has come outside. What is that? Nothing, I say, trying to hoe dirt over the thing. Is that a hand? Yes,

it is. Whose hand is it? I don't know. You don't know? My daughter is seven years old and full of questions. Where do babies come from? What is the meaning of life? Is there really a Santa Claus? A very inquisitive girl and wise beyond her years. I blame her schooling.

She holds her softball glove against her chest. My wife has put her blond hair in pigtails. The team cap looks good on her. My daughter is serious about her softball, her classes, her friends, and just about everything else. She gets that from me.

"It's so big," she says. "Is it an ogre?"

"I doubt it."

"Is it real?" She leans over and I tell her not to touch it. She puts her face close and I see her eyes take in every inch of the hand. "Wow," she says.

She looks around as if other body parts must be lying about, a foot here, a leg there, but we only have this, and I wonder if a severed hand is the best thing for my daughter to see. It might give her nightmares, a beast with five fingers chasing her through the woods, though she rarely has bad dreams. My wife is the one with the sleep terrors, horrible passages, waking me up in the middle of the night with her screams and cries. No, my daughter says her prayers, gets in bed, listens to me read from Harry Potter, we're on the third book now, and then she sleeps the sleep of the dead. So do I, except when my wife has one of her nightmares, then I am awake most of the night with her.

My daughter asks, Where is the rest of the man? I don't know. You don't know? I don't know. Is he down there? She points at the vegetable bed. The hand reminds her of Frankenstein, the way the body was stitched together, and she laughs when I do an Igor imitation, hunching my shoulder and going, yes, master, yes, master, trying to change her focus from the hand.

"What are you doing?" My wife stands at the back door. "We need to leave soon."

"Daddy found a hand."

"He did not," my wife says flatly. "We don't have time for this. It's almost ten."

My wife is the skeptic in the family. There is a difference

between being serious and being skeptical. For example, Sunday mornings my daughter and I attend church, Catholic of course, and my wife never does. She scoffs at religion. My wife says she won't condone the idea that we are born sick and if we don't get well then we are all going to hell. It sounds, to her, childish, and mean-spirited. She can't imagine an immature god. I try to explain faith but she won't hear any of that.

My wife likes the theory that we, our life, our world, our universe, might be just a hologram at the edge of a black hole in an alternate state of existence. That, to me, is unthinkable.

She makes a tut-tut sound as she comes across the lawn, the fresh spring grass bristling under her long steps, but when she sees the hand she gradually slows to a stop. What is that doing here?

We stare down at the thing in my vegetable bed. It is white, very pale, new enough that the bugs and worms haven't got to it yet. There are no spiders or maggots crawling over the skin, only the ants and ants in this part of the world can come on at any time. They are my constant enemy, those and aphids. Aphids are the spawn of the devil.

Last Saturday I turned the bed for the first time this spring after the long winter. This is to let the dirt breathe. Today it would get a second hoe and then next week the planting and the spreading of compost. So the hand is brand-new, a recent addition in the last few days.

"I want to keep it." My daughter says. "Can I keep it?"

"No," my wife says.

"I'll put it in the freezer. You won't ever see it. I can take it to school for show and tell. Please?"

My wife tells her no again and then sends her inside to brush her teeth before we head to the ball field. My daughter hesitates. She really wants the hand, thinking it will become memorabilia, an heirloom, something she can keep frozen for the rest of her life, bringing it out at family events and special occasions. My daughter also has quite the imagination. She gets that from my wife. But she heads inside anyway, stomping up the steps to the back door to show us she is angry at not getting her prize.

Alone, we stare more at the hand. This is the sort of thing

that can burrow its way into my wife's bad dreams and I foresee nights where I will be woken up by shouts of "The hand, the hand." I kneel down and touch the skin, surprisingly soft, no cuts or calluses, except down near the base of the thumb, a dark bruise there. It didn't come from anyone who worked in a garden. My hands are a battlefield by the end of spring planting.

It is the left hand. Does that mean anything? Is it a message? My wife says, in India, the left hand path follows the trail to magic and delusion. It is, she says, in Arabia, the one they use to wipe their butts with. The mafia, if I remember correctly, sends a left hand as a sign of deliverance from evil.

My wife wants me to rebury the hand, dig a deep hole and pretend it never existed. No, I say, not in my garden. She says we should bag it up and put it in the trash. No, I say, it belongs to somebody. Nobody we know, she replies. We don't know anybody that big.

She says calling the police will only make matters worse. Right now it is just a hand but if people find out we have a hand in our backyard then who knows what else they will think. We will become the family who found a hand in their backyard. We will become the subject of conversation, rumors will start, and soon the neighbors will start thinking we are murderers or something, and we'll be slowly ostracized, no more dinners, no more Sunday barbeques, not even Girl Scouts or block parties.

I tell her she doesn't care about those sorts of things anyway. She's told me hundreds of times how much she hates doing what she calls the "suburban crap," that living here has given her the creeps from day one, calling it some kind of temporary sentence to her soul, a long layover on her way through the valley of purgatory.

She says she's thinking of our daughter. She doesn't want our daughter to be known as the hand girl. Something like that could follow her for years, to middle school and even high school. Did I want that for our daughter?

I ask her to give me a moment to think this through. She makes a valid point, about the notoriety, it would be brutal around here, but this hand does belong to somebody and it is our civic duty to report it to the authorities. I doubt if re-

attachment is possible, but there is a man out there, a very large man, wandering around missing his hand. The other question, of course, is how it got here. Neither one of us wants to consider that answer just yet. Someone, a stranger, buried it here, but why, was it on purpose, specifically choosing my garden, and then why my garden, what had I done to make someone want to put a hand in my dirt, and if they did that then they wouldn't be a stranger, they would be someone we knew, and what had we done to deserve this, had we crossed the wrong den mother, the mad neighborhood dad, or it was random, a criminal driving down Addison late at night with a loose hand in his car, deciding my backyard looked like the perfect spot to dispose of the last remains of his crime, and maybe he buried the other parts in the other backyards, maybe the Johnsons have a foot, the Woods an elbow, or maybe one of the neighborhood dogs found a stray hand lying in the street and brought it over here and buried it for later. The possibilities branch out like a clump of weeds, all of them rotten.

So there is only one reasonable decision. I ask my wife to go inside and bring back a bag, one of the big freezer bags, and I will throw the damned thing in the garbage. No, I think, not yet, first the freezer, my daughter is right, hide it in the back, behind the ice cream, keep it cold until Tuesday morning trash pick-up. No reason to risk the garbage starting to stink.

My wife is holding the bag open while I am using the hoe to push the hand inside when my daughter returns with Nicole, her next-door friend, see, there it is, I'm not lying.

Her friend comes close and takes a hard look at the thing. Her friend is an aggressive little girl. The world revolves around her. She thinks it is unfair that she didn't find the hand first.

Hanna Wood, her mother, isn't far behind, and Hanna here means there is no longer any choice about calling the police. Hanna already has her phone to her ear, dialing around and telling everyone what we have in my vegetable garden.

Hanna Wood is a lawyer, so is her husband, they are both Baptist and they live in the next house and they both like to play bridge, and I think that pretty much says it all.

11 is my wife's most magical number. Then 19. Another is 5.

5:11. The time my alarm clock goes off in the morning.

5/19. The day we married.

5. Jasper Johns, her favorite painter, his favorite number. When we were young and lived in New York the Museum of Modern Art held a Jasper Johns retrospective and I think I followed her to the show about twenty times before it ended. We had to buy two copies of the exhibition book and now one sits out on our coffee table, its pages worn, thumbed, stained, and the other is on a shelf still in its plastic shrink-wrap.

5. The amount of years since we have moved here, and they feel like years and not seconds. Time in this city has not gone by in a flash.

We have no friends here, no one really to talk to. We are considered interlopers. The people from New York. Of course our daughter has many friends and we do sometimes go to her friends' houses and make uncomfortable, halting conversations with the parents while the children play together.

19. How many chairs we have in the house if you don't include the sofas, couches, and the chaise lounge. At night, when she can't sleep after a bad dream, my wife will sometimes get out of bed and wander around the house and count the chairs, going from room to room, beginning down in the kitchen, as a way to calm herself and make the world normal again. Some nights she miscounts and I hear her voice in the darkness of our bedroom. Seventeen? Eighteen? And she will have to return downstairs and start the process all over again.

My wife says she might be a cabalist, the way she sees numbers and letters as mystical and full of meaning. Her letters are J and W, on occasion V.

11. The day my daughter was born.

11/11. The night we met at a dinner party on the Upper West Side. It wasn't exactly love at first sight. I thought she might be unstable and she thought I was fuckable.

11/11/11. We flew back to New York and stayed in the eleventh room on the eleventh floor of a hotel on West Eleventh Street.

11. The amount of inches of the dildo she keeps hidden in the bottom drawer of her dresser. She knows I know but we

both pretend it doesn't exist.

Or we used to pretend.

One morning, this last Christmas season, my daughter, who knows why, opened my wife's bottom dresser drawer and saw the head of the dildo peeking out from under the stack of sweaters and picked it up and brought it down to the kitchen table where we were finishing up breakfast.

"Look what I found! It's a penis!"

"Yes," my wife said, "of sorts."

"I know all about penises." She cradled the thing in her arms like it was a doll. "I've seen lots of them."

I asked her where. At school. At school? Who has been showing you their penis at school? My teacher. Which teacher? Mrs. Abrams, she teaches science and she showed us drawings of penises and vaginas, I have a vagina, and she told us how mommies and daddies make babies. I said I really must talk to the school more often.

She held the huge rubber toy at me. "Is it yours, daddy?"

"No," I said.

"It's mine," my wife said, matter of fact, and reached across the table and took the dildo from my daughter and put it on her lap as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"But, mommy, you don't need a penis."

I told her to run upstairs and change out of her pajamas. She stopped at the door and asked if she could have the penis. She wanted to show her friend Nicole. She'll take good care of it, she promised, she won't lose it or anything. No, I said, go on and change.

We still do pretend it isn't around, though I am sure it is still here somewhere. It's not in the dresser drawer anymore, or anywhere else I look, and I am not about to ask.

Half the neighborhood is in my backyard by the time the cops arrive. There are the Johnsons, Troy and Michelle and their twin boys, and the Shaws, Vance and Velma, and their brood, and the Whites and the Bolgers and some even over from the next block, and of course the Woods, Hanna and her husband John, the lawyers, and Hanna is already starting to talk about the legal ramifications. The rest of them, there must be twenty or more by now, mingle around and

whisper under their breaths, many of the mothers hold their hands up to their kids' eyes so they can't see. Aww, mom, I hear over and over.

My wife has her told-you-so look on her face. She blames me for not being quick enough to get rid of the hand. She is fuming inside. And I don't blame her. Already I hear someone say they always thought we were a bit odd.

People are taking phone-pictures, sending them out who knows where. They ask me to kneel down by the hand so I can be in the frame. They ask me to pose like I was when I found the thing. They ask my wife and daughter to stand by me for a family portrait. My wife refuses, naturally, telling me to put down the hoe and stop acting like a dunce. This is getting bad enough without pictures of us going out around the world.

Some think the hand has grandeur, nobility, an icon from the past age of giants, and others, the more religious, wonder if it is a portent announcing the end of the world. Didn't Revelations say something about the hand of Satan? Hanna Wood worries that it might affect our property values. Who would want to buy a house in a neighborhood where hands are found in backyard gardens?

The hand of God, the hand of Fate, now various conspiracies dot the conversations, bouncing around willy-nilly without any direction. It becomes a portent, a symbol, a message from beyond. Saint Gabriel is the left hand of God and Gabriel appeared to Mary before her virginal conception and Gabriel will blow his horn to announce the return of Christ. Everyone agrees we are at the End of Days. It is a common belief in our neighborhood, the fantasy that we are so favored by God that we will be around to witness the great apocalypse. Who wouldn't want to experience the last moment of secular existence? It would be a "holy shit" to the extreme. At my side my wife rolls her eyes, wisely holding her tongue, keeping her holographic ideas to herself. Openly espousing the thought of an alternative existence would, in this subdivision, be grounds for an actual stoning.

When the cops finally show the crowd separates to let them through. In our neighborhood the police are respected, to a high degree, seen as the protectors of our affluence from the ravages of the rest of the world. There are two of them, both

young, and they walk up and lean over and stare down in my bed for a long time.

"Yep, it sure is," one says. "Anybody 'round here missing a hand?"

General laughter. Yes, you can feel the thought, the police can be funny just like us. Isn't that nice?

This encourages him and he starts saying things like, Can you give me hand? and All hands accounted for?, bringing more laughter, though dwindling. He's not as funny as we want him to be.

The other asks me the routine questions. Name, how long we've lived here, what I do for a living, how I found the hand. He writes down my answers with quick, easy strokes in a little notebook. Do I know whose hand this is? He raises his head to the crowd. Does anybody have a clue?

"How about you, little girl," he bends down to my daughter, "do you know?" She shakes her head shyly. He smiles. "So, no arms and legs hanging around the house?"

"No," she says quietly, then a light bulb goes off and her eyes get happy. "But my mommy has a penis!"

"Your mother has a what?"

"A penis."

The adults laugh a little, a bit nervous. You don't hear the word penis around here much, or anything sexual. It isn't that type of neighborhood.

"She does not," her friend Nicole says. "She has a vagina."

Vagina, of course, is worse than penis. There are more than a few gasps. Vagina is a word used behind closed doors.

"She does, too." My daughter is angry at not being believed. "I've seen it. I held it, didn't I, daddy?"

"I'm sure she does not," the cop says, but he glances over at my wife as if he needs confirmation.

"She does. It is a penis and it's this big," she exaggerates her arms way out, "and it's made of rubber."

Most of the adults understand now, some probably won't ever, and there is a hush like we are waiting for a whistle to blow. The cops snigger into their hands and try to catch a quick look at my wife out of the corner of their eyes. My wife stares straight ahead and a funny smile comes across her face and then she shrugs as if every woman in the neighbor-

hood owns a dildo, maybe two or three. So she's been caught out, no big deal, and it's charming and funny how she carries off the nonchalance and composure embedded in her silent agreement that she does in fact sometimes use an extracurricular object for her pleasure and enjoyment.

But she and I both know there is a very good probability that she has the only dildo within a ten block radius. Oh, there might be a vibrator or two stuck in some drawer somewhere, unused for years, but the idea of any of these women standing around in my backyard having a sex toy the size of a horse is beyond comprehension. These are mothers and lawyers and accountants, team moms and brokers and entrepreneurs. Sex, for them, is their own business, between them and their husbands, in bed, an adult activity kept secret.

"Disgusting," Hanna Wood says. "There are children here. The children don't need to hear this."

She seems to speak for all the mothers. They nod behind her in agreement, their heads bobbing up and down, stepping forward as if they are about to attack.

"Disgusting," Hanna Woods says again.

"We don't use it together," I say. I have no idea why I say that.

"Spare me the details," she waves a hand. "I don't want to hear it."

The men, though, they are a different story. With them my wife has reached an even higher level. Before, she was the beauty of the neighborhood, eye candy for their imagination, and now she is the beauty who uses a dildo for masturbation. Talk about an ultimate suburban wet dream, one of the top three for any of them, and they watch her, unable to hide the fantasies coursing through their minds, and I don't doubt she'll be in their thoughts the next time they go after it alone.

And they watch me, too, and I hear the "lucky dog" and there is something else, the unspoken question, why does she need sex toys, flowing across the backyard. Something, it implies, is wrong with me and our marriage for my beautiful wife to possess, and presumably use, such objects for erotic pleasure. I must not be able to fulfill her, and if I cannot be man enough then maybe she has been scouting around for someone who is able to satisfy her needs, perhaps a man with

very big hands. And you know what they say about a man with big hands. The enormous thing my daughter described could be a life-size replica of another part of the man found in my garden.

I read it all in their eyes and half-smiles. The officers are also grinning. Yes, I want to say, we, like most couples, I assume, have our difficulties in the bedroom from time and time and, yes, when those problems do occur it usually is on my end, but they are rare enough that I haven't asked my doctor for a Viagra prescription just yet. And yes, I want them to know, I am absolutely fine in the size department, even if I am a bit crooked.

"Well," the cop blows his breath out, "okay. Umm."

Our late arrival at the ball field hardly comes unnoticed. The game practically stops as we make it to the stands, a silence descends, and everyone watches us while we take our seats. The coaches turn, the kids, the parents around us, even the umpire gives us the once over. "Hand" is whispered over and over.

It is only the top of the second. Softball games for seven-year-old girls last forever. A five-inning game can go on for two hours, with the hundred walks and thousand errors. But my daughter does play well, the star of her team, shortstop her position and clean-up her batting order. As I said, she is serious about the game, and I can tell she is mad we are so late.

While we watch I field a million questions. How, why, what, where, who. The coach tilts his ear in the dugout so he can listen to my explanations. Again and again I describe finding the hand, adding tidbits about how I go about my spring gardening, highlighting this year's planned fruit and vegetable crop. Tomatoes, of course, and lima beans and black-eyed peas. A new strawberry type, designed to stay small and tart. But no one bites and the conversation keeps returning to the cops and the hand, their questions becoming more and more aggressive. No one can understand how I cannot know whose hand it was in my garden. Surely I must have some idea of the owner.

And when we return from the ball field, my daughter a hero

with a two-out double in the last inning, we find a local television van parked in front of our house and the reporter and her crew on our lawn. My wife refuses to be interviewed. But you are such a beautiful woman, they tell her, and she really is a pretty girl. The camera will absolutely adore you.

There is also a police van and the CSI team is in my backyard, busy digging up my oregano and my dill, my bulbs and my seedlings, tearing apart my line of rose bushes, while they search for stray body parts, and I stand and watch them as they destroy all my hours of hard work in a matter of minutes, and I feel like one of those strange people you see on television who are sobbing after a tornado has decimated a trailer home park and they have seen a lifetime of memories ripped from their grasp in the blink of an eye.

Later we are the lead story on one station and second on the other. Neither mentions our name but they do say the two thousand block of Addison and our address is plain to see above our front door when the camera shows our house, and all night I hear cars slow down out front, curious to view the place where the hand was found. Some stop and take photos, the flashes going off like fireworks at the curb of our property.

Tonight we lay side by side in bed after making love. Both of us struggle to catch our breaths. It has been one of our best sex sessions in a long while, certainly the best since before the Easter holidays, a real reap and sow. It is as if we had forgotten how we like to do it. My wife shifts and curls against me and places her head on my chest. At first I think she is crying but it is really gentle laughter. She says our life has become absurd.

Later I hear her rise and I know she cannot sleep and that she will begin her insomnia ritual of counting the chairs in our house, beginning with the breakfast nook and then to the formal, followed by our den, our living room, and our study, and she will slowly make her way up the stairs, careful not to touch the step that creaks, and turn to my daughter's room for the chair at her desk and the reading chair by the lamp and finally our bedroom and the twin chairs at the bay window.

I fall asleep, I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I know my daughter is at my side, saying, Daddy, daddy, daddy.

My daughter wears her Yankees nightshirt, from when we went to the city to spend a weekend and saw an afternoon game at the stadium. It engulfs her small frame like a sack made for potatoes. She jabs her finger into my shoulder to make sure I am awake.

Mommy, she says, mommy is screaming.

And my wife is screaming, a breathless, frightened sort of yell. I can hear her all the way upstairs and it is a big house. Downstairs I find her standing at the open front door and down on our welcome mat I see a severed right hand. It is the other's twin. And now I wonder if we might not find a better place to live.

Heather Frese

The Coffee Table Book of Funeral Etiquette

Prologue: Be advised that dead bodies may not fully resemble the people they once were. This fact will be upsetting. Remember that the mortician did the best he/she could, and did not stretch the skin around the deceased's eyes so tightly as to make him/her appear Asian on purpose. Keep in mind that, upon first glance at the corpse, the bereaved may begin to feel as though they're in a bubble, encapsulated in a gaping emptiness.

I stand over the body of my Aunt May, the body of the one constant presence in my life. Aunt May never, not once in her life, wore thick pancake make-up with circles of rouge on her cheeks like a china doll. She slept flat-out on her stomach, not primly on her back, hands crossed neatly one over the other. Her hair was wild and wind-blown, sticking out in frantic tufts, not perfectly positioned in stiff, starched curls. I expected her death; what I didn't expect was the wrenching pain in my chest when she went, the absolute, utter finality of the separation cleaving into me. I didn't expect to scream and hold on to her like a toddler when they took her body away. I didn't expect to recede inside myself. I didn't expect that at all. And so I stand over her body, the dutiful niece, my hair pulled back neatly from my face; I'm wearing a crisp black suit. I wonder, idly, if I can recycle the suit when I finally get my real estate license, or if that's just plain bad taste all around. Do real estate agents even wear crisp black suits?

"Mom," my son, Austin, says, tugging at my hand. Austin is six years old. I don't know if that's old enough to understand death, to understand that Aunt May's not just sleeping, that the creepy, pallid body in the polished box is not her. Austin wiggles his tie. "I think Walter just bit Grandpa."

I look away from Aunt May, across the dimly-lit room crowded with people. It's warm and the air smells of thirty different perfumes. Over by the guestbook, my best friend,

Charlotte, tugs at the tiny black snarling mass that is Walter, Yorkshire Terrorist extraordinaire. Walter lunges at my dad and barks, sharp and high-pitched, and the hum of conversation stops. Walter latches on to Dad's pant leg and growls, shaking his head. For a moment the air is filled with nothing but sad, sad organ music. *On a hill far away, stood an old rugged cross*. Dad kicks his leg until Walter lets go. Walter's posture changes, softens. People start talking again. My dad gives Walter a dirty look and goes across the room to hug someone. Walter glances up at Charlotte and wags his stub of a tail, as if he's expecting praise, then sits down and licks his chops. He never did get along with my dad.

I send Austin to my mom and walk over to Charlotte, my heels sinking into the too-soft carpet. I've never read a book of funeral etiquette, and I certainly don't know if there's one that covers proper behavior when the deceased's beloved Yorkie, specially instructed to be present at calling hours, starts attacking mourners. For a second I picture a funereal massacre—scattered limbs, Walter's muzzle wet with blood, people stumbling over one another in search of missing body parts.

"I think he's still out for blood," Charlotte says. She stands up. Walter takes his leash in his mouth and barks around it.

I wave my brother, Nate, over to Charlotte's corner. "Take Walter outside," I say to Nate.

Nate looks suspicious, or maybe that's just the look he gets on his face whenever Charlotte's around. Six years ago, Nate and Charlotte had a *thing*. Now what they have is a *history*. "You're the only one he doesn't bite," Nate says. I want to say "nuh-uh," to stamp my foot and insist Nate do it. Being around my brother brings out the latent brat in me. He's right, though. Walter's a nutbag, but I can make him behave.

I take Walter's leash from Charlotte and walk outside. It's a windy spring Hatteras day, chilly and sharp, with a blueberry sky. Aunt May would've laughed if I'd said something like "blueberry sky" to her. She had no patience for fanciful language. "This is this and that is that, no two ways about it, kid." Walter huffs and looks up at me, expectant, as if he wants me to say, "Go for a walk?" He paws the ground like a bull. "Not now," I tell him. I sit down on a stair step. My crisp black suit will get dirty and my hair's already wind-blown,

but I don't care. The parking lot's full of cars and trucks, rusty old island vehicles with North Carolina plates and fishing poles sticking out everywhere. Charlotte's rental, a BMW with Virginia plates, looks slick and shiny and out of place. I want to take off my heels and run away. I want this fissure in my chest to stop reverberating. I don't know how I'm supposed to do this all day. I don't know what to do. If I were to write a how-to book of funeral etiquette, it would be the coffee table kind. Glossy pages, bright illustrations. Something to set out at my parents' inn for guests to flip through as they wait to check in.

A car pulls up and I decide that Chapter One should deal with arrivals. *For the bereaved, the arrival of the one's former illicit lover may add an extra layer of complication to the grieving process. Try to maintain composure when coming face to face with the bodily incarnation of a past bad decision.* Royce Burrus steps out of his car, polished loafers, adorable Buddha belly, and all. I've been thinking of Royce lately, mainly because whenever I drive up and down Highway Twelve, which, between going to work, picking up Austin, driving Aunt May to doctor appointments, and going to Nags Head for real estate classes, I do about eight thousand times a day, I see big signs that say, "Make Royce your choice." Royce is running for County Commissioner. Two years ago, when I was stuck in a lousy marriage, I made Royce my choice. Then I dumped him and got divorced, and I've been single for two years now. Royce walks across the parking lot to me. He's carrying a bright yellow bouquet of flowers and the largest card I've ever seen. If he'd mailed that thing it would've needed ten stamps, I swear.

Royce sits down on the step. I reign in Walter's leash and put him on the other side of me. "Evie, honey," Royce says. He always liked to call me "Evie, honey." "I'm just really sorry. I know you and May were close." Royce pats my back. The ghost of our affair hovers between us.

"Thank you," I say. Then I think that "thank you" sounds off. It's not like he just complimented my hair. Chapter One of the coffee table book would go on to consider appropriate responses to initial condolences. *The mourner should carry a set of stock phrases in his or her grief arsenal. Acceptable*

condolence-responses include "thank you," "he/she would be happy to see you here," and the ever-popular and multifunctional silent nod while beginning to cry. "Thanks for coming." Only I don't know if I mean it. I stand up and Royce and Walter and I go inside. Royce holds the door for me and the warm, sicky-sweet air turns my stomach. Royce balances the giant bouquet and signs the guestbook. I don't get the whole guestbook thing. What do we do with it after? Charlotte catches my eye and I mouth *Royce* and jerk my head toward him. She grimaces and comes over to steer Royce to a group of older men in fishing waders. Yes. Waders.

Chapter Two of my book would illustrate proper funeral attire. *While the dressiness of the mourner correlates proportionally to their closeness with the deceased, and while the deceased did indeed enjoy both fishing and the company of fishermen, waders are never appropriate.* I'd make a shiny illustration of a fisherman with a big X over it. *Similarly dreadful funeral attire includes tight black satin dresses with butt-bows (just because something is black does not mean it is suitable); stonewashed denim (this is never appropriate); and Tar Heels baseball caps.* Walter and I walk over to Austin and Nate, who're both wearing dark suits and blue ties. *Exemplary.* They sit side by side and I'm struck by how much they look alike. Maybe it's the outfits, or the way Austin adjusts his posture to match Nate's. I sit beside them, resisting the urge to pull Austin onto my lap. I pick up Walter instead.

"How's my kid?" I ask. I'm worried. Austin's never lost someone.

"Hungry," he says.

Nate ruffles Austin's hair. If I did that, Austin would have a fit. "We'll break for lunch soon and head back to Grandpa and Grandma's," Nate says.

Austin uncrosses his arms. He squints up at Nate. "Uncle Nate, can I ride with you?"

Nate doesn't answer because we're hit by a wave of condolence-givers, Nate's friends. He stands and shakes hands. A grasp and one solid pump. A back slap given. A back slap returned. I busy myself with Walter so I don't have to hug any of them. This batch of Nate's friends is the sort to carry soda

bottles as portable spittoons.

"Honey, I want to give you this card." A hand on my shoulder. Kind eyes. Royce. "You open it when you get home." Royce massages my shoulder, his hand staying a fraction longer than comforting requires. *Chapter One, sub-chapter one: hitting on mourners at calling hours is a faux pas. While proper comforting necessitates a certain amount of touching, anything beyond the standard three-second pat is unsuitable and should be avoided.*

Nate slaps the last of his friends on the back and turns, extending his hand to Royce. "Thank you for coming," he says. Nate knows that Royce and I worked together, once. He probably knows we had an affair, but he doesn't know it from me, and he doesn't show it, thank God. I know I should run interference between Nate and Royce. Chat about real estate. Talk about the time May brought my lunch to work and we all ate burritos outside. But all I can do is run my fingers through Walter's soft fur. That's all I can do for now.

Chapter Three of the Coffee Table Book of Funeral Etiquette would concern Funeral Dining Manners. *When bringing a casserole to the bereaved, it is fundamentally inappropriate to include a card demanding that the mourner not break the dish. It is likewise unsuitable to ask the mourner to return said dish by noon the following day so that it may be used at the church potluck.* I toss the pink 3 x 5 card bearing the words DO NOT BREAK along with Emma Midgett's address in the trash and sit down beside my mom at their long dining table. Dad's set out casseroles and Nate and Charlotte have stopped being awkward long enough to eat. *While a nice casserole is traditional funeral fare, keep in mind that not all mourners may be fans of tuna noodle. Do not take it personally if the bereaved discovers that the triple chocolate cake, the macaroni and cheese, or the green bean almandine all taste, in his or her distress, like lumps of wet cardboard.* I'd make a full-page illustration of a steaming tuna noodle casserole accompanied by a woman making an ick-face. Across from me, Austin stuffs lasagna in his mouth like he hasn't eaten in six days. I have a moment of panic—what if I was so trapped in the Grief Bubble that I forgot to feed my son

breakfast? Then I remember fixing his Golden Grahams.

"Remember the time May bought that awful bus?" Mom asks. She's drinking her third mimosa, left over from the inn's Sunday brunch.

It is unwise to mix alcohol and grief when another set of calling hours await. Save your imbibing for the wake. Remember, too, that consumption of alcohol may induce false memories of closeness with the deceased.

"Only May," Charlotte says, putting her hand on my mom's just for a second. *See Chapter one, subchapter one: appropriate vs. inappropriate touching.* Charlotte's good at this sort of thing. She always has been. If Aunt May were here, she would've defended her bus. "That bus was damn practical," she'd have said, slamming her fist on the table. "How many hours of enjoyment did your kids get out of riding that thing up and down the beach?" She'd have been pissed we made the executive decision to not take Walter to afternoon calling hours. Out the window, the Pamlico Sound is all whitecaps and sunshine, and I just want to be outside. Or maybe it's that I want to be outside of myself. I don't know how to crack the Grief Bubble, how to think about anything else. I feel trapped. If I were a mime, I could place my palms against its sticky, waxy surface. I contemplate this as a coffee table book illustration. *Mourner Trapped in Grief Bubble*. Then I remember Royce's card. I excuse myself and go out onto the deck and sit in a swing.

Chapter Four: Cards and Gifts. If one has not dallied with the mourner in the time span of two years, it is generally considered unsuitable to bestow a large, glittery card bearing dueling proclamations of sympathy and abiding love. Glitter, in general, is in poor taste. Proclamations of love may substantially impair the mourner's fragile mindset, causing her heart to pound with something other than grief. I tuck Royce's card back in its giant envelope and tap it against my teeth.

The door opens and Charlotte comes out. She sits beside me and her skirt blows around her knees in the breeze. "How is it we're not nineteen anymore?" Charlotte asks. She tucks her skirt under her legs.

"How is it we're not nine?" Charlotte puts her arms around

me and I breathe in her vanilla-Charlotte scent. "I think I might have sex with Royce tonight," I say.

"Royce, the sequel?" Charlotte asks. She sits back in the swing but keeps one arm around me.

I play with a strand of my hair. It's getting long. "I can't stand this."

Charlotte's quiet for a while, but not in a judge-y way. We rock on the swing.

"If I sleep with anyone else, it'll up my numbers," I say.

"That's not really fair to Royce," Charlotte says.

I don't know how to explain it to her, how to say I need something, anything, to make me feel like me again. "Could you please not be so mature right now?"

Charlotte pinches my arm. I poke her in the side.

"You'll regret it if you hurt him," Charlotte says. "Trust me."

Nate pokes his head out the door. He's wind-tousled in two seconds.

Charlotte stands. "Round two?"

Nate nods. "Time to go sit in that room and cry some more," he says.

Chapter Five: Small Talk. Small talk can be a difficult issue to attend to during times of grief, for bereaved and comforter alike. Fitting topics of conversation to engage with mourners include, but are not limited to: the weather, fishing, games involving balls, and the fullness of the life of the deceased. Happy memories of the deceased are generally welcome, as well. Unseemly topics include, but are not limited to: the last will and testament of the deceased, queries about putting down the deceased's bad dog, statements regarding the lovely appearance of the corpse, statements regarding how the deceased is in a better place now, and queries regarding the suffering of the deceased. She had lung cancer. Of course she fucking suffered. I just want to smack Loretta Gray in the head. How is that okay to ask? For the first time in round two of calling hours, I cry. And this stupid black suit only has fake pockets. *See Chapter Two: Attire. It is most fortuitous for mourners to wear clothing with pockets suitable to containing Kleenex.* I find a box of scratchy, generic, funeral home tissues, but it's empty. I wipe at my eyes

with my arm, smearing foundation on my suit sleeve. *Chapter Two: Attire. The bereaved should forgo makeup for calling hours and the funeral service. The mourner's face will be mottled from crying, anyway, and now is not the time for vanity.*

Loretta Gray has me cornered. She's one of those women who wears pastel polyester suits. "What did you tell Austin when she died?" she asks.

Advice for the bereaved: try to retain your composure when faced with idiotic questions. "I told him Aunt May's body got sick and stopped working, and that she died," I say. "That's what all the websites said to do."

Loretta "tsk tsk tsks" and tips her head to the side. "Poor fellow. Do you think he understands?" She gazes over to where Austin sits on the carpet playing with race cars.

Let me just go over and ask him, Loretta. Son, do you understand that Aunt May is dead and that we'll never, ever see her again? Do you get that, kid? That she's dead, dead, dead? That she's never coming back?

"I don't know," I say.

Loretta purses her lips. She shakes her index finger at me. "What you need to do," she says, "is pick him up and show him the body. Make him hold her hand for ten whole seconds so he doesn't think she's just sleeping."

"Why would I do that?"

"You don't want him to think he'll go to sleep and not wake up, too." Loretta looks at me, eyes wide like I'm the dumbest parent in the world. "He needs to understand that May has gone to rest in the loving arms of Jesus."

"Right," I say.

She pats my arm. "The Lord never gives us more than we can handle," she says. "Keep your chin up." And she walks off to assault my mom.

A cautionary note to comfort-givers: be advised that mourners are in particularly precarious frames of mind and may, in fact, snap at any given moment. I go to the coat closet at the front of the funeral home and root around in my purse for my cell phone. I'm going to call Royce and get out of here. I rustle and shuffle and I can't find it. I can't find a goddamned thing. I pull out a brush, a tampon, a race car. I

throw them all on the floor, and then I throw the purse down. "Very dramatic, kid," Aunt May says in my head. I kneel down beside my pile of crap and lean back on my heels. I feel empty, turned inside out. I shove everything back in my purse and sit down on the floor.

"Okay?" It's Nate. He's got his thumbs hooked in his pant pockets. At least somebody read the subheadings for Chapter Two. Nate holds out a tissue and folds himself down beside me. We sit in the coat closet. When I look up I see Nate's face is red. I lean my head against my brother's shoulder and I don't say a word.

The preacher has a speech impediment, or else he thinks it sounds extra holy to over-enunciate the word "Lord" so it sounds like "Loo-ard." I shift in the folding wooden chair and glance around. Dad leans forward, elbows on his knees like he's engrossed in a particularly tight football game. Austin gazes at the ceiling, his mouth moving in an absent *ba ba ba* motion, singing under his breath. Charlotte's hair falls over her face as she rubs her forehead. Nate slouches. And my mother heaves with full-on, shoulder-shaking, snot-running sobs.

Chapter Six: Weeping. While funeral rituals provide a socially sanctioned space for public displays of grief, mourners are obligated to weep in a manner that is not melodramatic. The Melodramatic Weeper may feel the need to be in the spotlight of the comforting action. Try not to hold this against the Melodramatic Weeper. After all, the Melodramatic Weeper may not have the chance to weep at another funeral for an extended period of time, and must make the most of the occasion. I put my arm around my mom. She weeps into my shoulder. My black suit, which hasn't felt crisp in five hours, gets wet.

"'For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,'" the preacher, Dr. John, quotes. I know he's quoting the Bible because he uses his special Bible-quoting voice, soft and precise. He stands in front of Aunt May's coffin in his preacher-robe. "When I speak this verse I can't help but think of May." Dr. John talks about the Apostle Paul and how he was in prison, chained to a Roman soldier as his guard. I wonder where they

were chained. Ankles? Wrists? "Like Paul, May lived the last years of her life a prisoner to a body filled with sickness, yet she never complained." Dr. John has an earnest face. It looks like he truly believes this.

Mom wails. I glance at Nate. His mouth twitches. Aunt May was many things, but uncomplaining was not one of them. "Get that fucking blood pressure cuff off me," were her penultimate words.

Dr. John lays his hand on his Bible. "May, like Paul, seemed to rejoice in her affliction."

This time Nate snorts. He turns it into a cough and covers his mouth with his hand. He squints. Mom shakes her head back and forth into my shoulder, sobbing in little *heh heh* puffs. *Chapter Six, subsection one: weeping and laughter exist on the same psychological continuum.*

Dr. John talks about how the death of a Christian is a wonderful thing. "The problem is, we don't believe that," he says. Dr. John leans forward on his pulpit. "We think of death as some hideous monster come to cut off all our joys."

Austin sits up straight. He stops singing under his breath. Mom's weeping dials down a notch until she's just resting on my shoulder, breathing through her mouth.

"We live in a cruel world, and so when death comes to take us to the Lord," *Loo-ard* "where we shall have perfect health, wouldn't you say that death is a friend?"

Austin's mouth moves again, but this time it's because he's chewing on his lip. He grabs my arm, then climbs onto my lap. I can't move.

Dr. John goes on, telling us how wonderful death is, and how God will give us all his beloved sleep one day. I wonder how I'm supposed to get any beloved sleep tonight when all I can think about is putting Aunt May's body under six feet of sandy earth tomorrow morning. The Aunt May in my head turns to me and winks. "You know what the opposite of death is, right?" she asks. "Death with his hooded black cape and sensual bony fingers?"

"Life?" I ask her back.

"Hah!" She pokes me in the ribs. "Sex."

I wonder if she's right. I wonder if being naked will crack my Grief Bubble, or if an orgasm will. I think of Royce.

Chapter Seven: Leavetaking. The funeral guest should keep in mind that mourners have just put in a full eight-hour day of public grieving. Lingering is inappropriate. Suggestions for future lunch dates are best kept to another time. One to two sets of hugging, cheek-kissing, and I'm-so-sorry-ing is the standard culturally observed norm; more than that is excess. Take heed when the funeral home stops playing sad, sad organ music. This is generally a leavetaking cue.

I wander around the funeral home waiting for the last stragglers to leave so I can go home and get Austin settled. I extract my phone and send Royce a message. "I've missed your Buddha belly." He sends one back. "The lucky Buddha's missed you." I write, "Thanks for the flowers. I used to only get them after sex." Royce responds, "I could bring you roses in the morning." I put my phone away and go over to the coffin. The Grief Bubble, which had gotten less sticky as I messaged Royce, circles back over me like a veil. I stand over Aunt May and wonder who selected the pink satin coffin liner. At least they didn't put her in a pink satin dress. Aunt May wears a nice pantsuit which is neither pastel nor polyester. Then I study her body. The caved-in jaw from cancer surgery. The gnarled hands. The short legs beneath the half-open coffin. She looks doughy, too soft, which is strange since she's probably in rigor mortis. I think again that this isn't my aunt. This isn't May.

"She was my family," my dad says, putting his arm around me. "She raised me." He pats my hair like I'm a kid and it feels nice.

"I know," I say. "I know, Daddy."

Mom comes over and stands beside Dad. They hold hands. Charlotte and Austin walk up. Nate ushers the last straggler out then takes the empty spot in front of the coffin. He picks up Austin. "Do you want to say goodbye to Aunt May?" Nate asks.

Austin doesn't answer. I don't think he wants to. I don't think any of us do.

Walter leaves three turds on my bedroom floor. "Thanks for that," I tell him. I flush the turds, wash my hands,

and go back to my room. I've just gotten Austin to bed and Walter's asleep on my pillow. He lifts his head then settles it back down on his front paws. I'm trying to decide what to wear to Royce's. Black panties—morbid or sexy? Charlotte knocks and sticks her head in my bedroom.

"I brought you some tea," she says. She sets a mug on my dresser.

I sit down and pet Walter. He opens one eye then goes back to sleep. Charlotte sits beside me. "Can you listen for Austin tonight?" I ask. This shouldn't be too much of an imposition since Charlotte's sleeping in his top bunk bed.

"Of course," she says.

I lift Walter, pillow and all, to the other side of me in case he wakes up and decides to get cranky. "I think I might have inherited a dog," I say.

"Maybe you could get on that dog whispering show." Charlotte stretches her legs out on the bed and leans back on her elbows. She opens her mouth to say something else, but just then a scream from Austin's room rips through the air. We both jump up and run in.

Austin sits with a rigid spine and screams and screams. It sounds like he's just been stabbed. "Baby, what's wrong?" I climb in bed and pull him into my arms. Charlotte sits and massages Austin's feet.

Austin stops screaming. He sobs instead. I don't know which is worse. "It's Skeletor," he says. His body shakes.

"How do you know about Skeletor?" I don't let him watch that crap.

"Dad and I watched it." Austin's face is red. His lip trembles and his hair sticks on his forehead in sweaty strips. He clutches his Batman comforter in both hands. "Skeletor's coming to take me. He said so."

I smooth his hair, kiss the top of his head. I rub his back and straighten his blue pajamas.

"Skeletor's just pretend," Charlotte says. "He's a drawing. He can't hurt you."

Austin shakes his head. "He's coming."

I rock him back and forth, back and forth. His small body collapses my Grief Bubble and I'm flooded with the sharp pain of today until my chest literally hurts. Or maybe the

Grief Bubble doesn't collapse. Maybe my Grief Bubble and Austin's merge.

Epilogue: It is the bereaved's ultimate challenge and responsibility to comfort fellow bereaved persons. Especially if the fellow bereave-ee is your son.

"Don't let him take me," Austin says. He clings to my waist.

I hold Austin's face in my hands. "No one's taking you. I promise." I hug him and cry into his hair. His small body shakes against mine; mine against his. We fit tightly together, me and this body that was once part of my own.

Charlotte and I stay with Austin until everyone calms down. We put him in pajamas with Transformers on them since Transformers can beat up Skeletor any day of the week. We sing songs and read an old picture book that's too easy and drink warm milk and finally Austin falls asleep. I smooth his hair one last time and Charlotte and I slip back to my room.

I close the door, softly, and lean against it. "Thanks for helping," I say. I'm shaken. My phone's blinking on the dresser and I sit down on the bed to read a message from Royce. "This little Buddha's ready to be enlightened."

Charlotte picks up the now-cold mug of tea. "That's why I'm here," she says. Then she sets the tea down. "If you need to go see Royce, I can take care of Austin if he wakes up."

Part of me wants to run out the door. To be anywhere but here, thinking of anything but death and burials and Skeletor. I stand up. "How does anyone ever figure this out?" I ask.

Charlotte shakes her head. "There are no rules," she says.

I pick up my tea and we pass Austin's room, walking down the hall to the microwave in the kitchen. *There are no rules, except that sometimes there are.*

Gibson Monk

The Cedar Orb

"Jiro," sang the woman's voice, "wake up, Jiro." The boy stirred and rolled over in bed, drawing the blankets close around his head and peeking out with one eye to the window. It was still dark, the lights of the city orange and tired with long burning, and there was a hint of gray in the sky. The boy gave a little grunt from the covers of his bed. "There's no school today, Mamma," he called.

The shadow of his mother appeared in the doorway. "I know, Jiro," she said. "Did you forget? We're going to see Grandfather today. Now hurry and get dressed. I'll have a big breakfast ready for you."

The boy stared at the ceiling for a while and then rolled over. From the corner a small lizard raced fluidly across the wall. "Good morning, gecko," he sighed. Once upon a time he would give names to all the geckos in the apartment. In his language the word for gecko meant "tiger of the walls," and in his imagination he would go hunting for insects with them all through the small corners of his home. But he did not think the little lizards were anything like tigers anymore.

On the shelf across from his bed there was a model steam train locomotive his grandfather had carved from cedar wood. The wheels would move as the driver rods swept back and circled forward in an elegant gallop, the little whistle at the top popping up and down with the motion. When he first got the train he thought he could see little wisps of steam escaping from the locomotive as he ran it along the floor, and the painted headlight seemed to glow. His mother, becoming his memory, reminded him that it had once been his favorite toy.

Jiro dressed and went sleepily to the little kitchen, and it was filled with the rich scent of eggs frying, cut with the saltiness of dried turnips. He sat down to a small bowl of steaming rice porridge and dishes of bright yellow eggs, dried shredded pork, sweet gherkins, and a slender, baguette-shaped loaf of

light dough crisped in oil.

The boy wrinkled his nose. “This is poor people’s food. Why do we have to eat this? Father and Taro are making lots of money now.”

His mother sat down and looked at him. “It’s good, hearty food for honest people. And don’t you remember? Grandmother would always fix this for us, and it would always taste so good. I bet Grandfather is having this right now, even if he can’t cook quite so well.”

The boy stared at the dishes. “Why do we even have to go,” he said. “I don’t like eating at Grandfather’s. He slurps his soup. And he snores.”

His mother rose from her seat. “Eat,” she said. “I’ll pack your things.”

Jiro poked at the eggs with his chopsticks, and swirled the pork with the rice, watching it soften in the porridge. Looking over his shoulder he fished around in his pockets and brought out a cereal bar in a shiny wrapper. He unwrapped it carefully, trying not to make a sound, and then crammed it into his mouth. He chewed and gulped, pushing yellow pieces of eggs into the rice, submerging them.

“Jiro,” his mother said when she returned, “you’ve hardly eaten a thing, and we have a long trip today.”

The boy shrugged. “I’m not hungry,” he said, pushing his food around a little more. “So why do we have to go, anyway?”

“Jiro,” his mother sighed, “get your things.”

The bus finally slipped away from the snarling traffic of the city streets and began to race through the countryside, headed towards the mountains. The stewardess, dressed neatly in a dark blue uniform with epaulettes, greeted the passengers and began to serve refreshments.

Jiro sat next to his mother quietly. He peered at a little screen he had pulled from his backpack, working the controls effortlessly, earphones transmitting the sounds of virtual explosions in time with the flashes of light. The sun flickered on the liquid surface of rice paddies as they raced by, blurring silver and gold and green against the morning sky. The bus slowed as it climbed into the mountains, the earth falling away with each looping turn. Fragments of clouds began to

envelop the bus in a foggy mist as they floated past. Some would float upwards, clinging to the thick trees of the mountainsides; some would flow down, casting thin shadows over the deep valleys.

The bus lurched to a stop in a small village, and Jiro and his mother got off. It was late in the morning, but the skies were full of gray clouds and the mountain air was chilly and damp. They sat on a bench overlooking the valley. She peeled a sweet pear and shared it with him. After a while, half hidden in the mist, the bus flashed its lights and sounded its muffled horn.

"It's time to go," she said.

"But we take the train from here."

"I know," she said, handing him his backpack. "I packed a lunch for you."

Jiro looked at his mother, confused. "Where's your bag?" he said.

"Jiro, you're old enough to go by yourself now. Your grandfather wants to see you."

"But . . ."

She knelt in front of him and handed him three slips of paper. "You can catch this bus home; it will be back here tonight. The number two train leaves here in half an hour. The number four train will leave from grandfather's village at seven. Be sure to catch it. It's the last one."

The boy shrugged, taking the tickets. "I could just take the next one tomorrow."

His mother shook her head. "No. They're closing the line. It's the last one for good."

The bus sounded again.

"Go on, Jiro. You know the way to the station. Your father and Taro will be back tonight, and I will have supper ready for all of you."

The boy followed his mother to the bus. As she got on she turned to him as he stood watching her. "Go on," she said. "You'll be fine. You're getting to be a very big boy now. And grandfather will be waiting for you."

Jiro watched as the bus turned around to retrace its route; he clutched the straps of his backpack as it rested on the

ground. After the bus disappeared into the gray morning, he looked at the run-down buildings of the village. Though it was late in the morning it was very quiet, and Jiro felt like he was alone as he walked through the narrow streets. He looked at the old, faded signs on the buildings. The chipping paint transformed the characters on them into unfamiliar words. He had hoped there would be passengers at the train station, but when he arrived he found it just as empty as the streets. The old sloped roof of the station, swept up at the edges and hung with tattered paper lanterns, made the place look like a temple or shrine, and inside it was just as quiet. There were a few wooden benches; the floor was bare, but clean. An old clock above the schedule board ticked slowly, the only thing moving in the station. Jiro studied the schedule board, reading the times and destinations over and over. Though they were up to date, the place was so quiet that he fretted they had moved the station or closed it already, and he would be left waiting. The iron bars of shuttered ticket counters frowned at him. The sun coming in and out of the clouds made the windows glow and quickly fade again.

Finally he chose a bench and sat, his backpack between his knees. He reached into his jacket pocket for the electronic game, but found the battery had gone dead. Disappointed, he shoved it back in. Shafts of sunlight came and went, and he could hear the wind in the trees and the ticking of the clock.

At last came the sound of a far away whistle. Jiro hurried through the open arches to the station platform. Along the curve of the track the wind made the trees and the tall bamboo sway, and the boy peered far along it—nothing. He looked at the narrow track and he wondered if he dared jump down the little distance to the rails, touch them, put his ear to the ground and listen for the sound of the train. Just past the track the mountainside fell away to a deep valley, and through a gap in the trees he could see the clouds floating below him.

Now another cloud appeared just past the far curve, but this cloud rushed towards him quickly, and a bright, luminous eye appeared in the center as the horn blared, and as the wind rose the black iron and bright steel of the locomotive emerged from its wreath of steam, rounding the bend, the chrome spokes of the wheels materializing from their blur as

the fluid gallop of the driver rods slowed. Jets of steam burst from gaskets on either side of the train as a shrill whistle screeched and puffed. The locomotive coasted past him, and Jiro could feel its weight and heat and the wind it carried, and the wind carried the electric scent of metal and steam. Windows and portals passed by, slowing, slowing; and then a door slid just past where he stood and stopped, the train hissing, sending out little trails of white steam. The door opened, and the conductor leaned out and cried all aboard. Jiro grabbed his pack and hurried up the two metal steps onto the train car.

The coach was old; there was no plastic in it, only wood and metal, and most of the seats were empty. Jiro found a place in the back and settled in as the train began to move again. The conductor came by, and nervously Jiro found the proper ticket in his pockets and handed it over. After the conductor punched the ticket and wordlessly handed it back and went on, Jiro let out a sigh, relieved and proud.

The two or three people sitting in his car disappeared as the train made the next few stops. Jiro stared out the window at the weathered mountains, and the clacking of the train soon put him to sleep.

He woke, sitting up anxiously and looking all around him at the empty car, worried he had missed his stop. The train had lurched, laboring hard as it pulled up a steep passage. Jiro settled back down, almost sure that this passage was just before his grandfather's village, up a very steep track and then into a tunnel. The train began to level and pick up speed, and when the car went dark and the roar and clatter of the train began to echo loudly in the tunnel, he let out his breath—now he was sure.

When the train emerged from the tunnel the sun seemed brighter than ever and Jiro cautiously stuck his arm out the window to feel the warm air. Something cool and wet fell splashing onto his hand, and he drew it back, rubbing the rainwater between his fingers. Big, fat raindrops began to fall, pocking against the metal roof of the train, splashing the windows as Jiro looked out. The sun was wide and golden

and the big raindrops danced in the air, catching the gold color against the green of the valley below. Pineapple rain, he thought—that's what grandfather calls it when it rains in the sun.

He looked out over the valley below as the train winded down to it, remembering younger days and how he had loved to visit this place. He could just see the foaming white of a stream as it issued from the far mountainside in a waterfall, sending continuous mists into the wind. The water collected in a pool at the bottom of the valley, and the pool ran into many streams, dividing the land into a multitude of long islands before drawing back together at the edge of the valley and disappearing under the earth of another mountainside.

The valley was full of little footbridges of all colors, clusters of houses with waterwheels that spun slowly as they caught the streams. On a hill stood a high, narrow pagoda of many stories, standing like a watchtower, red and white and trimmed with gold. Tall cedar trees dotted the whole valley, and clumps of them made little forests at the edge of the watery village. Jiro smiled, excited as when he was younger. But he also saw that the colors of the pagoda were faded, and some of the windmills and waterwheels were tattered and still.

The train stopped at a mountain station very much like the one it had left—clean and bare and still. Jiro stepped off the train and from the platform he watched until the train disappeared around a bend. When he turned his grandfather was standing near the door. He was dressed in old-fashioned peasant cloths, simple and neat.

Jiro hesitated, then walked to him, a little stiffly. "Hello, grandfather," he said.

They bowed. "Hello Jiro," said the old man. "Have you eaten?"

Jiro looked at his pack. He had forgotten his mother's lunch. "No," he said.

The old man nodded. "Come along then," he said.

Together they picked their way down the steep, rocky path from the station to the valley. The brief rain had stopped, and the air was cool and clean. The two stopped at the middle of

the first bridge to look along the stream. This was where the many streams of the valley converged, and so this was where the waters were widest. They looked along the length of it as the sun glittered on the surface and as the light films of rain caught by the leaves drew into large, bright drops to fall into the river with a splash. A few green leaves knocked down by the winds sailed by in the current.

This was the last bridge to cross going from the village to the station, and after each visit his grandfather would walk with the family towards the station. They would stop here and say their goodbyes, and his grandfather would go no further.

They had stopped now. After a certain quiet time, they went on.

The old man and the boy passed the houses with the waterwheels, and others with windmills, and soon they came to the main street of the village. Jiro remembered that when he was very young the street was full of shops and vendors selling food, the smell of roasted meat and candied nuts was always in the air, and the sound of hammers and saws and shouts made it difficult to talk. The village was once thick with travelers from all over the world, who would come to buy things from the famous woodcarvers—tables and chairs, statues, model ships, children's toys of every design, all carved from the native cedar. The sharp tang of cedar wood pervaded everything. Now all that was left was a faint scent, and sawdust in the corners.

Just off the main street was his grandfather's workshop, which was also his house, as was the case with most of the woodcarvers. Past the clutter of the showroom, and the rolled-up tatami mat where he slept, the old man lit a fire in the kitchen and began to warm the cold food. He told the boy that there was only what he had left from breakfast, and after a few moments there was again the steam of rice porridge and the smell of fried eggs. Jiro sat at the table and ate.

His grandfather sat and watched him eat for a few moments. "Jiro," he said, "I think you are old enough for wine." He set out two small cups and brought out a dusty bottle of deep blue glass. He poured out equal measures of a clear liquid, the palest of gold. The boy tasted it cautiously. It was

very sweet on his tongue and the liquor made his head light.

"What do you think?" said grandfather.

"It's good," the boy said. "And sweet."

His grandfather smiled. "Close your eyes when you drink."

The boy did so. This time the sweetness passed and he could taste the plums behind it.

"Tell me what you see," said grandfather.

The boy opened his eyes, confused.

"Go on," said the old man. "Try."

At first Jiro could think only of the plums. Then the thought of plum trees came to him, and then their delicate branches against the sky, and then their white flowers, and then the scent of rain and wet earth. He told his grandfather, without opening his eyes, and he could feel him smile. "Take another drink, Jiro," he said. Again Jiro tasted the wine, and now he thought of his family—his mother and father and brother and grandfather, and for the first time in a long while his grandmother as well. He told his grandfather this and opened his eyes. The old man was nodding. He rose slowly, taking up the blue glass bottle. "When you were very young," he said, returning the bottle to the dark of the cupboards, "the family spent the whole day picking plums. This is the wine from those plums." He sat down again and took up his wine, closing his eyes as he drank. "We shall visit the plum orchard today, and other places besides. And then I wish to give you your gift."

After they had put the dishes away they set out. The old man carried with him a bulging satchel of worn leather and a weathered walking stick. They walked through the remains of the town, old buildings with fading paint, a few quiet old men and women in their gardens, tending the fish of weedy ponds.

They crossed a bridge and through the grove of plum trees dripping with rain, and beyond it the little forests of cedar trees which for so long had served the woodcutters, and the cedar scent filled the damp air. As they walked the boy asked the old man if he had lived here his whole life. The old man shook his head. "No," he said. "I went to work at a factory, after the war, and so I lived in the city, as you do. It was

many years before I came back here, and many more before I learned to carve."

The trees began to thin as the ground rose to meet the mountainside, and the two came to an empty green meadow where the red and white pagoda tower appeared suddenly as they cleared the forest. In silence they climbed the spiral stairs and at the top they looked out over the whole valley. The wind was cool and wet.

The old man said, "See where the streams issue; follow their course."

The boy set his eyes against the threads of the current and saw the far waterfall against the northern mountainside. He thought he could see a flash of red and gold through the green of the forest.

"It is far," said the old man. "It will take most of the afternoon to walk there and back again."

When they set out the boy offered to carry the satchel; the old man thanked him but said it was not yet time. They followed a dark stream through the forest, and by the time they heard the sound of the waterfall the sun was already slanting away in the west. At the place of the waterfall the forest came right to the mountainside, and up the rocky face there was a temple built straight into the mountain. Just above the curving red roof trimmed with gold was a natural stone shelf, and it was over this that the stream issued from the rock. The water broke against the shelf and poured over it in a sheet in front of the temple, causing the image of the temple to blur and waver behind the sheet of flowing water, as though it were underwater. The water also poured around either side, the twin falls rushing down to collect into a single large pool that began the stream they had followed through the woods. The pool was very deep, and despite the flow of the water it became very still as it spread out. In the pool, the reflection of the temple above seemed more steady than the temple under the fall itself, as though somehow the waters brought the image back together.

The old man and the boy climbed the steep, slippery steps, rough-hewn from the mountain, slick with spray and seeping water. They passed through the waterfall to the temple by means of a narrow, swaying bridge woven of leather and rope

and planks of wood, shielded from the falling water by thin bamboo slats. The temple face was open to the falling water; it had no doors, its pillars stood exposed. It was carved deep into the mountainside, and as they went further in, it became very dark, lit only with flickering oil lamps. A thin sheen of cold water covered the polished marble floor; the old man stood over it in his raised wooden sandals. The temple became very quiet. The rushing of the water seemed to enclose the space, but did not invade. The boy could hear the pulse of the water flowing outside, and also the echoes of individual drops falling in the darkness.

The altar was plain, without ornament—not even a golden Buddha statue so common in shrines, as though the place were older even than his coming. Engraved in the granite just above the flame in the center of the altar was a single glyph, a primitive character for home and family. On either side were bundles of incense in jade urns. The old man took one slender stick from each and lit them at the flame of the altar. They sputtered and lit, and he blew out the brief flame and breathed softly on the ember tips, the smoke trailing in the air, uncoiling, filling the space with the fragrance of cedar and plum and jasmine. He bowed three times, quickly, holding the sticks of incense, and spoke softly. He was quiet and set the burning sticks into the brass holder at the altar.

The boy stood beside him. He shifted his feet, the cold water seeping into his tennis shoes. The old man spoke, gazing at the flame. “I come here to speak with them. My grandfather. My father and mother. Your grandmother.”

They stood quietly.

“But,” said the boy, “they’re dead.”

The old man nodded. “Yes. All the more important to talk with them.”

The boy looked up at his grandfather, who still looked at the flame. “Do they talk back,” he asked.

“Oh yes,” said the old man. “They have much to say.” He looked down at the boy. “Would you like to try? I know it has been some time since you last spoke to grandmother.”

The boy nodded and did as his grandfather had done, lighting the incense, bowing. They stood in silence, with only the sound of the water and the wind and the flame. The boy be-

gan to shuffle his feet again.

"It's all right," said the old man. "It is hard, I know. It is as though they are very far away, and their voices are very small. But that is not quite so, though seems that way. It is that their voices have gotten very big, and yet fine—in the water, in the wind, in the quiet. It is our voices, and our ears, that are small." He turned to the boy. "They find it difficult to talk to us as well. That is why we have places like this. To make it easier." He looked back at the flame. "Even so, it takes a great deal of practice. Do not be discouraged."

The boy nodded. They stood there a while longer.

When they had left the shrine and climbed down the steps, the sun was much lower in the west. They set a brisk pace through the long shadows in the woods towards the village. At grandfather's house Jiro quickly gathered his things and they left for the train station.

Just before they crossed the last bridge they stopped by an abandoned house near the stream, its weathered waterwheel still turning idly with the current. They sat under a great willow tree, its slender branches dipping into the water, making little golden ripples in the late sun.

"I wish to give you your gift," said the old man, and as he stood he undid the latches on his satchel. He produced from the leather bag a cedar orb, perfectly round, perhaps a little larger than a soccer ball. The surface was smooth, dark, and polished. Running along its circumference, like a brass equator, was a narrow metal band; at two equidistant points there were burnished brass latches, one the face of a tiger, the other that of a dragon. Holding the orb in one hand, the old man unclasped the latches with the other. He looked at the boy. "Now sit," he said, "as a lotus flower, facing the west." The boy did as he was told, and the old man placed the orb on his lap. He gave the upper hemisphere a slight turn, clockwise, and lifted it up.

Underneath was a crystal dome, and within the dome a replica of the entire valley. Finely carved mountains lined the circumference; detailed trees covered the valley floor. The little windmills of the model town caught the rays of the fading sun and began to turn. A few moments later, water began

to seep out of the rocks, making a waterfall over the mountain shrine and filling the dry streambeds. The waterwheels began to turn. The boy looked at the miniature pagoda tower, the grove of plum trees with white flowers. The orb vibrated softly; a tiny train issued from the mouth of the tunnel, puffing steam.

The boy's eyes were lit with wonder. "Grandfather," he asked, "did you make this?"

The old man shook his head. "No. This is far beyond even my skill." He too gazed into the depths of the orb. "When my grandfather gave it to me, he said the same. He gave me the orb when I left to work in the city, after the war. It was many years before I returned. Many nights I would stare at it, and wonder what my life would have been like, if I had stayed."

The boy looked up at his grandfather, and then back to the orb. "Do you . . ." he began, and stopped. He looked up again. "But it's too much. Why didn't you give this to father? Or Taro? He's the oldest."

The old man smiled. "They have their gifts. This is yours." He sighed. "It is too early to say. But maybe I can give you an idea. Am I the same to you as your father?"

"No."

"And you are not the same to me as your father. Certain things require more time than others. Certain things must be forgotten, so that they may be remembered." The old man looked at the boy. "Do you understand?"

The boy nodded.

The old man continued. "It is different also with Taro," he said. He leaned down to touch his grandson's shoulder. "You see, I was 'Jiro' too—the secondborn. It is not the same. I know this is too soon for you to know. But when you have children, you will know. The firstborn brings excitement, for all things are made new. It is like the first bite of young plums. The secondborn is not like that. But it brings its own gift, a fullness that the first cannot. It is like wine. So it is also with grandchildren, to see your own child with his own child. That is why the orb is yours: you are my grandchild, and you are the secondborn. You will understand."

The boy looked at his grandfather, a little sadly. "Do you want someone to stay," he asked.

The old man shook his head. “I want someone to remember.”

The boy nodded, and again looked into the orb. He saw the miniature mountains and rivers and bridges, and the plum grove and the pagoda, and the forest and the temple. He saw the little village, each house carved in great detail. And on the outskirts of the village he saw a miniature house with a waterwheel and a willow tree.

Underneath the tree there was the figure of a boy. He was sitting as a lotus, and near him stood an old man. In the boy’s lap there was a tiny cedar orb, bound with brass, one clasp the head of a dragon, the other that of a tiger.

In the dark of the morning, with just a touch of gray in the sky, an old man sat alone in the little apartment, the city lights glittering outside. The kitchen was filled with the smell of frying eggs, and the steam of tea. The old man sat at a small table. On the table, resting in his hands, was a cedar orb, a lamp shedding light on the windmills and the trees, and the little train steaming around the curve of the track.

The old man’s eyes were full of tears, and yet he was also smiling. He was waiting for his grandson to visit, who lived very far away.

Bronwyn Berg

Try to Be Normal

1. Introducing Jeanie

I got this diary because I stopped talking. My mother took me to another new doctor and he says when I don't feel like talking, I can write things down. He says no one will read it. He gave me this notebook, which is yellow, which I don't like. I'm not in my yellow phase anymore, but he doesn't know that. I wrote in my yellow notebook (the one I am writing in right now)

What should I write?

and I held it up for him to see. He said, "Your name and the date is a good place to start." It is April 15, 1981 and my name is Jeannie, but it doesn't matter because nobody calls me that—they all call me Birdie and this is why . . . (dots mean, to be continued.)

2. Introducing Birdie

Sometimes I have too many words in my head and I can't think fast enough about which one to choose so I get them all mixed up and they come out funny and kids laugh. Like last year, in grade one this girl at school named Larissa, which is a really pretty name and who is also really pretty, said that her dog died. All the kids were giving her sympathies and I wanted to give her a sympathy too. So, I didn't know what to say—I thought of saying "Oh my God!" like my sister Bridget would say, but then I remembered you shouldn't say God's name unless your talking directly to him. So then I thought I'd say "Oh my word" like my mother says when she's trying not to say "Oh my God," or I could say "Oh brother." But what happens when you think of oh my word and oh brother is your mouth combines them before your head and what came out was "Oh my bird." All the kids laughed and from then on every time I walked into a room they'd shout out "oh my bird!" Eventually it turned into Birdie. I didn't mind so much because my best friend is a bird.

3. Introducing Seven

I found a way to get around the talking. When I don't know what to say, I make a bird noise like this—Ka Kaw! I don't know why but it makes my head feel better. It makes it feel like it's still. I learned it from this bird I know. His name is Seven. Bridget says that's a dumb name for a bird. I didn't name him. His mother did! Bridget can be really dumb sometimes. Seven used to come to my window and he would say "Ka kaw" then I'd say "Ka kaw" back. We would have long talks because he never got mad about what I said and he also never got mad about what I didn't say. Seven came to my window every day, but then one day he flew into the window when it was closed and fell to the ground. I ran outside to see if he was okay. Seven laid there real still, staring up at me with one eye open. I went in the house to tell Mother, and when we went back outside Seven was gone. Mother said that he probably got stunned, just needed a rest, and when he was ready he flew away again. But I haven't seen Seven in a long time. Ka kaw! Ka kaw!

4. My Reasons—Big and Small

People always like to ask me why I stopped talking. They think I have a really big reason. I just have small reasons.

1. I can't think of things to say.

2. I say things that get me in trouble.

3. I don't know what they want me to say, so I get all worried that I'll say the wrong thing and then #2 happens.

4. People ask too many questions. Especially how is your mother holding up?

5. Sometimes when I talk people ask me who I'm talking to. Which is a really stupid question.

5. Things that are wrong with me:

1. I'm not normal.

2. I don't know how to be normal.

3. I like to divide my food into four sections and take one bite from each section like I'm going around a clock.

4. I am afraid to sit down on toilets, but if I spin around three times I'm okay. Also standing on the rim works.

5. Things itch me more than most people.
6. I have pigeon toes.
7. I'm a bit of a silent sam. Whoever he was.

6. Not Me

My mother tells me that I talked late. I don't know if she means I talked when I was older than other kids or if when I got asked a question I was late with the answer, because that still happens. It is very hard for me to come up with the right answers and I don't know where answers are supposed to come from. My mother also tells me that I had a strange first word. It wasn't Mama or Dada like other kids it was "Help." She also said that I called Dad "not Mother" and I called my sister Bridget "Not me." Eventually I learned their names, of course. I'm not a retard. Which is not a nice word. I know this, because I've been called it. Sometimes when Bridget and I walk home from school the kids sing "Extra, extra read all about it, Birdie's retarded, no doubt about it!" Bridget hates it when they sing that. Sometimes she yells at them, "It takes one to no one." Sometimes she says, "Just cover your ears, Birdie." And sometimes she won't walk home with me. I asked Mother if I was a retard and she said I wasn't. She said I was just different. I asked Bridget what it means to be different and she said "Not normal."

7. My Yellow Phase

This was my first phase. My favorite song was "Yellow Submarine." I played it over and over and over and over and . . . well, you get it. I played it so much that it drove my Dad crazy and he told me to pick a new song. Instead I just hummed it. That also drove him crazy. I wore only yellow, but it turns out there are many different kinds of yellow and that is why Bridget said I looked like a fashion disaster. Also she said I looked like I puked up a canary. Mother said I looked like a ray of sunshine. My Dad rolled his eyes at this. My Dad also rolled his eyes at my yellow food. I had lemonade for supper and banana's, corn on the cob, yellow beans and lemon jello all on a yellow paper plate. The rest of the family ate normal. My dad asked my mother how long she planned on indulging this behavior. My mother said if he'd like to go to the doctor's

appointments with us then he could have an opinion. My Dad decided to eat in front of the TV that night. Now he's used to it and doesn't say anything much about my phases.

8. Ways I can be more normal

1. Try to act like my sister.

2. When I don't know how to act think, "What would Bridget do?"

3. Make a friend, a real friend this time.

4. Politely ask my imaginary friend to leave. This will be easier, because I can write it on a page of my yellow notebook and hold it up for her to see. Last time I asked her to leave, someone heard me and it was what you call awkward.

5. If she doesn't listen try closing my eyes real tight and see if she's gone when I open them.

6. Don't scratch myself so much. Or at least stop before bloods come.

9. Things I did good

I made a friend of a girl at school. Her name is Mary and she is blind. Teacher made me her special helper. I lead her around places and make sure she doesn't bump into things. At recess I put things in her hands so she'll know what things feel like. I made a snowball and put it in her hand. I wrote in my notebook

How does it feel?

Which was really dumb, since she can't see. So, then I whispered in her ear. She said it felt cold. Of course the teacher found out I whispered and now mother and dad and pretty much the world is jumping for joy at my friendship with Mary. The good thing is if I don't feel like talking I can just stay away from her and she doesn't even know I'm there.

11. Introducing Mildred

Now that I have Mary—I don't need Mildred. Mildred is my imaginary friend and I asked her to leave. At least everyone thinks she's imaginary. Bridget says Mildred is a terrible name. It's not like Bridget is the greatest name in the world. Besides I didn't name her. Blame her mother. Mildred says she can't leave, because she has nowhere else to go. I wrote in

my notebook:

Maybe you could go on a vacation

She laughed at that. Or she laughed at me. I can never tell the difference. It hurt my feelings so now Mildred and I aren't speaking. Or at least I'm not speaking to her. As usual Mildred won't shut up.

10. How to act more like my sister:

1. Try to spy on how my sister sits on the toilet. I'm pretty sure she lets her bum touch, but one can never be sure.
2. Make cross-eyed faces so kids will laugh. Also fart noises under the armpit seem to be a hit.
3. Stop cutting my own hair.
4. Learn how to skip rope better.

11. A very bad day

Today was a very bad day. It doesn't even get one star. Well, maybe just one.

Mary asked teacher for a new helper, just because I walked her into a wall. It was an accident. Sheesh. And also because I put a dead bird in her hand and she didn't like that. Now I don't have a friend. I might need to make up with Mildred.

12. How Mildred Died

Mildred says she died when she was six from a blood disease. I wrote in my notebook while Mom was making me green jello, because I'm now in a green phase.

Mildred died. Do you want to know how?

Mother said, "Not particularly."

Do you want to know when?

Mother sighed. "Would you like broccoli or peas for dinner?"

She died when she was six. She was really sick.

Mother hung her head. She went to the bathroom. When she came out her face was red.

Are you embarrassed?

"Am I embarrassed of what, Jeanie?"

Your face is red.

"That's because I was washing it," Mother said.

Bridget says I should stop making things up because it up-

sets Mother. At supper I pointed to the page about Mildred dying to my Dad. Sometimes I reuse the pages so I don't have to keep writing.

He said to my mother, "How long are we going to keep up this charade?"

13. Doctor's Visit

My new doctor's name is Doctor Kaminski. He said I could call him Dr. K. I'm not calling him anything, because I especially don't like talking to doctors. He said we were going to play a game. He would hold up a word and I would write down the word it made me think of. He gave an example like if he says black I might say cat. Except I would never say cat if he said black. He said there were no right and wrong answers and every answer was okay. I wish normal life was like that. This is how it went.

Safety = Mother
Hate = Noise
Love = Mother
Dirty = Hands
Yellow = Submarine
Dolls = Friends
Emergency = Mother
Happiness = Quiet
Birds = Free
Bridget = Normal
Hospital = Bridget

14. How I Learned to Fly

Yesterday was such a bad day that I don't even give it a single, lonely star. It gets zero stars. Seven came back—he invited me out onto the roof and told me I should try to fly. So, I went to the edge of the roof just like Seven and I flapped my arms til I got good speed and I flew. Only I don't have the hang of it yet and I broke my arm.

15. My Black Phase

I started a new phase, because I broke my arm and because Seven has gone away again and I miss him the most out of all those who go away. My new song is "Black Bird" by the

Beatles. I don't just play the song, I sing it. Mother is very happy that I'm singing words, since singing is close to talking. What she doesn't understand is that singing is different from talking, because the words are already there and also they are someone else's words. Mother doesn't like my black phase though—she says I can't survive on black licorice and she's running out of ideas and can I please just give it a rest. Dad says I look like a widow and that it's "morbid." I don't know what that means. They told me to pick a new song or else. I never know what the or else is. So, I picked "I Am the Walrus," also by the Beatles. I especially like the whole goo goo ga joob part. It's just like Ka kaw—when you say it, you feel better. Somebody shot John Lennon last year for no good reason. He isn't going to write any more songs. I wonder if John Lennon said "goo goo ga joob" when he saw the gun.

16. All My Friends

Bridget told me I should try to act normal and make more friends.

I have lots of friends.

She says I'm lying, so, I wrote all of their names.

Mildred who you've met a million times.
Daisy
Isabel
Sonia
Jeremiah
and Rosemary

At least they were my friends before they all went away. I haven't seen anyone but Mildred in a long time. I even showed her how many people signed my cast to prove the point. She said no one signed my cast. Bridget must need glasses.

17. My Dad is super mad

Last night my Dad was getting super mad about a lot of things. First he got mad when he came home from work and tripped over my shoes that I forgot to line up nicely. Then at supper he was mad that I had a plate full of black olives and blackberries. He asked my mother how long this was going to go on. She just ignored him. Then he got mad when he asked me how school was and I also ignored him.

Then he said, “Is no one in this goddamn family going to talk to me?”

So Mother asked how his day was. And he said how do you think it was? Mother didn’t answer, because I don’t think she knew the answer.

Then Dad said, “The only person in this whole goddamn family who made any sense was Bridget.” I looked at Bridget and she stuck her tongue out at me, but of course no one noticed. Then mother started to cry because I think Dad hurt her feelings. I hate seeing Mother cry. I tried to just stare at my plate and eat my blackberries, but my hands were shaking and I dropped a blackberry and it landed on the floor. Dad thought I did it on purpose. He yelled at me to pick it up and I was trying to, but I knocked the plate over when I was leaning and everything went flying and then Dad picked it up and smashed it against the wall. Mother was crying, “Stop it Harry!” I couldn’t hear her because I started to scream and bang my ears. Sometimes that helps quiet my head and calm down all the talking, but it gives everyone a headache. Usually when I do that mother holds me real tight until I calm down, but this time she just walked away. Dad started to yell louder than my screams and told me to get a hold of myself. I was trying to, but I was used to Mother getting a hold of me. Then Dad grabbed my fists and I didn’t mean to scratch him that hard. I even got a bit of his blood under my fingernails and had to wash my hands twenty times. Or course I got sent to my room.

18. What to do when people are angry
    1. Say sorry for what you did
    2. Say sorry even if you don’t know what you did
    3. Say sorry even if you aren’t sorry

I came out of my room before I was allowed to. I saw Mother and Dad sitting at the kitchen table talking about something. They were talking quietly and they seemed sad and also really tired. I walked up to my Dad and wrote:

I’m sorry

He grabbed the notebook out of my hand and ripped the page out—crumpled it and threw it. He then told me to march back to my room. Mother started to cry.

An hour later I came out again. This time Mother was sitting on the couch with her hands on the sides of her head like her head was itchy and Dad was pacing around the room.

I'm still sorry

Dad didn't look at me so I brought the notebook closer and closer to his face. I could see my scratch mark up close. It was starting to heal already. He pushed the notebook away from me. I kept pointing to the page.

Dad sat down and said, "It's not about being sorry."

What's it about then?

He didn't answer. I don't think he knew the answer.

Later that night, Dad came in my room and he said in a calm sort of way.

"Jeanie, I want you to talk."

I shook my head.

"Why won't you talk Jeanie?"

Then he wasn't so calm. "Goddamn it, Jeanie! I know you're in there somewhere! We know you can talk! We've heard you! Say something for Christ's sakes!"

The more he yelled, the less I wanted to talk. I just shrunk deeper and deeper inside of myself like I was crawling to the bottom of a sleeping bag.

Even later that night, Mother came in the room. She crawled into bed beside me. I was in a tight ball. She tried to pry my hands loose, but I wasn't letting go of myself.

So she wrapped herself around the ball that I was in and said, "Come back, Jeannie. Don't go away."

19. Things I do when I'm afraid:

1. Count to 20, but you should always skip 13. It's unlucky. I'm not sure why, but I don't want to risk it.

2. Talking to my dolls, helps. Well, the nice ones. Remember not to talk to Betsy. She is the worst one of all. She has big blue eyes that never blink. Sometimes she stares at me all night and I can't go to sleep unless I blink four times really fast. It's hard to blink four times, you should try it. You accidentally blink five or six times and then you have to start all over again.

3. Pretend you're somewhere else.

4. Also pretend you're someone else.

5. Close yourself into a tight ball and hold onto yourself real tight.

20. *The Game of Life*

Bridget and I were playing *The Game of Life* after school. Bridget always wins. She wins every single game we ever play and she says I'm a sore loser, but I think she's a sore winner. Today she had twin girls and named them Mildred and Jeanie. I wrote in my notebook that I didn't want her to name the babies after us. She wouldn't listen and then she took us out of the car—these dumb plastic pink sticks and said "Goodbye Mildred. Goodbye Jeanie" and ran the car over us. I got angry and I picked up the game and threw the pieces everywhere and then I stomped on the box. When Mother came in to see what all the racket was about she was not pleased. She said that when Dad got home I was going to get a licking, but Dad never came home. I told her it was Bridget's fault and she said, "Why couldn't I have had a normal child?" I wrote:

Bridget is normal.

21. Good News

Seven is back! He came to my window last night and tapped his beak on it 3 times. I let him in the room even though I'm not allowed to let birds in my room anymore. He and I talked a long time, until mother banged on my door "Would you please stop making that incessant noise!" Also, mother is too tired to take me on doctor visits.

22. Bad News

Mother seems to be getting more and more tired.

She doesn't get out of bed until Bridget and I get home from school.

23. Where Did Dad Go?

Bridget says Dad isn't coming back and that's why Mom is always in bed. I wrote,

Why, is she sick?

Bridget said "No, dummy. She's sad."

Why, are you sick?

I asked that because Bridget is sick a lot. The sicker Bridget

is, the sadder mother is.

"No, she's sad about Dad leaving."

Where did he go?

"I don't really know," Bridget said.

24. Seven has a Bad Accident

Seven flew into my window again. This time he hit his head really hard. I ran out and waited for his rest to be over. I waited and waited. I told mother and she came out. She looked at him and she cried. She cried really, really hard. The sort of cry that steals your breath and sometimes leads into hiccups. Then she kept saying "I'm sorry, so, so, so sorry."

What for?

She said, "Because I don't know how to help you."

With what?

She didn't answer. I don't think she knows the answer.

25. Seven is Dead

Seven didn't get enough rest. He never got up and flew again. Mother said there are some things we just can't recover from. So, I put him in a shoebox and he's under my bed.

26. Where Did Mildred Go?

I haven't seen Mildred in a long time. Mother asked about her. She said it's good she's gone. Maybe things are starting to look up. Then Mother asked me if I thought Mildred might be gone for good this time. How am I supposed to know? Bridget said she thinks it's stupid that Mother goes along with my imaginary friends. Mother has always said I have a very active imagination. Mother used to like that about me.

27. Where Did Bridget go?

Mother took all my dolls away. She said I could have them back later. It isn't her fault. The doctor told her to do it. He thinks that if I don't have the dolls to talk to that I'll start talking to people. He's wrong. Now I have no one to talk to. Not even Bridget. I'm not sure where she went, but I haven't seen her for days.

28. I Like Birds

I've been opening my window and letting the birds in. They fly around my ceiling, circling and circling.

29. Where Did the Birds Go?

The birds aren't coming anymore so I drew birds all over my walls. Mother was not pleased.

30. I Miss Bridget

I haven't seen Bridget in a long time. Sometimes when Mother and Dad fight she lets me crawl into bed with her. She draws pictures on my back with her finger and I guess what they are. Then, when she is feeling too sick and tired to lift her hands I draw pictures on her back. I always draw birds and she always draws stars.

I wrote to Mother:

Where is Bridget?

She didn't answer me. I kept pointing to the question, but she still didn't answer. She said I was making her tired.

You're always tired!

Then she said "Please Jeanie. Don't push me right now." I wasn't even close enough to push her! When I was calm, I pointed again to,

Where is Bridget?

She said, "You know where she is."

Is she in the hospital again?

Mother began to cry.

Can we go visit her?

"No, sweetheart we can't."

I miss Bridget.

Mother said, "I do too. I miss Bridget and I miss Dad."

I only miss Bridget.

31. My Sleeping Mother

I'm really getting worried about mother. She sleeps all the time now. It's like she took a sleeping potion or something. I can hear her crying through the walls. I slipped a note under her door

Mother? Are you OK?

She didn't answer me so I slipped another note

Dad and Bridget might come back, just like Mildred.

They go away for awhile and just when you stop missing them—there they are!

32. My Strange Mother

Mother is acting stranger and stranger. She doesn't talk hardly at all anymore and last night I had a bad dream that I was pushing Bridget on a swing, but she fell off and wasn't moving. I kept trying to shake her to get her to wake up, but she wasn't waking up.

33. The Pizza Box

Last night we had pizza. Mother hadn't even gotten out of her bathrobe. I think she must be coming down with something. I wrote on the pizza box.

Are you sick?

She shook her head. I think she doesn't want to talk anymore. I think this house will be awful quiet if neither one of us talks.

34. My Mother's Bedroom Door

I spend every night outside of mother's bedroom door. It is the only way I can be close to her. She is tired a lot and goes to bed as early as I do. As soon as she thinks I'm tucked in—I take my blanket and pillow and camp in the hallway.

Last night I heard her talking to someone on the phone. This is what I heard:

I'm sorry.
How could . . .
You don't just . . .
What about Jeanie?
I can't do this by myself.
Fine.
Fine.
Fine.
Bastard.

Then I heard her start to cry so I sang her a lullaby like she used to sing to Bridget and I. "Hush little baby, don't say a word. Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird." Then I sang "Eleanor Rigby," "all the lonely people where do they all come from?" Except I'm more curious about where they all go. And

when they are coming back. When I stopped singing, mother opened the door but crawled back into bed. She lifted the covers up so I could crawl in with her. I lay against mother's chest and I could hear it beating. We didn't speak and now that mother doesn't speak I don't like the not speaking so much anymore. I wrote in my notebook:

I can hear your heart beating deep inside you.

Mother didn't answer me, but held her hands out for my notebook. Mother has never written in my notebook before. She wrote:

Once upon a time I could hear your heart beating deep inside me too.

"But how?" I said out loud. Mother laughed and my hand flew to my mouth in order to hold the rest of the words in. She took a pillow and stuffed it under her nightgown and stroked her fluffy, feather-filled belly. I laid down on her odd-shaped pillow belly and wished I could crawl back inside of her.
I wrote in my notebook:

Do you think Dad is coming back?
I don't know. I hope so.
Where did he go?
He needed some time away.
Away from what?
Away from sadness.
Why is everyone so sad?

Mother put the notebook down and looked at me really hard like when you're trying to find something.

Do you think Bridget is coming back?
No.
Where is she?
She went where Seven went.
In a shoebox?

Mother smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile. "Did you put Seven in a shoebox?"

I nodded.

"I think you better go and look in the shoebox."

I went and got the shoebox out from under my bed and brought it into mother. She told me to open it. So, I did. She looked inside and asked me to look inside too.

"Is Seven in there?" She asked me.

I shook my head. The shoebox was empty. Mother let out her breath as though she'd been holding it for a long time.

"Do you remember when Seven fell and needed a rest?"

I nodded.

"Bridget was very tired honey. She needed a rest too."

I wrote:

But he got back up and flew away again. Maybe Bridget will get back up and fly away again too.

"Yes, Jeanie she already did. She flew far away where we can't reach her."

I could feel the noises in my head getting louder. I balled up my fists and curled my body tight. Mother wrapped herself around me and I felt my fists release. She began to sing, "Hush little baby, don't say a word."

Jessie Foley

Night Swimming

I met Amanda at Foster Beach, the week after I turned seventeen, halfway through a three-week stretch that would eventually be remembered as the worst heat wave in Chicago history. There was a stillness in the city during those three weeks, a breezeless, wooly air. The temperature never once dipped below ninety-five, not even at night. In our neighborhood, Mrs. Stanek, an old lady from down the block, died in the front room chair of her third floor apartment. Her windows had been painted shut, so the smell was contained for four days before anyone noticed. When they finally busted down her door, veteran firemen got one whiff and puked so hard that blood vessels popped in their eyes. They discovered that the wet rag Mrs. Stanek used in an attempt to cool herself had already dried up into a stiff gray mass and had melted into the rotting skin of her forehead.

That's the kind of heat it was—the kind that killed. Our house was red-brick, which absorbed the heat like an oven, but the only air conditioning we had was a window unit in my parents' bedroom, and none of that Freon ever made its way up the stairs into the attic where I slept. By nightfall, my room plateaued at about a hundred and five. Sometimes, to escape it, I climbed out onto the roof, a flat space above the bay window that jutted out from the back of the house. The surface was so hot that when my feet landed on it, they made imprints in the heat-softened tar. But I discovered that if I flung a milk-gallon of cold water out the window, the tar hissed and steamed, and the surface felt like cool, wet moss. Sometimes, I'd spend half the night out there in that heavy stillness, slapping away mosquitoes and thinking about things. Down below me were the crisscrossing streets of the neighborhood, and beyond the houses I could see the hazy glow of downtown to the southeast, and the Sears Tower rising above it all like a great, defiant middle finger.

One night, I discovered an old red Folger Brother's coffee

can in a niche between the bricks. My older brother, John, had used our little jutting roof as his secret smoking lounge, love den, and escape route ever since he was in high school. When I reached into the can, I found an unsmoked Newport. It was brown and crinkly, the tobacco soaked through with dried rainwater. I reached back into my bedroom and felt around under the sill for where John kept his matches. In the sulfurous sudden light, the cigarette caught and I inhaled deeply. It tasted terrible—like bled tobacco and stale Genuine Draft. But it smelled like John. He'd been dead for a little over seven months, and my mom had folded up most of his things and put them in boxes, where they sat in the basement labeled with his name, as if she believed he was coming back one day to collect them. The coffee can was the one thing in our bedroom that still belonged to him. I smoked the cigarette down to the filter, and when I finished, I flicked it onto the front lawn, where it glowed for a moment before burning out on my mom's peony bush.

The next day I met Amanda. She was standing near the concession stand, carefully removing the paper wrapping from a Neapolitan ice cream sandwich. The two friends she was with were high-school-girl skinny, with colt legs and concave stomachs. They leaned against a table in their skimpy bikinis, sticking their narrow butts out and elegantly dipping fries into a large squirt of ketchup. Amanda was shorter and heavier than they were, with soft, chubby arms and a little gut that stuck out over the rim of her bathing suit bottoms. I could tell by the way she stood with one leg crossed in front of the other and tentatively licked at her ice cream that she didn't feel comfortable standing around half naked the way her friends did.

I had gone down to Foster Beach with my best friend, Allen, only to be told that the water was measuring unsafe levels of mercury and the lifeguards weren't letting anyone in the water. Well, those lifeguards had a near-mutiny on their hands from the hordes of sweltering people who stood before that cool, lapping lake, and a bunch of crimson-faced, sweat-dripping cops were called to patrol the water, clomping through the sand in their military boots and telling us we should all just go home. Soon, most of the people gave up in

disgust and left, climbing back onto the Foster Avenue bus, which at least was air-conditioned.

That's why the beach was sort of deserted, despite the record heat. Allen had gotten a clear view of the girls from nearly two hundred yards away, when they'd gathered up their towels and headed towards the concessions. He'd been circling closer ever since. Allen was working as a cashier at the Chicken Inn that summer, so he emanated a constant salty stench of fried poultry skins. He had the type of body where you didn't think he was fat until he took his shirt off, so when we went to the beach, he always wore a tentishly oversized black Bobby Jenks jersey, and enormous wet stains seeped from under his armpits. The sweat seemed to activate and amplify the chicken smell, and he had a small chin-strap of zits and a slick t-zone of grease down the broad part of his nose. But despite his physical shortcomings he was inexplicably and exceedingly full of himself, and sometimes, to my endless shock, this quality actually appealed to women.

Allen's technique with girls was one of over-familiarity. He acted like he'd known them all his life, and then, as they struggled to overcome their confusion, or their indignation, he insinuated himself into their fortresses and hunkered down. Now, as he zeroed in on the three at the beach, he strode forward to the table and helped himself to one of the skinny girl's fries.

"Hey!" she objected.

"Hey," he said, smiling as he dragged the fry through the ketchup and stuffed it in his mouth.

"What, you just take people's food?" demanded the other skinny girl.

"Where do you girls go to school?" he asked, ignoring the question and chewing with his mouth open.

"None of your freaking business." That was the first one again. She hoarded her fries to her chest, guarding them from another attack.

"Fine," he said. "You don't need to tell me. I can figure it out."

He looked the three of them up and down. Amanda, who hadn't said a word, shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She'd put down her ice cream sandwich, and it sat on

its paper wrapper, gathering soup.

"Well, first of all, you go to Catholic school," he finally said.

"How do *you* know?"

He pointed at Amanda.

"That."

All of us looked. Twined around her neck was the small brown curl of a scapular. She touched it now, self-consciously.

I could tell his attention to detail had impressed them.

"So?" said the first skinny one. She wasn't giving in that easily, but she'd stopped guarding the fries."There's *lots* of Catholic schools in Chicago."

Allen was unperturbed. He stroked the zitty nodules on his chin and pondered. Then he said, "Well, you're not Alvernia girls—too classy. And you're not Notre Dame girls—too white. And you can't be Regina girls, because Regina girls are afraid of anything south of Devon Avenue. So that means that you go to Madonna."

When the three of them looked at each other and collapsed into fits of giggles, I knew that he was right. I had to hand it to him—Allen had moments of genius every now and again.

That's how we got three Madonna girls to agree to hang out with us on the hottest day of the hottest summer in Chicago's history. Allen had stolen some vodka from his dad's bar, so we spent the rest of the afternoon in the shade of his brother's pick-up truck, chasing its sharp warmth with fizzy swigs from a lukewarm two-liter of 7-Up. It was so hot and bright out that it didn't take long for the five of us to get pretty tipsy, and when the sun finally went down and the beach closed, an enormous moon floated above our heads and we finished the vodka by its light. By that point, Amanda and I were sitting next to each other with our eyes closed, leaning back against the hard metal of the truck that was still warm from baking all day in the sun. One of the skinny girls—the one who'd announced early on that she had a serious boyfriend—had disappeared, and I could hear the wet, sloppy sounds of Allen and the other girl French kissing nearby.

When I opened my eyes my vision began to spin, and, I realized, like you do suddenly, how drunk I was. I closed them again and it felt like all the particles of me were spinning away and affixing themselves into the sky and the lake and

the pebbles in the street. The only thing I was aware of was the warm pressure of Amanda's arm against my own and the patterns of darkness and light that filtered from passing cars outside into my closed eyelids. I steadied myself by stroking the soft skin at the crook of her arm, and then I was kissing her, and she was kissing me back, and I was telling her that I loved her, and meaning it.

My brother was a master at sneaking girls into our house. If they were the discreet type, he'd tiptoe them in the front door once our parents were asleep, and lead them up to our bedroom. If they were the loud, sloppy drunk type, he'd hoist them up from the backyard using a rope made of old pairs of our St. Sebastian uniform pants tied together at the leg. His preferred make-out destination was the roof , but when the weather was inclement, he'd take them inside to his narrow twin bed that stood just a few feet from my own. He had a strict policy, though: no sexual intercourse in my presence until I turned seventeen. I could hear him whispering this to some of the girls, who sometimes were downright pushy, that he had to be a role model for his little brother. When I heard him say these things, I remember laying with the covers pulled all the way over my head and smiling in the dark. I remember thinking that I couldn't wait to turn seventeen, when John would finally start treating me like a grown-up and taking me out with him on weekends and bestowing on me his extensive knowledge about women.

The worst day of my life was that January morning, an hour or so after John had been pried from the smoldering heap of his Pontiac Grand Prix on the side of the Kennedy Expressway and airlifted to the hospital, when the priest had knocked softly on the door of his room. We stood around his bed, barely recognizing our brother and son, while the priest read his last rites and we watched as the life slipped from him just as clearly as you'd watch a bird take flight from a fence. But I have to say that my seventeenth birthday was almost as bad. There was so much that John had promised to show me about life, and now I would never know. On that day, the missing him was a real, palpable thing, a monster that crouched on my chest. I'd shared cake with my parents and aunts and

cousins, then gone upstairs and put my fist through the wall in our bedroom closet. The hole's still there. I lay in his bed then, wrapped in his comforter despite the heat, and cried like the pussy that I was, holding my throbbing hand until I fell asleep and woke up the next morning when it wasn't my birthday anymore.

Somehow, I had convinced Amanda to come back to my house with me. Allen and the skinny girl had dropped us off, roaring away with the radio blasting, which I was sure must have woken my parents, and now that we were now standing in my dark backyard and looking up at the little roof, I couldn't summon the courage to try to sneak her inside. I thought about the uniform-pants rope, still coiled in a back corner of our closet, but the thought of asking her to climb it seemed ridiculous.

A sudden idea occurred to me, an idea, I thought, that John would have approved of.

"Do you want to go swimming?" I asked.

My next-door neighbors, the Hansons, were retired and spent most of their summer up in Door County. Their house stood dark and mute, the windows tightly drawn. The reflection of the moon floated in the middle of their above-ground pool, lighting up the blue inner walls.

I looked at Amanda, held a finger to my lips, then hooked my toes into the laths of their chain link fence and hoisted myself over. I landed barefoot in the soft grass, and she climbed over after me, quiet as a cat.

The neighborhood was entirely asleep—no buzzing of cars or tweeting of birds. All you could hear was the lapping of the chlorinated water against the lacquered sides of the Hanson's pool and the sighing of the water filtration system. I stripped off my shirt, and when I felt Amanda watching me, a strange feeling bubbled up inside me. I shivered, understanding that this particular summer would mean both the ending and the beginning of something; that it would someday weigh heavily in the measure of my life.

I went in first, swimming around underwater, coming up only for breath, and opening my eyes to watch the churning, pale legs of Amanda as she climbed in after me. She'd made

me turn around while she took off her dress, which I thought was cute since when I'd met her she'd only been wearing a bathing suit anyway. I reached for her now, and was able to get a finger into the elastic band of her suit before she squealed, though it sounded far away in the air above us, and then she swam away, foaming up the water with bubbles that blocked my vision.

But I swam after her and reached for her legs again, and now she didn't protest. This time, she let her legs drift toward me and my fingers climbed up her legs and then I burst out of the water, breathing deeply, the peonies from my mother's bushes, the leftover charred smell of a smoldering grill, the chlorine. I was face to face with Amanda, and her dark hair was slicked back like an otter's, and her makeup had run down below her eyes in black crescents, and her eyes were two gloaming stars before me. I planted my feet on the bottom of the pool, toes groping for a solid foothold, and I cupped her face in my wet hands and kissed her, a big wet sloppy, tonguey kiss, and she kissed me back expertly; all the shyness of the daytime, which seemed so long ago, was entirely forgotten. It felt as if we were the only people in the world. We were alone in the darkness and there were only two kinds of light. The streetlight in the alley was yellow and artificial and the moon shone soft and white and her skin was something in between, pale pink, and it reflected off the lights from the moon and the alley. We floated there, kissing, until the sky began to turn gray and that made the moon less white and the streetlights less yellow. When I pulled down Amanda's bra, the tops of her breasts floated to the top of the water and they were white, too.

"Someone will see," she said, crossing her arms shyly. But I gently drew her hands away, pulling them back into the water.

"No. They're still asleep."

"But they'll be up soon."

"No."

And I knew that they wouldn't be because I knew that the Hansons were in Door County and my parents would not get up before eight-o'clock mass, and the night still belonged to us as long as the streetlights were still on. But it was not really even night anymore, and both of us knew it. Dawn was

coming and it smelled like rain. We could see forks of heat lightning flashing in the sky beyond the trees and garages and houses. I wondered if it was going to rain and then I heard the low rumble of thunder, and then I began to hope that it would, because then Amanda and I would be there in this warm heated pool and the raindrops would come down and pelt the pool water, making tiny splashes, and our faces would be dappled with cold drops but our bodies would be immersed in warm, still water, and I love the way it feels when two kinds of water touch you at the same time, one cold and moving and fresh and one warm and still, but both clean. Our towels, filched from the Hanson's pool shed, were tossed on the grass, and I began to dread the moment when we would have to wrap ourselves in them, when it really became daytime and the neighborhood woke up, with the purpose of taking the world back from us, because right now it belonged to me and Amanda only. It was dark, and secret, and ours.

When it's time to get out of this pool, I thought, everything is going to end, and I think she felt the same way, because now she pressed her wet head to my shoulder and I thought to myself it was the most tender gesture a girl had ever made toward me, more tender, even, than the kissing.

Lightning snapped across the air above us between long rolls of thunder, and then the rain swept in, pinging off the gutters and blacktop roofs and needling the water all around us. Amanda laughed and, using my thighs to brace her feet, pushed off across the pool, floating on her back, her hair twisting on the surface of the water. She opened her mouth and let the rain fall on her tongue. I circled the pool after her, kicking my legs. She turned to me, smiling, and then dragged me underwater where she kissed me with open eyes. We rose to the surface. I held her as I caught my breath.

"We should probably get out soon, huh?" she said, wiping smudges of mascara away with her fists. "I need to get home before my parents wake up."

The giddy happiness I felt at being there with her began to ebb away. It was over now. We wouldn't be able to get it back. She reached out and touched my cheek, as if to apologize, and her hand felt cold. She leaned in to kiss me again, but then her eyes cut to something that was moving just over my

shoulder and she jumped back with a splash, the hand on my cheek pushing me away. It stung as if she'd slapped me.

I turned around and saw a big, fat, white possum hunched on the pool's edge. Its eyes were red and its long rat tail wrapped around its body. Its claws curled around the fake wood paneling of the pool deck. It didn't look at us, but its long, pointy snout dipped down, and a tongue, the same color as the eyes, darted out and licked at the water.

We couldn't do anything but stare. We were afraid to splash or move or startle it. A cold, sick terror gripped me and all the vodka from earlier in the night began to rise, like mercury, in my esophagus. My head felt gelatinous.

Amanda whispered something to me but the words got lost in the rain.

The possum's tongue was too short to reach the water, and the tail waved in a languid kind of frustration. The claws curled tighter around the pool edge and the round, dull white form inched forward. It leaned in and then, with the gracelessness an obese child, it clawed the air and fell forward, splashing into the pool.

Amanda screamed, and so did the possum—a horrid, bestial shriek of rage and anguish that sounded eerily human. It thrashed in the water, screeching steadily, its white fur saturated to an oily gray. Its panicked movements kicked up a feral, animal reek, like moldy bath mats and mushrooms.

"Do something!" Amanda wailed, clinging to my shoulders. We'd pushed ourselves back to the far side of the pool, as far from the screaming, drowning thing as we could. Its claws were reaching out to the rainy sky, its mouth wide open, revealing a row of gleaming, pointy teeth.

My legs, underwater, felt wooden.

"It's going to drown!" she shook my shoulders. "You have to help it!"

"Get out of the pool," I commanded, my voice loud and falsely authoritative. She sensed, wrongly, that I had the situation under control, so she hooked her arms over the side and hoisted herself out, yanking her bra straps back into place and shivering.

"Eeeeeeeeeee!" the possum shrieked, and it was louder than the thunder and the rain and the pool filtration system.

It clawed at the slick sides of the pool with such ferocity that thin red tendrils of blood began to thread their way across the surface of the water. I turned my back to it, not looking at Amanda, who stood there dripping, huddled in a towel, and launched myself over the edge and out of the pool.

"Are you getting a net?" she demanded.

I reached down for my towel and didn't answer.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeee! Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

"Shut the fuck *up*!" I screamed, punching the plastic side of the pool. My knuckles throbbed, and Amanda jumped back.

"So that's it?" She stood in front of me, so that I couldn't not look at her. "You're just going to let it *die?*"

The possum's shrieking had tapered off into a pathetic, torturous whimpering, accompanied by desperate splashing. Just as I couldn't bring myself to look at Amanda, I couldn't bring myself to look in the pool either, and we both stood there dripping, listening to the splashing that was becoming less and less urgent, punctuated by intermittent gurgling. Then, the sounds stopped altogether. The rain drummed gently all around us and the morning had turned a milky gray. Amanda turned and walked over to the pool. I followed her. The possum was there in the middle, floating like a great white buoy. Its long, ringed tail floated uselessly on the surface of the water. Amanda, shivering, pulled her towel closer around her shoulders. She reached down, viciously scooped up her clothes, and stomped her feet back into her flip-flops. She looked at me and the profound disappointment on her wet, pink face made me want to find a shotgun and blow the head off of every single goddamn possum in the city of Chicago, including—especially—the one belonging to the carcass that was already dead in the middle of the Hanson's pool.

"It was just a possum," I tried weakly. "They eat garbage—"

But she was already walking away from me, in quick, determined feminine steps, so pretty and so proud, down the gangway between our house and the Hanson's, to find her way home in the rain, alone.

I thought about my brother and decided that he probably wouldn't have let it drown; no, he probably would've picked up the clawing, scratching, rabid thing and launched it over the side of the pool, where it would crash onto the lawn,

shake itself off, and then lumber off, with the peaceful forgetfulness of animals, back on out to the alley as if nothing remarkable had happened in its little possum life. He would have scratches down his arms and he would tell and re-tell the story at bars, at parties, expanding it, exaggerating it, gesturing, imitating that awful "Eeeeeeeeee!"—only the way he'd do it would be hilariously funny. The way he would tell it would be just right and the girl who'd been in the pool with him that night would say what a hero he had been and she'd look at him forever in just the same way that Amanda had looked at me for only a minute.

Still dripping wet, I hopped the fence and landed again in my own backyard. The dawn drizzle had broken the languishing spell of the heat wave, and soon enough fall would arrive, and with it my senior year. I would graduate, turn eighteen, and then I would go to college and graduate again, and then I would be twenty-three, and from then on I would always be older than my older brother ever was. But that morning, after I finally fell asleep out on the roof in the cooled-down air, I still believed that I would be seventeen forever; that it would be like the way I missed him, a thing unfinished, a beginning without an end.

E. Ce Miller

A Shock to the System

The boy landed on the concrete beneath him with a hollow crack. I hadn't known he was there until I heard him; hadn't seen him perched atop the concrete wall like a dark bird, just beyond the yellow glow of the streetlights. I hadn't seen his body snap against the impact of the bullet, which traveled up into the air and left a hole just below his ear—a hole that looked too small to have killed anybody. I hadn't seen him fall; just saw his body after he'd landed, after the crack of bone against concrete echoed off the walls of the skateboarding park I stood in, next to my brother. Then, once I saw him—blood pooling in one ear and running thin rivers down the back of his bald head—I stopped seeing everything else.

I am David. I am twelve years old, but I pretend I am ten because I am in the fifth grade. In the United States, in the fifth grade, you are supposed to be ten. I play soccer, which is really football and I also write love stories—not gross love stories, just stories I think would be nice if they happened to me. Sometimes I shoot a gun; but usually just up into the air and usually only after parades and parties in the summer, when there are fireworks and everything smells like burnt quesadillas. I have been told I am about to have a shock to my system.

I don't know what this is: *a shock to my system*, but it makes my teeth hurt just like the night Axel asked me to go with him to the skateboarding park at the corner of Cesar Chavez Avenue and Hazard Street. Axel is my brother. He is seventeen and shaves his hair so close to his head that it doesn't even look like hair, just a thin layer of dust collecting around his skull. Thinking about Axel too much also makes my teeth hurt, and when they hurt too much, I have to go to the clinic on Whittier Boulevard, where I wait in line all day for the dentist to poke a little metal stick around my mouth

and ask me if I grind my teeth, saying: "No, no cavities. Too much tension in your jaw." I know when things are wrong by the way my teeth hurt. That night, at the skateboarding park, when I told Axel about the pain in my teeth he put his hand on the top of my head and squished my hair flat.

"Mijo," he said, "I am covered in sand." He grabbed my wrist and twisted it, running the back of my hand along his cheek and down his bare arm.

"You feel that, mijo?" I looked up at him and nodded, even though I didn't feel anything except the soft little hairs that sprouted up from his skin.

"That's sand." He let go of my wrist and returned his hand to the top of my head. "Deserts and deserts of sand."

That night the streetlights around the skateboarding park covered everything in a foggy, yellow glow. The air was warm and smelled sugary, almost sticky. In East Los Angeles the air in the projects smells good—not like in Mexico City, where the thick breeze can become so bitter it makes my eyes water. Breathing the air in Mexico City means breathing in the smell of hundreds of other beings: people and cars, donkeys and goats, dogs and chickens; all sharing the street and pressing tightly against each other

That night Axel jumped up onto a low wall that wrapped around the skateboard ramps in ripples and waves. He climbed onto a thin, metal rail that ran along one side of the ramps; performing like a tightrope walker we saw on Venice Beach one summer. The rubber soles of his shoes squeaked against the rail, and I felt my body tense with worry that he was going to fall. He stuck one leg out into the air and jutted his arms up in strange, unnatural angles.

"You know what I am now, mijo?" he yelled, jerking his arms back and forth. I shook my head no.

"I'm a cactus. One of those big saguaro fuckers!"

He jumped off the rail and over the low wall, running straight at me and grabbing me by the back of my neck, pulling my face into his. His breath was smoky and a little sweet, and I wondered if I could taste the salt from his sweat evaporating into the warm night air. My heart throbbed beneath my thin shirt and Axel's hand began sweating against the back of my neck.

I wasn't always afraid of Axel like I had been that night. I wasn't always worried about where he was going or what crazy stunt he could be fooling around with. Axel used to take me to the skateboarding park at night and we'd lie on our backs on the cold, cement ramps, sneaking cigarettes and once in a while something Axel called *hierba*—what I learned later was really called pot. Axel would talk about the girls he had slept with, or wanted to sleep with and I would nod my head and pretend I knew about all the things he was saying. But then Axel went across the desert, to Mexico with a group of older men—men with tattoos across their bald heads who belted their loose, black jeans beneath their waists and greeted each other with wild hand gestures. When he came back he had cut off the long, thick braid he always wore greased back along his skull and couldn't stop talking about sand—always feeling like he was covered in sand.

"You know what that pretty cactus is going to do for you out there in all that sand?" Axel asked, squeezing my neck tighter. My teeth began to hurt all the way up into my eyes. I squinted into the face of my brother.

"It ain't going to do shit!" His voice grew louder with every word until he was screaming. He released my neck and danced around in front of me, twirling and kicking at the ground, stirring up dirt that stuck to the sweat on the back of his legs. As he pulled out the gun he'd started tucking into the waistband of his jeans I saw the thick skin of his stomach, paler than the sun-darkened skin of his face or arms. Axel clenched both of this eyes shut and lowered his chin to his chest, shooting twice into the air. After a moment, a third shot was fired shakily into the distance.

Neither of us saw the boy until he toppled off the ledge of a taller ramp, further into the park, and landed with a hollow crack into the concrete basin beneath him.

Axel said shooting the gun made some of the sand fall off.

Now I am folded into a blue, plastic chair that is too small, listening as Miss Therese explains to me "a shock to the system."

"We have some documentation here," Miss Therese says, sliding a thick folder of papers across the table to where my mother and father sit in their own larger chairs. My mother

opens the folder and flips through the sheets of endless, tiny text. My mother does not speak English, but sometimes she pretends to read it. This, I think, is part of the reason I am sitting here. Another reason could be that during the math lesson on Tuesday I stood up before I was excused and walked across Mr. Rowan's classroom to give Nadia Zavala part of a love story I had written for her. After I sat back down, Mr. Rowan took the folded sheet of paper from Nadia and began to read it aloud to the class.

In all of Los Angeles, which is a really big place, there were only two special people—a boy named Axel and a girl named Nadia. Axel was a star football player at Roosevelt High School and Nadia danced salsa, sometimes in the pavilion on Olvera Street and sometimes in Mariachi Plaza; and Axel thought she was beautiful, in her long skirts with green and white ribbons in her hair. But one day, Axel couldn't play football anymore, because he was going to Mexico for a long time, and Nadia, if she would love him enough, was the only person who could bring him back.

There Mr. Rowan had stopped reading and threw the paper into the trash. I think he was trying to embarrass me, like he did to the girls when he read aloud the notes they passed to one another during class. But I was only mad that he threw my story in the trash. Then he sent me down the hall to Miss Therese, who called my mother's answering machine and left a message that I had to translate for her when I got home that afternoon—leaving out the part about Nadia Zavala and telling her I was in a little trouble for using too many sheets of paper at school.

"We think this will help David to concentrate." Miss Therese says, reaching across the table to run a finger along one of the sheets in my file. She pronounces my name "dah-veed", slowly and making sympathetic eyes as she says it, even though I have been "day-vid" for a long time now. My parents nod from across the table and my father looks at me sitting in my small, blue chair, as I concentrate on pulling a thread out of the sleeve of my sweater. I concentrate.

Sometimes I concentrate on Axel and sometimes I concentrate on that kid, the one who was spraying graffiti on the brick wall behind the tall skateboarding ramp. I concentrate on how his whole body seemed to crack when he fell, and what he looked like when he landed, with blood pooling at the back of his neck and creeping along the concrete. I concentrate on how the ground around him was littered with spray cans, and the sound he was making when Axel and I walked over to him, like air being let slowly out of a tire. I concentrate on how long it took Axel and I to walk over to him, walking so slowly we couldn't even hear our feet hitting the ground. Usually gunshots make things happen fast in East L.A.—cars speed by, swerving across two lanes of traffic; people duck behind parked vans and run into doorways, swearing loudly in Spanish and slamming their metal screen doors against the noise. But this was different.

"His health?" my father asked, interrupting Miss Therese and speaking slowly, stumbling over the words. "We don't want him to be sick, or sad, or too tired. The doctor at the clinic said—." Miss Therese folded her arms across her chest and cleared her throat.

"And this will certainly help Mr. Rowan manage the entire classroom better," Miss Therese continued. "There are forty-three students in the fifth grade this year. Forty-three."

This was true. So many students were crowded into the fifth grade that some of us—usually those of us who needed a shock to our systems, had to sit at long tables on one side of the room, with our backs pressed against the bookshelves, instead of sitting in desks of our own. Three days each week, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, Nurse Celia rolled a gray, metal cart into the classroom, covered with little plastic cups of water and white pills. Those of us who sat at the long tables counted down the minutes until we heard the cart rolling down the tiled hallway, like marbles being shaken in a jar, and knew we could end our spelling five minutes before the rest of the class. On Tuesday and Thursday, when Nurse Celia was at the high school, Mr. Rowan had to get the cart instead, and our spelling ended even earlier. Even though I sat at the long tables, I had never received a white pill or a plastic cup with my name written on it in black permanent marker. Now,

it seemed, I would.

"We're just helping David help himself," Miss Therese said, reaching over the table again to retrieve the file and arranging the papers in front of her into a neat stack. "And everybody around him." She removed one sheet from her stack and slid the small, pink paper across the table, before standing up. "You'll be amazed what you can accomplish, David, when you're able to *concentrate*."

I finished pulling the thread out of my sweater and flicked it onto the floor next to my blue chair. I didn't want Miss Therese to stand up; didn't want a little white pill and a little plastic cup. I concentrate. I concentrate on the moment Axel and I stood over that kid, staring above his head instead of at his face, because his eyes were still open. I concentrate on how Axel grabbed me by the shoulders and shoved me; shoved me so hard that I fell onto the concrete and scraped the skin off my right hand. He kicked the back of my legs while I was on the ground and yelled "Run, go home, fucking *run*", over and over until I finally got up, tears streaming down my face and turning into hiccups as I ran. I concentrate on how, even though he could have run too, Axel waited for the police, who showed up too late and without an ambulance; how he stood there alone in the dark, next to that dying kid. He told the police that he had come to the skateboarding park alone and let fly a few shots; and since the kid was tagging gang signs, the police thought the shooting was gang retaliation—a battle over graffiti and drug territory. I concentrate on what happens to defendants suspected of gang affiliation; how I found "defendant" and "affiliation" in the dictionary when I finally went back school, and then got in trouble for playing at the bookshelves instead of concentrating. I concentrate on how the police helicopters, with their spotlights, hummed over the projects that night—ghetto birds shining their light on us only after it's too late to see anything.

When I found "defendant" and "affiliation" in the dictionary I also looked for "indicted" and "probation." I already knew what the word probation meant, but it was more interesting to look for words instead of trying to hear Mr. Rowan over the buzz of forty-three chairs scraping, papers ripping, pencils sharpening, faces sneezing, coughing, burping, whis-

pering—every time the fifth grade made a noise it was made in sets of forty-three. Then I looked for *Axel*, which wasn't in the dictionary, but *a-x-l-e* was, so I read that, and my teeth started to hurt again.

A-x-l-e—the definition fit. Since that night at the skateboarding park, since Axel went to jail, it felt like he was the thing around which my mind rotated, and the rest of life followed.

Then I looked up *David*, but I don't exist in the dictionary.

"So then," Miss Therese said, clearing her throat and making me jump. "You have the prescription. We take care of all that for you." She brushed a stray hair off her skirt and walked to the door. My mother and father stood, uncomfortably, but allowed themselves to be ushered out of the office. I reluctantly peeled myself out of the plastic chair and followed behind.

"Now, this level of medication may be a shock to him at first." Miss Therese led us quickly down the hall, her shoes echoing loudly off the tile, and held open the heavy door that led to the parking lot. "But this is really our only option if David would like to continue at our school."

The next time Nurse Celia rolls into class with the metal cart there is a plastic cup of water for me and another with a white pill rolling around at the bottom, and my name written on it in black permanent marker. There are two more kids sitting at the long tables next to the bookshelves now, and I wonder how long it will be before they receive the shocks to their systems. There are twenty-eight kids sitting at desks, and fifteen crowded into the far side of the room, filling in where they can at the long tables. Mr. Rowan pulled the tables further from the bookshelves and turned them at odd angles, in an effort to make room for more bodies, but now the students seated at the left table have to turn sideways to see the chalkboard.

When Nurse Celia hands me my plastic cups, I fill my mouth with the water first and then slip the pill in between my closed lips. I swish the pill around in the water, waiting to see if anything will happen. My white pill becomes a thick, chalky dust and some of it sticks to my tongue. I ask Nurse

Celia for a second little cup of water.

"I bring only one per child." Nurse Celia stutters harshly and her accent is deep, like a man's. She speaks English only a little better than my parents, except she is not from Mexico. She has pale, long hair—so pale it is almost white, and so long that she could probably sit on it. I wonder if anyone ever made Nurse Celia take a little white pill, out of a plastic cup with her name written on it in black permanent marker.

I press my tongue into the pill paste stuck to the roof of my mouth, and it feels like tiny grains of sand that taste bitter. Tiny grains of sand, stuck to the roof of my mouth and rolling over my tongue. The sand makes me think about Axel—about how there was one thing Axel didn't tell. One important thing my older brother Axel, who was seventeen and who had tightly-shaved hair and a gun tucked into the waistband of his jeans, kept to himself. One thing my brother didn't tell the police; one thing he didn't tell the man in the tight gray suit who stood next to him in court and said he would help my brother for free, but then nodded at the judge and shrugged his shoulders; one thing he didn't tell our parents, or even Father Adalberto who went to visit him in the Los Angeles Department of Corrections at 441 South Bauchet Street, Cellblock J, where for the first sixty days other visitors are not allowed.

What Axel didn't tell was what happened after the first two shots were fired, but before the third one killed the boy. Axel didn't tell anybody that I got mad at him, so mad it felt like the entire night was buzzing around me and I couldn't hear anything but the roar of anger inside my head; how after Axel tucked the gun back into the waistband of his jeans, like he always did, I started kicking him, punching at his big chest and arms with my scrawny fists; how I yelled at him—yelled at him for going to Mexico, for shaving his head, for buying the gun in the first place. I yelled at him for staying out at night and not taking me to the skateboarding park anymore, except to walk around in the dark and fire the gun. Axel didn't tell anyone about how he let me tackle him to the ground, even though he was so much bigger than me and could have easily stopped me. He didn't tell anyone how—as I flailed my fists above him—the gun fell out of his waistband and onto the

concrete and I stopped flailing, jumped up, grabbed the gun, and crying like a small child, aimed it at his face before firing off into the distance.

At home my parents watch me when they think I'm not paying attention. They watch me, look at each other, and watch me again. I think we are all waiting for the shock to my system.

It comes on the third day, after the third little white pill and the third little cup of water. There is a sharp, prickly pain in my head—the same feeling I get when I sit on my foot for too long or fall asleep on my hand, only this feeling is in my brain and I can't shake it out. On the fourth day my hands start to twitch every time I hold my pencil, so I hold it harder, until it breaks and Mr. Rowan yells at me for "improper use of classroom resources." But at the end of the week I can hold my pencil straight, and the pain in my head is dull and muffled, like a fight happening in the apartment next door—I know it's there, but I can ignore it if I try. What I can't ignore is how tired I am and how heavy my face feels, like there is a weight attached to each of my cheeks, pulling me forward. I lay my head on the cold table; too tired to concentrate on Mr. Rowan, or soccer, or police, or ghetto birds, or the kid in the skateboarding park, or Axel. Even too tired to concentrate on writing my love stories. With my head on the table I close my eyes and quietly think about nothing.

Lucy Tan

Cachito

The men we met at Cachito called us *girls* or sometimes *ladies* and also *chickies, broads, biddies, moon-faces* and *jailbait*, but not *kids*—never *kids*. We had to learn their speech to mask our ages.

Cut us a stoge, will you? We'll give you a buck for a loosie.

We had a way with numbers. There were four of us. We stood outside the bar and let the men watch us pass their cigarettes from mouth to mouth to mouth to mouth and imagine what they would. Behind their backs we had names for them too: we called them "possibilities."

Because it was not about the men at all. It was about seeing if they could take us to Caston City and back home again before morning. We lived in the driest part of the state where the air smelled like nothing (and not nothing as in "absence of" but *nothing* as in weeds sunned to death and the dust from loose rocks skipped downhill to nowhere). Cachito was about as far as we ever got from home. It lay at the intersection of three counties, just off a highway crossed by men from both coasts and all the pass-by states in between. We studied their license plates and cars' emissions, disappointed that acrid breath smelled the same coming from anywhere—Virginia, or Texas, or Arkansas.

One night, at Cachito, we found a man leaned up against his car, peering down the interstate. He had a thin frame and hair slick as the back of a beetle. We liked that he was alone—it made us bold.

"Hey, nice hair," Tammy said to him. "We like your car. You wanna buy us drinks? Wanna go inside?" He looked at each of us and then back at Mini, the prettiest.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Sixty-four." That was how old we were combined.

The man was tall and timid. When he walked, his arms were like two wavering apologies. He held the door to the bar open for us Dad-style—propped up with one hand high so we

could slip underneath. Once inside, three of us girls got into one end of a booth, and Tammy, the baddest of us, got in on the side of the man. She asked him for four screwdrivers, and he ordered in a voice that fell straight into his lap. For a while after the waitress left, he continued studying the menu, and then finally, pushed it aside to look out at the pinball machine and the beers on tap.

"You waiting on someone?" Tammy asked, tilting her head. She had a cute little chin like a spade, which she was used to using for leverage.

"No," the man said. "Just looking."

He rubbed his fingertips against each other while eyeing Mini again—the pretty one. She wasn't even that pretty; we were all pretty. To the world we were one: best friends and interchangeable, with a unified stance on most things. We liked being close enough to love and hate each other in place of loving and hating ourselves.

"So what's your name, anyway?" I asked, picking up the relay.

"Dave," he said, still watching Mini.

"What are your plans tonight, Dave?"

"Goin' to a party in Caston," he said. "How 'bout yourselves?"

"Us too!" piped Tammy.

"Imagine that. Where abouts?"

Tammy did not have an answer to this, so she just dipped her chin and winked at him.

When our drinks came, the man looked at his as if he had forgotten he had ordered it. He swirled it, tasted, and then drank the whole thing at once. A pair of high beams flooded in from the parking lot, making the man angle his eyes. I saw then in the glare that he had thick knuckles and sausage-patterned skin. He was old, truly old—about forty-five. The other girls must have seen it too because everyone got quiet and sucked on their drinks. This was not the man we hassled in the parking lot. Something had fooled us out there.

"What are your names?" he asked us, suddenly friendly.

"Well I'm Tammy. That's Lisa. And Mini and Jean."

Lisa and I motioned hello. Mini, though, was jabbing at the bottom of her glass with her straw.

When we were in the fourth grade, our class put on a play. Mini had stage fright, so Mrs. Woodruff cast the four of us as seasons, hoping that Mini would feel more comfortable performing with the three of us by her side. Tammy was Winter, Lisa was Spring, I was Summer, and Mini was Fall. When the time came, though, we still couldn't get Mini to go out. The rest of us stood in a row, our heads all turned stage left to where she was standing. "Fall!" Mrs. Woodruff had urged from the wings. "Fall!"

"Well ladies, if we're all goin' in the same direction, why don't I give you a ride? Would you like that?" When the man smiled, we could see one of his bottom teeth was darker than the rest, and I could feel Mini's leg start to jiggle against mine.

"That'd be nice," said Tammy. "I mean—thanks."

"I guess any party in Caston has got to be better than this bar," he said. "What do you think if we get on now?"

"That sounds okay to me," Tammy said. She looked at Lisa and I and we nodded.

"I need to pee," said Mini.

"Me too," the rest of us agreed.

In Cachito's bathroom, we could not tell if our faces were flushed or if it was because of the red, green, and yellow fiesta lanterns strung up around the sink. We wet paper towels and laid them on our faces, just in case they were.

"What now?" asked Lisa.

"He's weird," said Mini. "He looks at me weird."

"Don't flatter yourself," I said.

Mini peeled the paper towel off her face and flung it at me. "You guys go. I'm not going to go."

"If you were going to be scared, why did you come?" asked Tammy.

"I'm not scared. I'm just saying it's weird."

"What's weird? There's four of us and one of him."

For a man's car, it smelled surprising in there—not of cigarettes or old socks, but of antiseptic and canned fruit. Tammy got in first, then Lisa, then me. Mini was left to sit up front, where she kept her legs crossed, but the man didn't even look over. He turned on the ignition and the radio and

eased out of the parking lot, taking the wheel with one hand. Though old, he had on the kind of music we knew.

"Can we roll down the windows please?" Lisa asked. Dave understood right away. He not only lowered the windows, but turned up the radio so that it roared above the sound of the wind and just like that, nothing felt weird anymore. The three of us in the back seat started singing, and pretty soon Mini joined in too. Even the man had one arm out of his window, drumming his palm against the car door.

We didn't know what kind of car it was, but it looked expensive. The dashboard shone like a new foal, and its dials blinked lightning bug green. "This is a nice car!" I yelled to him. "You make a lot of money, don't you?"

"Naw," Dave said, shaking his head, but you could tell he was happy to hear it.

"What's your job?"

"I'm in business."

"You must be good at business," said Lisa.

He raised his shoulders, and then let them slowly drop. "I get by."

The farther we got from home, the straighter and smoother the highway became, until it was hard to tell if we were moving or if things were just moving past us. For the first time that I could remember, I didn't know where I was. There was little room for nerves or even excitement now that we were on our way to Caston. What I felt mostly was relief. Curiosity could only itch so long before it started to chafe.

In the front seat, the man was saying something, and Mini was laughing.

"See that field there?" he asked, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. We craned our necks to look. Below the overpass was a football field with grass so green it looked fake under the floodlights.

"St. Antony's. Best football team in the nation and never better than when I was there."

"You played college football?" asked Tammy.

"No," he said, turning down the music. "But buddies of mine did. They traveled all over the country playing football. Some of 'em even went pro. We got so good my senior year, some of the players had their names engraved on the goal-

posts back there."

We smiled at each other. How like our own fathers he seemed—how like most men we knew—to shrug off direct praise and associate with victories that had nothing to do with him.

Dave pulled us off the highway and down a long ramp, over which we could see lights coming up from the valley. Stores and bars lined either side of a long road, their signs flashing against the cars on the street.

"I don't know where you ladies are heading," said Dave, "but if you don't mind I'd like to swing by my place real quick to get a bottle of something to take to my party. Then I can drive you where you need to go."

Mini spoke for us this time—I didn't even hear what she said. The light changed, and we turned off the main street, into a tunnel of trees that mothered the side streets.

His house looked how I thought a normal Caston house might look—small but dignified, with a roof that fell away on either side under the weight of maple branches. He parked in the driveway and pulled the keys out of the ignition.

"You guys want to come in or what?"

"We'll wait here," said Mini.

He said, "Suit yourself. Won't be a minute," and got out, leaving the car door open. We watched until he let himself inside the house before getting out ourselves.

The air in the valley was different; it didn't smell like nothing. It smelled like motor oil and wood-things and the sweet scent of cold barbecue. I squeezed Lisa's hand, which was still sticky from the screwdriver, and we followed Tammy and Mini, who led the way down the street. A few blocks later, we stopped at a house with no lights on. Its lawn was dark green and evenly mowed, and we lay down to feel the grass behind our heads and needled beneath our ears and against the backs of our legs. It was like riding on the neck of a giant, and suddenly, I saw this city for what it was: a mighty conveyor of opportunity and magic. "We could never go home," I said. "Let's never go home."

My words gathered weight in silence, and I realized the

other girls were waiting for Tammy to speak.

"We'd need money," she said, finally.

"We could find money. Besides, we just left that guy. How would we get home anyway?"

Across the street, an American flag thumped over someone's garage.

"I know where we can get money," said Lisa. "The guy left his wallet in the car." Her eyes searched out Tammy's in the dark, and they were saying to her what deep down, Lisa and I knew we were always trying to say above each other: *You might be the baddest, but I can be bad too.*

"Should we get it?" Tammy sat up. "How much do you think is in there?"

"Probably enough for a cab home, at least," Lisa said.

Back on Dave's street, his car doors stood open, as we'd left them. Tammy slipped into the driver's seat and found the wallet just where Lisa had said it would be, resting in the console. There was a lonely twenty tucked into one end of the billfold.

"Better than nothing," Tammy said, sticking it into her purse. "But you know what would be even better? Screw the money. We should just take the car."

Lisa and I looked at each other. Here's the other thing we knew deep down: the baddest girls weren't really bad—they were *mad*.

"I'm pretty sure that's a felony."

"Who's gonna report us? *I'm* pretty sure that guy won't want to explain how he got his car stolen by four teenage girls. If nothing else, we could say he was coming on to us, and we needed the car to escape."

"That's messed up," Mini whispered.

"It's not going to get to that point, is what I'm saying."

The screen door opened, and Dave's head poked out. In one hand, he was carrying a cordless phone. "Come on in!" he yelled. "I gotta take care of something." I noticed that he'd changed into a T-shirt too wide for his narrow shoulders, and the bones of his chest jutted through. He didn't seem surprised to find Tammy behind the wheel of his car. The four of us exchanged glances.

"Well?" asked Tammy.

"I can't tell if you're joking about the car," I said.

She smiled, dropped the wallet back into the console, and opened the door. "Why don't we just see?"

Our shadows stretched ahead of us as we walked up to the front stoop of his house, one behind the other behind the other behind the other. The exaggerated lengths of our legs seemed almost threatening. Dave stood at the top of the steps, holding the door open with one hand and a beer in the other. He had his phone wedged under his chin and couldn't smile at us without almost dropping it.

The living room's rust-colored carpeting was faded in one section beneath a window with drawn shades. There were low bookshelves, a couch, and a coffee table with newspapers stacked neatly in its cubbyhole. On top of the newspapers was a videogame console with its wired tails wrapped around and tucked underneath. We took off our shoes and sat on the couch while Dave put the TV on for us. "Uh huh," he was saying into the telephone. After some time pacing around, he took his conversation upstairs.

"The keys have to be around here somewhere," Tammy said, the second he was gone. But after five minutes of looking around we came up with nothing. "We'll have to wait. They're probably in his pocket."

So we stood around the kitchen drinking the things we found in his fridge and cabinets—beers, mostly, and a bottle of scotch that circled us once before coming to rest in Tammy's hands, where its horizon quickly sank below the paper label. Then we went back to the living room to watch TV, which was showing mostly dated sitcoms and infomercials.

By the time the man came back into the room, Tammy had fallen asleep. He seemed surprised to find us still there, and after pausing a moment, sat down on one end of the couch and draped his arm around the back cushion so that Mini was close enough to smell the crooks of him. She had taken off her socks along with her shoes, and the man stared at her toes. They were small and round with worn crescents of blue nail polish. The toes sensed him looking and curled beneath the balls of Mini's feet.

"Everything okay?" I asked the man.

"Yeah," he said, shifting his body toward me with a look of sudden focus. It was as if we'd all been sitting in a darkened basement and I'd suddenly turned on a light bulb over my head.

"You find your bottle?" I asked.

He smiled, and the folds above his eyelids pitched up in smiles of their own.

"Yeah. Thing is, the party called, and it said it's not until later."

"How can a party call before it's happening?"

Dave gave a loud "HA!" and raised his beer to me. He twiddled it by its neck before he drank. The skin beneath his chin hung loose and furred with stubble, except for where the sharp knob in his throat rose and sank.

"You're a smart one, aren't you?" he asked. He started doing that thing with his fingers again, where the tips traced each other in circles.

"Actually, she is," Mini put in. "Smartest one in our school."

It was just commentary, but it was more about us than we'd meant to say. One look at Dave told me he felt the same. The light above my head went out. He blinked and stared down at his beer.

"You come to the city a lot," he said, his voice touched with sarcasm. "Right? Regular night on the town."

The pinkness that had winged his cheeks was gone; he was getting sober. It's a terrible thing to watch, an old man sobering up. You see him lose so much all at once—humor and arrogance and sundry hopes. You figure this is how he must look when he's about to die.

"Christ," he breathed, when none of us answered. He leaned forward, bringing his palms to his temples and said to no one in particular: "I mean, you never told me where you wanted to go."

Then the doorbell rang. It was a girly kind of ring, with at least five notes.

"Who's that?" Lisa asked.

Dave neither answered her, nor moved. Moments passed and another string of notes sounded.

"You gonna get that?" Lisa asked again.

It rang a third time.

"It's probably his mother or something," Mini whispered to me. "He's scared to have people find us here."

Two rings, one after another, the second cutting into the first like a bad record.

Abruptly, Lisa got up and left the living room.

"Hey," the man called, when he realized where she was going. It was too late; we could hear the door opening and voices outside. Moments later, Lisa returned, followed by three men.

"David!" the first one said. He was lightly bearded all the way down his neck, underneath his sleeveless shirt, over his shoulders and across the backs of his hands. "Lookit the party you've got going on here. Sure took you a minute t' git to the door, huh?"

The man stared back at the men and said nothing.

"'Sa matter with you, son? Chipper a minute ago. 'Scuse Dave's manners, ladies. My name is Larry. With me here I got Chris and Jon."

"Tammy," I said. "Tammy." She was too far from me to shove awake.

The men were bringing in chairs from the kitchen because the couch was too small. They did not talk or look at one another. For eight people sitting there, the sound of the TV was too soft, and the main thing I heard was Lisa's tongue ring going off against her teeth like gunfire. We sat in silence for a few seconds before I asked, "Where's your bathroom?"

All four of them looked at me a while before the biggest one spoke. "It's upstairs. Down the hall and to the right."

Lisa and I stood, and Mini stared up at us.

"Mini," I said, and the men all turned their heads toward her.

Mini looked at Tammy, whose eyes had not even opened once. "I'll go after you," she said.

No lights were on in the rest of the house that we could see. At the staircase, Lisa and I felt our way to the second floor where a thick rug covered floorboards that felt loose underneath our steps. I groped until I found a wall that was

cool and tiled, with a light switch. In the bluish light of the bathroom, we could make everything out very clearly: a linoleum floor, strewn shirts, stained toilet, and old-fashioned sink. We stepped inside, and I closed the door as best as I could. Its frame had either shrunk, or the door engorged with humidity, but the one didn't fit into the other. Lisa lowered the toilet seat and her skirt and sat there with nothing coming out of her.

"Oh God," she said, looking at the floor. "Where the fuck are we?"

Downstairs, the TV volume went way up, and Lisa raised her head, startled. Her hair clung to the sides of her neck.

"Shut up," I said, before she could say anything else.

"Oh God," said Lisa again, and then really did start to pee.

After she finished, we turned off the light so we could feel our way back down the stairs very slowly. When we got to the bottom step we saw that the door to the living room was closed.

"Fuck," said Lisa. "Shit fuck. What do we do?"

For a moment, we stood at the landing, looking around. A hallway led from the living room door to the front door. It was a straight shot—twelve feet, maybe.

I took a breath, turned toward the living room, and knocked.

"Tammy? Mini!" I couldn't hear anything but the TV, so after a few knocks I stopped, just stood there holding Lisa's hand, my own going cold, and one of us was sweating.

"We gotta go in," I said. "Okay?" Her face had never been so still.

Just as I touched the knob, the door opened and the biggest man, the one who had given us directions to the bathroom, stepped outside. He was too big to see around, and he pulled the door shut behind him.

"Hey girls," he said, taking us each under an arm. "Let's get me a drink."

"Um," I said, as we were walked toward the kitchen. "What—"

"Nothin' to worry about," he said. When we reached the kitchen he dropped his arms from our shoulders and opened the fridge. "My friends are not bad people. They're just lookin' for a little bit of fun. Everybody's lookin' for a little bit. Every-

body's having a good time. You'll see. You want one?"

He held a beer in one hand and pointed at it with the other.

I shook my head no, and looked back at Lisa, who had stopped short of the door.

"It's going to be alright," he said, popping the top on his bottle. "You're big girls. I'm sure it's nothing you haven't done before."

Then his arms were around us again, and he steered us out of the kitchen, back toward the living room.

"Wait," said Lisa, pulling back.

"Whassamatter?"

Her eyes dropped. I saw that her thumb was hooked around the hem of her dress, pulling on it in the way I'd seen her do when she was little.

"I—I do want a beer."

A smile spread across the man's face. Just then, the living room door opened, and there stood Mini, with the bright overhead light spilling out from behind her.

"Tammy threw up," she said in a small voice, and then, to the big man, "Can you get her some water?"

He looked her up and down, sighed, and headed back to the kitchen. From inside the room, someone said, "Fuckin' nasty," and someone else started laughing. Mini pulled Tammy out into the hallway and closed the living room door. I felt her nails in my arm and her mouth against my hair.

"*Get out.*"

We opened the front door with a soft click, and then the screen door. Mini dashed for the car, fishing keys from the pocket of her shorts. She said, "*Don't slam the door!*" just as the rest of us got in and slammed all the doors.

In that moment I was more scared than I'd ever been. The three of us were watching the windows to see if anyone was coming for us, but Mini had her eyes turned to the rearview mirror. I looked around and saw that a second car on the driveway—the one the other men must have come in—was blocking our way to the street.

"HEY!"

Dave's head and shoulders appeared through the doorway.

Mini reversed hard and rocked the front bumper of the car behind us, at the same time slamming my face up against

her headrest. Pain started in my nose and mapped its way around to the back of my head. When I could see again, what I saw was Dave reaching in through Mini's open window and making a fist around the perfect circle of her arm. The raised veins in his grip glistened.

"Get off!" she screamed.

It was as if her voice produced an electric shock. He pulled his arm back and the hard lines of him disappeared. He almost didn't have enough in him to step out of the way as Mini lurched us across the lawn. Twin globes of light swept across grass, the car's stunted vision leading us away from the house, the man, and the men.

"Are you serious?" I heard someone shout from a distance. "Are you fucking serious?" It was the man who had led us to the kitchen. He and the two others were trundling down the steps. They paid no attention to the man, who was still standing on the lawn, with his hand held up to stop them. That hand stayed in the air even after the men stopped chasing.

I faced front then and didn't look back.

Turn after turn brought us to the main road, but not any stretch of it that I remembered. The bars were empty now, except for the legs of upturned stools framed in darkened windows. We expected Mini to stop at any second, to pull over so we could talk it over, reassess, but she didn't. Her bare feet barely reached the pedals. We left Caston in time to see the mountains appear on the horizon, their outlines still purple and vague with sleep, and only then could I tell we were heading east. We got onto the interstate, driving back the way we came. We passed towns we couldn't name, and then those we could. We passed the football stadium where Dave had stood when he was younger, watching men bigger than him win games he never played. Finally, we passed by the exit to Cachito and our town, and kept on going. I wasn't sure if we were still driving to get away or in chase of something else.

An hour later, when Mini signaled to turn into a rest stop, we all straightened up in our seats. She rounded the entrance and parked outside of a Roy Rogers, even though what

we really needed was gas.

We sat there in quiet until I said, "You guys are okay, right?"

Mini caught my gaze in the rearview mirror, her jaw sharp. One of her eyes was still lined and the other wiped almost entirely of makeup.

Tammy exhaled and brought her knees up to her chin. "Goddamn," she said quietly. "That was sloppy as hell."

Sloppy: she had her own way of saying.

"Mini?" I said, when I saw her still looking at me. "You could have come to the bathroom."

"No, I couldn't," she said. "I couldn't leave Tammy alone. And then it wasn't four anymore. It was two and two."

Though her voice was steady, I saw that she was about to cry, so I looked away at the highway on which we'd come. Its median stretched farther than I could see, one concrete barrier linked to the next, like vertebra on a spine. After a while, Mini and Tammy got out of the car. The two of them walked around the side of the restaurant and disappeared, an odd, shoeless pair.

"Some people are just better at knowing," Lisa said to me, or to herself. "Mini didn't know what was going to happen, or she would have done the same thing we did."

"None of us knew what was going to happen," I said.

"Didn't we?"

"Don't say that shit, Lisa. It doesn't matter."

But it did matter. It mattered in a way that could not be said if we tried.

Sloppy, Tammy had called it. If I had to call it anything, I'd say the feeling that stayed with me the longest was abandon. Forget what we had done to Mini and Tammy—this is the kind of abandon that's felt when you realize you don't even have yourself by your side. Your self could be someone completely different from who you thought you were. She could get up and walk clear out of the room.

But it wasn't just me. There were new sides to the other girls, too. Years later, I would look back and remember Lisa's stillness as we stood outside the living room, and Tammy's slumped body on the couch, and the set of Mini's jaw. These strangers in us had made strangers of us. In knowing what it meant to belong to the outside world, we did not belong to one

another. Not anymore.

That morning, though, I wasn't thinking of all the things we lost at that man's house. For once, life had outpaced what I could imagine. I opened the car door and stepped outside, where the heat met me like an anxious parent. It felt good to be touched that way. Next to the gas station was a convenience store whose light had just come on. I thought about buying a map, but wasn't sure what good it would do us. What about food? Cigarettes? I pictured walking in and asking for a pack of Marlboros. "How old are you?" the cashier might ask. "What happened to your shoes?"

"Sixteen," I could say. "Take it or leave it."

Instead, I walked toward a shaded corner of the parking lot. Kicking aside paper cups and the wax husks of take-out food, I sat down on the curb to watch the morning traffic. Truckers drove in and out of the rest stop, carrying who-knows-what from one side of the country to the next. They nodded at each other, grown men of a union. They signaled left, or right, and drove off to all the places we'd been trying to go.

Daniel C. Bryant

En route

The vinyl burned the backs of Arlie's legs. She cranked down her window. Vern ooh'ed and ee'ed as he worked himself in behind the wheel: he felt it, too.

"Seatbelt, Vern." With grand gestures she fastened her own, and from the clicks and groans beside her, knew that Vern was trying to secure his, one of those many little rituals, like holding hands, or running the water cold, that her husband—her physical husband at least—could still carry out about as well as ever. When he finally grew quiet, she felt for the upper left button on her watch: "Two-Thirteen-P-M."

"Plenty of time," she said, as if in reply, and then, "Roll down your window, Vern. Get us some air in here." She opened the purse on her lap and felt for the keys. Once she had isolated the car key—bigger than either the apartment or locker one, toothed on both sides—she held it up and jangled the bunch in Vern's direction.

"Got it? That's it. Put it in your keyhole there and turn. Like we do." She pointed to the left, the general direction of the steering column, and heard the metallic tap and scratch of the key finding its way into—she hoped—the ignition switch.

"You turning? You've got to turn it, Vern, like this," and she made a little pinching twist with the fingers of her right hand.

Nothing happened. She felt a bead of sweat tickle between her breasts. She reached across the console until she brushed Vern's arm, then followed it out to his hand: he was holding the key all right, but up by the dashboard, near the radio. TV repairman so many years, he'd never forget about knobs and dials.

"Vern!" she shouted, slapping his hand. "We're starting the car, for God's sake! The key! Then do the foot. You know!"

Clinks followed, and in another moment the old Buick's engine revved three times like a hotrod at a light, then settled into a muttering idle. Throatier than last week, that was for sure: next thing would be a new muffler.

This driving routine of Vern and Arlie's was one they'd been following for almost two years now, ever since Arlie's macular had become so bad—"lights are just about out now"—that she couldn't get her license renewed. And though Vern's memory meant he couldn't find his way around town any more, his vision seemed fine, and his old driving reflexes had stayed in his limbs just as surely as Arlie's old itineraries had stayed in her imagination. Between the two of them, they could get just about anyplace they had to.

Today, anyplace they had to was Vern's neurologist, then the Shop 'n' Save for a rotisserie chicken.

"Any cars coming on your side?" Arlie asked. "You looking to see? Pay attention now."

They'd stopped soon after Vern had pulled out of the parking place. From that timing, and the sticky whine of tires on pavement, Arlie knew they'd reached the exit to the elderly-housing lot.

"You looking to see?" she repeated, louder.

"Yes."

"You tell me, now, when there's a good long space." And a few seconds later, "How about now, Vern? Look out your window. Still cars?"

"No cars."

"Pull out! Quick now, Vern. To the right." She swept her hand widely, knuckling glass. Tires squealed, her head snapped back.

No horns, no crash, just a cool cheek from moving air. She opened her eyes on lesser darkness, and drew her legs back in.

It had been a month since their last visit to Dr. Drummond, the one who had started Vern on the experimental drug for his memory. In fact, Arlie was quick to tell anyone who would listen, Vern was enrolled in a nationwide study, run by specialists down in Boston, which meant free medicine, free brain scans and blood tests, free appointments. They'd both had to sign consents—which she couldn't read anymore than he could grasp—indicating they knew the drug should do some good, though might also do some harm; and for four months now, at seven-thirty sharp every morning, Arlie had been making him swallow his two big capsules with a full

glass of water. So far, she hadn't seen much change.

"Have we gotten to the light yet, Vern?"

"No."

"When we do, go right again." As she pointed, she felt the car slowing, then smoothly stopping. It was cooler here, and dimmer: the shadow of the Stanley Building, it must be. Yes, the dry-cleaner smell, from next door.

"Light red?"

"Yes. Red."

"When it's green, go right." She pointed again. "Wait for green now, the one on the bottom. You watching?"

This wasn't the shortest way to Dr. Drummond's office, Arlie knew, but this time of day it would mean the fewest cars, the fewest delivery vans, the least chance of an accident. There would be stop signs—three of them all told—but Vern was good with stop signs. Better, really, than she'd ever been in her own days behind the wheel.

"At the stop sign after next we're going to go left." Shortly, they stopped, but soon after starting up again, slowed.

"What is it, Vern?" Arlie asked. "Something in the road? Something in the way?" He shouldn't be braking just yet: this should be the long block. She swung her head back and forth, hoping for a shard of peripheral vision. Nothing, and with a jerk that set her seatbelt, the car stopped dead.

"Vern, what are you doing?" They couldn't be much farther than the Pizza Hut. "Answer me!"

"My son."

"Your what was that, Vern?" Malcolm had died thirty-three years ago, triggering a tripwire on night patrol, the official letter had said. Forgetting all about that had been the one saving grace of Vern's dementia. Would that blindness had done the same for her.

"Vern . . . ." But the car door behind her squeaked open. Rustling sounds, a grunt. Slam.

"Drive, gramps! Got a gun under this camo."

Arlie shrank, her heart wild under the chest strap. Perfume in the air. She reached for Vern's arm.

"You deaf? I said, Drive!"

"What . . . what is this?" Arlie asked straight ahead. "Who . . . ?"

"C'mon! Get a move on!"

Arlie leaned toward her husband. “Any cars coming, Vern?”

“No cars. Coming.”

“Go ahead, then, down the road. To the stop sign. Like we do.” As the breeze from her window resumed, something knocked Arlie’s left arm, tore her purse from her lap.

“What’s your bank?” The raspy voice was a young man’s. Young smoker’s.

“Bank of America,” Arlie said.

“Where we’re goin’ then!”

In another minute, the car came to a stop. Must be the intersection now. That program once about holdups—what never to do. Police stations. She tried to line up streets. On account of the crowds at the Farmer’s Market, there should be a policeman at Monument Square. But how . . . . Was this really Tuesday? Were they really . . . ?

“I said, Drive! You stupid or something?”

“Ray.” It was a girl’s voice directly behind Arlie, syrupy, verging on whiney: the voice of the perfume.

“Shut up!”

“Keep straight, Vern. If nothing’s coming. Going to be all right. Everything’s going to be all right.”

“What’s with the geezer?”

“He needs help with directions. Sometimes. He . . . he doesn’t remember so well.”

“You drive, then. Pull over!”

“I can’t.”

“What? Drive?”

“See.”

“Oh, shit! Shit, shit, shit!”

“Go left here, Vern.” And then, emboldened by the strange new advantage her blindness seemed to be giving her, Arlie finally turned her head toward the voices. “May I ask what this . . . ? Why we’re going . . . ?”

“May I ask, Shut the fuck up, lady!”

$2016 in the savings account. Arlie knew the amount, including this month’s interest, to the dollar. Both of their Social Security direct deposits not due until Wednesday. The CDs . . . they wouldn’t have to know about that part. But it wasn’t the money that was the worry: they had her MasterCard now, address, both their Medicare numbers. Identity

things. And what were they going to do with Vern and her after the bank? Maybe Vern was right—they really would be meeting Malcolm today.

She could slowly work her hand out the window and signal whatever it is you signal for help. Lower it and scratch "SOS" in the grime on the outside of her door. Maybe face out the window when they stopped, and mime "Help!" over and over with contorted lips, hoping someone happened to be standing there on the corner to notice, someone big and bold and yet caring enough to take seriously an old woman mouthing like a fish in a bowl. Or how about just fling open the door next time they stopped, and run, ducking gunfire. Run, leaving Vern to his fate the way he had long since left her.

At the faint dinging sound of the Preble Street intersection, she whispered to Vern to go right. And then, louder, over her shoulder, "You don't have to worry about us, you know."

"Who's worryin'?" It was Ray. "I'm not worryin'."

"Because, like I said, I don't see, to give a description or anything; and my husband here, he doesn't remember, so."

There was to be no reply. Arlie could tell from the zipping, change hitting the floor mat, he was still working on her purse.

"My husband must have thought you were our son," she began again, keen to keep some kind of contact, but not show she knew a name. "He thought he was stopping for our son."

"The camo? He been over there in . . . ."

"I said, Shut up!" Ray interrupted. There was a sharp report, a whimpered "Ow!"

"No need of that, now," Arlie said. "No rough stuff in my car. No, he was . . . ."

"You too, lady. Both of you, Shut! Up!"

But she didn't. "What are we passing?"

No, Arlie wasn't about to shut up, even to save her life. Without seeing, talking was the only connection she had. She didn't even know where they were any more. Her bare right arm was hot from the sun, so they were going south, all right, but she'd lost count of the streets.

"Looks like a post office," Ray said. "Big gray place, on the right. That a post office?" Then louder: "I said, Is that a fucking post office?"

"Shut up, you told me." The girl's voice was muffled—bent forward, she must be, face in her hands.

"Jesus! You're the one lives here. You want me to . . . ."

"Post office sounds right," Arlie interrupted. "We're going good. Keep straight on, Vern, few more blocks." She could hear the girl sniffling behind her and went on. "No, not Afghanistan, our son. Way before that. Vietnam. Before you two were born, I bet." They were still: not interested. Didn't even know what Vietnam was, probably. But Arlie was determined now to keep them talking, even if it was about this. "Killed in Vietnam, actually. 1972. That's when the war was good as over. His name's there on the wall, with all the others. You can go see it. Walk right up to it and touch it and spell him out with your finger."

Once more the car stopped, as if blocked by that long, tapering expanse of black marble Arlie could see clear as day.

"So how could I have been him?" Ray asked. "If he's dead. Answer me that, huh?"

"He don't remember stuff, Ray," the girl said. "Don't you remember?"

"'Membered somethin'."

"You don't get it do you, Ray?" And then she added, more resigned than vindicated, "He don't get it."

Arlie braced for another blow; it didn't come. She wiped the sting from her eyes. Ray must not be from around here, she thought: he didn't know the bank or even the main post office; didn't get how they were just tacking back and forth through mid town, going nowhere fast. The girl, though, she sounded local, though for some reason wasn't questioning anything. Soon, however, long before they'd ever run out of gas, she would have to get them to the bank. And then? To get them in close, Ray would make Vern parallel-park, something he hadn't been able to do for years. Flustered, Ray would pull her out of the car, steer her in through the big glass doors by the elbow, wait behind her by the velvet rope with his hidden gun pointed at her back and keep it aimed as she felt her way forward to ask the teller for all their savings. "In twenties, please," she could say, to make the count take longer, giving her time to grimace and dart her useless eyes and trace H-E-L-P on the counter in front of her in sweat. And all the while,

back in the car, the girl would be holding Vern hostage. Not that that would be anything new for Vern.

"What do you look like?" Arlie asked. "Wondering if you look anything like . . . ." Then, ruing the question: "Can you see Monument Square yet?"

"Coming up," the girl said, more brightly. "The bank out Congress we going to?"

"Yes," Arlie said. "That's the one. Out Congress."

She was running out of time now, as well as conversation, but the girl saved her: "Ray's like, really thin? Like your husband. 'Cause he don't eat right, chips and stuff, and he chain smokes, all the time. Crazy hair . . . ."

"Shut up, Lee!"

But she didn't, anymore than Arlie had. "Your son look like that? Probably not the hair, though, in the real army, huh?"

There was honking behind them, and in the distance Arlie could hear guitar music, one of the buskers who played folk songs at the market.

"No," Arlie said over the noise. "Doesn't sound much like our Malcolm. He was a big boy. Big shoulders. From my side. Maybe it was more the outfit. We have this last picture Vern loves. It's all framed on the bureau, him in camouflage, and every night Vern . . . ."

"Make him drive, lady!" Ray shouted.

"He can't, Ray, that truck."

"Pull around it!"

"Vern, honey, can you see around the truck? Just drive around it if you can. Nice and slow. You see around?"

Stopping and starting, the car lurched ahead, then, with one defiant surge, the engine went silent. Vern was stomping on the pedal like a fire. More horns blared, overwhelming the music.

"God damn it!" Ray shouted. "Start it up!"

Softly, Arlie instructed: "Turn the key back, Vern. Then the other way. Do your foot." But though the engine turned over, it didn't catch.

"Fuckin' flooded it!" Ray snarled. "Get outta here!"

"Ray, not that way!" the girl shouted. "Cop!"

"Shit yes. Your side!"

"Police?" A pause and Arlie threw her arm back between

the seats, grabbing cloth, flesh. “No! Stay here . . . . If they find Vern . . . . Vern! In the back!” She released his seatbelt, grabbed his shirt and wrestled him toward her. “Switch with him, Ray. Get up here!”

“You gonna . . . ?”

“He’s by the truck,” Lee called, as Arlie felt Vern, whimpering and writhing, being dragged over the console and into the back seat. Ray’s elbows, his buckle, gouged her left arm on their way forward.

“Officer,” Ray said a moment later, his voice in the front bland and innocent as Vern’s.

“Can’t park here, you know. Loading zone.”

“We’re not parking, sir.” Ray cleared his throat. “Stalled out on us is all.”

The officer didn’t say anything.

“So, OK I start it up?” Now Ray was almost shouting: the officer must have moved away.

But in another minute there was the voice of authority again. “Need to see your license and registration, please.”

“Is there a problem, officer?” Arlie asked, leaning toward the voice.

“I just need to see the papers, ma’am. Routine.”

“This here’s my nephew,” she went on. “Grand nephew, that is. He’s driving us to the doctor—in our car—for my husband in the back there. He’s the patient. I hope this won’t make him late.” She opened the glove compartment and groped inside until she came to an envelope. She waved it to her left.

“License, too,” the policeman said.

Arlie felt Ray shifting in his seat. “It’s for medical research,” she explained, smiling up toward the voice. “The appointment, I mean. My husband’s part of a nationwide study and . . . .”

“Back with you shortly.”

“You all right, Vern?” Arlie called over her shoulder.

“Nephew?” Ray asked. But Arlie wasn’t listening to him.

“He’s fine,” Lee said. “Aren’t you fine, Vernie, all cozy back here with me.”

“Just be a few minutes, Vern. Have to wait for the officer. You need the lavatory?”

There was a slap close by. “Hey, what the?” The raspy Ray

again.

"Just wants a feel of your camo, Ray. Christ sake."

Arlie straightened herself. She took a deep breath: the heat there in the sun, the stench of exhaust, were making it hard to breathe. Or was this plight within a plight what made it hard to breathe? The chance and danger it brimmed with?

Hardly: it was none of that. Nothing as simple or logical or even heroic as that. What was making it hard for her to breathe was anger, the return yet again of the awful, visceral anger at Vern for losing his mind; for abdicating everything, including Malcom, to her; for putting the two of them, over and over again, in jeopardy.

She grabbed at her wrist: "Two-Forty-Seven-P-M."

"Who's that?" Lee asked.

"So." It was the officer, back at the driver's side. "Seat belt violation, and inspection's overdue. You've got two weeks. See if you can't start her up now."

Arlie reached across Ray's chest, leaning until her finger tips touched his door.

"Officer?" She waited, sensing against her arm the tension of young muscles, the held breath, the rapid taps of another's heart. "I just have to tell you . . ." and she waited again as long as she dared, ". . . that we thank you very much."

She sat back. Ray's buckle snapped. After two tries, the engine started. Air moved; the guitar twangs grew louder, then blurred back into the general hubbub of a downtown afternoon.

"Where you wantin' to go now, Ray?" Lee called. "You any idea at all where you want to go?"

Ray didn't answer. The car picked up speed, but two turns later began to slow, and with a creak of the emergency brake stopped abruptly. The driver's side door opened and closed, then the rear door on the other side. All was quiet except for the rumble of the engine and a slow pounding—the foundry on Grant.

"Vern? Honey? You there?"

Arlie reached back between the seats, groping until she came to a bony knee. She patted it, then turned and stuck her head out her window.

"You take care now!" she called into the dazzling darkness. "You two take care of yourselves."

Marc Burgett

Armed and Dangerous

The morning after the break-in, Harlan knew he would have to buy a gun. He ate his breakfast one-handed and reviewed his foolishness. He had turned on the basement light and taken the stairs two at a time, gripping his ax handle and yelling like a one-man infantry charge. He saw the ass end of the intruder scurrying through the window, legs dangling like some slithery creature fleeing the light. He swung his club and connected real good on an ankle. He heard the satisfying sound of hardwood smacking bone, heard the young voice scream in pain. He dropped the ax handle and grabbed the foot. Then he heard a loud *pop,* followed by another and another. Pain tore through his arm. The intruder kicked hard then, throwing him off balance. He staggered backward a few steps and was left holding a dirty red sneaker as the burglar disappeared through the window and blood leaked from his arm.

As he sipped black coffee and considered his options, the idea of a gun darted in and out of his mind. He thought of bars for the windows—ugly—and a home security system—expensive. He settled on window sash locks for the first floor and glass block windows in the basement—a good weekend project. But the gun idea wouldn't leave him alone.

He looked past his oatmeal to the empty chair that had once been Marge's. "I was lucky this time," he told his deceased wife. "The son of a bitch shot me." He was being practical, he argued, solving a problem. She still helped him after she was gone by letting him think out loud at the kitchen table. He took her silence as acquiescence to his plan.

The ax handle had been a concession to Marge. She had convinced him that he didn't need a gun, that there were too many guns as it was. He bought the ax handle a year ago, after he woke one morning to find his tomato plants had been picked clean during the night. He lay awake every night for two weeks, listening, hoping they'd try to steal his new crop

of zucchini.

The day he bought the ax handle, he showed it to the other custodians at Longfellow Elementary School, holding it like a baseball bat during their coffee break. He said they'd better not try to raid his garden again. Jake, the head custodian, roared with laughter.

"An ax handle? Man! I got me a pump action shotgun and a sign on the back door that says, 'Insured by Smith and Wesson'."

"The bad guys aren't gonna read your sign, Jake." This came from Babs, the only woman Harlan had ever worked with in his twenty years in the public schools. Jake called her "Boobs," but never to her face.

"Their problem," said Jake. "They miss my sign, then they're too stupid to live. One less lowlife son of a bitch. I'd be doing the world a service. Hey! You know why a shotgun's like a digital camera? You just point and shoot. An ax handle? What's wrong with you, Harlan?"

Harlan came back with how he didn't need a gun, giving Marge's argument. A gun was overkill, he said. They all laughed at that, and argued some more before going up to clean the classrooms now that the kids had gone home.

He refilled his cup and resumed his argument with his wife's ghost. She brought up Italy. Had it been only five years since she dragged him there? "The one place I want to see before I die," she had said. He'd relented, not knowing her wish would become prophecy.

Marge had read aloud to him about the pickpockets of Florence. The tour book informed them that petty thieves made emptying the pockets of tourists an art and an industry. This caught Harlan's imagination. He had admired the finesse of these unseen adversaries and had looked forward to outwitting them.

"Those days are gone," Harlan said to the empty kitchen. "You can't outsmart a bullet."

After work, he drove out to a building supply warehouse in the distant suburbs. He bought glass blocks, mortar and frames and loaded up the truck. Then he crossed the highway

to a large sporting goods store and bought the gun.

It wasn't until he stood at the counter, surveying the vast array of weaponry in front of him—shotguns, single-barreled, double-barreled, hunting rifles, revolvers, semiautomatic pistols, so many he couldn't imagine the need for them all—that the realities of buying a gun hit him.

"Help you?" A gray-haired man wearing a smile said from behind a thick white mustache.

"I want to buy a handgun." He added, "To protect my home. I had a burglary last night," as if to explain that he wasn't really that kind of person.

"Permit?"

"What?"

"You got your permit to purchase? Got to have one to legally purchase a handgun in this state."

Why hadn't he thought of that? The salesman produced the required application, filled out the dealer portion and told him where to file it in person. He asked if Harlan also wanted a permit to carry a handgun.

"You're just as likely to run into trouble on the street as have another home invasion, especially in the city," he said.

Harlan decided, on the spot, why not? No point in going halfway.

Next they talked guns. He knew nothing about them. The salesman, whose name was Earl, claimed to be something of an expert, said he had made it a hobby two years ago, when his home was broken into. Earl reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet and extracted a photo of three smiling children. They were his grandkids, he said, and they were sleeping over the night of the burglary. They all slept through it. When they discovered the break-in the next morning, his wife's hysterics had frightened the children.

"She told me to get the gun. I ended up with three; got two of them strategically hidden around the house and one strategically on my person right now, so you behave." He raised his eyebrows and grinned.

Earl showed him four guns, turning each in his hands, pointing out its features, then passing it to Harlan. As he took the first gun, the muscles in Harlan's hands deserted him, and he thought he would drop the weapon. He forced him-

self to mimic Earl's actions. He thumbed the hammer, opened the cylinder and examined it. He spun the cylinder, admiring the smooth, well-oiled action and the soft, efficient clicking sound. His hands operated on their own, beyond his control. He gripped each gun, sighted an imaginary target, squeezed the trigger.

With each gun he handled, the tingling muscle weakness receded. He recognized guns for what they were—tools, like hammers, table saws. He was on familiar ground. What's it good for? How does it handle?

In the end, he decided on a Colt Cobra .38 caliber five-shot double-action revolver with a two-inch barrel. He chose the blued steel barrel and the composite rubber grip.

Earl said it was a perfect choice for home defense.

Harlan liked the feel of it in his hand, its heft and the snug fit of his hand on the rubber grip. Earl suggested a trigger lock; and Harlan agreed it made sense, insurance in the unlikely event his weapon fell into someone else's hands. He ordered the Colt ankle holster made specifically for this gun and paid extra to get leather instead of nylon.

Earl recommended a handgun training course, a requirement if Harlan was going to apply for a concealed carry permit. "They're the best," he said. "I used them, so I can vouch for them. State approved, too."

Harlan paid for his purchase and left the store with the gait of a man who knew he had done the right thing. He drove straight to the Fifth Police Precinct, where he delivered his Permission to Purchase application to the officer on duty.

As he drove home, Earl's words returned to him, *just as likely to run into trouble on the street.* The break-in hadn't surprised him. The neighborhood had been changing for twenty years. As his neighbors aged, a few traded their homes for RVs and went off on a vagabond existence Harlan couldn't understand. Renters were sucked in with the backwash of their departure. Homes became properties. Properties became eyesores, longing for a fresh coat of paint. Lawns frayed under relentless use by too many children.

Litter drifted in like flotsam—beer cans, broken bottles, fast food containers. Crime followed the litter. Cars parked on the street were broken into. Bicycles were stolen from

garages. He called to report abandoned cars and noisy parties. Graffiti appeared everywhere. One morning early in the summer he found a wall of his garage covered with swirls of black and red paint. He called the police, knowing they could do nothing. He needed three coats of white paint to erase this newest insult. Shoveling shit against the tide, he thought.

On some blocks—not his, thank god, not yet—men sat on porches in the middle of the day and late into the night, drinking, taking up space. Why these losers didn't get a damn job and take care of their homes, he just didn't know.

He and Marge used to walk, carefree, each night after dinner. Ollie, their black lab, would zigzag ahead, sniffing for treasure. When Ollie died, Marge said, "Now I'll have to walk you, instead."

"I'm not wearing a leash," he said, and she smiled at him.

And then Marge was gone. Harlan kept walking, grief his companion. He altered his route now to avoid the men, only to encounter teenagers on street corners and in the park. The kids were loud, and the air reeked of marijuana and profanity. He changed course again, his world shrinking like an old man's eyesight.

A week after the burglary, he picked up his Permission to Purchase at the police station and returned to the store, where Earl met him with a huge grin and produced his gun, the holster, trigger lock and a box of ammunition.

Harlan held the handgun to his nose. Like the soft leather of the holster, the gun had its own scent. As he smelled its oiled mechanisms and felt the cool hard steel, he admired again the functional beauty of a well-crafted tool.

The first night the gun was in his house, he couldn't sleep. He put it in the drawer of his bedside table, without the trigger lock. What if it happened now? Would he shout a warning? Would he shoot? He remembered something Earl had told him. *Don't pick up your weapon if you're not willing to use it.* The gun lay in the drawer, inches from his head, loaded, five live bullets. The knowledge set his heart to beating like it had the first time he and Marge had lain together in this bed.

On the first night of the defensive handgun training course at the local community college, Harlan counted ten women and four other men sitting in student desks with him. At the front of the room, a small, thin man with a well-trimmed moustache and a military haircut leaned against the teacher's desk, arms folded, watching silently as the room filled.

At precisely seven-thirty, the man walked behind the desk, placed his hands on the surface, no-nonsense like, leaned toward them as if ready to share a confidence and began their instruction.

Over the next five weeks, the instructor drilled them until they demonstrated flawlessly the skills needed to handle and shoot a gun safely. They became fluent in the rules for handgun safety, the fine points of state laws pertaining to handguns and the psychology of violent confrontation. They practiced the Weaver stance to perfection, dominant hand holding the gun, support hand wrapped around the gun frame, covering the strong hand. Hundreds of times they gripped their unloaded guns, pushing forward with the dominant hand while exerting rearward pressure with the support hand, providing the isometric tension needed to control recoil and to shoot with greater speed and accuracy.

Each night after dinner, Harlan sat at the kitchen table, disassembling the Cobra and putting it back together until he could perform the entire feat in thirty seconds with his eyes closed. Unable to sleep, he rehearsed break-ins, like the students at Longfellow rehearsed fire drills. He slipped through the dark house to the kitchen and the basement, the most likely entry points. He flipped the light switch, assumed the Weaver stance, said, "Freeze!" He was armed and ready.

The sixth week, they met at the firing range. After all the lectures, all the rehearsal with their empty weapons, the group was subdued, businesslike. One person at a time stepped to the firing line as the instructor hovered close, watching for the slightest imperfection in their technique while the others looked on.

When it was his turn, Harlan was calm. He settled into the shooting stance, gripped the weapon as he had countless times, squared his torso, and completed the triangle with his right hand covering his left. He looked at the black silhouette

thirty feet away. He squeezed the trigger and fired again and again until the Cobra and he were spent. Three of his shots had hit the silhouette—one in the shoulder, two in the broad mass of the torso. He wanted to reload the Cobra and empty it over and over into the target.

"Not too bad," said the instructor. None of the others had done as well. They all applauded, as they did for everyone. He returned to the group as one of the women took her place on the firing line. He watched and applauded without seeing or hearing.

Later, a group of them went for drinks at the Bull and Barrel. One of the women said that, as she aimed, she felt an almost sexual intensity, as if she and the target were partners, alone in the world. Another woman said, "Yes!" The men were silent, but Harlan nodded.

The county sheriff was the issuing authority for permits to carry a handgun. Harlan applied the day he received his certification of successful completion of the handgun course. Every Thursday when he finished his shift, he drove to the firing range. Each time he took the firing stance, his concentration was complete. He had no name, no job, no home. No Marge. He was alone in the world, with the target, his bullets penetrating it with relentless accuracy. His aim improved so that at thirty feet he could put all five rounds into the center of the torso almost every time. He was a goddamned natural. Driving home, he wondered what it would be like to aim at a live target and squeeze the trigger. He wondered if Babs owned a gun. Maybe they could practice together.

The carry permit was approved right on schedule, and he claimed his prize at the sheriff's office. The next morning, he strapped the ankle holster to his left leg, the Cobra snug in its place. At the breakfast table, he could feel Marge's glare as he rushed to finish his oatmeal.

Not to school, Harlan. Please. Her voice was so clear that he looked up, certain he would see her sitting across from him.

"I'm not going to do anything stupid," he said. Remember Columbine, he told her, his voice soft. Maybe if someone at Columbine had been carrying—a teacher, a hall monitor, a

custodian like him—the tragedy could have been avoided. Maybe there would have been no grieving mothers and fathers. He rose from the table, put his dishes in the dishwasher and hurried from the house.

He parked his truck near the custodians' entrance to the school and hurried through the early morning chill. At the door, he slowed as he saw the bold-lettered sign, *This establishment bans firearms.* He felt naked, the Cobra exposed.

"Hey, Harlan. Cold enough for you?" Harlan spun around at the cheerful greeting. "You're a little jumpy today. Too much coffee?" said Babs.

Harlan recovered and smiled, hoping he didn't look guilty. He held the door for her.

Babs returned his smile and said, "Oh, a gentleman. Not enough of that going around these days." As she entered, her breasts under her winter coat brushed against him. She took his arm and led him past the sign.

All day, the Cobra clung to his leg and the encounter with Babs to his thoughts. He reminded himself that his carrying was a measure of extra security for the school. Still, that whole first day, fear rattled around inside him. As he mopped spills in the lunchroom and bantered with teacher's aides, his breathing came in short, violent bursts, like gunfire.

His insomnia persisted. He gave up fighting it. He'd get out of bed at three in the morning, tuck the Cobra in the waistband of his pants, and go for a ride in the truck. He'd cruise the dark streets and alleys, looking for signs of trouble, for a chance to do something. He took up smoking again after twenty years. He'd drive around, eyes searching the shadows for movement, ears tuned to noises, chain-smoking and listening to talk radio turned real low until the first light appeared in the eastern sky. Then he would go home and get ready for work.

The night was warm for November in Minnesota. Harlan wore a light jacket as he set off on his walk. People were out. Ahead, at the corner, he saw a cluster of teenagers enjoying one more night of loitering, wasting their lives. Seven boys were shouting, laughing, pushing, showing off for three

girls. The girls were just as loud. He heard filthy language, obscene suggestions, taunts. The Cobra hugged his ankle, but failed to reassure him. He wished it were in his pocket, easy to reach. He walked past the group, careful to avoid eye contact but walking in a way that showed he belonged there just as much as they did. The teenagers paid him no attention.

After that, he abandoned the ankle holster in favor of carrying the Cobra in his jacket pocket. He liked his tough guy image, collar turned up, hands in pockets, like Marlon Brando on the waterfront. He'd wrap his palm around the gun's rubber grip, his finger caressing the trigger. Sometimes he felt himself grow hard and allowed his thoughts to turn to Babs.

A week later, the weather turned. He could smell snow in the air. It was dark by the time he finished the dishes and left the house. He neared the corner where the teenagers hung out, but the cold had driven them off. He headed for the park, a small wooded area where young toughs loitered and drank beer and other unsavory characters—drug dealers, homeless men—occupied the shadows, unseen. He used to avoid the park after dark. That was before the gun. Now he could walk any damned place he pleased.

He entered the woods, and as he left the pavement behind, he enjoyed the feel of the soft wood chip path under his boots. A movement ahead caught his eye, something coming fast toward him. He pulled the gun from his pocket, and had his thumb on the safety release, when a golden retriever skidded to a halt at his feet, then pushed its body against his leg, rubbing hard, making friends.

Jesus!

He slipped the gun into his pocket and rubbed the dog's thick coat. "Good dog," he said. *And almost a dead one.* Where was the damned owner? There were leash laws for a good reason.

A man appeared, walking slowly, a leash draped around his shoulders, unfazed by his own negligence. Harlan straightened, not wanting the man to see that it was okay between him and the dog. He put his hands in his pockets.

"There are leash laws," he said.

"Sorry." The man tossed out the word like loose change,

then added, “Nobody leashes in here.”

“Well, you better control your dog. Something bad could happen. What if I had a gun?”

The man took the leash from around his neck, wound it a turn in his hand.

“Are you threatening me?”

“I’m telling you to obey the law. Take care of your damned dog before something bad happens to it.”

“Fuck you, man. Come on, Jocko. Come!”

The man strode past him. The dog ran after his master. Harlan watched them until they rounded a bend. He turned and walked, practically ran. Goddamn! That was a situation. As he walked himself back to a state of calm, he reviewed how he handled himself. He decided he had done well. He asserted himself, used reasonable restraint, and stayed well within the law. But the surge of adrenaline—he hadn’t been ready for that.

Harlan knew it was all wrong even as he squeezed the trigger, before the man cried out. He did everything right—turned on the garage light, shouted a warning, assumed the Weaver stance. The man lunged. He fired.

“Aw, man! You shot me.”

The man fell to his knees, holding his shoulder, blood trickling through his fingers. No more than a dozen feet separated them. Hundreds of practice rounds placed in the kill zone, and he missed from twelve damned feet.

“Don’t shoot me, man. I’m just tryin’ to get warm,” the man said.

Harlan kept the Cobra pointed at his live target, studied the target through the sight. He saw a man his age, two hundred pounds at least, round face flecked with gray stubble. The man wore a dirty Twins baseball cap. His grease-stained black warm-up jacket, too flimsy for the brutal cold, was opened to reveal a shirt so filthy Harlan couldn’t be sure of its true colors. The man wore no gloves. Tears streaked his face.

The man said, “All I want is to get warm, man.” He swayed and leaned into the fender of Harlan’s truck. Harlan pivoted, following the man’s movement with the Cobra. As the man knelt, motionless, his eyes closed and his face softened. He

looked as if he were just resting, without a care to bother him.

The gun grew heavy. Harlan, spent, lowered it to his side. He had aimed to kill, and he had failed. His teeth chattered, and he began to shiver. Weariness advanced on Harlan with the cold. Like an unfaithful husband who has been found out, he was now faced with the mess he had created. He couldn't leave his victim in the frigid garage, even for a short while. He stuck the Cobra in the pocket of his coat, walked to his victim and lifted him to his feet.

He led the man into his home. The man whimpered, "Don't shoot me. Don't shoot me," until Harlan said, "Be quiet. I'm not going to shoot you." He cleaned and dressed the man's wound in the bathroom, breathing in shallow gasps against the stink of homelessness and booze.

Now they sat opposite each other at Harlan's kitchen table, his victim hunched over a mug of hot chocolate, grasping it with both hands as if trying to absorb every possible heat calorie. Harlan drank from a bottle of Leinenkugel. The Cobra lay on the table by his hand.

The man, keeping his head low, lifted his eyes in a plea.

"You got a cigarette?" the man said.

"No," Harlan lied. "Cigarettes'll kill you."

The man's head dropped and began to bob. He was laughing.

"They'll kill me quicker than you will," the man said. "You got a gun, you ought to know how to use it 'fore you hurt yourself." Then he said, "You going to call the police?"

Harlan had not thought past shooting the intruder, who was supposed to be dead. Like when you put milk out for a stray cat and you are stuck with that cat, Harlan had taken this stray in, and now he was stuck. He could no longer shoot him and solve his problem.

"If I call the police," he said, "they'll take you to a hospital, or a shelter maybe. You'll be out of the cold." *Both of our problems will be solved,* he thought.

The man shook his head. "Uh uh," he said. "No police. No hospital. No shelter."

"You'll freeze to death out there tonight. It's got to be ten below."

"I ain't froze to death yet. You call the police, I believe I'll

just up and walk out your door." He sipped his hot chocolate, at ease in Harlan's kitchen.

"You're not afraid of me? I've got the gun."

"Ain't nothing much for a man like me to be afraid of, although I do respect that gun. Always respect a man with a gun, I say. But I don't believe you'll shoot me if I turn my back on you and walk out of your house." He added, "That what you want? Me to be afraid of you?"

"I wanted you dead."

"But you don't now."

"You were just trying to get warm. No crime in that."

Harlan drained his beer, stood up and walked to the sink. As he rinsed the bottle, he looked at the thermometer outside the window. Fifteen below. The man's reflection looked at Harlan from where he sat in Marge's chair. Harlan made his decision.

"I have a spare bed. You can sleep here tonight. Take a shower first." He added, "I sleep light. You move from your room before morning, I'll shoot you. And I won't miss this time. You go when I leave in the morning, and don't ever come back."

"I'll go right now, goddamnit. Just 'cause you got a gun don't mean you can talk to a man like that."

"Your choice. I'm going up. Either come or get out."

The man grinned and said, "Shit. Why not? What I came here for."

Harlan lay on his back, looking at the bedroom ceiling. He and Marge had walked the crowded, steamy streets of Florence. They had had no problem with pickpockets. They had taken precautions—money belts, zippered pockets. They dressed and acted to blend in. They finessed the street thieves with their attitude and laughed about it over glasses of Rosso di Montalcino. He had tried to identify the thieves as they strolled the markets, but it had been impossible. He could see them now—young men in clean jeans and stylish wide-collared shirts, women with babies, boys and girls who posed for tourists' cameras—because now they grinned and held up their loot for his inspection—watches, wallets, passports, cameras. One boy held an object delicately with his thumb

and index finger, like a rare specimen. The boy approached, and Harlan saw that the boy held the Cobra. He reached under his pillow, but the gun was gone. The pickpockets burst into silent laughter.

Harlan sat upright, his heart racing, and slid his hand under the pillow, felt the Cobra nestled where it belonged. Armed and ready. Like seeing the face of an old acquaintance and not being able to attach a name to it, Harlan sought to name the current that pulsed through him. *Fear.* He had drawn his gun twice. A dog and a drunk. As jittery as a boy on a date, he thought. And far more dangerous. What was a man with a gun to do?

Use it, said Earl. *Do the world a service*, roared Jake. *Finesse*, whispered the boy.

He saw then how this could play out. He got up, carrying the Cobra in his left hand, by his side. He stopped at the guest room door and heard snoring. He went downstairs to do what was necessary, then went to bed and lay with his eyes open until he fell into an uneasy sleep.

He awoke, as he always did, before the winter sun broke the night. He dressed for work and slipped the Cobra into the waistband of his work pants. The door to the second bedroom was open, and the bed was empty. He went to the kitchen.

The old down parka he had placed on the table was gone. The wool watch cap, the old flannel shirt, work boots, heavy socks and gloves were also gone, along with the two twenty-dollar bills he had set out.

In the center of the table, under the man's empty hot chocolate mug, lay a torn piece of paper. Harlan picked up the paper and read the scrawled note.

Don't worry, it said. *I won't be back.* It was signed, *Bear.*

Harlan crumbled the paper and dropped it on the table. *Not if you're smart, you won't, Bear,* he thought. He fixed himself scrambled eggs, toast and coffee. As he ate, he looked across the table at Marge's empty chair. "There," he said. "Satisfied?" Marge smiled and nodded once. He put his dishes in the dishwasher, then got his holster and attached it to his ankle. He transferred the Cobra from his waistband to the holster. It was time to go to work.

Liz Cook

Why You Should Never Speak To Your First Love

With special emphasis on how his fading memory will be a comfort to you during times of trial; including, but not limited to, miserable break-ups, writing (but never sending) sarcastic letters to former employers, and making naive decisions of an impulsive nature.

REASON No. 1:
You Should Not Speak to Your First Love,
Because Upon Encountering Him,
You Were 15 Years Old,
And Annoying.

Even when you weren't garbling out a brace-face singsong, or transposing wit with nonsense, everything you said was battered and fried in the thickness of giddy teenage angst. Half your time was spent in the hugely colored worlds of anime and Japanese imagination, and the other half in enduring reality. You watched Miyazaki for hours, lying on your belly before the television screen, so close that the colors scattered and rainbowed on the whites of your eyes. You shifted from your house, to the oatmeal-colored hallways of high school, to your part-time job, then back to the house again, all with the naive disinterest of a dream.

Kicking off a two-year fit of aimless originality, you dyed your hair green. The next Sunday, when MeeMaw saw you sashay into church in a sprigged white cotton dress and combat boots, your short fluffy hair an emerald nimbus around your head, she started to cry—loud enough to be heard over the plunking piano and feet shuffling in their pews. Huge, cartoonish tears rolled from her face and splashed onto the church bulletin. The words on the announcement page grew fat and swollen with water, sprouting thin-ink lines of caterpillar fur.

So it was that, after MeeMaw had been dropped off at home

to recover from the shame and shock, your family went to the Pizza Hut buffet, as they did every Sunday after church.

And so it was that, with a plate of rapidly-cooling, thin-crust pepperoni and an icy coke, you turned the corner round the salad bar, fell in love, and dropped your food all at once.

You crouched on the carpet and scrubbed the sauce with a napkin, and felt your heart quietly and instantly collapse in on itself. You kept your head bent, and could see his feet still standing as they were, right nearby, but still you never spoke.

Before you dropped the food, you'd seen, or if you didn't actually see, you somehow abstractly sensed the crooked smile on his face.

When his black patent shoes turned and walked away, you felt you could hear your own bones turn to water. Finally, and somehow, you stood up and managed the surreal business of feeling in love, but walking away.

When you slid into your seat, you were crushed . . . but no one in your family even noticed the shift in your spirit; they just kept on talking and eating, or stealing bits of each other's breadsticks.

You were miffed that your silence went unnoticed. But still, too preoccupied with the pang and the mystery inside your own ribs, you didn't really care; you only felt snubbed out of principle. You were a martyr, a sensitive spirit, surrounded by beings of lesser feelings, which made you love and pity your boisterous family so much that the combination of loves made you feel your entire heart was bound to swell up and explode.

For years, the usual ritual upon arriving home was that you and your sister tumbled out the van's backseat and rushed into the house, shedding patent shoes, itching dresses, and nude pantyhose to make a long, lacy trail through the kitchen. But today you let your sister slam the door in front of you, then sat, slowly, on the front steps, yanking off shoes and nylons, and pulling the pins from your hair.

You squinted out towards the road, and shuffled your feet slowly on the warm, sun-soaked slate.

The gardenia bushes that flanked the sidewalk grew so high and thick that they were taller than a grown man, and the air was heavy with their smell. Always, they bloomed in the two

weeks before and after your birthday. Despite being your favorite flower, you'd learned restraint: picking the blossoms was a waste. The skin-smooth petals wilted so quickly, and in a few hours, their thick petals turned shriveled and brown.

But still, you brushed the unopened lips of a few tight buds with your fingertips before stepping inside. The house was quiet, and your parents and sister were draped with boneless ease over two couches and an easy chair.

From the tight-squeezed stacks of the thick bookshelves your grandfather made, you picked out a brand new journal—one your Aunt gave you two Christmases ago, that had always seemed too beautiful to use. But after today, you felt yourself more or less a woman, and the journals you kept yesterday, the week before, and the months before that no longer suited. Their childishly wide, blue-scored lines brimmed with yearbook-style abbreviations. Those journals were fat with the looping-cursive secrets and movie-star, singer-songwriter crushes of a frivolous high school girl who had, until a few hours ago, never been in love.

On the first page, and after much thought, you wrote:

I have both brushed and avoided an entirely interior tragedy.
I am a Picasso piece and my legs and arms are too big
for my tortured body.

In retrospect, this entry earned its pretentious veneer from the heavy influence of that semester's AP Art History lectures.

REASON No. 2:
He Will Not Notice You
When You See Him Again.

Same place; same time—the lunch buffet, eleven till two. From behind your sweating-cold glass of cherry coke, you watched the boy with the limp make his way across the parking lot to his brother's car. If you were in your room watching movies with hot tea under an old quilt, you'd think by the way he walked that the dvd was scratched. It was a quiet scene—you watching, him leaving—but it froze in small breaths.

Halfway between each step, a snagged suspension; then, a jarring collapse as his foot hit the ground.

Maybe the saddest Beatles song ever made would play in the background, skipping notes in sympathy with the boy's arrested movements. You watched through the tinted window with Wes Anderson-wide eyes.

In the hot Florida sun, he shimmered, the braces on his legs burning through the thick air. He seemed a fleshly ghost in a Hurley brand T-shirt and brown suede shoes; a paranormal presence that made your chest ache and sent goose bumps scurrying down your arms.

His limp seemed more like an accent than a handicap . . . some smooth and beautiful trick of the voice. You wondered if that meant you understood him more than other people, or less.

His brother limped as well, but more severely, so his knees knocked and he swayed like a man just come from sea. The shudders in his footsteps was harsher, the half-collapse between his steps more dangerous: a sight that made you feel ill.

You went home and wrote on the second page of your journal, in the very middle:

Just being born with a twisted leg
does not mean you always had one.

It seemed very profound at the time, and you shut the door to the bedroom you shared with your eight-year-old sister and cried—from sobbing to snuffling, then the slow heavy breathing of a stuffy nose and drained emotions.

When your little sister ran into the room looking for her soccer cleats, you yelled and threw a stuffed menagerie of rabbits and hippos and bears until she ran out again.

You wanted to apologize, but you felt too strange and tender, and too awkwardly placed in other people's existence. After she left, you slid off the bed to lock the door. The door's mirror was cracked down the middle, and a black streak jagged down between your eyes, then veered left to slice through your shoulder.

Twisting and turning in front of the mirror, you hoped that

some particular purse of the lips or turn of the head would make your face beautiful—exotic and knife-thin. You couldn't quite succeed, but your own loveless glamour, or maybe the excess of tears, gave you a stomach-ache.

I never love my own blood.
This family beats through my veins,
but my heart pulses for someone else.

At dinner that night, while pushing the vegetable stir-fry around with your knife, you tried to remember the boy's appearance, but couldn't—not really. More than anything, you felt the impression of his eyes—dark and dark-circled—meeting yours, and his limping step. These two things seemed a complete image, but you didn't really know . . . you didn't know how to look at men enough to know when their outlines blurred, or when they had edges and bodies and mouths to distinguish them from the all the rest.

REASON No. 3:
The Why Does Not
Answer The Question.
(You Found This Phrase
Of Ambiguous Origin
Meaningful, But Not Clear.)

Girls—and some women who never quite grow up—feel more beautiful when hidden. Born too big and broad for attractive frailty, daintiness can only be achieved through artificially spiritual means, or a well-timed, romantic illness. But even round, healthy protestant faces look otherworldly and pale when cloaked in fantasy, hidden inside Tolkein's mountains, or wrapped in white cloth and pseudo-catholic, heaven-gazing prayers.

A body looks beautiful in tragedy: when a nun with almond eyes and a smooth face floats down any street (in any country), businessmen peer around their newspapers. Waiters leaning against a wall to smoke their coffee-break cigarettes follow her path with their eyes.

"A damn waste."

But she is too perfect and untouchable for anyone to even say this aloud, so the businessmen shake their papers with a crack, and ask for another espresso, and the waiters stub their cigarettes viciously into the brick walls before crunching the ashes underfoot.

After high school, you realize that all first loves are, for women, part catholic mercy and part wound-stitching pity, bound together by the yearning to brush fingers against fevers, and run a feminine hand through boyish curls.

It was only after college that you realized boys do not have first loves at all, only Wendybirds and Wendydarlings, stretching tall and growing up by their bedroom window, hoping for next year's Spring Cleaning.

Even knowing this, years later you still loved him—that boy you saw in the first shake of a Florida summer.

Or at least, if not dependably or steadfastly, you still loved him a little bit. More than the other person that you still loved, and shouldn't have bothered with in the first place. The first one, the limping one, would resurface in your thoughts during moments of immense safety, sometimes when you were wobbling in a palm tree pose while waiting for the water to boil for your tea; sometimes, while rubbing the thick leaves of your potted plants, or pressing your index finger into the soil to test for moisture.

More rarely, though, you thought of him while slipping into church late, just so you could listen to the sermon from the loft, closer to God, alone and warm, looking down on bald heads and the thick, perfect curls of women's wigs. Both seeing and unseen, with the exception of God.

REASON No. 4:
Someone Less Worthy,
Less Mysterious,
and Of Significantly Less
Psychological Interest
Will Crush You.
(Figuratively Speaking.)

After that boy, you fell in love maybe two or three times, and once with the person you were actually dating.

He took you to see a jazz band on a Monday night, and you both danced so fast and long that your skin was slick and the sky was growing light when you arrived back home the next morning. You shivered while he drove you home, happy and goose-pimpled, with the hem of your red dress (borrowed from your old college roommate) stuck to the tops of your knees. He didn't ask about the air-conditioning being too high, or think to offer his jacket, but you were happy and tense, smelling of dried sweat and other people's cigarettes.

Three months after that, he met your parents, your grandparents, and all your friends. ("Hi, how are you?! Yes, his job is very promising. Two promotions in two years.")

Five months later, and he moved to Nebraska to work for his uncle. Two short weeks and three love letters (yours) after, he called to break up with you, as cool and quick as a cancelled appointment.

When he hung up the phone, you sat very still for a few moments, then went over to the coffeepot and measured out eight heaping tablespoons. It was eight a.m. on a Thursday, and the cool blue-pink air was seeping into your apartment from the sliding glass doors. You couldn't find a pen, so you used a purple sharpie to scribble over his name in your new, pebble-covered address book.

When the trickle slowed down and the coffeepot was three-fourths full—shiny, fragrant, and almost too black to drink—you carefully, gently poured yourself a mug.

When you called the airline company, your hand shook, but your voice was steady.

They promised to give you credit for the miles you would have used to surprise him on his birthday.

The very next morning, you got a phone call confirming that you were chosen for that fancy internship in California—the one that your boyfriend—your ex-boyfriend—had begged you not to even consider.

But even there, in the cold marble halls, tip-toeing through the temperature controlled rooms of perfectly preserved paintings and artifacts, you were wilting. You cried making copies; you cried with your feet tucked tight beneath you, perched on the toilet lid in the handicapped stall; you cried delivering Starbucks to the museum president and his celeb-

rity donors. When he saw your tears splashing onto the plastic coffee lids and sugar-dusted scones, the president gave you his silk handkerchief to wipe your face and nose.

Between sobs, you managed to say thank you, and apologized, saying meekly that you felt very unprofessional.

"I can imagine," he replied.

On the bus ride home, you fumed to yourself, clinging to the grab strap that dangled from the ceiling, and teetering in your high heels at every turn. You hated to know that your ex-boyfriend, for his entire life, could feel safe in the perfect doubtlessness that he was your first love and first heartbreak. He could believe, was privileged to believe, that he alone had wanted the relationship to end. He had power over you even if you never spoke again; by caring less, he had won.

Of course, the heartbreak was true, but years before you had stored a piece of your naiveté in the subconscious of a stranger. The victory of being your first love did not belong to anyone, because the first did not even know it himself.

Somewhere, a man with crooked legs carried something of your fifteen-year-old spirit in the cracks of his past.

Someone told you once—a hippie lady on the subway in New York—that the human mind is incapable of creating anything truly new. Our brains, she said, store every face we ever see deep in the furrows of our selfhood, and we use those faces again as the faces of strangers in our dreams.

"I look at the ground most days," she went on, "unless I sense a lovely aura. Then I look up to save your face for my dreams."

REASON No. 5:
When You Quit Your
Internship, Damning Industry
Connections, Recommendation
Letters, And Coffee Runs To Hell,
You Will Cash In Your Unused Miles,
Plus Buy a Few Thousand More,
And Take A One-Way Flight To Asia.

All your mom said when you told her was, "please don't stay," and, "just one year, right?"

You bought the ticket because round-trip airfare seemed too pragmatic, and one-way tickets like modern magic. You sensed that this was just twenty-first century superstition; the salt over your shoulder that wards away bad luck; the one-way ticket to guarantee happiness; the internal quietness that means you'll want to stay.

REASON No. 6:
Maybe, You Meet Him Again.

You board the aircraft, and your seat is in the very middle of a row of five. Shucking your flats off under the seat in front of you, and trying to avoid the stewardess's judgmental gaze, you consider the uncomfortable reality that your cousin may have offered you her tiny apartment's loft with the assumption that you would not accept . . . but it is too late now, and the ticket stub lies crumpled at the bottom of your purse with the last strip of spearmint gum, and your morning to-do list.

Before even the flight takes off, the middle-aged woman to your left falls asleep, her head bobbing on her collarbone in a gentle rhythm. People still trickle down the aisles, cramming their carry-ons into too-full overheads, then shuffling sideways between chair backs and passengers' knees to collapse, with heavy sighs, in seats too small for their long legs.

A duffle bags drops on the seat to your right.

You don't look up, but can feel something shifting. The smooth-sliding bars of the conscious and unconscious moving into parallel, or the tense, heavy feeling of a combination lock, right before you click the last number into place.

You sense, rather than see, the dark eyes, the side-winding smile.

The sound of limping, and he slides into the empty seat.

Eileen Arthurs

Investing in Plastic

If it weren't for Muriel Serene, Gladiolus would have been much like any hamlet in the Florida swamp. Steamy dankness cloaked its single traffic light, church, restaurant, two bars, and a cluster of low houses occupied by a host of citizens related by blood or history or both.

All took it for granted that Muriel made Gladiolus special.

For as long as anyone bothered to remember, Muriel lived near a stand of mangroves in her little house at the end of a bleached shell path. Just inside her purple front door stood a clay vase stuffed with plastic flowers that she shared with her many visitors. Her only family seemed to be her great-niece, Lily Gilmore.

Everyone in Gladiolus showed up on Muriel's doorstep sooner or later. By way of example, the minute that Cassie Little learned that her husband had died in a woman's arms at The Seahorse Hotel, Cassie headed straight up the shell path to Muriel's purple door. Spitting mad, and her husband's body already growing cold, Cassie didn't have much time to jump-start her ravaged heart into proper mourning.

Muriel Serene was the only one with a prayer of setting things right.

"Oh, honey, I already heard," Muriel said, as Cassie stormed in without so much as a knock. Cassie sank into the beanbag chair. Muriel peered over her half-glasses, then slipped a needle through the center of her embroidery hoop.

"You heard all of it?" Cassie asked. Her eyeballs were flaming and puffy. Half-moons of sweat spread under each arm.

"Oh, I think so. And here's the deal. We all know how much he loved you. Didn't he buy you those crystal beads last year on Valentine's Day? The ones that sat in the window at Reed's for two years, until the red velvet under it had turned clear white from the sun?"

Cassie nodded.

"Didn't they cost nearly as much as the porch he put on

your house last spring?"

"Every bit as much," Cassie said.

Muriel poked her needle back through the hoop, catching the stitch just so. "Seems to me he wouldn't do that for just anyone."

Cassie pressed her hands together. The rotating fan in the corner paused on its journey from side to side and faced Muriel full on. The stream of its breeze lifted the hem of her caftan, puffed her bell sleeves into angel wings, and ruffled some gray strands that peeked from her turban.

"As far as I can tell, James was a special kind of guy," Muriel continued. Her words came out slow, like honey. "That girl with him? She was nothing to him and she knows it. You're the only one big enough, wide enough, sweet enough for a guy like James. James wasn't a bad guy. If his heart hadn't given out right at that moment, he would have come straight home to you and begged for a batch of oatmeal cookies, now wouldn't he? And after that, a double shot of the Captain." Muriel winked at Cassie, who nodded and wiped a tear from her cheek.

"James didn't mean to be a trouble-maker," Muriel said. "There's a name for people like him. Scientists have figured it out. They call them multi-taskers, because their minds are too busy to stick to any one thing. James was just a multi-tasker sweetheart, and you were the calm at the center of all that tasking."

Muriel put her hoop down, stood up and studied the bouquet of plastic flowers in the painted vase inside her front door. She pulled out a red rose and handed it to Cassie.

For James' funeral, Cassie pinned that plastic rose to the lapel of her jacket, right next to the crystal beads. She left everyone breathless as she swooped down the aisle in her red heels and skintight black skirt, one black-gloved hand on her husband's casket. Her friends hugged her and told her how special she was, hard as it was to be the widow of such a dedicated multi-tasker.

Eldridge and Sue Ellen Henderson were at the funeral, too, with their grown son Chester. His eyes focused skyward, the way they had for the last twenty years, since his birth. The Henderson family sat with Cassie in the front pew, mostly

because of how special Chester was.

Muriel had been the first to figure it out, all those years ago.

Chester was born right when hurricane winds uprooted the Gladiolus welcome sign and slammed it into the town's traffic light. Right there, in the middle of the deserted intersection, in the front seat of their Ford Maverick, Chester slid from Sue Ellen's womb. He was eerily quiet, with big blue eyes that stared upward. The fancy Miami doctor who examined Chester a month later pronounced that even if Eldridge and Sue Ellen had made it to West Beach General, the outcome would have been the same. Chester had something terribly wrong with him, the doctor said, and wrote the name for it on a slip of paper. Eldridge flushed the paper down the toilet at the first rest stop on the way back to Gladiolus.

As soon as Sue Ellen and Eldridge unpacked, they showed up on Muriel Serene's doorstep. Sue Ellen held Chester in a tight little bundle inside a striped blanket. Muriel got everyone lemonade and then reached for the baby. She unswaddled him and stroked his tiny arms. Throughout, he never looked at her, his gaze frozen upward. His rosebud lips made occasional sucking motions, but his sky blue eyes scarcely blinked, clear and steady as could be. Muriel asked Sue Ellen and Eldridge about Miami. Did they walk along wide flat beaches, did they spot any movie stars? They said they hadn't.

"It doesn't matter. What's the big deal about movie stars, anyway? You've got something way better than that right here, something that a movie star can't even begin to measure up to. A baby like this only comes along once in a generation or so. See how his eyes are always looking up? He's in touch with heaven, that's what he is. He's a direct communicator. All the stuff that keeps the rest of us so busy? None of it's ever gonna matter to Chester. His eyes are on bigger things. You brought a direct communicator into this world. Why, Gladiolus is blessed to have all three of you." Muriel pulled a plastic daisy from the vase by the door and tucked it inside the edge of Chester's striped blanket.

That day, word of the gift of a direct communicator spread throughout Gladiolus like a summer bloom of red tide in the Gulf of Mexico. Along with their gifts for Chester's christen-

ing, the townspeople brought their dreams and sorrows and laid them bare for Chester's intercession. They touched his soft baby fingers and stroked his round cheeks. All day long at the christening, he lay in his pine cradle, without a tear or a whimper, his eyes focused aloft. Folks still wander into the Henderson's house on Swamp Road to sit with Chester, quiet, while he stares directly into heaven for them.

At James Little's funeral, from his usual seat in the front pew, Chester's eyes lifted above the people, the minister, James' coffin, and straight up to heaven, making Cassie and everyone in the church feel just a little better that the direct communicator was, as always, on the job.

The service for James Little was simple. Afterwards, in her red stilettos, Cassie led them in a slow procession to the cemetery, where a headstone already marked the last resting place for the town's most famous multi-tasker. After a ceremonial and tearful burial, the whole town made their way to Cassie's house. Muriel's great-niece, Lily Gilmore, was with them, visiting for the weekend from the gleaming world of Tampa.

"Lily is in college, reading so many books that they would fill this house from the floor to the ceiling if we stacked them in piles," Muriel said. She bent over, slow and careful, to slip a tray of popovers into Cassie's oven. "She's going to understand porpoises and turtles, figure out the language of the world that swims around us. Not many people can learn to understand sea creatures. It's a gift. Almost like magic."

"I'm not doing that anymore, Aunt Muriel. I've switched majors. I'm in business administration now," Lily said.

Muriel turned to Lily and smiled. "I don't know what that is, but I'm sure it will be real nice, too."

The folks gathered in Cassie's kitchen couldn't help but study Lily as they opened cabinets, set the table and poured drinks. They hoped for a clue to settle the ongoing debate over Muriel's ancestry, something they'd always puzzled over, but never thought to ask her. Some were sure that Muriel was black, others just as sure she wasn't. "She's half-Spanish and the other half from some Pacific Island," Cassie had once stated with authority. Some said she was French and left it at that. Muriel's long skirts and turban headdress cov-

ered enough of her that clues were hard to come by. They all agreed on one thing. Muriel was not young, and hadn't been for a very long time.

They found Lily as difficult to pin down as her great-aunt, what with her polished mahogany skin and elegant nose. A pair of tortoise-shell glasses with rhinestones in the corners magnified deep chocolate eyes. Her hair frizzed a little at her temples and again at the nape of her neck where it swung down her back in a heavy braid. She had Muriel's voice, soft and textured, like velvet.

After the celebration at Cassie's, Lily and her great-aunt walked back to Muriel's little house with the purple door at the end of the shell path. They shared a plate of sliced mangoes with grated coconut and a whole bottle of sweet wine.

"So, tell me about business administration," Muriel said. She slipped on her half-glasses and picked up a long rectangle of purple cloth. Her needle slid through the fabric.

Lily puckered her face into a frown. "That's pretty, what you're making, all covered with flowers," she said, and reached out to touch it. "It's okay, this business stuff," she continued. "If a person spends all that money on college, something useful ought to come of it."

"Hmmm." Muriel said. She tilted the fabric she was working on so Lily could see the beginning of a burst of white petals against the dark background. "This one's a lily, for you."

"It is." Lily smiled. "Who's this one for?" She pointed to a tiny pink blossom, its petals only half-unfurled.

"That one?" Muriel's velvety voice thickened a bit. "That's for someone from long ago. Not all flowers come to full bloom, do they?" She fluffed up the purple cloth and repositioned her needle. "Now back to your school, this new plan of yours."

Lily wondered if she should ask more about the little pink blossom, but decided it wasn't the right time. She cleared her throat. "I mean, I'm sure I'll come to enjoy business administration more when I'm finished with school."

"No question."

"My mom and dad will be happy once I'm able to support myself."

"Seems to me anyone lucky enough to bring a baby into this world and see her through so many years would be happy

enough already." The embroidery fell onto Muriel's lap while she drained the last sticky drop of wine from her glass. She stood up. "You have a long drive back to Tampa tomorrow. Do you need an extra pillow for the couch tonight?"

In the morning, while Lily stowed her gear in her trunk, a strange car pulled onto the sandy stretch behind her. A young man in khaki pants, navy jacket and a distracted expression got out and grabbed a shiny brown briefcase from the back seat of his car. His white shirt was open at the collar. He didn't wear socks.

"My name is Benjamin Abner. I'm here to speak to Muriel Serene." His boat shoes crunched on the shell path to Muriel's front door.

Lily followed him to the house, where Muriel was sweeping sand from the kitchen floor. Benjamin Abner opened his briefcase and set a stack of papers on the table. After only a moment of introduction, he announced to Muriel that the house with the purple door wasn't really hers. He couldn't understand why she was there.

"Nobody else was," Muriel said. "Would you like some lemonade?"

"No," Benjamin Abner said. "Legally, this house is now for sale. By the heirs to the property, its rightful owners." He swatted at a fly on his ankle. "No thank you, that is."

Muriel didn't blink.

Lily asked to see the papers. She skimmed through a long document with initials after every paragraph. She set her car keys on the table, twisted her braid and fidgeted with the rhinestones at the corners of her glasses.

"Don't worry. There are agencies for people like you," Benjamin Abner said to Muriel. "I mean, people in your circumstances." He turned to Lily. "They'll relocate your aunt."

"Great-aunt." Lily picked up her car keys. "Are you quite through?" she asked.

A film of sweat beaded Benjamin Abner's upper lip. He nodded, gathered his papers and crunched his way back down the path to his car.

"I'll come back next weekend, Aunt Muriel. Don't worry," Lily said.

"I'm not worried. If I'm not here, take care of things. And

by the way, don't forget to look inside the vase." She pointed to the painted clay vase in the corner, filled with its wild spray of plastic blooms.

Lily frowned. "You'll be here." She kissed the top of her great-aunt's turbaned head.

That night, Muriel closed her eyes and never woke up. The whole town of Gladiolus wept. The minister at Gladiolus United asked Uncle Clarence to perform a symphony with bells and water glasses at her funeral. "It only seems right," the minister said.

At the ceremony, Uncle Clarence's sightless eyes dripped tears while his hands tapped out just the right notes. When his eyes went bad from what he called immaculate generation a while back, Uncle Clarence had called on Muriel Serene. She told him that his eyes were taking a break so that his ears could have a turn, on account of the fact that his senses were more democratic than most. She attached four bells to a braided cord and rang them. They both listened. She hung a strip of jingle shells from driftwood. They touched the knots in the wood and the sea-polished edges of the shells. They slid their hands over her worn table. They touched and listened. She sent Uncle Clarence home with a plastic zinnia from the vase by the door.

"It's orange," she told him, "the color of brightness, flame, fat pumpkins, blazing sunsets. It's a strong color."

"I'll need strength," he said.

The strains of Uncle Clarence's funeral music wrapped around Lily the second she opened her car door. She hurried up the walk and slipped into a pew at Gladiolus United, her heart heavy with regret. She wished she hadn't left for Tampa where her childhood dreams of dolphins had given way to spreadsheets. She wished she'd asked Aunt Muriel to drink sweet wine and talk about the tiny pink blossom that never had a chance to bloom.

Through misty eyes, she noticed that nearly everyone in church had a plastic flower, looped through a buttonhole or shoelace, tied to a purse strap, tucked into a vest pocket. She had to peer around a plastic snapdragon that sprouted from a nest of silver hair in front of her just to see Muriel's coffin. She recognized the purple cloth that covered it, littered with

a field of embroidered flowers. Her moist eyes searched for the shiny white threads of her lily. The memory of the flash of the needle in Muriel's hands made her heart hurt.

"Look in the vase," Lily remembered. After the sad procession to the cemetery, she drove to Muriel's house. She turned the handle of the purple door, half expecting resistance, but it swung open. Muriel's vase was where it always was, inside the door, stuffed with plastic flowers, a few still stuck with yellow price tags from Reed's. Lily slumped in the beanbag chair and stared at the vase. A knock on the door made her jump.

"Come in," she said.

The woman with the plastic snapdragon in her hair entered and shut the door behind her. "I'm sure glad to find the house open. You know, Muriel never locked her door." She paused and fiddled with the stem nearly stuck in her scalp. "I'm Thelma Riddle, Muriel's good friend. But I guess we're all Muriel's good friends. I hope you'll excuse me. Believe it or not, my George died the same night that Muriel did."

"Was George old?" Lily asked. She didn't know what else to say.

"Oh, my, yes. Probably twenty. Maybe more. Until last month, he still went outside in the evening. He napped in the sunspot on the front porch every morning. But this last month, he was real sick. Didn't touch his Fancy Feast, even the chicken livers with gravy. I don't know what I'll do without George. Without George and Muriel Serene."

"George was your cat." Lily took a deep breath. "I had a cat once."

"Then I guess you understand. Well, there's nothing to be done for me, now that Muriel is gone. I just hate to lose them both."

"That's just it," Lily said. Her own voice surprised her with its certainty. "Muriel and George are together. I'll bet you're closer to Muriel than any person in Gladiolus today, your cat taking off with her and all. If you listen hard, you'll hear that cat purring out in his sunspot real soon, with Muriel nearby. If I had a very old cat, I'd consider it an honor that Muriel took George under her wing when it was his time to go. Why, Thelma, what do you bet that those two are ambling around

heaven this minute, just plotting a visit to you?"

Thelma slapped her knee. "Well, they are now."

In her enthusiasm, Lily had edged so far forward that she nearly fell out of the beanbag. She straightened up and sank back into the chair. Thelma watched her.

"Well?" Thelma asked.

"Well what?"

"My flower. That's what Muriel does. After she helps you, she gives you a flower."

"Oh. Well, go ahead and take one."

"That's not the way it works. She chooses it for you. It's always the right one."

Lily watched the snapdragon bob in Thelma's silver bouffant. "Yes, I guess it is." She went to the vase in the corner, and after a moment's consideration, pulled a plastic Queen Anne's Lace from the tangle of stems. She handed it to Thelma.

"That's it. White with a little black spot, like my George. A royal weed for a royal old alley cat. Why it's a miracle." The plastic tendrils on the snapdragon scratched Lily's cheek with the force of Thelma's hug. "Lily Serene, thank you."

Lily started to tell her that she was plain old Lily Gilmore from Tampa, but stopped herself. After Thelma left, she took out the plastic flowers from the vase and laid them on the floor. The vase was tall, narrow at the top with a bottom that ballooned into a stout base. Underneath the flowers were what seemed like hundreds of tiny scrolls, each tied shut with a snippet of embroidery thread. Lily pulled out a scroll, loosened the thread and unrolled it.

"Wanda Cafferty. Car accident. White Dahlia," she read. She rolled it back up, tied it, and opened a few more. It was always the same—a name, an event and a flower in her aunt's telltale flourish. She dumped all the scrolls from the vase, careful to corral them with her elbows so they didn't skitter away. She dug deeper into the vase and hit something solid. She grabbed onto a small rectangular brick and pulled it through the neck and out the vase's mouth. There were three in all, each wrapped in chamois. She unwrapped them and stared. Gold bricks, she was sure of it, even though she'd never seen one before. One had a note attached.

I traded the money from Gordon Barker for gold, as I have

no use for money. Tried to help Gordon, but he had a heavy burden. Son jumped from bridge four miles above Gladiolus. I told him the huge stone in his belly will weigh him down his whole entire life. Only thing left for him to do is help every person he meets. My guess is he'll find lots of folks have stones in their bellies too. Maybe a few even heavier than his. Didn't he just come back some five years later with a whole pile of money, which I traded for these gold bricks. Muriel Serene.

Lily rewrapped the bricks and stuffed them back through the mouth, down the neck and into the bottom of the vase. She gathered the scrolls, dropped them inside, then picked up the tablet and ballpoint pen near Muriel's embroidery hoop. On a thin sheet, she wrote 'Thelma Riddle. Passing of George the Cat. Queen Anne's Lace.' She cut a snippet of silver embroidery thread, rolled the paper into a scroll, and tied it shut. It rustled when it landed in the vase. Lily stuck the plastic bouquet back in place.

She thought about the gold bricks that Muriel bought all those years ago with the money from Gordon Barker, but she thought even more about the little pink blossom sewn into Muriel's purple funeral cloth. She wondered if Gordon Barker knew anything about Muriel's past.

Everyone had heard of Gordon Barker, media mogul and angel whenever disaster struck—flood, pestilence, famine. She'd even read about him in her business classes. Lily looked up the number of the Gordon Barker Relief Foundation and punched it into her cell phone. She had to talk to six receptionists, but every time she said the name Muriel Serene, obstacles melted. Finally, a man with a low, smooth voice answered. She identified herself as Lily Serene, since that seemed easier, and they talked for a while.

Gordon was sorry to hear about Muriel. He told Lily that a long time ago he had been on the verge of suicide when he stumbled upon Muriel Serene's little house in Gladiolus. "I wouldn't have made it otherwise. I gave her something in return," he said, humbly and haltingly. "It's of no consequence to me, really, what she did with, the, er, token of my appreciation. But I guess I'm just curious."

Lily looked around her. "She invested it."

"Really," Gordon Barker said. "In what?"

"Plastic," Lily said. "Mostly plastic, and a little gold."

"Very wise. Prescient, in fact."

"That was Aunt Muriel."

"Lily? I've always wondered. Did Muriel ever say if anything in particular led her to undertake her line of work? Of course, again, it's none of my business."

"No, she never said." Lily's heart sank. The answer to that question was the very reason she'd called him in the first place.

They hung up.

I never asked her, Lily thought. As far as she knew, no one had ever asked Muriel anything about herself. Lily's eyes burned from tears of guilt and regret and wondered if there was a worse sort of pain. Why hadn't she understood that there was such a thing as too late? She went to the kitchen and found a bottle of Muriel's sweet wine and drank half of it. She had a financial analysis class in the morning, but she was a little drunk and too tired to drive back to Tampa. She fell asleep in Muriel's bed under a lavender coverlet.

The next morning she was still too tired. The day after that, she decided she needed to stay another few days to pack up Muriel's belongings before Benjamin Abner and his cohorts descended on the house. Her seminar on the implications of the tax code on philanthropy would have to go on without her. When she couldn't think of any more reasons to delay, she carried a box of Muriel's embroidery to her car and promised herself that tomorrow she would lock up the little house at the end of the shell path once and for all. She finished the last bottle of Muriel's sweet wine, the ache of regret heavy in her heart.

In the morning, a knock on the door awakened her. Her mouth tasted fuzzy and her hair frizzed from her braid in all directions. She grabbed one of Muriel's turbans from the dressing table, threw on a robe and wondered where she'd left her eyeglasses. She answered the door.

"I'm sorry to intrude," Benjamin Abner said. His white shirt was rumpled, but this time he wore a tie.

"It's almost ready," Lily began.

"I didn't come about the house. I came . . ." He bowed his

head. ". . . to pay my respects to your aunt." Bare ankles stuck out from his shoes.

"Oh," Lily said. "Great-aunt."

Benjamin walked into the house, uninvited.

"I came to apologize actually. I'm afraid I killed her." His words came out slow, edged with remorse.

"No, of course you didn't. She was very old," Lily said, in her velvet voice.

"I didn't think my job would be that hard." His long arms hung at his side.

"Here, sit." Lily had to press on his shoulders to push him into the beanbag chair. She knew from experience that guilt and regret sapped a person's strength. She made him coffee, extra strong. He drank it in a few gulps.

"The first little old lady I have to evict, and she up and dies on me."

"No. Not Aunt Muriel. She wouldn't do that." Lily's eyes were sincere behind the eyeglasses that she'd stumbled across on her way back from the kitchen. Glasses on, she noticed the stubble on his cheeks, chin and over his lip, the dark shadows under his eyes. "She wouldn't do that to anyone."

"How do you know?"

"Well, first of all, Aunt Muriel was too kind to die out of revenge. And second, you didn't evict her. You just said she didn't own her house. For all you know, maybe she would have bought it."

"With what?" Benjamin Abner looked around the sparse room.

"Who knows? Anyway she didn't mean to make you feel bad. That wasn't Aunt Muriel's way."

Benjamin raised his eyebrows.

Lily took the mug from his hand and refilled it. "Don't let Aunt Muriel's dying ruin your job. She wouldn't want that."

"I was just doing my job."

Lily put the steaming mug back into his hand. "Of course," she said.

Silence filled the room.

"I know what you mean about jobs," Lily began in a soft voice. "When I was little I thought I would grow up and talk to dolphins. Now I'm studying business so I can make money.

Truth is, I hate it." She eased into Muriel's sunken spot in the couch and picked up the embroidery hoop that she hadn't the heart to box up the night before. "What would you do for a living, I mean, if you could pick?" she asked.

Benjamin sipped his coffee and looked skyward, the way that Chester Henderson had all through the funerals of James Little and Muriel Serene. "I would be a clock maker," he said.

Lily remembered the rhythmic ticking of her grandmother's porcelain mantle clock. "Yes," she said.

"That's silly, isn't it, when everything is digital and no one even wants a clock with gears and hands . . ."

"And ticking sounds," Lily said.

"Yes, especially those." Benjamin Abner rubbed his chin. "I forgot to shave this morning." He stood up. "I have to leave. I have a lot to do. But thanks for the coffee. And for understanding, I mean about my job." He moved toward the door. "What was your name again?" he asked, his hand on the doorknob.

"Lily." She paused. "Lily Serene."

Benjamin dropped his hand. "Lily, I guess you won't be staying around here, now that your aunt, your great-aunt, I mean, is gone."

Lily smiled. Certainty popped into her voice. "Actually, I'm staying right here. I plan to buy this house."

"Well, good, great. I suppose we'll cross paths again, then. That is, if you're not too mad at me."

"No." Lily opened the door for him. "I'm not."

Benjamin turned to go.

"Wait," Lily said. She reached into the vase and picked out a plastic lily, with a giant yellow stamen at its center. "Here. Take this."

He opened his eyes so wide that three parallel lines spread across his forehead. He transferred the stem from one hand to the other.

"It's kind of a tradition from my Aunt Muriel. A peace offering."

"Okay. Thanks." The questioning lines in his forehead remained.

"Just hang on to it."

"What about your flower?" Benjamin asked.

"Mine?"

"Why not?" Benjamin reached into the vase and pulled out the first one he touched. "It's small, I guess, but . . ."

He handed her a pink rose.

Lily gasped. With stunning clarity, the unfurled pink blossom on Muriel's purple cloth filled her mind. A phantom taste of Muriel's sweet wine and mango and coconut coated the back of her throat.

She understood.

If Muriel had wanted to tell her about the unfurled pink blossom, the many steps or missteps of her long life, she would have. It was as simple as that. Muriel's life was a closed and perfect monument. That had been her choice. The stone of regret lifted from Lily's shoulders.

"It's just right," Lily said to Benjamin, "the flower."

She reached out to him. Their eyes met, and then their hands, soft and familiar, a touch between friends. Or lovers even.

Barry Bergman

This Mascot Business

Ingram's first time wearing the beagle suit was in a windowless office in the bowels of the stadium, two levels below the refreshment stands. The office had concrete walls and exposed trunk cables and smelled like tuna fish. It was just the two of them, him and a burly kid in pressed jeans and a football jersey, well-scrubbed and officious, a junior assistant athletic director for public relations. Ingram thought he remembered him, backup defensive lineman perhaps, two, three years ago. Wishing he'd brushed up a bit.

The suit was warm but not uncomfortable, the papier-mâché beagle head lighter than he'd expected. The ears were floppy but nonfunctional, and he had to listen through pinholes at the sides of the head. The lineman had him walk a few paces, turn around, walk back. When he was pretty sure he'd gotten the all-clear Ingram removed the head and placed it carefully on the desk, beside the brass desk plate with the kid's name and title, so that it faced the nearest wall. He stepped out of the torso and laid it across the desk, legs akimbo. It looked like it wanted its belly rubbed. He took a chair opposite the kid. It was all he could do to look at the kid, and not at the headless torso.

The kid scanned his résumé. Ingram mumbled, pointlessly, that he was an alum. The kid grunted. It was in his favor, being an alum. But he was what undergrads called an "Old Dog," more than a little long in the tooth for a mascot. The kid perused the résumé, noted the absence of mascot experience, his lack of current employment. On the plus side, Ingram needed the job, was an excellent fit for the costume, and had never been convicted of a major crime. And the kid was impressed by the firmness with which Ingram asserted, in reply to his question, that he'd never abused drugs or alcohol, which, at the time, he hadn't.

That was outstanding, the kid said. It was settled, then.

"You won't regret it," Ingram said. "Go Beagles."

"Go Beagles," the kid said.

"You hydrate through one of the eyes, with a straw," the kid went on, using a chewed-up pencil stub for a pointer. "That's where your mouth will be. You hear through these holes on the sides, and see out these holes at the top, which you probably know by now. You'll need to learn your moves. The Wag, the Scratch. That thing with the ears. There's a class. Here's the main thing. Stakeholders love the beagle. They're invested. You are not, under any circumstances, to remove the head in a public place. This protects the brand. Under no circumstances are you to be seen in public wearing the beagle body, but not wearing the head. Being seen in public wearing the beagle body, but not wearing the head, can and will result in immediate termination."

With extreme prejudice, Ingram hoped. He would rather die, he thought, than be seen in public wearing the beagle body, but not wearing the head.

The junior assistant A.D. for P.R. shook his hand. The grip was firm and Freudian, the kind of grip you'd expect from a former backup defensive lineman with the responsibility for hiring mascots. The kid folded the torso and lowered it into a duffel bag bearing the school's colors, black and brown and white, and its logo, a mortarboard-sporting beagle. Students of Asian descent, joined by a Native American or two, had once protested the color scheme, but had since come to accept it.

No one, it seemed, had ever protested the logo.

The head was too large for the duffel, which the kid zipped from both ends so that the crown poked out of an opening at the top. He presented the bag to Ingram, who dutifully held out his arms to receive it. The bag smelled like tuna fish.

"Go Beagles!" the kid said.

Ingram's wife, when he told her the news, was not in a cheering mood. When he first noticed the posting online, she had urged him not to apply. When he was invited to interview, she'd urged him not to go.

Now that he'd landed the job, she urged him not to accept it.

But he already had, he said.

She was standing over the kitchen sink, washing vegetables. She let the faucet run for a while before turning to face him.

"No, uh-uh," she said, brandishing a freshly rinsed carrot. "No way. A *mascot*? What is *wrong* with you? What are you, six? Dress up like a doggie? You need to grow up. But you're growing down. You've finally hit bottom."

That wasn't so, Ingram said.

"There's nothing wrong with me," he said. "It's called being responsible. We need medical. Seen our bank balance? My unemployment checks? We need this. We need medical." The job paid next to nothing, hardly better than Burger King, but came with a modest health plan. It was the only justification Ingram had for getting into the mascot business.

She had not, in fact, seen their bank balance.

"We need medical," he said again. "The baby and all."

The baby was due in October, soon after the homecoming game. His beagle-moves training would start in August, once he'd completed "Pregnancy for Expectant Fathers" at the teaching hospital. That was when their benefits kicked in. Until then he would keep looking. He was a human resources professional. In the final weeks of his last job he'd been forced to give pink slips to five employees, older ones, people with families and mortgages. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Then, instead of a bonus, he got pink-slipped himself. Said some things he probably shouldn't have said.

He did not expect to find work again in the field of human resources.

Now, at least, he was gainfully employed, or nearly. He settled in to a daily regimen, locking himself in the bathroom to placate his wife, who'd found him modeling the torso in the bedroom the day after he took the job. There were tears. He had not been wearing the head, and this only confirmed for him the wisdom of not being seen without it. The bathroom was windowless, like the stadium's concrete office, and the costume was warmer and stuffier than he remembered. He found it hard to breathe with the head in place, and harder to turn around in the narrow space between the sink, the tub, and the toilet. But it made him happier, somehow, wearing the head.

She clocked his time in the bathroom. "You've been in there an hour," she hollered, in a tone he recalled from puberty. "What are you doing in there?"

"I'm *acclimating*," his voice barely audible through his beagle head and the locked bathroom door. "Are you feeling sick?"

She'd spent much of the first trimester throwing up, but was all right now.

"I'm not sick. I just want you out of the bathroom. I want you out of that poodle suit. I mean it. Seriously, it's humiliating."

She was not a dog person. "It's a beagle suit."

She screamed something into a throw pillow.

"Sorry," he said. "What?"

He could not make her understand. One day, after a baby shower at the home of a friend, his wife returned to the house to find him busting beagle moves in the living room, where he'd relocated the full-length mirror from the back of the bedroom door. He hadn't heard the car door close in the driveway, through the beagle head.

The friend, laden with baby gifts, lowered her shopping bags. His wife stood beside her, belly distended, glowing and disgusted. She rested one arm across her belly, where the baby was, and her forehead on the fingertips of her other hand.

The friend excused herself, and he took off the head. He heard the car drive away.

His wife stood inside the doorway. After a while she waddled to the couch, where she buried her face in her hands.

He wanted to ditch the torso, but felt sure this would set her off. He remained as he was, sheltering in place, not speaking, wearing the beagle body but not the beagle head.

"I can't do this," his wife said finally. "Look at you. You're a *poodle*. A mandoodle, whatever. I don't know. All I know is I need a husband, and the baby will need a father. A human one."

"It's only a costume," he pleaded. "A uniform. It's a job. With medical. That's why I'm doing this. You think I'm proud of this? You think I *want* to drink through a straw in my eye?"

She pondered this for a while.

"What?"

"Water, I mean. And Gatorade."

"What?"

"To stay hydrated."

"Hydrated."

"Forget it."

She stared off toward the beagle head, which sat in a patch of sunlight next to the potted money tree. The tree, a housewarming gift from her mother, was said to bring good luck.

"All I know," she said, "is my child will not have a clown for a father."

"I'm not gonna *be* a fucking clown," he said, exasperated. "I'm a mascot. There's a difference. Kids are afraid of clowns. Kids love mascots."

She refused to return his gaze. Ingram instead took in her profile, her swollen belly, the matte-finish glow of the papier-mâché head. Its black eyes beaming, he thought, like giant martini olives.

"I'm doing this for us," he said.

His wife, though, was already gone, down the hall and into the bedroom, deaf to everything but her own uncontrollable sobbing.

Ingram was despondent, at first, when she moved in with her mother. This was a short-term arrangement, she said. But still. It was several days before he could put on the costume again, and then only in bursts, while he watched daytime soaps on the set in the bedroom. He watched *The Young and the Restless*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*. If he was especially blue he stayed in bed for *General Hospital*, but this only made things worse. There was Tracy confronting Luke, Alexis confronting Shawn, Franco confronting Lauren. It made him despair, for himself and America. Plus it was hard to hear, through the beagle head. But he needed the practice.

During commercials he drank Tropicana through a straw, alternating between the eyes. This, too, was harder than he'd expected.

His wife was confrontation-averse. She had her mother answer the phone. Horrible woman. Ingram half-suspected she'd poisoned her husband, a man of ambiguous means

who had paid off the mortgage before his untimely passing. She had never liked him, Ingram, even when he was working. Didn't believe in answering machines. If she didn't pick up, there was nothing to do but call back later. If she did, he asked politely to speak with his wife. But her mother would say she was out, or resting, or too upset with him to come to the phone.

Sometimes he drove past her mother's place, a gingerbread house on a tree-lined suburban street. He searched for his wife, her eyes, peeking out of an upstairs window. Once he knocked on the door. Her mother said she was out.

"That's her car in the driveway," he said.

"I tell you she's out," her mother said. "Now go away. Come back when you've got a job."

"I've got a job."

"One with dignity."

"One with medical."

"We're done here."

He wrote emails. Deleted them. "Monica," went one, "please." This was whiny. He changed it to "MONICA, PLEASE," which was belligerent. "Monica, I'm trying," went another. "I love you." He deleted it.

He forwarded a funny baby video he found on a parenting website. It bounced back with a "fatal error" message. He stopped writing emails.

There were no jobs. Even if he weren't blacklisted, which he was certain he was, the market was flooded with human resources professionals. And he wasn't qualified for anything else likely to come with medical.

Just the same, he devoted an hour a day—after he'd had his coffee and Cheerios, and before his soaps came on—to emailing his résumé to prospective employers, each résumé accompanied by a cover letter professing his passion for finance, or biotechnology, or social media outreach. Each cover letter included his salary history, and said he would be happy to provide references on request. This was not strictly true.

He hit the send button, then donned the beagle suit and settled in for his soaps.

His wife didn't call. Prospective employers didn't call. He'd lost touch with his older friends. Most of his friends now were

couples, people he saw with his wife, who had always handled the social arrangements. They didn't call, now, either.

The lineman, Brandon, called once, while he was sending out résumés.

"Only three months to kickoff," he said. "Are you stoked?"

"Sure," said Ingram, who was still in his Jockey shorts. "I guess."

"You haven't told anyone, right? Outside your immediate family, I mean?"

"Mum's the word," Ingram said.

"Don't forget, it's important," the kid said. "To protect the brand."

There were plenty of calls from telemarketers, always during his soaps. He spoke to them through the beagle head and they hung up. His brother-in-law phoned one weekend, wanting to reclaim the potted money tree. Ingram did not want to talk to him, and especially did not want to see him. He told him the tree was dead, which was probably true, and the brother-in-law hung up.

He was spending more and more time in the suit. He was getting acclimated, as promised, a process abetted by alcohol. His custom was to switch from Tropicana to Tanqueray, the kind with a zesty lime tang, midway through *General Hospital*. This was about the time he started to feel another day slipping away, spiraling down the sinkhole after his job and his wife and his unborn child.

He was a cautious tippler. His rule was to drink only while wearing the beagle suit, lest his mother-in-law, anticipating a custody fight, start looting his recycling bin in the predawn hours of Thursday morning. There were not so many bottles, but enough, perhaps, to be used against him. He took pains to consign them to the bottom of the recycling bin, under the Tropicana containers. He found it surprisingly easy, now that he was acclimated, to sip lime-flavored gin through one of the eyes, with a straw.

He rehearsed in the living room. He'd picked up the rug and moved the furniture back to the walls. He invented steps for the Wag, the Scratch, that thing with the ears. He assumed these would be modified later, in his beagle-moves class, in the interests of continuity and school tradition. Stakeholders

loved the beagle. Meanwhile he found it invigorating, prancing about in a beagle suit. He kept the blinds drawn, and the full-length mirror turned to the wall. Seeing himself in the mirror, which he'd relocated again from the back of the bedroom door, reminded him why he had opted for a career in human resources.

That had turned out badly. But this, too, was a dicey business. His class was still months away. He'd barely noticed the beagle during the handful of games he'd watched on TV, or the one he'd attended sometime during his freshman year. The lineman, Brandon, would never reveal the identity of a former mascot, and Ingram would never ask.

Nor could he seek advice from his college chums, being sworn to secrecy, even if he'd had the remotest idea how to reach them.

His only hope was a video.

YouTube, he discovered, was the Golconda of beagle videos. This was a mixed blessing. The videos were boorish and cruel, mainly, a streaming sewer of beagles falling gracelessly on their keisters, usually with the help of student sociopaths. Some featured mascots hydrating furtively through a big olive eye, and one—the most popular, by far—showed a beagle retreating down an underground stadium passageway, holding what was unmistakably, despite the poorly lit cellphone footage, a hip flask. The comments, almost without exception, were semi-literate and inhumane, and shared an unseemly joy in piling on. Nearly all invoked the flask and the notorious "boozer beagle," which they took to be representative of the breed. Beagle-move mavens, who claimed to detect subtle variations in style and choreography from one season to the next, or even one game to the next, were sure this explained the high turnover in mascots.

It was so unfair. Ingram had watched dozens of videos, and could not tell the beagles apart. There could be no reliable data on turnover, no possible way to know why a particular mascot had passed the torch, beyond the natural lure of career opportunities, which were admittedly scarce. Even if it were true, though, who were these people to judge? People who spent their days chained to computers, eyes glazed, cooped up in cubicles, offices, factory discount outlets. Others with-

out jobs at all, who passed the entire week in a Barcalounger, clutching a beer, pecking out ungrammatical witless abuse and looking ahead to the weekend, when they could torment you in the flesh.

People who asked you to offboard your colleagues, then forced you to walk the plank. People who didn't know the meaning of dignity, or the value of even a modest medical plan, and whose potted money tree he was glad was probably dead.

People who took beagles for poodles, who couldn't distinguish a clown from a goddamn mascot.

Ingram sucked on his Tanqueray. He drank with assurance now, using a jumbo straw, and his dancing was fueled by a newfound passion. He felt, in fact, like a new man. In a moment of fearlessness he had flipped the full-length mirror back to the room, and when he caught his reflection now it seemed to him the very image he'd seen in the videos, the cruelty-free ones at least, graceful and effortless. It was beautiful. He barely recognized himself, there in the rugless expanse of the living room, ringed by the sofa and chairs and the upended coffee table and the probably dead money tree and three or four hardy perennials, which formed an irregular broken circle along the walls and windows.

His wife was still always out, or resting, or too upset with him to come to the phone.

He tried not to think about that.

It was the kids that mattered. Kids loved mascots. The kids, once he'd perfected his beagle moves, would wave to him in the aisles, holler for him to dance their way, beg for a hug, wonder if they might nuzzle his nose or rub the top of his head. He would nod his assent, waggle his ears and tail, and the kids would jump and laugh and squeal with unbridled childish delight.

It wasn't the stakeholders. It was the kids. No matter how hateful their parents, how crude or vicious or pitiless, Ingram knew the kids would still love the beagle, and would never, ever be frightened.

Katherine Enggass

Table

Sarah and Warren ride in the back of her parents' rental car, a white monstrosity with a maroon interior and electronic everything. Warren clutches her hand like a nervous prom date and, in fact, riding in that ridiculous vehicle, all dressed up in her most somber maternity dress, Sarah has the feeling that they actually are headed for some demented dance.

As her father turns the corner Warren uses the motion to lean close. "I can't have a grave," he says to her ear. "Or a casket." Their newborn is dead and they are on the way to make arrangements. Arrangements, that word. "Sarah, please, I can't." He can't? Why not? If she can, why can't he? Her mother turns to look over her shoulder at them, smiling her worried chaperone's smile, then turns back.

Sarah nods, "Fine, whatever." Right then she feels a deep cramp, an aftershock. "A viewing first," she bargains. "After that, cremation." Then she thinks, I didn't say that, did I?

Sarah's mother sets a mug of tea among crumpled tissues and steadies the box that is serving temporarily as a bedside table. Then she walks around the bed to give Warren his tea. Sarah pushes herself up and takes a swallow. She still has trouble sitting upright.

"What else can I do?" Her mother begins poking through a pile of boxes at the foot of the bed, the ones marked, "Master Bedroom." Sarah and Warren had moved across town into their new house just three days before Sarah had gone into labor, and so far only essentials have been unpacked. Her mother pulls out a wastebasket filled with shoes. "I know I can't do anything, really."

"The tea is good." Warren sips carefully. Sarah can tolerate very hot liquids, but Warren always has to wait for them to cool. "You're doing a lot, Moms," Warren says.

Her mother sighs, "Oh, I don't know." She goes to the closet

and lines up the shoes in a row on the floor, then brings the wastebasket over to the bedside box and shoos all the damp white wads into the trash.

When they've finished their tea, her mother takes the mugs. Dishes rattle in the kitchen. "Why does everything sound so loud?" Warren asks. "I feel like what people say about hearing aids in restaurants." Sarah rests her hand on his shoulder. After a while he sits up and wipes his eyes. He wanders to the window and opens the blinds. "Your father," he says, squinting out at the yard as Sarah turns away from the glare. She can hear the hammering, has been hearing it all along. The fence would have kept an older Andrew, their Drew, from running out into the street. It would have kept him boxed in the back yard, safe where he belonged.

"I'm going to take a pill," Sarah says. Warren hands her the bottle. She swallows one, then another, then another, while he watches. She pours the rest of the pills into her palm. There are five left. Warren says, not in a mean way, but neutrally, "It's not enough to kill you, is it." Then he leaves. He leaves her with the pills and walks down the hall and speaks briefly to her mother. He gets in the car and drives off. She hears the engine race, then fade away. She pictures abandoned Andrew, last seen lying cheek-to-cheek with his own reflection on a wheeled metal table at the hospital.

Sarah can hear her mother loading the dishwasher. The pills are sticking to her hand so she scrapes them back into the container. If they aren't going to kill her, forget it. She says this to herself in the same tone that they sometimes would joke at work about the irate parents they encounter at the agency: *fuck them if they can't take a joke*. Outside the hammering continues, faster than her heartbeat. She can smell herself, the blood, too rich and sweet, slightly past, like curdled breath from a cave. Her breasts are as hard as a mannequin's and her heart feels like a pincushion squeezing on pins. "I guess you need a heart that works," Warren had said to the doctor. Warren, who can't have a grave. What did he mean by saying that this wasn't enough to kill her?

For several minutes she concentrates on breathing. Her back and arms ache. It's as if she has pulled her muscles, as if she had helped with all that moving, lugging furniture piece

by piece into their new home, but of course she hadn't helped at all. She'd been about to have a baby. No one had let her carry anything.

As she comes out of the bathroom the telephone rings and she is immediately certain that the call is about Warren, that he has crashed the car, so she runs down the hall toward the kitchen, calling, dizzy from the pills. She is running down the endless hall forever. Her father is talking on the phone. He holds up his free hand, trying to silence or stop her, and her mother, looking shocked, puts her arm around her and steers her back to the bedroom.

"Don't look like that," she tells her mother, who answers, smoothing Sarah's chopped bangs, chopped in a recent fit of anger, "You must have had a dream." She sits Sarah on the bed and runs a bath for her. "I wish I *were* dreaming," Sarah says, drowned out by the sound of the running water.

Sarah sits in the tub on a clear inflatable cushion shaped like a donut. Her skin flushes with the heat as the water slowly stains pink. This is what it would look like if I cut my wrists, she thinks. No, it would look worse. She closes her eyes and feels space around her. She recalls a field so large that it made her head spin. Chubby legs churned through the grass, her own legs years ago, knee-deep, down low. She was a toddler trying furiously to keep up with older kids. This is an old memory, her official first memory, relived so often that it seems polished, but for the first time she realizes that the legs could not have been hers after all, that they were angling away from her as she lost ground. She'd been left behind by some other child pulling ahead and now, looking inward, there is a black hole where she should be. The other child has long since run out of sight. All of the children have gone.

The hammering stops. The ceiling above the bed floats lower and lower, then snaps back into place. Her mother keeps coming in to report on unpacking. "I put the wine glasses in the cabinet over the dishwasher." "The dinner plates will be to the right of the sink." "I stuck the saucepan lids in the wok down low next to the stove." She tells Sarah over and over to rearrange whatever doesn't suit her. She says

she doesn't want to impose. "Change whatever you like," she insists. Finally she comes in with an armful of mixing bowls nestled together and the top one holds a shadow, not just any shadow, but a shadow of substance next to a gleam, the type of white smear you might find on an X-ray.

"I'll tell you what to change," Sarah says, aware of her own cruelty. The ceiling jerks again.

Her mother looks at the bowls. Then she kneels and carefully sets them in the doorway and walks out. In a few minutes Sarah gets up to follow her to apologize. She shuffles around the bowls; they are just bowls—bowls she'd bought when she thought she could have a kid—and looks into the den.

Her father sits with his head down on Warren's desk, his forehead resting against his wrist, which is draped across the phone book. He glances up, startled. There's a red mark, like a wound, in the center of his forehead. Sarah forgets everything. What she had intended to do, where she is, her mother, apologies. Where is Warren, she wonders.

"What?" her father says tiredly, rubbing his wrist, then his head. "Walking in your sleep again? What is it?"

The next day Sarah is still wearing her bathrobe at three in the afternoon, trying to sit without sitting in the living room, when the furniture repairman drives up in his pickup. He is coming at her father's request to give an estimate on fixing the dining room table damaged by movers. Sarah sees the white of his cab as he passes beyond the courtyard wall, hears brakes groan, then a couple of door slams. The new and therefore unfamiliar doorbell rings, a flat strangled sound. She can't get used to it.

Sarah's mother answers the door, and Sarah hears them talking as they come down the hallway.

"My wife informed me he'd be mine today," the repairman is saying as he comes around the corner, avoiding the books stacked there. He is a vigorous-looking short man with graying curly hair grown longer in back and worn in a ponytail, and small but bright dark eyes. He wears an earring, a gold loop graced with one clear green bead, and tendrils from a tattoo reach up his neck. Sarah's mother steps in front of him,

smiling anxiously. Then Sarah sees the boy.

"It's no trouble at all," Sarah's mother says politely. "Mr. Parino is here."

Sarah's father emerges from the kitchen and shakes hands with Mr. Parino. Sarah pushes herself up from the couch, and as she stands part of herself seems to rise until she is hovering about three feet above the others. She has become a hunched crow watcher of herself, but she is calm. Below, she, too, shakes hands with Mr. Parino. She is calm, but she should have told him no children.

"This is Andrew," Mr. Parino says, "Andy." If Sarah hadn't been split off already she would have crumpled at the sound of the name, her own boy's name, except for the choice of nickname.

"You picked the other half," she says. Mr. Parino frowns but at the same time tries to look receptive, and the effect strikes Sarah as comical. She smiles but she can feel the smile stretching unnaturally, so she covers her mouth to stop it.

"I'm sorry," Sarah's mother is explaining. "We've had some bad news recently. You'll have to bear with us." Sarah likes that, *bad news*. Nothing has actually happened; they've just received bad news. How tidy. Mr. Parino is offering to come back at some later time, but Sarah's father tells him to stay.

"Would you like some orange juice?" Sarah's mother bends close to the child, Andy, her head zooming down like something out of Picasso. Andy flicks a look at his father. "Or I think we have some Coke, if it's all right with your dad."

Mr. Parino shrugs and Andy says, "Coke." Again he looks to his father, who frowns at him. "Please," Andy remembers. Then Sarah's mother asks Mr. Parino if he would like anything, coffee or anything, and he declines by holding his hand out as if to show its unsteadiness. "Had plenty already," he says.

Sarah slides back into her semi-recline on the couch. She and the listing table are buddies, they share the same off-kilter pose. Her father pulls up dining room chairs for the Parinos, and Andy sits with his feet tucked behind the rungs. He seems to be about nine or ten years old, Sarah guesses. He is the quintessential boy, or would any child seem that way to her now? He is too similar to the boy she had imagined

her baby Drew would become one day or, perhaps, she hadn't imagined Drew at all and now, without him, she has to use whatever she finds in front of her. If she had done a better job imagining him would he have lived?

This Andrew is skinny, but with a round face. He has a touch of red in his hair, a few freckles, and a delicate, inch-long curved scar under one eyebrow. His top front teeth overlap slightly. His skin is beautiful, babyish, soft baby skin. His hands are darker than his face, grubby, with dirt—wonderful clean dirt, kid dirt—under nails that need trimming. He is wearing high-top sneakers with neon-orange laces and jeans. He has left his jacket on. Zipped up and ready to run, Sarah thinks. Take me with you.

Andy enjoys slurps of Coke while his father examines the table. Mr. Parino crouches under the table and feels the splintered legs with both hands, like a groom checking a horse. He backs out and stands up, then runs his hand along the tabletop. "They really did a number on it," he says cheerfully. "Don't worry, though, we can handle it."

He smiles at Sarah. Somehow he's figured out that the table is hers. Something is required of her but she can't think what. She knows she looks odd. She hasn't slept. She's had too many pills. All the blood has run out of her. She has hacked off her hair so that it sticks up in uneven clumps. She wants to tell him, I feel shorn so why shouldn't I look shorn?

So, Mr. Parino and Sarah's father go through a pile of movers' insurance forms and estimate receipts. Andy rattles the ice in his glass and suppresses a burp. Sarah's mother smiles at everyone to make up for Sarah. Sarah's father keeps looking over at her, too, willing her to participate, but she deliberately turns and looks out the window.

Where is Warren? Everyone has told her to give Warren time. The pickup truck is blocking the driveway if Warren tries to come home. Maybe she will ask Mr. Parino to cart her off with the table. Anywhere. She doesn't need time but Warren does. She will give Warren time and he will vanish into it. There are traces of snow in the shadows along the wall and the sun burns against the corrugated metal roof of a shed in the next yard. Frost melts. Frost *does* melt. A man emerges from the house across the street, her new neighbor,

name unknown. He lifts the lid from a garbage can sitting at the end of his driveway, glances up and down the street, then replaces the lid and goes back inside. She can't get used to this new view, this new house, that doorbell. But she is lucky, luckier than her own son who is—floating? Drifting? Nowhere with Warren? She is lucky to have a house, to be housed, contained.

Her father and Mr. Parino agree that mahogany is a rare and beautiful wood. They decide to refinish the table in addition to the repairs. They decide not to deal with the matching chairs for now. The chairs can wait.

Andy rattles ice again. Sarah can see that he wants to get rid of his glass but can't find anywhere to put it, that he doesn't want to call attention to himself by getting up but also can hardly stand to sit there. Why doesn't someone else notice? She can't move. Outside, a dead vine twists on a weathered trellis. The vine has been dead all along, she reminds herself sternly, on moving day she'd noticed it. The world is full of dead vines and parents with perfect children. *I'm being so reasonable*. She leans her forehead against the upholstery, remembering a mitten packed with snow and held against her head after a fall on the rink. She lifts her head and sees that they are all watching her warily, which makes her feel like a powerful but unpleasantly unpredictable queen. The boy is trying to shrink into nothing. "Don't worry," she says to him.

"You look pale," her mother says, giving her an excuse.

"You would, too."

"That should end soon," her mother answers.

"What was it—? Half now and half later?" Sarah asks Mr. Parino. She uses her fists like an old woman to push herself off the couch. She takes Andy's glass to the kitchen and finds her checkbook. Her signature looks different, spiky versus rounded, mean.

Mr. Parino signs a receipt and holds it out to her. He is about her height. Warren is a lot taller. When he is around Warren spends a lot of time looking at the crooked part in her hair while she stares up at his bony chin. What strange angles they have on each other. She takes the receipt without looking away from Mr. Parino. He seems to be more used to her by now.

"We'll have it looking as good as new," Mr. Parino promises, and it seems to her before he breaks away that he has agreed to some deeper exchange, like the harsh bargains made in fairy tales. He steps back quickly, smiling a little at his own earnestness. "Don't X-ray it or anything, but from the outside you won't be able to tell."

Sarah's father and Mr. Parino tip the table and carry it upside down, end panels swinging. Andy goes first and opens the front door, then lowers the truck's tailgate and spreads a gray pad on the truck bed. Sarah shivers in the doorway while they tie the table in place. With its splayed legs in the air that table looks like a cartoon of a dead dog.

Sarah and her mother sit on the couch. Sarah falls asleep immediately. Her mother is gone. Twin babies lie side by side on woven mats of grass. One is the baby dead and one is the baby alive. She picks up the living child. "You're alive," she says to him, surprised, and he shrugs in a curiously adult manner. No big deal. She holds him, not so much relieved as bewildered, until her husband tells her to try the other one. The dead child is much heavier than she expects, he's cement, a gray petrified cupid. A white slug curls in his ear and his eye sockets are cloudy with cobwebs. They have given his eyes away. A deep, jagged crack runs the length of his torso. Where is the real baby? This one is just an old relic, an old and weathered gravestone, her stone. She feels the weight of him on her chest. He's holding her under so she can't breathe.

Warren touches her cheek. "Lines," he says, and she thinks of her father's wound. It's dark out.

"Where did you go?" she asks.

Warren leans back and closes his eyes. "I dinged the car."

"Warren." She gets up and he follows her into the garage and snaps on a light. The right rear bumper has come loose. She notices the car seat, unused, still strapped in place in the back.

"I backed into that pylon. I always said one day I'd hit it."

The pylon is back at their former apartment in the parking lot protecting a green metal box full of cables and wires. "What were you doing back there?" Sarah asks.

"Nothing." They head back to the couch. "Our spot was

empty so I parked in it. Someone already lives there though. There's a bamboo shade hanging on the balcony."

Sarah hears her mother in the kitchen lifting the lids off the various casserole dishes sent by friends and coworkers. Since the move to the new home, they've had to give everyone directions. "This house will seem better some day," she says. Is that true?

"Who put the chairs like that? They look wrong."

Her father had arranged the chairs around the spot where the table had been. They stand rigidly like generals on the losing side, keeping up appearances. "I was thinking they seemed sort of decent, somehow," Sarah says.

Her mother emerges from the kitchen. "Oh, you're back," she says to Warren.

"I'm back," Warren agrees.

Gradually the living room fills with family. "Do you think something is wrong with that doorbell?" Sarah asks, but no one hears her. Sarah's mother and Warren's sister-in-law begin heating up the food. Sarah's older sister, Beth, pulls her husband over toward the empty wall unit for one of their annoying whispered conferences. Warren's parents call from the airport to say they have arrived and are renting a car. A hopeful thought: maybe she won't live long enough to make it to the service. Her father sets various end tables and boxes around the room, then distributes paper napkins, and someone turns on the news, which everyone eagerly yet blankly watches. Warren's brother opens a bottle of beer. An assortment of aromas from at least three different entrees wafts in from the kitchen. The telephone rings a few more times.

Warren and his brother meet his parents at the door and his side of the family heads straight to the den for a half an hour while everyone else sits and waits, until Karen, Sarah's younger sister, knocks on the den door to say the food is ready. Warren's mother sits next to Sarah and reaches for Sarah's hand, stroking the knuckles with her thumb, as if trying to smooth her out.

"I confess," she says, "My first thought was for *my* baby. Once a mother—" She looks across the room to where Warren and his father are feigning interest in the new floor tiles.

Sarah pulls her hand away. Earlier Beth had reminded Sarah that she could try again, "It's not like you had a chance to get to know this one, anyway." For an instant the TV announcer's voice takes over. The official cause of a recent small plane crash, he reports, is *flying too close to the ground*. "No kidding," Warren's brother says and Karen laughs.

Warren's mother brings Sarah a plate of food, spaghetti sliding into chicken salad. Slops. They eat for a while, listening to the weather forecast.

"Dear," Warren's mother says, "I have to ask, but did you even hold him? It's so important, even—"

"No," Sarah says. "I, well, after—"

"Yes, you did," Warren interrupts.

"I thought I'd drop him. I was trembling too much."

"You *did* hold him."

Warren's father frowns at him.

"She held him," Warren insists. His skin has that mottled look it gets when he is about to lose his temper. "Everything was perfect for about two minutes. Then the doctor gave her a shot."

"I didn't *want* the shot," Sarah says. What kind of mother doesn't want to hold her newborn? Warren's mother pats her on the shoulder.

"Who cares, anyway?" Karen stands abruptly and begins collecting and stacking dishes. "All this stuff, it hardly matters, does it?"

"He gave her a shot."

"OK, Warren," his father warns.

"The doctor gave her a shot." The food slides on Warren's nearly full plate as he shoves it at Karen. "*That's* why she doesn't remember."

"Come say goodbye." Warren has found her curled on her side of the bed, studying her hand. Isn't that what new mothers do—count fingers and toes?

"Maybe I remember."

"*May*be?"

"He was beside me on the table, that operating table bed cart thing. My arm was nearby, practically holding him."

"Practically?"

"I was looking at him close up. He was looking all around. I remember later that incubator with the blue hand-holes. I remember his hands. His hands looked funny, not quite real, like gray gloves filled with sand. When I woke up I didn't know where anybody was. You were gone. He was gone. Two women were washing me, sluicing water over me and talking to each other. It was like they were washing a car." She stops for a moment, trying to remember more. Warren opens and shuts the dresser drawers as if searching for something, but the drawers are all still empty.

"What are we going to tell ourselves?" He helps her off the bed. On their way back to the living room they pass the closed door to what would have been Andrew's room. Sarah's father appears in the hall with an armful of limp coats. "And I don't want the truth, either," Warren says. "God, I need a lie."

Sarah drives the freshly dented car. The car seat is still in back, Warren won't let her remove it. Sunlight bursts off a windshield just ahead. Blades of sun go through her but she keeps steering through floating black dots, over the crest of a hill toward a chunky jeweled pendant suspended over the pavement. There, she misses the turn and drives on. She isn't supposed to drive yet and she hasn't told anyone where she's going, but they'll figure it out. How fast is she going? She checks the speedometer but can't make sense of the dial, attractive spikes radiating from an explosion at the core, like a clock. If she goes faster will she finally cause time to pass?

She is a passenger even as she drives. A mother and not a mother. She isn't driving, invisible ropes control the car as she circles the block, a cord pulls her toward her destination. Years ago her mother used to take them out in an old motorboat with rusting seats. Her normally sedate mother would crank the wheel tight and they'd loop in frightening zeros in the middle of the lake, crashing the bow into their own wake. This is the proper pattern of the generations, Sarah thinks, and so, when she plunges down a side street, she half expects to be pitted against some opposing force. Instead she meets no resistance, no waves. She is on a ridge overlooking the valley. The high desert land slopes down to the band of naked cottonwoods choking the river. Dirt-bike trails crease the red

clay earth like straps cutting into flesh.

A honking sedan rushes by on the left as she rolls more and more slowly along the curb. She pulls into a wide drive, passes a barren expanse dotted with miniature American flags and then stops near a marble mausoleum studded with gleaming brass plaques. Spread before her is a flat black sea strewn with enormous yellow fish spines. The skeletons are both beautiful and mysterious, like formations that might be attributed to aliens, and she is grateful to witness their odd loveliness in the moment before she identifies them.

The sun is bright illusion. It's cold. A man intercepts her as soon as she gets in the door. She wonders if they have a bell that rings deep in the building whenever a visitor crosses the threshold. She doesn't recognize the man from her last visit but he knows her. He knows her name and invites her into one of the offices to the left down a short corridor. She tries but she can't focus on his face, it's a distant moon pitted with faint craters.

"I need a telescope," she tells him. He gets her some coffee and lets her sit there without bothering her. Maybe he says a few words but she is busy tasting the coffee, which is rich with an aftertaste of ash that makes her think of Warren. She thinks of him as if he is someone she knew long ago, softened by time, recalled only with hazy affection. He always preferred strong coffee, preferred French roast, that Warren. In restaurants before ordering any he would make them hold up the pot so he could see if the brew were opaque enough. In two days Warren has put a lot of mileage on the car, and on the way over she had just noticed a new crack in the windshield, a star down low on the driver's side. Apparently he has been back to the old apartment several times. Maybe he is waiting for their former selves to drive up and tell him nothing has changed.

The moon man asks her if she is ready to see her son. She says yes and he excuses himself and leaves the office. She sips coffee and looks at what appears to be some sort of document posted on the wall. It seems she can no longer read. Even though she knows there are letters in front of her what she sees is a series of notched lines leaning at different angles like a collapsing picket fence, followed by a lovely coiled shell

as small and contained as a snail's.

She follows the man by walking beside him. With a twist of his shoulders he sends her in one direction, with a lean, in another. Another man follows them. Like a school of fish they move in unison. Then, with gracious subterranean nods indicating she should enter, both men halt at the chapel door. She asks to be alone for a moment.

Between them are several pews, then an open space lit from above by a milky skylight. Beyond that is a kind of stage, one step up, flanked by pale and solid-looking olive curtains. The pews are modern, unembellished, of a light blond wood, as rhythmic as captured waves, while the curtains hang in sculptured folds, held back by ornate tassels. Flowers are scattered about, quivering in currents of air. The urn that will soon contain him is to the right of the bassinet, both displayed on pedestals.

She stands next to him for a while. Her mother always claims it is rude to say "him" about someone in the room. Andrew, then. She has been thinking of Andrew's comfort. That's why she came early, it's purely natural to want to check on the baby.

His head barely makes a dent in the satin pillow and his hands, those long and finger-like thumbs, rest on the multicolored blanket her mother had crocheted. Maybe later someone will hand her the blanket, folded like a flag for the next-of-kin. She's glad to see that his hands look familiar, that they are the hands she remembers, except they seem smaller.

His face looks familiar and unfamiliar. Lying there not looking back at her he manages to appear both swollen and deflated, existing in opposing states or not existing at all. Canceled out. When she leans close she still can make out the faint raw marks where they'd taped a respirator to his cheeks, but his overall skin color is better than at the hospital. He has shed that luminous gray sheen. He is not better, she knows. He looks better now but even smaller.

She touches his hand, which has become the hand of an older child now, the hand of the future child, with grimy knuckles and a knobby scraped wrist. "How did this happen?" she asks him, bending near to hear the living boy somewhere beyond this dead one.

It is possible to touch him and wonder where he is. She can look right at him and not be watching over him.

Three weeks later, the doorbell rings. Warren is at work, they've all gone back to their routines, except for Sarah, who is taking part of her maternity leave anyway. Mr. Parino has returned with the restored table, which is shining in the truck bed, glossy as a new coffin.

"You're a fast healer," he observes as he opens the tailgate. "You've lost that hospital look."

"I have?" Sarah says, surprised. When she isn't feeling crazy she feels half asleep, thoughts slip away from her half remembered like dreams. She helps him carry the table inside and they lower it into place. "Maybe you can tell me," she says as she writes the check—but then she forgets the question.

This time he has a plain gold stud in his ear. "Look here." So now it's time for her to admire his handiwork. He flicks a cloth over the table's burnished surface. She bends forward to see their falling shadows as flat silhouettes. Within the shadow her reflection appears next to his, three-dimensional, deep down beyond the polish, on the other side. It is oddly comforting when her hand from below reaches up to meet its real counterpart, near her wooden brow.

Back at the chapel, the moon man had eventually returned with Warren. She didn't want to move but part of her shifted involuntarily to let them know she was aware. The moon man propped open the door. People, or ghostly coughs and rustles and shuffling feet, gathered out of sight in the hall. She lowered her head and studied the space between the stage and her feet. The carpet was a muted forest, sand and plum floral. Not as bad as it sounds, she thinks now as she sets the table for dinner, but rather like a lake bottom seen through ten feet of water. There was a damp leaf stuck to the side of Warren's shoe, startling new green in the midst of winter. Would there be an end, after all, to this season? Warren lifted the baby from the bassinet and adjusted the blanket. It had been his idea to have a receiving line—although it never had been exactly clear to her what would be received and by whom.

Maria Hummer

The Person I Was Yesterday

I share a house with the person I was yesterday. She is exactly like me, minus 24 hours.

When I first moved into this apartment I was nervous about living alone. Three years with Ryan made me used to another human's sounds—the rustle of his sock feet on the floor, his yawns. The first night was tough. But it turned out okay because the next day I started sharing this place with the person I was yesterday.

She showed up with two bags in her hands, wearing the outfit I had on the day before. I asked why she looked so scared and she said she didn't know what was going to happen. She wasn't even sure she ever got over her fear of the dark. I told her it's not as bad as you think.

I gave her the living room fold-out couch to sleep on but at some point in the night I heard her drag the three heavy couch cushions into my room and drop them on the floor in a line. She stretched a sheet over the cushions and lay down and then proceeded to make such a noise, crying and blowing her nose on my pillowcase.

The next morning when I sat up she was already awake, eyes fixed on the ceiling, unmoving, like a corpse. I left to go make coffee. The pot was weak. No matter what I do, the pot is always weak.

When she came into the kitchen she was wearing my clothes from yesterday. She had picked them out of the hamper. I wondered if she also had on my old underwear. But I didn't feel like asking.

We sat together with cups of coffee. We were quiet.

At first I liked the company. We had the same taste in TV and books and we shared a lot of opinions, though mine—having had an extra day to mature—were more defined. This gave me an advantage over her I think I misused. One day she came to me after realizing I had been right about something the day before, not to apologize but to be angry.

There was no need to make me feel stupid, she said.

I said I was just trying to help.

I found a job in a coffee shop, and then she got a job in the same coffee shop. We were short-staffed, so even though I'd only been there a day I was asked to train her. She was slow. I was slow too, but she was even slower. She got lost in steaming a pitcher of milk, carefully, like it was the last thing on earth she'd ever have to do. Customers' faces on the other side of the espresso machine turned sour with impatience. I elbowed in to help. She squealed and dropped the milk. She went to get a mop while I made the long line of coffees. No one had taught her how to wring out the mop head properly and instead of soaking up the milk she made an even bigger puddle of water. I slipped and spilled the milk again.

She infuriated me sometimes. She'd make a wrong order that I'd gotten wrong the day before. She'd crack jokes no one laughed at, no one ever had. And sometimes she'd just sit there, watching life around her like someone at the movies. I would beg her to say something, anything.

I know, she said. I know.

But she never took my damn advice.

If I left the door open and a moth got in, she'd leave the door open and a moth would get in. If I tripped on the sidewalk and teenagers laughed at me, she'd trip on the sidewalk and teenagers would laugh at her.

After weeks of just sitting at home with her, I had to get out. I went with some friends to a club. I got drunk. I kissed two different men. I went home without learning their names. The best part about the kisses was right before it happened, not during. During, I was already thinking about how she'd be doing the same thing tomorrow and there was no way I could stop her.

The next evening I sat around, glum, while she tried on dresses from my closet.

Remember who you are, I said.

I already know who I am, she said.

And when she stumbled home at 4 a.m. and started sobbing at the kitchen table, it was me who stayed awake with her until dawn, listening.

I thought about leaving. I tried to, once. Went to stay at

my sister's for the weekend. We had a fun night of drinking homemade cocktails, watching stand-up comedy specials in our slippers, and drunk-dialing her new boyfriend. The next afternoon we went for a walk in the park, talking about old crushes and birth control and marriage. We stopped at the store for a box of instant lemonade mix to drink in the sun on her front lawn. And when we got back, there she was, looking lost on the front porch.

What could we do? We let her in. We made her lemonade too. And she sat there and complained about all the topics I covered yesterday.

My sister kept looking at me. She didn't know what to say. She'd comforted me already, nodded her head as I listed all my problems. And here they were again.

When she was done, cried herself dry, she wanted to get drunk. She wanted homemade cocktails. But we'd already done that the night before.

We're just gonna eat spaghetti and read books, we told her.

She looked at us. Betrayal. She went into the guest room and didn't come out except to pee. I had to sleep on the air mattress, which somewhere around 3 o'clock meant I had to sleep on the hard floor.

I drove us back to our apartment. She cried the whole way, brushing tears away as if scratching an itch. Such a fragile thing, like blown glass. I kept my own face resolutely dry.

That night I sat down and told her I was moving away. I would go make coffee somewhere else, the next state over perhaps. She wanted to come.

No, I said.

Why not? she asked.

I didn't have a good answer. So I said nothing.

I packed up all my things, which were her things too. I left the sweaters I didn't like anymore, the jeans that didn't fit. She wore them, oblivious to how much she would soon hate them. I took all the kitchen things, the knives and pans and cutting boards. She tried to make the best of it.

I can microwave food, she said. Don't worry about me.

She stood outside on the lawn while I drove away. I put on an old CD I used to like, but I shut it off when I realized it reminded me of her. I kept turning around to check she hadn't

climbed in the back seat when I wasn't looking. All I saw was garbage bags of clothes.

The new place was smaller, the city the same. I sat and watched TV with only the movement of the vertical blinds to keep me company, like somebody was parting the slits with a finger to see what was going on outside. I had a job interview in the morning, went there, talked about coffee. When I came back she was waiting for me.

It was the same routine as before. Spilling milk, kissing strangers, crying.

I tried to make rules this time. I designated her a shelf in the fridge so we could keep our rotting vegetables apart. I learned to change my schedule every day because she would repeat the pattern 24 hours later and I wanted our paths to cross as little as possible. I made friends. I'd go to a once-a-week knitting circle or book club knowing they were safe from her because she'd show up the next day when they were long gone. It made me a little sad to picture her sitting there with her herbal tea, alone, so I tried not to think of it too much.

It happened that I met someone, someone in the book club. He looked at me with a warmth I never saw in Ryan's eyes. In the heat of his gaze I felt my heart bloom, like a rose.

His name was Shane. I brought him to the apartment to share a bottle of wine and look at the new bird feeder I'd hung outside the kitchen window. No birds had found it yet, so there wasn't much to see besides it just being there, waiting for hungry beaks. But I wanted to show somebody, somebody besides the person I was yesterday.

We stood there in silence and sipped wine as we watched the feeder twist softly in the wind. It was a warm silence, something you'd like to crawl into, like a bed.

We sat at the kitchen table and shared a bag of pretzels. We talked a little, about things like favorite books and hairstyles we used to have. But any small noise outside the room would send me into silence, and not the kind of silence that was warm.

When the wind blew I thought it was her, outside, breathing on the window. When a car rushed down the street I thought it was her coming home. I tried to remember where

I had been 24 hours ago. Was I grocery shopping? Alone in some bar? Or was I on the front porch sliding my key in the front door lock?

What are you thinking about? Shane kept asking. He tilted his wine glass to his lips and waited for my response.

I heard a sound like the front door opening, like her taking off her shoes and unzipping her jacket.

Or maybe it was just the neighbors outside.

Tony Burnett

Painting Over Stains

I.

I'm stumbling and worn from a controlled blood loss. It pays thirty dollars and a glass of orange juice, enough money for hamburger, buns, tomatoes and bananas to last a few days. I'll have to choose between a bottle of cheap wine and fuel for the camp stove. I'm not quite out of fuel. I trade my room in the motor lodge for painting and drywall, general maintenance. It seems that no jobs exist for an ex-navy E-3 who was honorably discharged after a year. I couldn't handle endless hours on the ocean living in quarters the size of a coffin. Now I wonder if maybe I should have tried harder to hang in there, but my mind was slipping, like now.

I've done about all I can with the motel. It's pristine, for what it is. My conscience won't let me work any slower. Down the road the bridge is out and the river is flooded. The bottle of wine smooths out the ripples in my brain but empties my pockets. My old Chevy sits outside my room gathering dust; tags expired, inspection out in two more months. It would run if it had gas. I could sell it for a few hundred if I could find the title. I may need to sleep in it soon.

II.

The painting is finished. The grounds are spotless. "We need the room back," he says. He's sorry, he says. I hand him the key. "Good luck," he says and looks away. "I'll pick up the car later," I say. "Cool," he says. I walk toward the blood center again. The water has receded. Men in hard hats and orange vests are cleaning up the debris. I begin to pitch in for something to do. A fat man leaning on a shovel motions toward me so I walk over.

"Where's your hard hat?" he asks.

"I don't have one," I say.

"You're supposed to have one."

I look up. There's nothing overhead. "I'm just helping for

something to do," I say.

He looks at me as if I were some alien life form. "OSHA regs," he says.

"I'll get one if you give me a job."

"We only hire temps."

"I can be a temp."

"We go through an agency. They do drug tests and background checks."

I look around at his crew then look back at him as if he were space junk. "Which agency?" I ask.

"Hargrove," he says.

"I'm on their list," I say, "but they never tested me or called me about a job."

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Paul Thorndale" I say.

"If someone quits I'll ask for you," he says.

"Aren't you going to write my name down?"

"I'll remember," he says. I go back to picking up debris. "You have to leave," he says.

III.

The nights are getting chilly. I'm thankful that my Chevy is so old it has a front bench seat. My clothes, stove and few other belongings fill the back. After buying a quarter tank of gas, I have enough blood money left to do laundry so I clean up and shave in the bathroom of the washateria. I look okay, a little loose around the edges. Tomorrow I'll try to find work again.

IV.

I'm in the parking lot of the Home Depot when the sun comes up. A guy with a bent nose and jowls pulls up in a crew cab pickup. He's looking for painters, eight dollars an hour. He hires me. I climb in the cab. It smells like stale cigars and sour beer. "You speak Spanish? he asks.

"Muy poquito," I joke. He pulls around behind the store where three Hispanic guys wait. Two are young but one is old enough to be my grandfather. They jump in the bed of the truck before it comes to a complete stop, the two young guys grabbing gramps by both arms.

"What's your name?" bent nose asks.

"Paul," I respond. He asks me about my experience. "Just got out of the Navy," I say. "We painted anything that we didn't have to kill first." It was a joke but apparently bent nose didn't get it. Sometimes lately I feel like a refugee from an alien invasion. He tells me his name is Buddy. I doubt it but it makes no difference as long as he pays cash. We drive across town to an old neighborhood that seems to be experiencing gentrification where we stop at a single-story frame house. Buddy pulls a metal sign from the back seat and plants it in the yard. It says Buddy's Painting and Drywall and has a phone number. He hands out paint scrapers and paper particle masks. "Wear them, the exterior tested positive for lead," he says, like it was an infection. He unloads a five-gallon water jug and leaves. We get to work. The sun is low in the sky when he shows up to retrieve us. My elbows, shoulders and back feel demolished. I have blisters on my fingers and palms that have long since burst. He gives me three twenties and a ten. He gives Gramps a roll of bills. I had already determined that my three *compadres* were a familial unit. He gives us all a ride back to the Home Depot.

My car is gone. I go straight to the customer service counter. I have to throw a fit and a few items from the general area before I find someone who knows what's going on. "We had it towed," he states, "company policy. The tags were out, probably wouldn't have noticed if you hadn't parked at the edge of the lot."

"I was trying to leave the closer spaces for your customers," I say.

"Sorry," he says and hands me a card for the towing company.

"Can I use your courtesy phone?"

"Customers only," he says. I consider homicide but decide to walk away. Although the store is full of potential weapons, he is much larger than me and who knows what he has stashed behind that counter.

V.

Across the interstate from Homer's I find a convenience store with a working pay phone. The ten dollar bill is

transformed into a bottle of cheap wine and a handful of quarters. " How much to bail out the old Impala?" I ask the wrecker guy, trying to maintain a jovial demeanor.

A gruff voice replies, "Ninety bucks, if you pick it up by midnight."

"I can't be there 'til tomorrow," I say.

"One hundred twenty, tomorrow," he says and hangs up. I find the address of the towing company on a map stuck to the wall inside the store. It's not quite five miles away. I can walk that, I'm thinking.

"You can't have that wine open in here," the kid behind the counter says. I hold the bottle straight out with my left hand and screw the lid on with my right. "You know what I mean," the kid says. "Get the fuck out before I call the law." I start toward him. He cowers against the back wall. I lean on the counter, my body bent at the waist. "Kiss my ass!" I turn and walk out the door, waving goodbye with one expressive middle finger.

VI.

The juniper tree behind the Home Depot blocks the final rays of the sun while the grape loosens the tight coils and spurs creative contemplation. There's an abundance of cardboard available. I enter Homer's and spend a few of the quarters on a fat permanent marker. My sign says: "GET THIS HOMELESS BUM OUT OF TOWN! I need 50 more bucks to get my car out of hock!" Okay, maybe I lie a little. I'm not going anywhere soon but the sign works. Three hours on the street corner and I have another 60 bucks and I have yet to be seen by anyone I know. I start walking.

VII.

I never would have thought I would be so happy to be driving the old Chevy. I still have a few bucks in my pocket. Back at Home Depot I find a spot right in the middle of the parking lot, windshield facing east. Crack of dawn and I'm up looking for Buddy. About 8:30 he shows up, hung over as hell. I had received a couple of offers for painting gigs but I wanted to talk to Buddy. Most of the guys supposedly still looking for work really aren't. They either want too much money or

they're obviously junkies. "How about this?" I ask Buddy. "You give me ten bucks an hour. I'll follow you to the jobsite and you won't have to bring me back. Come by and pay us at the end of the day and I'll bring the other guys back too." He looks at me sideways then looks around at the deadbeats gathered around his truck. "I'll make sure the job gets done," I say. I didn't know if I could pull it off but figured I had nothing to lose.

VIII.

It's three days later and I'm some kind of foreman I guess. I'm getting my ten an hour and I'm running the spray rig. It's me and the same three guys almost every day. If we need an extra I let Gramps pick somebody he knows. It's worked well so far. Buddy sits in his truck drinking beer and listening to sports on his satellite radio. Sometimes he splits for a few hours. Once in a while he gets out and stumbles around the jobsite pointing out this or that faux pas. We're starting another house tomorrow. It will be Friday. When we finish cleaning up the jobsite, Buddy collects from the homeowner. He gives me a hundred dollar bonus when he pays the day labor. I have 400 dollars in cash. I've been hanging on to it, sleeping in the car. Tonight I'm going back to the motel and see if I can work a weekly rate on a room.

IX.

Friday morning I'm at Homer's, showered, shaved and wearing clean clothes. I round up my regular guys and we share a box of donuts I picked up. It's 9 a.m. and still no sign of Buddy. The two younger guys take other work. I'm down to Gramps and some underage kid that's been hanging close. Buddy rolls up at about 9:45. He hands me a card with an address on it and gives me directions, says he'll meet us later. He smells worse than I did yesterday. There's a woman in the truck with him who's young enough to be his daughter. I'm pretty sure she's not. She looks rougher than he does.

We get to the house and unload our tools. "Where's Buddy?" the homeowner asks.

"He'll be by later," I say. "He had some business to take care of."

"He was supposed to be here."

"I don't know what to tell you. We're here, ready to go." The homeowner paces a couple of times around the yard, looking between me and the house. I wait.

"Okay," he says, "let me know as soon as he gets here."

We get to work. The homeowner comes out periodically to observe. It's almost 3 p.m. before Buddy shows up. He's had a shower but he's still wearing the same clothes. At least he's alone. The homeowner is out the door before the truck stops. We keep working but I'm trying to hear what's going on. It ain't pretty, but the energy winds down and they reach some agreement. Buddy calls us over. "Let's knock off for today, meet here Monday with the whole crew." He gives us each 50 bucks. "It's all I've got on me," he says. "I'll hook y'all up on Monday. Cool?" What could we say? I give the guys a ride back to Homer's, trying to appease them as we go. Truthfully, I'm concerned. I pick up a six pack and go chill at the motel. I plan on spending most of the weekend in bed.

X.

There's 100 channels on the cable TV and nothing worth watching. I swear this mattress was more comfortable a couple of days ago. It's Saturday afternoon and I'm antsy, not a good sign. When I get like this I usually get stupid. I decide to hedge my bets. I pay for an extra week at the motel, fill up the Chevy and stop by the A&P. I buy some fruit and three microwave entrees, all that will fit in the freezer of the mini-fridge. A jumbo pack of jerky, some peanut butter cheese crackers and a twelve pack of PBR finish off the tab. By the time I get back to my room I've got less than 50 bucks left. Seriously, how much trouble can I get in for 40 dollars?

XI.

Fishing. That would be a good way to spend a Sunday. I don't have a pole or tackle. I figure when I get my own apartment and a thousand bucks in the bank I'll call my parents and let them know I'm okay, because, then, I really will be. My dad used to take me fishing, largemouth bass. He had the cool boat, fish finder, all the bells and whistles. I never really understood the fascination. Now I miss that. I'd give

my left nut to be out on the lake with him right now, stalking the stripers.

Just to get out of the room I decide to take a stroll down by the river. I see people jogging on the path, older folks, with their grandkids, feeding stale bread to the ducks. There are a few homeless guys, nobody I know, sitting under the bridge passing the bottle. No one is fishing. Finally, I see a guy about my age showing his son how to catch perch. They have a couple of cane poles and some red wigglers. Whenever they catch one they throw it back.

XII.

I made it through the weekend unscathed. I'm here at Homer's at the butt crack of dawn, donuts in hand. After Friday it's going to be tough to round up my crew. They show, so before they have a chance to ask questions, I pile them in the Chevy and head for the jobsite. Just for good measure I run through a drive-thru and get everyone coffee. This better pay off. I'm cutting deep into my last 40 bucks. We get to the house at 7:45 and unload our tools. I tell the guys that we aren't going to start until Buddy shows up. He shows at ten after eight. He's jumpy but clean. He talks to the homeowner then unloads the paint and spray rig into the owner's garage. It's at least a day before we will be ready for these but I reckon it's a show for the homeowner, whatever works. He makes a big production of giving the two guys from Friday a fifty dollar bill each, then slips me a C-note. While we work he spends the morning cleaning up every little scrap we drop and eyeballing our every move. I know this is for the homeowner's benefit but it's making the crew nervous. About eleven, I tell him it might be better if he goes to pick up a bucket of fried chicken. He agrees, even gives me props for the idea. After lunch he leaves and we're busting ass. By 4:30 we're prepped, spot primed and ready to start laying on the color. No Buddy. He shows up at 5:15 with a wad of cash, pays us off and says he'll meet us here tomorrow at eight. I'm feeling better about this. I drop the crew off at Homer's. Everybody is cutting up and trash talking. It feels good.

XIII.

The guys are waiting by the Home Depot driveway at 7:45. I don't even have to pull into the parking lot. We get drive-thru coffee and still make the jobsite by ten after eight. Buddy isn't there. At a quarter to nine there's still no Buddy. I decide to step up. I check with the homeowner to make sure which color goes where then assign duties. The young kid will follow me around and knock down any runs as I lay on the base. The "*familia*" will hand paint the trim. It's a midsized suburban house, but 6 hours in we appear to be done. We decide to take a late lunch while it dries, come back and see if it needs any touch-up. Buddy is still a no-show. The job looks good. It takes maybe an hour to knock out the touch-ups, clean the spray rig and load out. No Buddy, we wait. It's 4:45 and I have to do something. When I knock on the homeowner's door the wife answers.

"We're all done. Y'all want to check it out?"

"My husband's not home but I'll take a look." she says. She walks around the house then stands by the curb. "It's beautiful," she says, though her expression shows that she isn't sure exactly what to look for.

"Can I use your phone to call my boss? I need to get my guys paid." About then an SUV pulls into the driveway but it isn't Buddy.

"There's Lou, my husband," the wife says. "I'm sure it will be okay to use the phone."

The husband jumps out and strolls around the yard. He's all smiles. "Prettiest house on the block. You guys finished?"

"Yes, sir," I answer. "You can have the leftover paint. There's not much but it might come in handy if you get a scratch."

"Great," he says. "Where's Buddy? I need to get you guys the balance."

"I need to call him. I was hoping to use your phone."

"Sure, come on in. Can I get your guys a beer or something?" At the word "beer" they break into grins.

"Seems like a good plan to me," I say. "Thanks." Lou distributes the beers while I dig out Buddy's business card and dial the phone. His cell goes straight to the message so I take a gamble and dial the office number. A woman answers.

"Is Buddy there?" I ask.

"No!" She is clearly not a happy person.

"I need to reach him. We're finished with this job on Primrose." The line falls silent. "Hello?"

"Shit!" the woman on the phone exclaims. "Just a minute." A few eternal seconds of silence then, "Buddy is indisposed. Do you know where we live?"

I'm beginning to understand that I must be chatting with Buddy's wife. "No," I say, "but I need to get my guys paid and the homeowner is ready to settle up."

"Let me talk to him." I hand the phone to Lou. After a bit Lou hands the phone back to me. "Lou's going to give you the balance. Pay your crew then come to 408 Pocahontas. You know where that is?"

"I've got a map." The phone goes dead. I turn back to Lou. He has a stack of bills.

I walk out of the house with 1400 dollars in my pocket, the most cash I've seen at one time in months, maybe years. The crew is leaning against my car finishing off the six pack. Two couples are standing out front while about a half dozen rug rats cavort on the lawn. The adults don't seem to care. They're admiring the house. One couple and the man from the other couple approach me.

"Nice work," the lone guy says. "Think y'all could make mine look that good? It's the second from the corner down there, the brown one."

"Maybe, if you're not married to brown," I joke. His smile makes me guess he isn't.

"Do you have a card?" he asks.

"Not me but I'll get your number and have the boss give you a call."

"You're not the boss?"

"Nope. I'm just the guy that makes the magic."

"Well, either way, I'd like a bid for you to paint my house."

"Us, too," the woman from the couple says. She hands me a business card for some web design and advertising firm. "You guys do commercial interiors?"

"Paint's paint," I grin. "I've done a lot of interior work." Okay, it was the interior of ships, but still.

"Good, we need our house done, but we're moving our offices to a larger space in a couple of months."

"We'll get back to you." I got the crew loaded up. I'm pretty sure this accidental sales job is going to work into a little bonus when I tell Buddy.

XIV.

I'm sitting in Buddy's kitchen across the table from a tall Hispanic woman. Even with anger oozing out of every pore she's still drop dead gorgeous; liquid brown eyes burn between high cheekbones, voluptuous lips that demand attention and the blackest straightest hair hanging to her shoulders. I'm beginning to get the picture.

"Solicitation, third strike. He's going to be out of circulation for a while." She's biting the words as they leave her mouth. I'm trying to figure out why he would cheat on this goddess while imagining my immediate future swirling down the toilet.

"That sucks," I say. "I got him leads on three more jobs."

"Do them yourself. He'll be in state jail for at least three years. I'm done with him. I'm going out to the west coast and I don't plan to leave a forwarding address."

I count out ten of the 100 dollar bills and slide them across the table. She looks at me as if I have a pair of noses. "I don't want his damn money. As far as I'm concerned his shit is just baggage." She takes one of the bills and shoves the others back toward me. "I tell you what, I just sold you his business, truck, equipment, leads, the whole fucking nine yards. The son of a bitch set me up with power of attorney last time this happened. Dumb ass, serves him right! Let me find the truck title. Here's the fucker's phone. You'll probably find that about half of his contacts are hookers. Want a beer?"

"Sure," I say. I feel like I might have lost consciousness and stumbled into a surreal dream. "Are you sure you want to do this?" I ask.

She looks me over, brings a hand up to her hip and drops it back. She looks me dead in the eye until my blood temperature elevates a couple of degrees. "Yeah, you seem like a nice enough guy and I damn sure want to be rid of Buddy."

"You could sell his stuff for a lot of cash," I say.

"Not tonight I couldn't. I'm gone tomorrow." She completes the paperwork, puts his ledgers and rolodex in a box, gives

me the contact info for his phone company and a signed blank check on his bank account. After she drives me to the impound lot to pick up the truck, she follows me to my hotel to drop it off then takes me back to her house to pick up my car.

"Thanks so much, I'm astounded," I say. "There's no way I could make this up to you."

"Sure there is," she says. "Stay the night."

I have no illusions about this going anywhere. I know, for her, it's about revenge. I'm adaptable. I'll do my best to make the revenge as sweet as possible.

Karen Pullen

Something to Tell Henry

Tugging on her floppy hat, Ava steps off the bus into the baking oven that is Tampa in July. She walks past pastel-colored stucco walls softened by red hibiscus and spiny agave, the only sound the stuttering of sulfurous sprinklers. An armadillo enlarges its burrow under an azalea bush. She watches for a moment. It's something to tell her son Henry about. Is an armadillo a reptile? Does it lay eggs? He will know, or pretend to know. Though only seven, he likes to be an expert in everything scientific.

Ava is the nanny for Terry and Clara Wicker's three-year-old twin sons. She got the job two months ago through her sister Fran, whose husband works in Terry's bank. Ava prefers being a nanny to her previous job at a daycare, except for Clara's never-ending requests for favors—"Ava, would you mind . . ." folding the laundry, starting dinner, cleaning up after Sigmund? Sigmund, a large colorful parrot, has the run of the house, and deposits crusty cement-like blobs wherever he perches. But the pay is decent and she enjoys working with two boys instead of a dozen. Even though the twins are holy terrors with ten-second attention spans, Ava's already made a difference in their lives. For one thing, they're now potty-trained, mostly. Clara still puts diapers on them at bedtime, but the first thing each morning Ava removes those diapers and lets them run around in their shorts, no underpants, so they can easily access their little squirters when they have to go. Clara gave Ava a fifty-dollar tip for potty-training them. Now Ava is working on their language, which, until recently, has been nearly unintelligible twin-speak. She withholds treats until they pronounce words correctly. It's working, almost too well. Just yesterday Dylan said perfectly, "I want more cookies, please," shrieking it over and over until he was banished to the naughty seat.

The Wicker house is a peach-colored stucco mansion on the bay, with a red tile roof and a flagstone courtyard already,

at eight-thirty in the morning, stunningly hot. Once inside, Ava pulls a sweater out of her tote bag; Clara keeps the thermostat on frigid. In the Florida room, Joe and Dylan sit slack-jawed and unmoving in front of the TV—the only time they are ever immobile while awake—still wearing their pajamas. Cute dark-haired boys, with thickly-lashed blue eyes, dimples and a sprinkling of freckles, they need activity. Today it's too hot for the park but they can play in the sprinkler to work off energy. She can drag their wading pool under the pergola so they'll be shaded. She sends them upstairs to put on their bathing suits and goes back to the kitchen to fill a pitcher with cold water.

Ava halts in the kitchen doorway because Terry Wicker stands by the sink, dressed for work in his banker's navy suit and shined shoes, his thick sandy hair gelled into submission. His unsmiling face is a particular shade of red Ava knows well. Her ex had the same dark flush, a sign of high blood pressure, booze, and a temper. Ava tends to avoid Terry though he is polite enough.

"Look." He points through a window. A few feet from the seawall, black dorsal fins break the bright choppy water. Dolphins. A pod, Henry has told her. A pod of dolphins. One of them spouts a gust.

"Cool," Ava says, "my son's favorite animal," though she suspects Henry would adore Sigmund, who clings to his perch in the sunny corner muttering as he combs through his feathers. She wishes Henry could hear the bird talk. Sigmund sounds exactly like Clara, who's taught him "don't worry, be happy," "peace, brother," and other upbeat sayings in her lisping girlish voice.

Terry drapes his jacket and tie over a chair. "My boys like T-Rex. Anything that roars and bites and scares the crap out of people. Like them."

Ava laughs. "You're right. They're tough."

"We must've had hardy forefathers. Clara and I are easily bruised types." A smile opens his face, suddenly likeable. He goes out the back door into the garage. Through a kitchen window she sees him come around the corner wheeling a metal tank and carrying a long wand. He aims the wand at the ground and a blast of flames roars out. He sweeps it back

and forth over the white gravel, incinerating every stray blade of green. Now that's something to tell Henry, how Mr. Wicker uses a flamethrower to get rid of crabgrass.

"Ava?" Clara calls from the top of the stairs. She wears a white negligee so sheer that Ava can see her dark nipples and bikini underpants. She is not a typical mother-of-toddlers like the daycare moms, frazzled-looking women who put themselves last, no makeup, hair scraped into a pony tail. Curvy and dimpled, with dark-gold hair flowing over her shoulders, Clara had been some sort of entertainer, a dancer or possibly a stripper, before getting pregnant with the twins and marrying Terry, a bank president. Marriage hasn't changed her clothing style—skin-tight with cleavage—though according to Fran the labels have had a significant upgrade. Fran says everyone at Terry's bank thinks Clara is a piece of work.

Clara tilts her head and bites her lower lip, a flirty look. "If you have time today? Terry loves your potato salad. And oven-fried chicken. And while the boys are sleeping, the living room needs cleaning. " The living room needs cleaning because Sigmund frequently perches in there. It's easy to get his poop off the marble floors, swirled pink-white-brown like Neapolitan ice cream, but the blobs stick to the upholstery. "One other thing. Can you take the boys out this afternoon? I need privacy."

Ah. Ava studies Clara's face, her almond eyes, dark brows like crescent moons, slightly pink skin. Pink with guilt, perhaps. Ava strongly suspects that Clara wants them gone so that she can spend the afternoon with her lover. Ava's never met the man, but nearly every time she takes the boys out to give Clara "privacy," a black Ford 350 will be parked down the street, *Eric Nowicki, General Contractor* printed on its door. And once she overheard Clara on the phone, talking about Eric and his penis the size of a beer can. "A tall boy, not the 12-ounce," she'd whispered, giggling. Something Ava would rather not know, though the image is now stuck in her head.

"It's kinda hot to be outside," Ava says.

"You can take my car. Go to the mall or the movies. I'll pay extra."

Ava shrugs. "Sure." The money is a bribe to buy her silence, completely unnecessary concerning the business with Eric

since Ava wants no part of the Wicker family melodrama. She's happy to go to the mall and know nothing, la-la-la-la-la, avoid the man entirely.

"Try to be gone by one."

"The boys don't wake up until two."

"Then get them up early." Clara sounds exasperated.

Okay. Clara doesn't care how tired, cranky, and hyperactive her sons are, as long as they are out of the house when Eric arrives. Ava goes back to the kitchen muttering the words she saves up to say when no one is listening: *useless fucking whore*, repeating the words until she passes the dining room and realizes that Terry stands inside the doorway. He has come in from the yard. He has heard her. His bleak angry eyes bore into hers, and she looks right back, embarrassed. She smacks her hand over her mouth. "Geez, sorry."

"No problem." His expression is frozen but his face matches the dining room walls, tomato soup.

She feels an impulse to say more, to make an excuse for Clara, then an impulse to warn Clara that Terry might have heard her—competing impulses that cancel each other out.

As potatoes simmer and breaded chicken bakes, Ava watches the boys splash in the wading pool. She's lulled by a breeze warming her skin, the iodine smell of the sea, the cries of gulls. She wonders what her son is up to in his classroom. He doesn't seem to miss having a dad. Before Henry was born, his father lit out for Nevada to find work, promising to send money. Though she never heard from him again, Ava managed. She and Henry lived with Fran while Ava earned her associate's degree in early childhood, not a money-making career but Medicaid and food stamps kept them healthy and fed. She's even bought a little house recently, a fixer-upper near Fran's, and does that feel good, her own place with a yard. Not the greatest neighborhood, but a short walk to the bus, the library, the school.

A cry for help startles her. Leaving the boys fighting over the hose, Ava finds Clara in the courtyard, dancing around the base of a royal palm. Thirty feet above them, Sigmund nestles in the fronds, preening and muttering to himself.

"I'll get a ladder if you want," Ava says.

"No, he'll fly away. He'll only come down when he wants to. Problem is the other birds will attack him, he's so big and odd." Clara sighs. "Ava, dear, do you know what I need? I need a mud wrap. Get me an appointment for eleven, would you? The spa number's on the bulletin board. You'll keep an eye on Sigmund, won't you? Keep him out of trouble."

Add *parrot rescue* to Ava's list of chores.

Ava calls the spa to make Clara's appointment. The receptionist is rude, inspiring thoughts about making numerous fake appointments. Maybe another day. Ava is horrified by the price—$195 would feed Henry and her for a month. Clara seems so careless with her money. Terry's money. Many of the clothes in Clara's overstuffed closet still sport price tags, and there are at least sixty pairs of shoes. How many shoes do you need? Well, Ava needs another pair—her left big toe is starting to poke through—but it's not until the fourth paycheck each month that she has any extra cash. She's been saving up a cushion, a few hundred dollars so she won't have to worry about getting sick, or buying medicine. If they stay healthy, knock knock, some day she might be able to afford a car. Today's bonus will go to a new pair of shoes for herself, and a trip to the thrift store to buy pants for Henry.

She gives the boys lunch then drags them protesting into their beds where they immediately fall into a deep sleep. She boils eggs, chops celery, pickles and onions, and mixes it all together with the potatoes and lots of mayo. In the living room she sprays cleaner on the coffee table, a slab of glass on driftwood legs. A brick planter is crammed with fake dust-coated plants. More spray, more wiping. Sigmund has pooped all over the leather sofa so she mists the sofa liberally, leaving the cleaner to work. A shelf holds dozens of dusty glass figurines and she wipes them one by one, admiring a little dolphin in a graceful mid-leap.

Outside, Sigmund has migrated to the back of the house, high up in a clump of palm trees leaning over the seawall. She calls out to him, and the bird caws but doesn't budge. A pair of seagulls circles the clump of trees and lands close to him. "Peace!" he says, as one of the gulls opens its wings and hops toward him. Sigmund raises his crest, cries, "Peace!"

again, and takes flight. The gulls attack him, screeching, diving until they knock Sigmund into the water. Ava watches to see if he can swim, but his feathers are soaked and he bobs up and down with the lapping waves. He looks stunned, his beady eyes closed. She trots onto the dock and grabs a fish net hanging from a hook. The water isn't very deep so she removes her shoes, climbs down the ladder and wades over to Sigmund. She scoops him up in the net and cuddles him as he mutters little caws. She wonders if the swim will loosen his feathers. She has been wanting one for Henry, but Sigmund doesn't seem to shed.

Awakened too early, the boys are cranky as hell as Ava jollies them into going potty then putting on their shoes. She has to promise ice cream to get them into the car. Clara's Cadillac is custom-painted a pale mint green and clean as new. Ava drives slowly. She likes driving a rich lady's Cadillac, pretending it is her car.

They wander around the mall for hours eating ice cream and candy, playing in the mall playspace, riding the escalators. It's not hard to entertain three-year-olds if you devote yourself to them utterly, and that is Ava's job. At four o'clock, the boys have had enough of the mall, and Ava figures it is safe to take them home.

Driving home, she passes Chickadees, the daycare where she used to work in the two-year-old classroom. Do the potty dance, sing the alphabet, feed dollies. An exhausting, hard job, where the kidlets clung to her all day, banged on each other, screamed "no" and "mine" every other word. Nanny work is much easier.

The sight of Eric Nowicki's big black pickup in the driveway surprises Ava. Her heart begins to pound a little faster.

She turns to hush the boys. Joe has just socked Dylan, who is shrieking like it doesn't happen twenty times an hour. Dylan reaches out and grabs Joe's ear and pulls, hard. Ava needs to get rid of these children, collect her paycheck, and catch the 5:12 bus in order to pick up Henry at Fran's by 5:30. She refuses to drive around for another hour, waiting for Eric to leave. She releases the twins from their car seats and leads

them along the side of the house to the back door.

The house is freezing cold as usual, and quiet. Clara must be upstairs. "Can we watch a show?" Joe asks, enunciating perfectly, and Ava smiles at him for being such a good little talker. TV will keep them quiet, occupied, while she figures out what to do. She turns on the TV and gives them a bowl of pretzels. With a table knife she begins to scrape the softened blobs from the leather sofa. They come off easily, and she is soon finished. Now what? She stands at the bottom of the stairs, listens, hears the murmur of their voices. Clara's bedroom door must be open. For Christ's sake, doesn't Clara realize the boys are here?

Ava climbs the stairs, leans against the wall and knocks on the doorframe. "Uh, Clara? I have to leave now."

Clara says, "Come on in, honey."

Ava doesn't move. "It's Friday and I need to get paid."

A man appears in the doorway, muscular and shirtless. His thickly-lashed blue eyes are wide-apart, his skin lightly freckled. Ava takes him in, the dark floppy hair, the deep dimples as he grins, and she gasps, not because he's nice-looking, not because he's half-naked in Clara's bedroom with a tall boy in his pants. She's shocked because she's seen the smaller versions of his face a thousand times in the past two months. She claps her hands to her mouth. Over Eric's shoulder she sees Clara reclining in bed, smiling at her, her head tilted. Repulsive.

"What the fuck is going on?" Ava asks. Clearly it's not necessary to be polite.

Eric takes hold of Ava's arm with a vise-like grip, locking her gaze until she flushes and sweat breaks out on her face. "You gonna tell on us?"

She yanks out of his grasp. "I need to get paid."

"Can it wait till Monday?" Clara asks in her whispery voice from inside the bedroom.

"No." Ava doesn't feel like explaining that she has to buy groceries, pay the electric bill.

"Bring me my checkbook then, in my purse. Downstairs."

She finds Clara's purse, a beautiful red Coach bag, and rummages for the checkbook. She glances at the twins; they are feeding each other pretzels as Ernie sings about his rub-

ber ducky.

Upstairs again, Clara's wrapped the sheet around her chest, dark-gold hair tangled on her bare shoulders. Eric sits on the bed tying his shoes. The room smells of perfume and sweat. "Shouldn't he be hiding in the closet?" Ava's voice is strangled, she can barely choke out the words.

Flushing, Clara hands her a check. "There's extra for you." She's added a hundred to Ava's weekly wage.

"It's not right, you know. The boys might come up here."

"Well, they didn't, did they?"

"Terry will be home any minute."

Clara sinks down onto her pillow, turns onto her side, pulls the sheets over her shoulders. "You better say nothing. And go."

"That's right." When Ava shuts the bedroom door, she is shaking.

What a mess.

Ava unzips the red Coach bag, takes out Clara's wallet with its wad of cash, and removes six twenties. *Clara will never miss it, she doesn't know what she has*. She goes into the living room and slips the glass dolphin into her pocket. She scoops half the potato salad into a plastic tub along with four pieces of the oven-baked chicken and puts the container into her tote bag, along with a bottle of citrusy bath gel, part of a gift set Clara's forgotten about in the laundry room.

She kisses the boys' freckled noses, forcing Joe then Dylan to meet her gaze for an instant with their lovely blue eyes. "Goodbye, little friends," she says, and they turn back to the TV. Elmo is talking about imagination, something Ava needs no more of today.

As she's smartly plucking a green feather from Sigmund's tail—he doesn't say a word—she hears the garage door open. It's Terry, no doubt rolling his gold Lexus past Eric's black pickup. *This is going to be interesting* but Ava won't stay to witness Terry's humiliation. She folds her sweater and tucks it in her tote bag. She opens the back door, stands aside to let Terry in. He's even more red than usual.

"Why is that prick here?" he asks.

Ava shrugs. "I have to leave now. The boys are watching

TV." She studies his face. Is he angry? Perhaps ashamed that there's a witness. "I won't tell anyone," she says. He nods, then charges past her, knocking a stool to the floor. She pictures Eric burned black and crispy by the flamethrower.

The twins will be okay, she hopes, though Sesame Street will never produce the Big Bird episode addressing this particular muddle.

At Fran's, Henry sits on the steps clutching his backpack. He jumps up. "Look, Mom, I got a WOW sticker. I was the only kid in the class to get one today. Mrs. Harmon says I am a whiz at math, and I am way ahead on my book tally, I've read sixteen books this month. Knock, knock." He waits. "I said, knock, knock, Mom." His hair is sweaty, his glasses smudged, and something sticky has spilled down his front and collected grime. They walk along slowly, three blocks to their house.

Ava's been murmuring oh my, and that's great. "Sorry, who's there?"

"Mister."

"Mister who?" She takes Henry's hand and squeezes it.

"Sorry I missed her name, what is it again?"

"You're funny." Ava unlocks the door to her frame house with its four cramped rooms and peeling paint. She wants to scrape and paint it soon. She has almost decided on yellow but might go with a light creamy green like the Cadillac. She puts out the chicken and potato salad, glad she doesn't have to cook dinner.

Tucking Henry into bed, Ava gives him Sigmund's bright green feather, tells him about the parrot's escape and rescue. She sets the glass dolphin on his bedside table. "I saw a pod today."

"It's a bottlenose. They're the smartest of all dolphins," Henry says.

"I am the mother of the smartest dolphin."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Mrs. Wicker gave it to me." Ava slides Henry's glasses off his face and gently rubs the faint red marks they've left on each side of his nose. "Oh, and I saw an armadillo digging a burrow. Do they lay eggs?"

"Mom, it's so cool. They lay one egg, with four babies in it."

"Quadruplets."

"What's that?"

"Quadruplets, means four babies born at once."

"Your job is good, isn't it."

"Yes, sweetie. It's pretty good." Ava hugs her son for a long moment, pressing her face against his cool silky cheek. He smells faintly orange from the bath gel.

Ava counts her money. Forget new shoes, she'll need it all to tide her over while she finds a new job. Maybe a classroom of fours. Fours use their words, love silly jokes. She can teach them letters, how to use scissors, the difference between right and wrong.

She lies down on her bed, feeling wiped out. She thinks about Terry's face when he'd overheard her call Clara such a terrible name. Did he already know about Eric? Had he seen the truck parked outside his house all those afternoons? Did he know *everything*?

She allows herself a brief pang of sadness at having to leave the boys. Goodbye, little friends. Hang tough.

Catherine Bell

Getting Away

Bea pulled the copies out of her typewriter, one for Miss Leopard, one for the files, and let the switchboard know she was going to lunch. Threading the crowd of people in the hospital lobby, she set off up Charles Street, looking into the windows of the antique shops, though there was no point now. No point in anything. She stopped to wonder who had kept cigars in that brass-cornered rosewood box, so like her father's in the old days, and what little girl's hair, brushed with that miniature ivory brush, had crackled and stood on end in winter, as Bea's had done so long ago, before the Depression, before the War, before everything had happened. The shopfronts swam before her eyes. You can't, she told herself, *can't* be feeling like this about a dog.

She couldn't shake off the memory of her first glimpse of the darling black puppy in her brother's arms, Thurston in uniform off to the Pacific after Pearl Harbor. For fourteen years, ever since, Bea had hastened home at lunch to let Battie out and up Mt. Vernon Street to widdle on the bricks. No need to hurry now. Still, habit was habit. Sometimes it seemed the only thing that kept a person going. Mother would be out at her bridge luncheon, so Bea could mourn in peace for the dear old mass of dusty black fur, stumbling and widdling everywhere. Battie's bed still occupied a corner of the living room. She would have to summon the courage to throw it out.

She rattled the keys to the apartment, steeling herself at the silence she was never going to get used to, no scrabbling of claws behind the door, no joyful panting, no Battie. Only the telephone bill on the gray tiles, the appeal from the rheumatism foundation, the premium for the life insurance policy benefitting Mother. And a square blue envelope. She recognized the handwriting at once. Years ago in school, Miss Parkinson had inveighed against girls dotting their i's with little circles, but Sukey had felt the circle dots were fashionable and had never given in. Extraordinary of Sukey to write. They had

lunched just the other day. Something must have come up.

"It's the worst thing in the world," Sukey had said at Maître Jacques, "losing a dog."

Bea steadied the hot shell on her plate and dug out a scallop. Sukey was comfortable and lucky, went to Paris in the fall, Nantucket in the summer.

"You've never even had a dog."

"Don't change the subject. You're not getting over it."

"I don't want to get over it."

"Of course you must get over it."

"What does it matter? I'm not anybody much." Bea mopped up her cheese sauce with a crust of bread. "I might have been, but circumstances forbade."

"Nonsense."

"Battie loved me all the same. She saw me through the worst year of the war, with Thurston in the Pacific. I named her for Earl Mountbatten of Burma, you know."

"Listen, Bea, you need to get away. Come to Nantucket. Bill loves you to beat him at Scrabble."

"Mother doesn't like to be left alone."

"Phooey. She can get along for a weekend. It's your turn."

"It's too far for a weekend."

"Nonsense. You can fly down Saturday and come back Sunday."

"Don't keep saying nonsense and phooey. You know how it is. When she goes to Thurston's in August, then I can get away."

"That's not for weeks." Sukey jangled her bracelets. "Look, darling, does she throw fits, or what?"

Bea lit a cigarette and crossed her legs. "Oh Sukey, dearest, don't ask. It's just easier not to stir things up."

"And now no Battie."

"It wasn't all wine and roses with Battie, you know. Did I ever tell you how she went fox hunting on Charles Street?"

"A fox? On Charles Street?"

"Draped around the shoulders of an elegant woman, with its little fur legs dangling down. Battie plunged after it into the traffic, like a good spaniel."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. With me on the other end of her leash, cabs swerving, horns blasting, the two of us wound around a lamppost, and the elegant woman striding on, oblivious. Oh how we laughed, Mother and I. Battie could always make us laugh."

"You can't pretend with me," Sukey said. "We were in kindergarten together. You're laughing, but you're not getting over it. Come to Nantucket, Bea. You need a fling."

"You're a darling."

But Bea had been terribly tempted. Nantucket would have been such fun.

And now a letter. Bea propped it on the counter in her tiny kitchen and got out lettuce and cottage cheese and a can of pears. When lunch was ready, she opened the envelope and found something stiff and green. "Island Air, Miss Beatrice Watts, 9 a.m., June 24." What on earth was this? Bea took care not to get it near the cottage cheese. A plane ticket to Nantucket for this Saturday?

"Now Bea," Sukey wrote, "don't deny yourself. It's all paid for."

What a present! Of course she should refuse, but how do you refuse a ticket with your name on it? And how could she bear to? She had never flown, but since the War people flew all the time. Lady Mountbatten had flown all over India and thought nothing of it. Bea rinsed her plate, tucked the ticket into her bag, locked the apartment door, and headed back to work. This very Saturday! Sukey could easily afford this, but how could Bea ever reciprocate? She might get her some of those blue cornflowers at the florist's on the corner. But of course, Sukey already had everything.

Bea's own life had been shaped by disappointment. Mother had scoffed at her hope of nursing school, and Dad never had any intention of allowing his eldest to roll up her sleeves with the daughters of Irishmen. "You'll marry," he said, "and let your handsome husband support you." So she spent a year "coming out" at picnics, skating parties, and balls, her picture in the paper vivid among the debutantes, with parted lips. But the call came from Milwaukee, where Dad was traveling on business, before there was any husband. Mother took it in the breakfast room, her frightened face outlined against

the knobby, cold spring gingko trees. “Pneumonia?” she said, and caught the next train. But too late. Dad didn’t leave the money everyone expected, so Mother advertised for lodgers, and Bea took a secretarial course and went straight to work, because there wasn’t any other way to pay the bills.

Someday, she thought, passing the cheeses and smoked salmon and black olives in Gemello’s window, she would buy a piece of real Parmesan, just for the heck of it. They had nice hams, too, in Gemello’s. She could take one to Nantucket, but it would be cheaper to buy a plain ham and glaze it herself. Why not? Sukey was right. Mother ought to be able to get along for a weekend. Bea went on with her walk, soaring a little. Maybe it *was* her turn. She would call to thank Sukey and announce she was bringing a ham.

At intervals all afternoon, as she drafted Miss Leopard’s letters, Bea practiced what to say to Mother. “It will do me good to get away.” Or, “I’ve lost my sense of proportion.” No. Better be resolute and optimistic. “You’ll be glad to know, Mother . . .” By the time she got home, Mother was waiting with pointed fingernails and white piled hair for Bea to make her dinner.

“I won seventy-five cents at bridge,” Mother said. “Mrs. Davenport played poorly, as usual.”

“Guess what?” Bea said, pouring them each a Bourbon, “I’ve been invited to Nantucket.”

“What?”

Bea raised her voice. “Nantucket. For the weekend. Sukey sent me a ticket.”

“Why ever did she do that?”

“She’s my best friend, that’s why.”

Bea went to heat up the clam chowder. So far, so good. When it was ready, she put it in bowls and settled them on little tables in front of Mother’s chair and her own.

“How extraordinary of Sukey,” Mother said. “You haven’t salted this well, Beatrice. Chowder should never be bland.”

Bea headed to the kitchen for the salt. “If you don’t want me to go . . .”

“That’s quite all right. Now that Battie has died, you can travel.”

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly sure. I simply could not undertake to walk a dog three times a day."

"No one expected you to."

"What?"

Mother's hearing aid battery probably needed replacing again.

"No one expected you to, Mother."

Alone in her room, Bea consulted the picture of Jamie, her brother, that stood on her bureau. "Do you think I might get away with it, James? Can you imagine?" Jamie with the slight smile always. He had dived in from a sailboat the summer after his sophomore year in college, and drowned. He must have hit a rock, people said, though it was all sand there. He'd always been afraid of cold, choppy water, but he wanted to impress that Vassar girl.

Dreams harrowed Bea with visions of twisted wreckage and smashed bodies, but she commanded herself resolutely. She was flying to Nantucket, and her blue suit and medium heels would do. She bought a ham on the way home from work Friday and got it properly cooked too, though Mother kept coming into the kitchen to interfere and direct the glazing.

"That won't be enough pineapple, Bea."

"It will have to be."

"When she's invited you all that way?"

Bea yanked the little parsley heads off their stems to stick around the edges of the ham. "Why don't you run out and get me another can, then, old dear."

"Bea! How much have you been drinking?"

"Enough to wonder when was the last time you cooked a ham. Or anything else, for that matter."

"Don't be ridiculous. I boil my egg every morning."

A stripe of sun across her pillow woke Bea early. She tiptoed to the kitchen, wrapped the ham in wax paper, and lashed it to the platter with rubber bands.

"You don't want to miss your plane," Mother called.

"It doesn't go until nine. I'm not going to miss it."

"I know you're not." Mother appeared in her doorway, slinging the sash of her dressing gown around her waist. "I'm coming to the airport."

"No, Mother, I can manage."

"With a suitcase and a ham?"

"I'll get a porter."

"What?"

"A porter. If you fuss, I won't go."

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course you must go."

It would all go wrong, of course. Somehow it would go wrong. But they left the apartment in plenty of time, Bea plunking her suitcase down to hold the elevator, Mother bearing the ham. All the way down the hill, Bea worried about finding a taxi, but as soon as they reached the corner a cab drew up, and the driver leapt out and popped her suitcase into the trunk.

"Which airline?"

Bea had no idea. She pawed her purse, suddenly hot.

"You haven't lost your ticket?" said Mother.

"Mother, please. Nantucket. I'm going to Nantucket."

"Perfect place for a fine June morning." The driver ushered them into the cab and scrunched down in his seat. "That'll be East Terminal."

Bea felt him seeking her eyes in the mirror and unwillingly looked up. She dreaded having to make conversation in cabs, at the hairdresser.

"Ever flown?" he asked, easing into the downramp to the tunnel.

"Never," she said. "I'm going to close my eyes."

"Oh no you don't. Open them so you don't get sick." He laughed. "My wife flew to New York when our daughter had the baby. Annie's in labor thirty-six hours, needs her mother, and Mom arrives sick as a dog."

"Oh, but your daughter. Is she well? And the baby?"

"Fine. Caesarian. A redhead."

It was starting already. Chatting at seven in the morning with an Irishman, undoubtedly a Catholic. Exactly the sort of thing that never happened unless you got away.

They arrived at the airport in plenty of time, 7:23 by Bea's watch. But the ticket desk was dark.

"You should have thought," said Mother.

"How could I?"

"You rush off at the last moment."

"Will you lower your voice, Mother? People can hear you."

At the next counter a uniformed man was gesturing.

"You've never known how to plan, Bea, darling."

"What will I do with you, Mother?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll be out of your way for good, soon enough."

"Mother, don't!"

The man at the next counter beckoned Bea over.

"Island Air won't open until eight," he said. "May I make a suggestion? The restaurant down the concourse serves a good cup of coffee. It you're back by 8:30, you'll be in plenty of time."

A very nice man, Mother and Bea agreed. He even offered to check Bea's bag through with Island Air. But it had all been a bit of an ordeal. They set off for the restaurant, and Mother transferred the ham to Bea. The thing that had to go wrong, Bea reflected, was the ticket counter being closed, and since that had already happened and calm had been restored, maybe everything was going to be all right. As they had breakfasted already, they ordered Bloody Marys.

"What a lovely morning," Mother said, gazing out at the airfield and the bay, where gulls were wheeling. "All the horrid little houses far away across the water, and everything so blue."

"I'm afraid it's going to be hot in town."

"Think nothing of it, dear. I've had my turn in life. Nowadays I don't expect to be Queen of the May."

"I've left vichyssoise for your supper. Will you be all right?"

"Certainly. I'm lunching with Mrs. Sears, the Symphony comes on the radio tonight, and tomorrow Thurston will come and take me to church." Mother's drink was halfway down her glass. "When I die," she went on, "I'd like to come back as a gull."

"Nonsense. You're never going to die."

"Oh, Bea, we're getting loopy. What time is it?"

Bea looked at her watch. 8:45. “Dear Lord. Waitress!”

“I’m paying for this,” said Mother.

“There isn’t time. Let me just leave five dollars.”

“You paid for the cab. It’s my treat. I insist. Yoo hoo! Waitress!”

Bea picked up the ham and closed her eyes. Perhaps she wasn’t meant to get away.

“Is it one of those teeny-tinies?” Mother asked as they hurried along the concourse. “I hope it’s not the kind that crashes.”

“It’s just like the ones that go to New York,” said Bea, presenting herself third in line, fluttering only slightly. Her watch said 8:53. When she handed over her ticket, the agent paused a moment, cool in pressed khaki.

“I’m afraid there’s a problem, Miss Watts.”

“What do you mean? There can’t be.”

“We didn’t see you at check-in, and we’ve sold your seat.”

“But I was here early. You have my bag. I’m due in Nantucket for lunch. I’m bringing the ham!”

“What is it?” Mother demanded. “Why doesn’t that woman speak up?”

“One moment,” the agent said, picking up a phone.

A door behind the counter swung open and a man barged in, kicking a gray canvas mailbag ahead of him. Unshaven, in loose khaki, he lifted a clipboard off the wall, licked his thumb, and began riffling papers. The agent hung up and sauntered over to chat.

“Oh God,” Bea said. “It’s no use. I may as well give up.”

“Not on my account,” said Mother. “I won’t have it. I don’t want to stand in your way, Beatrice.”

“That’s not how it works, Mother.”

“Miss Watts,” broke in the agent, “we may have a solution. If you don’t mind a small plane, Rocky can fly you down.”

“Rocky? Oh I don’t think . . .”

“He’ll want to be done with the islands before the fog comes in.”

Don’t let Mother notice the hair on his chest, Bea thought, as Rocky knotted the neck of a second mailbag. But Mother was already kissing her goodbye.

"I have every confidence in that young man," she said. "He looks like someone in the movies, like one of those aces. I'm going up on the platform to see you off."

Is that all it takes? Bea thought. Somebody out of the movies? But she had no time to think. Rocky shouldered the mailbags and nodded, and she plunged after him down a corridor and out a heavy door into the wind, where he made toward a tiny plane parked in the shadow of a giant.

"Only one engine?"

"Piper Cub," he said. "Very reliable."

The plane was smaller than a car and tipped with Bea's weight. There was a windshield in front but the side window was alarmingly open. Rocky showed her how to hook the seat belt, stuffed the mailbags behind the seats, did something with the dials, and the engine roared up.

"Put your purse under the seat," he ordered, "so it doesn't get sucked out the window."

My God, Bea thought, as they clattered and bounced toward the bay. To come through the War and then to go like this.

Something fell out of the ceiling and put a dent in the ham.

"Goddam compass," Rocky shouted, and slammed it back up into its brackets.

The plane rattled and bucked into speed. Through the rush of wind, Bea made out Mother on the platform, small and valiant.

"Here we go," Rocky shouted, and up they went. The earth sank sickeningly. Mother was whisked behind and down among the bullrushes.

When Bea remembered to open her eyes, everything was prismatic and blue, as if she had fallen into a kaleidoscope. Then the world tipped, and the pattern resolved itself into sky and sea. She made out rocks and guano at the foot of a lighthouse, a line of green weed near the water, sailboats tacking toward a green claw of land. The plane leveled and flew steadily over the wrinkled sea and islands. Then everything slid sideways, and there was the Customs House Tower and the hospital, the esplanade where she'd walked with Battie, the river away toward Harvard. Here were the railroad tracks running into South Station, where Mother had arrived with

Dad's coffin, shocked white in her best hat. "How can I be expected to raise two sons without a father?" she had cried, as though the boys were the only ones who mattered. "You'll have to sacrifice, Bea."

Well, she had done it. Taken a job and helped pay Dad's debts one by one, while the boys got scholarships to college. Her nose stung, and she flicked away a tear or two that ran down beside her nose, hoping Rocky didn't notice. Ridiculous. Why fuss about all that now? And anyway, here she was, soaring above it all. Though she never had become a nurse, Miss Leopard thought very highly of her and told everyone it would be impossible to run the nursing service without Bea. And the earth from above looked beautiful, intriguing. She hadn't expected that. Here was a ship, steaming out the President Roads. You could see the white of Boston Light, the islands.

"Nantasket Beach," Rocky shouted over the engine roar.

She knew it well, the beach, the hook of Hull, the ledges, the big houses along Jerusalem Road. She braced herself for the cove, full of sailboats now as then, where Jamie had peeled off his sweater and dived in to swim ashore, while she and the Vassar girl bagged the sails, careless and happy as they had all seemed to be in those days. But the wind had blown up, and the waves turned dark and choppy. They stared at the surface of the water, Bea's skin all in prickles, but he never came up.

Below the plane Bea saw the dock she had rowed toward after someone brought Jamie to the surface and draped him over the dinghy's stern. His dead weight in the water dragged the boat this way and that, and the dock never seemed to come any closer, but he was gone already. He must have gasped in the sudden cold and filled his lungs with water. The firemen worked a long time with the pump in their starched blue sleeves, but nothing changed. Walking up from the beach behind the ambulance, she had wanted to tell Jamie, as she told him everything, how terrible, how really awful this was.

Now in the plane her breath caught. Her hand flew to her mouth.

"Okay, lady," Rocky bellowed, fishing behind his seat for a rusty towel. "You wouldn't be the first that upchucked in my

plane."

Bea waved him away. She'd got through it then and she'd get through it now. Mother gave up after Jamie drowned, wouldn't cook, wouldn't see friends. Thurston couldn't take it. He disappeared, and for years they hardly saw him. So Bea took care of Mother. She had hardly been able to leave her except to go to work, and the moment she got home, it all began again, the worry, the fault-finding. "Have you lost the electric bill? What have you done with my library books? You would think I could at least have a sandwich." She had given too much of her life to Mother.

Rocky was flying now over the trees of Cohasset Common. Bea could see the white fences, the stone church on the rock, the grassy common where Austin in the autumn dusk had asked her to marry him and she'd said no. She'd hardly given Austin a thought in years. Why had she said no? Stands of hardwood and pine slipped below the plane, stone walls, a baseball diamond, a dump scattered over a hill, sun flashing off the windows of old cars. Austin had loved her. But she had felt she couldn't saddle him with Mother, so he had married someone else instead, someone nice, and had children, and Thurston had got Bea a puppy so she'd have an excuse to go out for a walk. Oh, how can I bear myself? she thought. In my whole life, my only happiness has been with a dog. She bit her lip. The last thing Rocky would want on board would be a weeping woman. But a cry escaped her. What good had ever come of bowing down to Mother?

"What the hell?" Rocky shouted. "Don't faint on me, lady."

He pushed Bea's head down into her lap, crushing her curls. It tickled her funnybone. Here she was, zooming over Massachusetts with her cheek in a ham.

"Mind my fifteen-dollar perm," she yelled at him, shrugging him off, and sat up into the overpowering white and light blue air. Nantucket lay scythe-shaped beyond the Vineyard, in the immensity of the sea. Absorbed, Bea watched the shoreline below her turn and twist, form shapes of cove and point, spawn a white curl of surf. She followed the ribbons of road, the patterns of ponds and fields and woods, and the shadow of the plane bounded over the hills and hollows, like Battie chasing a squirrel. She could see so much. She could

see it all. She had done what had to be done in life, made her own mistakes and paid for them. Funny thing to be proud of, for someone supposed to let a handsome husband support her.

"Hell." Rocky hit the dashboard with the heel of his hand.

"What is it, Rocky?"

Low in the east, beyond the mass of Cape Cod, the haze congealed in a menacing gray line.

"Fog. It'll have to be in and out. Can you handle the mail?"

She nodded.

"Sit tight. We might get thrown around."

The fog crept up the curve of earth, blotting the east, spreading a blight of gray. As they crossed the south shore of the Cape and flew out over deep water, Bea's heart came into her mouth, but she wasn't afraid. She would need any time that might be left to her to watch the earth. The ferry making for the island drew a white line in the blue water, still sunny next the shadow of the fog. Everything was sky and ocean. Everything was immense. Bea forgave the sea for drowning Jamie.

"Hang on," Rocky yelled. "We're going in."

They sped toward the lighthouse, skipping on the troubled air like a stone on water, skimming the harbor and the town. Big elms sprang up beneath them, the sandy airfield margins slipping by. Buffeted sideways, the plane hung, sank, landed with a bump, spun in a dizzying tight circle, stopped. Shreds of gray drifted across the sun. Rocky leaned over to unhook Bea's safety belt. She climbed down, wobbly in the knees, and reached back for the ham. He pushed the smaller mailbag at her.

"Drop this anywhere."

"Good luck," she called, a little sadly.

He waved. The little plane turned, whined, shook, charged the wind, and shot away through the thickening gray air. The grass blew, silent. Bea had never felt so earthbound.

Hoisting the mailbag over one shoulder, cradling the ham, she began to make her way toward the windsock across the field, working to keep her heels from sticking in the grass. She had given up too much to Mother, but they'd got past that point, thank God. She had plenty of vacation time she'd never

used. She would travel.

There were people at the fence. Could that be Bill, hunched like a crane? And Sukey in yellow linen?

"Yoo hoo," she called.

They were waving. Wait till she told them about the compass falling into the ham.

"Bea dear," called Sukey, "where did you come from? We thought Mother must have had a hissy fit at the last minute. Oh what a lovely ham, you shouldn't have."

"Mother is lunching with Mrs. Sears."

Bill pointed out a gap in the fence, and they all began moving toward it.

"I'm afraid the weather is going to be terrible," Sukey said. "We saw your bag. Everyone's is Black Watch, but the corners chewed by Battie, you know. Why weren't you on the plane?"

"I thought it would be nice to have Rocky fly me down."

"Rocky? What's all this about, dearest? I sent you a ticket."

"Can you take the ham, Bill?" Bea said, reaching it over the fence.

"This isn't like you, Bea," said Sukey.

"Now what shall I do with the mailbag?"

"Bea!"

"They overbooked the flight, darling, and I had to come in a teeny-tiny."

"A tiny plane? With all you have to put up with? Whatever was it like?"

"Just wait, darlings," Bea said, emerging through the gap in the fence. "Wait till I tell you."

Steven Lee Beeber

The Box

This is what his mother tells him:

"The night you were born, you were almost not born. You came sideways, not head to earth, but hip to groin. A contrary child. Troublemaker."

"Don't fill his head with such foolishness," his father says, tutting at her words. "You will make him fachacht in the head. A mother should not say such things."

"And then who should say them?"

"No one!"

"You would like that, no?"

"Yes."

"Some peace and quiet?"

"Yes!"

"You know nothing!"

This is what he remembers:

A cow in the field lulling its heavy head as he passes.

The look of the sun through the wheat.

The sound of the bell on the cow, a cla-clunk.

The feel of the wind through the wheat, a whisper.

The dirt on his shoes.

The rock that he kicks.

His parents' voices raised in anger. Or their eyes narrowed as they sit in silence.

The beginning, in the beginning, before the beginning. Where does one begin?

In the Torah the story begins with Adam. Then Eve. Then the sons. The murder. The exile. Then the generations after that keep coming.

In the Torah things are ordered. All the disorder of life given shape and form. In the Torah there are answers to the questions. Though in school there are only questions. "What did Moses say to Pharaoh? What is the reason we recline on Friday night? Who is the daughter of Rebecca? Why was it

Lot was not supposed to look back?"

His father asks him these questions too. His father bent to his book in the evening, the golden glow of the candle casting shadows in his eyes; his father bent to his book in the afternoon, the white light in the window reflecting the lighter snow on the ground.

His father will look up and say, "And the sin that was in Sodom. How many honest men did Lot negotiate with God to find?"

He will look back, quiet, staring at the pores in his father's nose, thinking of him leaving the house with his box.

"One."

"At the beginning or the end?"

"The end."

"And in the beginning?"

He turns to the window, looking out at the snow, the white hill in the distance, the shafts of wheat popping through, reaching up.

"Ten?"

His father makes a sputtering sound, looks down.

"Go. You are not here anyway."

He knows he is expected to say something, but he turns and leaves the room.

Outside the snow is bright, the sky less so, a soft swirl of cloud like milk hanging above him. The snow below shines in crystals almost blue. His breath is raw, white, clear.

He runs past the wheat, the breeze whistling through it lowly. He hears the other boys off in the field. Sees the cow with its bell, head lulling. Sees its eyes upon him as he passes, large, wet, peaceful. The bell is silent as he runs and he hears his breath now and his feet on the rocks and the crunching, and then a jangling. A horse behind him, moving rapidly, then slowing, coming to a stop.

"Boy. Can you tell me the way to Kabryn?"

He looks up at the carriage, the driver looking down at him, behind the driver a shade drawn across a window.

"There," he points.

The driver nods and the horse sets off again, a jangling and snap of leather. He has never seen such a carriage before. He stands looking after it, stunned.

The carriage moves slowly, listing from side to side on the rutted dirt road until it is so far it is like a rectangle in the distance. He decides to run after it to find out where it is heading, catching up with it just as it pulls around a corner and comes to a stop in front of a house.

It is his house.

The man driving the carriage remains in his seat, staring straight ahead, much like his horse. At the side of the carriage, a curtain parts, then a man emerges, his hair white, his face red, his mustache large enough to serve as a broom.

"This is it?"

The carriage driver grunts.

"How much?"

The carriage driver snorts and continues staring straight ahead.

"How much?!" the man says as he descends from the carriage.

"Go," the carriage driver says. "Hurry."

He snaps the reins so that the horse moves one hoof with reluctance.

"Ach!" the man with the mustache spits, waving his hand. "And you'll return?"

"I'll return," the carriage driver says as he moves off.

The man with the mustache shakes his head and sighs. The boy looking after the carriage driver sees the back of his head ascending like a moon. Then he sees the man with the white mustache looking down at him.

"You live here?"

He nods.

"Your mother, she needs help?"

He does not know how to answer.

"Do any of you people know how to speak? Ach!" The man spits again. "Can't ride on your Sabbath, can't take care of your own ill. A man walks all the way to tell me this only to turn around and walk back. Another brings me out only as the sun's about to rise. Meanwhile your mother . . ."

He stops himself, looking at the boy.

"Come," he says, walking toward the house.

But the boy remains where he is standing. He has heard the screams. He has run outside to get away from them.

Afterward they will say, "She is resting now." So they won't let him in to see her, even though he can hear the moans through the door.

"She's sleeping," they'll say.

"Dreaming?" he'll ask.

They will look confused, these women who guard the door. They bring pots of steaming water and have fresh linens draped over their arms. When they emerge from the room the linens are in the now cooled pot. He's seen a droplet of red spill over the edge once. Since then, he hasn't looked again.

It goes on for days, two, three, four, five.

All the while his father mutters downstairs. His father who has quizzed him even as his mother has groaned.

"You must learn. Even now. Life is hard. You must learn."

Does his father mean that he must learn even though life is hard? Or that life is hard and that he must learn that?

He doesn't dare ask. Even more than usual his father is focused on his book, staring into it unblinking as the women pass.

Only when the moans grow loud enough that the women stop and shake their heads, does his father make any sign he hears, blinking, then rubbing his eyes.

But it is only for a second, and then he is wetting his finger and turning a page so hard it sounds as if the paper might rip.

And then on the sixth day the moaning lessens, and then on the seventh it stops.

At first the boy is frightened, wondering about the silence. Is his mother still in there? Is she worse than before? Is she . . . gone?

He rises before everyone else, as he has done these past few days, creeping toward the door while the others sleep. He presses his ear to its side, straining to hear. He can feel the rough grain of the wood against his cheek, the cold of it, the lifelessness.

That was a tree, he thinks, but now it is a door.

That was my mother in there, but now she is . . .

He does not know how to finish the sentence.

He wanders into the front of the house, standing before the embers of last night's fire, feeling his tears hang like drops

over the window when the icicles melt. He can feel his throat tightening, his lips turning. He can imagine his father telling him not to be a child. He can see the remaining embers, light orange in the white flaking ash. He wills himself not to cry, to be strong, to stand still. Then it occurs to him that even if she's dead she is free of the moaning. No longer in pain. No longer trapped in the bed.

He begins to smile, then immediately to cry.

"*Chochkala*, what's wrong?"

It is Mrs. Sapperstein. She is carrying something steaming again. But it is not a pot, he realizes. It's a cup of tea.

"My mother—"

He stops, unable to say anything else.

"Oh, she's much better, much much better. She's just so thirsty, the poor girl. You wait here and I'll get you some breakfast. You'd like some breakfast, no?"

He nods even though he doubts he could eat a thing. He is too excited to eat. He is standing still, but he feels like he is running.

Before he can see his mother he must have breakfast, Mrs. Sapperstein insists. And then he must bathe. And then his mother must too.

By the time they finally let him in, he is all but exhausted by the waiting. But he is happy and perhaps calmer than he would have been. He feels older as they open the door.

Then he sees his mother's face.

She is paler than he remembers. And thinner. And her eyes look tired, but shiny. She waves him over, her hand so slight it looks like a leaf on the wind. He moves to the side of the bed. She puts her hand on his and clears her throat.

"You have been a good boy?"

He nods, thinking his father might not agree.

"Your father, he has been good to you?"

Mrs. Sapperstein coughs behind him.

"Come Shmuel, let your mother rest."

"But—"

"It's alright . . ."

"No," Mrs. Sapperstein says. "There is too much to do and you need all of your strength. Your son has been a good boy.

And he can be a good boy a bit longer, yes?"

She looks at him, nodding slightly.

"Yes," he says.

"Good," Mrs. Sapperstein says hurrying him out. "Tomorrow, there will be plenty of time."

"There will be no time at all," his mother says.

But the door is shut.

All that night the women come and go, bringing plates of food and baskets of rolls, jars of jam, a brisket that steams near the stove.

He wants to ask what it's for, but he's uncertain if he should. Mostly, he's just happy to see all this movement so different from the back and forth of steaming pots and red-stained linen. And a little bit too he's afraid that it might have something still to do with that, all this food for his mother because maybe she's still sick.

Then he hears the crying in the next room.

At first he fears the worst, imagining his mother in tears, her teeth clenched above the pillow, her black hair a spilled thing around her head.

Then he hears the cry again and realizes it is much higher pitched.

"Such a hungry little boy, your brother," Mrs. Sapperstein says.

He looks up into her eyes, confused.

"Little Oscar. You have seen him, yes?"

He shakes his head.

"Oh, of course," she says, touching his brow. "You will."

"When?" he asks.

"Tomorrow."

"What's tomorrow?"

She starts to laugh.

"Yes, tomorrow," she says again. And then she leaves the room.

He doesn't rise early this time, having stayed up so late watching the preparations. As a result, when he comes out of his room, he sees that the guests have already begun arriving, the men congregating around the baskets of bread,

the women ladling broth into bowls and arranging small fishcakes on a large plate.

The crush of bodies is almost overwhelming and as he pushes his way through the legs of the men and waists of the women, he feels as if he is crossing a great distance. Then he emerges, as if from a deep wood, only to see his father staring into the fireplace.

"Poppa?"

His father doesn't answer.

"Dahveed," another man says clapping his father on the back. The man is much larger, his hand almost the size of his father's head, and as he smiles his father appears unsteady.

"Morton," he mumbles in his soft voice.

"A fine day Dahveed. A second son. And a fine boy here."

The man smiles at Shmuel, but his father continues staring at the flames.

"And Sarah," the man says lowering his voice. "She is . . ."

"Ach," his father frowns, waving his hand.

The man nods solemnly and moves away. Shmuel takes another step toward the fire. The warmth is almost too much now. Yet his father, even closer, appears to be shivering.

"Poppa?"

His father still doesn't appear to hear.

"It is time," the big man says from behind.

Shmuel waits for his father to answer, then realizes the man is speaking not to his father, but him.

Near the fire, before the hearth, a table has been draped in a cloth. And above it, in a basket of wicker, a small child dressed in white kicks its legs.

"Go," the big man says, pressing his giant palm against Shmuel's back.

Shmuel sees the flames behind the head of the child and hesitates.

"Come, come," a familiar voice chides. And Shmuel turns to see the Rabbi, his grey beard almost as long as Shmuel himself. He is a little man with a wrinkled face and a smell seems to rise either from his beard or his lips. Shmuel recoils, then to rid himself of that smell as much as anything, steps forward.

As he does so, Shmuel sees another man approach the table. It is Mr. Steinberg, Mrs. Steinberg's round husband. He is a bull next to the Rabbi's thin stalk. Still, the firm line of his lips can't deny their almost feminine fullness, or his narrowed eyes, which are as warm as the cow's in the field.

The big man who urged Shmuel forward also comes to the table. He and Mr. Steinberg now stand at either side of the basket, Shmuel next to the big man, but closer to the baby's head.

Shmuel looks down into its pink face, pinched as if struggling with some internal question. The cheeks are smooth and the top of the head soft, the arms at the sides of the white gown full and meaty as sausages.

He smiles.

"Quite a boy," the big man says.

"Your mother should be proud," adds Mr. Steinberg.

The two men exchange glances and cough.

"Come, come," the Rabbi says again. Shmuel looks up to see his father now approaching the table. He stands on the same side as Mr. Steinberg, yet closer to the baby's feet. His eyes are looking down, but vacant.

"And now we are gathered," the Rabbi says.

The low murmuring of the other guests fades, only the sound of the women and their dishes in the background.

"We gather to celebrate a new addition to our community, our people, this family."

The Rabbi nods at Shmuel's father. Then, surprisingly, at Shmuel.

"A mitzvah is birth. It binds us and brings us full circle in our lives. It is the beginning that belies the end, God's answer to Sarah in her barrenness, to the children of Israel in the desert wandering. A new generation, that's what God demands. Be fruitful and multiply."

He nods meaningfully toward the guests and a man steps forward. He carries a small black box and has a beard that is just as black. He is large too, especially next to the Rabbi, his cheeks a ruddy red as if he's been standing by the fire, though he clearly hasn't.

"A covenant with God, we mark upon our flesh. A people of destiny, chosen, wiling to do as God wishes."

The man with the box places it at the edge of the table. His clothes are black as well, his heavy coat matching his jet-black pants, his eyes black too, as if all pupil. Only his shirt is white.

"Oskah Melech Gersham, child of Dahveed Gersham and Sarah Gersham Libnah."

Shmuel senses a movement in the crowd and looks to see where everyone has turned. His mother is in the far corner, near her bedroom, in a chair.

"Baruch atah Adonai . . ."

The man in black begins chanting, all but drowning out the Rabbi's high-pitched whine, his voice so deep Shmuel can almost feel it rattle in his teeth.

". . . elohaynu melech ha olam . . ."

The chanting continues, but Shmuel is barely listening. He is staring at his mother, a blanket thrown over her even though the room is so hot the man with the dark eyes has drops of moisture across his brow. She seems to be swaying to the music, or her head at least, her eyes closing, almost as if she is falling asleep. Shmuel tries to catch her eye, but she seems lost to him, in some other place. She appears to be looking out from far away at the far end of the room, and when Shmuel glances at his father only to see him looking at her too, but from the corner of his eye, he feels a shiver despite the heat. His father is not himself. His face is not his.

"Asher barchabanu mekol haolem, venachtan lanu et torah toe, baruch ata adonai, notain ha torah."

The chanting stops and Shmuel turns back to the table only to see the dark man open the black box. Inside there are silver tools, instruments. They lie arranged on a mat of red velvet. They gleam like fish from a stream, caught and on a river-bank.

The dark man's ruddy hand—strangely long-fingered and fine for its size—reaches in and briefly fingers one of the silver pieces. Then it emerges, and both seem to float from the box to a place just above his brother's midsection.

What is it his father does when he leaves with his own box? Shmuel has wondered for almost as long as he can remember. He has watched from the corner of the room, knowing his father will not tell him. And now he watches his father

watching the hand of the other man as it brings the knife-like tool down in a place Shmuel turns his eyes from not to see, a movement like sawing beginning, his father's eyes cold as Shmuel looks up, the other men's slightly averted, their arms out straight, holding his brother down at each shoulder, down at each ankle of each leg.

"Take this."

The Rabbi is pressing a cloth into his hand.

"Dip it here."

He motions to the silver cup in his other hand filled with wine.

"Then touch it to your brother's lips. It is a blessing. An honor."

Shmuel dips the cloth slightly in the red, watching it stain, thinking of his mother's linens, his mother who is watching from the opposite side of the room.

"Now touch it to your brother's lips."

Shmuel brings the cloth closer to his brother's face, trying not to see what is happening, but his brother's mouth is wide and he fears he will smother him.

"Touch it," the Rabbi says.

The old man's fingers clasp his wrist, guiding him. As soon as they let go, Shmuel's hand falls away.

"Closer."

The Rabbi forces his hand again, covering his brother's crying mouth. There's a gurgling.

"He can't breathe."

"Closer!!"

The gurgling continues, but Shmuel can't tell if it is from his brother or himself. He tries again, but he can't look, can't bear the expression on his little brother's face, turns to look toward his mother again, only to see the door to her bedroom closing.

He turns back to the table and sees his father looking too before catching his eye.

"Closer, Shmuel! Can't you do anything right?!"

Again there is gasping. But it is not from Shmuel or his brother. Mr. Steinberg's eyes are wide. The big man next to Shmuel frowns.

"Here, son," he says, taking Shmuel's hand.

Shmuel's fingers are now completely covered, the cloth completely over his brother's mouth, the gurgling silenced.

"Amen" the voices say after a few moments. And his brother's mouth is free, his mother's door closed, the men heading toward the food, one of them clapping his father on the back.

"Can't cut on your own son, still a good job, yes?"

But his father merely glares and walks off as the dark man closes his black box with a click.

Later that night in bed Shmuel sees the scene in his mind again and again, clearer even than when it was happening, the thing he thought he couldn't watch now something he can't stop watching.

He sees the silver instrument floating above the table where his brother lays, the hand at the end of it blue-veined, long-fingered, red around the nails; the silver's moving then hovering above his brother, the middle of his brother where the cloth is, another hand, gnarled and claw-like, moving over the clean and white and his brother's small and pink pizzle out in the open. Then the silver's coming down from above, like the lamp above the ark in the synagogue that always hangs there, its lip of flame licking around the edge so that the black line of oil smoke rises, mixing with the other scents in the synagogue, the stones, the damp of them, like the well where they draw the water, a crank, a rope, a pail. But the water is so soft and reflecting under the sky while the silver thing touching his brother is sharp. It's like something at the end of a line when fishing and hooked, Shmuel, knowing this having seen the same in his father's wooden box, the one that sits on the shelf and which he is never supposed to look in though he has, thinking it has something to do with the pointer in the synagogue, the silver stick with the tiny sculpted hand and the index finger at the end pointing. But why a hook?

"It's to guide you while you read," his father had said.

"Why not use your real hand?"

"It is too sacred," his father had smiled. "The scroll cannot be touched."

"It will break?"

"No," his father frowned. "It is made from parchment."

"Parch-ment?"

"Animal flesh. A cow. Like the heifer in the field."

Shmuel had looked toward the window, thinking of the one with the big eyes, the friendly eyes.

"A cow?"

"Yes," his father had said returning to his book.

So the scroll was from animal flesh. The book from life now dead. And it was too holy to touch. Must be treated gently. That was a commandment. But his brother, they touched him, the dark man, with the silver tool of his own, like his father's, so sharp. Shmuel knew. He'd felt it. And he can feel it now, can see his brother, his pudgy legs out, his little boy's *thing*, the other thing pressed down and moved back and forth on it, like a sawing, a red welling, a red fleck on the white cloth, his brother's mouth wide, and the men holding him, Shmuel holding the cloth to his mouth, his red mouth, his reddening face, his face almost purple and swollen. They did that, right there, in the middle of the room. And then they put the cloth back, said amen. And ate.

He had to run from the room and close the door to where he slept. Had to breathe deep to keep from being sick. Had to tell them that he was too sick to eat when the women came knocking. And now finally they are all gone and he is alone, and able to think, to forget them, forget about them knocking, coming for him. To relax. Though he's not relaxed. He keeps seeing it, the silver line descending, the silver hand pointing, the silver hook catching, the fish, the blood, the vein, the cloth. The oil smoke, stone grey, water rising, reflecting in a wooden pail. The dark wooden box that his father keeps on the shelf. The books he leans over, talking low to himself, seeing nothing but them even as Shmuel and his mother pass, his books that he closes with a softness that is silent yet seems to Shmuel like a thud, the books he closes only to eat, to glare at Shmuel, or ignore him, the door behind his father clicking closed, the box his father has and the box the man had and the red welling and his brother crying and the dark and his room and his own *thing* and the women laughing and the people eating, like it's nothing, something they've all seen before.

Which he finds the next day, after he talks to his friend Naphtali, the one with the older brother, they have. They all

have.

"How do you know?"

Naphtali looks at him sideways like he expects Shmuel is going to say something else. Then he laughs.

"You're not joking? You really don't—"

He stops and shakes his head, grinning.

"Don't what?"

"You've never seen a briss? Never heard of it? It's a . . . thing. A ritual. They do it to everyone. Every boy."

Shmuel just stares.

"You. Me too. All of us. All Jews."

Shmuel narrows his eyes.

"My father too?" he says.

Naphtali just laughs.

"Of course."

"And my moth—"

But he doesn't even have to finish the sentence, Naphtali is laughing so hard and pointing at him with his finger.

"Your mother?! Your mother has a pisher?"

Shmuel shoves him, but Naphtali can't stop laughing, so he pushes him again until his friend falls over, looking up at him, quiet. But still smiling.

Once he knows, he knows. But he can't look at his father the same. Or his mother either. He has seen them both, there when it happened. Knows his father has that box. Knows there are tools, sharp things, hooked things, for hurting the flesh, the boy place, that the women laugh, and the men take part, then they eat.

He knows, and he becomes used to it, but still finds it hard to believe. He can't believe they would allow it. That they did that with him. That they all sit in the room with him now as if it were nothing. As if some of them hadn't held him down, others prayed over him, others put a wet red cloth to his mouth. They know even if he doesn't. And it makes him feel he can't look at them for a long time.

Then something else happens and that seems like nothing.

Because then there is another box, even shinier, and smoother. A larger box, one that they lower into the

ground.

"She is in a better place," his father says.

He doesn't realize till then that it is his mother that is in the box.

"Don't cry. You are a man almost now."

He tries not to, sniffling hard. But even as he becomes quiet, the tears are on his cheek.

He remembers his mother in the bed only the night before, the way her eyes seemed both to look at him and above him, bright with wet, her words a raspy whisper, his ear close to her lips so as to hear her.

"Like this you came into the world. This room. I remember. And I was weak then too. So tired. Backwards. Your feet rather than your head. Like an onion. Growing backwards. Coming backwards. That's what the doctor said, pulling you into the world. 'Just relax,' he said, as if he knew anything. 'Just relax.' I am so tired. So tired."

They took him from the room then and he heard the familiar coughing, though fainter. The wet of it, like something pulled from the mud. A shoe covered with it. A rock. A bone.

"Baruch ata adonai . . ."

Another prayer. They raise the box, their hands on either side of it. He is there too, holding up his arm almost straight, shorter than the rest, though not by much, still the box is above him, almost too far. He feels his fingertips on its smooth surface.

"Elohaynu melech ha olam."

They raise it before they lower it, a kind of mocking gesture, he thinks, first one way and then the other.

"Ashes to ashes."

Ashes are dry and his cheeks are wet.

"Dust to dust."

Adam was dust and his mother's cough was wet.

"Amen."

And then the clods of earth hitting the surface. A hollow sound.

"Go," his father says, nudging him.

He grabs a handful of dirt. Drops it. It scatters like rain over the surface. A softer sound. Not a thud. He's glad of it.

Jessica Bagwell

Melon

The guy sitting across from the battered wood overlay table is the first person that I have told about the cancer. For that reason, I really wish that he would stop puffing on the unlit cigarette in his lips and say something. The concentrated stare he is giving his own hands radiates anxiety that burns my face. As the silence stretches on, I begin to wonder if I even said what I think I said. I've rehearsed it in my head so many times, it's hard to know for sure.

He is silent; the only silent thing in this whole bar.

Finally, he raises his thin arm and brushes his stringy brown hair back with his fingers, and then abruptly drops his limb, lifelessly back to the table, knocking hard once onto the surface with his knuckles.

"Well, shit," he exclaims.

"Yeah," I say.

"I mean, I'm just really surprised. You really don't look like you have cancer."

"Thank you?"

"I'm sorry. I mean you have your hair. When will you lose that pretty hair?"

He says this dripping with skepticism, or maybe condescension, while he holds a bent unlit cigarette in his hand. It's the same one he's been holding all night. He rolls it habitually between each finger.

"I won't. I'm not going to do any kind of treatment. No point."

"I see. How do you feel?"

"Great."

The waitress with the frizzy hair brings two more beers in bottles. He tucks the cigarette back behind his ear, reclines in his stool as he brings the longneck to his lips.

"So, then when will you die?" he asks.

"When will you die?" I ask.

"Please." He says it. I think it's earnest.

"They said eight weeks, maybe," I say, looking down at my beer, scratching at the red and white Lone Star label.

"How long ago was that?"

Wasn't it four days after I fainted in the kitchen and hit my head on the counter? I couldn't be sure, but it didn't matter anyway. My life, all of it, was now eight weeks long, and years stretched out in between each sleepless night.

"Three weeks, I think."

"So I shouldn't get too attached," he says. His smirk isn't empathetic, but it's not exactly callous either. It's just the casual, musing expression that sometimes accompanies talk about the weather.

"It's hard to get attached in a few weeks anyway."

"So then why did you sit down?" he asks.

"Hey, why don't you just smoke that thing already" I say pointing the neck of my beer toward the cigarette in his hand.

"Well, I like cigarettes, but I don't like to smoke them because I don't want to smell like smoke," he says. He grants me an apologetic shrug and drains the rest of his beer.

"You're in a bar. There's smoke everywhere,"

"That's true, " he says as he chokes on the last swig. A little bit of beer foam oozes out onto his lips. "But I can't afford to smoke them, really. Too expensive. I've had this same cigarette for three days now and I feel satisfied. If I light it up, I'll need another and another and then I'll be broke."

I nod.

"What kind of cancer is it? My grandma had ovarian cancer. Shit sucks." He holds up the empty bottle and points at mine when the waitress walks by. Without stopping, she grabs both bottles as she passes our table. My bottle is still half-full and beer sloshes out and onto the table, running off the side and onto my jeans. Without an apology she hands me the towel hanging out of her back pocket. The fizz seeps through the denim, stinging my legs and I am then reminded of the care with which I shaved them earlier.

"It's a brain tumor behind my nose. It's next to my olfactory bulb," I say as I press the stiff white towel into the denim to soak up the mess.

"What the fuck is that?" he asks, still rolling the unlit cigarette in between his fingers.

"It's like a sponge in your nose that soaks up smells. It's how you smell things." I deliberately and spitefully drop the towel on the floor.

That's how I'd imagined the bulb, anyway.

"Really? What does it smell like?"

"What does what smell like?" I'm looking down now. I'm staring at the jagged letters carved deeply into

"The tumor. You ought to be able to smell it, right?"

"Is that a fucking joke?" I ask.

"No, really."

"I can't smell it. It doesn't work that way."

"Really, if you could, you probably would have gone to the doctor sooner, right? And then you could get better?" he says.

I nod. That is probably true. Really, though, I wonder now why I haven't smelled it. I think now that I ought to be able to smell it all the time.

"Cancer has to smell bad, right? You know it can't smell like flowers or something sweet. I bet it doesn't smell like vanilla, or cotton, or leather."

"I do not know that at all. Because I can't smell it."

"Right. But it's cancer. It's bad and gross so it has to smell bad."

"Yes, I imagine it does, but I can't smell it."

"I bet it smells like dog shit."

"I bet it smells like rotten fish."

"Vomit."

"Cat Piss."

"Houston."

"Nursing home."

"Dumpsters."

The waitress brings us two more beers.

"So do you maybe want to leave after these?" he asks.

"Okay,"

"Okay?"

"I'm sober," I say.

"I'm not," he says. "But back to the other thing; really?"

"Yes," I say. I expel the word with a sigh.

"Well, okay then."

"It doesn't bother you then?" I ask.

"What?" he asks.

"The tumor thing" I respond. "It doesn't freak you out?"

"Why would it? It's not like it's contagious," he says, still looking at the cigarette in his hand. Has he actually looked at me since I told him?

"No, but knowing I'm dying—is that weird?" I ask.

"Did it bother anyone else when you told them?"

I shake my head slightly, maybe even unperceivably. It doesn't matter. He's not looking at me anyway. He's looking at the bouncer turning away two girls with apparent fakes. Everyone's attention is now on the door, waiting breathlessly for the teens to make a scene.

"I think about death all the time. If you hadn't told me, I already would have fantasized about you dying anyway," he says, looking at me again, finally.

"Fantasized. I mean, Jesus. Fuck," I say, trying to muster up some offense that I wasn't really feeling. Maybe inoperable brain tumors are the only truly offensive ideas. Everything else is just annoying at worst.

"Not in a good way, but I really think about it all the time. I look at people, strangers, my family, everyone, and wonder how they will die."

"Seriously?" I ask.

"Yeah. But I never would have thought cancer for you," he says coolly.

"Oh yeah?" I say. Me neither.

"Yeah, you read more of a stroke," he says. Then he corrects himself, "But not until you are very, very old. Like a normal person."

"Normal?"

"Yeah, normal like of natural causes."

"Cancer is a natural cause."

"It's not natural for a young person."

"Well then I guess I'm abnormal."

"Aren't we all." It's not a question, but a declaration.

"I see. What about—" I pause and look around the room. "What about our waitress?"

"She is not normal, " he says and I can't tell if he is kidding.

"No. I mean how will she die?" I ask. It's not like I actually believe him or anything. I only ask because it's nice to think about someone else's mortality for a minute. I begin peeling

the red and white Lone Star label from my beer.

"If she's not careful, it will be drunk driving," he says while pointing with his beer, over to the waitress, whose nametag says April. I watch as she takes two shots right after the other. "Wrap whatever little old sports car she drives right around a pole."

I shiver at this prophecy. He flashes a proud smile, and winks at me knowingly, maybe seductively.

"Okay, then. What about you?" I ask, unnerved.

"Me?"

"Yeah. Surely you've thought about your own death," I assert, slipping the label completely off my beer and starting to fold it in half over and over again.

"I'm going to be drafted, and die in whatever shit we step into next," he says, placing the cigarette between his lips again, and angling it up and down.

"You mean Iran?" I ask.

"Could be. Could be North Korea. Could be Canada. Fuck we don't know where we stand with anyone anymore," he says, actually upset now.

"I doubt Canada. They aren't very aggressive, eh?" I say.

"I was just making a point," he says, cooling down now. "I don't really keep up with the news."

I put the folded beer label into the ashtray.

"You ready?" he asks.

I nod.

I step down off of the tall stool. I grab my coat and slip it over my blouse. I feel inside the pockets to make sure my license and debit card are still there. He's already at the bar when I get there. I pull out my card, and he shakes his head at me.

"Hey, let me get this," he shouts over the jukebox tune blasting from the speaker that is now directly overhead

"Really, I can pay. It's fine," I say stepping up onto my tiptoes and angling into his ear.

"No. I mean, don't get the wrong idea. I'm not your boyfriend," he says.

"I wouldn't dream of it," I say.

"Good, then let's take your car." He points toward the door with the pen he has been handed by the waitress. I look at her

while he is scribbling his name on the receipt and she frowns severely at me.

My companion. It is too late to ask his name now. In my passenger seat he fumbles with my radio. He stops every few stations and sings along to mostly the country songs. I hate them, but then he carefully adjusts the knob to clear up this static-filled choir song that immediately sends chills up my spine.

"God, this song," he says, turning it up.

"It's kind of creepy," I say glancing at him. His eyes are closed and he is swaying his hands back and forth like a choir director. God, he really is drunk.

"It's my dad's favorite," he says.

"*When peace like a river attendeth my way; When sorrows like sea billows roll—"*

So, it's a hymn.

"I'm not religious," I proclaim over the choir.

"Me neither, but my dad's a choir director at a Baptist Church."

"*It is well."*

"Which one?"

"*With my soul."*

"The big one, the main one, downtown."

"Jesus."

"*Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say—*"

"I thought you said you weren't religious," he says turning the volume up.

"*Though Satan shall buffet, though trials shall come—*"

"I'm really not."

"Even now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just that when people are dying the tend to find God or whatever."

I sigh and grip more tightly on the steering wheel.

"*My sin, O the bliss, of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part, but the whole!"*

"I thought that's what you meant."

"*I bear it no more! Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord. O My soul!"*

"And?"

"It is Well!"

"I just . . . " I begin.

"It is Well!"

"I think it's a little late for all of that." I bite my bottom lip and clench more tightly to the steering wheel.

"With my Soul. O, my Soul!"

The choir fades out, and a commercial for the bible store downtown begins to play. He reaches over and turns it off as we speed through a changing yellow light.

At my apartment, maybe we would sit on a couch if I had one. Instead, since I don't, I apologize for the empty room as sincerely as I would for a room stacked to the ceiling with dead bodies and lead him to my bedroom. He sits on the bed while I fumble with my iPod across the room, contemplating which song would set the right mood. Really, I'm contemplating which mood would be the right one to set.

He picks up my throw pillow and hugs it close to him, pulling his face toward the ruffled edge.

"You know, I expected you to have a fluffy white cat around here somewhere," he slurs teasingly.

"Well, I don't."

"Are you allergic?"

"No, I just don't have a cat," I say.

"You should get one," he says.

"Really would seem irresponsible to get a cat I can't take care of," I say, deliberately allowing the sardonic tone to grow with each syllable.

"Oh right, sorry. Because you're dying. Maybe you could find a dying cat, and the two of you can relate and comfort each other," he says.

"Yes, maybe there are ads on Craigslist for just such a cat," I say, looking up from my iPod and turning to face him. He lifts his head and sets the pillow aside and looks at me.

"You could post your own ad in the "Wanted" section," he suggests.

"It wouldn't work anyway. Cats have nine lives. It's very likely that after we each use up the lives we are on, he will go right on ticking, and I'll be dead. So we would be back to square one with no one to take care of him," I explain to him in the way I would to a child.

"I guess you're right."

I give up on the music and drop the iPod in apathy. I walk over slowly and sit next to him on the bed. He is pulling on a loose thread in my bedspread now. He pulls it out further and further. He unravels several more inches of stitching before he realizes what he is doing and then abruptly releases the thread and smoothes out the wrinkles his tugging has created. He looks up at me, embarrassed. Then, as if to atone for his mistake, he kisses me. An apology kiss? This can't be how this goes.

I pull away.

"I only want to have fun." I say with contradictory self-consciousness.

"That's good."

"I mean, just while I still can."

He nods looking down at his knees then quickly turns to look me in the eye.

"Wait, you're not a virgin are you? Because I really can't do that."

"No I'm not." I laugh indignantly to corroborate my story.

"Good. I can't do that. I can go along with this whole thing, but I can't be picking cherries on a dying tree, you know?"

"Oh, please."

"But promise."

"I'm twenty-six."

"But really."

"I promise."

"Okay."

I can't look at him anymore and reach across him turn out the pink-shaded lamp on my nightstand.

When it's off, he feels for me in the dark. He touches me, but not too much. He kisses me a little too much, though. Not on the mouth but on the neck. He pulls me down into a horizontal embrace, while my feet uncomfortably entwine around each other, shoes still on. Then, all at once, he turns me over and asserts himself on top of me. In this new position, when he's kissing my neck, my eyes, now adjusted to the dark room, are only able to look at the ceiling fan above me. Even with just the moonlight, actually probably the streetlight, pouring in, I can see the clumps of dust that form on each of the

blades. I wish he would kiss my mouth again, that his face would obstruct my view, so that I couldn't see it. Instead, he pulls my shoulders up and raises my arms above my head.

He pulls me clumsily and hard by my arms and slips my sweater off. It is moist and sticks to the small of my back a bit. He directs my hands to his pants. I move them back to his neck, but after a few seconds of kissing, he pulls them back down to his crotch, so I reluctantly begin fumbling with the closures. I feel his oversized belt buckle, and the double button at the top of the zipper.

Really, in sex or any other time, clothes come off just as they go on, with about the same enthusiasm. Not slowly, but the way clothes are hurriedly stretched over your body when you are running late. It's deliberate, with a bit of annoyance at each piece. That's the way the come off. That's the way we pare ourselves away from them.

"Do I need to do anything special?" he whispers in my ear.

"Fuck. How sexy," I say, though I know exactly what he means.

"I mean do I need to do anything for your—"

"No."

"Really, I just don't want to shake the tumor loose while pounding you from behind."

"You won't," I say. I hope.

He slides next to me and reaches down to the ground where his jeans are and I hear the rustle of foil as he slides a condom out of his pocket.

"Hey, don't bother," I say.

"You sure?"

"It's okay. I promise," I say.

Back on top of me he keeps his face buried into my neck as he aligns our bodies. While fucking me, he moves slowly, as though he may lose his balance at any moment, and his breath is labored and reeks of beer. I remember the cigarette he won't light, and have to stifle a laugh as the whiff of musty smoke from a hundred different brands of tobacco enter my mouth.

Again, my eyes are fixated on the dirty ceiling fan. When a car pulls into the apartment parking lot and the lights shine through my window, it is like a spotlight spilling onto the

fan. How long has the dust clump been growing there? Why haven't I noticed it before now? He begins moving more intensely now and with my ear next to his jaw, I hear his teeth grinding.

Overwhelmed by the odor, the sounds, and shame, I mumble that we should switch. He exits, holding himself protectively and falls onto the bed. I assume a top position and pull him inside me. I move back and forth slowly, even still keeping my eyes clenched as tightly as my fists, which are both pushing into the mattress on either side of his head.

And then, suddenly, I feel a tickle sliding down my throat and nostril. I close my eyes with the instant recognition of this sensation. I should have tasted it while lying down. I should be used to it enough by now to know when it's coming. A splatter of warm blood rolls out of my nose and directly onto his face and into his open mouth.

I stop moving, open my eyes and stare at him in the dim light. My entire body begins trembling and burning with embarrassment.

He tastes it, closes his mouth and swallows hard. I think he probably swallows down vomit as another large drop of blood lands on his chin. I bring my hands to my face as I unhinge our bodies and climb from the bed, without a word. My feet are stung by the impact they make with hard wooden floor.

I go into the bathroom and run water over my white washcloth, wring it out, and bring the cloth ball to my face. I look into the mirror as I hear the lamp on my nightstand click. I stare into the mirror at my face, nearly unrecognizable with mascara smeared over my droopy, tired eyes.

"I'm so sorry," I say through the closed door.

He coughs hard and the headboard hits the wall as the bed shakes.

"I'm coming back, but I'm naked. Would you mind turning off the light?" I ask.

"Sure," he says as he clicks the switch.

I climb into bed and pull the sheet up to my neck, keeping the rag close to my nose. In the dark I glance over at him. I can see his silhouette against the illuminated window, rolling the cigarette between his fingers again.

"I'm so sorry." I close my eyes and wait for him to respond.

I hear him sigh and clear his throat in the darkness.

"It's really okay. I guess you were for real."

"What do you mean?" I ask looking over to his shadowy figure.

"I kind of thought you were lying."

"What?"

"I don't think I wanted it to be true. It's such a waste, you know?"

I say nothing. I'm embarrassed. I'm irked by how earnestly and self-consciously my heart stopped at the word "pretty" and I wait, shamefully hoping there's more flattery to come. Even now, we're still flirting.

"You wouldn't happen to have a lighter would you?" he asks.

"Why? Are you finally going to smoke it?"

"Yeah, now seems like the right time. In movies they always smoke after sex," he says.

"No, I'm sorry. I don't smoke," I say.

"You really shouldn't either. They say it causes cancer," he says.

"That can't be right," I say.

"Swear to God. But honestly, with all this girly shit I thought you'd at least have one match to light one of your hundred candles you got in here," he says.

We lie there silently. I lean back on the pillow and hold the rag. This is the fastest way to stop the bleed. I stare again at the dusty ceiling fan. And then, in the silent darkness, I realize it for the first time.

"You know what?" I ask in a whisper, clearing my throat of the blood that has drained back there.

"What?" he says.

"It smells like cantaloupe."

"Is that right?" he asks.

"Yes, very ripe cantaloupe," I say.

"Well ain't that some shit."

Jodi Barnes

Six Days of Pritchett

Thursday

I had to squeeze Mr. Pritchett into an already full afternoon, not uncommon in the hospice world where remission flakes out on its proposal and becomes more of a one-night stand. As nurse case manager, my job was to explain the rest of his life: his care team, pain management, transitioning from the solids he still ate to the pabulum, the cans of Ensure and later, the juice directly injected into his weakened veins. When I got to that part, he shook his head. I told him that even patients who were needle-phobic didn't mind them once swallowing became too difficult.

"I don't care about needles," he said. "But I'm not sleeping anywhere but my bed." He pointed to a half-closed door down the short hallway of his small apartment.

Pritchett was a handsome man, a rarity among our clients. A long time ago I chose to believe that when terminal illness and advanced age coincide, they conspire in an almost kind way. Disease helps transform the decaying body into something more easily surrendered. Kafka's cockroach in *Metamorphosis* came close to explaining it. But here was Pritchett: trim and graceful. Blue-grey eyes that seemed no less engaging or beautiful than those of a 20-year-old; good posture, articulate. He was nearing 79.

I explained that the care team had to walk all the way around a bed with wheels to hook up IVs; they needed hydraulics to raise and lower him. "Not now," I said, "maybe not this week or next, but you will be moved to a mobile bed."

He asked if I'd seen anyone who was happy to move into a bed on wheels.

"I do initial counseling; I won't be here later in the process."

"You mean when I'm dying on a roll—when the going gets good."

I nodded.

"How much does all that cost? Let's say if I last another month?"

I told him not to worry. He had insurance and the government reimbursed the rest.

"I'm not worried!" he growled. "It makes no sense to keep me drugged and fed another thirty days. For what? I'm not going to get better."

Last year I would have politely argued with Pritchett, citing the benefits of palliative care. But after my father's slow wasting, I knew better. Had he been able to ask for a quicker end, I would have risked a life behind bars. Unlike my father, Pritchett still had his faculties. I'd asked myself *for what?* every day for the last ten months.

"I don't have a lot. But I'll leave half of it to you if you help me."

My silence was his invitation.

"First, contact my daughter and tell her this is it. Ask her to see me before I'm moved to that glorified gurney. If she refuses, you tried."

"We don't do that type of—"

"And two: after she visits or refuses to, leave me something lethal, while I can still put it in my mouth."

My phone slid off the folder on my lap.

"Don't answer now," he coughed. "I left her name and phone number on the kitchen counter. Pick it up and take it. No obligation, no hard feelings either way."

Killing someone and providing the weapon are two different sins. Not that I believe in sin, really. I believe in ethical and moral treatment which, depending on how I looked at it, this job both allowed for and lacked. Call it justification or convenience, but I lied to him by omission.

For twenty years I *was* the nurse at the end. I'd seen thousands of people and their families suffer. Although the occasionally abusive patient or relative reminded me that the other side might be preferable to their psychic pain, I staunchly opposed euthanasia until I saw the only person I loved, maybe more than I'd loved my mother, in months-long agony.

My case manager position was not a promotion. It was to get me the hell out of the end game. I'd done my hands-on, put my hands in enough bile and shit, blood and foul mat-

ter that bent me over buckets and sinks. Twenty years. And then these last few to manage *cases*—an apt description for my arms-length dealings with death. I was the meeter and greeter of people whose pain was still manageable, most of whom could reason.

Like Pritchett. Yet Pritchett didn't seem as psychologically manageable as the rest. I admired that.

"It's around a hundred grand. If my daughter wants to talk to me or not, I'll leave her half. But that's a nice bit for you."

"I don't normally talk to patients this way, but you're pretty nervy asking me for this—assisted death."

"I never thought about it that way. Your *assistance*? It's like putting booze in a cupboard, knowing the alcoholic can reach it but you wouldn't pour it down my throat."

Right then I liked him. With effort, he stood up and ambled down the hall toward the half-closed door. Before pushing it open he looked over his left shoulder, his pain palpable: "It's on the kitchen counter, her name and phone number. Take it. You can decide to chicken out later."

I walked into the kitchen, an early seventies décor if you could call it that, dingy but not filthy. An envelope with my name on it was propped against a dusty percolator.

After work, I opened the envelope. Pritchett's handwriting was not only legible but beautiful. A female who answered the phone sounded like she was in a hurry to meet her girlfriend at the mall. I asked for Kathryn Browning. "That's me!" her voice giggled. I thought she might call me a silly goose.

I told her I had a message from her father. She interrupted: "You must be Linda from hospice."

My confusion flipped to irritation. She gushed that she was working for Mr. Pritchett and needed to give *me* important information. When could we meet?

"No thanks," I didn't need this scam and I hung up.

Friday

When I got to the office, a plump, late-30s Kathryn sat in the lobby. "So sorry he lied to you. What I have to say is important."

"Not to me," I said and I heard her footsteps follow me

down the hall.

"At least he didn't put you on the spot," she said. I kept walking. "Believe me, you want to know this!"

I stopped at my office threshold and turned to face her while blocking her entrance.

"May I have two minutes?" her eyes pled. "Then you won't ever have to talk to me again."

"I have a meeting in six."

She followed me in and waited for me to sit down. Then she sat.

"Pritchett is your father."

I smiled. "Nope. I had a wonderful father who died last year."

"No," she said firmly, "he was, biologically, your stepfather."

I felt immediate anger toward this woman. "Who the hell are you? Get out of here!"

She didn't move. "I'm sorry, Linda. Pritchett asked me to find you and luckily you still live in the Atlanta area. When he found out his cancer was inoperable, he made arrangements with your hospice because he wanted a chance—"

"No, I have a dad! I had a dad, not a stepfather!"

Kathryn waited for me to lower my shoulders and breathe evenly. Then she placed an accordion folder, the old-fashioned kind that fastens with string, on my desk. "He wants you to have this: a few photos and your mother's poetry."

My mother's what? I couldn't move my hands from the arms of my chair.

She didn't pause. "You can go to the courthouse, look up your parents' marriage license: twenty months after you were born."

I concentrated on helping reason cut a path through my stupor.

"He's willing to take a DNA test now or post-mortem for you."

I was lightheaded. Kathryn, Pritchett, the folder, the courthouse—all of this seemed plausible.

"Then, why didn't he tell me yesterday?"

"He thought it wouldn't be, well, I suggested it might be too stressful. This is intense—understandably—and he's not even here."

"So, he's a coward?"

"We agreed I could explain it and be a buffer. That it might feel worse, initially, coming from him."

We sat, silent. After what could have been an hour or a few minutes, she apologized for the pain she caused me and held out her hand. "Here's your check." Fifty grand.

Before she opened the door, she looked over her right shoulder, "Oh, and another check is coming . . . I don't know how much, but he said to remind you about the other favor."

I knocked on his door after work, not expecting Nancy, one of our nurses, to open it. We looked at each other, surprised. I quickly realized I needed to explain myself. "Mr. Pritchett forgot to sign one of the contracts yesterday."

"He's sleeping right now. They moved him up on the schedule. Had a rough night."

It was against the rules, but I told Nancy that she could take off early. I'd sit with him for the remaining two hours of her shift. "You're the boss, or close enough," she winked and handed me his chart.

As soon as she left, I opened Prichett's door a crack and saw him on his back, eyes open. I thought of Kafka. "You didn't waste any time after signing the contract, I see."

He didn't smile but turned to look at me. I sat on a chair close to the door.

"I didn't think you'd come back, but I wouldn't blame you . . ." He looked like he was going back to sleep.

"I came to give you back your check."

His eyes were again wide. "Only money. It's nothing to me."

"I also came to ask you about my mother. Why you didn't stay. Did she want out or was it you?"

"I knew she wouldn't tell you anything about me. I wouldn't have. I was an asshole. No, actually," he exhaled slowly, "an asshole is very useful."

I wasn't going to argue but I wanted facts, not opinions or regret.

He asked me for water. I held the glass while he sipped through a paper straw.

"I wanted her to abort. Imagine. I'm telling you I wanted you dead." And he chuckled, then coughed.

"She said she would. We had plans to go to Black Mountain College. I wanted to paint and she wanted to study poetry with Robert Creeley. You've heard of Black Mountain?"

I nodded. I'd been through the accordion folder, found the acceptance letter and fourteen handwritten poems, a few in good shape but as many faded or crumbling. In a pocket near the back, two thin journals. One was mother's personal journal filled with scribbles of starts and scratched-out verse; the other was a 1956 issue of *The University of Kansas City Review*, where two of her poems appeared.

"It was summer of '55. Rumors that if we didn't go soon, it would close." He sighed. "And it did two years later."

"She said she'd abort, so what happened?"

"She went to New York to stay with an aunt for a couple weeks, but I didn't hear from her for two months. I bought a bus ticket, found her and she was already showing. Told me to get out, move on. I was hurt and angry, so I did."

"How'd Black Mountain work out?"

"I never went."

Saturday and Sunday

I wasn't sure I'd go back to Pritchett's. Not because I held a grudge. I didn't know how to return his money. He'd fallen asleep and as far as I knew I was his only relative. I didn't want to call Kathryn and I wasn't going to leave the check on his nightstand.

For two days I read and reread mother's poems, hoping to bring some part of her I never knew back to me. I'd read Sylvia Plath and Gwendolyn Brooks in college, not that I understood everything, but I appreciated what I could. Thirty years later, here I was, researching female poets published in the early 1950s, my mother's possible inspirations: Edna Vincent Millay, Gwendolyn Brooks, Adrienne Rich. Their work had immediate and concrete intimacy, "confessional," the experts called it. "Modern Oath," by Lillian McMillan—it seemed strange to see her maiden name in print—seemed a nod to a Millay's "Modern Declaration."

Modern Oath

I, having loved lilacs and fireflies,
the fine curl of my mother's script,
her lips and books
bound by my father's leather hand;

Never having to choose between
or deny them
like the earth and sky;

Then you appear to me an ocean
taking the form of a glass
so I drink, refreshed;

Never having declared or denied
my thirst,
always wanting, unafraid to ask

You, without apology or conniving smile
no matter who breaks,
no matter who wins this war.

Mother drowned in the Atlantic's undertow off Tybee Island in 1965. We were on vacation and I should have remembered more than a blonde woman wrapping a towel around me, whisking me inside a hotel, offering me a Shirley Temple as I shivered and told her about my cat back in Atlanta. I should have remembered my father yelling for my mother, running out to try to save her, screaming for help. But I don't remember anything, even getting home, until her funeral and the wake, where people sat looking helpless in my living room.

For two days I thought about two fathers—I refused to think of my dad as my stepdad—the one I knew and loved, now dead; the one I didn't know who'd lobbied for my death fifty-seven years ago, dying. It seemed that fate got bored with my wardrobe and overnight constructed an entire line of irony. A hidden closet whispered, *Please, unwanted and unloved daughter, kill me.*

I tried to put myself in Pritchett's place. Had he changed? Who was he in the first place? How much had I changed? Why hadn't I wanted children? Would I have aborted if I had to choose? Was he simply using me now? Did it fucking matter?

Monday

I decided to check in on him. A nurse named Marcus, apparently a new hire, greeted me. I identified myself first by work title and second as the patient's relative. I could hear Pritchett but he sounded frail, "Is that you, Linda?"

I walked past Marcus before he gave me gave me a nod. The dining area off the kitchen housed the wheeled deathbed. Pritchett was on morphine already, wrapped like a baby in white linen arms. I sucked in my breath and walked to his right side. I decided to sit on the bed, sheet and thin blanket separating us.

"This isn't so bad," he said, with heavy-lidded eyes.

"I told you," I said, confused by tears starting to blur his image.

"You lied. Said you wouldn't be here when the going got good."

"No," I shook my head, "I think that was before—"

He turned his head to look at me, seeming to concentrate: "I've always hated people who feel sorry for themselves. Here I am doing it."

"It's okay," I put my hand on his wrapped chest.

"I'm not sorry I'm dying. I'm sorry I missed out. Thinking some imagined life without you would be better than . . . being your father."

I withdrew my hand like a child who grabs a stranger's hand instead of his parent's. What the hell was I doing? What was *he* doing, asking for me, asking anything of me? Especially to be here for him at the putrid, grueling end.

His arms were trying to struggle free now, as if he were desperate for my touch. I walked out, mumbling goodbye to Marcus.

That night I dreamed that my father dug himself out of his grave. He stood at my door, his funeral suit shedding little

clumps of dirt.

"How did you get out?" I demanded.

He laughed at me the same way he did when I lied about getting drunk at prom.

"Only you know the truth," he said, as he tried to get into my house. But I wouldn't let him in.

Tuesday

I called Kathryn at seven a.m. and told her to meet me at the Starbucks next to my office at nine. She appeared less chipper this time. I wanted everything. All the details about her and Pritchett.

She was the granddaughter of James Price, Pritchett's partner who died of Aids-related pneumonia in 2007. Price was a writer and former Poet Laureate of North Carolina.

"You said you worked for Pritchett. Or are you family?" I wasn't sure where my questions were coming from or where I was going. Were she and Pritchett buddy-buddy? Was she his surrogate daughter, helping assuage his guilt? Did she love him like she might have loved her grandfather? Or did she need Pritchett's money?

"I found you as a favor. He was always good to my granddad. They were together eleven years. I was still in high school when granddad came out. My mom didn't want anything to do with him, but I didn't judge him. The more I got to know Pritchett, the more I trusted him.

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't much like Pritchett right off the bat. He doesn't try to be likeable. But he's always been trustworthy. Tells the truth. Is direct. There's something to be said for that, right?"

"Have you seen his will?"

She narrowed her eyes.

"I'm being direct," I offered.

"I haven't and I don't know if he's leaving anything else to me."

"'Anything else?'"

"Granddad left a sizeable estate to Prtichett. Old family money. Nothing to mother, his only child. Before she could contest the will, Pritchett gave her seventy-five percent of

everything, including all the land and property, some North Carolina beachfront and some near Asheville, Black Mountain area. He kept a modest annuity for himself and a small savings account they'd opened together." She took a long sip of coffee. "I fought my mother on fighting Pritchett for the rest of it. Nothing would make up for her disapproval of her dad's lifestyle or the fact that he wanted her to have nothing."

"Where is your mother now?"

"Not even on her damned property! In a very expensive holding tank for Alzheimer's patients in Buckhead. She has diabetic kidney disease to boot. So much for her sense of fairness," she blinked back tears.

I told her I was sorry and I meant it. Like me, Kathryn was single, an only child, lost in her work, and motherless. Unlike me, she had the burden of visiting a body that resembled her mother; she'd endured a decade as dutiful daughter and power of attorney despite her mother's verbal and more recent physical assaults. And yet, Kathryn was working without complaint to establish her business and I felt happy for her. Before we parted two hours later, she told me she gave up a son who would now be nineteen. Soon, she would find the courage to find him.

I started to head back to work, but I was already three hours behind. *Lilacs and fireflies, earth and sky . . .* their *war,* my conception. Who had broken first?

I drove to Pritchett's where I found him sitting up, glasses on, reading the *Atlantic*.

He nodded. I said hello and looked for his caregiver.

"She was going to buy some coffee, but she's been gone over an hour," he closed the magazine. "I don't mind."

"I'm glad you're doing well today," I tried to hide my nervousness. I was rarely nervous and my awareness added to it.

"Yes, they call it a last rally," he motioned for me to sit in a chair to his left. Someone on his care team had angled the bed to catch the best light through the small dining room window. His face looked even younger, his eyes bluer than five days ago. "But you know all about that."

I was grateful to talk about something less personal. "A few people have them, most don't. I'm still surprised by families' attributions. Either it's a miracle healing or a gift from God.

Answered prayers. We try to tell families at the beginning about rallies, so they don't ride a euphoric wave only to crash even harder in a day or two."

He nodded. "You look like your mother, the way she held her head when explaining something that mattered to her. Even more, you *sound* like her—her syntax and rhythm."

"I wouldn't know. She's hard to remember. After you saw her pregnant with me in New York, did you speak to her again?"

"No. I mailed the *Kansas City Review* to her, the one you now have. She should have received it the month you were born. I congratulated her and encouraged her to keep writing."

"I was nine when she died. I'll never know if she kept it or anything from you."

"That's not important. I had hoped that you had some of her poems, that she'd kept writing, but now, that's not important."

"I don't know if she wrote after I was born. Dad gave me photos and some jewelry. When he died, I found nothing but his things in the house. Did mother write back to you, ever?"

"No. I didn't expect it. But I thought I saw her boarding a train with you once, or maybe I was rallying because I missed her and wanted to see her. A woman and a girl about five or six boarding a train in Durham, North Carolina."

"Coming back from grandmother's. My father's mother lived there. We visited twice a year."

He looked sad, as if he had hoped for fifty years that my mother and I were a mirage, not a lost opportunity. He aged instantly and I remembered my work identity, aware that his rally could end any moment.

"Yesterday, you tried to say you were sorry you weren't around to be a father—I was here briefly."

"Yes," some of the sadness drained away, "I was in pain, somewhat drugged but I remember. You left quickly."

"I . . . I heard you and believed you, but I couldn't block a surge of anger. It came on suddenly."

"Maybe that's *your* last rally?" he looked earnest, as if he knew how delicate a thing truth is and that most of us wrap it in sarcasm, wit or irony because we are all so afraid of its power.

"I don't know . . . I want to be mad that you waited so long to find me. That you haven't said, 'Hey, Linda, I'm sorry—for *you* not just for *me*—that I wasn't around. Hey, Linda, I'm sorry you have to see me like this. Linda, I love you.'"

Pritchett didn't look surprised or shamed. I sucked in a deep breath and shook my head. "I don't . . . I didn't mean that last part, really."

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Important thing is you said it. To me. While I'm here."

I scooted my chair nearer to him. "Kathryn said it's easier to believe she's doing her son a favor by keeping her identity a secret."

"No arguments here," he lifted his hand from his lap and moved it toward me. I took it.

"She said she has to expect nothing but rejection, maybe hatred at first."

He leaned all the way back into his pillow as if he'd found the perfect resting spot.

"She said the worst would be indifference. If a birth parent didn't matter enough to even dislike."

"I'm glad you got angry and left," he said, "but even happier that you're here today."

His eyes closed as the little window's light dimmed with the setting of its source. I put my other hand on his forearm and stroked it the way I'd comforted my father.

Contributor Notes

Eileen Arthurs' novel, *Lorelei's Family*, is available for Kindle and Nook. Her story, "The Two Madonnas of Positano," won honorable mention in the Spring 2013 Writers Weekly 24-hour Short Story Contest. "Just Enough," placed second in fiction, and will appear in Carlow University's "Ten" anthology. Eileen teaches writing at the Community College of Allegheny County. A member of the Madwomen in the Attic and the Liars' Club, Eileen earned her MFA from Carlow University.

Jessica Bagwell is a Senior Creative Writing student at Texas Tech University. Born and raised in Lubbock, she harbors a special love for the unique people and culture of West Texas. In addition to reading too much, she enjoys spending time with her three dogs and watching the same movies over and over.

Jodi Barnes' flash fiction can be found on *100 Word Story*, *Prime Number*, *Wigleaf*'s Top 50, *Camroc Press Review* and *Fictionaut*'s Editor's Eye. She's a short-short story finalist on *Glimmer Train* and Press 53 Open Awards. Her chapbook, *unsettled* (Main Street Rag), was runner-up for best poetry book in North Carolina. Other poems are in *Iodine Journal*, *Blue Collar Review*, and in several anthologies. She founded 14 Words for Love, literary experiments in social activism.

Steven Lee Beeber is the author of *The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk* (Chicago Review Press), the editor of *AWAKE! A Reader for the Sleepless* (Soft Skull Press) and the associate editor of the literary journal *Conduit*. His work has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Harpers, Fiction, Post Road, Memorious, The New York Times* and elsewhere. He has an MFA in Fiction from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and teaches creative writing and creative nonfiction at Lesley University.

Catherine Bell has published work in *Peregrine*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *Inkwell*, *Coal City Review*, *Midway Journal*, *Saranac Review*, and other journals. Recently, her story "Witness" appeared in the anthology *Amazing Graces*. "House on the Rocks" received a New Millenium honorable mention. *Rush of Shadows*, a novel, was a finalist in a Whidbey Writers Association contest. "Gull" appears in the current issue of *Green Hills Literary Lantern.* "Incident at Cohasset" is forthcoming in *South Carolina Review.*

Bronwyn Berg is a Canadian poet, writer, student and single mother to two grown children. She was born and raised in Calgary, Alberta and had her first poem published at the age of ten. Although she has had poetry published, this will be her short story debut. She currently resides in Peachland, British Columbia where she is pursuing a degree in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia.

Barry Bergman fled New York for the Southwest at a tender age, and now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. His checkered career includes stints as a smelter worker, warehouseman, courier, newspaper reporter, magazine writer and editor, and communications professional. Hobbies include reading, yelling at cable news, and tweeting. He hopes to finish writing a novel before he dies.

Daniel Bryant, a Maine physician, is delighted to have his work published again in *Sixfold.* His stories have previously appeared in *Nimrod*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Hospital Drive*, *Madison Review*, and *Crab Orchard Review*, and the first chapter of his novel *May We Waken One by One* was published in *Silk Road*.

Marc Burgett began writing short fiction when he retired from a career in special education. His stories have appeared in *The MacGuffin, The Iconoclast,* and *The Talking Stick.* He owes his development as a writer to the teaching artists at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis and to his circle of writer friends. When not writing, he explores the many paths of retirement with his wife, plays with his grandsons, and walks his black lab, Rowdie.

Tony Burnett is a director of the Writer's League of Texas and an award winning songwriter. His short fiction and poetry have appeared in national literary journals including, most recently, *Tidal Basin Review, Fringe, Fiction 365, Red Dirt Review, The Vein, Toucan Magazine* and *Connotation Press.* He lives rural Texas with his trophy wife where his hobbies include having philosophical conversations with melons, poking wasp nests with a short stick and wandering aimlessly about.

After earning her Master's degree at the tender age of zero, Liz Cook moved to Korea for a year, where she was most definitely not a member of an elite spy team's unsuccessful attempt to take down the North Korean empire. She is currently working on her MFA in fiction from New Mexico State, where she eats green chiles with every meal.

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Heather Frese received her master's degree in English from Ohio University and her MFA in fiction from West Virginia University. Her work is forthcoming in *The New York Quarterly*, *Creative Nonfiction*, and *Rougarou*, and has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Front Porch, Switchback*, and *The Southeast Review*, among others. Her essay, "Fatigue," received notable mention in the *Pushcart Prize Anthology* and *Best American Essays*.

Maria Hummer is from Toledo, Ohio, and lives in London. She has a BFA in Creative Writing and an MA in Screenwriting. She has worked for an English school in Seoul, a refugee resettlement agency in St. Louis, a taste-testing panel in London, and a youth hostel in Budapest. She is currently writing her first novel.

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