SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2014

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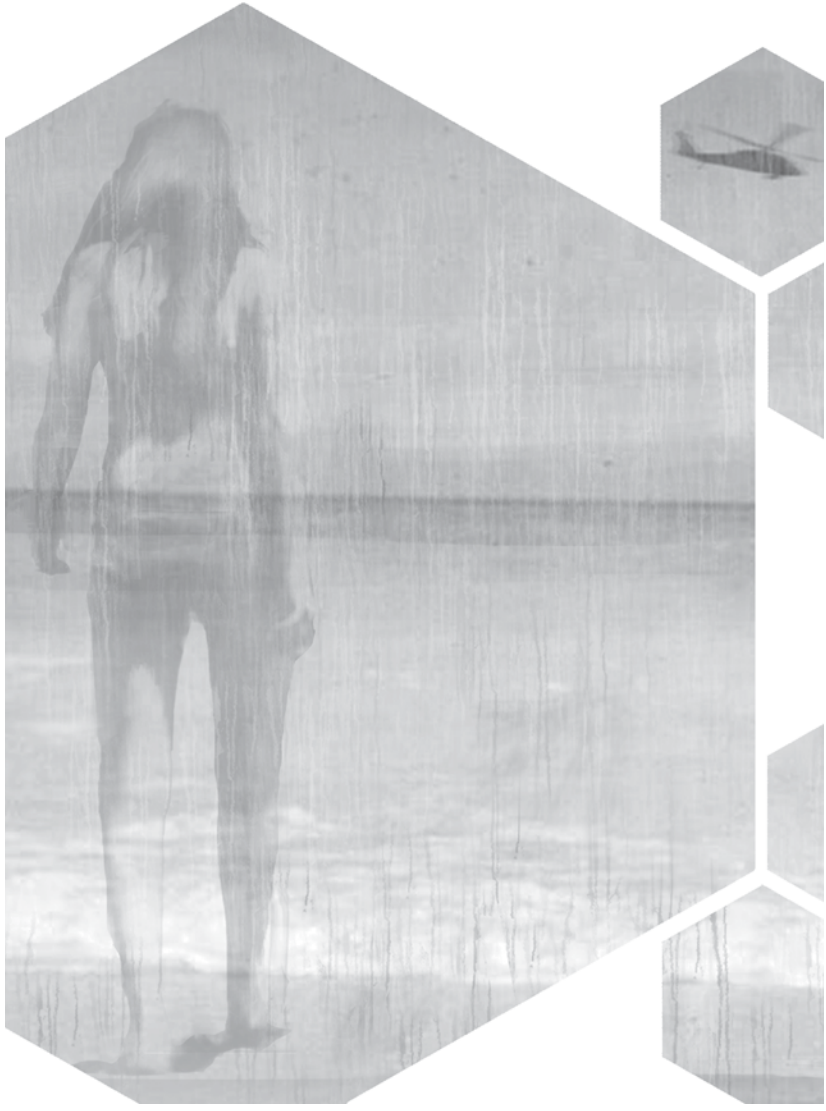

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Bill Pippin

Century

It was a little past noon when Connor drove up the curving asphalt lane through a stone archway and entered the sprawling grounds of the Sierra Vista Assisted Living Center. He'd motored from Taos the day before and spent the night in a motel—his monthly ritual. The overpriced center wasn't what Connor would've chosen for himself, but of the five they'd checked out together this was the one Roy liked best, albeit reluctantly, having long resisted assisted living as a service for old people.

Roy had opted for Sierra Vista because it was outside the Phoenix sprawl, not too dandified, and offered a view of the mountains. He'd also heard through the geezer grapevine that the kitchen was run by a Mexican cook legendary for her top-shelf chile rellenos. Silhouetted on a rise in the desert against a cobalt blue sky, the imposing structure of brown stucco topped by a red-tiled roof, with its abundance of flowers and shrubbery, resembled a country club.

Connor parked in the visitors' lot, tugged a small cooler from beneath the pickup cap, and trudged up the concrete walkway. Entering the reception area, he heard sounds of lunch being served in the dining room: chattering voices, laughter, clattering dishes. Something smelled good. He was halfway across the tiled floor, homing in on the men's room, when Helga Young stepped out of the main office holding a brown paper bag.

"He's not in his apartment," she said. "You'll find him in the courtyard."

Connor could tell Helga wasn't pleased. She was a tall, raw-boned woman in her mid-fifties with short graying hair, a wide, oddly crooked mouth, and posture so erect that Connor suspected she wore a back brace. When he asked if Roy was behaving himself, she complained that he refused to attend the party they'd planned for his birthday, contending their diabolical intent was to capitalize on his age for the purpose of cheap publicity.

"And might he be right about that?" Connor asked with a wink.

Helga pushed out her lips in a feigned pout. "It's not every day that one of our residents turns one hundred. We did invite a newspaper reporter and photographer—an invitation we've now rescinded. Angela baked him a lovely chocolate cake—"

"Whoa. She has to know how much he hates sweets."

"Among other things." Helga frowned. "Oh, someone called to wish him a happy birthday. A woman. Roy refused to speak to her."

Connor hesitated. "A woman?"

"Claimed she was his daughter in Seattle?"

He was stunned to hear this. "I do have a younger sister named Marsha."

"And yet Roy swears he doesn't have a daughter. I was afraid dementia . . ."

"They don't like each other," Connor said. "Hard to explain."

Helga was one of the few staff members who could tolerate Roy. In return he seemed to abuse her more than he did the others, especially after Connor made the mistake of telling Roy that Helga's father had been a Nazi during World War II. Helga had divulged this fact to Connor innocently enough while they were discussing Roy's wellness check over coffee. A *low-level* Nazi, she insisted. Her father had surrendered to the British at the end of World War II and later worked for them as an interpreter. Eventually he'd emigrated to England and married a Brit. Helga was born a year later. Although she assured Connor that he hadn't betrayed her trust, he regretted the miscue.

Helga handed Connor the bag. "This is for our birthday boy. Tell him we'll just have to party on without him." She paused, tilting her head. "You know . . . I really wish we could record some of his stories. How do you think he'd feel about that?"

Connor shrugged. "Why don't you ask him?"

"I was hoping you would."

"I'd rather not. Roy might think I'm in cahoots with you." Helga studied his smile uncertainly. Connor was only half joking. Roy guarded his privacy above all else.

"One more thing," she said. "Care to join me for dinner this

evening? My place?"

He was stricken by a moment of panic. He liked Helga but he wasn't attracted to her. It had been a while since he'd been attracted to any woman, an issue he was content with. What little he knew about Helga she had volunteered: her marriage to an American soldier that brought her to America; the subsequent divorce. Another divorce or two may have followed—he wasn't sure. He tried not to sound brusque as he alibied, "Appreciate the invite, but I plan on starting back before dinner."

Helga nodded stiffly and turned away.

In the men's room, standing before the urinal at last, Connor sighed with relief. Almost every time this urgency struck—and his enlarged prostate made it happen with increasing frequency—he relived a scary night long ago when his parents left him outside a bar. "Stay in the car," his dad instructed, "we won't be gone long."

On his knees in the driver's seat, both hands gripping the steering wheel, Connor pretended to be racing down a highway in pursuit of bank robbers. The front of the car faced the bar's door and every time it opened he heard the jukebox playing. He was steering madly when two angry men shoved a drunk out the door. Sprawled on the sidewalk, the man lay partly shielded by the car's hood. Only the backs of his splayed legs, clad in jeans and cowboy boots, were visible. Then Connor saw one leathery hand reach up and grasp the chrome hood ornament. Bit by bit the man hauled himself up until his head appeared. Apparently he'd slammed into the lamp post: bright red blood seeped through his long black hair and streamed down his face.

The man had trouble focusing, until at last he pulled himself up to full height and focused on Connor. To Connor he looked like an Indian. His shirt was torn at the shoulder, buttons ripped off down to his navel. Groping clumsily, he felt his way along the side of the car. Each step he took drove Connor to slide lower in the seat. By the time the man reached the driver's window, Connor had sunk to his knees on the floorboard.

The man flattened his broad nose against the glass and peered down past the steering wheel into Connor's face. The

car door was unlocked, Connor realized, but he was too terrified to reach up and lock it. At any moment he expected the man to open the door and grab him. His heart drumming inside his chest seemed to actually make his shirt pulsate. That wide brown oval face covered with blood was the scariest thing he'd ever seen.

Then the man did something that broke the tension—he crossed his eyes and stuck his tongue out at Connor.

After the drunk moved on, Connor was left with an urgent need to pee. He was afraid to leave the car—he knew better than to disobey his dad. Peeing in his pants was unthinkable—big boys didn't do that. He considered opening the door just enough to pee in the street, but the drunk might still be out there. In desperation he looked all around. The car was a big, black, early 1940s four-door sedan with large chrome ashtrays everywhere: in the dash, behind the front seat, in the arm rests. Rather than let his bladder burst, Connor filled the ashtrays one by one with steaming piss. He used his shirt sleeves to wipe up the overflow.

By the time his mom and dad emerged from the bar, his gut was cramped with anxiety. During the drive home he worried that his dad would light a cigarette. He agonized much of that night and throughout the next day. Would his dad come home from work and take off his belt, vowing, "I'm gonna wear your britches out, boy."? For days Connor made himself sick with worry. Until at last it dawned on him that nothing was going to happen; the desecration had apparently gone unnoticed. Now, nearly seventy years later, he still wondered about the incident. Had it even happened? Or had he dreamed it?

Connor washed his hands, picked up the cooler and brown bag, and went looking for Roy.

Sierra Vista's large inner courtyard was tastefully landscaped with native flora: a tall saguaro, Joshua trees, alligator juniper, agave, ocotillo, yucca, holly-leaf buckthorn. In place of grass, the courtyard's main surface was covered with three different colors of gravel, intersected by curving flagstone paths. Near the center of the courtyard was a fish pond with a fountain, beyond this a gazebo. Connor spotted Roy inside the gazebo, slumped on a cushioned wooden bench that ringed the interior.

"Happy birthday!" Connor sang out.

Squinting behind thick glasses, Roy looked up at his son. He wore cowboy boots, navy blue trousers, a tan, short-sleeved shirt, red suspenders. His knotty hands lay motionless in his lap. Once he'd been a handsome, muscular man with a full head of black hair combed straight back from his forehead. His thinning hair had now turned pearl gray, his swarthy complexion had faded. He was smaller, both in height and weight, though his flat stomach and dearth of wrinkles made him appear younger than his age.

Connor set the cooler on the gazebo's redwood floor. "How does it feel to have lived for a hundred years?"

"You don't wanta know," Roy said. "What's in there? Beer I hope."

"And a Subway foot-long. Peppers and onions, black olives."

"No cake."

"I know better than that. They were just trying to be nice, Roy." He sat down on the curving bench and faced his dad. Though he still spoke with vigor his voice had turned gravelly. Connor opened the brown bag and pulled out a brightly wrapped present with a big blue bow. "From Helga." He passed the gift to Roy. "Open it first, then we'll eat."

"Little Miss Nazi? No thanks."

"Looks like a book. And she's not a Nazi. Shouldn't call her that. Helga wasn't even born till after the war. Her father was the Nazi."

"Blood's thicker than water."

"Yeah? Some people say you're an asshole but that doesn't make me one."

Roy chuckled. "I been called worse."

Connor took a deep breath. "Why'd you tell Helga you don't have a daughter? Why wouldn't you talk to Marsha? Why do you treat your own daughter like crap?"

"I don't treat her any way. I never see her. So she's not my daughter."

"Of course she's your daughter."

Roy sniffed. "A real daughter would come visit."

"After you told her to stay away?"

"She should come anyhow, same as you do."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Does to me."

Connor snatched the gift back and tore off the wrapping. "Looky there," he said. "*The Spell of the Yukon*. Boy oh boy. How'd Helga know you love Robert Service?"

"You told her, that's how. How big's the print?"

Connor opened the book. "Not big enough. I can read it to you, though. How about *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*? You used to read me that one."

"First give me a beer, some of that sub."

Connor laid the book aside and used the bottle-opener on his pocket knife to pop the cap on a Corona. He handed the bottle to Roy. After wiping the largest blade on his pants leg, he sliced the sub across the middle. He placed each half on a paper plate, along with a napkin, and passed one plate to Roy. He tore open a jumbo bag of Fritos and propped it on the bench between them.

"Forget the lime?" Roy asked.

"No way." Connor fished a lime out of the cooler. He cut two angular slices and handed one to Roy. He opened a second Corona and they tapped bottles. "Here's to a century of hard living," he said.

Roy took a long swig and gasped, teary-eyed. "Good golly Miss Molly, that is good."

"Make it last, Roy. One's your limit."

"Bullshit. Couple more down there—one for you, one for me. Seeing it's my birthday, maybe both for me."

"Want Helga to skin my ass?"

"That kraut'll do more to your ass than skin it."

Connor laughed. "Too young for me. Is she making sure you take your medication and drops?"

"Those eye drops aren't worth a hill of beans." Roy bit into his sub and Connor marveled at the whiteness of his teeth. He still had nearly every one.

For a time they ate in silence. Connor had grown accustomed to these quiet periods. Their conversations were generally mundane anyway—What've you been up to? Same old, same old.—both of them halfheartedly going through the motions. But on Roy's hundredth birthday maybe he should try to spark a more meaningful discourse. He was considering how to go about this when Roy helped him out: "Tell me

something," he said. "How come you haven't remarried?"

Connor shrugged his shoulders. "Too much trouble, I guess."

"Hard to find women like we had, huh? Sheila made the best damned tamales. She was a lot like your mom."

Connor nodded. "I'd have to agree."

"But Marsha, that damned girl—she as much as accused me of killing your mom."

Connor gave this some thought. In her own way Marsha could be as unyielding as her dad, but Roy was exaggerating. "I don't think she went that far. She's told me how she feels. She thinks the life we lived was too hard. She thinks it shortened Mom's life."

"And she hates me for that."

"Marsha doesn't hate you. She's just cautious . . . overly cautious. You want her to come see you and yet you told her not to. If she did come you'd be all over her, like when she was a girl. She's a grown woman now, an engineer. She was in charge of her department when she retired, for Christ sake. Why should she expose herself to your verbal abuse?"

"I never once whipped her like I did you."

"That's not the issue."

"Was it really that hard?"

Hard was relative, Connor supposed. Their mom had pampered his sister to a fault. Her baby girl, Little Princess, Angel Puss. As a grown woman, Marsha expected—*demanded*—the same treatment from Roy. She wanted Roy to somehow become their mom: sweet, affectionate, charming. That was never going to happen.

"It was hard on Mom," Connor said. "Raising two kids. Her health wasn't always good, and yet she toughed it out. How much of her intestine did they take that time?"

"Too much," Roy said. "She always had spirit but her gut was weak. Gangrene—she waited too long to complain. "

She did at that. For Connor, their nomadic life had been exciting: always moving, never knowing what the next place, the next school would be like. Hardscrabble oilfield towns in Louisiana, Texas, Colorado, California, New Mexico—whenever and wherever Roy's itchy feet took him. Living in tarpaper shacks, duplexes, one-bedroom trailers, drafty old

farmhouses. One shabby little oilfield town in Wyoming—if you could call it a town—had been so far out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by miles of sagebrush, it lacked electricity. The general store, gas station, café and bar were hooked to generators. All the rental houses—shanties really—received free natural gas from the oil company to fuel space heaters and mantles. Behind every house stood an outhouse. But Connor had been adaptable. Only when he reached his teens and had to leave his girlfriend in California did he come to view their lifestyle as problematic.

"Mom didn't like to complain," Connor said, with an edge to his voice, "because she knew you'd see it as weakness."

"One thing she wasn't was weak," Roy said.

Connor remained silent for a minute, recalling that his mom had had more than one miscarriage. That blocked intestine that resulted in gangrene nearly killed her. A couple of years later adhesions from the first operation nearly killed her again. He remembered her straining to hand-pump water into buckets and pans to heat on a gas cookstove, bending over a galvanized tub—the same tub he bathed in every Sunday night—scrubbing their clothes on a rub-board. Bundling up to venture outside in freezing wind to hang starched khakis and blue jeans on a line, where they quickly froze. Why the hell hadn't he helped her out more? Why hadn't he been more thoughtful instead of being just like his dad? Because his mom let him get away with it—just like his dad.

"God only knows why she put up with you," Connor said at last. "You'd come home from work and sit down to a good supper every evening, then like as not you'd mosey down to the nearest bar and blow your paycheck playing poker or shooting craps. You never worried, not about anything. Mom worried. Your irresponsibility, your recklessness, your philandering. The life she lived was harsh. It wore her out. Wore her heart out, not her gut. Forty-seven. That's too young to die."

Roy kept staring straight ahead. "She put up with me because she loved me," he said. "And what was I doing besides that other stuff? Making a living, that's what."

"Okay, I'll give you that, but—"

"Had to go where the construction was, boy. Where they were drilling for oil. Where somebody would pay me a living

wage to roughneck or skin a Cat." He grinned at Connor. "I even won at poker now and then."

Connor couldn't resist grinning back. "Guess I wasn't aware of it."

"Life was hard, sure. But not *that* hard. Not compared to the Great Depression. Jesus. Read *The Grapes of Wrath*. You don't remember any of it. Your mom and I experienced it. We were more afraid of fear itself than a hard life. She never complained—not to me she didn't. Saw it as some romantic adventure. Marsha doesn't know what hard is. I thought we had a pretty good life."

"Mom *should've* complained," Connor said. "Should've given you an earful."

"What about you?" Roy said. "You were a handful, yourself. When you started driving, your mom and I worried you wouldn't make it through your teens. Drag racing, speeding tickets, that time you rolled my Ford. Your mom couldn't handle you, she gave up trying. Somebody had to make you toe the line."

All true, Connor had to admit.

It was hot in the gazebo, but not unbearably so. An intermittent breeze wafted through. Roy kept staring at the fountain until it drew Connor's attention. It looked antique: intertwined cupids supporting a top basin, surmounted by another winged cupid in bronze. The cascading water made Connor think of the Rio Grande Gorge, not far from Taos. He'd driven out there more than once this past year to stand on the long bridge that spanned the gorge, lean over the railing and stare down at the rapid-splotched river over five hundred feet below. Trying to work up his nerve to jump, like many others had before him.

Then he'd remember Roy and back away.

The glass door leading into the courtyard opened and a stooped, white-haired woman toddled out. Tapping her cane on the flagstone, she shielded her eyes with the other hand to peer at the gazebo. In a croaking tremolo she sang a few lines of "Happy Birthday," before ducking back inside.

"Mildred Bell," Roy said. "Babe's got the hots for me."

"I can see that," Connor said.

"Well, I'm done now. You can tell Marsha. She'll be glad to

hear it."

Connor set his beer down on the bench. "Done?"

"Hit my mark."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Wanted to live to a hundred. Time to hang her up."

Connor snorted. "You're gonna live a lot longer, Roy."

"What's the point?" Roy asked. "Realistically? You think it's fun being this old?"

"Better than the alternative," Connor said.

"Hell it is. I'm going blind, boy."

Connor took time to open Roy another Corona. He'd never heard his dad talk this way. He reached for his beer and nearly knocked it over. "What do you—what do you miss most?"

"Miss most?" Roy repeated.

"In your life."

Roy squeezed both eyes shut. "Driving, I guess. I miss being out on the road like that Willie Nelson song. Getting up before dawn, heading out to someplace different, the sun coming up on a new day, my woman there beside me. You in the backseat, gawking at everything over my shoulder, asking all those questions. That and tobacco. I dearly miss my smokes."

"And Mom? Do you miss Mom?"

"You know damn well I do."

Connor studied his profile. He'd often done this as a boy, lying on his belly on top of blankets spread over their worldly possessions piled high in the backseat of whatever car they owned at the time, the smoke from his dad's Camel veiling the narrow mottled highway, stretching all the way to the horizon, with a mystical haze. Once he even felt compelled to reach out and touch his dad's cheek, before quickly withdrawing his hand. So quickly that his dad didn't appear to notice, and Connor went back to looking for Burma Shave signs.

Early on, his love for his dad had blossomed into hero worship. This despite his paradoxical fear of Roy's volcanic anger. He dreaded the sting of his dad's double-tongued embossed leather belt; feared the disappointment that could cloud those emerald eyes whenever Connor made some misstep, usually in emulation of his dad's transgressions, transgressions that Connor had, in boyish dreaminess, endowed with quixotic radiance. Once grown, he'd come to see those same trans-

gressions for the character flaws they were and swap them for faults truer to his own nature, while recognizing he was no better off for this exchange.

If Roy said he was ready to die, Connor decided, he likely would die, and this awareness riled him. Had Roy even considered his feelings? Had he ever? Suicide was such a self-centered act. Not that Roy would consider killing himself—Connor was certain of this—he'd simply will himself to die. And then he *would* die.

"Hard to believe now," Connor said, "how we used to pile everything we owned in the trunk and backseat of some car."

"We did travel light," Roy said. "After Marsha came along, we needed a U-Haul. She had all this stuff that made things more complicated. Girls need more stuff. Girls are more complicated than boys. A lot more."

"She's asked me more than once," Connor said, "how come you made us start calling you Roy. I wasn't really sure."

Roy tossed a piece of bread into the pond and watched a big fish rise up to grab it. "Because," he said, " you weren't kids anymore. Somehow it didn't sound natural hearing grown people call me 'Daddy.'"

Connor rolled his eyes. "You don't think people think it's strange hearing me call my dad by his first name? Helga thinks it's weird."

Roy poked what remained of his sub into his mouth and didn't bother to reply.

"What should we do now?" Connor asked. "Go for a ride?"

Roy shook his head.

"Play checkers? Cards? Dominoes?"

Again Roy shook his head.

"It's your birthday. We can do whatever you like."

"This is fine."

"I wish you hadn't told me that."

Roy turned to him. "Told you what?"

"You'd decided to die."

"Hell, you ought to be expecting it . . . after a hundred years."

Connor chewed his lower lip. "If it happens, it happens. But you're gonna *make* it happen, you said."

"When I die, I die. "

"You bailing out on me, Roy?"

Roy kept staring at him. "How much does it cost you, helping with my rent?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"I'm a liability."

"You never heard me complain."

"You should."

"I can afford it."

Roy winked. "Yeah, you did all right for yourself."

"You were my model."

"Me?"

Connor smiled. "I learned to manage my money from watching you piss yours away."

Roy drank some beer and squinted down at the bottle like it tasted flat.

"About ready to go inside and join the party?" Connor asked.

"You're an old man yourself," Roy said. "What do *you* miss most?"

Connor pretended to ponder this question, though he knew the answer. "Sheila," he said at last. "I miss my wife. I miss her smile. I miss her touch. I miss watching her fingers wrap those tamales. I regret taking her for granted. You took Mom for granted, I did the same with Sheila."

They were more than partners, more than lovers, they were a team. In the early seventies, after selling their home in Houston and quitting good jobs, they moved to Taos and invested their savings in a bed and breakfast. They were childless, though not from lack of trying. Twenty-five years later they sold the much-improved business for a sizable profit and moved into a chalet nearer the ski area. Living the good life. Until some out-of-control yahoo, skiing above Sheila on a black diamond, went airborne off a mogul just as she was bending down to adjust her bindings. The yahoo's skis scissored her neck, nearly decapitating her. Connor, skiing farther down the slope, didn't know about the accident until the ski patrol came looking for him. The gaudy insurance settlement he received only left him feeling worse.

"Everybody does that," Roy said. "Sheila took you for granted, take my word for it. That's how marriage works." He

reached into the bag for another handful of Fritos. “You think Marsha will miss me?”

Connor cocked his head. “To be honest . . . I’m not sure.”

“I’m real proud of how you both turned out. You can tell her.”

“Mom had something to do with that.”

“Your mom was a saint.”

Connor looked over at him. “Not exactly.”

Roy sat up straight. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Hard to believe she’d leave her kid out in the car while you and her went in a bar.” When Roy broke into laughter, Connor asked, “Why is that funny?”

“I can’t believe you remember it. You were only . . . four, five? We didn’t mean to stay in that bar long.”

“Why did you then?”

“This drunk Indian got rowdy when the bartender stopped serving him. This was in Lander, Wyoming. He was likely from the Wind River Reservation. He grabbed a bottle and was halfway across the bar before me and two other guys dragged him back. After they tossed him out, the bartender insisted on setting us all up. Your mom and I couldn’t just leave. When we did come out, you’d pissed in all the ashtrays. Every damned ashtray in the car—and then some.”

Connor made a show of laughing. “I guess you wore my britches out.”

Roy shook his head. “Your mom nearly divorced me, that’s what happened. She’d pleaded with me to let her go check on you, but I didn’t like her babying you. I felt like a bastard when I saw how desperate you must’ve been. Your mom raked me over the coals, said things I wouldn’t’ve normally stood for. Shamed me. I deserved it.”

Connor remained silent, until Roy added, “Wish it was still like that.”

“Like what?”

“You could leave your kid out in the car, not worry about some weirdo grabbing him. That sort of thing didn’t happen back then. Hardly ever anyhow.”

“It’s a different world,” Connor said.

“That’s the problem with being a hundred. You see so much change. You see how things are better in some ways, worse in

others. Mostly worse and that's depressing."

"Nothing stays the same."

"I felt kinda sorry for that Indian."

"I'm glad you told me about it," Connor said. "It helps."

Roy used his thumb to push his glasses higher on his nose. "Helps with what?"

"Helps me understand you better."

"Christ, good luck with that." Roy chuckled. "I have trouble understanding myself."

"Even after a hundred years?"

Roy appeared to weigh this question, until with a flutter of eyelids he lost focus. At last he blinked and nodded at the book. "I'm ready now. Read me that Dan McGrew poem. Then the one about Sam McGee."

Connor opened the book to *The Shooting of Dan McGrew,* cleared his throat, and began to read. Occasionally he looked up to steal a peek at Roy, leaning back with arms crossed, eyes closed, head nodding slightly, settled deep in some rapturous trance, intoxicated by the rhythm of those sparse tough sentences. When Connor read the poem's last line, about the lady that's known as Lou, he raised his eyes and saw Roy sitting motionless, slumped in a peculiar way, his eyes half closed. He didn't appear to be breathing. Connor stopped breathing as well.

He reached over and placed the knuckles of his right hand against Roy's jaw, letting the backs of his fingers trail lightly across the warm emery-cloth skin. When Roy shuddered and drew a long breath, Connor released his own breath. Then Roy smiled. Connor smiled too. He was about to say something, but the words caught in his throat. It wasn't easy speaking words of love to Roy, just as it wasn't easy for Roy to tolerate them. Connor decided not to risk it.

Instead, he turned to the next poem and began to read, "There are strange things done in the midnight sun . . ."

Chris Belden

The Finger

They'd left the house without a flashlight, which Walt now regretted. He could barely see the road, paved but narrow, with the occasional gravel driveway branching off into the darkness. The lake shimmered a dull silver to their left. They always walked this way, counterclockwise around the lake, one of their many habits he was bored with.

He'd asked Clare to take a walk in order to tell her that their marriage was over. He hadn't wanted to tell her at the house, thinking the words might come easier out here, but he couldn't get them past his dry lips. Instead, he kept looking up at the sliver of moon hanging in the trees.

"Bob and Debra Ann went to see someone," Clare said. "Some kind of counselor, and it really helped them."

"Oh?"

Clare, perhaps inspired by her dull friend Debra Ann, had lately decided that she and Walt were merely "in a rut," nothing that a little professional help couldn't cure. There wasn't enough "communication," Walt was "distant," there were "intimacy issues."

"What do you think?" she asked.

"About what?"

"About us. Seeing this counselor."

"Us?"

Bob had told him all about it, about how Debra Ann and the counselor had ganged up on him, and how they'd scolded him for not crying. He agreed with Bob that counseling was for those who need to tell themselves they've tried everything.

"We need to get it all off our chests," Clare went on. "But in a safe environment, with a neutral observer, so we don't get hostile."

Walt hated this kind of talk. Ever since Clare had started therapy, her conversations were peppered with terms like "supervising ego" and "unconscious anger." All of a sudden she knew everything about him, why he said or did certain things, why he couldn't sleep at night. She knew that his

"emotional unavailability" was due to his alcoholic father and cold, distant mother. She knew everything, it seemed, except that he'd been having an affair.

"Debra Ann says this counselor is an amazing woman. She really got Bob to open up and be honest about his fear of commitment."

Walt wished he had the nerve to say, *But I don't have a fear of commitment. It's just that, recently, I've been more committed to somebody else.*

One day Walt had gone into the little bookstore on Main Street looking for a copy of *Light Years* and ended up getting into a discussion about James Salter with Leah, the owner. Walt had been in the store a few times but had never bought anything, had barely noticed the tall, slender woman behind the counter, but, as she talked about Salter's work, her green eyes growing large, he could see how pretty she was. Those eyes—the way they contrasted with her long, dark hair—were like lamps in a far-off house in the middle of the night. She had no copies of *Light Years* in stock, she told him finally, but she would order one for him. He spent the rest of the week debating with himself about what to say to her when he went to pick up the book. In the end, he decided it couldn't hurt to have a friend in town, or at least that's what he told himself, and so he asked her to lunch. That was three months ago.

"Haven't you noticed how different they are?" Clare asked. "Bob used to be so mean to Debra Ann. All those cutting remarks."

"I haven't really noticed," Walt said. He didn't tell her that the reason that Bob was so mellow these days was that he'd also started seeing someone else, a nurse at the local hospital.

"The ten-year mark is a milestone," Clare told him. "That's when it really sinks in that this is forever. It can be hard, especially for men."

Ten years, Walt thought. It seemed so much longer. Back then they were living in the city, in a small one bedroom in the Village—the center of the world. They stayed out late on weeknights, spent all day Sunday in bed, and went through money as if determined to die broke. Then came 9/11 and Clare all of a sudden developed a desire to live in the country. "Time to grow up," she'd said. For Walt it meant, "Time to run

away from the place where everything is happening."

But, sufficiently beaten down by Clare's post-attack anxiety, he gave in. They bought their little house on the lake, he quit his full-time job to freelance, and Clare found work at the local weekly newspaper, where she covered town meetings and the latest collisions between deer and SUVs.

Leah could relate to his frustration. She'd moved out here with her ex several years back and started up the bookstore just to maintain her sanity. When they divorced she thought she'd move back to the city, but she'd grown fond of the store and decided to stay on instead.

She told him this over lunch. She'd dressed up for the occasion in a tight leather skirt that didn't quite reach her knees and a sleeveless blouse. Walt had surprised himself by putting on his expensive Italian suit coat for the first time since quitting his full-time job. He was up-front about being married, mentioning Clare several times in the first ten minutes, though he found his tone veering toward a sort of embarrassed exasperation whenever he referred to her. Leah seemed unfazed, even curious. She asked what Clare was like, what she did for work, what she looked like. For a moment he thought they could perhaps all become good friends, the three of them going out for dinner and drinks every now and then, but then he decided he didn't want that. He wanted Leah all to himself. After lunch they shook hands and she told him to let her know what he thought of the book.

"This is all very natural, sweetie," Clare told him. "There's no harder work than marriage."

They neared the Turner house, where a party was in progress. The Turner boys were a wild bunch, driving their souped-up cars too fast around the road's tight corners, occasionally knocking over mailboxes, and, when their parents were out, throwing these notorious parties. The usually placid night air thumped with hip-hop bass notes and peals of teenage laughter.

"Poor Mark and Laurie," Clare said of the Turners. "Those kids are a real burden. If they can stick together through *this*, *we* should be able to."

"I suppose you think everything would be okay if we had kids," he said.

"Oh, Walt, that's not what I meant."

She took his hand, the way she always did when she detected his frustration on this topic. But it only made him more angry.

Last year, after trying for months to conceive, Clare had talked him into having his semen analyzed. The whole experience was humiliating, with the smirking receptionist handing him that plastic cup and escorting him to a small, tiled room with a flimsy door. He could still picture the chair covered with examination-table paper, the shelf stacked with pornographic magazines, the television with a built-in VCR. The whole time he heard the people next door in the laboratory, chuckling among themselves. Not since he was fifteen years old in his parents' house had Walt masturbated within earshot of so many people going about their business. When the results showed that his sperm were not up to par—something about low motility—he'd felt emasculated and ashamed. Every time Clare spoke about couples who had children—even the Turners with their delinquent teenagers—Walt experienced it as a thinly veiled personal insult.

One of the reasons Leah had split with her ex was that she didn't want to have children. "The world is so crowded already," she'd told Walt that first time as she ran her long fingers lightly over his chest. A week had passed since their lunch. He'd stopped by the bookstore twice already, first to chat about *Light Years*, then just to say hello. During visit number three, she asked him if he'd like to step out for lunch. She told her assistant she'd be back in a couple hours, then led him down the street and up a flight of external stairs to her apartment above a pharmacy. She pulled leftover chicken from the fridge, which they ate cold with wine at her kitchen table. After lunch and a full bottle of pinot grigio she took his hand and escorted him to the bedroom. When she kissed him, parting her soft, wet lips, the hairs on his arms stood up. It had been forever since he'd felt that electric jolt that comes with the touch of a woman. Afterward, with one long leg draped over his belly, she spoke about her ex's anger at her for not wanting to have his babies. She went on to express her disdain for self-absorbed suburban ladies like Clare, with their biological clocks and SUVs. She was relieved, she said,

that Walt was sterile. “That means no contraception,” she said with a mischievous grin.

“But I do think the adoption process could bring us closer together,” Clare said as they passed the Turner house. She squeezed his hand again.

“I told you,” Walt said, tearing his hand away, “I think we should hold off on that.”

“Why? It takes so long, Walt. It wouldn’t hurt to start on the paperwork.”

He sighed. Paperwork meant lawyers, and lawyers meant money. If he was going to climb into that mud pit he may as well get what he really wanted out of it: a divorce.

They turned onto an especially dark stretch of road, flanked by fields of huge old maple trees, their full branches hanging overhead like a canopy. From somewhere around the next bend came the rumble of an engine.

“I’ve been doing some research,” Clare said. “We could fly to China in about twelve or fifteen months if we start the ball rolling now. Sheena at work did it with her husband, came back with an adorable little Chinese girl. They couldn’t be happier.”

Leah had also been talking about adoption lately. While she felt no need for a biological heir, she had decided that caring for an unwanted child would be a service to humanity. But instead of the predictable China—it seemed like every other couple in town had an adorable little Chinese girl in a state-of-the-art stroller—she was interested in Africa. “Have you ever met an Ethiopian?” she’d asked. She said they were absolutely gorgeous, with their smoky brown skin and neon smiles. For weeks now Walt had fantasized about raising such a child with Leah.

As they neared the turn in the road—a sharp left through the woods—Walt could hear the rapid approach of the vehicle, its stereo turned up all the way. Headlights flashed through the trees. It looked like a pickup, moving very fast.

“I just think we should figure out our problems,” he explained, “before we add such a huge complication to the mix.”

“A ‘huge complication’?” Clare said. “Is that what a child means to you?”

They’d just reached the turn when the pickup roared around

the bend, nearly running them over. In the split second during which the vehicle passed by, a mere foot or two away, Walt saw into the cab where two boys flanked a pretty girl with blonde hair. There was something especially infuriating about the trio, above and beyond their rudeness and lousy driving, and before he could think about what he was doing, he lifted his middle finger. Even within that crowded fraction of a second, he detected that his gesture had registered. Then the truck was past them.

"Jesus!" Clare said, stumbling on the uneven shoulder of the road.

Walt took hold of her arm. "Are you all right?"

"They could've killed us!"

Clare dusted herself off and they continued walking. As they made the sharp left turn, Walt glanced back to see the truck slow to a crawl, then stop. It was about fifty yards behind them. The brake lights glowed bright red in the dark.

"Anyway," Clare said, "I was going to say, it might do you some good to have a 'complication' in your life."

She hadn't noticed that the truck had stopped. Walt looked back again. What if the driver started to back up, or turned around? They were probably all drunk and looking for a fight. They might even have a gun in that ridiculous truck.

Clare said, "I think we've both gotten so comfortable with our lives that we could use a little shaking up, you know?"

Yeah, Walt thought. How about a little shake-up right now? Through the trees in the woods he could still make out the fire-red brake lights.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Uh-huh," he said, his ears tuned to the truck's low rumble. He considered telling Clare that they may be in some danger, but then he would have to tell her about his obscene gesture, and she would berate him for being so adolescent. Still, if the truck returned he would have to do *something*. He figured he had three options: dash into the woods and hide; run to the next house and ask for help; or stand his ground and confront the hoodlums. If only Leah were here with him instead of Clare. Leah inspired him to be stronger, mostly in dumb little ways—sending back an undercooked hamburger, or asking for directions from a stranger—but he could feel these small

adjustments shifting, ever so slightly, the tectonic plates of his character.

"Every time I bring up the idea of adoption," Clare said, "you shut down. Do you even realize that?"

Leah's right, he thought. Clare is so self-absorbed she can't even see what's going on right in front of her. Could she not hear the growl of the truck less than one hundred yards away? Could she not detect the hyper alert, anxious way that he was carrying himself? How would she protect her precious little Chinese girl from danger when she can't even tell if she herself is in peril?

"You're shutting down right now, aren't you?" she said.

He listened for the truck.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Shhh!"

The engine still rumbled, but it seemed quieter, either because the truck had moved on, or perhaps just because the distance was greater between them. He could not relax until he knew the truck had gone.

"What is your problem?" Clare asked.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"I thought I heard a fox," he said. She had a thing for foxes—maybe that would keep her quiet for a moment.

"Where?" she whispered.

"In the woods."

She cocked her head to listen.

He heard it, now that Clare had stopped talking: the truck engine. It had not moved. He wondered what they could be doing back there. Were they debating their course of action, one boy wanting to go back and kick some ass, the other anxious to get to the party, with the blonde girl torn between the two?

"I hear a car or something," Clare said.

The truck engine grew louder. It was moving.

"Must be those Turner kids," she added.

"Will you *shut up*?" Walt hissed. Even in the dark he could make out the look of shock on her face.

The truck, still around the bend, was coming closer.

"Walt?" Clare moaned.

"Okay," he said as the truck's headlights shone through the trees, "I need you to go into the woods."

"What?"

"Just do as I say."

The truck was just reaching the bend in the road. In a second or two, the headlights would be in their eyes.

"Please," he said. "Go into the woods and wait for me."

"*Why*?"

"Trust me, Clare."

She just stood there.

"*Do it*."

He pushed her toward the trees, but it was mostly the force of his voice that propelled Clare off the road and into the woods.

"Go on," he called out to her as the truck rounded the bend. "Keep going till you can't see me."

She had disappeared into the darkness but he could hear the crack of twigs as she ran. The truck was on the straightaway, its bright beams shining in his eyes. He considered following Clare, but for some reason he was not afraid anymore.

Earlier, Walt had parked in back of Leah's apartment and waited in his car until he saw her come home from the bookstore and climb the stairway. By the time he got out of his car and climbed the stairs, she had taken off all her clothes and lay in bed. This was their usual routine, two or three times a week. He thought now of her pale, smooth skin, her long legs wrapped around him, ankles locked and pulling him deeper inside her. Before she came, she went completely still, like a cat in freefall, just waiting, breathlessly, for the impact. When it arrived, she let everything go, including all decorum. It was nothing he'd ever seen or heard before: the way she writhed, the filth that poured from her mouth, as if each word, each gyration, could prolong the sensation. It horrified him at first, then made him laugh. Now it turned him on like nothing else ever had.

He stood by the side of the road, blinded by the headlights. The truck slowed, then braked to a stop ten yards away. The driver turned off the engine, leaving the lights on. The night sounds fell into place as if into perfectly carved slots: crickets, leaves rustling in the breeze, the far-off barking of a dog.

Walt raised his hand to shade his eyes, but could not see inside the truck. The occupants remained where they were, perfectly quiet.

When he announced that he was planning to leave Clare, Leah had not been as enthusiastic as he'd hoped. Not that she was displeased, exactly. *Reserved* was perhaps the best way to describe her reaction. There were no hugs and kisses, no tears of joy, but neither did she turn away. She continued to drape her long leg over him, but spoke in an unusually serious tone. She asked what he would do, where he would live. She wondered how Clare would react—would she be so angry that she'd make the divorce ugly? These were all good questions that he had not seriously considered. He had thought only of Leah and his life with her: the days and nights together, the trips to be taken, the sex. Even as she posed her thoughtful questions he glossed over them, declaring that he didn't care, that he cared only about *her*, about *them*.

"Walt?"

He heard the crackle of twigs in the woods.

"Stay there," he said.

The truck had not moved, nor had anyone inside spoken. They just sat there. Walt saw the tip of a cigarette glow red, then die out.

When he left Leah's apartment today, there had been a new seriousness between them. Normally they would kiss, hold one another, sometimes even return to bed. She would laugh, they would make plans to meet in a couple of days, both of them wishing out loud that they could meet sooner. This afternoon, there was a kiss, but it was without heat, and there was no laughter. They said they would get together in two days, but they both knew that, if Walt went ahead with his plans, the meeting would be consumed with a discussion of what had happened with Clare, and what it meant for their future. Everything would be different. No, he thought now—everything was *already* different.

He'd been so sure Leah loved him, just as he'd been sure he loved *her*. But as he stood there in the road with the truck's headlights burning his eyes, he was not sure of anything.

The girl giggled in the cab, then came a male voice: "I'm bored. Let's go."

The engine started with a bellow, followed by the grind of gears as the truck rolled backwards. The driver angled it sideways, then turned around. Still blind from the glare, Walt could barely make out the three occupants. A beer bottle shattered at his feet. The girl laughed and the truck tore off, exhaust clouding the view of its red taillights.

Clare emerged from the trees.

"Are you all right?" she asked, wrapping her arms around him.

He watched the truck's lights turn and fade into the trees, the rattling engine now a dull, far-off purr.

"What were they doing?" she asked. "Why did they come back like that?"

"I don't know," he said. He felt his head go heavy and his eyes fill with water.

"What's the matter?" Clare asked, touching the tears that rolled down his cheeks.

But he could not tell her.

"Let's go home," Clare said, taking his hand. "You'll feel better then."

And, knowing she was probably right, he went with her.

Amberle L. Husbands

Only Whistle Stops

They'd been calling him Antman so long that even he'd stopped wondering where the name came from. Whenever some truly devoted fan of his music found their way down to Flowery Branch, Georgia, and began asking around about him, a well-meaning local was sure to set them straight:

"Who? . . . Oh, *oh*, you must mean Antman."

And then that fan would get an educational earful. They would stumble out of the Pour House Tavern, back out onto Main Street, and go home to spread what they'd learned . . . But after all, it wasn't such a bad thing. "Antman" certainly made a better stage name than "Elmer" did.

Elmer Hugen had been "Antman" so long, in fact, that the name—shouted by a frightened voice as he lay snoring in an unfamiliar bed—snatched him up out of dream-sleep quicker than "Elmer" ever would have. He jumped out of bed in a sudden cold sweat, ready to fight; then the room began to dip drunkenly around his head, and he sat back down hard on the lopsided mattress, wondering if the motel was on fire. It claimed to be fireproof, but Elmer had learned that nothing on the jazz circuit was really fireproof. Everything burned, if you got it hot enough.

Elmer himself was capable of combustion, as he'd found out with that presumptuous redhead in Mobile. She'd gotten him hot enough, all right, with her gum smacking, her nasal disdain, her unsatisfied sighs . . . And when he'd finally burnt out, when the flames clouding his vision had finally cleared, she'd been as pale as ashes, spread across the mattress.

Slowly, the hotel room began to come into focus out of his dreams. The plastic-framed, square-faced clock by the door said it was nearly four in the morning, and it was *hot*; Carolina-coastline-in-July *hot*. All of Mount Pleasant had been sweating, rippling beneath the sun, ever since they'd gotten into town a week ago.

"Get up, man," the voice was still shouting. "C'mon, Ant, we gotta go!"

Snapshots of the scene would stick with him and resurface later, although the complete timeline was lost along with his broken-off bum wine dreams: Empty green bottles upside down in a wire trash basket. Trumpet case by the door, looking ready to bolt with or without him. A lady's scarlet shoe with the heel snapped off, lonely on the floor. A hot, flamingo pink moon burning in past the crooked blackout curtains. And a foot.

A woman's bare foot and pink toenail polish, peeking out from behind the bathroom door . . . Elmer barely had time to notice it, in the general smear of things around him. He wouldn't remember, later, whether he'd seen the leg attached to it, or the woman herself. He wouldn't be able to recall whether or not he knew her, or whether she was sleeping, or dead, or three-eyed, or two-headed. All he could remember were her hot-pink toenails; her foot looking pale and clean against the dirty motel carpeting.

He was sitting down with a shoe in his hand—his own shoe—and suddenly pain was tearing into his toes, as he yanked the shoe back off, yelping.

"Man, keep *quiet*! Come *on*, Ant—"

Elmer let the man yell; it was Jonah Crabtree, his drummer. Jonah was always yelling about something. Ignoring him, Elmer poked cautiously into the toe of his left shoe, scooping out the thing that had attacked his innocent foot, and came up holding an orange kitten in the palm of his big, doughy hand.

Or maybe it was holding him—biting fiercely, deep into his knuckles.

"Man, get *up* already! I'm telling you, we have got to go!"

Jonah threw a coat over Elmer's shoulders, pushing the big man up off the mattress. But the night's alcoholic fevers swelled back up, swallowing him in blackness once more. He felt himself getting lost in blackout, sleep-walking the last few inches back into oblivion. Elmer, next thing he knew, had the kitten in one coat pocket, his trumpet case banging against his knee, and could feel the cold breeze off an incoming train against his beach-burned face.

"Just like Mobile," Jonah kept muttering to himself, shaking his head and trembling. Elmer knew that part of it was the drugs, but there was more to it than just that. Poor Jonah was really, truly scared this time.

Just like Mobile . . .

Elmer sighed against the greasy train window, watching fields of wet cotton whip by.

Yep, just like Mobile, he thought. *And Plant City, and Hastings . . . Just like in Juliette and all of the other cities Jonah don't know about . . .*

But none of them died, he reasoned.

None of them you're sure about, some quiet voice inside him whispered back.

There was no news while they were on the train. No news from Mount Pleasant, at least. Town after town rolled up over the horizon, but they all turned out to be only whistle stops, miniature cotton or corn meccas populated by old men and sulking, dirty kids who only wanted to be runaways.

Elmer didn't leave his seat the entire trip, half afraid of who he might see on the platforms. They'd decided, anyway, it'd be best if his face wasn't seen in any of the stations between Mount Pleasant, North Carolina, and . . . wherever it was they were going. Jonah, though, got off at every stop, selling a little dope on the platform—never enough to become conspicuous, but they would need some spending money, after all—and picking up the local newspapers.

Elmer sat hunched down each time, waiting for his partner to get back, and watching the gray faces passing by on the platform below, all warped and muddied by the soot-and-rain film on the windows. He didn't know at first who he was looking for. Then, he realized with a sick shock, he knew he was looking for her; she of the pink-painted toenails. It couldn't really have been as he'd seen it, he thought. Those things never turned out to be real, once the liquor was sweated out. He was waiting to see her smile from the crowd below, waiting to be woken up from what still felt like a whiskey nightmare.

Each time, though, they rode farther and farther from the scene at the motel, and reality grew up a little bit stronger in his mind. Each time, Jonah brought him a fresh stack of reality, in hard black-and-white newsprint, and forced him to

paw through it.

"Well, what'cha got?" Jonah asked nervously, as the train pulled away from yet another tiny, dirt-road town. He was in too frantic a state to read it for himself.

Elmer shook out the newspaper carefully, trying not to disturb the tiny ball of fur that curled against his stomach. After a few pieces of roast beef and a good long sleep, the kitten had turned out to be a pacifist after all; Elmer had been calling him Monk, while Jonah was calling Elmer nuts.

"Huh, they arrested Bugs Moran," Elmer reported. "'Bank Robbery.'"

"Yeah, like that'll stick."

" . . . More complaints about the bomb broadcast . . . Everyone wishes they'd had a better view . . . Hey, look at this right here, I was telling you—"

"What?"

"Back page, the picture."

"Oh, hey now! Ain't she something? Who in the—"

"Some French guy. He's calling it 'the bikini' . . . Not a week goes by and they're naming underwear after the A-bomb, huh?"

"Yeah, go on . . . What else?"

Elmer shook his head. "Nothing. Nothing about it. Nothing from Mount Pleasant, nothing about a murder . . . nothing."

Jonah sat back in his seat again. He'd been twisting his cap into a formless tweed rag for hours, sleepless, watching the marshes speed by.

"Hey Ant, you know I know you didn't do anything to her . . . I came around 'bout four, man, and your door was wide open, I knew you and her had been at it, so I thought I'd . . . and she was just there, on the carpet—"

"I know, Joe. Don't worry, man."

" . . . I know you're not like that," he added guiltily.

"Thanks, Joe."

The train was a rough one, the tracks worn out. Their whole trip smelled like old, wet cigar smoke and too many different brands of perfume. Elmer's skull was being split down the center by a dull bum wine chisel, and its insides felt too full; he wished he could just tip forward and spill some of it out onto the floor, to relieve himself.

"So what do we do now?" Jonah asked finally, sounding shaky.

Elmer didn't know what to do now. He didn't remember more than that foot, the pink toenails, the motel door left wide open to the hot night . . .

"Guess we cut the tour short, huh?"

He tried to smile, but Jonah was having none of it. "Yeah, I guess . . . You know that guy Gary Conway, out west? You know, Gary from Atlanta, he went out over the Rockies one summer, then moved to—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know him. San Francisco. He's a poet, right?"

"Oh . . . I don't know . . . I think I can put up with him for a while, though. We used to go camping, when we was kids, right out there where the Appalachians end. I think he'd—"

"Sure, yeah, San Francisco," Elmer was nodding absently, watching a wild, wet tangle of the east coast sweep by outside. "Good idea, man. That'd be good for you, have a good sunny, western vacation. See some girls in bikinis, I bet."

Jonah let his cap rest, finally, staring at it in his lap. He and Elmer had always made a good pair on stage; the big-bellied, nearly bald, dough-skinned trumpet player and the short, dark, mop-headed drummer. People often thought the contrast was intentional, like they were a Vaudeville act in disguise. People all around them were constantly waiting for the punch line, waiting to be amused.

"Hey man," Jonah began, apologetically, "I'm sorry about all this . . . if you want—"

"Naw, that's cool, man, don't worry about it . . . Think I'll head down home, spend a little time with some old friends of the family. Just lay low and let happen what may."

Jonah nodded, both of them staring out the window. Finally, Jonah reached in his hip pocket and fished out a thin fold of paper money—dope money, Elmer knew—and handed it to him. "Better change trains, then. You're headed the wrong way, for Flowery Branch."

Monk the cat seemed more than content to spend his whole life asleep in coat pockets. After an hour in Flowery Branch, Elmer envied him that contentment. He knew that there was a fat-and-laughing Buddha; in fact, he'd often

been told by drunk artists, poets, and con men that he resembled the guy. But he wondered if there'd ever been a sleeping-kitten Buddha. He thought there probably should be.

It wasn't until Elmer walked into the Pour House and pulled up a stool at the bar, that he felt he'd come home. Before he'd left to seek his fortune, they could have kept the bar running on his own donations alone.

The bartender was a new guy, though, younger than Elmer and looking far too fresh for Flowery Branch. He got Elmer his beer and turned away to hover over the radio again, listening to a boxing match. The kitten stretched and settled itself again, heavy in Elmer's pocket.

Down the bar, Brother Gostwick leaned over his drink, looking exactly the same as he had the night Elmer had left town, six years before. His eyes stared in the same way, looking at nothing, not blind but refusing to see anything before them. He might even have been wearing the same old coat, Elmer thought, and drinking the same old glass of whiskey. He was tempted to go down and run a finger over the brim of the old man's hat, looking for dust.

"Hey Brother, how have you been?" he called, remembering to raise his voice as Brother—if not yet blind—had long ago willed himself as good as deaf.

"Fair to middlin'," the old man croaked. He'd always reminded Elmer of an ancient toad, watching history happen around him from a hole in a log. "Ain't seen you around much, Elmer. You come back to town for good, then?"

Elmer hadn't decided that, yet. He hadn't thought of anything more than getting away from the trains, diving down into a place where the world couldn't come after him.

"I'm staying with the Foresters, for a while. Just needed a little break from the road, you know. Thought I'd work on some new music, rest up a bit. Get a little down home cooking back on my bones, before I wither away."

Elmer slapped his sloping stomach, but Brother didn't laugh. "People come through here, asking about you. All these dirty people with notebooks asking questions about your religion and what you was like as a kid . . . We set 'em straight."

"I'm sure you do."

"What was that?"

"I said 'Thank you,' Brother."

"They all call you Antman, now, don't they?" Now the old toad laughed. "In the papers and everything, eh? Ol' Antman Hugen . . ."

"Yeah, I guess," Elmer shrugged. "It's a good stage name, people remember it . . . Can I get another beer, here?"

"They ask about you as a kid, and we all tell 'em. You were a strange one, that's for sure. We tell 'em about that girl, and how you— Oh, she's still around here, Carol. Got a scar, now, on her chin, but it barely shows."

"I never hit her—"

"She never talks to 'em, the tourists, never really comes down here anymore. Works up at the library. Married to that Ned Helms, and working on kids . . . I don't think she blames you, Ant. Carol was a good girl, but she had that runaway streak they all get at that age. You can't hold that against a girl, around here, not when they get right again later. Naw, she don't hold it against you."

"That's because I never . . ."

"What's that?"

"I said, 'That's great, Brother, thank you.'"

Elmer swallowed the last of his beer and sat turning the glass around through wet circles on the bar top. All of Flowery Branch seemed to remember Elmer as a teenage punk with bloody knuckles, driving a crying girl home from some dance he barely remembered now.

"He's throwing it," the bartender mumbled to himself, shaking his head. "Damn son of a bitch is throwing the fight, tonight . . ."

Buck and Nancy Forester were the type of people who moved out just beyond the city-limit line and into mobile-home territory, then put up a white picket fence to keep out their neighbors. But then Nance's spinster aunt died, and they moved into her place right downtown, taking the fence along with them.

News from what had happened broke the first morning after Elmer got to town. He had come downstairs before either of the Foresters, and sat on their front porch listening to Nance making coffee and Buck knocking about half asleep

in their upstairs bedroom. They'd put him up in Nance's tiny sewing room, on a little cot beneath the window, and he'd woken up to the smells of crepe myrtle and honeysuckle, with Monk chasing his toes around through the cotton sheet.

The Foresters lived a block off of Main Street. Early morning life was trickling up and down the sidewalk. Elmer popped open the can of tuna he'd bought the evening before, and sectioned off a little chunk of it for Monk. Then, on second thought, he set the kitten and the entire can down together on Nance's little garden table, sitting himself down in a wicker chair beside it. The kitten was a scrawny, ragged, alley-fight-looking thing; he felt guilty enough not having cat food for him. The least he could do was to let him eat himself as fat and blissful as he wanted to on tuna.

Monk dug into the can wide-mouthed and purring. One mouthful and all was instantly good again in his world; he was a happy cat by nature.

"Lucky you, little man," Elmer muttered, petting him. He could hear Nance Forester shuffling around in the kitchen.

The Forester's had a dog—a big skinny shepherd named Bullet—who laid at the head of the porch steps, panting already in the early heat and watching Monk closely. At first Elmer had worried about it, but they'd assured him Bullet wasn't a mean dog.

"Morning, Elm," Nance chirped, tripping out into the sunshine. "There's coffee on the stove, if you'd like."

"Thanks, that's great. In a minute."

She smiled and stepped lightly over Bullet to fish the morning paper from her boxwoods. The sun cut through her skirt and, just for a millisecond, Elmer could see the sharp, dark lines of her legs scissoring beneath it. He'd been thinking about Carol Hurley—now Carol Helms, he reminded himself—ever since she'd been mentioned in the bar, the night before.

Whenever he came home, he thought of her the entire time. Never with regret, though; they'd had a peaceful parting. Things turned out how they had to, he thought, and that didn't change the fact that they'd been good for one another, for a while. During the first couple of years, every time he rode through Flowery Branch, she had met him for a din-

ner where they laughed at nothing in particular and drank just enough wine to be wary of one another. Then, each time, things got quiet, she went home, and he went on to the train station. After a while, he'd stopped coming through Flowery Branch at all.

Nance had taken the paper inside to Buck. Elmer didn't mind; she had her loyalties, and he was sick of seeing newsprint anyway. Monk finished off the entire can of tuna and curled down over his own feet, belly rounded out tight and gurgling, his little kitten eyes squeezed shut as if trying to keep every scrap of happiness captive within himself.

Elmer stole some of it anyway, smiling and scratching behind the tiny ears with one big, rough finger.

"Are you gonna play for us later?" Nance asked, coming out with her own coffee cup and one for him. "It's black and sweet, I hope—"

"That's fine, Nance, thanks. I didn't expect you to fix it. Thanks . . ."

She sat down across from him and crossed her legs like a lady, leaning back in the sun and smiling. He could tell she was happy to have a guest, no matter who it was. She wouldn't have cared if the postman walked into her kitchen and asked for a place to sleep; she'd have beamed and started dragging out extra pillows, putting on the coffee.

"You know, I used to love to hear you play," she said, bubbling over. "Did you know that? We used to live across the alley, in back of your mamma's place."

"Oh yeah, I'd forgotten that," he said. "You were so many years behind us in school, me and Buck, I guess—"

I guess he noticed and I didn't, he'd almost said, but stopped himself. Nance Wrigley had been a little girl in her brother's overalls, with her hair chopped off bluntly at the chin-line, who'd kept a pet crow that always smelled like road kill. How was he to know she'd spring up into the graceful, lemon-fresh thing she was now? She wasn't listening to him anyway, lost in admiration of Monk's pretty, fat belly and yellow eyes.

"I used to love it when you'd play Buddy Boldin," she went on. "Momma hated that . . . I'd sit down behind the alley fence where you wouldn't know I was listening . . ."

"You were in Carol Hurley's classes, weren't you?" he

asked, fishing.

"Oh, that's right, you and she were a thing. I'd forgotten that. You know she got married, right? Well, that was only a year ago now, and, well Ned says she's visiting a cousin, somewhere, but Carol never liked any of her own family enough to go visit them . . . I think she's run off with someone, but you never know, really."

Buck came down the stairs with heavy, thudding steps. They could hear him in the kitchen, and Bullet heaved himself up dutifully, tail swinging, to greet his master.

"Out! Go on, get out, back out Bullet, out! Out!"

The dog scrabbled backwards through the open door happily, and Buck followed him, coffee in one hand and paper rattling in the other. Elmer scooped Monk off of the table just before Buck had thrown the newspaper down in the middle of it, folded back to the second or third page.

"There you go, right there in black and white! Old Antman strikes again!"

It took a minute for the picture on the page to sink into Elmer's brain and make any sense. But there he was, on the train platform in Mount Pleasant, trumpet case in hand and a stony look on his face. Jonah was pictured, too, but had his collar turned up and faced away, up the tracks, unidentifiable. Elmer looked at his own profile, there; he thought he looked a little bit like the gangsters they showed from New York and Chicago. Maybe that was the big secret, he thought. Maybe they all looked so tough and hard because of early morning bum wine hangovers.

"Says you killed a woman in Mount Pleasant, right there."

Elmer shook his head. "Buck, I never killed anyone—"

"Buck!"

"Nance, it's okay, I never killed anyone!" He leaned over the paper and then sat back again. "It's got to be some mistake. We were in Mount Pleasant for a week of shows at the—"

"I know, the paper says so, right there," Buck declared, pointing. "And on the last night, this woman, this whats-hername, no-one knows her, she shows up dead in the motel, and ya'll are getting on the first train outta there . . . Doesn't sound like a mistake to me. Just sounds like Antman Hugen, all over again."

"This is silly, Buck," Nance said, standing up with her coffee. "There's no way Elmer did something like that. I mean, it says there that this woman was a . . . well those women show up dead all the time. They just do stupid things, they do drugs, or they . . . there's no telling. But that's no reason for them to go accusing Elmer—"

"Nance, you're younger, you don't remember."

"I remember fine," she snapped, turning with a swish of her skirts and retreating back into the house. Bullet raised his head to watch her go, then looked questioningly to see what Buck would do. When Buck sat down, the dog lowered his head again and went back to watching the street. Elmer was steady staring after Nance's shadow; for just a moment, she'd looked like someone else.

"She doesn't remember right," Buck was saying, looking darkly at the paper.

Nobody in town seemed to remember right, Elmer thought. They remembered bloody knuckles, or cherry bombs in mailboxes. The fireworks had been Buck's idea, anyway. But Buck had become a dentist, by the time Elmer had left town with his trumpet.

Elmer sighed, deciding to speak simply and clear things up as quickly as possible, cutting to the heart of the matter.

"Should I leave, Buck? I can go down to the—"

"Naw, naw, it's not so much of a thing . . . Nance is right about that part. These women, it happens all the time. Won't be a big thing, even if they do get you."

"Buck, I swear I didn't—"

He stopped, because Buck was laughing. "Ant, don't you think I know you a little better than that? Come one, give me some credit . . . We knew, even as kids, what kind of person you were . . . You remember why they called you that, right? Our parents?"

"What, 'Antman'? No, actually . . . They just always did, and then you kids did. Then everyone else did too."

"You used to volunteer, each summer, to go around every yard in town and pour gasoline on the ant hills. *Every summer, man*. You just loved it, I guess, watching all those little things run . . ."

He spent the afternoon upstairs, writing. Every few hours, Nance would call up to check on him, but for the most part her awe of his occupation kept her away. Buck had gone off to pull some rotten teeth, somewhere, and Bullet paced just inside the picket fence, tiger-striped in its shadow, anxiously awaiting his master's return.

The cat, Monk, was still recovering from whatever unknown trauma had driven him to shelter in Elmer's shoe to begin with; he slept on and on, curled on the borrowed pillow, smelling of tuna fish.

While he wrote—fingering the notes before penciling them down, occasionally throwing out a trill to hear how it filled the air—Elmer thought of the cat. He still liked the idea of a supremely enlightened kitten; it was a musical concept, he thought. But he had to realistically consider the animal's future, too. When Elmer grew bold enough to leave Flowery Branch again, what would happen to Monk? A life on the road didn't seem right for a cat, he thought.

Besides, he didn't even know if the cat would want to stay with a person like him. Would the weekend in Flowery Branch—in a town that didn't know anything except that Elmer Hugen must be a dirty, violent man—be enough to turn Monk against him, too? Would the hate be contagious?

Elmer chuckled, wondering how you could explain yourself to a cat. *I was only doing it for the money*, he thought, practicing. *I was saving for a blues harp, I was eight years old, I got nothing against ants, honest.*

I swear, I never hit her. I loved her . . .

I swear, I never saw a woman in the room . . .

"But you know that, I guess," he said aloud. "I'll bet you saw the whole thing . . . whatever it was."

Monk raised his pretty orange head and yawned.

No, Elmer thought, a cat would know better than to hold a decade's worth of schoolyard flogging against a grown man. Monk would stick with him. Monk was hip. He laid down on the cot and scooped the ball of fur up onto his big stomach, feeling drowsy.

Towards evening, the sun began to press against the window above his head, making him think of the red crepe myrtles outside and of baseball games played an eternity ago.

The hiding out—which he finally admitted was what he was doing—began to gnaw at him, until he did feel like some Chicago gangster, laid up in a safe house somewhere.

He went downstairs, taking Monk along on his shoulder, swinging his trumpet from one hand. In the kitchen, Nance was pulling boiled chicken from its bones, planning a pot-pie for dinner. She reached up towards Monk—having to stand on her toes—and he needled her chicken-flavored fingertips inquisitively, never satisfied.

"You want some lemonade?" Nance asked, smelling like flour and vegetables and boiling meat. "We don't keep any beer around . . . It was sounding good, up there, by the way."

Elmer realized she couldn't have heard anything but his experimental blatting, and he was still full of the song, ecstatic with it. He took her out onto the porch, settled her in a chair and Monk on the banister, stood in the red sun and pressed his lips into the familiar mouthpiece.

The music was something like catfish passing just below your bare feet, in a cool brown stream. It came out swimming slow, seductive. You were always waiting, watching for the big one, the monster, really only half believing in his existence. Elmer pulled the notes and bent them, imagining the music as a hot molten thing, then sculpting it cool and smooth.

He began breaking the music over various images that came to mind, silently thanking the weird universe for the scenario it had delivered him into—the week at Mount Pleasant, this surreal homecoming—all that had put the song into his own simple head. He was seeing Carol in his mind, growing older and older over a string of dinners spaced too far apart, and felt the music taking him out of his own outdated flesh. He saw her smiling, throwing his own sappy devotion back in his face, laughing out the music . . .

Nance Forester saw the thing a moment before it happened and half-shrieked, jumping to her feet. Elmer, his eyes closed to hold in all the music he could, only saw the aftermath: Nance with her shoe pulled off and the shepherd dog scrabbling away, down the porch steps, with his tail tucked and looking wounded. And the kitten, Monk, his little orange kitten—

"Oh Elmer! I'm so sorry, I can't believe he did that! He's

never been mean, he—" Nance was already on her knees, staining her fingertips red in futility; she was already crying with the thing barely over with. Elmer had to love her, a little bit, for giving up that much.

Elmer couldn't look at it, though. He couldn't stand to be part of it. Instead, he looked out to the street, the trees in bloom, and the sun setting on the noiseless town. Nance cried, apologizing, and a wind blew through the boxwoods. Elmer looked away from it all. Way up high, always too far away, he was looking for the face of some God to stretch down, to lean in and hear the music.

Kyle A. Valenta

The Narrows

Did you hear that?
A falcon.

He's sure of it. They're all over the place out here.

But overhead a flock of starlings skitters off and there are no wide-winged birds to be seen. Purple clouds march west to east and disappear behind the cliffs. Another hundred-degree day is gone and he considers driving out to where the desert swallows the road, laying down on the hood of his car, and letting the heat drain out of his body and into the big, bright night. He sips the back end of a beer instead, taps his heel against the hobbling barstool, and goes back to the motel.

The Zion Valley is a shiver in the morning. He shakes the tingle of leftover sleep out of his arms, drives into the park and hikes. In a sandy slot canyon wedged high in the cliffs, he eats a sandwich sitting on a large rock in the shade. Dwarf pines quake in the faint breeze. He is alone and wonders about mountain lions. The organs in his belly tighten, release, and tighten again. He reminds himself to breathe, puts everything back into his bag, and begins the long descent, looking for condors in the afternoon sun. But when he stops to think, he doesn't have a clue as to whether they'd be out at this time of day, dipping and rising on thermals. He should have studied more. M would have known the answer.

At night he sits on his bed at the motel, his back propped against the wall. He looks down at his hairy, tanned thighs against the crisp white sheets. He takes a picture on his phone and considers what to do with it. Someone would admire this kind of picture, he thinks. He could upload it and in a few minutes someone—someone who looks just like everything he's every dreamed—could be right at his motel door. It's that easy, but he's never had the stomach for that sort of thing. He throws his phone onto the other bed and chugs the rest of the beers that he's bought for the night.

The following morning he splashes down into the Virgin River long before Zion Park has filled with people. The water is cold and so is the air because there's no sun way down in here. The hike is called The Narrows and he thinks it sounds like a neighborhood in London. For a moment he considers what shape his life would have if he still lived abroad, but shakes the feeling because at some point you have to admit defeat, pack your things, and leave. That much, at least, he knows.

The river is sometimes ankle deep, sometimes hip deep, and at times he has to swim, holding his bag in front of him like a float. His fingers turn blue. The wind ripples the surface of the already roiling water. Around a tight bend he spots a small patch of dry gravel to the side. He steps out of the water and his skin prickles. A retired couple passes, waves, wishes him luck, and moves on quickly around the far side of the bend and out of sight. He clenches his chattering teeth shut and a sharp pain shoots up through his jaw. He wants to turn around. M would say that was classic, giving up like that. He steps back into the river and feels a deep ache in his groin, though if he could just understand that as time passes, as the canyon warms up, his body will adjust to the temperature, he wold be better off. Journeys like this demand patience. He is bad at patience.

A mile later he stops for lunch.

"We're sleeping in the back of our jeep," one half of a couple says while he chews, squatting on a wet, rocky strip of land a mile up river. "This is the first shower we've taken in a week." They laugh. He crumples some aluminum foil with his hand and squints up at the sky. He isn't ready for jokes.

"Yeah. That sounds about right," he says after too long. He hasn't heard his own voice in days, or weeks, and he thinks it might not be his own any more. He takes off before the couple is finished eating and before they feel as though they're all friends. The wind makes a hollow noise through the canyon. After another mile the path becomes choked by piles of boulders guarding deep stretches of water. He climbs, descends, and climbs again until the human sounds are gone. When he is sure he is alone again, he thinks of where he will go tomorrow, as he passes out of southern Utah in any direction. He

has a tent in his trunk, though he hasn't had reason to use it yet. M showed him how to set it up, once. He thinks it would be nice, that it'd be just about picture perfect to set up that tent way out there somewhere and let the loud silence of the desert smother him, unbroken until the next morning and the next.

He hears a splash behind him and looks over his shoulder. He must have stopped walking. Three young men trudge briskly against the current. At the next boulder pile, he stands off to the side to let them climb over before him. They're ragged in the way that you can tell they're on some epic journey and just by watching the easy way they cut the river, he's sure that they're young and on the verge of some great thing. The one wearing work boots and a short red bathing suit goes first—he's dark haired, dark eyed, and a brown that matches this part of the country. Twenty-one, twenty-two, he thinks—a kid, really. The kid scrambles up the rocks, the muscles along his torso tensing and easing, his legs pressing tight against the red fabric of his shorts. The friends follow. At the top, the kid drains the water out of his boots, mindlessly adjusts himself, and smiles back down at him.

"Throw your bag up," the kid says. "It'll be easier." He blinks, and without speaking does as he's told. He climbs over the rocks slowly, so he can think about each handhold and foothold—this should look both effortless and meticulous. It should look like he's a pro. As he nears the top, the kid reaches out a hand. Thanks. He catches his breath and can't think of what else he's supposed to say so he asks them where they're from.

D.C.

Nice. Never been.

The small talk is mostly silence. "I'm Tommy, by the way. That's Mike. Rob," the one in red shorts says. "You?"

He tells them that his name is Dekker. It is a lie.

"Shouldn't be any more of these the rest of the way," Tommy says, pointing down at the rocks like he's been here before. Then, like that, the three friends turn and jump into the pool below. "You coming?" Yes, yes. Just a minute. They swim away and he immediately regrets his hesitation. As they paddle into the distance, he opens his mouth to say, "Wait

up," but no sound comes out. He's too rusty. They make their way upstream, their laughs bouncing off the canyon walls. He looks down at his own shirtless body and wishes he knew what it looked like as he climbs on these boulders. Do his muscles swell and strain and contract like that kid's? Did they ever? He pinches his stomach, wishing he didn't think about these things.

He's alone in the canyon again—but this time he feels it in his chest and shoulders. It's as if he's twelve years old, abandoned by friends who never wanted him around in the first place. The path between solitude and loneliness has always been too slippery for him; he's never sure on which side he'll end up. For so many weeks he's been skimming the periphery out here, following a jagged line from one ocean to the other, keeping his distance from as much humanity as possible. Most people out this way hide from the sun until it disappears for the day, so he can pass through wherever he found himself like a ghost. But when he found himself hurtling across the bottom of Utah in a filthy Grand Am, all he could hear was M saying how much he loved Zion. He knew Zion would be filled with the Americans he'd been dodging for weeks, that there would be too many chances to talk. And now here he is, in a valley, chasing a boy he's seen for two minutes and running from everyone else.

The canyon keeps going forever, as far as he knows, but the trail officially ends at a thin waterfall and a shallow pool. He puts out his boots and everything to dry on the wide, rocky shore and lays down on his back, letting his body warm through in the sun. There should be herons here, or egrets dipping their long heads into the shallows. Do they have those birds out here? Or just soaring raptors? He hasn't seen either this whole time. M would know the answers. From the forest upstream he hears splashing again and sees the three boys emerging from the shadows. They drop their backpacks on the shore and wave. They're all shirtless now and Tommy stretches his lithe, tan body backwards, arced towards the sun. It is impossible not to stare. They walk over to him and he searches for the right thing to say.

"What's that way?" he comes up with, careful to lower his voice, to sound relaxed and deliberate.

"More canyon, pretty much. All the big cliffs are done already," Tommy says, shaking water out of his shaggy hair.

"How long have you been out here?" one of them asks.

"A few days," Dekker answers. It is a lie. "You?"

"Same. We've been all over. Drove out in a hatchback. Circled up through Yellowstone and Glacier and Grand Teton then down here. We're camping down on the river just inside the park." It's clear that Tommy's in charge, that he's making their decisions as they speed across country.

"I wish I had time for that. I have to head back in two days," Dekker says, lying again. His heart is way up in his throat by now and he point at the small cliff over the shallow pool. "Too bad you can't jump in from up there. You'd break your legs, though, wouldn't you?"

"Oh man. We were cliff diving yesterday," Tommy blurts excitedly. "There's a spot right next to our campsite." He whistles the sound that cartoons make when bombs are dropped. "Right at sunset. It's perfect."

They are quiet for a few moments. *Did Tommy say you should see it?* Dekker's sure that his face is turning red, though it isn't. His mind is trying to convince him that things are happening that aren't. He shakes his head hard and imagines the boys cliff diving yesterday—everyone watching Tommy scramble up the rocks, his body plunging down and wading out of the river, hard bodied and wet. But that's stupid. So stupid. No one in this little group is looking at anyone else. None of these boys are wishing they were inside the skin of the other.

"Yeah. Maybe I'll find a site for tomorrow. All the hotels in town are booked up," Dekker lies a fourth time, though he isn't keeping count.

"Well, you can share our site," Tommy offers. "You got a tent?"

"No." That makes five lies. He thinks for a second that he should stop. But no, no, he won't.

"You can sleep in mine, or in your car. Whatever. It'd only be a few bucks. We've got an extra sleeping bag, anyway."

Dekker holds his breath for three, two, one and then agrees. Way down deep, though, he doesn't believe that they're sincere about their offer and is sure that over night they will

disappear. Dekker sends up too many wishes too quickly to count. In one of those wishes, Mike and Rob were never born.

They hike out of the canyon together, tell Dekker where to meet tomorrow night, and say their goodbyes.

That night Dekker sobs in the parking lot of the only grocery store in town.

He wakes and stretches. His legs are sore. Dekker spends the day in a bookshop, drinking coffees, walking from one end of town to the other, looking at the trinkets he would have bought for M. As the afternoon turns colors he drives to the agreed upon bar near the park's entrance and sits at a high table outside. His hands are shaky. The waitress is chatty. After two quick beers his head slips in several directions. The waitress has a brother out in St. George—Anthony.

"You should meet him," she blurts out. "He's gay, but you wouldn't know it. Like, he's gay, but not, like, gay. Kind of like you." Anthony has an online account through which he sets up dates with men. Once the tryst is agreed upon, Anthony and his sister park within seeing distance of the hotel or wherever and watch the guy show up. The guy will stand around expectantly, nervously, all upset and waiting for someone that's never coming. She says they laugh and laugh. Dekker thinks this is sad and would like to hurt Anthony. He'd like to stab this stupid fucking girl right in the throat, too. Dekker curls his mouth into a smile and asks for another beer.

"Sure, hon. Oh! You're reading *On the Road*?" she says, pointing at the table. "Is that what you are? On the road?" She laughs like a hyena through a horse mouth.

"No," Dekker says. He looks up and sees a flock of starlings squeak away into the warm evening. These damned little birds are everywhere, he mutters to himself. The landscape looks like it's on fire and when he squints down the road he sees the three friends walking towards him. Dekker's stomach flips. They stroll up to the table all smiles and antics and jokes. They sit. They eat. Everything is coming easy and the four of them are lit up by beer and tequila. These boys all have girlfriends. Or they did. Mike and Rob broke up with theirs before leaving on their cross-country trip, but pretty little Tommy still has his, though he hasn't talked to her since he

crossed the Mississippi, which is fine because he's been talking to this girl out in San Francisco instead, where they will arrive in three days. They decide to go to another bar. Word is, they have karaoke. Dekker hates karaoke but lies and says it sounds good. Real fucking good. His forehead sweats. As they walk down the middle of the road, Dekker imagines that they are flames burning furrows into the asphalt. He dares any car to even try coming close to them.

The bar is crowded and everyone there is sunburned—except Tommy. Tommy is a glowing, sunkissed gold. There's a small dance floor and the four of them jump around, rhythmless, for a few songs. Tommy, Mike, and Rob chat up girls, pull them close, and let them go. Dekker fakes it too, staying as close to Tommy as possible, trying to absorb him. There are tit jokes and arms around shoulders and bonhomie. Hips grind into various other hips of the opposite sex. Dekker thinks: if M could see me now.

Tommy moves so easily among the crowd, starting up little conversations with everyone within his arms' radius. It's like he's magic or some solar body with gravity. Dekker's temples are too hot and he tells the boys that he's going to the bathroom. The room is a humid blur and after asking around he finds the door at the end of a narrow, wood-paneled hallway. Are there small antlers on the walls? Are there arrowhead-shaped plaques with the names of bowling teams carved into mica? He bolts the door and the pit in his stomach opens wide and threatens to swallow him whole. A cold feeling—the certainty of desperation—settles into his bones and crackles off of his skin. He knows that he should leave these boys alone. Their adventure is not his to have. That time is long gone and he is dead weight. He decides to leave the bar immediately, find his car, and swerve way out into the desert. Maybe he'll go to St. George. Maybe he'll find Anthony and fuck him in the backseat until he bleeds or says stop, stop, stop, whichever comes last. But when Dekker opens the door, Tommy is standing directly in front of him—a warm, damp smell wafts off of that perfect, young body. His eyes are hot and red and look right back into Dekker's. Tommy's lips part; Dekker sees Tommy's tongue between his teeth. Tommy looks down, grabs Dekker's wrist and turns it over. They both stare

at the spot where Dekker has a small tattoo of an anchor and Tommy softly rubs his thumb over the ink, back and forth, as if to wipe it away, then lets go, says nothing and slips past Dekker into the bathroom. The lock slides in place.

Dekker walks to the bar, holding the wall the entire way, and orders two shots of tequila and a beer. With his non-drinking hand, he picks at the bar's rough plywood underside and when he rests his hand back on top of the bar, his fingertip is bloody. He drops it into his remaining tequila, pulls it out, and sucks. After throwing back the second shot, he holds the glass under his nose, hoping to burn Tommy's scent from inside his nostrils. After three deep, reeking breaths, Dekker feels a tap on his shoulder and hears the words, "Let's go." Nodding his head without turning around, Dekker forces a shallow smile and follows the three boys out the door. Nobody is leaving anyone alone. Keeping his body as upright and loose as he can, Dekker acts like this has been the plan all along—like they are just old friends walking around a passed-through town. Overhead, bats dip and flit in tight curves and arcs. Dekker considers pointing this out to Tommy, but is sure that Tommy always already knows.

It's dark. The night is filled with whoops and shouts and the sounds of a burning propane lamp. An endless stream of cheap canned beer finds its way out of the cooler and into their dirty hands. The campsite's on a sandy riverbank and Dekker digs his toes into the loose earth. He's a vapor; a mimic hovering on the edge of their triangle, reflecting their careless joy back at them. It's all he knows how to do. M hated that, hated how Dekker was always becoming someone else. M couldn't gauge it day to day and tried to shake it out of Dekker. Fucking punk. Fucking liar punk. Lost in thought, Dekker doesn't notice that Tommy, Mike, and Rob have stripped to their underwear and run off up a path to the left. He sees a white body disappear into thick shrubs and hears wild human yipping. The cliff, Dekker remembers, and so he strips too and runs off into the darkness, into somewhere that he's never been.

It's all moon and stars up there. The earth becomes the sky in an endless loop. *Don't move*, Dekker thinks, but everyone does. One by one they scream and jump and then he is alone

with Tommy and the sky and the shimmering water below and he wants to hold onto Tommy's body as they both plummet into the cold water below. But Tommy turns and says, "Don't stay up here too long, all right?" and disappears. A moment later, Dekker lets go of an old cottonwood and splashes down, holding his breath under water until his lungs burn. Maybe they play chicken in the shallows. Maybe everyone is drunkenly falling and laughing and tossing one another back into the deep. Dekker doesn't know any more.

Back on shore they change and hang their underwear on branches to dry. Tommy tells Dekker to just sleep in the tent with him—it's big enough for them both and when they're inside they lay down on separate sides. A cool breeze plays with the open flaps and Tommy's left toes touch Dekker's right toes—neither of them correct the intrusion. Dekker can't catch his breath and doesn't know what Tommy wants or if he is reading too deeply into these small moments. It's been so long.

Tommy starts reading a book, oblivious to the silent weight under which Dekker is being crushed. Dekker presses his eyelids together hard. Purple and red blotches appear. The author's name is familiar to Dekker because M used to talk about him all the time, a fact that led Dekker to avoid any books with the author's name on the spine. The author is dead, he knows, and used too many footnotes. M called it genius. At the moment, Dekker curses M, as if this coincidence has been orchestrated by a fate that M controls. Because right now, M would know exactly what to say to this boy. M would have something to talk about. Instead, Dekker is now watching his chance at saying something, anything, drift off into oblivion. Soon Tommy will be asleep. Soon it will be tomorrow. Soon they will part ways and Dekker will never see Tommy again. His eyes feel hot. M always said that Dekker's passions rose and waned without a tether to logic and reason. M told him that he'd be miserable like this—moving too fast and spitting out lies. M said he'd die alone. *Just watch me now.*

"I'm actually going to wash up proper in the river," Tommy says, stripping off his shorts. "I feel fucking grimy."

Dekker tells himself to look away but doesn't—he knows that Tommy feels his eyes passing over every crease and curve

of his naked body, but this fucking kid makes no gesture to cover himself or disappear. They stay this way—Tommy on one knee and Dekker splayed on his back—for an instant like forever. Nobody reaches out across the divide. They are frozen.

"Don't worry. I'll be quick," Tommy says before he throws his shorts at Dekker. "Those can keep you company." Tommy grins and crawls out through the opening, looking back and smiling before wading off into the darkness. Dekker cannot move. The flutter in his abdomen reaches out into his joints and limbs and retracts; his body is an imploding star, consuming everything within its reach. He hears Tommy splashing in the water, soaping his body, dunking himself under to rinse. These are the situations Dekker has been told to avoid so many times—the ambiguous ones, the ones with strangers and alcohol and unclear motives. He should have kept driving west, out past the hordes that throng to Zion. People are only trouble. Not enough time had passed. But M always said, didn't he? M always said.

A feeling swells up in Dekker's chest and he knows he is about to burst into tears. At the end of this, when their separate drives west are finished, Tommy will have his girls and his boys and whoever he wants scattered across the country, waiting for him, in an endless stretch of body after body and heart after heart longing for the moment when this beautiful thing enters back into their basic, yearning orbits. Tommy will always be satisfied, will always be loved and will always be fulfilled. There is no one to notice whether Dekker is present or gone; he's a shadow that passes across the people he meets without them feeling a thing. Dekker knows that this is his condition. It is permanent until he dies.

Unsure of what to do any more, Dekker stares at the peak of the tent as hot streams drop down the sides of his face. With his eyes, he follows the seams of the tent until he returns to the apex once more. The sound of splashing has stopped, he realizes, and he looks out through the flaps, his heart in his throat. He doesn't see Tommy, but realizes that they're set up right next to some shrubs and small logs. Rattlesnakes. Large-toothed rodents. Burrowing spiders. The possible inhabitants are endless. That's stupid, he tells himself. That's

really fucking stupid.

"Tommy?" he whisper-yells toward the river. There's no reply. On the other side of the woodpile he hears a rustling sound. "Tommy," he says again, louder, his voice cracking.

"What?" he hears from behind the tent as Tommy finally appears. "I wanted to get this from my car. You alright?"

Dekker sees a small notebook in Tommy's hand.

"Yeah. I heard something, that's all." Dekker tries to laugh, but his pulse hammers behind his eyes. "You're set up right next to these bushes. There's a million things that can fucking kill you living in there."

"You think too much, don't you?" Tommy asks, smiling, and Dekker is sure that Tommy's voice has changed. He sounds just like M, standing there with his hand on his hip the way M always did. Dekker feels transparent and limp. Tommy drops the notebook down onto his sleeping bag and lays down naked, his skin perfectly holding his body together, muscle and bone—every fiber tightening and releasing in perfect synchrony.

"I have to piss," Dekker mutters. "I'll be back in a minute."

Outside the tent Dekker feels a sting in his eyes and a lump way down inside. He has stayed in this place too long.

Tommy opens the notebook and starts listing the things that he's seen over the last few days: the cottonwood trees, the California condors, the big-horn sheep, Angel's Landing and The Three Patriarchs. And a peregrine falcon—a pair—right? He notes the temperature each day, the various songs played at the bar the night before, the name of this man that he's just met—Dekker. Tommy thinks back on the hike out of the canyon, how Dekker seemed to throw himself at the rocks, like he was forcing them to submit. He's always wanted a body like that—solid and purposeful. He'd like to see Dekker again. In fact, he can't imagine what it would feel like to never see him again. These compulsions come hurtling at Tommy from nowhere. He gets attached so fast. Tommy writes all of these things down and realizes how long Dekker has been gone.

Outside the tent, Tommy hears a loud rustle. It stops. He looks back at his notebook and hears the sound again.

"That you?" Tommy says. But nothing answers. Maybe Dekker was right about the bushes after all. Tommy chuckles to himself. Of course there's animals out there. It's the desert. He sticks his head out of the flaps and sees someone, or something, on four legs, or hands and knees, bobbing up and down at the edge of the water. He rubs his eyes, trying to force them to adjust. Something is the matter. He loses his breath. Catches it. A twig snaps to his right and Tommy looks up, wide-eyed, and filled with all the sadness in the world as a log comes down on him once, again, and again, harder each time. The log lifts once more and drops on Tommy's head with a wet sound, before it rolls down the bank and into the river.

Did you hear that?
An owl.

He's sure of it. But when Dekker looks up in the sky, the trees, he sees nothing. M would have something to say. That much is clear. He gets in his car and points it in the direction of St. George—in the direction of a million other elsewheres—and drives.

Robert Martin

Trepidation

There is a meadow somewhere on Mt. Hood, the northwest slope maybe, where the grass rises up past my ankles, past my shins and calves, maybe tickling the backs of my knees in the breeze. There are scattered wildflowers, Indian Paintbrush, I don't know the names of the rest. I'm not worried about names. Yellow and white flowers, little beauties, their faces upturned to the sky. This meadow, maybe not Mt. Hood but somewhere in central Oregon, one of the Sisters or Mt. Jefferson, some place I've never been but a place I have reason to believe exists, it smells like Oregon and life and the epitome of what I thought it meant to be me and the scent seeps in through my skin, it blends into my bones, it is me and it is Oregon and mountain and blood.

I button my pants and look out the clinic's window. A woman plows an overfull shopping cart across the parking lot. No supermarkets nearby. It's a day of things where they don't belong.

I married young and we had a son, in that order. He's six, beginning first grade. His hair is never right, always a transition from one cut to the next. He reads all the time, stupid books. He'll read out loud to no one, sounding out the platitudes of talking animals. When he's finished a sentence he'll look at us like we should be proud of him. We are. My wife and I are proud of our son, talking to himself like an animal.

I am thinking about my wife, vaguely, as I watch this homeless woman shuffle across the parking lot. I contemplate the lies I could tell her, my wife. That the tests were inconclusive, that nothing will change. That I'll be alright. I can't resist wondering whether this would be a good thing—nothing changing. I wonder if I want things to change. I wonder if I will be around to witness the inevitable change that is about to occur.

The woman with the shopping cart comes to a curb at the end of the parking lot. She rams the front wheels against the cement. Like a mechanic, she walks around to the front to diagnose the issue.

Doctor Hunter returns and I am still buttoning my pants, a numb-fingered baby. The buttons refuse me. The shopping cart is gone, lifted over the curb and across the grass and out of view. I don't know how long I've been staring out there at nothing.

"It's early," Doctor Hunter says. He drops his clipboard on the exam table's crinkly paper.

"They only ever got me into trouble anyway," I say. The buttons do their work. For the moment, I am contained. "So what's next?"

"We kill that fucker," Doctor Hunter says. "We get it out."

"I need to ask," I say, "for my wife. She'll want to know."

Doctor Hunter looks at the surface of me, the part everyone can see. "It's a risk," he says. "If we go with radiation. Could be temporary. But your chances at conception will likely be diminished."

This is not the worst news I've heard today. I nod my head. It's already been six years. Our son is already most likely an only child for life.

Doctor Hunter says, "Come back next week, I'll cut your balls off."

I say, "It's a date."

When I bought my truck, less than four months ago, the salesman gave me a canned line: "It practically drives itself." Today, I arrive home without steering, without consulting street signs, without putting it in gear.

I have a dog that weighs as much as me, a Newfoundland named Henry. We keep his coat trimmed so he looks less like a bear. His habit is to slumber just inside the front door so I can't open it. I speak soothingly through the crack. "Henry. Get up. Come on boy, let's move." My wife and son aren't home. Grocery store. Buying Pepsi, buying lunchmeat. Buying tortillas and cereal and juice concentrate. Buying paper towels, Band-Aids, buying ketchup by the gallon because

James won't eat anything without it.

I owe twenty-one grand on the truck. Fifteen fifty per month on the mortgage. Sixteen thousand on our Chase and Visa and Discover cards. Combined, we owe various lenders upward of forty thousand more for our student loans. This will be my legacy, the ghost of a debt haunting my wife and son's FICA score. And if not, if I am not uprooted from this earth by a disease nibbling at my testicles, then the biopsy, the surgery, the radiation will put us under. No more ketchup, no more deli meat. We'll sell Serena's car. We'll dress James in his cousin's hand-me-downs. We'll take him out of the private school where he developed his joy of reading, the habits of please and thank you, the restraint needed to walk and use an inside voice.

I lower my shoulder into the door. The dog grunts and sighs, then moves out of the way. He gives me a long, annoyed gaze when I step inside. "Well, don't lay there," I tell him. He nuzzles my hand for a pet but I don't have the energy. He nuzzles my crotch instead. I am not aware of curling, falling to the floor. I'm not aware of hitting the ground, rocking on my hips up to my knees, crouching, pounding the carpet with my fist.

I am still on the ground when James and Serena's voices ring from the driveway. Henry is on the ground with me, his chin on his paws, his enormous eyes waiting for mine to tell him what's wrong. I manage to lean against the kitchen counter, pretend to be looking at one of Serena's magazines, full-color spreads of idiotic humans, before my son bolts through the door, tosses "Hi Dad" over his shoulder, slams his bedroom door shut.

Serena yells "Walking feet!" in an outside voice.

She drops her day bag on the table, snacks and sunblock and popular fiction. No groceries. She knows better than to ask, just looks at me. I stare at the glossy pages of her magazine, teen idols celebrated for their public failures.

She comes closer than I want her. She leans against my back, her palms curling around my shoulders, her cheek resting against my spine. Her smell, a thousand times inside my nostrils, the scent of a mountain meadow, twining inside my brain. The page of her magazine softens with starbursts of

moisture, my tears seeping into the gloss. I turn the page.

James complains of hunger through the door, his whine a dentist's drill. Serena detaches toward the freezer and lugs out a sack of chicken nuggets. It's the easiest ketchup-delivery food we've found.

"I'm hungry, too," I say, watch our son emerge from his bedroom to boogie on the sofa, no music.

"James," I order, "put on your PJs."

He looks at me like I've lost it. "We haven't eaten dinner yet."

I say, "Well you're dancing like it's a pajama party."

He pauses in a pose, pointer finger in the air. He does this a lot, this being a kid type of stuff. I wonder if he would be so wonderful if he had a little brother or sister to set an example for, to show the ropes. If that would change him in any way, because if it would then good riddance. Behind me, chicken nuggets plunk on the baking pan.

I say, "Don't tell me you've never had a pajama party."

"Okay I won't."

"A pajama party is when you get in your pajamas even though you're not going to bed. Everyone gets in their pajamas, and then you do things you're not supposed to do in pajamas."

His eyes work at this new concept. I take a moment to remember that he doesn't know. That the instability and brevity and tragedy of life aren't a part of his story.

"Things like what?" he asks.

"Like dance around how you just were, except to music. And, you know, play games and stuff."

"Hide and seek?"

"Exactly."

"Does everyone wear pajamas, or just me?"

"Everyone. I wear pajamas. Mom wears pajamas. We can put Henry in pajamas."

James laughs so suddenly he falls to the floor. His laughter sends tears from his eyes, beautiful little droplets. The dog tilts his head.

"I have pajamas, right?" I check with Serena.

She raises her eyebrows, a curious affirmation.

"I'll race you," I say to my son. "First one in their PJs gets to hide." And to convince him that it's an actual race, I move quickly into my bedroom, marveling at the bright light flashing with every step. His door slams behind him—he's shy, these days, about being naked.

Serena finds me on the foot of our bed, breathing. "A pajama party?" she asks. She sits beside me, leans into my arm like she did when we were just married, when we were engaged, when she was my girlfriend. We haven't been this affectionate in years.

"I don't know," I say. "Is he changing?"

"He is. It's amazing. You may have started a tradition."

For some reason when she says this, I hear the word "trepidation." When my brain autocorrects, trepidation is precisely what I feel at the thought of a new tradition. I imagine a pajama party every night between now and whenever, I imagine my wife and my son carrying on the tradition after I'm gone. Dancing, falling to the floor laughing as they remember the husband and father I had been. I remind myself that death is about as unlikely as growing my balls back after the doctor cuts them off—still, there's a chance. I say something just to shake the current of self-pity, the surge of trepidation coursing through me. "I have an appointment next week. Soonest Doctor Hunter could get me in. He pulled strings."

"Well, and what?"

"Just chop it off. Start radiation."

Her hand on my shoulder, I brace for the question about whether we can still have children. Instead she asks, "What can I do?" She isn't crying, she isn't tears and panic. She is business. She says, "I can fundraise."

"We can't fundraise radiation." I blow through my lips, a horse sound. I do it again.

She says, "We can fundraise the copay."

James knocks on our door. He is a good son, a good boy, he knows not to come in if the door is closed. "I win!" he declares through the wood.

"Come in here buddy," I say. "I want to talk to you."

Serena shakes her head, telling me don't you dare. Reminding me this is a conversation we don't have with our son until

we've agreed on how we're going to have it.

"What's the matter?" James asks, staring at my crotch, and it takes a miracle to realize that he's asking why I'm still wearing my pants.

"I can't find my PJs," I say. "We need your help."

He drops to the floor to check under the bed—the place anything he can't find is ultimately located. "Not here," he says.

Serena says, "Check in the closet, sweetheart," and James scurries to the disorganized cave where we keep our clothes. She pets my neck, fingers a whisper on my clavicle, and steps away to pull her bathrobe from the hook on the door.

"Are these them?" he says. He holds up a pair of pajamas, sure enough, tops and bottoms, long sleeves, like old men wear. They're still in the cellophane packaging, a price tag taped over a price tag taped over a price tag.

"That's them," I say. I have never seen them before in my life.

"I'll go hide," James says. In the kitchen the timer dings, and one by one my family vanishes.

The pajamas are not my size at all. The buttons strain as I near the neck, I barely get the top on. I'm pretty sure these are lavender.

I drop my pants and take a second in front of the mirror, man to man, balls to balls. Greet the swollen object that aims to kill me. They'd shaved it for the biopsy, and now stubbly hairs sprout among the wrinkles. A thin scar shines purple and distraught up the side, stitched like a baseball.

"Why does it look like that?" James says, surprising me. He stands in our doorway, which he'd opened without knocking. The mirror shows me what my son sees: not a father, not a familiar and dependable institution of a man, but a shaken and disorganized individual in a too-small lavender pajama top lifting his dick to better view the swollen, purpled nuts underneath.

"It's infected," I say.

"Can I see?" he asks. He walks right up to it. I flinch a little. He's inches away, breathing through his mouth.

Serena fills the doorway, a terrified spatula in her hand.

"Does it hurt?" he asks.

"Sometimes," I say. "The doctors are fixing it."

He inspects it like mysteries are solved there. To a six-year-old, this might be accurate. How much does he know about balls? What healthy adult balls should look like, what they shouldn't? He's six years old: his testicles are meaningless as a knuckle.

He stands up, unimpressed or satisfied with my reasoning. He says, "Dinner's ready," the message he was sent to deliver, and he scoots past his mother into the dining room.

The bottoms are tight before they reach the knees. I put on sweatpants instead and take my seat at the table. A pyramid of nuggets on a single plate in the center, a free for all. James grabs with his hands and Serena doesn't stop him. My plate's already decorated with a pond of barbecue sauce, Serena's with ranch. James has his squeeze bottle, but tonight he doesn't douse his nuggets. He says, "I want to try mustard, I think."

Serena looks at me, looks at him, looks at Henry hovering nearby, hoping for spills. She says, "Mustard? Like, yellow mustard? Or what? There are a lot of mustards."

"Mustard mustard. What's on hot dogs."

"That's yellow mustard. It won't be good on chicken," she warns, but she retrieves it.

"Dad, your pajamas are too small," James says. In between buttons, the fabric offers little oval-shaped windows to my chest.

"And purple," I say. "These are some tiny man's pajamas. These aren't my pajamas."

James laughs, chicken mush in his teeth. He says, "Maybe they're for Henry," and he laughs harder, a windfall of laughter. He falls off his chair—this is apparently something he does now, this falling down. Half-chewed bits of nugget spew from his mouth. Henry rushes over, vacuums it up.

"Enough mister," Serena says, setting the bottle on the table. "Here's your mustard."

"Is this yellow mustard?" he asks. The bottle is yellow, it says "yellow mustard" on it. This is how far talking animals have gotten him.

He hesitates, and then reaches for the ketchup.

I let out one quick, bark-like laugh. The jolt shudders down to my crotch and I almost choke—even this, I think as I'm curling over, it will take even laughter from me.

"Don't make your dad laugh, honey," Serena says.

"It's not his fault," I cough, but I'm lying. It is his fault, somehow, all of it. The years of waking up in the middle of the night, the fights between Serena and I, the twelve-hour days, the inability to pay down our debt, the two and a half years since I've seen Serena naked. It has nothing to do with testicular cancer, but somehow it does.

In this one terrible second of pain and frustration and weakness and fracture, my son is smiling, the little fucker. "I'm full," he says, and he jumps from his chair. His mother and I stare at the nuggets on his plate, doused in ketchup like discarded bloody lumps. He retreats again into his room, closes the door, moves on to who-knows-what.

"They're mine," Serena says, pointing with her fork at my straining buttons. "I was going to try something."

"Try something?"

"Spice it up," she says.

"You were going to wear these," I confirm, "to be sexy."

She dips a nugget in ranch and crams it whole into her mouth. She nods.

"What's wrong with lingerie? What's wrong with blowjobs?"

She swallows. "I feel weird wearing that stuff. Like I'm trying."

"What's wrong with trying?" I ask, my arms in the air, exasperated not by the conversation but that we didn't have it five years ago. I demolish a nugget between my teeth and can't help but imagine my wife in old man pajamas. There is an undeniable stirring in my crotch, however slight, not unpleasant. Futile, but not unpleasant.

"Why didn't you do it?" I ask. "They were still in the package."

She looks away, embarrassed or doubtful, or embarrassed that she's doubtful.

"I'll still be able to," I say. "There's still a chance."

"I don't know," she says, but she looks at me with a new

conversation in her eyes: her ears perked, hearing something in James's room that I don't hear. She disappears and I hear her voice a second later, calm and soothing, the best voice she has: "What's wrong sweetheart? Oh, come here baby."

"This always happens," James groans. "You say you'll play and then you don't. You just don't. You never keep your promises and it's not fair."

I join them in James's room. Serena's hand smoothes the shitty hair at the back of his head. My parental instinct is to chastise him, to tell him it isn't time for games, that it's still dinner time and he needs to finish the nuggets he spilled ketchup all over. Serena simply says, "We're going to play. We're going to play." She holds him against her chest, and he cries into the soft lapel of her bathrobe. His shoulders shudder and he gasps, that abject, selfless crying that children take for granted. He sniffs long and burbling, fluids pouring out of him. "I heard you talking. You forgot all about the game."

"Mommy and I had to talk about something. We're ready to play now," I say to him. "Do you want to go outside and count?"

"You go outside and count," he snarls, as though these are the meanest words anyone has ever uttered.

In the living room it's Henry and I. He jumps up on the sofa I shouldn't have bought, drops his head on my thigh.

It's been about a minute, I figure, I hope. "Ready or not," I announce. Henry's little eyebrows twitch. He doesn't lift his head to let me up. "Ready or not," I say again, drawing the words out. I pat our dog on the head, try to communicate to him that my family depends on me standing up right now. Their hearts are beating in some darkness in my son's room, their breath preparing for the long hold, their bodies locking into a stillness that will not give them away. They know that eventually they'll be found, they know that it will end with losing, but those moments in the dark when they are convinced there is a chance, that they might continue on indefinitely undefeated, that is why we play.

Eileen Arthurs

Portrait of an Artist, After All

Her obituary was terse, a few lines underneath a photo. No spouse or children. No compelling history to make the reader regret not having cozied up to her when the opportunity existed. And, especially, no details of the frightful events of the morning of October the twenty-seventh. The real story of the death of sixty-two-year-old Frances Blanche Cartwell could not be divulged. The photograph would have to do.

It was a simple newsprint shot, fuzzy and gray-toned, of a woman on the far cusp of middle age. On closer examination, Frances looked eerily similar to those old-time renderings of female Catholic martyrs, magical beings subsumed by a greater prize, capable of a flirtatious wink even at the hands of their executioners. Maybe it was her eyes.

But the photograph was just Frances, wasn't it? A grainy, slightly younger version of a sixty-something insurance lady, a woman who read about a single case of Bolivian pork-borne tapeworms and swore off pork forever. It was just Frances, the woman who never left home without a cell-phone charger, a collapsible umbrella, a travel pack of Band-aids (with built-in Neosporin), and a toothbrush, also collapsible.

But somehow, Frances, the poster person for staying out of harm's way, died the morning of October twenty-seventh in a tragic school shooting. It was not a predictable event. If it were, it seems she would have avoided it. It seems that way.

When she was eight years old, Frances learned that in some irresponsible infancy, planet Earth had wrapped itself around a roiling molten ball that still burned within, a sort of stickless evil tootsie pop. She went home, took stock of her shoes, and prepared for the worst. When her sister and brother ran barefoot to greet the ice cream truck, she grabbed the flip-flops stuffed behind the front door before following. She hid slippers under her bed, and stashed an extra pair of boots in the hall closet for the day when the ground began to buckle or leak. Frances had seen images in National Geographic of hot plumes spewing from volcanoes. The path from core to crust

was breachable.

"Good Lord," her mother said, when she figured out the reason for Frances' sudden shoe fetish. "Comets and birds and all sorts of things race across the sky, maybe even fall. Are you going to wear a helmet, too?"

"She's just sensitive," said her father.

In middle school, Frances proved herself a gifted piano student. She perched on the bench, feet square, and laid down each note with a deliberate poignancy. "She's not just sensitive," Mr. Ossini, declared, his teacherly voice fraught with emotion along with a few extraneous vowels. "She is quite possibly an ar-tees-ta."

At her earliest opportunity, Frances went to the library and checked out books on artists. Unlike the biographies of steadfast war heroes or congenital angels like Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton, artists seemed a frightful lot—penniless, temperamental, and in one memorable case, earless. The prospect terrified her. She quit her piano lessons the next month.

Frances' early life held few surprises, spanning a gradual transition from cautious student to frequent maid of honor. She was a stoic friend, empathetic to the extreme, yet harmless enough to be the bridal party compromise every time. As a single professional, she grew increasingly alone as her friends delved into lives too busy and complicated for her risk-averse constitution. An early career in real estate faltered, but she found her niche in the insurance business, where she spent many years perusing data tables and offering prudent advice.

She never played the piano anymore. In fact, she rarely listened to music at all, preferring a state of constant vigilance to the dreamy hypnosis induced by a sonata. She commuted on foot as long as the weather cooperated—safer, all in all—by way of a well-traveled trail, some stretches even paved, from her home to her west-facing office (southern exposure involved too many damaging UV rays). She lived alone, although she'd once considered adopting a cat. As if toxoplasmosis and feline leukemia weren't enough, actuarial tables forced her to conclude that cat ownership was doomed to result in heartbreak. Frances took pains to minimize all serious

interfaces with the stickier points of life. That is, anything involving risk to body or soul.

Her life did have one chance to take a different tack. When she was sixteen, she sat next to Chet Chambers in homeroom. Chet adored Frances, for reasons that no one, least of all Frances, understood. She was cute and shapely, but her habit of wearing an overcoat and socks at the slightest chill, and the way she toted her books in a padded case, had already taken her out of the high-school dating network. For her part, Frances had no idea why the sight of Chet's hands set off a fluttering in her chest, or why she blushed when he relayed the attendance sheet from his desk to hers.

Chet's note was simple, scrawled in a liquid blue-black stream, splotchy with nerves and desire. He stuffed the folded missive into Frances' locker between classes. "Hope to see you at the class party at the lake tonight. Chet."

When Frances found the note, she smelled the ink on the page and traced the curves of the letters with her finger. Her heart began to pound. She willed it to stop, but reason wasn't enough to override the strange and compelling heat that flushed her cheeks and pulsed through her body. That evening, the weather was unusually warm and sticky, so even Frances wore shorts to the party. She had to wipe her palms more than once on the yellow napkin beside her plate of egg salad and carrot sticks. She didn't know if it was the heat or Chet's note that made her palms sweat.

At the party, she looked up from her seat at the picnic table and caught Chet looking at her. He sidled up to her and asked if she'd like to walk down to the dock. She only paused a moment before she shoved aside her plate and nodded yes. The two ambled down the trail to the water's edge. They skipped stones and made nervous small talk. Chet waded into the lake as the evening sun slipped beneath the horizon. The gaiety of the school party echoed from some hundreds of yards away. The murmur of the lake lapped at the dock, immediate and languorous. Frances listened, hesitated, left her sandals on the shore, and followed Chet into the water's edge. The lake smelled fresh, so unlike the chemical and pee-ridden municipal pool she'd made a long habit of avoiding. Frances felt her pores open to its tender magic.

Chet plunged ahead and dove under the water in his jean shorts and T-shirt. Frances waited for him to surface. He swam out a ways and she took a few steps farther into the lake. The water swallowed her knees. She took another step. Wavelets threatened the edges of her shorts. Chet popped up next to her with a wet, noisy spray. She screamed, but didn't run. He pushed her, playfully, and splashed until her blouse clung to her in spots. When Chet's arms circled her waist, and his head bent close to hers, Frances was transported on an unfamiliar tide of emotion. It may have been the same tide that transports all adolescents, but then again, it may have been stronger, wilder. In truth, it must have been so, to overpower Frances' already substantial coat of emotional armor.

Afloat on this current of desire, the young lovers' lips met. Frances had a moment of serious reservation, a stomach-churning awareness of a new and ultimate risk. By way of justification, she decided that the lake existed on its own plane, a surreal, nonjudgmental Switzerland, exempt from the carefully plotted rules of her earthbound life. There was the glow of a rising moon, the sheen on the liquid surface that turned suddenly glassy, the caress of waterlogged breezes. Her brain bought the neutral waters justification, and her body became alive and responsive, greedy with its own surprising agenda. Careful, conservative Frances kissed Chet back with the abandon of an unpracticed sixteen-year old. She allowed his fumbling hands access to whatever he dared reach without removing any clothing.

All might have been perfect, had Sister Mary Stephen not broken from the party for her evening rosary recitation. She wandered to the edge of the lake only to discover youthful body parts absorbed in uncharted activities. Frances looked up from the forgiving waters of her liquid Switzerland straight into the nun's unforgiving eyes, dark points in a face gone as white as the wimple that haloed it. A rogue gust rustled up a faint fishiness and exhumed the odor of algae and drowned leaves from the water's depths. Chet's fingers around her waist weighed on her. Her damp skin bristled with goose bumps. Frances broke from Chet's embrace. A wet strand of hair clung to her nostrils, so recently flared with the effort of passion-quickened breath, now clogged with the musky de-

cay of things long submerged.

Frances melted before Sister Mary Stephen's dire warnings and merciless justice. Her life's practice of separating herself from impending doom, even if that required losing something dear—piano lessons, for instance—kicked in without hesitation.

Chet transferred that next year to public school, and Frances donned yet more layers of clothing, prophylactic accessories, and unbendable rules. In the end, those few moments of aquatic bliss weren't enough to redirect the path of Frances' life. She picked her way carefully through the next many decades, toiling at her insurance tables, falling asleep in her bedroom under the softly glowing LED displays of her security system, smoke detector, and carbon monoxide monitor.

Any Imax-screened interpretation of the unfurling of our universe informs us that if the whole process were condensed into a mere twenty-four hours, the first stroke of midnight is when things really heat up. So it was with the life of Frances. Her first hypothetical stroke rang out when she was sixty-two years old, on a fall morning.

She opened her front door to appraise the weather and retrieve the newspaper. A grayish sky warned her than an umbrella was in order for the day. She leafed through the newspaper to insure that she hadn't missed any egregious events while she slept. On the front page of the local section, boldface type alerted her to the alarming news that yet another rape had occurred, this one in a neighborhood within a few miles of her house. After much cogitation, she opened her jewel box and took out a tiny silver key. She reached under her bed with trembling hands, and pulled out a gray box. She inserted the key into the box, lifted the lid, and slipped a small handgun from its velvet wrapper. The gun was a necessary evil, a carefully considered purchase on her sixtieth birthday in recognition of a step less spry, a body less agile. She buried it in the bottom of her purse. Her hands would know where to find it, in the horrifying and unlikely event that she'd actually need it.

She applied Burt's Bees balm to her lips, in anticipation of the dryness of the upcoming heating season and began her

customary journey from home to office on foot, her gun and umbrella, along with a multitude of other useful items, tucked in the marsupial pouch of her purse. Halfway there, her sensible T-strap flats stumbled over something, and she jammed her left foot. A sharp pain came and went. She lifted her foot and inspected it. Although quite sore, she was relieved to find it intact. She bent down and picked up the offending object, a worn-looking fountain pen, with a dark droplet of ink on its tip. A gasp escaped her.

She stuffed the fountain pen into the pouch next to her umbrella, not even bothering to wipe it or insert it into the stitched tubular compartment meant for such things. At her office, she didn't perform her usual fifteen neck circles while her decaf brewed and her computer awakened. Instead, she sat at her desk and polished the pen with a tissue. With her index finger, she traced the italicized v-shape of its delicate point, the cetacean breathing-hole at its center. She smoothed the ruled tablet by her computer and poised her right hand above the top line, pen slanted just so, the way the nuns had taught her. She wrote a name that she remembered from long ago. The ink was the same as it was in her school days, blue-black, like blood on its oxygen-depleted return path from the body's hinterlands.

Her computer awash in new emails, the smell of brewing decaf heavy in the air, she sat and gripped the pen. The name glistened on the paper in front of her. An avalanche of memories crashed the barrier of her brain's solid underpinnings. Forgotten moments slipped through aged, crumbling defenses. A film clouded her vision. The pen fell from her hands.

Once, long ago, there had been a note.

The memory of those few moments of watery bliss with Chet hijacked her body. Remnants of that giddy passion surged through her half-spent veins and seized what was left of her heart, quickening its beat with a futile longing. How had she tucked away that night at the lake so callously, so obediently? How had she failed to understand that one such night was worth more than forty careful years of opening cans of soup, after checking to be sure they hadn't swelled from botulism, and heating them on the stove to avoid exposure to the unknown havoc of microwaves? As if to reinforce

the pain of her staggering epiphany, her foot began to ache. She took off her shoe and sock. Sure enough, a bruise had started. She imagined that more capillaries would leak, that her foot would bloat with the trauma of what had happened, the way her brain swelled with what she now understood.

She locked up her office and limped back home. She got into her car and drove to the drugstore for an ice pack, and to browse the shelves for a strong pain reliever. She had no idea what sort of product would address her symptoms. The pain that had started as a mere jab was fast consuming her, spreading up her leg and into her gut, until even her head throbbed.

After wandering the drugstore aisles in desperation, Frances settled for an ice pack and an eye mask. Maybe a nap would help. She stood in line at the counter, doubling forward, shifting from one foot to the other. Ruth Delaney, a longtime insurance customer, joined the line in back of her.

"Well, Frances, how are you?" she asked.

Frances always answered this question with the news that she was very well. Despite the mutiny in her body and soul, she did the same today, fearful to add another element of new to a day that had suffered from too many already.

Ruth had a vial of Midol in her hand, for her daughter, she said. The school had called to tell her that Carrie had fainted in gym class again. "Menstrual cramps," Ruth added in a whisper. Through the dull scrim of her own pain, Frances began to remember how that felt, even though her own reproductive system had long since given up on creating any sort of seasonal conditions, that hopeful laying, then patiently expelling a layer of thick, nurturing blood. Another regret? Her ears filled with an odd buzzing sound. She wanted to go home and hide from the assault of the day.

"They told me to come get her, but I can't," Ruth said. "She'll just have to lie there in the nurse's office until I'm off work. They have a cot there, and a sort of curtain thing in front of it. I told her I'd grab some Midol when I could, and bring it home."

Although she scarcely knew the girl, Frances pictured Carrie Delaney, prostrate on a cot behind some shower curtain of a screen in a school nurse's office. "I'll get her for you," she

said. She was too surprised by her own words to notice Ruth's open mouth. "I'll drop her off at your house."

Frances completed her transaction, and waited while Ruth paid for the Midol and scribbled a note allowing permission for Frances to retrieve her daughter. Frances slipped the note and the Midol into her capacious purse, along with the umbrella and the Band-aids and everything else in her ever-expanding bag of life's remedies. She headed for her car, still puzzled by her own sudden generosity. The pain in her gut and the throbbing in her head abated somewhat. She drove to the high school, the public one, not the old brick building where she'd studied, with its protective cross and the nuns clinking with yards and yards of rosary beads worn smooth from so many indiscretions witnessed or committed.

She arrived at the school amid a flurry of changing classes. A guard in uniform admitted her through a set of glass doors. He studied the note from Carrie's mom, and then asked for her driver's license, which she dutifully produced. He nodded and sent her to the school office, where a new guard stared into space from a high-backed stool. At that moment, Frances remembered that she'd slipped her handgun into her bag early that morning. It was so uncharacteristic of her to fail to mention this essential bit of information to the guard. If it weren't for that fountain pen, she wouldn't have become so addled.

It was too late to run. Frances was about to explain, apologize even, as the guard opened her bag. She had a permit for the gun, had logged the appropriate number of practice hours. She knew how to use it, too, and how to safeguard it when not in use. And she, of all people, understood its terrible power.

It was the day, she thought. Everything about the day felt upended.

Before she could utter a word, the guard gave a perfunctory peek into her bag, and handed it back to her. He gave her a form and asked her to sign it. A woman with a frizzled pageboy took the form to another room. Within minutes, the woman returned and handed it to Frances with a photocopy of her driver's license and an official stamp in the corner. Frances debated whether to mention the gun, but she had no

idea what to say, and she didn't want to cause a scene. Instead, she resolved that she would pick up Carrie and leave the school as quickly as possible. She squared her shoulders and joined the controlled chaos of the high school hallway.

The students ignored her as they loped along the tiled floor with armloads of books, calling out to each other, some studying crumpled pages of notes on their way into class. Frances had forgotten how lovely children were at that age, how bright their eyes, how endearingly awkward stretched limbs and scrawny arms could be on a freshman boy, how perfectly Adonis-like they became at the end of their high school careers, when mass and muscle finally took hold. She marveled at the girls with their shiny hair and long eyelashes. Was she ever that way? Her nervousness about the gun in her purse evaporated as she fought a rising sense of the futility of her entire existence. Why had she allowed herself to emerge from that lake and lock herself into the fortress that had become her life? It had started before that, though. It had started before she knew enough to try to stop it.

That's when she understood why she'd come for Carrie. It was an apology to her own younger self for her fears, her naïve harshness, her failure to save herself back when there was still time. She followed the directions to the nurse's office, her sore foot slapping flatly on the gleaming floor, her bag laden with its stash of too many antidotes bumping against her hip. The hallway overflowed with students. They called out to each other, laughed, and split around her as if she were a ghost. They were right, she thought. She was a ghost of what she could have been, too worn now to spin what was left of her life into anything of substance at all. At a propped open doorway, beneath a black-lettered sign that said Health Office, she stopped.

She heard the sounds first. Pops. Sharp and crisp. She didn't realize what they were until the screams began, until blood, red and oxygen-rich, pooled in a spot not ten feet away from her, underneath the head of a perfect and handsome young man. His arms stretched beside him in a useless, open embrace. One after the other, they fell, laughter still in their throats, history notes still crammed in their brains, dresses for homecomings and proms yet unworn in their closets.

Young, precious lives exploded and fell around her.

She saw him, clear as could be, as he approached the entrance of the nurse's office. Carrie stood in the open doorway, hands clutching her head, her mouth opening to form a scream. He was as young and fresh-faced as his classmates, with a manic tilt to the way he held his gun. He leveled it now at Carrie.

In a flash, Frances retrieved the pocket-sized Smith and Wesson 638 Airweight revolver from her bag. Despite her sore foot, she lunged and planted herself between Carrie Delaney and her murderous classmate. While time ticked off in slow and languid nanoseconds, Frances raised and readied her pistol. She was meticulous as she centered the shooter in a delicately orchestrated frame. His halo of thick hair was at the top, his feet, in sneakers with untied shoelaces, at the bottom.

With sure fingers, she encircled the trigger and pulled it. The boy with the gun flinched. Blood soaked his pants at his left thigh, precisely where she'd aimed. He pointed his gun at Frances and fired off a stutter of shots as he sank to the floor.

Uniformed guards appeared and filled the hallway. Frances heard more pops and felt someone remove her revolver from her hand. A sensation of leaking overtook her, followed by a heat, then a breezy coolness in her upper chest that spread throughout her body.

Then, hands grabbed her, nurse hands, Carrie's hands, other hands, and laid her on the cot behind the screen in the nurse's office. She lay there and thought, what if she were sixteen, and the blood that now poured from her was her own hopeful menstrual blood, and that she was waiting for her mother, or perhaps her mother's friend to pick her up and take her home, where she had a whole houseful of scampering pets, and some buried in the garden under little crosses when they died, and a piano, where she would pound out a wild sonata, and then push back the bench, throw away her shoes and walk barefoot to the lake where she would go skinny dipping with boys in the moonlight.

Now the blood was a torrent, as warm and soft as the water of the lake that night with Chet. She heard the nonjudgmental lapping of small and gentle ripples of acceptance. She

smelled the breeze, so fresh, its scent of promise and desire skimming the glassy lake surface. Chet dived beneath its surface, daring her to follow. With her litttle remaining strength, Frances opened her palms. She invited the neutral waters to close around her.

Emergency vehicles converged on the scene. Investigators measured and cordoned off hallways while they reconstructed the day's events. A cluster of anxious authorities closeted themselves in the health office in a hushed huddle. The Smith and Wesson 638 Airweight revolver that Frances had put to such timely use was spirited away. A fleet of disaster counselors descended on the shaken eyewitnesses to extract their stories. The students were sure, then unsure of what they'd seen. The counselors helped shape their tearful accounts, edging out all impressions that Frances was anything but victim. Before they were discharged into the arms of ashen-faced parents, the eyewitnesses agreed that a security guard had stepped between Carrie and the shooter, perforating the shooter's thigh first, then silencing him with subsequent shots, thereby ending his murderous reign over his classmates. Hapless Frances was merely the last of his victims. How could it be otherwise?

The handful of police and administrators who knew the truth were sworn to secrecy. It would be frightening, they determined, that an armed adult had penetrated school security. A student gone berserk was understandable. In this age of violence and uncertainty, it happened, again and again. But a security breach was intolerable. Better to categorize Frances as yet another victim, vulnerable despite her life of preparation, than to cause new fretting in the community. The gaps in security would be addressed under a cloak of silence. The huddled group swore this to be so, on the fresh blood of the slain.

And so, Frances' photo appeared in the obituaries the next morning, alongside but outclassed by the shockingly glam smiles of two prom queens, a square-jawed track star, the Indian grocer's daughter, the math-a-lete who had led the school to three national championships (although no one cared about that feat until after his death), and the handsome son of an orthodontist. The shooter, pronounced dead

later that day in the hospital, had a separate gallery of photos, starting with his smiling toddlerhood, through a pimply but otherwise unremarkable adolescence, to a recent spectral moodiness, rife with clues visible only in hindsight.

Some news accounts gave Frances fleeting mention, spinning her as the sole consolation in the whole terrible ordeal, someone at least old enough to have forged and followed a life's path, struck down on a simple errand of mercy. Timid as it was, hers was a life lived, more than the fallen students would ever know. Ironic that it was spent preparing for the worst, some whispered.

And yet, there was that photo, marvelous in its nuance. Whoever had found it pressed in Frances' missal couldn't have known the story behind it. The photo had been shot on a Sunday afternoon. The usual church organist hadn't shown, and Frances had been coaxed into playing for Mass. After a tenuous start, her fingers remembered Mr. Ossini's admonitions, and glided over the keys, squeezing permutations of salvation into the souls of stunned parishioners with an urgency not known since the church was built. Afterwards, a handsome young photographer had snapped her photo and sent it to her through the church office. She'd always meant to drop him a line, thank him, maybe more, but for too many reasons, she hadn't. She thought that perhaps the church would ask her to return, but the regular organist was back the next week with her pudgy fingers and prosaic delivery. Frances had ended up breathing a sigh of relief, reminding herself that the life of an artist was not for her.

Still, if one paused over the photo of Frances amid the tragic gallery of so many eager and unlined faces, and if one then bothered to study it more closely, one could discern something remarkable, shining through the muted gray tones.

Gibson Monk

The Tenth Part of Desire

"For Allah created desire in ten parts—nine parts He gave to woman, and one part to man."—Islamic saying

Al-lah-u . . . Akbar, Al-lah-u . . . Akbar, Al-lah-u . . . Akbar—Allah is great, Allah is greater, Allah is greatest. So the muezzin's call unfurled from the tall spires of the minarets by the sea, as graceful and unyielding as the curves of the Arabic script in which the words were set down forever. The chant hung in the clear morning air, as it had every morning for a thousand years, a vibrating line dividing the golden pool of the rising sun and the sapphire vault of the sky from the deep blue sea and vast yellow sands that spread beneath them.

The muezzin called the faithful to prayer, and Muhammad was a faithful man. The path down from his home to the mosque by the sea was well-worn, for every day he would heed the call, make his quiet ablutions, roll out the intricately woven prayer mat, and bow to Mecca, as his faith required of him. He did this with a joyful heart, for Allah the merciful had delivered him from his early miseries. And knees unbending from his worship, his step was light and buoyant as he walked back up the hill.

Along his path there lay a stone, resting between sand and sky. It was lustrous and shapely, as though it had been carved, and it was not of the same kind as those around it. As Muhammad mounted the ridge, the city of spires spreading beneath him, he passed the stone without a thought, for there was no room in his heart.

For this was the day he would take a wife, young and beautiful, and he thanked Allah not only for this, but also for his success as a merchant, which had made him wealth enough for such a fair match. After the labors of this day she would come to him in the train of a great wedding party. Under the brilliant stars of the desert sky, in the courtyard planted with palm trees and flowers from far shores, there was to be

a great feast—a goat ritually slaughtered, swiftly and mercifully, so that its blood would not abide in a suffering body. The rich scent of roasting meat mingling with the fragrance of the night-opening flowers.

This was to be so. But what was also to be so, what Muhammad could not guess, was that one year from this day he would take this path again, with a heavy heart and a heavy hand. In his heart would be the weight of a great shame, and in his hand the heavy stone.

And so the stone waited. Hewn centuries ago from the living rock of a distant land, it had come to these shores in the belly of a swift-running galley, sails unfurled. It was laid with skill and care beneath the quiet arches of a Roman bathhouse, built to comfort the new masters of the land. Amid the heat and steam and the vibrant colors of sensuous mosaics the stone witnessed innumerable acts of lasciviousness and debauchery, as well as a few acts of genuine, amorous passion. It heard countless whispers, by turns lewd, plaintive, and true—plots of betrayal, promises of money or of love.

The bathhouse crumbled, forgotten, replaced by one grander still; its successor would crumble in due time, as would the Empire that engendered them both. In the meanwhile the stone lay fallow in a field of rubble. It was during this wait that the stone, for the first time, was raised in anger. But a powerful, peaceful voice stayed the wrathful hand, and the stone was set down upon the sand again, unblemished.

When the armies of the Prophet, peace be upon him, swept through the land, the masons who followed them admired the light color and quality of the stone. They gathered it up and laid it with great cunning in the high walls of a towering mosque, its architecture simple and pure. Here the stone abided for centuries, witnessing the ceaseless procession of men who came and bowed and prayed, all in harmonious unison, aspiring to the purity reflected in the mosque, and perhaps also to the stones in their perfect submission to the will of Allah, whose fire is men and stones.

Then the armies of the Cross came; the Templars reduced the mosque and tumbled the walls. Again the stone lay fallow, and when gathered up to be laid in a new mosque, the mosque by the sea, it rolled from the jostling cart as it mounted the

ridge and fell by the path, perhaps unwilling to be part of the world of men once more.

ب

Aisha, of almond eyes and honey skin, daughter of a shepherd, first met the elder wife in the courtyard garden. A harmonious rectangle bounded by a marble walking path, the garden lay open to the sky, and this night the stars shone fiercely above, and the crescent moon rose perfectly over the eastern wall. The doors of the inner walls of the great house opened upon the garden, and a spiraling staircase led up to the second story. Here there were colonnaded balconies from which one could look down upon the fountains and hear the waters playing. Where there were no balconies, windows stood upon the courtyard, their pointed arches as graceful as the tapering beaks of nightingales, the filigree surrounding them as extravagant as the feathers of a bird of paradise. And the brilliant colors of such birds, their wings clipped, fluttered amid the palms and the vines trailing in the rippling pools.

The wedding feast was over and the men had retired to their sitting room, drinking strong tea and smoking tobacco mixed with rich fruit from ornamented hookahs. The sweetness of ripe dates had begun to replace the savor of roasted meat.

Fatima, once beautiful, a shade of the youth who was the new bride, received Aisha with resolute eyes. The younger wife bowed her head in modesty as Fatima accepted her into the household, speaking gracious words and flashing the gaps in her teeth that were the cost of a child's bones. This made Aisha blush; she glanced at the older face with deference and pity. But Fatima returned this glance with a long look of yet deeper pity.

One of the many doors upon the courtyard opened silently, and from it came a man with vacant eyes and a shambling gate. He shuffled to a certain point behind Fatima's shoulder. "This is Mustapha," Fatima explained, without turning to him. "He does not hear, nor does he speak. Yet he knows the ways of this house as well as any. He has come to show you to our husband's bedchamber. Follow him now."

Fatima watched as the two disappeared silently into the house, the door shutting firm. Alone, she looked at the moon and the stars and the water running from the fountains. She walked along the border until she found the nightflowers that she especially favored. Bowing as she drew one close with a careful hand, she breathed in the scent of another land.

ج

Aisha, blushing, for the first time in her life arrayed in diaphanous undergarments and scented with rosewater, stood dazzled in the sumptuous bedchamber. Hundreds of silken pillows lay in heaps upon the embroidered rugs of deep red, all lit by a hundred candles of fine beeswax and fragrance. Around her neck was a delicate collar of gold, and her wrists were braceleted with fine silver. She found the deepest corner, plush with pillows, behind a veil of pure white silk split down the middle. It rippled with a breeze soft as breath. She lay upon the pillows, supine, as instructed by the mute Mustapha's last gesture before he left. Aisha waited, her heart beating like a bird's.

After some moments the door opened once more, the veil of white silk surging in a heave, and Aisha could see the silhouette of her new husband by the candlelight. She gazed at him with pride and longing. As the master of the house began to remove his robes, he spoke to her without looking. "The Prophet, peace be upon him, has enjoined the good husband to treat all of his wives as equally as possible."

The veil parted. Aisha saw her new husband's hand, strong and rough from long labors, come gently through the veil. The hand held a small disk of brass, much like a large coin. On it was inscribed the name of her husband, and her own name as well. "Take this," he said. "In your years as my wife you may have longing in you heart; if this longing is too much to bear, you may return this disk to me, and it will signify that you have a desire to be fulfilled. I will meet with you and you will speak this desire to me, and I shall tell no one of it. And if it is not against the will of Allah, and it is within my power, you shall have your heart's desire."

But this was to be the only gift the husband would give his bride that evening.

ع

The changing constellations over the garden marked the passing seasons. Aisha fell into the rhythms of the household, helping with the wash, helping with the cooking. The tension between Aisha and Fatima had long passed into friendship, sharing as they did the innumerable intimacies of the home, and now they made their days lighter with each other's company. Of all her tasks, the favorite of Aisha was to help watch over the children of Fatima, who stole their way into her heart. Three spirited boys, none yet twelve, and the little daughter especially, who had only just learned to walk.

Yet this love cast its own deep shadow upon Aisha's heart.

During the lonely nights she would stroll in the moonlight along the marble paths of the garden. She would look upon the trees and the waters of the courtyard and imagine that it was an oasis without walls, that the garden would not end at the marble border, but would go on and on. At the far edge would be the border of a vast, empty desert. She imagined what it would feel like to be alone, to stand at the edge of the desert, the dome of the sky all around her, and yet with no eyes upon her. She tried to imagine how it would feel to let out a cry upon the dry desert wind, with no ears but her own to hear it.

She imagined this only, for she of course had never been alone outside the walls of a household; first her father's, now her husband's. This had not troubled her until these last few months, for she had thought her whole life that at least behind the walls she would one day have a child of her own, a world of her own, to comfort her. But each barren day made more bitter the one that had passed.

On certain nights Aisha would come to the garden and weep by the fountains, under the palm trees. She did this only when she thought herself alone. From time to time, in one of the windows above the courtyard, she would catch what she imagined was the flashing of a white robe, and she would dry her tears.

ف

"Why do you weep, young one," came Fatima's voice, finding Aisha weeping one evening beneath the palm trees.

The almond eyes looked up. “Do you not know?” she cried.

Fatima looked upon her sadly. “Yes,” she said.

The older woman hesitated. “You have had your first blood, then?”

Aisha nodded.

“Forgive me,” Fatima continued. “It is just that you are so very young. I was not certain.” She sat down beside the young girl. She gazed at the moon. “Our husband is not the first old man to hope that a young wife would stir his flagging passion,” she said. “And you may yet.”

The two sat, the vibrant birds of paradise rustling in their nests, their colors muted in the silver light of the moon.

“My advice, young one,” said the older woman, “is that you not hold on to your wedding gift too long. Think about what it is you wish, what it would be that could ease your longing, and ask. For if you hold on to it too long it will be only a thing of brass.”

“You have spent yours already, then,” Aisha said.

Fatima nodded. “Long ago. Nor have I regretted it.”

The younger wife looked into the dark pools. “What I wish, he has not the power to give me.”

A stern look crossed the face of Fatima. “Think of something else,” she said. Then, softening, “Come, see what my token brought to me.” She took the young woman’s hand and they crossed to the foot of the garden. There, near the deepest of the pools, grew slender shoots just budding.

“I heard stories about such flowers from my father, who was also a merchant. They come from far away, in the distant East. They blossom but once a year, in the dark of night, just as they did on your wedding night. Now that rains have come and gone once more, this year a little early, soon they will bloom again.”

Aisha recalled the memory of a delicate fragrance as the night breeze caressed the tiny white buds dancing on the slender stems. “They are very beautiful,” she said, though their beauty had not made her forget her sadness. She looked up, catching the glimpse of white among the shadows of the colonnaded balcony. She thought it might be a trick of the moonlight, but Fatima was looking up as well.

“Fatima,” she whispered. “Is this a haunted place? Is there

some jinn or effrit hiding among the shadows?"

"No," came Fatima's soothing voice. "I do not believe so. But I have seen it as well, have seen it in the dark of night from time to time, ever since I became part of this household; ever since I was as young as you."

The two women stood, hands clasped, underneath the moon.

ك

In the late morning the household was quiet, the greater part of the servants having departed with Muhammad on a trading voyage. They would be gone for two weeks. Fatima and Aisha also made ready for an expedition, though one more modest. They quietly and carefully prepared a meal, and they arrayed themselves in the long black robes required past the gates of their home. On fine days such as this they would often take their midday meal outside, and close by the house there were the ruins of an old Roman town. The children especially loved to chase and play amid the tumbled columns and crumbled walls, hiding in the many corners and paths that made the place a labyrinth. Sometimes one of the boys would even be able to surprise his brother by reaching up and grabbing his ankle, for over the years curious men had excavated some of the structures that lay beneath the empty town now filling with sand.

When they arrived at the ruins, Mustapha sat down upon a tumbled shelf of stone, staring blankly at the far horizon. The boys had already begun to chase one another, shouting as they disappeared among the old walls and vines. The women spread out a fine cloth and began to set out dishes, talking and laughing quietly to each other, as the young girl pulled at the long grass beside them. Fine dark olives and hummus and oil were set down, along with the crushed eggplant and garlic and the flat bread to go with them. The two forms, veiled in black, animated the stillness of the abandoned town.

The women were busy, and so they did not notice as the young girl caught sight of an iridescent butterfly. Enchanted, she grasped at it, and chased as it fluttered away. Soon she was lost to sight.

Fatima, rising from the spread of food, shrieked when she

saw her little daughter missing. Mustapha at last turned his head, and seeing the distress he leapt up from his seat and scampered over the stones, following Fatima and Aisha as they rushed into the ruins. The shouts died away and the town, briefly bustling, returned to the stillness of a cemetery.

Inside, the women and Mustapha rushed about, separating to cover more ground. Fatima raced along row after row of empty doorways, rooms without roofs, all alike. She stopped, heart beating loudly. She heard a cry and knew it was Aisha, first a loud cry of surprise and then another, weaker and more distant. Fatima froze, torn. And then she heard the long moan of Mustapha calling over the ruins, and this put half her heart at ease. There was no urgency in his moan; Fatima knew that her daughter had been found.

She ran to where she heard Aisha calling. Turning the corner of an old path, she saw a jagged gash in the ground. She knelt down to it and saw Aisha lying in the dust below.

"Aisha!" she called.

"Yes Fatima," called the younger wife. "I am all right. I cannot yet stand, but the pain is passing."

Without hesitation Fatima lowered herself down into the crevasse. The bottom was a little less than ten feet below. She came to Aisha's side, cradling her. "Did the ground give way beneath your feet?" she asked. "The rains, they . . ."

"No," came Aisha's reply, with a youthful laugh. "In my haste I was not looking where I ran."

"Mustapha has found her," Fatima said quietly, her heart deeply touched by the young woman's concern and spirit.

They rose slowly; Fatima helped Aisha very gently put weight on her injured leg. "It will be all right," she said, gaining her feet. "Where is this place?" The two women began to look around, their eyes adjusting to the dim light. Surrounding them were ancient columns, and they found that they stood in a dry, shallow basin, wide and long.

"It must be one of the old bathhouses," said Fatima. They looked along the walls. Through the deep dust vibrant mosaics still held their color. They depicted scenes of passion, men and women unclothed and embracing, carnal pleasure written upon their ecstatic faces. One of the mosaics showed the image of two women bathing each other, one caressing

the breasts of her partner, and she gently touching the other's hips and between her legs, delight in her eyes.

The two women held each other, a nameless spark arcing between the gulfs inside them. The sky shone brightly in the fissure above, blue and empty and flawless.

م

It was the next night that they met for the first time as lovers, summoned to the garden in the late hours by the scent of the opening nightflowers, an unspoken signal between them. Their veils fell away in the moonlight, and by the running water glimmering with the stars they made love.

Afterward, the women sat silently beneath the palm trees. Aisha's lips trembled and she buried her face in her hands and wept. Fatima caressed the hairs of her head, saying, "Young one, why do you weep?" Her voice was strong but full of worry. "Do you not wish it so?"

The young woman of almond eyes and honey skin shook her head. "It is not that," she cried, holding the arm of Fatima close to her cheek. "It is only that I am frightened. If we should be discovered . . ."

"Shush, young one," said Fatima, relief in her voice. "Muhammad is away. And I know the ways of this house even better than he. Mustapha has slept soundly since he was a child, in all the years I have seen since my own marriage day, many years ago. We are safe here."

Aisha, wiping her tears, looked away. "And what of the Master above? Does He not see? What have we done, Fatima? There is love in my heart for you, and yet I know that it is a shameful love."

Fatima looked at her. "There is no shame in love," she said. "And besides, where is the place of women in Paradise, so that we may deny happiness in this life? I do not know, and these are not matters for us to speak of. Only Allah knows our fate, and He himself has written it and will lay judgment upon it." She took Aisha's hand. "As for us, little one, fear not. In the world of men, here at least no eyes will set upon us."

They drew closer, the crescent moon overhead. The two did not see, but from the shadows of the balcony came a brief flash of white in the moonlight, as of a silken robe upon the wind.

ش

On the day of Muhammad's return, Aisha rose early to prepare a special meal for him. She sang in a soft, clear voice, and her heart was joyful and light, for it was filled with love. Not only for Fatima. Aisha's love for her husband had grown as well, for as her passion had spilled out at last, this left room for the tenderness she felt for her husband to unfold from its prison.

The kitchen, cool and bright in the morning, the windows open to the sounds and fragrances of the courtyard garden, bustled with Aisha's carefree labor. While preparing the flatbread she paused, gazing through the window. Mustapha had come down the spiral staircase from the balcony and was shuffling silently across the courtyard. This was not unusual.

But Aisha stared, and a dread filled her heart. She reached for the token her husband had given to her, and found it still in the folds of her dress. Her fear lessened, though her confusion grew. For as Mustapha moved unhurried through the morning light the rays of the sun caught a small object he held in his hand. It shone like a brass coin.

When Muhammad, refreshing himself in his chamber after his long journey, saw the brass coin upon the silken pillow, his own heart filled with dread. He held it in his hand and in it he could feel the weight of doom. But Muhammad was a faithful man, and his word, as his name engraved upon the brass, had been set down forever.

That evening he climbed the marble stairs and entered chambers of his house he had not visited for many years. Without complaint he listened to the entreaty. And without hesitation or question he set its fulfillment into motion, though he knew not the reason for it.

He was asked this: Send for Aisha's five brothers; tell them nothing, and tell Aisha nothing. Before their arrival, depart as though for another trading voyage, but do not leave the city by the sea.

That was all. His word would then be fulfilled.

And so these things he did.

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Muhammad's sojourn at the city by the sea did not last long, and on the third day the muezzin's cry called him not only to prayer, but afterwards also to a council meeting of elders. Muhammad attended dutifully, for he was a faithful man. In council chamber, with the wise old men sitting for judgment, Muhammad saw Aisha's five brothers, anger and anguish in their eyes.

It was from their testimony, as they hid by the windows overlooking the garden, that Muhammad first knew of the betrayal, of Aisha and Fatima's passion.

Muhammad burned with shame, and his heart was heavy. He wondered why Allah would be so cruel—to dangle happiness in front of him, then to humiliate him and make him suffer the loss of two wives all at once, rewarding with one hand and punishing with the other. He wondered what he had done to be so ill-favored in Allah's eyes. But he said nothing, for it is not for men to question the will of Allah, only to submit to the will of Allah, whose fuel is men and stones.

And so Muhammad followed in an unhappy train along the path to his home, the same path as his marriage train had come one year before. Aisha's five brothers led the way, knives flashing in the sun. At the ridge, Muhammad stopped. He saw the stone and stooped to take it, and then continued on his way.

By the gates of his home the woman in the white robes waited for him, her son Mustapha by her side. Aisha's brothers continued through the gates. The woman limped to her husband and leaned to whisper in his ear. "Many years ago, husband," she said, "I gave to you your first son. Though he made me barren, and deaf and dumb he is, he has been faithful to you. As I have been to you. With my father's riches, given to you in dowry, you built for me the splendid garden. It was a comfort in my long years of wretchedness, to look upon its beauty, its purity. Now that purity has been defiled. Your new wives have wronged me, Muhammad, and I call upon you to set things right."

Muhammad put up his hand. "They have wronged us all," he said. "And even this is nothing, for they have wronged Allah as well."

Aisha's brothers, storming through the house, found the young woman in the kitchen. When she first looked up a smile of delight and wonder caught her lips, for she had not seen her brothers in a very long while. But seeing the fell look in their eyes, Aisha knew that she had been discovered, and an icy fear came upon her. She turned and ran, fleeing to the garden; as she ran the memories of how her brothers would chase her through their home, in their childhood only a few years past, filled her head. She remembered all of them squealing with laughter as they played; but now they called to her in shrill and murderous shouts.

Fatima's children were playing in the courtyard. Aisha raced past them, raced down the marble path, past the fountains, past the folded flowers, past the date palm trees heavy with fruit. She finally fell, collapsing by the stairs, weeping. She called to her brothers, who were surrounding her. "Please, please," she cried, lifting her hands in front of her face. "Please, not so that the children will see."

Aisha's last sight, as her brothers plunged in their knives, was of the three brothers of the little girl surrounding her as she played, shielding her eyes. Perhaps as a protection, perhaps as a warning.

Under the molten disk of the sun, Muhammad's servants brought Fatima out through the gates, struggling. They dug into the burning yellow sand and buried her to the neck. All the household and all the elders of the city by the sea, joined by many villagers who had come to witness, gathered around her. Fatima's veil was stripped from her head and this was the first, and only, time as a woman that her face was shown in public.

The elders, circling, looked down upon her. "Do you not have anything to say?" they asked.

Fatima held her tongue and set her jaw.

Muhammad her husband came forward, the desert wind catching at his robes. He looked at her, with pity and hate, and the hurt was set genuine and deep in his eyes. "Why, Fatima, why?" he called to her, one hand upon his head. "Oh, my beloved wife!" he called, his voice cracking. "Why have you brought this calamity upon us? Why have you destroyed

our lives?”

Fatima looked up but said nothing. The vault of the sky was deep and blue and flawless, pure but for a distant contrail etching a white line across the emptiness.

The stone, sent arcing through the air, struck the uncovered head and rolled into the dust, wet with first blood. ي

J. S. Simmons

Bodies In Motion and At Rest

Dawn at the Tasti-Linx sausage plant, there are football field sized lockers full of hanging meat. Headless, skinless, gutless steers, heifers and hogs hang from dull gore-crusted hooks in vast crowds. They wait to be separated from their bones and ground into a bloodless paste. They wait to be blended with a secret mixture of herbs, spices, nitrates and other preservatives.

Thirty-five year old Donna Consiglio adjusts her hair net. She's got on her blood stained white smock coat and her full-length black rubber apron. She's ready but first shift won't begin for another eight minutes. She walks through three long corridors to the door onto loading dock number twenty-nine. She smokes. This is where in seven hours Wayne Stokes, her fiancé, will back in a refrigerated tractor-trailer, help load it with fresh boxed sausage, then drive it to a distribution facility in Fort Worth. She finishes her cigarette and returns to her station where she stuffs two-pound hunks of meat and gristle into the funnel of a grinder bigger than her doublewide.

At about nine, three hours before the trucks come, Donna looks up at a clock for just a moment as her hand performs a rote motion for the um-teenth time—pushing meat into the grinder with a special length of two by four. Occasionally the wood catches on the whirling blades and the trick is to let go of it quickly before the hand is wrenched and the wrist broken. The wood will tumble about in the hopper for a beat or two, then pop out. She'll catch it and work some more.

But this time Donna doesn't wait for the wood to pop out, and she doesn't catch it because she is thinking about something that is not her job: sweet, quiet Wayne. She grabs for the wood, throwing her left hand into the hungry opening. The rotating blades grind four fingers within millimeters of the palm, plus the tip of the thumb down to the knuckle.

She's not in the habit of removing her engagement ring. It's company policy to wear no hand or wrist jewelry but Donna reasons, justly, that she is a careful and skilled

worker. This is, as industrial accidents typically are, unexpected.

By the time the severed fingers make their way to the machine that stuffs spiced and treated meat into an endless sheath of casing to be twisted into contiguous, coherent segments, the digits are indistinguishable from the beef and pork that are the main ingredients here. The ring has been battered and disfigured but is more recognizable for what it is: a cheap bauble of low-karat gold, which accounts for its semi-retained structural integrity as it travels through the blades and rifled tubes of sausage-packing machinery. The tiny chip of cubic zirconium is still firmly nestled in its mashed setting. It rests just under the skin of an otherwise perfect link, visible to Spot Inspector Juan Lopes. He plucks the ring-bearing sausage off the conveyor belt, slices it open with a box-cutter clipped to his apron, extracts the scrap of metal and deposits it in a back pocket of his jeans. He throws the ruined sausage into a hundred-gallon bin that fills throughout the day. The contents of this bin will be shipped to Mexico to be processed and added to feed for hogs and cattle.

Juan takes his lunch at noon, same as everybody on first shift. He has nothing to eat but pays twenty-five cents for a cup of coffee and begs a cigarette from a coworker. He drinks the coffee. To light the cigarette he uses a brass lighter left him by his late father, Big Juan. As he smokes he remembers the ring, fishes it from his pocket and fingers it between drags until he decides it's worthless and flicks it into the dust in front of dock number twenty-nine.

Wayne Stokes drives short-haul. It's refrigerated food, safer than the oil and CNG he hauled when he was twenty, but three-plus tons is a big load, long and wide as big rigs always are, so it isn't easy. The money's okay, not as good as long haul but he's glad he can stay put, settle in. He wants a family. His girl, Donna, isn't too pretty. She's seven years older than him and at thirty-five she's only got a few, now risky childbearing years left. But she's solid in her mind, practical. And she took his ring. She accepts him.

He's looking forward to seeing her on her lunch break.

He doesn't drive faster; he's on schedule. He'll back into bay twenty-nine at about five to noon. He'll hop down from the cab and have a smoke. She'll come out the same door she did when they first met. He'll walk up and hand her a sandwich in a brown paper sack. He brings her a sandwich every day. Ham and Swiss on white, roast beef, lettuce, and horseradish on toasted rye, these are her favorites. He likes to watch her eat. She's so hungry from working seven hours straight, and she loves the sandwiches so much, but she's real careful when she eats around him. It makes him feel special that she minds the way she eats just for him. He's pretty sure he loves her while he thinks about this.

It's three of. The end of the trailer kisses the rubber bumpers on the loading dock. It's hot and dry out, sunny. Wayne's boots kick up a tiny cloud of dust when he hits the ground. He's holding the bag with the sandwich in it. He was out of rye bread this morning, out of ham too, so the sandwich is roast beef with lettuce and horseradish on white toast. That's okay.

The quiet boy, Juan, stands smoking up on the dock. He's looking into his hand, fidgeting with something. He squints and cocks his head a little bit. His bottom lip juts out for a beat and he tosses whatever it is away without looking. It lands in the dust on the far side of the rig. Pausing, resting the paper sack on a running board, Wayne lights a smoke of his own. He walks around to the five steps up to the dock. The thing Juan threw is near the trailer's left wheel. It's shiny. He squats, his cigarette an upward, diagonal slash jutting from pursed lips. He picks it up. It's dirty. He rubs it, spits on it a little and rubs it again. He knows what it is and to whom it belongs. He drops it in his shirt pocket.

Inside the office, a tiny cube with imitation wood paneling and no windows, the plant manager makes a joke about gays, scribbles numbers on Wayne's clipboard, then initials the appropriate forms and bills of lading. He says his joke about gays is just a joke and Wayne doesn't hear and he doesn't notice the manager's obvious desire to chat, the fantastic gossip dangling from the tip of his tongue and shining in his puppy-sad eyes. The manager hands over the papers, and Wayne goes out to help load the truck. He's not leaving yet.

He wants to get in the cab and gun it the hell out of there without pulling the freight door down. He wants to shove it into fourteenth gear, strip the clutch, and find a stretch of steep, downhill road with hairpin turns. But he won't do that because he believes that moving food from where it's made to where it can be sold, bought, and eaten is important. It's his patriotic duty, he thinks. And, he thinks it's all he's got left. He thinks he's alone now.

He's throwing the boxes very hard.

He yells, "Keep 'em coming!" and mutters, "Mother humpers."

When the sausages are loaded and locked in under the humming refrigeration units, he gets behind the wheel. He doesn't say anything to anyone, just starts the engine, slips her into gear, and hits the road.

The day is clear and bright, not a cloud in the sky, royal blue. The road is dry. Why isn't the ring on Donna's hand? Why would she throw it out like that? Why is it so beat up, he wonders. They don't fight. There's no time for fighting. Five days a week he drives all morning and afternoon and when he gets done he's beat to hell, maybe has himself a beer in front of the TV before turning in. She works those twelve-hour shifts, gets home soaked in gore, spends forty-five minutes in a scalding shower, and collapses into bed. He's speeding, doing eighty-four. He thinks maybe he should have tried talking to her but he was thinking such nice things about her when he pulled into the loading bay. Then the ring, right there in the dirt. That boy Juan just tossed it there, like a bad link lifted off the belt and dumped into a refuse bin.

Wayne's knuckles whiten on the wheel. A brown-spotted rabbit hops once in the middle of the road. It's the biggest he's ever seen, four feet from nose to nubby tail. It makes just the one hop then turns its head and looks Wayne flat in the eye. He turns the wheel a tiny bit, not a genuine evasive effort, just unchecked reflex. He's still going to hit the rabbit, he knows. And he knows he shouldn't have jerked the wheel. The comprehension about the ring, the eye-contact with the rabbit, the steering-wheel flinch and the flashed picture of what is surely about to happen come simultaneously. In this instant he knows so much it should be pleasurable—so much

knowing washing over and through him like a low wave falling across a clean, sandy, stupid shore. He'll never again have this much certainty at once and he knows this, too.

The rig jackknifes. He's thrown clear of the cab through the windshield, which smashes, filling his face and scalp with glass. Tractor and trailer snap apart and collide and the freight explodes over the blacktop. Sausages litter a fifty-foot swathe of roadbed. They rain down like meat blackjacks and, before he loses consciousness, one hits Wayne on his caved-in cheek.

Carl Tubbs pushes a pen across his blotter. He's early. There's nothing to do. There never is because it is his foremen who run the plant, not him. He signs papers and takes orders over the phone. He tries hard to avoid his nagging awareness that he is not really manager of the entire Tasti-Linx packing facility, but its overpaid shipping clerk. Days like today it's hard. He's early because he rushed to beat traffic. In his car he makes a blustery effort to be on time every day because while he's changing lanes without signaling, spilling coffee on his tie, and laying rubber at four-way stop signs, he can convince himself he has purpose. But today he arrives a few minutes before nine and knows the plant has been churning for four solid hours with no help from him.

He picks up the pen, pulls a steno pad from under a stack of papers and writes his name several times in varied script. The intercom from production ops buzzes. He jumps, catches his breath and presses the "talk" button.

"Yeah?" he says.

"Mr. Tubbs," says the man on the other end, one of the foremen—Glen Stillman. "Lady lost some fingers in the grinder. I put a tourniquet on her and called an ambulance."

"I'll be down."

He gathers paperwork for an injury. These things must be carefully recorded. Liabilities must be assessed. He strides down the corridor and takes the last three steps to the plant floor in a bound. He has his clipboard, steno pad, and forms he will pass on to his bosses in triplicate.

The injured woman is sitting on a stackable plastic chair. Stillman must've cut away the left sleeve of her white work

coat to make room for the tourniquet. She's still got on her bloody rubber boots and big black apron. Her legs are splayed, toes pointing up to the ceiling. She's looking at nothing, eyes out of focus. Carl wonders whether she's in shock. Her mouth is moving and her right hand twitches on her thigh. He has to walk past her to get the papers to Stillman. He needs to get them signed by her foreman, someone who in the event of a lawsuit can be reminded of their name on this form and relied upon to testify to the truth of what they've already signed. He comes within a few feet of her. He'll pass her in seconds and be on the floor, get the papers signed.

"Can you please give me a ride to the fucking hospital?" she says as he steps over her feet.

"Pardon?" he says.

She lifts her fingerless left hand, wadded in paper towels already soaked through with blood. The veins in her forearm are swollen because a fat orange rubber band is cutting off circulation at the crook of her elbow.

"Hospital, motherfucker!"

They're right by the door to loading dock number twenty-nine. It opens. Three EMTs come in. Carl exhales. They bustle him out of their way. They need to get at Donna, who relaxes, tells them her name. She lets them shine a light into her pupils. They hold up fingers and ask her what day it is.

Stillman signs the papers. One EMT asks him what happened to Donna's hand. They need to know whether they can find the fingers somewhere and bring them to the emergency room for reattaching. Carl stiffens. He waits for Stillman to make eye contact but he won't. Instead the foreman looks at the EMT in charge, oscillating his head slowly. This gesture says, *There is no way, and you have no more questions*. Tasti-Linx employs, counting both full and part timers, 127 Texans—a real economic boon and necessity. Everybody around here knows it. The other two EMTs get a stretcher and hustle Donna out to the ambulance. There is an understanding reached here but Carl doesn't play a part in it. He watches it, bears mute witness.

Juan Lopes gets off work at five. In twelve hours he'll stand again at the end of the assembly line and watch tens of

thousands of pink-gray phalluses emerge onto a conveyor belt. Some of these he'll remove and discard on the basis of flaws: discolored meat showing through the casing, deformities, bulges, or ruptures. He's been on his feet since five a.m. He doesn't count hours or look at clocks. That's a trick he knows. The shift is either happening or not. Now it's over and he waits with other men who ride with him in the back of a flatbed pickup. They ride to the same barrio coffee shop where Juan sometimes buys a pork sandwich to bring for lunch at the plant. Tomorrow, Wednesday, payday, he'll have lunch. Having eaten, he won't be so tired at the end of the day. Before he sleeps he'll stay in the kitchen for a while and read.

The truck comes. The men pile into the back. There are benches facing each other along the sides, wooden slat railings that come just above the backs of their heads as they sit and ride.

It's very hot. The sun is bright going down, and slanting light pierces their eyes. Inside the factory it is dim so this sharp contrast is uncomfortable. It affects everybody's mood. Juan doesn't know their names, the two arguing.

"¡Asno! *¡You stepped on my toe!*" one hollers.

The other snarls back, "*You're sprawling all over like a fat rich pig*."

The men are up, glaring into each other's eyes just like that. Juan stands too. He holds his hands out with one palm extended toward each, trying to placate them before something bad happens.

"Hombres," he says. "Amigos, *sit down. The truck—we're moving*."

They don't bother looking at him. He is quiet all the time, only a boy to them, he knows. He is taller than most of them, and skinny, not muscular as they are. They carry meat from the big refrigerated rooms to thick tables where it is cut. They butcher it into two-pound hunks with single strokes of their cleavers. He isn't like them but he is of them, more than the whites. They must know this at least.

The angry men pause then square off. They will punch each other anywhere they can. Juan understands these men are angry out of all proportion because they hate their jobs and can get nothing better and they hope their children will get

educations and desk jobs but this is also unlikely. The truck rolls over a small hole. It bounces twice, front wheels then rear.

The bigger fighter loses his footing and stumbles, grabbing the other's forearm for balance. Their eyes widen. Maybe they see the significance of their quarrel is minute compared to what will happen in the time it takes for their hearts to beat once more. These fighters are in the middle of the truck bed. Juan is at the rear by the tailgate. He watches them fall at him, holding each other's arms, knocking him off with them so that all three tumble onto the rushing dirt together. It hurts more than Juan expects. After all, the truck rarely moves more quickly than thirty-five miles per hour. The pitted road scrapes his skin off in sheets.

They cannot afford treatment at this emergency room, none of them. The fighters are sitting by one another talking, friends now. Juan is in a seat by himself. He watches the elevators, the check-in desk, and the entrance to where doctors and nurses help the hurt and sick people. The big doors open and a gurney comes out into the hall. A fat orderly pushes it up against a wall and walks away. There is a man on the gurney. He has bandages on his head and face, casts on his arms and legs. Juan recognizes him by his voice. He is Mr. Stokes, the man who drives an empty truck to the dock five days a week, helps load it with sausage, and drives away. He always has a cigarette to spare. He is also the man who will marry a woman who works at the other end of the assembly line from Juan.

Mr. Stokes is moaning very loud but his words sound crushed as if they were coming through the grinder. "Donna," he says, again and again.

The elevator doors slide open and a woman in a wheelchair with bandages on her hand gets off, pushing with her good hand on the right wheel, pulling herself with her feet on the floor in front of her. A nurse follows her. He tells her she needs to go back to her room and lay down.

"I been here all day," says the woman. "I'm going outside and have a cigarette."

"You lost a lot of blood. You're on a lot of morphine."

The woman stops jerking herself forward in the wheelchair

and sits very still and straight. She turns her head and lifts her left hand from her lap.

"Fuck you," she says.

"Donna?" says the man on the gurney.

Juan can hear the two fighting friends chattering. He watches the lady, Donna, yanking her wheelchair toward the gurney bearing the man she will marry. The taller of the fighters says, "*We are waiting here so long I can't feel my injuries anymore*."

This is a boast and a lie. Juan feels his injuries. He wishes the fighters would shut up so he can hear the lady in the wheelchair. But he hears her fine because when she gets to the gurney she is crying loudly and this makes her voice rise as she speaks to the broken truck driver. Juan sees her trying to get closer to her man, held at bay by the railings on the sides of his wheeled bed. She leans, resting her head on the brushed metal, and holds a dangling end of the thin bedclothes as if they were an ailing child's fingers.

"I lost my ring," she says, choking on her own thick sobs.

Through miles of gauze and cloth tape Mr. Stokes breathes, "Found it."

Nancy Nguyen

Truck Stop

Tang Ngo scratched the line in the middle of his rib cage. His wife always clicked her tongue when she caught him itching the scar. Of course, it had healed over from a year ago, but she still disapproved. *"It's as if you want to rip it open again and bleed,"* his wife once said in her undoubtedly Southern Vietnamese. In Vietnam, he would have looked down on her and her provincial accent. But here in America, he thought it endearing. She was at home, and he was on this lonely winding road in Arizona. Other than the beautiful Grand Canyon, Tang knew very little about this place. He put his hand back on the steering wheel, trusting it to steer towards a truck stop.

Tang had been truck driving for six months. He hauled a 5-axle tractor semitrailer. From far away, the beast had a growling bear's head and a metallic snake's body. He was lucky enough to work for a Vietnamese supermarket in Little Saigon called America's Best Market. Tang could have ended up anywhere, working for anyone. But he ended up working for people as close as family, so they overlooked Tang's red flags. Firstly, he had an extensive resume. Secondly, he had a master's degree in business. Lastly, he underwent a bypass surgery a couple months before applying. But they didn't question Tang. Instead, they gave him the benefit of the doubt, something that came from mutual understanding.

Truck driving was a simple life. Every day, Tang reminded himself of three things. Get on the road, call wife, and find a truck stop. Get on the road, call wife, and find a truck stop. He had already called his wife. It was a short conversation—one that was more about what they didn't say rather than the words that came out. The last goal to accomplish was to find a truck stop before he could get a violation. Truck drivers had curfews. But he didn't worry—not like he used to about infractions. The prospect of a violation breathed on his neck like a wife's soft nags.

There was something in the distance.

The sun was hiding behind the burnt orange plateaus, so he couldn't be sure. He leaned over the steering wheel and squinted. Yes, there was a person wearing a dark parka walking at the side of the road. His wife had warned him about hitchhikers. To her, they were the literal embodiment of people who weren't family—people who did not bear a resemblance—people who couldn't be trusted. *"Don't be so nice all the time,"* he could hear her say. *"That's how you let them take your life from you—even your bones and your blood."* This was not an ordinary hitchhiker, though. Hitchhikers—at least in the movies Tang had watched—stood facing oncoming traffic and stuck their thumbs out. This one was hunched over away from the truck with feet dragging against the dark orange earth.

Tang sucked the air through his teeth and pulled over. When he made a complete stop, the Mother Mary statuette taped to the dashboard rattled as if it disagreement.

The hitchhiker kept walking down the side of the path, and each step looked more like a Lazarus reflex than an act of purpose. It was odd how the stranger didn't notice a semi truck had stopped. Tang figured the thunderous growl could wake the dead.

Tang honked.

The stranger jumped and turned. The boy took out an earphone and squinted at the headlights. He couldn't have been more than sixteen years old. A child. An American. The boy had light brown hair peaking through his knit hat, blue eyes peaking through his squints. After a moment, the boy nodded, readjusted his hiking backpack, and walked to the passenger door. This was no hitchhiker if Tang had offered the boy solace before the boy could even ask.

A bit of cold slipped into the truck when the boy opened the door. The stranger sat himself in the passenger seat and closed the door. Tang observed the boy's blue-tipped hands rub together. Then they plunged into the boy's parka pockets.

Tang got the truck back on the highway.

Silence permeated the truck as if spoiled meat also found its way into the truck the same way the boy did. It had been a while since Tang had company. Tang stifled a laugh. What sort of company was this? What sort of host was Tang? Back

at his home in California, Tang and his wife had hosted plenty of gatherings. They mostly were loud drunken parties, incomplete without Vietnamese food, beer breath, and inappropriate jokes. No matter how formal, Tang took each guest by the hand and spurted a joke—only understood between the Vietnamese.

"What is your name?" Tang said. He spoke slowly, enunciating every word. The words felt more like strange food in his mouth.

The boy didn't say anything. "Name," Tang repeated. "What *is* your name?"

Again, the boy remained silent, even unaware of everything except the passenger window. Perhaps Tang wasn't making himself clear. Perhaps Tang spoke a different language without even knowing it.

The boy's parka crinkled together. It was a sound that was so subtle, but it still sliced through the silence between them.

"My name is Tang," Tang offered. "Not Tom. Tang." Tang's offering did not feed the boy's curiosity, so Tang tried to feed his own instead. "Your parents, are they worried?"

"Yeah, right," the boy said. Tang barely heard him.

"Every parent worries for their child. Even not the best parents," Tang decided. He should know. He had three children of his own. Three daughters, in fact. Two had jobs and husbands. One was going to graduate school, studying art history or something of that nature. There was not a day he didn't recognize the restless feeling at the back of his head as parental worry. Now, the tables have turned a bit. Since Tang's decision to become a truck driver, his daughters became three more wives, demanding weekly checkups and calls.

Tang heard another crinkle of the boy's parka.

"Listen," the boy finally said. It was a hollow sort of voice—a voice just getting accustomed to its depth. "Nobody has to get hurt here or nothing. Just give me all your money and then I'll leave."

Tang's heart felt like it burst in his chest, which felt more like a memory. In his mind, Tang could hear his wife speaking in the southern dialect, *"Trời ơi! Don't strain yourself. When a doctor fixes your heart, you need to take care of it."* Doing what his figment wife said, he slowly drew in air as if

he were sipping hot soup. Tang looked over at the boy.

The boy had a Swiss army knife. A blade the size of a finger pointed at Tang.

Tang looked back at the windshield. He let the air pour out of his lungs. The truth of the matter was that Tang was not afraid to die. Tang never used to feel this way. He was scared of death in Vietnam. He was scared of death when he first came to America. He was scared of death a year ago, when he woke up in a hospital bed, wondering why his chest hurt. After driving on the road and having time to think, Tang realized that death lacked all human thoughts and motives, making it the kindest bogeyman invented by the human psyche.

"When I was young," Tang said slowly, "when I was in Vietnam, I saw my first dead body. My family and I were escaping from Phan Rang—my home. We drove the family car, and I sat by the window. I was fifteen. I did not know what was going on. I had this big feeling that we were not only running away, but we were being chased. Then, I saw the dead body. On the side of the road. My father drove around the body, but I still saw it. It is a picture in my mind. Very still. Very real. The eyes were open. The mouth, too. Going to say something."

Tang paused for effect. In truth, Tang did not fear the dead body. He was more curious—curious as to why the sight of a dead body didn't affect him as much as he thought it would. "The person did not die from a knife," Tang continued. "The person died from fear, from his country, and from a gun. Do you think I am afraid of you? Do you think I ran away from my home to be scared of a little boy with a little knife? How could I be?" Tang glanced over at the boy, who had lowered his Swiss army knife.

"Here is the deal," Tang said. "Put the knife away. You stay for a little bit. I will get you some food. When you ready, I will give you money, and you can leave. Sound good?"

There was another crinkle of the boy's parka. Tang glanced over to see that the knife was gone. "Yeah," the boy said. "Whatever."

The truck was quiet again. Tang didn't mind so much. He found solace in their shared similarity of silence. It promised some semblance of peace.

After a few long moments, there was a truck stop. It sat on the side of the road like a glowing mirage. Without the fervor he had before, Tang turned into it. There were already domino rows of trucks inside the space. Tang drove down the path between semis and found a little bit of space at the end. He parked the truck and turned off the ignition.

Tang looked over at the hitchhiker. The boy was staring out the window. He was staring out the window for some time now. With the sun nearly set, Tang wondered what was there to see. Still, the boy looked. The boy stared. The boy. Tang could not see the boy as anything but a child. If he was correct, Tang was nearly three times as old as this child. Maybe Tang was wrong. Maybe Tang was older.

Tang sighed. "Eat?"

The boy jumped. His tired eyes looked over at Tang. The boy gave a nod.

Tang and the boy walked to the building, which was in the back center of the lot. It looked like it used to have a working sign out in front. From the last bit of sunlight, Tang made out the words, "Al's," and "Cafe." Every so often, the large sign flickered to life as if it were struck by lightning. When it flickered, the sign gave a small buzz. Tang grabbed the large handle of one of the double doors and pulled. He nodded for the boy to walk in. The warm smell of coffee and greasy food touched every inch of Tang's face like a fleece blanket.

The same kind of crowd was inside of this truck stop. These were the typical truck drivers. Baseball caps, facial hair, and large stomachs. Each truck driver had his own table or his own hidden corner. Instead of talk, there were the clinking of utensils on porcelain plates. And Tang wondered how odd he and the boy looked. A Vietnamese man and an American child. This had to be a start to an American joke—one about a bar and walking into it. Tang wanted to laugh even though he didn't even know the punch line.

They walked up to the cashier, who was picking at her long red nails.

"What can I get for ya?" the waitress said. Tang had read the name on her name tag but quickly forgot it. The waitress had this grainy voice. When she asked the question, the words fell out so easily, as if she were blowing a stream of smoke.

Tang looked at the boy, who was staring at the floor.

"What do you have?" Tang asked.

The waitress took a big sideways chew of her gum and pointed at the menu above her head with her pen.

"Oh," Tang said with a light laugh. "Two orders of the Breakfast for Dinner Special," Tang said slowly.

With a glossy-nailed finger, the waitress clicked a button on the cash register twice. "Will that be all for you today, sir?"

Tang glanced over at the boy again, but the boy's head still hung there.

"And a chocolate pie," Tang said.

The waitress clicked another button. "Will that be all for you today, sir?"

"Yes," Tang said, pulling out his wallet from his back pocket.

Tang and the boy sat down at one of the small tables. There was that small moment of potential. Either they could acknowledge each other existence, or they could maintain the status quo of strangers. The boy scooted his bottom to the edge of the chair, his shoulder blades resting on the back of the chair. He closed his eyes and assumed some disguise of sleep. Tang passed the time by scrunching the paper off the straw and twisting the loose skin.

In a couple minutes, the waitress's heels clopped towards them. Tang looked up to see the waitress with two steaming plates in her hand and a chocolate pie at her elbow. "Here ya go," the waitress said, giving Tang a closed-lipped smile. She put two stretched plates of food in front of Tang and the boy. She put the chocolate pie in front of Tang. When she turned to leave, Tang put the chocolate pie in front of the boy.

The boy's eyes opened and stared at the light wisp of steam. He looked at it as if he hadn't seen food do that in a very long time.

With hands clasped together, Tang did what he did every time he had food in front of him. Tang prayed a short prayer and crossed himself.

"Eat, eat," Tang encouraged.

The boy unrolled the napkin, and the fork and knife fell out in a clamor. The boy took the fork in a shaking fist. The fork stabbed into the fluffy scrambled eggs, and the force of the metal made the porcelain scream. He took the first bite. The

boy scooted his chair in so that his face hung over the plate, and he shoveled in bite after bite. The food must have passed through the boy's gullet so quickly that taste was irrelevant.

Tang gave his second sigh of the night. It was then that Tang felt the truth of what he asked the boy. How could Tang be afraid of this boy?

It was around eight p.m. when Tang and the boy walked back to the truck. They walked parallel to one another, two lines on a graph that would never meet. When they got to the truck, Tang took his keys out and unlocked it. The boy climbed in through the passenger door. Tang squeezed in behind the seat, and the boy grabbed the hiker's backpack from the passenger seat and followed suit.

Without needing to grope for it, Tang found the light switch and turned it on. The light revealed the small cabin. The space was about six foot by six foot—a perfect square of the simplest living. The cot was straight against the back wall. It stood five feet high with a skinny ladder leading up to it. Below the cot was a small sitting area where Tang usually ate his food. Right next to the sitting area was the microwave and mini fridge. Off in the other corner was a small standing shower. Within that shower was a miniature porcelain toilet. He kept a trash bag over it to keep it dry.

The boy looked around the place, analyzing everything without touching.

"Make yourself at home," Tang said to the boy. This was another one of those American phrases he never truly understood, but the boy threw his hiking backpack onto the cot. "Use the shower. But do not use it for too long. You might take all the hot water."

The boy didn't turn, but he said, "Where will you sleep?"

"Over here," Tang said and nodded to the driver's seat, though Tang knew the boy wasn't looking. The driver's seat was as comfortable as a couch. Well, it had to be for someone to sit in it for hours on end. Tang pulled out the small heater from the front compartment. He looked for the end of the plug and put it in the outlet. Tang turned the dial of the heater to two.

After the shower went off, Tang prayed his last prayer of the

day. Somehow, his prayer drifted into his daily reminders. He had to be on the road at the break of dawn, call his wife in the afternoon, and find another truck stop. Tang added a new reminder. The boy. Figure out what to do with the boy. It had been a while since his mind was ruled by problems. Perhaps it was because he couldn't figure out the solution to this one. When Tang realized he wasn't praying anymore, he crossed himself and gave a third sigh.

Tang woke up before his alarm. After a few seconds of fully realizing his reality, he reached over to the alarm clock and turned it off. He took the windbreaker that was draped over him and put it on. He rubbed his face with his hands, and then he rubbed his hands together. Then, the memory of last night seeped into his bones, and he turned to look for the boy. There was a lump in the cot, which Tang assumed was a sleeping boy.

With a carefulness he hadn't used in a long time, Tang skulked around the cabin to gather his toiletries. Then, he went into the half-asleep gray morning and into the cafe. When he came out, he was clean—at least by the truck driver's generous definition. In his hands, he had two grease-spotted paper bags of croissants, a cup of lidded coffee, and his toiletries in a small basket, hanging by his ring and pinky fingers. With the hand holding the two paper bags, he unlocked the truck and opened it. After he was all settled, Tang turned the ignition. Finally, he drove out of the truck stop and onto the road.

The routine made him forget about his stowaway. Tang continued on his route and even started to hum to fill the silence.

About two hours into driving, Tang drove past a sign that caught his eye. It was an emerald green sign that said in white letters, "Grand Canyon." The great and beautiful. When his children were young enough to expect things from him, Tang promised to take them to the Grand Canyon one day. He promised them other places, too. Hawaii, the White House, and even Vietnam. He just never had the time with work and everything. But when he promised the Grand Canyon, his daughters jumped up and down with excited smiles. Year after year, Tang promised his children the prospect of a small

road trip to the Grand Canyon. Year after year, his children became more immune to hopeful words. There was a sort of weightlessness to children, and Tang had an idea as to why adults dragged their feet.

Tang checked the time to see it was already ten in the morning. His eyes lifted to catch the sight of the Mother Mary statuette, and her eyes were looking past him. Tang felt a jolt spread from his core, and he couldn't help scratch the scar on his chest.

"Boy?" Tang heard himself say.

There was no response. Tang wondered how long the boy had been asleep. It had to have been 14 hours now. A terrible thought passed through Tang's mind. Maybe last night's dinner Tang had bought the boy was the boy's last meal. Maybe the boy was dead. Tang's hand was now digging at the scar, and it began to hurt. Tang brought the clawing hand back to the wheel. It was sweaty, so he gripped tighter on the wheel.

Looking ahead, he saw a yellow sign saying, "Checkpoint Ahead." It was only after he made out the words that he also saw a white truck parked at the side. Tang breathed air through his teeth and pulled the truck over to the side of the road. He parked his truck right behind the white truck. When he stopped, the orange dirt picked up into a faint cloud around him.

All that went through his mind were his daily reminders. Get on the road. Call wife. Find truck stop. Figure out what to do with the boy. Tang looked behind him to see the lump in the cot; the dark blanket made it look like a mound of dirt.

There was a knock at Tang's window, which startled him. Tang rolled down the window. Before him was a man in a dark green uniform. His tanned skin had a pink glow as if the dark green baseball cap on his head was too tight and cut off circulation. His pointed, crooked nose glowed the deepest pink and had sand-colored hairs sticking out. He wore aviators. Tang looked at the patch on the man's left breast. It said "Border Patrol."

"Hidin' anyone?" the man said with a grin.

"No," Tang said. Tang had said it too quickly, which made the man's sand-colored eyebrows raise.

"Sorry for the delay," the man said with much less friendli-

ness than before. “I have to go through random and routine checkups on these big-rigs here. You see, we’ve been having an influx of illegals comin’ in, and we suspect that some of the truck drivers have something to do with it. Now, I’m gonna ask again. Are you hidin’ anyone?”

“No,” Tang said again, but with control.

“Then, you don’t mind me looking through this beauty?” The man tapped the side of Tang’s truck.

“Yes,” Tang said. “I mean, no. I do not mind.”

“Where are you from anyway?” the man asked, now leaning an elbow on Tang’s truck.

“Vietnam,” Tang replied.

“Wouldn’t have guessed that,” the man said. “You’ve got dark skin. I was almost sure you were one of the illegals I’m lookin’ for.” He laughed, though Tang wondered if it were a joke. “’Nam, huh? You must be one of them refugees. See, that’s the legal way of comin’ here. The illegals here, they don’t know shit. They come in here, don’t pay taxes, take all the jobs my son could be workin’. They gotta learn from people like you. You’re goin’ all about it right.”

“I will open the door in the back,” Tang said.

“America thanks you for your cooperation,” the man said, stepping back a few steps to let Tang out.

Tang watched the man. The man was inside the fridge of the truck, moving crates and boxes. Tang felt as though his insides were twisting and untwisting as time passed—the same sort of twisting and untwisting with the straw cover at the cafe the night before. The man did a thorough check going all the way back into the fridge, and then he did a thorough check back.

“All clear,” the man said when he was at the opening.

Tang was back in the driver’s seat, and the door was back as the border between Tang and the man. The man was writing something on his notepad. He had been asking Tang questions, and Tang had been answering. Tang hoped if Tang had complied so easily this far, that the man would not search the truck any further.

“Alright,” the man said, clicking the back of his pen on his chest. “That about wraps that up.” The man put his elbow on Tang’s truck again. He was looking behind Tang, at the small

cabin. Tang's back stiffened. "I gotta say, truck drivin' is some of the freakiest shit in the world. How'd you get into this line of work anyway?"

Tang could have said a whole host of things. He could have told the man that Tang made six figures at his previous job. Tang could have told the man about Tang's previous boss—not too different from the man in the green uniform. Tang could have told the man about Tang's heart hurting. "Odd jobs sometime need odd men," Tang decided.

"You're tellin' me."

When the man went back to the white truck, Tang let out a breath he had seemed to be holding in for some time. After a quiet moment, he put the key in the ignition and turned it. The lump that seemed so lifeless before made a jerk, and Tang felt more at ease.

Tang got the truck on the road again. The further away he was from the man in the green, the better. He jumped when the boy plopped into the seat beside Tang. Tang looked over. The boy had more color to his cheeks. In fact, there were small clouds of faint pink blooming on either side of his nose.

"Can I please use your toilet?" he asked. The boy looked like a student asking for permission.

"You may," Tang said, pointing to the shower while looking at the road.

After the boy was all settled, the boy sat himself in the passenger seat.

"Did you really see a dead body?" the boy asked. "In Vietnam, I mean."

Tang couldn't help grin. "Yes," Tang said. "It is nothing like imagination. Not a lot of things are."

"Cool."

They rode together without speaking another word for a while. It was a calm ride. The sun was at a high angle in the sky. The orange earth illuminated and made Tang think of Mars. It was only when Tang saw another familiar emerald green sign that Tang said something.

"You been to the Grand Canyon?" Tang said.

"Hm?" The boy perked up in his seat.

Tang nodded to the boy's passenger seat window. "Grand Canyon," Tang repeated. "It is one mile away."

"Never been."
"Same for me."

Tang parked somewhere on the shoulder of the road. He turned on the hazard lights just in case. The boy did not question Tang, so Tang did not question himself. They walked out of he car, leaving behind their jackets. They found a narrow road paved by other travelers—other seekers. They walked until they found the railing. They followed the railing until they found the Grand Canyon.

Tang slapped his hands on the railing and stared. And waited. He stared out into the chasm. He could only compare it to man-made creations, like New York City and its magnificent buildings of impossible heights. Or a footprint left deep into a muddy ground left by some giant. Or a gigantic pool in the summer with the shadows in the canyon serving as some lifeless liquid. Tang kept staring and waiting. But nothing came. No overwhelming emotion. No epiphany. No understanding or incomprehension of greatness. Tang had the feeling of laughter tickle in his stomach, but he kept silent. Perhaps Tang was the first man to have thought that the Grand Canyon was just another piece of land.

Tang looked over to see what the boy thought. The boy was staring straight down. It occurred to Tang that the Grand Canyon meant different things to both of them. Here was the boy Tang had found far from life—far from hope. And the bottom of this cliff was a quick mercy.

"Do you know why I drive a truck?" Tang said. "I used to work at big company. We sold ideas, which are very expensive in America. I was program manager. It was a good job." The smile Tang wore began to feel heavier and heavier. "My boss and co-workers made jokes. They made little jokes. Sometimes funny jokes. Other times not very funny. A lot of them were about me. They called me Tom. They knew my name but called me Tom. My boss said once, "Tom, don't forget to speak English today." Jokes are okay with me. "My skin," Tang slapped the skin on his forearm, "very thick. Every day, though, I began to see truth in jokes. The truth seeped into my heart."

"What happened?" the boy said, glancing up at Tang.

"My heart felt heavy," Tang said. "So heavy that it began to hurt. In Vietnam, something like this means your soul is damaged. In America, they call it coronary artery disease. They cut me open," Tang made a fist to his chest to recover whatever masculinity he had shed off, "and they gave me a bypass surgery. Doctor said to take it easy. Then, I did something stupid. I quit my job. Then, I did another stupid thing. I became a truck driver."

"You're saying there are second chances?" the boy said with a false half-grin.

"No," Tang said. "I say this piece of land does not deserve your bones and blood." Tang pointed to the drop in the chasm. "But you know what it deserve?" With a dollop of spit cradled in his mouth, Tang bent over and spit into the Grand Canyon.

"What are you doing?" the boy asked, incredulous.

"Try it," Tang suggested.

The boy shook his head, but he looked down at the chasm again. This time, the boy let some spit fall out of his mouth.

"There," Tang said with a laugh he was waiting to let out. "We own the Grand Canyon now."

Tang and the boy were back on the road. By the time the sun was behind the plateaus again, he knew he had to find another truck stop. Tang found the next truck stop almost as soon as he thought he had to find one, and he decided truck stops were fickle. Just like expectations. Since Tang was early, he was able to park at the forefront of the truck stop. He turned off the engine.

The clock under the Mother Mary statuette read 4:46 in the evening.

"Do you know when the bus comes?" the boy asked.

"Sometimes every hour. Sometimes shorter. Sometimes longer." Tang looked over at the boy. The boy suddenly looked much older than before. Maybe it was the orientation of the sun. Maybe it was mutual understanding. Tang decided not to ask if the boy wanted dinner, not to lecture, not to show worry, though Tang would wonder about this boy for the rest of Tang's life. Instead, Tang pulled out his wallet and pulled out whatever money was left in the wallet. It was a little over a hundred dollars. The boy looked at the money for a long time.

Then, the boy took it and put it in the pocket of his parka.

"Cool," the boy said. "Thanks."

Tang nodded, and the boy took the hiking backpack and left.

The boy walked all the way to the empty bus stop. Tang looked to where the boy had been sitting. To his surprise, Tang found a slim orange piece of polished wood. When he picked it up, he knew exactly what it was. The Swiss army knife was a little heavier than Tang expected. Tang looked up to see that a bus was coming. When the bus made an exhaled stop, the boy climbed on, and he was gone.

Tang's phone went off, and he expected it to. He walked out of the truck and stepped into the glowing orange earth. Then, he took out his phone. His wife was calling. Tang opened up the flip phone and pressed it to his ear.

"Hello," Tang sang, emphasizing the second syllable.

"Why haven't you called yet?" his wife's Vietnamese shouted through the receiver.

"Ah, there were a few distractions," Tang said, looking at the Swiss army knife.

"Distractions?"

"Border patrol," Tang said in English. He implemented the same Vietnamese emphases and intonations.

"What did they want?"

"They wanted to see if I was stowing anyone illegal.*"* Tang said the last word in English. The word illegal in Vietnamese wouldn't have meant the same. He opened the knife, so that a blade the size of a finger stuck out.

"Well, were you?"

"No. Not illegal.*"* Tang set the phone, so that it was wedged between his shoulder and ear. With the free hand, he pressed the index finger against the blade. At first it glowed a pale yellow. When it pricked, the pain felt more like a memory. *"I have something else to tell you."*

"Mmm?"

"I'll explain later," Tang decided. The raw part of his finger began to feel cool and wet. *"It's a long story, and it's been a long day."*

"Long day, long day," his wife said with a small sign of resentment. *"Don't forget to call next time."*

"Mmm."

"Bye."

Then, he let the blood drip on the ground. *"Bye."*

Melissa Ragsly

The Pigeons of Apartment 9C

Boiled peanuts fried in pork fat, blood sausage topped with fried duck egg and tarragon cream, beef and caramelized Stilton pie. I'd take one of each and a second for the doggy bag.

Sitting at my desk with the menu from The Breslin, I delighted in circling all I wanted to taste. It's the highlight of being a critic. The expectancy of just how those words, raw prostrate nouns, will smell, look and taste as they appear to you atop a white plate on the altar just above your lap. It's salvation and I get to preach it. In the pre-internet Wild West, I had to smuggle out an actual menu, stashed away in an oversized purse, not the fashion back in the day. I think I might have started a trend though, and it earned me several mentions in the columns of New York gossip doyennes. Now, I could circle away at a future meal, one full of warm meat and heavy gravy, just what I needed in the dead bone middle of a lengthy winter. January just wouldn't end.

My desk faced the window. I waited for a dose of vitamin D, but the damned sun covered itself in a blanket of clouds and refused to see her fans. How Garbo of her. From this vantage point, I could almost see my apartment, two blocks up and one over on West End Avenue. Purchased in full by me alone, it was a gift to myself after I became established. Rick was home, either in bed or in his darkroom. The week prior, I sat at the bar of Kin Shop with two couples and one bubbly pineapple-Thai basil cocktail. After a number of hours, I lost our table because Rick never showed up. He said he was working in the darkroom and lost track of time. I said to him after we got home, "Why don't you go digital? We could turn this room into an exercise studio or an archive space for me."

He scoffed, giving me a rebel stare he probably gave his parents when they told him he couldn't go see The Kinks at the Fillmore East. "We're not getting rid of *my* darkroom."

I squinted at the computer monitor and reached for my glasses when something moved outside the window, a fall-

ing gray mass. My stomach lurched. I got up from my chair and looked down to the sidewalk, terrified at what I might see. With mortal weight this thing fell so fast and, my first thought was it was a newborn tossed. I could see only part of the body, webbed claws of a pigeon poking out stiffly from a plump belly. Tops of heads walked by, dressed in woolen caps. The bird, not quite invisible, became merely a nuisance, something to be stepped over by rubber boots or gawked at by toddlers bundled up in passing strollers.

My assistant had a phone to her ear and called out to me. When I turned around, Kathleen held a lithe hand over the receiver. She was effortlessly young, a junior at NYU. Surrounding her were the magazines my reviews have appeared in, cataloged in cardboard boxes standing at attention. There were the two novels I had published in the late-70s. My hats, fitting for the Kentucky Derby or Ascot, always worn when photographed to hide my identity, hung on hooks near the bathroom. Nestled in between all the work I had produced since I was 22 years old was a leopard print sofa, complete with pull-out bed.

Kathleen officiously scolded me, "You didn't tell me you already dined at The Breslin. You need to tell me these things so I can put them in the system."

I was confused, "Kathleen, you know I haven't. I'm only looking at the menu now." I motioned for her to make sure she covered up the receiver all the way, so no clues about my identity leaked. Chefs are rock stars now, private investigators have tried to out me. I do whatever I can to avoid being exposed. These are some tools of the trade; of course, don't use your real name when making a reservation, use someone else's name that will be dining with you, because you need to leave a real phone number. High-end restaurants confirm reservations. Also, it's best to eat with four to six other people so that you can sample more of the menu without it being suspicious. And those friends always pay, to be reimbursed at a later date.

Kathleen politely chirped to the host, "Could you excuse me? I'll be right back and we'll finalize," a manicured finger with Breton stripes smothered the mute button. "If you didn't already eat there, why did he say to me, 'I hope Mr. Talbot

enjoyed the Oxtail?'" Another thing that's changed. Information. Everything is filed away in the computer so backers and money people can determine who eats what when and what makes them the most profit.

"There are a million Mr. Talbots in New York. They just made a mistake."

"No, they have Rick's name and number in their database. Table for two, last Wednesday, January 12th. They read the whole order. How could you forget you had a Chocolate Stout Syllabub?" Kathleen took a breath and let the question hang in the air, before it crested and crashed down with the thud of gravity. I could see her putting it together in her head. She looked at me, but her focus was out through the window, where the sky was darkening, gray like the pigeon still reclined on the pavement. "Oh, it doesn't matter, I'll make the reservation for 7 p.m., okay?"

I nodded my head and smiled as I got up and pointed to the bathroom. She finished the call with laughter and evasion and made the reservation, remarking how, "Yes, Mr. Talbot loved the Oxtail." I closed the door quietly and flipped on the switch. The damask wallpaper's orange and gold print was ostentatious anywhere but a small powder room. On the wall above the toilet, I kept my Key to the City of New York. The key which was, to my surprise at the time, only a Proclamation, written in gothic script, in block gold and blue letters. It declared that December 5, 1989 was a day in honor of Martha Molsen. I was hoping for an actual key, an old-fashioned one, heavy and gold and curled at the head and attached to a delicate ribbon. Next to it hung a picture of me in a plumed hat, laying low over my eyes but exposing a bright smile. I was shaking the hand of Mayor Koch, who had just lost his bid for a fourth term. In the photo, he's handing me the "key" and smiling just as vividly as I was. How hard it must have been for him, someone who got the message from millions of people, *we don't want you anymore,* to have to keep on working before the new model could take over.

I heard the intercom, Kathleen's heels approached on the wood floor, "Martha, your Pilates instructor is coming up." I changed into leggings and Rick's Village Voice T-shirt. Over my shoulder, on the wall opposite hung the photo Rick took of

me in our first year together. Black and white, my bare back to the camera. A before shot. That was back when his camera seduced me. If he took my picture, I knew I was wanted; I knew I *was*. In this photo, my face unseen, but my body, young and taut and posed, was one of a wanted woman. I wondered what about me from that picture still existed. What was left that wasn't exhausted subject matter?

I closed the blinds when I exercised. No one needs to see my face turn raw. At the mouth of the window, I looked to check on the pigeon, hoping it hadn't been kicked in the road and mowed over by taxis speeding to cross the Park. The bird was gone from its spot. I saw a man I knew from the elevator whom I had never spoken to, just a friendly nod now and then. He wore sky-blue denim with a collar of sheepskin. His face was wrinkled and distracted and his eyes dipped in shock. In his arms, he cradled the dead bird. People passed on the sidewalk and exhaled wintry white breath like a soul escaping a body. Up, up, up it went and faded into nothing. The man stroked the bird and took it back inside with him.

After dinner at the Breslin, I kissed Henry and Sals on their cheeks and told Rick I had a deadline and needed to spend the night in the office working. "So I won't see you tonight?" Rick asked as he searched over my shoulder for a taxi. He smoothly stuck some fingers in his mouth, perhaps still dusted with the fat and salt of a crispy charred sausage, and whistled.

"I'll probably be home in the morning to shower," I told him. A cab pulled up and before he got in, I handed him an unlabeled white envelope.

"What's this?"

"Just open it later," I said with such nonchalance, he took me at my word and stuffed it into his inside pocket. I guessed he would forget about it all together until he fumbled through the pockets in the morning for his wallet. In the envelope was a check I wrote out to Rick for $10,000.

Entering my lobby, I felt warmed by the topaz light reflected off the walls. The night doorman leapt to his feet as soon as he heard me push open the door. He must have damned me for bringing in the cold. Tommy, is it? Joe? He profusely

nodded his head, a sign he was ready to be of service. He was so young and eager, like a kenneled puppy trying to prove his worth, "Good evening, Ms. Molsen. Finishing up some work?"

"Yes, thank you." I headed toward the elevator and before I could read the sign affixed to the door with smudged-fingertip scotch tape, the young doorman cleared his throat.

'It seems there is a wee problem with the lifts."

"Oh, is there?"

"Yes, terribly sorry. Fixed in no time. You're one of the lucky ones. Four floors is a doable walk, isn't it?" His smile made me want to agree with him.

"Yes, Tommy. It's doable. It is Tommy, am I right?" I said like a woman half my age with designs on using the services of an able bodied lonely man. I gave him my take-away bag from the Breslin, two desserts from the Pudding menu. Rick hadn't flinched at all when I ordered the exact same menu he already devoured with his mysterious guest. "Here, Chocolate Stout Sylabub and Spotted Dick. All very delicious and sweet and completely untouched by me. Please enjoy."

"Oh, no, Ms. Molsen, I couldn't. It's not allowed."

"This will be our little secret. Just get rid of the evidence." I started towards the stairs, but stopped for a question. "Tommy, I don't suppose you know, but I saw a pigeon today."

"Rats with wings, I understand. We'll get the sidewalk swept more often."

"No, I saw one fall from the roof. There was a man who picked it up. I've seen him before."

"Oh, you mean Dennis."

"Does he have a moustache? Gray and white hair?"

"Yes, that's him. He's a bit of a pigeon fancier. He's kept some on the roof, but the board keeps telling him to get rid of his loft."

"Thanks." I was about to leave the lobby and it's buttery dimness, the perfect lighting for a woman my age. I turned and admittedly, got a bit business-like, a bit demanding. "And Dennis lives on what floor?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Ms. Molsen. I couldn't give out personal information." I held my gaze on him. Once I could use a little leg and a wink and flirt anything out of a man. Like squeezing toothpaste out of a tube. Now, it's only fear I can use. So I

glared and waited and before long—

"Dennis Auburn. 9C."

After walking up four flights, sweat formed under multi-layers of coat, sweater and dinner clothes. It's so bitter cold outside and so tropical inside, even in the seldom-used stairwell. It's like setting a kitchen blowtorch on an ice cube. An utter annihilation. I melted in a puddle right next to the umbrella stand. All layers shed, I was down to my champagne slip and nude hose.

Then I heard typing. A glow came from the workspace. I emerged from the hallway and saw Kathleen, with white earbuds, focused on her computer screen. She turned her head and saw me, I'm sure a little shocked to see me in my undergarments. After a smile and a tug at the headphone cord, I saw a quick look betrayed on her face and a wrinkling of her brow for just a moment before, efficient, all-business Kathleen returned. She felt remorse, or maybe it was pity. The printer churned and Kathleen attended to the papers it spat out. "I didn't think I'd see you tonight," she articulated and referring to my state of undress, she merely asked, "Shall I turn the heat down?"

"Maybe just open the window?" She went to the window and after opening it a sliver; she put what she had printed out on my desk.

"I wasn't expecting to see you tonight. I'm not entirely prepared."

"Don't worry about anything, it's after hours. You're free. Free to flutter about at one of your social events."

"I'm going to get you a glass of wine. Sit. Red?"

A glass of wine poured and served sounded heavenly, but I just wanted to be alone for a spell. Kathleen re-entered the room, bringing with her a juice glass filled with Pinot Noir and a silk robe from the bathroom. She settled the wine on the side table and placed it delicately on a coaster.

"Has Rick called?"

"Martha, I've placed on your desk my letter of resignation. It's effective immediately. Rick hasn't called."

"Kathleen, you can't just leave me in the lurch."

"I have received an offer and I need to start tomorrow or

it's a no-go. I got a position at *Gullet* and they're producing a piece about Reggie Hollander's bustaurant. I'm packing a bag and leaving tonight." Reggie Hollander was an occasional dinner buddy of mine, whom I saw less of as he became more and more a fixture in the foodie world. He started showing up on national morning shows. People began to listen. His trademark, a classic Heinz ketchup bottle tattoo from shoulder to elbow. I had recently spoken to him about an article I was writing about the launch of *Gullet*, a web magazine that Reggie believed would revolutionize modern food journalism. It was to be a mix of writing, food porn and short video pieces. And now, somehow, Kathleen was jumping on board. "I wasn't searching for a new job. Do you know who works for him?"

"He has an army."

"Theresa."

"My old assistant? She said she was going back to school."

"No, she went to Reggie. She became his assistant, that's how I started talking to her. Then she got a promotion and we had a few drinks together and she offered me this job."

"She could have told me she got another job."

Kathleen got up and got herself a glass. She poured, watching the ruby liquid trickle in and surveyed the glass for an answer. "Martha, I like you. You've been difficult, but in a good way. I respect you." I heard this and my stomach tensed. This was a prepared speech and people don't prepare good news, they let it flow and explode like champagne uncorked. Bad news, you try to control.

"What is it?"

Kathleen took a swig from the glass housed in her palm, "Theresa gets very lubricated when she drinks."

"It's none of my business what kind of person she is. She doesn't work for me anymore."

"It's like all of a sudden, this girl has a lot of power. And I accept that. But in a way I don't, Martha. And I'm telling you this because I do respect you. And I feel like Theresa is a total cliché of a girl and you're an intelligent woman." I couldn't fathom what Theresa could have done. Stolen my rolodex? She wouldn't need to, she had Reggie Hollander now. Kathleen spit out the information that burdened her chest. "The-

resa is sleeping with Rick. She's the one that had dinner with him at the Breslin. They've been seeing each other for a long time, since she first became your assistant."

"Bullshit."

"He likes to take her picture. They have photo shoots all the time. He feels like this wanted artist and she feels famous. They both have their own little fantasy about it. She sent them to me."

"You're trying to hurt me."

"Martha, you are a legend. You're important to me and you deserve to know."

"Why are you telling me this?

"She has a picture of you she got from Rick's files. She's told me she keeps copies with her just in case the mood strikes, she can out you whenever she wants."

I went to my desk and drafted an email to a friend who teaches at NYU. He always has willing students who will work on the cheap to get a good recommendation from me. I placed Kathleen's letter against the window, and for a while, I looked out into the frigid night. The fire escape's metal spine looked slick and wet from a coating of ice. A jetsam of crumpled napkins danced in the air. Receipts fluttered like little Cabbage White butterflies. On the roof of the brownstone across the way, two gray pigeons landed and flew again. *They are free, aren't they*, I thought then chastised myself. That was cliché territory. I went to the bathroom, put on my workout clothes and left my apartment.

Approaching 9C, I chuckled at the choice of doormat, a creamy rectangle reading "COME BACK WITH A WARRANT." I rang the doorbell which barely registered over what I thought was a Frankie Valli song. A scrape of metal on the other side of the door, probably from the peephole. He must have been looking at me, trying to place me.

"I have a warrant." I said with enough sarcasm it was obvious I wasn't there to complain. He opened the door, slumped, looking unprepared for any sort of fight. "Mr. Auburn? I'm Martha Molsen. I live a few floors down." From the next room, separated by a black sheet, I heard coos. "Are those pigeons?" He motioned for me to wait. Behind the curtain he

slunk, leaving me alone with a cloudy mirror in the dimly lit vestibule. The music, falsetto voice singing, "Oh, Dawn, go away / Back where you belong," got softer and the pigeon's vibrato took over. Dennis returned, "I'll keep the music down."

"I bet the birds like it. That's what they say about a raging gorilla. Put on a little Brahms and he's putty."

"Can't say I know much about gorillas," Dennis scratched his graying moustache, like it was a poker tell. He was tall and kept his distance. It would never occur to him to offer me a drink. So I asked.

"Well, I'm sure I have something. But," he stopped, not knowing what to say. His index finger continued to stroke his moustache, folding the downward stubble upward, emitting a barely perceptible crunch. "I don't know who you are."

"Pour me a drink and I'll tell you."

Behind the curtain, pigeons flew freely. Most stayed in one spot, happily resting, their necks twisted and heads slumped down, eyes closed, their own breasts as pillows. Unvarnished wood and chicken wire lined the wall opposite the window. The place smelled distinctly of corn. "I saw you pick up a dead bird today. I thought about it all day"

"That was Merrielle. Bought her sick a few years ago."

"Do you race? I've heard of that." I slugged a Budwiser through a long neck.

"Not into racing. Just like the birds. I get 'em at the auctions up in the Bronx." He went on about the VFW halls filled with young Latino men, Italians from Staten Island and never a woman in sight. All these guys, guy's guys, in satin jackets displaying their favorite teams, hairy knuckles gripping Styrofoam cups of steaming sludge coffee, and their cars reminding us to *Never Forget*. "These are the birds no one bids on. They can't race any more."

"So you bring them to your little retirement community here?" Dennis didn't quite know how to respond to me except to start another round of facial hair scratching. "You know, you really should take a compliment. I basically called you a hero. Patron saint of old pigeons."

"These aren't old pigeons necessarily, they're just not going to race anymore. They have another ten years most of 'em. Racers just like really young birds. It's a thing now, didn't

used to be." He showed me the different types of breeds he had. He became more loquacious with each new type to describe. There was a Breslauer Tumbler, descendent from Poland; the Pigmy Pouter, which sports an inflated neck that grows like a bubble all the way up to its beak; a Starling, a striking black fat-breasted creature; the Fantail, which looks like a smaller version of a cartoon Thanksgiving turkey. I held a Fantail, who Dennis named Parami. Its back feathers stood tall and its eyes were nothing but black. Its heart, so close to its chest, vibrated into my hand. Transfixed by the beating pulsation of that little body, I sensed the flesh under its feathers. I had never held something I might eat, so close to me. Live meat peaking through the space between my fingers. "Do you eat meat?"

Dennis looked at his beer then me. He was a processor. A question was never answered immediately. "Of course I do. What else would I eat?"

"You keep all these birds nobody wants, you care for them, you name them. Then you go out and have a chicken kebab?"

"People have dogs, they eat meat. Hell, their dogs eat meat. Above the food chain too."

"Yes, but people don't eat dogs. You have birds. People eat birds. People even eat pigeons. It's squab."

"Only fancy people eat squab. They don't sell it at Gristedes." While squab was not a fashionable protein at the moment (this was during the time of organ meat) you still see it on the menu from time to time. Eleven Madison Park serves it in the autumn, roasted with apples and cabbage, with a slice of bread as thin and fibrous as a dryer sheet perched atop. I looked down at Parami and felt the tips of her feathers. I looked up from the bird, whose plume was tickling my chin to see that Dennis held a small silver camera. He flashed our photo, the bird and me, and showed me the result in the camera's screen. I didn't realize I was smiling. He told me about his web site where he takes a photo a day, to show people in the pigeon community how well his castoffs were doing. "You looked so happy with her, and on a sad day, when I lose a bird, I like to make sure I post something good."

The next day, I met Rick at the bar of the Breslin. Another critics' secret, we always go back to a restaurant before we commit to our opinion. There's always a chance you might get surprised at a re-examining.

I hadn't seen Rick all day, but I had listened to the voice mail he left while I was at Dennis' apartment. His message was gleeful and although there was no mention of it, I was sure he had opened up the envelope. I had forgotten about it, what with all the drama with Kathleen. He was giddy, probably thinking about all the new equipment he could buy. Not to mention something special for Theresa. He suggested we go meet at the Breslin again, just the two of us.

He leaned up against the bar, back hunched and un-manicured hands stirred the straw in his gin and tonic, creating a little tornado in a glass. I had memorized the specialty cocktail menu and knew I'd be partaking in a "Rush of Blood to the Head," a Prosecco and Blood Orange liqueur concoction that promised zest and a flushed face. The bartender explained that all the drinks were named for famous albums and songs from mostly modern classic artists, like Radiohead, The Clash and The Pixies ("How to Disappear Completely," "Spanish Bombs," "Wave of Mutilation"). "I could have told you that," Rick fussed while I threw back my elegant brew, coral, cold and sharp. Like a marathon runner swiping a plastic cup of water while not breaking her stride, the cocktail was gone just like that.

I ordered a second drink, a Forbidden Fruit with brandy and Pimm's. As the drink arrived, I fished a file from my bag and placed it between Rick and myself. Inside the file were all the photos Rick had taken of Theresa. Smiling at his impending surprise, he grabbed the file with greedy hands. There was the series with marabou feather shoes and long fingernails. The ones with fishnets and Jackie O shades. And the one eating cherry cheesecake, where drops of bright red syrup dribbled onto the corner of her mouth and down to her chin. "Come on Martha, it's what I do for a living. It doesn't mean anything."

"Just because I used to tell you how brilliant you were, doesn't mean you can put one over on me."

"They're great shots! Look at them."

"Have you ever tried to sell them?"

"No."

"Because they're personal."

"I don't know why. Let me just order another drink."

"I'll give you a few days. Make sure you pack everything that's yours. Leave my stuff. Don't be tacky."

"You know I love you, Martha."

"You're worried about the money. You can keep it. Honestly, it was a desperate tactic. I'll think of it like a tax. As long as you don't try to contact me or try to get anything else out of me."

"But we're a team."

"You used to take my picture." I finished my drink and left him with the bill and those drinks were not cheap.

Hardy and like a mountain I slept. After a tumbler of coffee, I opened the cabinet near my hats. Good thing I made Kathleen change the needle on my record player before she left because I don't know the fist thing about replacing them. I pulled out a Nina Simone record, *Forbidden Fruit*. I had bought it at Bleeker Street Records about twenty years before after an unappetizing lunch at a cheap bistro on Thompson Street. Dover sole desecrated in an acidy lemon buerre blanc. I strolled into the store, getting dizzy from its black and white checkerboard floor. The cover of the Nina Simone album struck me and I bought it just because of that. I wasn't a fan, per se; I had never owned one of her albums before. N-I-N-A, spelled out across the top of the square, each letter a new color. *Forbidden Fruit* printed in smaller type underneath the singer's name. And then there was the photo. A woman peaked out from behind a loaded fruit tree. Lemons and leaves dominated the cover, with slow eyes looking though a small opening. Her eyes met my gaze. The photo just happened to be taken when everything was in the right place, her feelings written on her face like a price tag.

The first track, "Rags and Old Iron," scratched to life. I went to the little orange and gold bathroom and reached for the photo Rick took of me, the one where I'm looking away. I coughed in dust dancing down from the picture frame. On the wall, a clean rectangle of deeper, richer orange remained.

With a damp cloth, I wiped the frame down. Popping the back open, I removed that beautiful but sad image of me, my skin encasing my tense bones like that frame trapped the picture. The buzzer rang. The morning doorman was sending up a potential new assistant. Perhaps they will know their way around a feather duster? And record needles, as if a 22-year-old other than Kathleen would.

In the now-empty frame, I placed the photo Dennis took of me. I asked him for a copy and after a scratch of his upper lip, he obliged. I brought the frame out to my desk and leaned it against the fogged windows. My photographed smile greeted me along with the red eye of the bird, a victim of the flash. "Could be the cover of a magazine," I said to myself, plotting out the call I could make to the editors I've known for ages, beating out Theresa at her own game. The doorbell rang and before I let another assistant into my machine, I looked at the picture. *That's me,* I thought, *look at me now.*

KC Kirkley

Hydrangea

"Who's that?" he said to me from the hospital bed that dominated the living room. On the far side of the bed an IV drooled through a cloudy tube into his hand. His eyes were closed and his other hand was squeezing itself in a fist, in rhythm, as if he was milking an imagined cow.

"It's just me, Gramps," I said. "Just Les."

He was quiet for a long time, and I thought that perhaps he'd fallen asleep. I tried to take the time to reflect on his life, as one is supposed to do in such situations.

I considered that I was never particularly close to him and even then (even now!) his given name, Cecil, sounded strange to me. We all called him Gramps and he was ever a mystery to me, an austere relic from the unimaginable world of the past. I tried to picture him as a young man riding a horse through the snowfields of rural Michigan, but could only fill in the image with mental scraps of movie scenes pasted together into a miserable mix of melodrama and special effects. He filled a role, Gramps did, but I had a hard time thinking of him as a real person, see. I had spent entire childhood summers within meters of his hardened frame, vaguely aware that he was fixing the lawn mower, washing out the bird bath, painting the carport. But no way can I say I knew the man, and that's the first thing you need to know.

"How old are you?" he said.

I was working under the assumption that I should find ways to make him use his mind, to keep him sharp, I figured. I said, "I'm the youngest, remember? I was born in '88, remember? How old does that make me?"

"Shit," he said.

"Anyway, what does it matter?" I said. "Do you need anything?"

"Is it raining?" he said.

"No."

"Pray for rain . . . That's in the Bible . . . right?"

"I guess. Sounds like something from the Bible," I said.

"Well . . . pray for rain, then," he said.

In fact, we had been having a drought. How very astute of him, I thought. How very cogent and apropos. Perhaps he is getting better, I thought.

"Who else is around?" he asked.

No one else was around, of course, and no one ever was. The smell of approaching death offended them, I guess, or maybe I am being cynical and it's just that the rest of the family was harried by critical, pressing business as soon as Gramps was installed in Mom and Dad's living room. Either way, there was no one else but me, and hadn't been for some time. I admit that I took some pride in telling him that I was the only one.

He sighed.

We were both quiet. There are unbearable stretches of quiet when one is waiting for another to die. He continued squeezing his hand in that infuriating rhythm. After a time, what could've been ten minutes or three hours, it was hard to tell, he roused himself a bit. He sighed again.

"Tomorrow," he said.

"Tomorrow?"

"You go to my place."

He didn't have a place, actually. He'd been staying at my parents' house for nearly a month, his hospice arrangement being such that it was believed he'd be more comfortable there. Prior to that he'd been living at a retirement home.

"Your place at Sherwood Oaks?" I said.

He opened his eyes and returned to me a withering glare. "*My* place . . . my real place," he said. He meant his home of 58 years, then, the ranch home on two acres out on Chestnut which had been sold to a young family named the Sandersons a couple years prior. He had poured himself into that property over the years; he had landscaped it, worked it, gardened it, remodeled it, added on, remodeled it again, mowed the wide sloping lawns over 3,000 times, built and tore down and built again everything that existed there. I, though younger, also felt tied to the place. For me, it was the creak-slam of the screen door at the back porch, the smells of mown grass and apples rotting at the base of the tree, the paradoxical sense of fresh senescence, the strange combination of agedness

and renewal, the white home standing triumphantly bright against the green of the grass in summer, blending in a dull monotone with the snow of winter, the musk emanating up from the basement stairs; all these were elemental to that place for me. It had been the site of every family gathering, every holiday meal; it had been the epicenter of our small universe for half a century. His nostalgia wasn't surprising.

"Go to my place," he said.

"What for?"

"I left something."

"You left something. Two years ago." I began to doubt his grasp on reality again.

"Yes."

"It's not there anymore, Gramps. The Sandersons have been there, they've certainly cleared it out by now," I said. How terrible, not to understand this, to be so confused, I thought.

"I'm not worried about that," he said. "They wouldn't be able to find it. You'll need a shovel."

The second thing you need to know is this: I'm not exactly the most respected individual in my family. For instance, one of the reasons that I had to sit, every day, in that living room with Gramps is because I was the only unemployed member of our little clan. I'd been fired from my teaching position at the junior high school. Not many teachers get fired, you know; it takes a special kind of failure. But there had been days when I just couldn't force myself to go there, to face those kids with their toxic cynicism and spastic attention spans, and that was problematic for my employers. I wasn't bold enough to walk out or resign or to make some grand gesture about the state of education and the apathy of a spoiled generation of pre-teens. Instead, I just showed up less and less until, poof, I just didn't work there anymore. Mom offered my old bedroom to me and tried to help me salvage some pride by framing the offer as a request to help with Gramps. Dad was less tactful.

"Might as well try to carry some of the weight around here," he said.

"Sure, Dad, of course."

"Maybe pick up on Gramps' work ethic while you're at it."

"Go to my place," Gramps had said. He'd never asked me for anything before, and I could always only assume that this was because he did not believe I was capable. All those childhood summers watching him work, and never did he need me. I watched him rig up braces with vice grips to hold his boards steady while I stood by and pretended to play with my GI Joes. He climbed up and down ladders to retrieve tools that were lying near my feet. Not that I longed to help, but I found it curious, how he never asked.

I suspected he couldn't remember my name, and although I could have blamed it on dementia or strokes or simple aged forgetfulness, I also knew it was possible that I just wasn't that important. However, no one else was available, and Gramps needed my help, so he told me to pray for rain, to procure a shovel, to visit his true home. He didn't have the look of confidence as he explained these things to me. Instead, he turned his yellow, mucous-filmed eyes on me and seemed to assess my worth with grim resignation as he looked me over from hair to heels.

"Go in the morning," he said to me after a long moment. "Early in the morning." He took a labored breath. "Maybe two o'clock, that would be good. They'll be sleeping."

"Why not knock on the door?" I said. "Why not tell them you need it?"

He glared at me again. "Where's your uncle?" he said.

"I don't need him, Gramps," I said. "I can do this."

"Ok, then. Don't ask dumb ass questions. This is not a thing they can know about, leave it at that."

"What is it?" I said.

He shook his head. "I want you to bury me with it," he said. "Make sure they put it in my casket. Right on my chest, understand?"

"Don't talk like that. You're going to get better, Gramps," I said.

He shook his head again, this time with an added touch of disgust. "Cut out that bullshit and listen." He coughed awhile, caught his breath, breathed deliberately for a moment, then continued. "It's under the hydrangea bush along the south wall of the house," he said. "Deep. You'll have to remove the bush first."

I remembered the hydrangea, of course. I could picture the white siding of the house, the dark strip of black rich soil beneath the white wall, the brick border of the planter edge, the dappled spheres of the hydrangea flowers pluming from the spades of green leaves. We children used to pick the flowers and throw them at one another like snowballs. In the spring, bees would hover over the bush in reverence. Grandma, who died long ago, used to dote on that hydrangea. She fed it something mealy, mixing it into the earth. She clipped the flowers and decorated the dining room table with them, briefly transforming the house into something strangely sensual with their faint fleeting fragrance.

"Come on, what is it?" I said. "So I know what I'm looking for, is all." I couldn't help myself, I guess.

He sighed. "You'll know when you reach it. It will be obvious."

"Should we pray?" I asked.

"What?"

"For rain. You know, like you said."

"Ah, yes. It was more of a saying. We don't need to do that."

"It wouldn't hurt though, right?"

"Fine then. Go ahead."

Gramps was not the most spiritual man. I, on the other hand, had learned that any religious practice could be acceptable, if carried out with earnestness. I grabbed his hand and closed my eyes. His hand pulsed in mine, still squeezing out that strong steady rhythm, and it seemed impossible that he could die.

The third thing is this: correlation does not indicate causation. I learned that concept in college and it has become a guiding principle for me. Such as, just because it rained the afternoon that Gramps and I prayed together, that doesn't mean there is a God.

I parked on Chestnut about three blocks from the old house and hiked down the road, trying to look inconspicuous with my spade and black trash bag. Gramps had fallen asleep while we prayed, and then the family came home and Gramps had given me hard sideways glances from his bed, seeming to mean that I should not bring the subject up around them. So,

I hadn't had a chance to ask him more questions and, therefore, I was left to equip myself using only my weak wits and the limited knowledge he had shared.

The rain was still falling steadily, and as I set the spade to the soil, I wondered why we had been praying for this rain, after all. To get the spade close enough to the base of the bush, I had to press my body up against the wet leaves and flowers. The water ran down the front of my shirt, soaking me quickly. I worked around the bush gingerly at first, stopping at each perceived sound, each skittering leaf blowing across the sidewalk, each nocturnal animal noise. I eyed the windows of the house, expecting the lights to flash on and the air around to burst alive with sounds of outrage and offence, shouts of trespass and vandalism.

Soon, though, I warmed to the work and I forgot to be so wary. The task was physically demanding; the exertion in my hamstrings and forearms, the mud, the feel of my wet fingers slipping into the earth between roots, it all felt true and elemental.

I cleared a ring-shaped hole around the bush, sliced through roots with the blade of the shovel, reached into the bush's heart, pulled and pushed, heard its roots crack, felt them crack with my hands on its base. The wet earth held it still. I reached into the ground again and ripped at the remaining roots. My fingers tore through the small ones, my hands snapped the larger ones, and then I found the center root diving down vertically, still grounding the bush. I attacked it with the shovel, slicing and gouging with some sort of newfound vengeance, until at last I felt the shovel point shoot through into the soil on the other side, and I think I may have heard a final sigh come from that bush.

I pulled it out and threw it on the grass, ludicrously exultant, spent with the receding flow of adrenaline.

The hole it left was large, but I saw nothing except dirt. I looked at my watch and realized that I had been there for over an hour. I leaned over, my hands on my knees, my body bent and wet from exertion. Rain mixed with my sweat as it ran off my nose and hands. A car drove by, slowing as the headlights swept across my hole. A teenager in the passenger seat leaned out the window and stared hard at me. I remained

motionless except for the rise and fall of my torso working for air. The car kept going, slowly, the boy staring back at me for a long while.

I set to the hole again, certain that I was nearing the treasure. Yes, treasure, because that's the shape it had taken in my mind. I blame Gramps for this—he's the one who wouldn't tell me what it really was, and so my imagination had free reign.

I dug deep and wide. I found nothing, and time passed quickly. I dug and dug. I threw dirt to the sky and the rain ran in rivulets down the banks of my hole. The rain made the digging tricky. The dirt was soft, but heavy. It made sucking sounds as I lifted my spade with each load, and it smelled like bone meal, loam, animals. I dug past roots and clay, but there was nothing.

The sun rose.

A neighbor said "Hey!"

I looked up from my hole. I was waist deep, bleary with fatigue and failure. I said "Hey!" back to him.

"What the hell are you doing?" the neighbor asked.

I didn't recognize him, another new member of the neighborhood, like these folks here, who bought Gramps' house.

The fourth thing is this: a hole is, by definition, absence. Whatever object Gramps intended for me to retrieve was absent. The hydrangea bush is absent, along with its roots. Gramps, himself, is absent too. By the time I got things sorted out with the police and the Sandersons, Gramps had squeezed his hand for the last time. My guess is that he was laughing at his fool grandson, out in the rain, digging up a hydrangea bush in someone else's yard. Perhaps he wanted to be alone and knew I'd leave on such an errand, or perhaps he wanted me to learn something that I just wasn't ready for.

The fifth thing is this confession, of course, and a reminder that still I'm the type of guy who tries to do the right thing, whether or not I understand why or what it is, and that is why I was standing in a hole where the hydrangea used to be instead of sitting where I should have been, with Gramps, perhaps.

B. Yvette Yun

Fire in the Sky

"Stay." My father pulls me back to the railing. "Please."

I hate leaving land. Flying, swimming, it is all the same: out of my hands.

The anchor rises, my vision bobs, and the dock slowly retreats. The wooden boards below my feet feel as if they are sliding out from under me.

I stay, but I feel like I'm moving without moving.

"See," he says, pointing at our increasing distance from shore. "It's not that bad." He peers through his glasses and the gray mist. He takes a breath. His salt-and-pepper hair remains motionless despite the movement of the ship. He exhales, and then pulls me close with a stern pull of his arm.

Fresh seafood, an occasional stop along the Alaskan shore, taking photographs next to glaciers in the summer light: this was how he tried to persuade my mother.

"Like the honeymoon we never had," he'd told her. The trip was meant to be for them.

"You know you're getting old when you spend your vacation on a boat." She backed out, but my father had already bought the tickets. So, I didn't really have a choice. I couldn't say no to my father. He changed the room request from a queen-sized bed to two twins.

My father's arms don't fit around me like they used to. He struggles to clasp his hand in front and squeezes me tightly.

"Come on," he insists. "Take it in. It's so fresh."

"Sure," I say, but I think not really. It's more foggy than fresh, but for him I will always agree.

"The pine trees." He takes a whiff of the cool air. "So alive."

I pull away from the railing, but my father stands there staring at the blurry patch of land that is slowly getting smaller. Then he pulls up to the railing and leans over, his bottom half keeping his top half from going overboard.

"Come on, Dad," I say, more like a parent than a daughter.

I watch him as if I am looking into a lens zooming out.

The ocean here is not like the ocean at home. The water is gray, not blue. It is calmer, though, and the ship glides to sea. Here, hurricanes are unheard of—not like in Hawaii when they come unexpectedly.

Like that morning during middle school when I woke up and school was cancelled. My father and I walked to the store to buy flashlights, batteries, and food. The air outside was so humid that his glasses fogged over and I couldn't see his eyes. At the store, we had to share a shopping cart with two other families. The checkout line was an hour long. When we got home, we filled up the bathtubs with water. I climbed the ladder while my father held it. I taped X's with thick masking tape on all the windows in our house. It didn't help that our house was made of glass. It took four hours and two rolls of tape to finish the job.

So I guess the calm here is a relief. The water is unusually quiet, but too much calm like this makes me wonder when the storm will come. Still, my father likes places like this. Maybe traveling makes him feel alive, like he doesn't have to worry and everything will happen as it should. But, he brings his medicine in bottles just in case his blood pressure goes up or his diabetes bothers him. He brings packets of sodium-free salt for his food. As for clothes, he already checked the weather forecast. Even though it is summer, the warmest time of the year here, he didn't bring any shorts.

"Only high of seventy," he told me.

Alaska is a strange place. The mountains here are dangerously jagged, but my father smiles when he says he misses palm trees.

For meals, my father and I have a seat at the window. Our waiter for the whole week is Andre. But he wants us to call him Andy.

"More American," he says.

Andy is Polish and has bleach-like skin, light-blonde hair, and pale-blue eyes. He reminds me of my best friend from elementary school. Both their faces are like perfect circles. Andy smiles at me in a forward kind of way.

I glance over at my father whose smile turns into a frown. I think he worries that I am growing up too quickly. He wants

time to slow down; I want it to speed up.

Andy serves us salad first. He asks if we would like salt or pepper, crossing both the long wooden shakers in his right hand. My father pulls out a small packet of sodium-free salt from his pants pocket and tells Andy he has his own. I ask for a little of both. Instead of attending to us as he adds them to my greens, he looks through the glass to the ocean, water like calm snakes. His eyes are fixed out there, mesmerized by nothing at all. I wonder how he can live on this ship for months. Doesn't he miss solid earth? I imagine it's a lot like waiting for rescue.

"This table is good to see whales," Andy tells us. "Big tails."

He stretches his arms wide to demonstrate, gazing outside.

"Really?" My father's head tilts out to see in the same way as Andy's. Both their eyes are wide, looking for a whale to breech. These are the same whales that travel thousands of miles to Hawaii in the summer. I've seen them a couple times by chance. I prefer not to look for whales, and I'd rather not confirm that we are cruising out to sea. I concentrate on my full wine-shaped glass of water in front of me, which is all the water I care to look at.

"I think I see one," my father says, pointing. He turns to Andy and me. "Over there."

"Yes!" Andy sounds excited, pointing in the same direction. "There."

I still don't look. I know I've already missed it. The whale—or whatever it is—has already sunk back, leaving no trace. Maybe just a splash of water or a temporary spread of ripples.

Bingo is for old people. Despite my opinion, my father and I sit on the Sun Deck at a table laid out with ten cards. Five cards per person is the limit. My father likes to press his luck. He's a gambler: Las Vegas, lottery tickets, whatever he can get his hands on. Five years ago, when I was still in high school, he and Mom went on a trip to Vegas and left me at home alone. He won twenty thousand dollars pulling a slot machine. He called me that night and said he would buy me a car.

"Why not buy something for yourself?" I'd asked him.

"I don't need anything," he said.

So he bought me a red Pontiac Sunbird convertible. He handed me the keys and said my curfew days were over. I was free. My friends called it the *Touristmobile* because the only people that drove red Pontiac Sunbirds were tourists. My mother bought seat covers to prevent the car from getting dirty. The covers had pale pink flowers on them. She put them on the front and back seats. There were even matching pillowcases and a Kleenex box cover. The inside clashed with the outside, but that's how my mom decorates nearly everything.

"Don't drive over the speed limit. Always check your blind spot," she told me.

In my head I was thinking, "Anything else, Mother?"

For a brief week, I drove in my personal garden of pansies. The covers made me carsick, and they "disappeared" a week later. Neither my mother nor father asked about them. They sold the Sunbird when I moved to the mainland for college. I miss that car.

The host begins the first Bingo game and this continues for an hour with no luck.

"Too bad your mother couldn't be here," my father remarks, putting his bingo cards into a neat line.

"She doesn't like cruises," I say. "You know that."

He plays with his cards on the table to occupy himself, moving one ever so slightly and then putting it back into place. I notice his fingers have grown more wrinkles or maybe just more skin, drooping around his joints. His nails, too, have a yellow tint that I never noticed before. He just keeps to his cards.

When the time comes for the last "blackout" game for big money, my father only needs N-37. The host calls N-36 and there's a "Bingo!" from a lady in the back. My father sits there in disbelief. His almost-winning card is full of red tokens except the one white spot above the middle star. The host confirms the lady's bingo and my father sweeps the card clean of red.

Straight from Bon Voyage to dinner to Bingo and now to a musical gala in the main theater, my father walks like stiff scissors. His legs are straight drumsticks, pounding on the

wooden floor left and right. His steps are quick, rhythmic, and strong like heartbeats. The pattern on the carpet below our feet is too symmetrical and I try to step only on the red hexagons. We wind around the Sun Deck outside by the pool to get to the elevator. The sun never sets in the summer so it's bright even at night.

"Andy said sometimes you can see the Northern Lights," my father remembers.

"Like fire in the sky," Andy had said. "So beautiful." Whales, the Northern Lights, I wonder what Andy doesn't find beautiful.

My father stops at the railing, looking overboard, below, and then out into the distance. We stand there, silent for a long time. He peers out to sea while I look at the white water churning far below us. The fast sound of wind grazes my ears. A faint taste of salt reaches my lips.

"Did you see that?" he asks pointing at the horizon.

I look out, shake my head, and look down again. The water is black and uninviting.

"Never mind," my father says, as we walk inside.

I notice my father's thumbs when he drinks red wine. He drinks one glass every night. It is supposed to be good for the heart. He sips on his Merlot in the main theater. I notice his hand cradling the glass. His fingers are curved, shaping the cup. His hand moves the glass around so the red liquid whirls around inside. When he goes in for a sip, his fingers shift and his thumb presses tightly against the glass. His thumbs are quick to move. Once finished, he returns his hand into a cradle. Then he goes back to pressing his thumb, sipping.

His thumbs remind me of when I was his little girl and how we'd play our thumb wars.

"One, two, three, four, let's have a thumb war," I'd chant in my little girl voice.

Our fingers curled in together and our thumbs lapped over and over on top in convolutions. Even though his thumb was twice as big as mine, my father never let me win those games.

"You have to be faster, quicker," he'd tell me.

I earned my victories, which were rare, but when I did I

knew to savor them.

"Try this," my father says, handing me his drink. His thumb is the last to touch the glass as he passes it into my hand.

I bring the glass to my lips, let the wine breathe in my mouth, my tongue swishes it one way, then the other. I do this not because I know how to distinguish one red wine from another, but because I want to show my father that I remember when he taught me how to taste wine properly. I swallow. He looks at me for a response. His face shows a rare calm.

"It's good," I tell him, and he smiles. The lights go down in the theater and the music starts playing from hidden speakers around us.

My father and I share a small cabin on the Promenade Deck. The maid pulled down the two twin beds for the night, making the room even smaller. The starched white sheets are folded over into a triangle pointing the way into bed. There's a chocolate mint on the wrinkle-free pillow. I drop the mint into the ashtray on the small desk in the corner of the room, turn off the cabin light and tuck myself into bed. It is midnight but like dusk outside our watermelon-shaped window. There are no shades to block the light so the violet-blue sky glows through like a nightlight.

My father is in the bathroom. I hear him brush his teeth, clear his throat. I hear the shaking of his pill bottles, the water running, dripping down the drain. I listen to him gurgle and remember when he stood beside me at the kitchen sink when I lost my tooth. He watched me gurgle salt water until I stopped bleeding.

"But it stings," I complained to him.

He said it always stings at first. He said the pain would be temporary.

Now, I hear his loud swallows with water. His swallowing sounds unusually hard, like there's a large lump in his throat. It hurts just to hear it, so I imagine he hurts and wonder if that pain is temporary too. He comes out of the bathroom and falls into bed. I know that, in a few minutes, his breathing will be deep in the bed beside me. I know it will take me longer to fall asleep. Maybe the rhythm of his breaths so close, as if they were my own, will help.

"Your mother would have enjoyed this," he says, nestling in.

"She would have." I never asked how he felt about her not coming. She should have come. I know she was his first choice.

The glow from the window keeps me awake and just as I begin to feel sleep take over, I hear my father beside me shiver. He is cold and tossing in bed. His sheets rustle like palm fronds in a light trade wind. I don't know what time it is when I hear nothing. He has stopped breathing and so have I. I wait to hear something. Maybe I wait for too long in anticipation. Then I hear him explode into fast monkey breaths. I look over at him in the dim light of the cabin. He is facing me on his side. I can see him clearly. His eyes, like quarter-moons, are slightly open and rolled back to show egg white. His lips are stretched long and flat, his nostrils flared. At first, his mouth pants out more air than it is taking in. Then, his quick breaths continue through his nose. It looks like he's in the middle of a bad dream.

I flip around in my bed to turn away from him. Staring head on with the white wall, I listen carefully. His breaths have taken up an even faster pace.

"Dad?" I turn back around to face him through the cold room.

He doesn't respond. His mouth is opened wide like the face a frightened child. He is panting sharply.

"Are you awake?" I get out of bed and bend down close to his mouth.

His breath is hot.

"Dad, wake up."

He is still panting fast and heavy.

"What's wrong?"

He doesn't answer.

I pull the covers off him. He is tucked into a tight ball, his knees are bent up and both his arms are crossed over as if they are hugging the air between. I try to nudge him gently and make him lie down straight, but his body is in too stiff a curl. Then I shake him. I shake him first lightly and then so hard until it would seem impossible to sleep through the

quake. I shake him and, still, he is tight and breathing hard like a bull. I run to turn on the cabin light and then return. His face, his arms and legs are pale yellow. His lips are a deep kind of purple. I rub his arms and legs; they're covered in goose bumps. He begins to shiver and I shake his cold body hard.

"Wake up. Wake up. Wake up," I plead.

Suddenly, his breathing stops and it is all too quiet. His eyes try to open. He blinks slowly once, then licks his lips. He comes to, looking at me with bloodshot eyes.

"What's wrong? What happened? I'm cold."

I call the doctor and my father is taken in a wheelchair in his white pajamas to the only emergency room on board. The nurse and doctor say I can't go yet. There are tests. He needs to rest under supervision. They will call me. They cart him off. A gray wool blanket is thrown around my father's shoulders, blending in with his gray-black hair. I see the cabin door come closing in and then the white paint of the door.

The next few hours are a blur.

Sitting by the phone and falling off into light dreams. My head bobbing to stay awake and looking at the reddening sky through the watermelon-shaped window. The phone ringing and then having to ask for directions to get to the emergency room. Walking in my sweatshirt through the cold hallway. Making wrong turns. Hearing the doctor say "Heart attack" as if it happens to people all the time. Holding my father's white hand in the recovery room as we wait to hear what the next move would be. "I want you to stay on the ship," he tells me. "Mom will take care of me in the hospital and you can come when the trip is over." Shaking my head no, but knowing that I have to follow his instructions. Standing on the Sun Deck and seeing nothing but water all around, not a trace of ridged Alaskan mountains. The fast churning of helicopter blades and looking up. My hair lifting up on the ends. The stretcher emerging from the floating helicopter above. My father being tied tight to the stretcher, taking my hand as he begins to fly away saying, "Don't worry about me." Hearing people around me whisper. *What happened? I don't know. Anchorage.* All the while, I'm thinking, *Don't*

go. Don't leave me. Listening to the clicks of cameras and pictures being taken of my lone father suspended in mid-air. The wind moving him back and forth like a child on a swing. The helicopter door closing. Knowing my father is safe inside. Watching him fly off and the sky swallow him. I see nothing but clouds and no longer hear the chopping.

I imagine my mother is frantic by now, on her way to Anchorage. I too am sick with worry. I don't want to stay on board, but the doctors said everything would be all right. There is nothing I can do anyway but wait. I am alone—stuck here on a massive boat, moving without moving.

I receive short notes from my father in the hospital:

Your mother is on her way.

My room has a big window that faces the water.

The doctor says I've improved.

Another glitch. Something called an angioplasty.

Your mother is here now.

Hours turn to days, days into a week. On my final full day, I look out over the water, wondering if I'm looking in my father's direction in Anchorage. That night, I lean over the boat's railing like my father had that first day. My bottom half keeps my top half from toppling in. Then, I look up, and I see a flickering of light on the horizon, deep red with greens and yellows, like someone took a paintbrush to the sky and swept across its canvas like a roller coaster.

A final note arrives on the morning of my disembarkation.

The first part is from my mother: *Hurry to Anchorage.*

The second part is from my father: *I saw that fire in the sky. It was beautiful.*

Katharine O'Flynn

The Island

I hadn't been back to the island for more than four years, except at Christmases and then I only stayed for two, three days and kept my head low. By now, I figured I was over Rita. I'd be okay.

It was good to be back home, to re-acquaint myself with the island's rocky shoreline and sandy coves, the marshlands, the scrub fir and spruce woods of the interior. I became conscious again of the rhythm of the tides, the signs of coming weather in the easterlies, or in the still, thick fogs. I eased back into the slower pace of island speech, and welcomed the sense of belonging to a community where everyone knew everyone else.

I'd landed a job at the Provincial Park at the north end of the island, the same place I'd worked through high school summers. Art Benson was still foreman. Even the pay was not much different: eight-fifty an hour instead of six-fifty. But I didn't have to worry about money this summer; I had a teaching job lined up for September.

At first, before the season got started, it was just Art and me working. We cleaned up debris from winter storms, painted picnic tables, dug drains, hosed down the canoes and paddle boats. It felt good to be outside in the spring sunshine, stretching muscles I hadn't used in five years of studying.

One of my first days on the job, Art and I came on a gang of boys throwing rocks and cans at the shags in their nesting ground up at the point beyond the beach. I leaped out of the truck. "Hey! Cut that out!" They were local kids. Joe Ames, Rita's youngest brother, was the ringleader. He swung a longneck in one loose hand, daring me to stop him, while the other boys looked on. Joe had always been a bratty kid. "Says who?" he sneered.

I glanced around to see if Art was getting out of the truck to help me out here, but he was showing no signs of moving. There was nothing for it but to stride across the road and grab the bottle out of Ames' hand. It worked. "Says the rules of this

park," I said, once I'd got hold of the bottle. "No harassing the wildlife."

"They's only shags!" Ames protested.

"They're cormorants." I used the correct name for the birds. Then, flexing authority while I had it, I ordered, "Put those cans and bottles in the recycling bin and leave the birds be." I set the example by tossing the bottle I'd taken from Ames into the proper blue plastic barrel. I waited till the boys did the same, got on their bikes and rode away on the dirt road.

When I climbed back into the truck, Art was carefully, uselessly, polishing his glasses with his thumb. "Why didn't you back me up there?" I asked. "Those kids could just as easily have given me a hard time."

"They'll be back in half an hour," Art said and put the truck into gear.

"Then we'll have to keep monitoring the site," I said. "We've got to teach some respect for the rules around here. And for the wildlife."

"Yeah, well. Them shags are dirty birds anyways."

Actually, Art was right. The smell of rotting fish was pretty powerful around the place. Still, the shags had always nested here and they had as much right to their living space as any creatures. "If those kids threw rocks at the seals or the sandpipers or, God forbid, the whales, you can bet the environmentalists, the police, the SPCA and God knows who else would be down on them like a rip tide. The shags ought to have the same protection."

"Gone ecological, have you?" Art asked, turning the truck into the perimeter road.

I didn't answer. I figured the question was sarcastic from the way he pronounced e-co-log-i-cal like it was five separate words.

But he must have talked to the park manager because a day or two later, McKenzie offered me the job of leading the park's whale-watching tours. "I hear you're interested in ecology," he said.

I was still feeling sorry for the cormorants—I'd caught kids hassling them again that very morning—so instead of accepting, I said I'd like to do cormorant tours instead.

"Cormorants?" McKenzie asked. "You mean the shags? No-

body's interested in them."

"I am."

"They your specialty or something?"

I didn't know anything about the birds. "Yes," I said.

"O.K., why not?" McKenzie shrugged. "We'll give it a try. We need a cheap morning program anyways. I'll put you down for, what? Fifteen-, twenty-minute talks? Weekdays at eleven? Up at the point there?"

"Great." It would be good practice for teaching. And reading up on the birds and preparing the talks would give me something to do with my evenings. This was going to be a boring, lonely summer for me. Most of my old friends from school were long gone to jobs on the mainland. The few that remained were married and tied down with their families and their jobs and part-time initiatives to pay off mortgages and car loans. I'd be spending most of my off-work time alone. And with my Mum, of course. I owed her some time. She'd never complained about my long absences these past years—she understood about my wanting to avoid the island after the Rita business—but I knew she'd missed me. And, come September, I'd be leaving again for my teaching job in Sydney.

On the July first weekend, I gave my first cormorant talk. The spiel I'd prepared lasted only seven and a half minutes. No one asked any questions. Obviously, I needed more material on the subject. So on Wednesday, my day off, I headed for the library to see what I could dig up. That was when I saw Rita.

She was sitting on the bench in front of the laundromat, smoking. "Hey Matt! What's you saying?"

"Rita."

She had a black eye, just starting to turn yellow.

"So what happened to the other guy?" I asked.

"God, I'm, like, so sick of that question!" She took one more drag from her cigarette and then stubbed it out. "I hear you're working down the park again," she said through the smoke.

"Yeah." I propped a foot up on the bench in a casual sort of way. I could handle this. "How're you doing?" I asked.

"How does it look?" She pointed to the shiner. "Not so good."

"Jesus, Rita. You don't mean, is that like . . . Did someone . . ."

"Well, I didn't, like, walk into a door."

I stared at her. My heart felt like something clunking around in the dryers behind us.

She looked up at me. "Yeah. He beat up on me. But you know, I'm thinking maybe it was a good thing. Like a wake-up call to leave the fucker, you know?"

"So did you? Leave him?" I asked.

"Why else would I of come back to the island? Nowheres else to go but home." She pulled the pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her denim jacket and held it towards me.

"No thanks, I don't smoke."

"Yeah, you always did the right thing." Rita replaced the smokes. "Not like me."

"I hear you've got a kid now," I said, and then could have kicked myself for the timing of that remark.

Rita nodded towards a stroller just inside the door.

I took a quick glance at the sleeping child. Curly dark hair, just like Rita's. "Cute kid," I said because that's the kind of thing you're supposed to say. I wasn't going to get into it any further, though, with questions like, "Boy or girl?" "How old?" I was on my way to the library. I needed to know more about shags, not about Rita and her husband—ex-husband, whatever—and her kid. "I better be going. Take care, eh?"

"You too." She kind of turned sideways and looked up at me and I remembered that thing I used to always do when we said goodbye: I'd run the back of my hand slowly along her shoulder, down her arm, all the way to her hand where our fingers would meet and entwine one last time. It was a move we'd seen on a dance show. So sexy it would drive us back into another clinch and we'd have to do it over and over. It was really kind of a dumb thing to do, but that's the way we were with each other, Rita and me.

Christ, that black eye looked awful. The skin was broken across the eyebrow too. But it wasn't my business, not now. I hurried on over to the library to research cormorants.

Now that the summer holidays were on, there were a lot more workers around the park: lifeguards at the sand beach, gate keepers, store workers, and a naturalist, a cute, perky brunette from Digby who did the whale tours.

I could have traded up to an easier job at the gate, but I chose to stay on maintenance with Art. I liked his laconic company. I liked the steady, unhurried rhythm of our work days, driving from job to job in the dusty green pickup that smelled of hot vinyl and Art's cigarettes. I liked the pull of muscles as we hauled logs, cleared brush, hacked down weeds, shoveled sand and gravel. I liked my eleven-o'clock cormorant lectures. I'd even got to like the shags themselves, now that I'd studied up on them.

"Welcome, everyone, to the home of our island's cormorants. As you can see, folks, these sea birds are not great nest builders. They'll set up house on any old bit of land or rock as long as it's close to their food source. They scrape together a few sticks and that'll do. Home sweet home." I pointed out a couple of piles of sticks and rockweed that looked more like haphazard heaps than nests.

"The cormorants are not the best of housekeepers either. They don't wash the floors and they never take out the garbage. That aroma you may have noticed"—I waited for the polite chuckle from the adults and the simulated gags from the children—"is coming from bits of fish they've left lying around rather than from the birds themselves or their droppings. But because of the smell that surrounds their nesting places, and because of their black plumage, cormorants are often mistakenly derided as dirty birds."

The tourists seemed to be pretty interested. They took a lot of pictures.

"If you teach it right, you can make any subject interesting," I told Art.

"Yeah." He always waited in the truck while I gave my talks. "If we drive real slow, it'll be lunch time by the time we get back to the hut."

Soon I could tell the shags apart and had names for them: Black Jack, Misery, Grover, Dracula. Each one had his or her own style. "Though quick and graceful in the water, cormorants are not elegant fliers and on land they are quite clumsy. Just before coming in to land, every cormorant goes through a distinctive routine. Here's Grover coming in now over to the left by the dead tree. If you watch carefully, you'll

see him circle and flap his wings hard, twice. There he goes. One. Two. We're not sure, but we think the cormorants do this as a signal to others in the nests nearby. What Grover may be saying is, 'O.K. you guys. It's just me, Grover, coming in for a landing. In case I overshoot and land on your nest, don't get upset. My intentions are good.'" To the delight of the crowd, Grover stumbled to a bad landing, crashed against a stump, and, shamefaced—or at least I thought he looked shamefaced—waddled over to his own nest.

I was in the middle of my talk one morning when I saw Rita at the edge of the little crowd. She was wearing tight jeans with a bright orange bikini top. I couldn't help but stare. Having a kid hadn't harmed her figure any. Maybe the curves were a little softer, her breasts fuller, the hips wider. My eye was caught by something sparkling above the low-slung jeans. It took me a moment to realize what it was: one of those navel studs, an artificial diamond, glittering in the sunlight. That husband—ex-husband—he must have put her up to getting the tacky thing, I figured.

"Do you know, huh?" A kid in the front row was asking me a question.

Flustered, I wrenched my eyes away from the stud. "Sorry, I didn't quite catch that."

"Why don't they make nicer nests?"

"Uh, well, I don't know. I guess they think they don't need anything fancier."

A young boy, maybe about twelve, was standing next to Rita and staring at that stud until his mother took him by the shoulders and pointed him towards me and the shags again.

I went on with the talk. "The shags . . . the cormorants," I corrected myself quickly when an older man gave a snort of laughter, "the cormorants' feathers, unlike those of most waterbirds are not waterproof. When they dive, their feather get flat and wet like your hair does when you dive. This means that under water they're sleek and thin and fast, and good at catching fish. They're able to move faster than ducks or geese whose more buoyant feather coats slow them down under water.

"But when the cormorants come up out of the water, they feel cold and wet, just like you do after a swim. So they hang

out their feathers to dry in the sun and wind. You can see a couple of them over there, with their wings stretched out." I pointed to the shags and then glanced over to Rita. She wasn't paying attention; she was talking to a couple of guys who'd just joined the tour. Those guys looked like real losers. If she was planning to hook up with someone new, she should be more careful in her choice, I thought.

When I got to the part about fishermen in some cultures clamping iron collars around the shags' necks so they couldn't swallow the fish they caught, Rita turned and began to saunter away. So she wasn't taking up with those losers. Good. She pushed the stroller with the kid sleeping in it, his dark curls flopping over the handles.

I'd always loved the way Rita walked, hips thrust forward and her neat round bum swinging side to side.

"Is that the end of the cormorant talk?" The same mouthy kid in the front row was asking now.

"Yes. Unless there are any questions?"

"When does the whale-watching tour start?" someone asked.

"Whale watching at one thirty and three thirty, down at the dock." I headed towards the truck where Art was waiting for me.

We drove to the maintenance hut where we took our lunch. Art settled himself into the creaking wicker chair he kept there and swung his legs up on the crate he used as a footrest. He tipped his thermos towards the window. "She following you, or what?"

Rita was out on the little gravel beach there by the rocks. She spread a plaid blanket and set up the kid with some sand toys. Then she unzipped her jeans and wiggled out of them slowly so I got a good view of the bottom part of the orange bikini.

"She's not following me." I took a big mouthful of tuna sandwich. I didn't want to discuss this with Art.

"I think maybe," Art said. "See that thing in her belly button?"

"Latest style," I muttered around the tuna.

The little beach by the rocks there was where she and I used to hang out the last summer before I left, the summer

we decided to give up the promise we'd made to each other back in grade ten to keep ourselves virgins for our wedding night. It didn't make sense, we figured, not feeling the way we did about each other. In the long evenings of that summer we lay on the deserted beach and discovered and rediscovered just how perfect we were for each other.

Rita and I had been best friends from kindergarten on. Always together. Never thought of dating anyone else when we came to that age. At least I didn't.

Rita was never that good at school and after grade ten she went to work at Marine Plastics. I stuck with school. I wanted to be a teacher. We planned out our future. I would get the first two years of study under my belt—Mum made me promise that much—then Rita and I would marry. As soon as I got my permanent teacher's certificate, we'd start a family.

But before I'd finished the first year at Dal, Rita left the island. She ran off with Dominic Lebrun, a big burly guy who drove a tanker truck, lived a ways up the mainland road. Mum told me all about it.

At first I couldn't believe it. I actually suspected Mum of making the whole thing up. She'd never been that keen on the idea of Rita and me together. The Ames family were not well thought of on the island. Mum always thought I "could do better" for myself than Rita.

"What's better than love?" I'd ask her then.

When I finally took in the truth that Rita had left me for another man, I could have just about gone crazy with the grief and anger and hurt of it. How could she think of going with someone else? We belonged together, she and I.

"Nothing you can do about the situation now," Mum counselled. "Might as well be sensible."

I was sensible. I could have turned to drink or drugs but I didn't. I pulled myself together. I drowned my sorrows in study. I accumulated facts. I concentrated on solvable problems. I passed with honors. "You've always been a smart boy," Mum said.

I went out with university girls, lots of them, but none of them touched my heart the way Rita did. Some talked too much. They seemed to want to show off how smart they were; they'd talk right through a kiss, even. Others were too wild.

They pulled off clothes, theirs and mine, too fast, and drank too much. I had some good times at Dal, but I didn't fall in love.

Rita and the kid were coming to the beach almost every day now. Maybe I imagined this, but it seemed to me that she always waited till I was working around the area to take off her jeans and sweatshirt. She'd pull them off slowly, like it was a strip tease. I'd promise myself not to look, but I always did. I was fascinated by that navel stud. I wanted to see it up close and touch it. I wanted to run my hand over the smooth brown skin around it and catch my finger in the ring and turn it to the light and . . . Hell. Maybe I wasn't as much over Rita as I thought I was.

Art and I were shoveling sand out of a drainage ditch one afternoon "Art," I asked, "do you believe real love lasts forever?" Art had been married to the same woman since he was sixteen.

Art leaned on his shovel. "If you're thinking about that Rita Ames, my advice is stay away. That family's no good. Never has been."

Sometimes this island makes me so mad I swear once I get away to Sydney, I'll never come back here.

Other times I feel it's the only place I'll ever want to live.

Art polished his glasses in his annoying way, "Why don't you ask out that whale-watching lady? She's some looker all right."

"She's too young for me."

Art waved his smeared glasses to a blocked section of the ditch and I got to work.

Rita was a great swimmer back when she and I used to hang out. Sometimes after we'd made love, she'd go and swim way out till I climbed up on the rocks and waved a flashlight and called, "Come on back, Rita."

These days, she didn't swim. Sometimes she took the toddler—it was a boy I knew by now—Ricky was his name—to the water and he'd paddle around a bit. Mostly he sat on the blanket and pushed a plastic truck back and forth or shoveled pebbles in and out of containers while Rita smoked cigarettes

and sipped from a can of Diet Coke and looked bored.

"So why does she keep hanging around here?" I asked Art.

"You tell me." He took off his glasses, spat on them, rubbed them with his calloused thumb.

"For God's sake, why don't you clean those glasses properly? I don't know how you can see through them at all." I handed him a tissue.

He handed it back. "I always clean my specs this way. I can see well enough."

I started eating my lunch on the little beach with Rita instead of with Art in the hut. Art's smoking was giving me a headache.

"Hers don't?" Art asked.

"Well, she's sitting outside."

"Watch it," Art said. "If you won't strike up with the whale woman, why don't you ask the Pearson girl out at the gate lodge for a date? She's crazy about you."

"I got all the girlfriends I can handle," I told him.

"Yeah?"

I gave Rita's kid half of the salmon sandwich Mum had packed for me. I gave him my container of milk too. Soon I was bringing a little lunch for him every day. "You want to go for a swim, I'll keep an eye on Ricky for you," I offered.

"Hey, that'd be great."

She swam and Ricky and I watched. He was a nice little kid, quiet. Sometimes, sitting there on the rocks, I felt like in the old days, waiting for Rita to swim back in to me.

When she turned back towards me, I felt my heart lift and skip the way it used to, and when she came out of the water, I wanted to wrap her close in her towel and in my arms the way I used to.

It was a good thing I'd be leaving soon. I really wasn't over Rita as much as I should be.

"Be careful," Mum said one morning as she handed me my lunch with the extra in it.

You can't do anything on this island, not even take an extra sandwich for your lunch, without everyone's knowing all about it.

"So you figure you're going to stay on the island now?" I

asked Rita that day while Ricky ate his sandwich.

"I dunno. Mum and Dad, they're asking me the same thing. I don't know where else to go. Time I paid rent and day care in Halifax or wherever, I wouldn't have nothing left. It's home or pogey are my choices, I guess." Her smoke-blue eyes were sad.

"Hey! Give a hand here," Art called from over by the hut. "Government of this province ain't paying you to sit on the beach yakking to married women."

"She's not married, not now," I said as I got into the truck and slammed the door.

In August whenever we drove past the nesting grounds, there were no kids throwing rocks. I was pleased that my talks had served their purpose. "Kids have learned to respect the wildlife," I boasted to Art.

"Yeah, well, it's the end of the season," Art said.

The last week of the summer, Rita and Ricky didn't show up on the Monday. They weren't there on the Tuesday either. I checked the laundromat, but they weren't there. I walked past her folks' place. Ricky's little tricycle was in the driveway. Finally, I got up my nerve and knocked on the door.

"She's went on up to Digby to see about a job," her mother told me while Ricky clung to her leg and smiled up at me. "She thinks she can get on at Sobey's there."

The rest of that week I thought about Rita and Ricky. I thought of her standing long hours at a cash desk, smiling wearily at customers: "Thank you for shopping at Sobey's." I thought of her picking up Ricky from some hole-in-the-wall cheap daycare and the two of them eating Kraft dinner for supper. Rita would spend the evening watching TV, maybe drinking a beer for a treat. Some creep would ask her out and she'd go, just because she was bored and lonely.

It wasn't right she and the child should suffer a life like that just because she made one bad choice. She was young at the time.

And if she made a mistake, well, so did I. I was the one who went away, left her alone on the island. Now I knew what that felt like. "Let me come with you," Rita had pleaded. "I want to be with you. Now. Always."

But I wouldn't give in. I'd repeated my Mum's advice. "Marriage and studies don't go together. If we really love each other, we can wait. I need to at least get started on my degree before we think of getting married."

There was Mum's advice, and there were my own secret thoughts too. Going to Dal would my first time away from home and the island and I wanted to enjoy it. I had a single room reserved and paid for in the men's residence. I wanted to be a university man. I wanted to go to parties and get drunk at the football games and meet new people, including girls. I sure didn't want to be the only married freshman at Dalhousie.

Of course, I'd come back to Rita. I just wanted a little free fling first. What Mum said about not tying yourself down when you're too young made sense.

I couldn't explain all that to Rita. Her eagerness to come to Halifax with me embarrassed me, shamed me. "I don't think I can live without you, not for a whole year," she said. "I'll go crazy. We need to be together. 'Member what you said that night? 'I'm the moon; you're the tide. You're the sea; I'm the shore.' That's how we are, you and me."

"I'll be home at holidays. Plus we can talk on the phone."

"You can't see and feel on the phone. You can't kiss."

"Rita, honey, we just can't do it," I told her on our last sad night while she held on and cried into my shirt. "Not this year. This is how we planned it."

"How you and your Mum planned it, you mean," she said.

So I went to Dalhousie and Rita stayed on the island. While I went to the dances and the parties and the games, she worked at Marine Plastics. And ran away with Dominic in his tanker truck. And got beat up.

I met the ferry every evening till Rita arrived back on the Friday. She'd got the job in Digby, she told me. She could rent a room at a cousin's who would look after Ricky during the day.

It didn't sound like a great life.

"It's better than hanging around here," she said.

"You should have told me what your plans were. Couple more days and I'd have been gone."

"Yeah."

I kicked at some loose gravel at the edge of the road. I'd had enough of being sensible and practical. Love isn't sensible and practical. "So, why don't you come to Sydney with me, you and Ricky?" I said.

Rita, she didn't hesitate. She didn't have to think about it for weeks, like I did. "Okay," she said. "If you want."

"I want." I slipped my arm around her, and it felt just right. We walked along the beach road, around the point, past the shags in their untidy nests and on towards our beach by the grey rocks.

Brent DeLanoy

Ghosts

Edna Harper bakes for ghosts. She goes about her business—the same business which she has gone about for most of her life—as though all the members of her family are with her, napkins in laps, knives and forks placed Sunday-style beside the good plates, window open for the afternoon breeze. Her husband, Lucas, and their children, Sarah and Eleanor, gathered at Lucas's table. Lucas's table, his sudden mid-life need to *make* something, manifest in mahogany and oak. He harassed the lumberyard and worked through a winter to finish it.

Edna gives up a step today and uses a store-bought crust. She gives in to her dimming eyesight and her tired hands. She prepares the blueberries, adds a teaspoon of cinnamon, a squeeze of lemon juice. She places it all into the crust and then into the oven. Forty-five minutes of the scent of blueberry pie, Edna sitting alone at the table, her fingers tracing the history of family meals.

Ari Henderson makes a point of being home on Sunday afternoons, though he hardly has anywhere else to be. Especially in the summers, college instructor Ari, off for the season to research and write the same book he has been working on for the better part of a decade. He sits in his living room, in his recliner, a glass of water on his coffee table, and waits for the smell of whatever is cooking to make its way through the vent above his bookshelf. It is the only thing keeping him there, the occasional sniff of dessert. Anyway, since the settlement, the rent is just about the only thing he can afford.

He has worked up the courage several times to knock on his neighbor Edna's door, to ask if perhaps she could spare a slice of pie, to offer her a beer and some company in exchange for home cooking. She hasn't answered the door yet, so he contents himself with the smell of it, with the memory of his wife, Lena—when she had been his wife—baking cookies or

brownies while he lounged on his back deck—when he had a deck—and watched his daughter, Abigail, crawl through the grass after a beetle.

After Lucas passed, after Eleanor moved across the country, after Sarah took a position in Paris, Edna sold the house where she had raised her children and moved across town to the Royal Point Apartments, where she could reside on the ground floor and bid farewell her stairs and basement laundry. Where her knees might find respite and her oven, new and shiny and electric, would be fixed at the dialing of a telephone, should it ever require fixing. The rental agent looked incredulous, an octogenarian intending to live by herself *outside* of a nursing home. How she regretted her decision, those first few weeks, the manager on duty sometimes stopping by to check on her. Announcing for all to hear, "It's Eric the manager, Mrs. Harper. How are you settling in?"

Edna misses the house on Whistler Ave., where she lived with Lucas for nearly six decades, where her daughters did most of their growing up. Lucas took great pride in his lawn, Edna in her house. They sat on their porch in the evenings, he watching his sprinklers on the grass, little rainbows playing in the water as the sun set. Once a decade or so, he'd accept her desire to redecorate. Out with the old wallpaper, in with the new. Remove a wall here. Add a closet there. Such is the prerogative of a homeowner that watched the stick frame rise where once stood nothing, that drywall and trim are impermanent and in want of change. Though Lucas disliked change, Edna knew.

Ari, on occasion, looks up a recipe online and pre-heats the oven, inspired by Edna next door to try his own hand at baking, though he has never been a talented cook. He mimics the movements he attributes to talented chefs, to Edna, a general Hail Mary to the patisserie. This leads, as often as not, to a full trash can and his swearing off kitchens forever.

This is his life, he tells himself, air-cooking in a rented kitchen, wearing sweat pants and a dress shirt—his only clean shirt—like some Gap Outlet refugee. Living and feeling somehow less than alive. Trying in vain to feel anything, re-

ally. Too lazy to do laundry, too shiftless to sleep his life away, though he tries. He makes resolutions to get out the door, to *do something*, and delights in breaking every one. Reminders that he is his *own* man, doesn't *have* to do anything, especially now, for better or worse.

How silly Edna feels with four place settings and the smell of baking pie—ancient habits that delight her. Though she would never entertain *here*, her one bedroom placeholder for the knickknacks and baubles she chose to keep after selling the house. How her habits of housekeeping have dwindled, dust in the corners and a basket of dirty laundry in plain sight in front of the wash machine. She has not had company since Eleanor helped with the move eight months ago. On occasion there have been knocks at the door, though she stopped answering after the manager's inquiries early in her stay. The recent knocks are from her neighbor, a sullen man who always has a book beneath his arm, who nods whenever they pass each other in the hall. She watches him through her peephole as he rocks back and forth on his heels before returning to his apartment.

She would be embarrassed for him to see her home. Embarrassed if her daughters saw it too, or for Lucas—even the *ghost* of Lucas she fancies now sits across from her shakes his head. She might ask the ghost what he thought of the place. He would lie and say it was lovely. He always lied about such things in life; she saw no reason for his shade to change habits.

She tried to involve Lucas in her decisions about the house, which wallpaper for what room, which color fabric he'd like for the living room curtains. He lived there too, she'd tell him, he should be happy with it. He'd reply that he had his lawn, his garage. He *was* happy. Such was her lonely lot: never knowing what he truly thought of the new paint or window dressings, if they were the right color, if they looked as nice as she thought, or if she was mistaken. Embarrassed in advance whenever they had company, embarrassed again when Lucas told jokes and slapped his knee.

On one wall in his apartment is the only thing Ari kept from the marriage, the one material thing—so much became immaterial when Lena asked for the divorce—he fought for. A bookcase of truly mighty proportions, six feet tall and eight feet long, one end tucked into a corner of the living room, the other end over hanging the kitchen door by six inches. The top edge engraved with leaves, little crenellations around the perimeter. It had to be taken apart, ever so carefully, with a molding bar before being moved into the apartment and reassembled. Though he tried to explain the significance of the object to the movers it still managed to be scuffed on the corners, the finish scarred slightly where it was pried apart. A tactical error, he thought, to have brought it in *after* the thirty banker's boxes of books that filled it, when muscles were weak and tempers short.

Ari has no TV. His recliner faces the bookshelf. He sits for hours, reading spines, trying and failing to choose a book, for, though he never admits it, he has only read a tenth of his own library. He spent the first month of his time there sorting and categorizing books, by author, subject, date, title, and weight (both physical and metaphorical). All that handling, the learned-by-osmosis feeling he got from it, left him impotent. He buys more and more books, and more and more books collect on the shelves. Books on other books. Paperbacks bent out of shape. Ari sits in his chair for a good part of the afternoon, reading authors' names, his neatly pressed shirt no longer neatly pressed. Then he smells the pie.

Edna opens the oven door, a balmy three hundred and fifty degrees wafting out. The pie looks perfect, she is glad to note. The store-bought crust has ruined nothing, though it smells a little sweeter than she might have liked. Hands into oven mitts, the cooling rack already placed in the center of Lucas's table. Each time she makes the traverse from oven to table is a little slower, she thinks, each time the pan, even through her mitts, comes closer to burning her. The pie on the rack, the table set, she returns to her chair to let the filling cool a bit before serving. How her husband came running toward that smell, all their Sundays together.

Lucas passed peacefully, in his sleep, while Edna slept be-

side him. Edna had no idea he was gone when she rose in the morning, a Monday, being as quiet as she could down the stairs to start the coffee and eggs. Her morning rituals went by—minutes of normal before normal changed for good. Coffee on, the morning paper collected, a new package of bacon from the refrigerator.

When Lucas didn't come down after repeated—and increasingly distressed—calls, Edna came to the sudden realization that her husband was gone. A startling moment of clarity as her morning radio played. How strange it was to know the truth of the matter before she investigated it for herself. She dialed the ambulance as she ascended the stairs. The paramedics found her sitting on the edge of the bed, as though she had just woken up.

She hasn't forgiven Lucas that transgression, leaving her alone. Though on her Sundays meant for baking, she likes to remember that he departed on a Monday, after one last slice of pie. It isn't until *this* Sunday that she thinks to comment on it. Edna is not the sort of person that makes a habit of speaking to the dead, yet she tells her husband now, as she divides the pie and serves the slices, that she appreciates his having stuck around as long as he did.

In the silence of the afternoon, Ari hears Edna speaking, or he thinks he does. The Royal Point Apartments are not so luxurious as to include much in the way of soundproofing, and he thinks the voice, however faint it is, comes through the vent alongside the smell. He's had eight months since Edna moved in to investigate the mechanics of their connection, the vent above his bookshelf, a sensory pipeline to the apartment next door. Who she is speaking to comes as a delicious mystery to Ari. He hasn't seen her with company since her daughter helped her move. With the exception of their initial neighborly introduction, the trivial hallway conversation thereafter, he has never heard her speak. She has no visitors that he is aware of. He rises from his chair and walks to the bookcase, his hands steady on the spines of Grimm and Greene. He tilts his ear toward the vent to see what else he might hear. Edna speaking to herself, perhaps, or to figments.

He can't decide why, but he likes this idea. That as *he* ages

it will become acceptable for him to talk to no one, to engage in discussion with the authors on his shelf. To ask the ghosts of friends that went before what life is like when life ends.

He imagines himself as a ghost, in his old home, his ex-wife and the conversations they might have as she baked her cookies. What sorts of things might be said with the absence of a body to impede their progress. How he, Ari the poltergeist, might sit in his old spot at the dining table and lift a cookie from the tray. The same dining table where Lena asked for a trial separation, laid out her case for the failing relationship, told him of the other man she wanted to begin seeing. She didn't want to be unfaithful, she said, though she felt increasingly as though there was little to be faithful *to*.

How great it might be, to sit at that table as a punitive ghost. To see his daughter's face as the cookie floated by and landed on a plate meant obviously for Daddy—because that was where Daddy used to sit. Perhaps his wife would faint. His spectral self might then carry on a conversation with Abigail—the one person in this life and the next he might wish to carry on a conversation with—because she would not be frightened. Such things do not frighten five-year-olds. He would let her have *three* cookies before his wife came to.

He might stick around to watch Lena in the shower. To see her get dressed in the morning, watch her try three or four outfits before making a decision. To see her *un*dress at night and slide between the sheets; perhaps he might lie down next to her. Perhaps. His ghost self thinks of these possibilities because these things still hold some interest, but he would be happy with cookies and his daughter. Cookies and a stunned-silent wife. Cookies and the possibility of a shadowy, happy life.

Edna feels silly, speaking to her husband as if he is there, though there is solace in the discussion. She even laughs a bit, the first laughter in some time, her slice of pie finished, the slices around her cold. Imagining what Lucas might say as a ghost, how he might finally apologize for his lack of involvement with the house, how he might apologize for leaving so abruptly, let her know he's waiting for her now. She rises to clear the table, still chuckling. She needs to scrape off the

plates and place them in the dishwasher. Wrap the cooled pie and place it in the refrigerator. All this as much a ritual as the baking.

Until she thinks better of it. She will leave the tray out, for once. For once the kitchen will not be cleaned. She will sit in her armchair and turn on the radio, listen until she falls asleep. She feels a sort of pride in the modest chaos, as though speaking to her absent husband has finally convinced her that he is not there, that there is no one else to care for, only herself to answer to. Then, she smells something burning and curses herself for leaving the oven on. Pie drippings, probably, burnt to the bottom of the oven, as good as glue and hard to clean. She sets her dishes aside and opens the oven to find instead a black cloud issuing forth, the smoke detector above Lucas's table immediately sounding its warning. Through tears Edna sees a dish towel at the bottom of the oven, on fire, smoking terribly. Coughing horribly, she backs away from the smoke, from the burning towel. As she tries to catch her breath, she turns her attention to the smoke alarm above Lucas's table.

Ari hears her laughter, a few snippets of conversation. He wants to hear more, his feet instinctively using the shelves of his bookcase as a ladder. He pulls himself up, craning his head closer to the vent. His hands grip the top of the bookcase, fingers in between the crenellations, pulling him higher, until he has positioned his face right in front of the vent, the rest of his body hanging awkwardly from the front of the bookshelf. He finds this position extremely difficult to hold and realizes, with some delight, that he might lie on *top* of the bookshelf, face directly in front of the vent. He climbs up another shelf, swings one leg up on the top of his favorite piece of furniture and hauls himself on top of his library, ear pressed to vent. He finds that it is nearly impossible to move. He wonders, on the wrong side of impulse, how he might get back down without injury, how much pain he will suffer for a minor prurient delight. Until, through the vent, he smells smoke.

Edna is sure that half the apartment complex is alerted to her now, the decibels of the smoke alarm calling down all manner of emergency response. The dish towel, burning though it is, heat still issuing from the oven as well, poses no real threat. She is shocked at her own carelessness, baffled at how a dish towel might wind up in the oven. Still, she wants desperately to be left alone, to sit and listen to music, to fall asleep to music.

From the cupboard she pulls a broom and walks to Lucas's table. The smoke alarm is positioned directly above it, too high for her to reach the reset button. She uses a chair to climb on the tabletop. Standing carefully, she pokes at the reset button with the broom handle and, when that fails, attempts to wave the smoke away as though she were shooing a cat. This does no good and she feels foolish for attempting it, especially as the sprinklers in the ceiling activate. She is soaked. The tabletop is slick. Edna tries to climb down and falls. Her left foot slips and she twists awkwardly, coming down hard on her left elbow and hip. The sudden sharp pain from her hip to her shoulder takes her breath away. The broom clatters to the floor and she is left gasping on the table, wondering what sort of damage she has done to herself. She lies flat, the cool jets continuing their drenching rain. She closes her eyes and tries to control her breathing. There will be no getting off this table without help, she knows. The pain recedes slightly, enough for her to imagine the water as a summer shower, perhaps with Lucas by her side.

From his vantage point, Ari thinks that his living room doesn't look the same. He is worried about the woman next door, about the fire alarm going off, but he is also distracted by this new view of his home. He is looking at someone else's stuff now. He doesn't pity the guy like he thought he would. He might even think it homey, the comfortable recliner draped with a quilt, a glass of water sweating on the coffee table in front of it.

The smoke alarm keeps a steady tempo, just ahead of a ticking clock. He has a vision of himself kicking down Edna's door and rescuing her from the fire. He imagines giving an interview to the five o'clock news. First, though, he must

get down. He kicks his left leg out only to find the bookcase groaning, threatening to tip over. He returns his leg to the shelf. Now he imagines tumbling from his perch, the bookshelf toppling soon thereafter on top of him. Edna in her apartment, ears burning from the sound, lungs burning from the smoke. Himself pinned on the floor, waiting for help to arrive. He shouts her name through the vent, Edna; get out Edna. He curses and screams again.

At best he can drop his left hand, try to steady a lower shelf before swinging both his legs over and hopping down, hopefully missing his coffee table in the process. He prepares for what will almost certainly hurt, curses himself for his strange climb. He thinks of his books. He thinks of Edna. He begins his descent. He loses his grip and topples. The shelf he is holding slides from its place, dragging the books from three other shelves with it, his precious freighted furniture, spilling books. Ari, amidst his literature, in pain on the floor, drags himself nearly shy of the bookcase as it falls. The top shelf, only recently his strange perch, lands on his left ankle, before the whole thing breaks in half where it had been pried apart by that molding bar. Broken or sprained, he can't tell, though he continues to crawl, hands and knees, to his front door, which he opens for the first time all day, calling Edna's name.

Edna Harper is drenched, lying atop Lucas's table, his grand old oak of a table. She might have heard Lucas calling her name, calling her to safety, though his voice falls away amidst the clamor of the alarm, the rush of water. She takes a momentary interest in the sprinkler's beauty, the way the sun shining through her living room window creates colors in the mist. Sirens already in the distance, her plans for music ruined.

Ruined, her photos and furniture, the still unpacked boxes in her bedroom. Her hands fall to the surface of the table, fingers again tracing the familiar pattern of years—the gouges of careless knives, the nicked corners. Here, where Lucas placed a pan still hot from the oven; there, where Sarah dropped her backpack every day after school. Eleanor's science projects and Edna's entertaining, Lucas's poker nights. History's promise to stand by long after its authors.

Daniel C. Bryant

Out County Road

Originally a clapboard farm house just over the town line, the Livingstone Memorial Library had been moved twice before ending up on its present foundation next to the high school soccer field. Jean knew something of this history because of her regular visits to the library of late, but as she approached the building this September afternoon realized Phil had been right: that was about all she did know about the place. Nothing about what makes institutions like libraries tick, about budgets and bylaws and egos. Did she even know that much about books? Phil had added. She read a lot now, she'd countered to her husband. That's really why the library committee appealed to her. And with the twins off to college, and him working all those hours to meet tuitions, she certainly had the time.

At the circulation desk she was directed to the conference room in the basement, a part of the building she had never been to. When she entered, the four people seated around one end of a long table turned to her as one. Hans Henderson, at the head, rose partway.

"Ah, Jean, welcome aboard. Please."

He gestured to the nearest empty chair, and sat back down.

"You all know Jean Wright, I'm sure. Phil's better half? But why doesn't everybody just . . . ."

As the three members identified themselves, Jean smiled and nodded in turn. She did know Marilyn Stein from the florist shop, but only barely recognized a Bill Thoms and a Grace Nelson. Older, both of them, by the looks. Earnest, all of them.

"Guess we're a quorum," Hans continued. "Those the minutes there, Gracie?"

Once they were approved, Hans started on the first agenda item—humidity in the Poetry Corner. As comments were offered, Jean struggled increasingly for something relevant to add. And when the conference room door suddenly banged open it was relief she felt, more than surprise.

"Bruce!" Hans exclaimed. "Man of the hour. Glad you could make it. Humidity."

"'What would the world be, once bereft of wet and of wildness?'"

The new arrival sat down next to Jean, and proceeded to report on his meeting with a contractor who had told him that, as a general rule, dehumidification of antique buildings is only partially successful. As he went on about vapor barriers and special paints, Jean was able to observe him further—a short, rather weathered man, in his sixties, probably, with still a full head of sandy hair. Rumpled flannel shirt and corduroys. Patch of fresh dirt, it almost looked like, clinging to one sleeve.

After further discussion, the committee voted to ask for a formal work estimate, then proceeded through the rest of the agenda.

On her way out afterwards, Jean passed the latecomer leaning over the bike rack by the entryway. At the sound of her footsteps he turned, bike lock in hand.

"How are you and bureaucracy?"

She stopped. "Pardon?"

"Committee work. Going to like it, you think?"

"Oh, I don't know. Interesting."

"Yes. Should just raze the place, though, don't you think? 'Make it new'?"

"Wouldn't that be . . . ."

"'Course it would. Why I haven't brought it up yet. Maybe next time. See you then."

He jerked the bike out from its slot, worked his leg over the high seat, and after one false start pumped off through the parking lot. As she watched him turn right onto County Road she noticed that one pant leg was stuffed into the top of his sock. Just the way the boys used to do it when she was growing up back in Ohio in the sixties.

It wasn't until a few days later that Phil asked about her meeting.

"Interesting," she said, aware she meant it this time.

"Well, that's good. Interesting is good. Proud of you."

"Oh yeah? I thought you . . . ."

When he didn't continue, she went on, "You know a Bruce

somebody? Short?"

"Bruce Short?"

"No. Somebody. Around our age? Little over? Rides a bike?"

"Bruce Manter? The communist?"

"Communist?"

"Well, I don't know communist exactly. Only Bruce I know around here though. Why?"

"Oh, just . . . on the committee."

"Sounds like Manter. Sold him the Strout place, what, five, six years ago. Cash."

"Huh."

Over the next three weeks Jean found herself wondering about Bruce whoever he was. Wet wilderness. Raze. Communist. Pant leg. Cash. That rumpled, comfortable look, such a contrast to Phil's propriety. One morning after leaving the grocery store she detoured out County Road. She knew the Strout farm had lain derelict, vulnerable to developers, since the last Strout died, but now as she passed she noticed solar panels on the roof, new fencing beyond the house, fresh boards striping the huge barn. When had all that happened?

At the next monthly meeting, the committee finally got around to books. Grace, who had spent thirty years teaching biology in a nearby town, headed a subcommittee that dealt with collection development. When she reported her statistics, everyone nodded approval. Except Bruce.

"I move a one-to-one ratio of classics to trash. You know we have only one Henry James?"

"Who reads Henry James?" Marilyn asked.

"Nobody, if we don't have him."

After a moment's silence, Jean leaned in, heart pounding. "Second?"

Hans made a long face, surveyed the group. "Any discussion?"

There being none, the vote was called: three to two against the motion.

Leaving the building, Jean again passed Bruce in the entryway.

"Gutsy," he called.

"That's me, all right."

She watched him pull the bike free, then, rather than mount,

stand there fiddling with the handle bars. She approached.

"Oh, I was going to ask you, what was that wet wilderness something the other time?"

He smiled, crinkling the tan of his face. "*Wild*ness. 'Bereft of wet and of *wild*ness.' Gerard Manley Hopkins. Know him?"

"Afraid not."

"'Nother classic we don't have."

Again he studied the handlebars, his broad hands now wringing them back and forth.

"But let's work on it," he added, looking up. "Shall we? Have a coffee sometime."

"Well, I . . . ."

"Ad hoc. We'll be ad hoc. Tony's? Tuesday?"

Jean didn't know what to say. Tony's was the popular diner in town, where she and Ellie, her walking buddy, often stopped. It was easy to run into people you knew there. Like your husband.

"Oh, all right," she heard herself agree. "Ten-ish?"

"Tony's, Tuesday, ten. Ish."

The first thing Jean did when she got home was look up Hopkins on the Internet. A few clicks after the famous hospital she recognized the poet's full name, then came to the very poem Bruce had quoted. She read it, and then again, and then out loud, and then louder. How muscular the words pulsing through the empty house, never mind their meaning—". . . the groins of the braes that the brook treads through." Da dah, da da dah, da da DAH DAH DAH!

Do you know him? Bruce had asked, as if she really might. As if she might be in a league not only with the lettered, but with Hopkins himself.

That evening at dinner she brought up the latest library meeting, adding that she had been assigned to a subcommittee. Ad hoc, she thought they called it.

"Really getting into it, aren't you," Phil replied.

"Hey, meets at Tony's."

Ten had been a good choice. The breakfast crowd had gone, including the counter regulars, and it was too early for the workmen grabbing their take-outs. Bruce was already there, at a booth by the window, cutting into a muffin. She slid in across from him.

"Read your poem," she said. "Loved it."

"Why?"

"Why? Did I love it? The words, I guess. Ended up reading it out loud. Don't think I've done that since grade school."

"He attacking capitalism, you think?"

"Gosh I . . . ."

"Big threat to the natural world back then, too. 'Let them be left, O let them be left.' Remember? Sounds like a lefty to me."

"Well, I hadn't thought . . . ."

The waitress arrived and took her order.

When she'd gone, Bruce said, "Thought I'd try to get some stats on the collection. But we're going to have to work on the others. Who do you want?"

"I don't really know them."

"Flower lady be a good one. Aesthetic sense. I'll take Thoms."

Take? Jean felt uneasy. She'd never had to convince anybody, other than her daughters, of much at all, and couldn't imagine trying to convince the local florist of something. But neither could she imagine trying to convince Bruce she wanted out. Or herself, for that matter, that she didn't. The arrival of her coffee and pastry, the cream and sugar routine, gave her some time.

"Think it was your husband sold me my house," Bruce was saying.

The change of subject brought relief, but only briefly. "He sells a lot of houses."

"Probably know mine. Old farm out County Road? Lot of square feet for one person, though. When you think of the real world, twenty to a room."

Jean nodded. Neither Ellie nor Phil had prepared her for conversations like this. Nobody had.

"One with the roof panels," she said.

"Trying to minimize my footprint. 'Course, won't be long before I won't have any footprint to minimize."

Jean frowned.

"Sorry. I'm not really that dark. There's the garden, birds, little carpentry, Hopkins . . . ."

"Sounds lovely."

"Hmm. Show you sometime."

He went on to tell her about his projects at the house, the hydroponics he was reading up on. When they were finished eating he signaled the waitress for the check and let Jean split it with him. Outside, he unlocked his bike from the downspout at the corner of the building, and as Jean headed to her car she heard him call out, "Same time, next week!" No question mark, by the sound of it.

At home, Jean made herself put a load in the dryer, then look through the mail. At two she was walking with Ellie, but until then? After the pastry, she wasn't all that hungry. She should go visit Marilyn about the library. Get that over with. But had she actually agreed to visit Marilyn? Could she stand visiting Marilyn? She was under no obligation. Yet she'd be meeting with Bruce next week and should have something to report. Or she could not be meeting with Bruce next week. She could call him up and say she wasn't comfortable visiting Marilyn. Wasn't comfortable generally.

Tuesday at ten he was sitting in the same booth. Jean admitted she hadn't gotten around to Marilyn, but he said that was OK—reluctance to confront, that is. He hadn't gotten to Thoms, either—out of town. But he had done a random sampling of the books in Fiction: five to ten percent were what he would call classics, or at least worthy. He didn't know how that compared to other libraries, but it sounded low to him.

"And what exactly are we calling a classic?" Jean asked.

"Aha! You've put your finger on it there. Let's think about that, shall we?" And he turned to look out through the window, squinting into the morning glare, thinking.

Jean tried to think too, about classics, but it was like the old days in church when she was told to meditate. All she came up with was the fact that she was sitting in a diner booth across from a man who wasn't her husband, who wasn't her anything. She glanced at the head of hair, poorly combed. At the tanned backs of the hands with their age spots. At the worn collar of the work shirt.

"Are you a communist?" she asked.

He turned back to face her again. "Interesting the way we say that word, isn't it? With a long u—com *you* nist—it sounds like living in a commune, sharing. Not all that bad. But *caw* munist—caw, caw—sounds nasty, subversive. But no, I'm no

totalitarian. How about you?"

"A communist?"

"A anything."

"Housewife?"

"That's anything. Unappreciated anything. I'd have all paychecks go half to the worker, half to the spouse. Did that with my wife."

Jean waited for more about the wife, but there was only distant kitchen clatter for what seemed like a very long time, until Bruce spoke again.

"I don't think we're hitting on each other, do you?"

"Of course not," she laughed, more quickly than she meant to.

"At our age. Mine, I mean. Anyway, tell me about your kids. If you have any."

Still unsettled by the previous question, Jean told about the girls, one sporty, the other aloof, so different in spite of being twins. Bruce nodded, praised their college choices, then went on about their generation, the technology they embraced more than he could.

When they left the diner, there was no mention of another meeting.

Jean definitely wasn't calling Marilyn. The whole idea of challenging the library routine seemed unseemly, especially for a newcomer like her. Almost as unseemly as these rendezvous, if that's what they were. On her walks with Ellie, she came close to mentioning them, but though at times over the years their conversations had turned confidential, even confessional, she didn't. Somehow, that would have been the most unseemly of all.

At the next committee meeting, more members were present than before, but not Bruce, even though the contractor's estimate was on the agenda. Jean managed to comment during a discussion of the children's story hour, then felt entitled to sit back and listen. When the meeting adjourned, Hans thanked her for her input and she went up to the main reading room to look for a new book. As she walked the stacks, she couldn't help wondering what Bruce would suggest, finally selecting the James he had mentioned at her first meeting.

And then when she left, there he was, standing by her car

with his bike.

"Didn't make it," he said. "Appointment."

"Didn't miss much."

"No, probably not. Got a good book there?"

"Oh, just a novel," she said, not showing it to him.

Bruce glanced briefly toward the road. "I'm heading back to the house. Want to come along?"

"To your house?"

He nodded.

"To . . . ?"

"Coffee? I don't know."

I don't know. Ambiguous, yet not exactly threatening. The sun was still shining. Cars were still passing on the road. Her cell phone was charged.

"For a few minutes. I've got . . . ."

Without waiting for details, Bruce mounted his bike and headed off. Jean followed, passing him soon on the open road, neither waving. Was this really she doing this? She could imagine her girls' disbelief. Phil's perplexity, at least. She could imagine her own outrage if she learned Phil was doing something similar. Through twenty five years of marriage, she'd never once suspected him, though maybe now she should have. It was all so easy.

When she reached the farm, she turned onto the rocky track leading to the barn, parked in front of its sliding door, and got out. It was a classic old farm house, all right, extending back from the road in the mismatched additions and odd ells of many generations. And it did need work—loose storms, peeling clapboards, cockeyed chimney. Beyond the house the gardens were plowed under for winter, except for a pumpkin patch where a few orange gourds peeked out from the green.

Bruce said nothing when he arrived, but led her in by a side door and then past a cluttered kitchen to a sunny sort of study furnished with old couches and a plank table piled with books and magazines. Either side of a large bay window shelves sagged with volumes of all sizes, a few framed photographs. In one corner an impossibly long cat was draped like a stole over the top of a wooden filing cabinet.

Bruce indicated the couch with the view. "Coffee?" he asked. "Tea? Booze?"

"Uh . . . . Coffee?"

While he was away in the kitchen, Jean ran through excuses for leaving. So awkward sitting there on that couch, listening to sounds of preparation, but for what? Maybe, if she was lucky, this was all just a nightmare. The house, the committee, everything.

Bruce returned a few minutes later with a tray: two mugs, a sugar bowl and jug of milk.

"You don't have to stay, you know," he said as he arranged things on a low table.

Of course she knew that, just not why he thought she might not, and why the knowledge hardly helped. Somehow, though, his intuition did. His rumpled shirt, his half smile, his casual proximity now on the couch.

Or was she kidding herself? He'd brought her here for sex hadn't he? She didn't think of herself as a sex object any more, if she ever had. Had he tried everybody else in town? Was it possible that she was, in spite of her age, attractive to him, special in some way? She hadn't felt particularly attractive or special to Phil for years, their sex having long since become routine, as well as less appealing to her. Whether still appealing to Phil, or become obligatory to him, too, she had no way of knowing. No easy way at least.

Bruce put down his mug. "Let me get my Hopkins for you." He stood and, stroking the cat as he passed, went over to the bookshelves.

If he wanted sex, he was being awfully indirect about it. As indirect as she was blasé. And what might the advance consist of when it came? How would she respond? Stand her ground? Comply? Scream? Bolt? She glanced around for possible weapons.

Bruce returned to the couch, sitting perhaps slightly closer this time. He opened the book on his lap, cradling it in a reverent, almost intimate way. She watched him run the titles with his fingertip until, sensing her gaze perhaps, he turned to her. Only when she lowered her eyes did he begin to read, the words vibrating through her from the nearness. When he was done he set the book down beside him on the couch. For several minutes they sat there in the warmth of the sun, content with the flashy back and forth at the feeder.

"And you don't have to worry," he said at last, as if the Hopkins hadn't intervened.

"Hmm?"

"You don't have to worry. This is all there'll be."

"It's all right. I'm not worried."

"All there *can* be, I mean."

She turned to look at him.

"I'm afraid I'm just a 'tattered coat upon a stick,' Jean."

She pulled away, then abruptly stood.

"I'm so sorry!" she blurted, turning and rushing back through the kitchen and out.

Fields, barns, woods, cars flashed by. Sorry? Sorry? What sorry? That she'd misled him? Misread him? Disgraced herself? Deluded herself? Sorrow had nothing to do with it. Only stupidity. Cruelty. Conceit. Disgust. Disappointment. God knows what.

County Road led south, where, she didn't care, just far. From Bruce. From Phil. From herself. She'd betrayed her husband. That's all there was to it. Her faithful, provident, working-this-very-moment-in-her-behalf husband. She'd never be able to face him again.

It was a T junction that finally brought her to a stop. Idling, wondering which way to turn, she kept checking the rearview mirror, as if not only cars but all the untold consequences of her act might be bearing down.

Yet nothing serious had happened. Phil need never know the little that had. Bruce was no gossip. No one had seen her. She'd resign from the committee. The whole episode would disappear. The whole episode so trivial, now that she was gaining a little perspective, that it might never have actually happened at all.

She turned left for home, taking the long way around.

But it was increasingly hard, over the next few days, not to say something to Phil. She owed it to him after all, and to herself—revealing honestly that she had met someone interesting, someone interested, at least so she thought, and that . . . . And that what? That he had, or so she imagined, made advances? Or that she had been, or would have been, complicit, not out of passion so much as expectation? Neither account was appealing. Or relevant. Or maybe even true. And

what would Phil's response be? He would have to be jealous, to think that his wife was drawn to another man, no matter the reasons or results. Of course, he wasn't jealous that she was drawn to Ellie for conversation, even for hugs at their rare bad times. At least he'd never indicated that. Because there was no sex involved? Is that all jealousy is? But there wouldn't be with Bruce, either. Phil would have to know that. Yet, knowing it or not—maybe, oddly enough, more knowing it than not—he would be jealous. It was only natural. As natural as her dismay if he weren't.

One week after the farm house incident Jean and Phil were sitting in the living room having a glass of wine. Phil was checking his messages and though she rarely interrupted him when he was dealing with his phone, she suddenly had to speak.

"Oh, by the way," she said, "I've quit the committee."

A moment passed, as if he hadn't heard, then he murmured, "Figured you would."

"And why is that?"

"Deadly, those committees. Takes a certain type."

"Which I'm not."

He didn't take the bait, so she went on, "What type am I, Phil, would you say? Honestly."

"I just know what you're not, I'm afraid."

"Oh dear. You married a woman for what she's not."

He put down the phone, raised his glass as in a toast. "Married her for love, Jean. You know that as well as I do."

Yes, she did know that. They had loved, still loved, would love, in their familiar, comfortable way. Now that he'd mentioned the word, they might even make love that evening. She hoped they would, if only for old times' sake.

She let him get back to his calls. She'd said enough. For now.

It was several weeks later when, pulling into a parking place by the bakery in the town center, Jean noticed what looked like Bruce's bike in front of the hardware store. She did her shopping, and when she got back in the car saw that the bike was still there. She waited. When Bruce finally emerged, carrying a large cardboard box, she stepped out and hailed him. He set the box down carefully by his bike and came over.

"How are you?" he said. "Committee misses you."

"Really?"

"Well, I do."

"Holidays, you know. Girls'll be coming home and . . . ."

"You were offended, weren't you."

"No, no. I was . . . . Well, not really."

He nodded slowly, smiling.

"Don't think I haven't been thinking about it though," she added. "What I was. Wasn't."

"Yeah. What we do, isn't it. Anyway, you know where I live."

At that he turned and walked toward his bike. Jean got back into her car and buckled up. She watched him fix his pant leg, but drove off before he would have to deal with that box.

John Mort

Red Rock Valley

O'Hare, four a.m., twenty-two degrees Fahrenheit. Donald Stone had hardly slept on the flight from Miami, but he chose the train, rather than a taxi. The train took two hours, a taxi twenty minutes, but his *per diem* covered cab fares, and he could make a little money with his expense report. Every penny counted. He was saving for his retirement—as a relatively youthful *pensionado* in Costa Rica.

He knew there was no such thing as paradise, but when Greg and he had gone there, Costa Rica seemed close. At least it did for Donald. Greg's appreciation of nature stopped with viewing sunsets from the balcony at the Hyatt, perhaps while sipping a *piña colada*. But Donald talked him into a canoe trip down the Rio Pacuar, with the argument that they had become so domesticated they needed an adventure they could talk about in their golden years. They tapped into their credit cards for a guide and canoe, and muddled their way, with their dubious Spanish, to the put-in.

The rapids were tame, or they might have drowned. Downstream ten miles they paddled into the stinking effluent of a coffee mill; the muck splashed up and seemed to invade everything in their craft. Filthy, high on caffeine, and cold, they made port in a low canyon, by calm water on a red rock shoal. They built a fire, then stripped and washed out their clothes and hung them to dry. For a while they lay together in the sun, resting.

Donald rose, at last, and drew on his stiffened clothing, but as he looked down on his sleeping partner felt alienated from him, as if their life together were an accident, or they each, for the other, had been less a choice than a capitulation. He turned, strode the rock face, and looked upstream, past the wild undergrowth and the dazzling flowers and the palms sticking up like tall men in a crowd, toward the ramshackle mill. He thought of the creek in Arkansas, on his parents' farm—the place he liked most when he was a child.

The crest of the shoal split and dropped down an animal

path between two great boulders. Surely, Donald thought, no place on earth was unknown, but he felt something new here, and followed the trail as it wound, first narrow then wide, toward a spring clear as the one in Arkansas. He knelt to drink. The water was cool and invigorating, and he imagined that it was the stuff Ponce de Leon had looked for. Ah, *si!* In the dark glade Mayans had camped, and after them, the clumsy Spaniards. They washed their jungle sores, drank the magic water, and grew young again.

Donald waded the water to a pool in which bass darted among submerged red rocks. He looked out upon a valley where, instead of forest, bluish-green grass grew, stretching for five acres or so until it met the opposite face of rock. Like a sign, two white horses appeared on the red rock, and seemed to eye Donald over the distance, before they turned and fled.

He returned to the Pacuar, where Greg had awakened, and looked about impatiently. He was weary of their middle-aged adventure and wanted to embark immediately for the take-out, thinking they could return to the hotel, and a magnificent meal, that evening. They'd visit San Jose's famous orchid gardens in the morning, then catch their plane.

Donald never told Greg about the valley. He never told anyone. But he thought about the valley at every conference his company sent him to, and every time he rode the train. He thought of it now, eying the snow as it swirled down the Kennedy, and Chicago's back streets. These were the resting hours for the homeless, shifting trains through the night to escape the cold. Most slept, but a little woman at the end of the car rocked back and forth, talking to herself, sometimes raising one curled hand in a sort of plea.

As the years passed, Donald wondered if he truly saw the horses, or if he had imagined them out of a need to visualize perfection. But he came to think of the valley as the one place on earth where he might find peace. He'd live out his days in San Jose, eating wonderful food and mastering Spanish, making new friends in a place where your past didn't matter. When the time came to die, he'd travel to the valley, stretch out in the sun, and wait for the horses.

Donald got off at Washington, shouldering his baggage for the walk, like a portage, through the tunnel to the Howard

Line. The odor of wine and urine was not so sharp this morning, and the haggard black man at the center of the tunnel, pounding out a rhythm on his conga drums, seemed brave and admirable, to be at his work so early. Donald shifted his luggage, and threw the drummer what change he had. The man smiled faintly, the nearest thing to a welcome Chicago ever offered.

Long ago, he'd enjoyed his work. He took cabs everywhere, ate at fine restaurants, and spent every penny of his *per diem*. He was a fine salesman, after all, and deserved his little rewards. But over time the hotel food all seemed stale, and even the quaint, ethnic restaurants lost their charm. Greg was sick, and couldn't come along any longer. Donald began to prefer Wendy's, or even to eat cold food in his room.

Somehow, they got through Greg's last year, with not much help from either of their employers. As a couple it was a final humiliation, little assuaged by the few co-workers who came to Greg's memorial. In the end, Donald wasn't a widower, but just an old bachelor—or, in the minds of his co-workers, an aging homosexual.

The new car was deserted and Donald closed his eyes briefly. The train rolled from underground into the stormy dawn, but he was out of the weather by six—home, it was called. Always a surprise to greet your former self, and discover he was a pig. But Donald had no visitors and saw little point in housekeeping. He'd sold his car, most of his furniture and dishes, and even his books, stripping down to the severest efficiency. He lived here not half the time, and anyhow decor was Greg's department.

He turned up the thermostat and watered a spiky houseplant that was one of the few things that he still kept of Greg's, and that no amount of neglect had been sufficient to kill. He went through his mail—bills, frequent flier statements, catalogues. After his nap, he thought, he'd allow himself a small treat, and go out for Thai food.

His cell was for business, the land line for personal calls, but he so seldom had a message, even when gone for a week, that sometimes he forgot to check. Lately, he'd thought of ending the service. He'd put on Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem,* and settled into his recliner with an afghan, when he

noticed the blinking light.

"Donald . . . this is Mom. It's Saturday night, about ten, I guess, I'm at Lakeland General Hospital. We're staying at the Flamingo Motel. It's your father, Donald . . . he had a heart attack. I think he . . . the doctor, he's from some African country, he says it's very serious."

Donald called the motel and then the hospital, but couldn't run her down. He pictured her, sleepless and frail, collapsed at the foot of his father's bed.

He left a message at work, then booked a flight to the other coast of Florida. And he took a taxi.

When he was a young man, Donald's parents held the usual hopes that he'd marry a nice girl, and father children. Donald, too, entertained the notion—down in Jonesboro, he dated a Brenda, a Mary, and an Arlene. Each was attractive enough, but Brenda and Arlene had been so bland that Donald could no longer separate them in his memory, although he'd seen them through the years, when he returned for visits. He didn't suppose he'd have made them any more miserable than the men they married.

Mary, the only one of his ancient loves with a wit, affectionately rejected Donald, complaining that his testosterone was too low. "I thought that was what I wanted in a man," she said. "But it isn't."

Donald liked Mary; he'd have gone to dental school for her, and they could have built a house on one corner of the farm. Far better than what he had done, which was simply to drift. Well, he was a remote sort with men and women alike, and only Greg was able to break through. It didn't have much to do with sex. I am asexual, Donald sometimes thought—like a character out of Henry James.

He hadn't seen his parents for seven years, ostensibly because of his father's disdain for Greg. Not for Greg himself so much, as the *fact* of Greg. His mother always kept in touch, and even stayed with them once, when she came to Chicago for a church conference. Greg was gravely courteous, fixing buckwheat cakes and sausages for her breakfast, because Donald told him this would please her.

Yet even if his father had been more accommodating, Don-

ald wouldn't have visited often. The farm near Jonesboro had charm, but he had no old friends to see, and the martyr's religion his mother practiced tried his patience. More: when he went back he was forced to confront the fact he hadn't gone anywhere. If not a dentist for Mary, then why hadn't he become a teacher, a county engineer, even a farmer?

He might even have been like Orville Bledsoe—a quiet man who, as he grew older, Donald more and more admired. Bledsoe was a cheerful, wizened immigrant from Missouri who made his living pumping out septic tanks, but he sent three daughters through college. That was a life worth living, Donald thought. Never a lover, he might have been a devoted father.

He slept all the way to Tampa, then rented a small Toyota for the drive to Lakeland. He scarcely noticed North Tampa; it looked like Los Angeles, or Houston. But heading east, distracted as he was, he caught a flavor of the down-at-the-heels, cracker Florida his folks had been so fond of. Not so different, Donald suddenly realized, from my obsession with that valley in Costa Rica.

His father, Alvin, had somewhere got the idea that prosperous Arkansas farmers were required to go to Florida in the winter. Of course, Alvin wasn't prosperous. He and Donald's mother would find some beat-up kitchenette left over from one of Florida's boom-and-bust cycles, then live for six weeks on mullet, dented canned food, and Ruskin tomatoes. For recreation they sought out flea markets and vintage attractions such as Weeki Wachi Springs or Parrot Jungle. There was church, of course, which Alvin tolerated in his old age. Sometimes, Alvin struck off inland in seach of abandoned farmsteads, and free tangerines.

When Donald was ten, he and his father waded a swamp and cut three cypress knees. That wasn't legal any more. It wasn't approved of even when crackers were king. Back in Jonesboro, his father boiled away the bark, dried the knees, and made lamps. The lamps were a low art, a stolen art, and after a while Donald wished that they could be restored to the swamp. Even so, the lore of it all provided good moments with his father.

"He was so skilled with tools," Donald announced, as he

drew into the hospital parking lot.

He checked in at the nurse's station and saw the doctor—a tall, grave Kenyan he could barely understand—the one time he would. "Alvin does not like the catheter. He fights, and he is a very old man."

"He was never in a hospital. Will he get through this?"

The doctor shrugged almost contemptuously and then caught himself, as if, in the past, he'd been criticized for his insensitivity. He shook his head. "What we can, we do."

So, Donald thought. My father is a dead man, and that is why I am here.

His mother, Eileen, sat crumpled like a pile of laundry. But without her presence, Donald would not have known that the old man in the bed, naked and emaciated, was his father. Alvin Stone's eyes were closed. His hands kept traveling down to yank at the yellowish catheter—hovering, pulling back. Greg fought the same battle. The enemy was not death, but plastic tubing.

The walls were off-white, and mostly bare; a curtain half-separated them from an old woman who stared at them vaguely. Across from Alvin's bed, placed so that he must have memorized every detail these past three days, was a painting of a generic Florida scene: live oaks draped with Spanish moss, with a lake, a setting sun, behind them.

Donald grasped his mother's shoulder. "Have you eaten, Mom?"

"Donald! You—"

His job was to remain calm. That poor soul on the bed was dying, but it was his mother who needed to be shielded. She'd grieve, and contend with endless, narrowing loneliness. Soon, perhaps, Donald would be driving down to Jonesboro for her funeral.

"He's been asking for you."

"Can he . . . hear me?"

Incredibly, the old man sat up. His eyes were fierce, startling Donald: they held the same fury as Greg's toward the end. His hand hovered above the catheter again, then reached weakly for the wadded-up sheet in a gesture of modesty.

"Dad?"

"Alvin?" Donald's mother stood quickly and grasped the

bed rail. “Alvin? It’s Donald!”

“Jesus Christ, I know that.”

Donald stepped closer. “Come to take you home, Dad.”

“Naw.” He fell back, and studied the ceiling. “Thinkin’ of Yellowstone.”

“Yellowstone . . . National Park?”

Alvin whispered, “Mother and I—”

“My mother,” Donald said, leaning near. “Eileen. Your wife.”

“Listen! We drove *out* there.”

“Five years ago,” Donald’s mother said. “He means—”

“Naw, naw, naw.” A shout tried to break out of the old man’s whisper. “Donnie was eight. You don’t remember.”

“Yes, I do,” Donald said. “You didn’t even have to reserve a campsite back then. Just us and the bears. We went fishing.”

“They pulled the fish out of the lake there and plopped it right in the hot spring. How they cooked it.”

“The Indians,” Donald murmured.

“You liked them campin’ trips, Donnie.”

“Let’s go camping, Dad.”

The old man closed his eyes.

“He has diabetes,” Eileen whispered. “We didn’t know. He’ll be on a very restricted diet.”

This time, the old man’s shout broke through. “This!”

“Alvin—” His mother reached out, but didn’t touch the old man.

“I bought four quarts of oil and a filter.”

“Oh, Alvin.”

“Donnie knows how—”

“I can change it, Dad. Sure.”

“You *do* it,” Alvin said, his last words for Donald, or anyone.

Alvin Stone dropped again into sleep, and his heart rate seemed steady, so Donald checked in with the nurse and chaperoned his mother to the cafeteria. She ate half of a Cuban sandwich and pecked at a jello salad. Donald sampled what the hospital’s food service was pleased to call key lime pie.

“Did you have a good winter down here? Before—?”

She grew angry. “We should never have come. He’s been sick; he couldn’t drive. And Florida’s *changed.*”

"If he should die, Mom. Have you—?"

"He won't die."

"Even—even if he's laid up for a while, can you—?"

"Could you drive us home?"

"Sure."

"This must be strange for you. You and Greg . . . we haven't been a family in so long."

He sighed. "Always a family, Mom."

"We've been talking about selling the farm. Jonesboro's grown right next door; it's worth money. Oh, it's just a *shame,* all the little farms disappearing." She brightened. "You could have the farm if you wanted it, Donald. Your father would like that."

He shook his head ritually, but stopped. In Costa Rica, he might enjoy living again. His life would be new. In Costa Rica you could find hidden valleys, while Jonesboro held no mysteries. Even so, he found himself tempted. "I'll think about it. You—"

"You could sell off a little chunk of land for houses and live like a king. You have your fantasy, that city down in South America, but Donald, you won't know a soul there."

He could keep peacocks and goats, species as odd as he was, and raise some good tomatoes, which you couldn't buy in the city. He had ten vigorous years, still, and his expenses would be minimal. Of course, if he owned livestock, he couldn't travel, but perhaps he'd traveled enough.

"The grass is never greener, Donald. Look at your father, always coming to Florida, never finding what he wanted."

"Mom," he said, trying again to prepare her. "You and Dad had a good life on the farm—"

"We had a *real* life," she said, dry-eyed. "Your father was faithful. There was always plenty to eat. But he wasn't . . . a Christian man, Donald."

Donald nodded abruptly. He didn't want to hurt this old woman. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"And he was mean to you, Donald."

He slid back from the table. His lack of sleep had caught up with him, and he fought off an unseemly yawn. "Not mean, exactly. He never really said *anything*. He just couldn't take it in, Greg and me."

She nodded. "'My own son,' he said. 'My only son.'"

"It's so long ago, Mom."

"I'm sad for you, Donald. You're a *good* man. If you only—"

Patience, he thought. Patience.

"—had Jesus in your life. You don't want to . . . *die,* oh Donald you don't want to go through eternity—"

Over the intercom, right on cue, eternity summoned them to the bedside of Alvin Stone.

"He can still hear you," the nurse, a Jamaican woman, whispered. "Talk to him. Tell him you love him."

"I love you, Alvin," Eileen said. "Donald and I are here. You're going to a better place."

What was the best advice, Donald wondered, for a man experiencing his last seconds? Pointless, harmful, to say what he truly thought, that sheer nothingness was a better place than a hospital bed. His father lay motionless, but there was the color of life about him, still, even though his heartbeat faded, and his breathing was indiscernible. His mother dropped back in her chair as if some force propelled her. She cried softly.

Donald took his father's wrist. He could tell him he loved him; he'd told Greg that. He spied a Western novel on the bed stand, and thought that if there had been anything romantic in Alvin Stone's nature, any longing to escape from his hard and mundane life, it had been in how he'd loved the West. His mother was a little wrong. Alvin Stone came to Florida, but he longed for the West. The fabled West of mountain peaks and glorious sunsets.

"There's a man on a horse," Donald said, and as he spoke a deep cold passed beneath his fingers, out of his father's hand and through his wrist. "He's an old soldier, looking for the place where he grew up. He's tired, he's fought in a hundred campaigns, and now all he wants is peace.

"Nothing looks the same to him at first. The soldier scouts with his horse all day long. Finally, late in the afternoon, he finds the trail he's looking for."

The cold spread up his father's arm. Donald stared at the old man's lips, but they didn't move; they were blue. His eyelids were still. Maybe he could hear.

"The trail climbs a mountain. It's a faint trail and part of the way the soldier travels over rock. All he can do is follow the chinks in the granite that the Kiowa made many years ago.

"But he knows where he's going now. He leads his horse over the crest and follows a draw down between two sheer, red cliffs. The sun is setting, and it catches the red rock, making it glow. From one of the cliffs a spring flows. The soldier stoops to drink: it's sweet water."

The cold traveled through his father's shoulder and perhaps found his heart. The nurse had come to the foot of the bed, but Donald wasn't watching the monitor.

"The soldier follows the stream and comes into a beautiful valley. There are tall pines, and trout in the stream, and a meadow full of blue-green grass. Far off, wild horses run. The soldier dismounts his horse, and sets her free to join the *remuda*. He walks through the grass and sits with his back against a big pine. 'I will make a garden here,' he says. 'I will build a house.'"

The nurse nodded. Donald put his arm around his mother and escorted her into the corridor.

"He's so sick," Eileen said.

"He's gone, Mom."

"Oh," she said. "Oh."

Nurses ran in and out of his father's room with a theatrical commotion. His mother and he sat on white plastic chairs. After a while Donald took a call from the Kenyan doctor, but could not understand what the man said.

Donald wanted to believe that his voice had reached his father's brain before the cold had. And he would have told him one more thing if he could have. He'd have told him that he changed the oil, and drove his mother home to Jonesboro.

Zac Hill

Conversations With Dakota Fanning

Like three a.m. on a Tuesday I get a call from Dakota Fanning. "What up," she says, then asks for "the guy who wrote that thing about me that was about me but wasn't actually about me."

"I am that guy," I tell her.

A couple of months ago, a Pacific Northwest online literary press posted this thing of mine called *Stories from the Collective Consciousness*. The shtick was that every week or two I'd release a chapter dealing with how I thought people thought a celebrity might act in some weird-ass situation. Gary Busey becomes a mall Santa Claus for a day. Emeril Lagasse becomes disenchanted with the soup quality at a local homeless shelter. Et cetera. Dakota, if I remember correctly, was supposed to be focusing hard—I mean actually jutting her tongue and pressing it flat against her upper lip—on the best way to propel a dart into a bullseye, when the opening salvo from Memphis-area rockabilly band The Dempseys derailed the trajectory of said dart into the whiskey glass of Brazilian power lifter Paulo Vitor damo da Rosa. Power lifter is pissed, Dakota plays it cool, and ultimately she winds up winning over his respect by hustling him at nine-ball.

Anyway it turns out that she stumbled upon her story via her mom, who was being sort of adorably mommish and soaking up every piece of information on the internet about her daughter. Dakota tells me on the phone that although she enjoyed the segment very much, there was no way she would ever reject an Oreo cookie in favor of one of those Milano vanilla-chocolate "wafer sandwiches," *especially* when the Oreo was served with milk—and given that said rejection figured prominently in one of *Stories . . .*' pivotal sequences, she was concerned that I fundamentally misunderstood her as a human being.

"And that's just a shame," she says.

But she has a plan to remedy all that, she says.

With a fortuitous gap in her shooting schedule starting

roughly right now, Dakota thinks the best thing to do is to go on a road trip and set things straight. She wants to know if that would be cool with me. I tell her that sure it sounds sweet and that yeah I'll see her tomorrow and that she should have a good morning or night or whatever time it is. Then I roll over and go back to sleep.

A day-long cruise up the Pacific in a '94 brown Ford Bronco later, she's sitting there on the street, honking two staccato Waah-Waahs in the direction of my modest Queen-Anne townhouse. I trot outside with my clothes and toothbrush and notebook in a plastic Safeway bag. She keeps her seatbelt on and leans across the passenger seat, sticking her hand out through the rolled-down window. I take it and shake it.

"Hi," she says. "I'm me!"

It's my third or fourth celebrity interview ever and I've got all my questions written out in impeccable cursive in my notebook. I haven't asked any of them yet. Instead Dakota and I riff on weird cloud shapes for close to an hour: "Bulbasaur!" "Kim Jong-il!" Then we listen to the sounds the wind makes when you roll the windows down to different levels—first halfway, then a quarter, then almost all the way up save for the littlest sliver, the ittiest bittiest bit. The sounds range from vacuum to dryer to busted drinking straw. Before we know it we're halfway through Washington headed to Helena, and the mountains engulf us. It is beautiful. I am nervous. I am rather warm for mid-May. I am wondering why she is driving a Ford Bronco, of all vehicles.

"OJ Simpson," she says.

I point out that her car is brown even though his was white.

"That is not a bad point," she says.

"So do you think, having been a prominent child actress, that it's difficult to transition out of aspects of your character that, like it or not, your audience frequently projects onto you—that for example you might have to actively try to assert your maturity, as in say for example the very graphic assault sequence in *Hounddog,* when, under different circumstances, you wouldn't have to do that otherwise?"

"Are you fucking serious?"

"Yes, I mean, it seems like it'd be a real pain in the ass for

everybody to think of you all the time as this nice innocent little girl when, I mean, we were all nice innocent little girls and boys at some point in our lives, like Meryl Streep and Helen Mirren were once nice little innocent girls, or whatever, but that's not what people see, you know? They see you with your blonde hair and no front teeth and it's like 'Hello, I'm an adult now,' and it just seems like that'd be kind of hard to deal with, is all."

She laughs hysterically and says nothing.

We are rolling through this dynamited pass, and the drainage channels in the hills are etched across the rocks like the creases of a brain. I ask her if she doesn't really want to talk to me about it, and tell her if she doesn't that it's fine, that it's cool.

"Dude, I want *very* much to talk with you," she says.

"Okay, well then, what do you—"

"I want to *talk* with *you*," she says, and floors the gas.

Maybe ten or twelve miles outside Missoula and I have got to piss like a fiend. Dakota has been testifying at length to the virtues of Mexican Coca-Cola, a twenty-four pack of which she keeps in the back seat floor, and so I've machine-gunned like three of them so far.

"It's good shit," she says.

The stuff is indeed good shit. For her part she has kept strictly to a 72-oz. Big Gulp! of pure soda-fountain H20, the kind you dispense by pressing the little white tab that hangs next to the Minute Maid spigot. She procured neither a top nor a straw for the glass, and drives with it sitting there sloshing around between her legs. Every once in awhile she'll palm the thing and take a massive swallow. Except for one harrowing skid around a bend when the cruise control started tripping out, not a single drop has spilled.

We resolve to whip into the next gas station. I am still gripping my notepad. We've been singing "Cherry Bomb." I am better at singing "Cherry Bomb" than Dakota Fanning. I am actually disconcertingly good at singing "Cherry Bomb." At one point I stick my head out the window and sing "Cherry Bomb" to a van in the next lane. The van has a ladder on top and the ladder rattles as it passes. Its passengers respond by

mooning both of us. Dakota asks me to drive for a second. We execute a Jackie Chan-like switching-seats-while-driving maneuver. We do not crash. Dakota Fanning moons the passing van. A hang and not a press. Her technique is truly inspired. The van's driver honks twice and thumbs-ups and the van passes on. I hand Dakota her drink. She takes an actual big gulp from it and returns it to her lap.

A big green sign tells us we're approaching somewhere. I take the exit. I ask her whether she's planning to acquiesce to the tremendous societal pressure that is surely mounting even now which suggests that despite many temptations to the contrary she should put her career in entertainment on hold to receive a quality college education. She says, "Herpa Derpa Derp" and makes a farting noise with her mouth. She points past my face and says, "Look, a hitchhiking dragon with a Roy Orbison hairstyle." I attempt to discover this dragon. She yanks my notebook out of my hands and shakes her finger in my face like Dikembe Mutombo and flings the notepad out the window and leans back in her chair. I tell her she probably has a point. We start to pass a gas station. I whip into the gas station. I go inside. I flash the cashier a peace sign. I enter the restroom. I take a very very very deep breath. At long last, I indeed piss like a fiend.

After I return to Earth and flush twice and dabble my fingers with water and piddle with my hair in the mirror, I exit the restroom to see Dakota holding a fistful of Slim Jims and a 20-oz. bottle of Pepsi.

"Everything come out alright?" she asks.

I make the A-OK symbol with my fingers and check to make sure I zipped my fly. Success. Dakota heads over to the cashier, and I troll the candy aisle for those awesome Granny Smith-flavored candy worms with the sugar crystals and the yellow package. More success. I pay for my Gummi Worms and notice Dakota thumbing through one of the issues of Buck'N'Bass they've got sitting in a rack by the door. She's sucking on the Slim Jim poking out of the wrapper like a kind of meat popsicle, her Pepsi cradled cozily in her armpit. The cap is still screwed on.

I open the door and lean against it and motion for her to go ahead. She does. I follow her out and head to the car and

hop into the passenger seat when I notice the mother lode of Coca-Cola that's still there chilling in the back. I point to her Pepsi and make a what-the-fuck gesture.

"What?" she says.

"Well . . . ?"

"Well What?"

"I mean, Coke or Pepsi?"

"Now that right there," she says, "is a motherfucking question," and tosses the bottle over her shoulder into the back seat.

We're edging toward Billings and the landscape is an immense nothing. The sky hangs. I have absolutely no idea where we're headed. The one time I asked, she just tapped me on the nose with her finger and told me to hold on one second. Then we drove for an hour and showed no signs of stopping.

"It'd be cooler if I interviewed *you*," she is telling me.

We're talking now about what led me to do the original series of celebrity stories in the first place. I said it's crazy how we form these conceptions of people in our minds based on this tiny tiny tiny tidbit of information we have about someone, and we call that conception a "person," and we give that person a name, and we talk to other people about that person, but the person in our minds has nothing really to do with the human being walking around on the planet somewhere eating deli sandwiches and listening to an iPod through little white ear-buds or whatever. So my goal was to create characters that were believable enough for my audience to buy that Gary Busey or whomever *really would* behave that way, even though none of us has any idea at all.

"But see, I am sitting here next to you," she continues, "without any kind of 'conceptions' about you or me or anybody. I don't know enough about you to write some kind of story—but I know you're fun to rock out in the car with. I know you have the squirreliest cheeks. I know you like to use a lot of hundred-dollar words for God-knows-why and I'm sorry, really, but it takes all my energy to keep from laughing in your face. People don't say this to you a lot—I mean, call you out, do they?"

"I guess not."

"That's good. Where are you from, anyway?"

"I was born in Memphis," I tell her.

"Do you usually drive with the windows down?"

"In the summertime, and also in the winter when it's late and I might possibly have had a little to drink and I don't want to fall asleep at the wheel."

"Where's the coolest place you've ever been on a date?"

"Definitely the three-dollar Better than Ezra concert at the Ampitheatre with the backstage passes and hand-picked roses. Not even close. They asked somebody if they knew the guitar part to Desperately Wanting and randomly I did, so I was all waving my hands or whatever and the crowd pushed me onstage and I rocked the hell out, and then I called my date Shea out of course and she acted all shy, but she got up on stage and all of us sang the last entire like half of the song together."

"That sounds awesome."

"It was."

"Lucky girl."

"She's married now," I said.

Dakota is wearing Daisy Dukes. Her sunglasses bulge around her eyes and make her look like a raccoon, and in the reflection off one of the lenses I see myself talking, my lips moving. Behind her, parallel to us, a tractor trundles forward in a slow, straight line, billowing smoke.

"Why do you care so much?" she says.

"Like generally?"

"That's not where I was going, but sure, yeah."

"Because I can't imagine not."

"And why do you care so much about this 'celebrity' stuff?"

I have no idea why I answered this question the way I did. I could have said that I *didn't* care, that I didn't understand why she thought I cared, that there was no reason to even think that there was any reason to care—that this subject simply made for good stories, was interesting to think about, provided a "meaningful glimpse into the collective construction of identity" or whatever. That too it was awesome to be onstage, metaphorically or otherwise. That finally in performing and being seen, in writing and being read, there was something

vital we all hoped to share, some experience which ought not to be endured alone, some comfort in knowing that there were people out there who got it, etc. etc. etc.

Instead I said, "I want to build pyramids."

"Oh My God Holy Shit Me Too!" she said.

We pull into a Motel 6 somewhere in the middle of the Dakotas. It is late as hell and very dark. She alights from the Bronco and hands me my Safeway bag.

"Classy," she says.

"Yes ma'am."

We enter the lobby through one of those single-person revolving doors, which I succeed at navigating on the second try. Dakota flops down on this love seat that sits in front of a fake stone fireplace. Its fabric is embroidered with very red needlepoint, and precious puffy pillows nestle in the nook between the chair cushion and the armrest. She throws one of the pillows at me. I catch it and toss it back. I walk toward the marble countertop.

"Can I help you?" the woman behind the counter asks. A blank gold nameplate is pinned to the lapel of her shirt.

"Just a room for both of us. Single night. Can I ask when checkout is tomorrow?"

The woman looks at Dakota.

"Twin beds, definitely," I say.

She blinks.

"We're on a road trip."

Dakota has gotten up off the love seat and has perched her chin on the counter in front of the concierge. She is making faces at her reflection in the service bell.

"It's nothing weird or whatever," I tell the concierge.

"Um. We can't really rent a room to anyone under 21."

"I mean," Dakota says, and pulls out a wad of cash from her back pocket. It is a literal wad of hundred-dollar bills. Like you might see in a music video. A few stray Benjamins fall to the ground. Dakota leans over and picks them up. She licks the tip of her finger and begins to flip through her stash.

"I believe it's possible that we might be able to work something out," the woman says.

"Thank you *so* much," Dakota tells her.

She turns to me.

"Now," she says. "Mind taking my stuff up to the room? I need to run an errand."

"Sure," I say, and lean on the counter.

Our combined score on Expert is unbelievable.

I feel like I should be posting this shit to YouTube. We're something like 98% on Through The Fire And The Flames, and would be higher if the kick-pedal on this drum set wasn't sticking on every double-tap. My mind is blown. It is four or five in the morning. The lights are off. She is shredding the guitar so fast that I cannot differentiate the different colors on the screen. The thwop of drumstick onto panel sounds like the cleaving of meat. I slow. She flourishes. We finish. She is sweating.

"That was so good," I tell her.

Dakota's "errand" involved bee-lining to a Wal-Mart and investing in the Rock Band III Concert Kit, replete with guitar and drums and bass and microphone and swivel-stands for every single piece. By the time I got downstairs, she was trying to bull the entire set through the rotary door in one trip.

"Need help with that?" I asked.

"Nope. I got it. Yes."

Eventually we muscled everything upstairs, and Dakota rented out all the adjacent rooms "so we wouldn't disturb anybody." Then we started playing. This was roughly six hours ago.

"I am pretty sure that nobody on the planet except for Eddie Vedder should ever attempt Pearl Jam vocals," she says. She has ninjaed a drumstick from me and is scrolling through songs by tapping on the cymbal.

"Epic disagree."

"It's just kind of embarrassing."

"What, is this one of those karaoke rules like 'Never sing Freddie Mercury, because I promise, you can't?'"

"Sorta."

". . . but what?"

"It's like," she says. "Like he has *conviction*, like he knows something. He's certain. Give the man a megaphone or what-

ever. When anybody else does it, it's like they've read something on Wikipedia and are just parroting what they heard."

"Sheets of empty canvas."

"Oh good God no—"

"Untouched sheets of clay."

She throws a sock at me.

"So now you really know something about the human being Eddie Vedder, do you?" I ask her.

"You have got a point," she says.

Earlier I had bought, against my better judgment, a few of those little airplane-sized bottles of Merlot that they sell in hotel lobbies for exorbitant prices, and I reach back now onto the counter to nab one.

"You going to offer me one of those there, stingy?"

"Aren't you like four or something?"

"Hardy har," she says, grabs a bottle, and twists the cap off with her teeth.

Time slows. We power through four or five more songs, and it feels like I am suspended in the air. The depression of the keys and the thud of the drums and the hum of sound into the microphone all require zero effort. Our rhythm is fluid. When the guitar bits ease up she starts to hop up and down like Eddie Van Halen. At one point I jettison a drumstick and play the set with my hands like congas. Gradually the sun emerges. I realize I am beat. I realize I am spent. I tell her if she wants to play more she can be my guest but thank you very much ladies and gentlemen I am out of here. I fall directly from the stool onto my pillow.

She says, "Good job champ!"

She says, "No PJs?"

I am still wearing my pink Converse Chuck Taylors. I am still wearing my Warby Parker Langstons.

I say, "Don't need," and groan.

She tells me I am doing it wrong. She tells me cotton is comfy. She shimmies her butt a little. She grips the base of her shirt with both of her hands. Then in one brisk motion she turns as she pulls it up over her head, and briefly into my frame sweep a pair of perfectly-formed breasts, and I see her, and I see them, and then I see her back, and the sinews of her muscles look exactly like paths on a treasure map, and the

blades of her shoulders look exactly like the buds of angel-wings.

Then her pajama-shirt is out of her backpack, and it is on, and it is dotted with images of SpongeBob Squarepants, and the sleeves of the shirt dangle past her arms like willow fronds.

She looks over her shoulder at me, directly at me, and falls onto her bed.

"Good night," she says, and I sleep like something holy.

We hit the road late, like three in the afternoon, and she is driving fast. She is dogged. She is focused. She is determined to be somewhere. A silver Honda passes us in the left lane and we coast in its wake like the sidekick in a V of geese. The windows are down and the radio is blasting and both of us have said very little. Outside the sun burns hot and steady and casts no shadows on anything anywhere.

"This is a side of you I haven't seen before," I tell her.

"Hm?"

"It's like you're driving an ambulance."

Her hands clutch the wheel at ten and two, and she juts her head forward as she passes traffic like some kind of turtle.

"Oh no dude it's nothing like a thing," she says. "We just have to get to this place by sundown, right."

"Ah."

We blaze southward. After awhile the signal from the radio dies, and we turn the static down, and the whip of wind inside the cabin both feels and sounds exactly like the sensation you get inside your head when you wake up early on a cloudy day. She cranks up the windows.

"I would never, ever, have guessed that you were anything like this," I say to her.

"I'm not like this," she says.

I roll my window back down and stick my hand out the side and play with the wind. It tickles my fingers. She laughs and does the same thing. I turn my head to look at her, and at the exact same moment she turns her head to look at me, and we both realize that we both decided to look at one another at the exact same time, and we smile like idiots.

"D. Hey. At the hotel last night did you mean to, like—"

"Everything about me is deliberate," she says.

In retrospect I have no idea how it happened. Maybe a car stalled or the shoulder lurched or we just weren't paying a damn bit of attention, but at this very moment the world itself shuddered and a sound like the crust of the Earth collapsing ripped through my body and hung in my bones. All was motion. Colors blurred and spun. Glass became the absence of glass. Things made noises. Then my jaw snapped shut against its will and only then did I realize we were rolling, the Bronco tumbling along the highway like something extraneous, its metal bending into grotesque shapes, the passing traffic skittering like ants, searing sun ablaze, ground and sky locked in churning tango. My seat belt held me like a mother.

Then the tumult eases and although I throw up into my own lap and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and throw up into my lap again I am able take off my belt and kick open the door and exit the wreckage. I am crawling on all fours and a shoe has come off and I dry heave a couple of times and I say Shit and Fuck and Damn and I say Shit again to make sure and I wipe my face with the palm of my hand and simply do not believe that there is no blood anywhere, but despite all of that I am fairly sure my body works. No other cars look hit. The Bronco looks like abstract art.

I struggle to my feet and try an upright posture. My spine does not collapse. Traffic passes well to my right. I am alive. I inhale and exhale deeply. Then I see her, a fleck of blonde against the pavement, red and dusty, and I am running, I am sprinting, I am hurling myself towards her and skidding to a halt on my knees. I say Shit oh shit Jesus. She is not moving. I pat down about fifteen places on my body at once and find my cell phone and get out my cell phone and dial 9-1-1 and miss the keys and start saying things into the receiver well before I realize no one has answered.

Dakota spits. The wad of spit on the pavement is viscous and black and trails back to her lips. She rises into a push-up position. She shakes the dirt out of her hair. Well, she says. She coughs and stands and gets back down onto her knees and coughs again. She motions at me to put down the phone. I say, Are you serious? She says, Yeah, ah, yep, and puts her hands on her hips, and stares intently at the ground between

her knees. I say, For real, you're serious? Yeah, she says, I got this.

I sit down on the pavement. I wait. She makes a phone call. Thirty or so minutes later a car of people pulls up next to us and parks. They wear gray suits and hold clipboards. They talk to the police. Maybe an hour tops after that a Maserati Quattroporte swings by. It has a twenty-four pack of Mexican Coca-Cola in the back seat. Someone gets out, and Dakota and I get in, and it's right then that I realize I know precisely nothing about what it means to be Dakota Fanning, and I probably never will.

"So we're actually going through with this?"

"Dude. I took you on a trip, and we're going to finish the trip."

Just like that, we're on the road again. The sun is setting, but this Maserati breezes. I did not know riding in a car could be like this. It doesn't feel like there is any kind of relationship between the car's tires and the road below us. The best example is like a landspeeder on Tatooine.

"We survived," I tell her.

"Sure we did."

"Not even that beat up or anything."

"Not at all."

"Am I going to ever like see you or talk to you again or hear from you or whatever after this?"

She smiles at me. It's an honest smile. Of course she doesn't say anything. We drive and drive and drive. We talk about things. We agree that Scottie Pippin was incredibly underrated. We disagree over whether Massive Attack is overrated or is rather rated at exactly the correct point. I tell her without any ulterior motive, baggage, or awkwardness that she is very beautiful, and also that she is very talented, and that watching her perform makes me happier to be a human being, and helps me feel less fundamentally alone.

"Thank you," she says.

Eventually we take an exit. The orb of the sun sits on the horizon like one of the steel spheres David Bowie contact-juggles in *Labyrinth*. It is waiting to fall. Everything is very green. The pavement turns to gravel, and gravel to dirt, and

the road winds and winds and winds. I am conscious of the pace and depth and duration of my breaths. We pull over beside a nondescript valley nestled between four rolling hills. The road navigates the crest of one of these hills. We get out of the car. Dakota opens the trunk and pulls out a red and white checkered blanket.

"Follow me," she says.

I follow her. She strides toward the valley's center with big, intentional steps. She unrolls the blanket delicately atop the grass. She pats the blanket down and picks a stray blade of grass up off the blanket and tosses the blade somewhere else. She invites me to lay down. I lay down.

The sun has finished waiting. Its bottom half has dipped below the horizon and has spilled its egg-yolk-colored rays into the sky. Soon it will be dark. Soon it will be night. Both of us have our hands clasped behind our heads and we stare straight up away from the Earth. Dakota offers me a stick of Wrigley's. I decline. Your loss, she says. Close your eyes, she says. For how long, I ask. Until I say, she says. I close my eyes. I fidget. I stop fidgeting. The air is the perfect temperature. The pattern of our breaths is like a drumbeat.

Check it out, she says. I open my eyes. The valley is awash with fireflies. An ocean of fireflies. No way this is real. Down from the sky they descend like paper lanterns, drifting and aimless. They carpet the valley like a city seen from space. A natural phenomenon called something-or-another. The pulse of their rhythmic glow like newborn dawns. The surface of the valley like an infant daybreak. Continually they fall. All around us they fall. They fall on top of us. On our faces. I feel the click of their legs and wings upon my nose. I feel something against my hand. It is her hand. She seizes my hand. It is not remotely romantic. It is the clutch of a hand on something tall and drastic, a grip to avoid a massive fall. They have coated her like a shroud. They are as numerous as stars. The night is black like dying at her age. I look at her. Her face glows. Her face is light. All light. I feel her squeeze my hand. I squeeze it back.

"Be here," she says. "With me. Right here. I'm here."

Haley Norris

The Last Day

It's dark. The wind is chilly and the moonlight filters through the trees, casting shadows across my backyard. I step barefoot in the grass, branches crunching under my toes. I don't feel them break. The moon is pregnant, hanging low in the sky. I find myself glancing up at the Big Dipper a lot as I walk. I am covered in dry blood.

I'm numb. I should feel scared or mad or guilty, but I don't feel anything. I walk towards the shed, hook a finger between the wooden doors and pull it open. It shrieks loudly in the still Pennsylvania night air. I turn the spigot on and wash my hands with a bar of soap until they are raw.

I think about my mom, who always smelled like lavender and laundry detergent. I think about laying on the kitchen table with her, painting our nails, doing each other's makeup. I wonder if she is happy, if she is still alive.

I wake up early on the morning of my husband's sentenced execution.

The house is cold and quiet. I creep around in my socks, shutting all the windows. The wind chimes are chiming softly from the front porch, singing their own melody.

I get a skillet out and crack a few eggs over top of it, watching the yolk drip down slowly. I pour a cup of scalding hot, black coffee and smoke a cigarette. My hands shake violently, even though I feel calm.

The doorbell rings at 8:43 a.m. It is my husband's sister, Lauren. She looks like shit. Her green eyes are bloodshot and puffy and her black hair is tangled, hanging down her back. She hugs me, pressing her forehead against mine. "I can't believe today's the day," she whispers, her voice cracking in the middle. I pull away.

"I know. I have no idea what I'm doing," I tell her. My throat feels tight, like I'm about to cry. I swallow hard. "Do you want a cigarette?" I ask her and she nods.

The smoke alarms wail loudly, breaking the silence. I go

into the kitchen and take the burnt eggs off the stove. The room is full of smoke and Lauren coughs. My eyes burn and I blink quickly. I tell her I have to take a shower.

I stand under the water and let it spill over me. It is hot and I wrap my arms around myself, turning my face up to it. I think about when my husband Daniel and I first started dating, and how we would always shower together in the morning. He would pull the ends of my hair back and comb his fingers through it, washing the shampoo out. My chest aches and I press my thumb against my left breast, where my heart is, trying to focus on the beats.

When I get out I wrap a towel around myself and stand in front of my closet naked for close to an hour. What do you wear to go watch your husband die? My head spins from the effort of thinking. I feel detached from myself, as if I am watching someone else's life. I find a too-big, solid gray sweatshirt that still smells like him, and black leggings. I pull a hair brush through my auburn hair for twenty minutes before putting it up in a bun.

Lauren is sitting on the couch, surrounded by newspaper clippings. The first few weeks reported the story of a missing teenage girl, Savannah Lance, who had disappeared from her bedroom in the middle of the night. Her body was found on August 7th in a creek three miles away from her home. She had been stabbed over sixty times, according to the news reports. It wasn't long before the police connected her to my husband. He was her English teacher and there were rumors that something had been going on between them. He confessed on October 2nd and was arrested and later sentenced to the death penalty.

The clippings show a picture of Savannah. Her skin was pale and her eyes were round and dark. I have sat up many nights, unable to sleep, looking at her picture.

Lauren is sitting cross-legged, her brow furrowed. She looks up at me. "I can't believe this is really happening," she says. I have heard her say this many times now. I don't say anything. She lights a cigarette.

I choke down a granola bar, wash it down with warm water. It is tasteless and gritty. I think about how the State Correctional Institution Greene allows their inmates to have a

Last Meal of their choice and wonder what Daniel is going to choose. I think about our dating days, and how I used to find all kinds of unique, intricate recipes to try for him. His favorite was the lemon pasta with roasted shrimp and I learned the recipe without even glancing at it. Anything to impress him.

The SCI-Greene also allows me to visit with him for thirty minutes today before the execution, which is scheduled at 5 p.m. I am nervous about it. It has been over two months since I have last seen Daniel. He hadn't looked anything like the man I had been married to for eight years. He spent most of his time showing me his journals, which were full of poems. He told me that he had found God, a statement that I was sure was meant to piss me off.

"Tori?" Lauren is talking to me. I look up at her. She tells me she is going to go shower. I sit down on the couch and try to drift away.

The girl is covered in blood. I half expected her to be gone when I got back from cleaning myself up, an irrational fear that had spread through me about five minutes down the highway. She is lying awkwardly in the grass. I try to pick her up and she is dead weight. I end up having to drag her towards the car, stopping to take a break every few minutes.

It is past midnight. I had passed a cop on the way here; their blue lights had been on, causing my heart to momentarily fail. My shirt is damp and sweat drips into my eyes, burning them. It takes me thirty minutes to lift her into the trunk and when I finally get her in I sit down on the ground panting. I take the knife which is still wet out of my pocket and wrap it in my blood-soaked shirt before tossing it into the woods. A coyote howls somewhere in the distance.

We drive Lauren's car to the prison. She drives slowly, with both of her hands on the wheels and her knuckles bone white. I want to say something to her, to break the awkward tension between us. Sometimes, I think that she suspects what really happened, even though she has never said anything. I can feel it in the way she sometimes spit her

words at me, bitterly. As if she's saying, *'Fess up, you bitch.* Acting normal is harder than a person would think. You forget how to act normal when you have something to hide.

We pass through Washington County quietly, the trees one big mass of color. The sunlight blinds me. I think about the day that I first met Daniel. It had been at a bookstore. He was sitting at a round table, drinking coffee and reading Edgar Allan Poe. He wasn't exactly attractive, with a crooked nose and honey brown eyes that were too big for his face, but I still couldn't stop looking up at him. A few times I found him staring back over his thick-rimmed glasses. I finally took a deep breath and went to his table. He looked up at me and a smile played on his lips. "Can I help you?" he had asked, sounding amused.

"I was just wondering if you . . ." I had trailed off, feeling embarrassed. A blush crept up my neck and across my face. I thought about bailing, walking away before I made too much of a fool of myself.

"What's your name?" he had asked. His voice was warm, gravelly, and drop-dead sexy.

"Tori."

"Do you like Edgar Allan Poe, Tori?" He tapped his finger against the book. I sat down in the chair across from him.

"I like 'The Tell-Tale Heart.' I think that, you know, that kind of guilt would be huge. That it would be the closest thing to being insane," I told him. He nodded his head thoughtfully.

"I think that you're probably right," he said after a minute and then reached his arm across the table and said with the most dazzling smile, "By the way, the name is Daniel."

I drive down the road with the music on loud and the windows down. My head is pounding. The clock on the dashboard says it is 3:04 a.m. The devil's hour.

I park under some trees, facing the creek. I know that it won't be much longer before Daniel realizes I'm gone, if he hasn't already. He has always been a light sleeper.

The realization of what I've done is starting to sink in. I feel like crying but I tell myself I have to finish what I started.

I pop my trunk open and roll the dead girl out. She is already cold. I try to feel any pity for her, but I can't. All I can

think about is her hands on my husband, her lips against his neck. I could almost stab the whore again.

I drag her over to the side of the creek. My arms are tired from all of the pulling and tugging. I give her one good kick and she tumbles down the side of the hill and crashes into the water loudly.

Lauren and I pull into the prison's parking lot at 1:49 p.m. A little over three hours left until Daniel takes his last breath. I light a cigarette with shaky hands. Lauren starts to suck in her breath quickly, her eyes glistening. I grab her hand tightly and hold it. "It's okay," I tell her. She looks up at me sharply and jerks her hand away.

"No, it's not. It's not okay at all. They should have investigated it better. They should have done something else. Me and Daniel were so close and I *know* it couldn't have been him. He cried when our puppy got ran over. He would always move spiders out of the house instead of just killing them. He couldn't have killed that girl." She starts to sob then, her shoulders shaking hard. She presses her face into the steering wheel and cries loudly. I stare down at my own hands for a minute before getting out of the car.

I enter the prison slowly, stopping in the front room for a few minutes to let my eyes adjust. The lady at the front desk remembers me from before. She gives me a sad smile and slides me a pen so I can sign in. I go back towards the visiting room and sit down in the uncomfortable, plastic chair. The room smells like bleach.

Daniel comes into the room a few minutes later. His hair is long and scraggly and his face is ashen. He walks over to me fast and wraps his skinny arms around me, bringing my head to his chest. I lean in to him and start to cry. He pulls away just enough to look at me and uses his thumb to wipe the tears off my face. "Tori, baby, everything's going to be okay," he says in a low voice. He kisses my forehead gently and sits down, pulling me down beside of him.

"I don't know what to do," I tell him, feeling choked. He shakes his head and sighs. "Maybe I should just tell them, Daniel. I can't live without you. I can't keep living like this. I miss you."

He kisses me again, roughly on the lips. I pour myself into him, grabbing his T-shirt and pulling myself as close to him as I can get. He pulls away again and looks at me seriously.

"Don't you dare tell them a damn thing, Tori. We've talked about this," he says harshly, pushing my bangs out of my face.

I shake my head, feeling close to hysterical.

"I miss you so much, though. I didn't know. I thought you were with that girl and I should have asked you first, should have waited until I had proof. I didn't know. I'm so, so sorry." I bury my face in his chest again. He is a lot skinnier than he used to be and his chest is solid. He puts his arms around me.

"It's okay. I love you, Tori." He stops and then looks at me seriously, as if he has suddenly made a decision about something. "Listen to me, okay?"

I nod my head.

"I lied. About Savannah. About how there was nothing going on. I lied. Don't feel guilty, because I feel enough guilt for the both of us. That's why I'm here. That's why I have to do this."

I pause, surprised. I wonder if he is telling me this because it's the truth or for my own sanity. And then I think back to those nights where he didn't come home until late, stressed out, smelling of perfume.

I think of that and I think about how it doesn't matter now, either way. I decide not to think about it anymore.

He is quiet, then, just kissing my forehead and running his hands down my back. I keep my head against his chest where his heart is, and listen to his heartbeats, trying not to think about the second that they will stop. I study every little detail of him so I will have it in my memory later. I try not to think about Savannah touching him, laying her head on his chest. My throat is tight the whole time but I don't cry, for his sake.

I get home around four and see that the lights in the house are on. I panic for a second, sucking in short little breaths and scrambling to think of an explanation. Daniel walks out on the porch and waves me in, looking concerned. He is wearing a solid red T-shirt and boxer shorts. I take a deep breath and follow him into the house.

When he turns around and sees me standing there in

blood-caked jeans and a bra on he stops dead in his tracks. His eyes get wide and he moves over to me fast.

"Tori, what the hell? Are you okay?" His skin has turned white and he feels clammy. I feel brave, then. I feel like I can do anything.

"I killed your little whore. I hope you're happy now," I spit out, feeling wholly pissed off. He backs away from me looking stunned, as if I had slapped him.

"What are you talking about? You don't mean—" He stops and puts his head in his hands. His eyes are red as if he's going to cry. "Tori, I never touched her. What did you do to her?"

When our time is up Lauren goes in to visit with him. She is crying and her green eyes are glassy. I sit out in the waiting room, watching the hands on the clock turn slowly. I recite poems to myself aloud. I am itching for a cigarette but I think about Daniel in the next room over and I don't want to leave.

She comes out after a few minutes and drops into the chair beside of me. It is past four o'clock and I know it won't be long before they take him to the death chamber. The clock seems to be moving faster and faster.

She looks up at me, "I'm sorry for freaking out on you earlier. I know you're as upset as I am. Oh, Tori, what are we going to do without him?"

Her words cause a lump to form in my throat. I take her hand again—her fingers are double-jointed just like Daniel's—and blink the tears out of my eyes. "I honestly have no idea."

A guard comes out and takes us to the observation room, a small room with concrete walls and a window that can see into the death chamber when the curtain is open. There are no chairs. Savannah's mom and dad are there, too. I look away from them quickly. I can't see Savannah's round eyes in her mother's face, or the shape of her jaw from her father. I expected them to look smug, since they had been the ones to push for the death penalty, but they look sad instead.

Lauren and I are still holding hands when they open the curtain and let us see into the death chamber. They have

Daniel on the table hooked up to wires that are monitoring his heart and breathing. Leather straps keep his arms and legs restrained. Lauren sucks in her breath hard.

He sees us and smiles sadly. He looks calmer than I would have expected. I feel my heart breaking.

We sit on the couch together. Daniel tucks my bangs behind my ear and sighs. "I need to know what you did to her, Tori."

I am near hysterical. Fat tears roll down my face. I back away from him and wrap my arms around my knees.

"I stabbed her, Danny. What am I gonna do? I'm so fucked." I half scream at him, feeling like a bubble in my chest is going to burst. I shake violently.

Daniels jumps up and paces around the living room. He runs his hand through his hair. His brows are furrowed together. He stops moving and looks at me. "She was really young, baby. They may push for the death penalty."

I nod, a chill running through me. Daniel's eyes are red, like he's going to cry. He drops to his knees in front of me and grabs my arms.

"Listen, Tori. You didn't stab her. I did, okay?" He says it firmly, looking me straight in the eye.

"What? I don't understand."

"Understand this: You are seriously screwed if anyone finds out what you've done. She was a teenager, Tori. A kid." He drops his head.

They have Daniel hooked up to an IV machine. He looks scared and it breaks my heart. I lean my head into Lauren's shoulder. I want to hold him again and my arms literally ache from it.

I think about running into the room, screaming that they are wrong, that Daniel doesn't deserve to die for this. Lauren wraps her arms around my shoulder and digs her fingernails into the skin of my arm, leaving tiny white half-moon crescent shapes. She closes her eyes and starts to cry.

The executioner pulls a single vial out of a drawer The sight of the needle makes my stomach sick.

"Where did you hide the body?"

He asks me this using his teaching voice, as if he is asking the definition of a word. He rubs his thumb across the top of my hand slowly, back and forth.

I am unsure if I should trust him, then. I wonder if maybe he wants me to tell him so he can go turn me in. I shrug a little, flipping my hair over my shoulder.

"Tori. I have to know."

I am quiet for a minute, thinking. I decide to tell him despite my worries.

"In the creek. I hid her there."

He looks sad. He takes his shirt off and gives it to me. I put it on and curl up against him, pressing my head against his chest.

"I'm going to go to the Police station and turn myself in. All they want is someone to blame. If I confess, they won't investigate it any further than that. At least, I hope not." He says this robotically, without any emotion in his voice. He kisses the top of my head hard. I pull away from him.

"No. You can't do that. There's no way."

"You can't keep me from doing this, okay? I love you."

The executioner gives him the shot. He is looking at me the whole time. He mouths the words "I love you." I nod, registering his words and don't even have any time to mouth anything back before his eyes are drooping shut. His breathing slows and I can barely see his chest rise and fall anymore.

I walk out of the room before the heart monitors register his heart stopping. I find a bathroom down the hall and puke into the toilet, my stomach heaving even after it's empty. I lean back against the cool, concrete wall, put my arm across my mouth and scream into it.

Lauren comes into the bathroom a few minutes later looking pale. "He's gone," she whispers, pulling at her necklace. She gags a little, like she is going to puke, too, but she swallows hard and holds her head straight up.

We go back out into the hall. Savannah Lance's parents are standing there. Her mom walks up to me. It is the first time I have ever been close to her. She smells like raspberries. Her eyes look exactly like Savannah's, down to the slight tilt in

the corners. She looks me over before speaking to Lauren. “I am sorry that things had to happen like this. I always thought Daniel was a great man, and I just couldn’t believe that he actually done this.” Her eyes flicker back to me momentarily. “It’s sad that the people who act the most innocent are usually the guilty ones.”

Lauren’s eyes flash but she presses her lips together hard. My heartbeat quickens, hearing the hidden accusation behind her words. Lauren grabs my arm and pulls me down the hallway and out of the building.

Once we are in the car I think about how people say their lives always flash before their eyes when they die, and I wonder, in the last few seconds, if Daniel was thinking of me.

Contributor Notes

Eileen Arthurs' novel, "Sweetie-pie," won writer's billboard First Chapter Contest, May 2014. Her first novel, *Lorelei's Family*, is available for Kindle. "Investing in Plastic" appears in Sixfold Fall 2013. "Just Enough" is included in Carlow University's "Ten" anthology, available through Amazon. Eileen teaches writing at the Community College of Allegheny County. She earned her MFA from Carlow University and is a member of the Madwomen in the Attic and the Liars' Club.

Chris Belden is the author of the novels *Shriver* (2013) and *Carryon* (2012), and the short story collection *The Floating Lady of Lake Tawaba* (2014), winner of the Fairfield/New Rivers Book Prize. He holds an MFA from Fairfield University, and teaches writing at the Westport Writers Workshop and Garner Correctional Institution, a maximum security prison.

Daniel C. Bryant lives in Maine, in a community not unlike the one portrayed in his story. His poetry and stories have appeared in a variety of medical and literary magazines over the years; his novels have not fared as well.

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Zac Hill is the Chief Operating Officer of The Future Project, a columnist for the Huffington Post, and a former Lead Game Designer of the card game Magic: The Gathering. His work has appeared in numerous journals and literary reviews, including *The Believer* and *The Monarch Review*, and he has taught at MIT, The University of Washington, and Richard Hugo House. A 2008-2009 Henry Luce Scholar, Hill currently lives and works in Manhattan.

Amberle L. Husbands is a writer, sheetmetal mechanic, and native-daughter of the Okefenokee. Her short stories have appeared in *Shock Totem*, the Alchemy Press *Book of Pulp Heroes*, and on *Underground Voices*, along with other magazines and websites. Her first novel, *See Eads City*, is currently available for order through Amazon.com, as well as from

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KC Kirkley is a teacher, writer, and editor from Mendocino, California. His publications include a forthcoming short story in *The Los Angeles Review* and previous publications in *upstreet number nine* and Curbside Splendor (web). He is a contributor to and editor of *Curbside Splendor eMagazine* and holds an MFA degree from Spalding University.

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Gibson Monk was born in China and raised in Libya and the American South. He received his Master's degree from Boston University after studying abroad in Vienna and Jerusalem. His short stories have appeared in *Zahir* and *The Arkansas Literary Forum*. He currently resides near Fredericksburg, Virginia.

John Mort is the author of the novels *Goat Boy of the Ozarks, The Illegal,* and *Soldier in Paradise,* as well as *DONT MEAN NOTHIN: Vietnam War Stories.* He reviews for *Booklist* and the Vietnam Veterans Association. In 2013 he won a Western Writers of America Spur for his short story, "The Hog Whisperer." He lives in Missouri.

Nancy Nguyen grew up in Orange County. She is a recent graduate of UCLA with a BA in English. Her work has appeared in *Every Day Fiction*, *Westwind*, and *Livewire*. This fall she will be attending the MA in Creative Writing program at UC Davis. In the meantime, she works as an online salesperson and will start another draft of her middle grade contemporary novel.

Haley Norris I love to write and this is the first time I have ever tried to put my story out there for others to read. I am absolutely delighted to have it published. When I'm not writing, I'm reading or spending time with my husband and three beautiful kids.

Katharine O'Flynn lives in Montreal. Her work has appeared online in *CommuterLit*, *Persimmon Tree*, and *Circa*, and in print journals and anthologies such as *The Nashwaak Review*, *Canadian Tales of the Heart*, and *In Other Words, New English Writing from Quebec*.

Bill Pippin is a writing instructor with Long Ridge Writers Group and the author of *Wood Hick, Pigs-Ear & Murphy*. His short stories, articles, and essays have appeared in the literary anthology *Tattoos, The MacGuffin*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Newsweek, Field & Stream, Writer's Digest, Philadelphia Magazine, Delaware Today, New Mexico Magazine*, and many other publications. He lives near Silver City, NM, with his wife Zona.

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J.S. Simmons was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts. He left for New York at the tender age of 21, stayed there, marrying, divorcing, and generally behaving as though a magical combination of booze, blow, and hateful women were the cure for all human ailments, until his heart and soul were thoroughly blackened. Now he lives in Oregon, teaching and writing.

Kyle Valenta received his MFA from Columbia University in 2013. He was a finalist for the 2013 *Arts & Letters* prize and his work can be seen at thethepoetry.com and forthcoming in *Secret Behavior*. He's an avid traveler who works in publishing and is currently completing his first manuscript: a story of travels in Argentina and India, chronicling encounters with Brazilian escorts, false holy men, wayward musicians, drug addicts, and Tibetan lamas in the Himalayas.

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