

SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2015



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Paul Heinz

I, Monster

In all the years my mom sat by my bedside reading books I was much too old for—short, pleasant stories about dogs and kittens—she never once mentioned my father. Not even on accident. Early on, when I asked about him, she'd only say, "That's behind us now. Let's look to the future." I didn't understand then what that meant, and even now I don't understand how she was able to move on from nearly ten years of trauma. I can't seem to move on from any of it.

I saw the pictures online. I've got a monster's cold, blue blood pulsing through my veins.

It's hard to know who is and who isn't a monster until he slows his Chrysler LeBaron alongside you on your walk home from school, but I'm always on the lookout. There aren't many suspects at school. Most are ordinary teenagers: emotional, insecure messes, but nothing that cries out, "future kidnapper, rapist and murderer." Some of them know my story and therefore want nothing to do with me, some know my story and want to play the hero, learn all the gory details and tell me that none of it matters (which is of course bullshit), and then there are those whose instincts I admire the most—the ones who don't know my story at all but who stay away from me just because I'm me: a fucked up girl with ghostly skin, hand-me-down clothing and a "remarkably unpleasant disposition," as Mr. Erickson said to me one day after physics class when he was trying to get through to me for my "own good."

Mr. Erickson is an asshole, but he isn't a monster. He doesn't fit the profile.

If I had to guess, if I had to pick the one guy in school who might be a monster, it would be Jeff Jeffries from physics class, where he sits for the entire fifty minute period saying nothing and peering at Mr. Erickson as if he's fantasizing about torturing him. Also, his first and last names are variations of each other, and I never trust anyone with similar first and last names, or worse—identical names. Humbert Humbert is

not a role model, even though all the perverts around me have read the pertinent pages over and over, and in U.S. history I learned about Sirhan Sirhan, a non-fiction asshole. But I could never trust someone named Mike Michaels or John Johnson or Larry Lawrence. I won't even listen to the music of Phillip Phillips.

My last name is my mom's last name now. It used to be Samuels.

Jeff Jeffries has said one word to me all year, which is one more than I've said to him. The word was fuck.

The reason he said fuck to me wasn't because he was calling me a fuck or saying he'd like to fuck me. Mr. Erickson (whose first name is not Eric) had just handed us back our midterm exams, and while I was trying to decipher why he'd taken two points off my answer about a car decelerating from fifty to twenty kilometers per hour, I noticed Jeff Jeffries studying his exam with more angst than usual, which was quite an accomplishment. I turned to look at him, and he turned to me, his face almost hidden behind his crazy long hair, and he said, "Fuck." I found this funny, so I smiled, but he didn't smile back. He almost never does, because his smile is lopsided; he was mauled by a pit bull a few years ago and now his left cheek—which looks like a roadmap even after countless surgeries—can't move the way his right cheek can, hence the long hair.

I think if Jeff Jeffries had a different name like Jeff Meyers or Jeff Parsons or something I could probably engage in a conversation with him that lasted longer than one word. It would probably happen gradually and build from "fuck" to something like "holy fuck" to "what the fuck?" to "fuck, this class is boring," and before long we'd be conversing in something close to legitimate sentences.

I've overheard some of the biggest losers in our school talking about going online to see the photos of Jeff Jeffries from when the *Tribune* did a piece on him about his accident and how his injuries affected him. These are the likely same assholes who've read in intimate detail my story. They probably get off on it, the sick fucks.

I'm the same age now as my mom was when she was taken away. The same age she was when my father locked her in

the basement of his rundown ranch, the one set back from the road just enough to remain hidden from prying eyes. My mom's thirty-eight now. It took him three years to impregnate her, and from what I read online he tried every night except during my mom's period. That's 280 times a year. My mom had sex 840 times by the time she turned twenty-one. My mom was *raped* 840 times before I was born and I don't want to think about how many times after.

I used to tell my mom that I missed my father, only I didn't call him father back then; I called him Daddy. Daddy was kind to me. He would play dolls with me, he'd let me win at Candyland, and sometimes we'd go into Mom's room—which I've learned since was actually something called a cage—and we'd play the game together. Even now, I really miss him sometimes, but I've learned not to tell my mom because I'm sick of talking with psychologists. What they don't seem to get is that monsters can be kind when they want to be, and my father used to treat me to ice cream and let me watch *Beauty and the Beast*, and I was allowed out in the yard to play, but I was never, ever to set foot beyond the trees where I could be seen from the road. "The Beast will find you and eat you," he warned. "Not the Beast from the movie who's really a nice man inside, but a horrible beast who eats little girls for breakfast and leaves their bones to remind other girls to beware."

I believed Daddy. He showed me the bones.

Even though I loved my father, when they came and took my mom and me away when I was six, I could sense that we were being rescued, and I remember feeling safer when it was just the two of us. She no longer flinched every time a door opened. She was able to enter and exit her room freely instead of having to ask, and her room had walls instead of bars. She no longer told me to run up to my room the way she did when my father came home from work, when I'd caress my Pooh bear in my bed for thirty minutes and hum loudly to block out the sounds from below before joining them for dinner.

On a gloomy Tuesday afternoon after an endless day at school, I begin to walk home, something I've been doing lately despite my mom's insistence that I take the bus. I'm

tired of everyone's eyes fixating onto the freak girl sitting alone in the front seat, and on the roadway I look like any other 17 year-old girl who could use a new wardrobe. No one stops to stare. About a half a block ahead of me is Jeff Jeffries, who often takes the same route I do, though we've never walked together and we've never said a word to each other about it.

I continue along the sidewalk, my mind nowhere except my kitchen where Ramen Noodles await my attention, when a car jolts me out of my mediation and whizzes past me at a crazy speed before stopping abruptly alongside Jeff Jeffries. When I notice a car, I notice everything about it, a skill my mom taught me at a young age. This one is a blue Chevy Blazer, license plate 189-NE12. I hear a man's voice saying something through the passenger window, and Jeff Jeffries stops and says something back to him. I notice another guy in the car's back seat, which worries me, so I yell, "Hey! Hey, it's me from physics class," careful not to say either of our names out loud. My mom taught me that, too. And as Jeff Jeffries turns to glance at me from inside his hooded sweatshirt, the Blazer takes off, burning rubber along the way. He stays planted in place along the side of the road, his hands stuffed inside his jeans pockets, until I catch up to him.

"You okay?" I say.

"Huh?"

"The man who just spoke to you? What did he say?"

"Why the fuck should you care what he . . . ?" He stops, and then with recognition adds, "Oh. Right. No, that's not what was happening."

"Oh. Okay, good. Stopping cars freak me out."

His hair covers his face, but I see his lips move and say, "Shelby, right?"

"Right. You're Jeff Jeffries."

He nods.

"I hate physics," I blurt out, recognizing that we've just added exponentially to our past conversation.

The right side of his mouth curls ever so slightly into a half-formed smile. "Yeah, well, I'm not exactly acing the class. Erickson is a douche."

"He says I have an unpleasant disposition."

He smiles bigger now, so that his left side looks like it's trying to catch up to his right side. "He told me I needed to lose the chip on my shoulder."

"What did you say?"

"I told him to put his face inside a pit bull and then we'd talk. What did *you* say to him?"

Now I wish I'd told Mr. Erickson to save the advice until his mother's been raped 840 times by his father. "Nothing," I say. "I just wanted to get the hell out of there."

We begin walking home, and I wonder if Jeff Jeffries isn't a monster at all, but just a kid who wants to be left alone and remain insulated from the Mr. Ericksons of the world. Still, when he asks me if I'd like to go to his house, I say no thank you. I don't know who this boy is, and he still kind of scares me. He fits the profile. So after a while, we diverge, Jeff Jeffries veering left into his neighborhood, me veering right, and when I get home, I revel in my sodium fix of Ramen noodles and watch two episodes of *How I Met Your Mother* before a shrill beeping noise blares from my cell phone. It's an alert from my school district about a child abduction.

And then I remember the car.

"Oh fuck!" *Please, please, please, please, please, don't let it be the blue Chevy. Please don't let it be . . .*

I check the announcement, and my insides sink as I read the description of a teenage boy and a blue SUV, and it isn't five seconds later that my phone rings, my frantic mom on the other end. I tell her that I'm okay.

"Then why are you crying?"

Am I crying? "Mom. I saw the car."

"You what?"

"I saw the car. It slowed down by a boy from school and then took off."

"And you called the police, right?" I hear her taking a breath. "Right?"

I hadn't. I hadn't even thought about it. All I'd had on my mind was Jeff Jeffries and his potential status as a non-monster and food and relaxation and . . .

"Did you at least get the license plate number?"

Wait . . . I had. I had. It was . . . what was it? "Um . . . wait, let me think . . . 189 . . . um . . ."

“Shelby . . . think!”

“NE12! 189-NE12!”

“Shelby. Listen to me. Call the police immediately. Do you understand?”

I give a pitiful cry of yes.

“I’m leaving work right this second. Call them, now!”

Call them, now! Her words reverberate inside my skull as I make the call to the police and blurt out everything in a long run-on sentence in between gasps for air, blubbing incoherently like an idiot. *Call them, now!*

I’d heard these words before, and as I lay in a ball on the couch weeping, wishing I had done the right thing and wanting desperately for Mom to arrive, broken fragments of recollections erupt inside me, unannounced and unwanted: an old flip-phone left carelessly on the dryer in the basement. Mommy pleading me to pick it up. *Call them, now!* But there’s danger in what she’s saying. Daddy will recognize his mistake and come back, and when he notices I’ve touched his phone, he’ll be angry. He’ll take me out into the yard where The Beast lives past the bones. *Call them, now!* I pick up the phone, but I can’t do it. I throw it toward Mommy, where it bounces off the bars of her room and drops to the floor in front of her, and I run halfway up the stairs in tears before I hear her cry her name over and over into the phone, revealing what I’ve never known and what I don’t entirely understand. *My name is Darcy Moser. My name is Darcy Moser. I was kidnapped by a man named Sam Samuels in September of 1995 in the town of Phillipsburg on the way home from school. We are on a back road somewhere I believe in Webster County, in a three bedroom ranch, locked in the basement. I’m with my six year-old daughter. I can’t stay on the line. I’m sure he’s on his way back home. Come quickly!*

Come quickly, come quickly. I’m back on the couch, waiting for my mom to come home from work, and by the time she does I’m inconsolable, unable to utter a word of comprehension as I wonder about the damage I’ve done. She hugs me tightly and says, “You did it. My brave, brave girl.” But I am not a brave girl. I’ve got a monster’s cold, blue blood pulsing through my veins. After all, what is a monster but someone who thinks of no one’s interests except her own? While I was eating Ramen

Noodles and watching an episode on Netflix, thinking not a bit about what had happened to the car whose license plate I'd memorized, a boy was being shoved into a blue Blazer.

Except—I come to learn over time—the boy hadn't been shoved. He had gone willingly.

And his name was Jeff Jeffries.

More and more facts are revealed and more gossip spreads around school over the next few days, and I learn that when Jeff Jeffries's father came home from work early that day, he saw what appeared to be his son getting shoved into a car by two men and called the police, prompting the school district to send an alert. But his son had actually gone into the Blazer by choice; he knew his abductors, only they weren't his abductors: just sick fucks who pay for sex, and Jeff Jeffries was a boy who got paid for sex. Thanks to a phone call by someone who caught the car's license plate number, he's now back home and safe.

Safe, sure. But still messed up.

My mom says I'm brave for having helped a troubled boy out of a troubling situation. She says that in my short seventeen years, I've saved three people: Jeff Jeffries, my mom and me. But I don't feel the least bit brave, and I don't feel like anyone's been saved, least of all me. I know I'm beyond saving.

My brave girl. I'm six again, identifying the man I call Daddy for the police. He looks sad and tired, and I want to give him a hug and tell him about how I beat Mommy at Candyland three times in a row, but Mommy says I can't talk to him now, that the police need to see Daddy alone. I never see him again except online where I study photographs of him sometimes, and they fill me with conflicting emotions, both haunting and happy. I've told myself a thousand times that I need to face him to move on, to somehow find a way to weave through this wicked world without hiding any more, but I've never even had enough courage to talk to my mom about it, much less go through with it.

Jeff Jeffries doesn't return to school the following week, and I wonder if he'll ever come back. I feel ashamed for not having made the phone call as soon as I got home, or for not going with him to his house or asking him to my house instead. It's my fault things turned out the way they did, and

things were hard enough for him at school before; now they'd be impossible, with or without the long hair to hide his scars. I try to put myself in his shoes, but I don't know what I would do in his shoes except hide away, and that's exactly what he appears to be doing. It's also what I've been doing for over a decade.

I decide to use physics as an excuse to knock on his door one day after looking up his address in the school directory. He lives in a nice home, a well-kept Cape Cod with painted shutters not even half a mile from my own, and when I knock and his father answers and lets me in, I'm relieved that someone else is home. I tell him that I've got his son's physics homework in case he wants to catch up.

"Thank you," he says, and he puts his hand on my shoulder, but not in a weird way. It feels more like the touch of a man who's run out of ideas and feels helpless to do anything for his son: the boy whose life took a sharp turn toward insanity the day he rode his bike into a neighbor's driveway to turn around, only to be greeted by the jaws of a pit bull.

Mr. Jeffries points to a door and welcomes me to knock, and though I do, I feel uncomfortable about it, like I'm invading his private space. "Come in."

I inch the door open and say, "Hey. It's me, Shelby, from physics class. I've got your homework. Can I come in?"

"Sure."

I don't want to go in. The room is dark with the shades down, but I can make out Jeff Jeffries sitting on a chair in front of a laptop, motioning for me to sit down on his bed. *Be brave*, I tell myself, and I place the physics homework on the bed and sit down. I wait there for a moment, neither of us saying anything, before I finally blurt out, "Mr. Erickson is being even more of an asshole this week, so be glad you're . . ."

"You made the call." It's not a question. "To the police, I mean."

I nod and whisper "yes." He doesn't move, and though his long hair covers up most of his face, I can see his eyes, and I can't tell what emotion they're revealing or hiding, but I'm guessing anger.

"Please don't be angry. My mom called me after the alert and I . . ."

Jeff Jeffries pushes himself off the chair so quickly that I flinch and make a motion toward the door until I realize that he's only reaching for a lamp switch, and he then pulls his hair away from his face, revealing the wound. It really isn't so bad. I mean, easy for me to say, I know, but there's a pink line etched into his face that extends from his upper lip to his eye, with three sharp lines breaking off from the main one, and they don't scare me.

Jeff doesn't look angry. He doesn't look . . . *anything*. With his hair still pulled back, he steps toward me, crouches and kneels down so that his face is lower than mine, and slowly, apprehensively, leans in and presses his face against my chest. Instinctively, I place my cheek against his hair, and as we wrap our arms around each other, I can hear his words, soft and muffled, an almost silent whimper against my sweatshirt, "Thank you."

I hold him until it's dark outside, and though I know my mom will be filled with worry, I tell myself I'm not going to let go until he's ready. And I feel that maybe, just maybe, when he's ready for me to let go, I can begin to let go as well.

Absolom J. Hagg

Someplace South, Anywhere Warm

When things between Claire and me started going south, I bought her a puppy, a purebred Golden Retriever. Even at the time, it seemed like a foolish thing to do, but when you're losing your grip, you'll do just about anything to dig back in. Claire named the puppy Lucy, and she really took to her, let her sleep in bed with us, taught her all the tricks, even talked about breeding her and having litters of puppies running around the yard. For those first two years, it almost seemed like my mad grasp had worked.

When Lucy turned two, I started looking for sires. It took me about two weeks of searching to find the one I wanted—a beautiful, thick-coated, rust-colored Golden named Erik the Red. It cost us four hundred bucks, but if everything had worked out, we could have sold those pups for at least five hundred each. Claire seemed disinterested in the search, almost uncomfortable, and now I think I know the reason why. It served to mark two years of make-believe.

I was able to persuade Claire into coming with me to the mating. Lucy sat with her head poking through from the backseat, and Claire rested her hand on the dog's head. As we turned onto Highway 61, the lake cold and blue on our left, Claire spoke.

"A strange thing," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Dogs and sex. They don't have much say in the matter. We either cut them when they're young or force them together." She scratched Lucy behind the ears. Lucy wagged her tail.

"And just look at how much happier they are than us."

"Who put happiness at the top of the list?" she asked.

I understood what she meant, but it annoyed me just the same. That was Claire. Nothing was ever just a joke. It's one of those traits that I found endearing when we first met but since has only caused me frustration.

When we arrived at the breeder's, Claire waited at the car while I led Lucy to the kennel. The breeder took her from

me and brought her to a large pen where our stud waited. The act itself was quick and almost violent, and when the sire dismounted, they remained stuck together, hind-quarters to hind-quarters. I resisted the urge to pull them apart, but they both had pleading looks on their faces. The whole procedure—I couldn't think of it as anything else, especially after what Claire said—took about thirty minutes and was a thoroughly unpleasant experience from where I stood. The breeder asked if I wanted to bring her back in a day or so, just to make sure, but I told her we'd just wait to see if this one took. Next to me, Lucy pranced and wagged her tail. Before I could open the door to let her hop onto the backseat, Claire knelt down and pressed her face to Lucy's and kissed her on the forehead. On the ride home, she rubbed Lucy's belly, and we didn't speak.

Two days after the breeding, Lucy went missing for the night. She slipped past me as I opened the door and ran off into the woods. I chased after her and called her name, but she disappeared into the tree line. I stood there yelling until my voice went hoarse.

Inside, Claire sat at the kitchen table, ensconced in a book. I sat down across from her.

"Lucy got out," I said.

"What're you going to do?"

"Call John."

"She'll come back on her own." She reached across the table and grazed my hand before pulling back.

John Maki was the local vet and the pastor over at Bethlehem Lutheran. I'd met him winters ago, found him passed out in his ice-fishing shack on my way out to drink whiskey and fish in the dark. The door to his icehouse had blown open, and I saw him slumped over the hole. Too many nips from the blackberry brandy he used to stay warm. I shined my light on him and saw that the fingers on his left hand had frozen to just past the nail and turned black. Doctor down in Duluth did his best, but dead flesh don't come back, even for a man of God. He lost his fingers at the first knuckle. But John still ice fishes and still drinks his blackberry brandy, and I bring a flask of whiskey, and we talk about the weather and our women and the way jobs keep bleeding south.

“It’s a migration,” he’s said more than once. “I’d go, but I’m too old. North Shore’s not fit for dogs, much less people.”

That’s what I liked about it. But I didn’t buy his line. People’ll always keep spreading.

I disagreed with John when it came to humanity, but he was a damn good vet. I doubt the doctors over at Lakeview Clinic treat their patients with as much respect as he showed my dog.

“She’ll come back on her own. They get a little restless when they’re in heat,” John said when I asked about Lucy.

“What Claire said.” It bothered me a little that she had been right.

“How is Claire these days?” John asked.

“Couldn’t say.”

“If you two want to come in and talk to me.” John wasn’t one of them proselytizers, but he always thought he could fix things on faith. I preferred to fix things with my hands, but I have to admit, I was stumped as to how I could work that on my wife.

“I’ll stick with your vet skills, Pastor Maki.”

I stayed up all night drinking coffee and cursing, waiting for Lucy to scratch at the door. At two in the morning, faint yowling sounded from the forest. I scooted out the door to the edge of the trees and called for her again. When my fingers cramped from the cold, I went back in to boil another pot of coffee and to empty my bladder. Claire never once came down to coax me into bed. At the time, I thought she understood my stubbornness. Now, I think she was just happy to have the bed to herself.

Lucy came trotting out of the woods with the sun. Mad as I was, I still held her and told her, “Good girl.” After that, I didn’t sleep well. Any movement or sound she made in the night woke me. Claire retreated even further. It began with her leaving for work before me and staying later. One morning she said, “I wake up every time you go check on that damn dog,” but that was all she said. We didn’t have dinner together as often. She spent much of her time in the bedroom, or on the porch, reading. I noticed but pretended it meant nothing.

I began showing up to work bleary-eyed and ashen. The guys gave me hell after I told them why. Called me bitch.

Leonard even sent me home one day. Said I was liable to lose a finger if I couldn't keep my eye on the sawblade.

I never told Claire, but the pregnancy terrified me. Sad as it was, an expecting dog was my initiation into fatherhood. I'd always wanted kids, but Claire kept pushing back. And now we were pushing against the time when we were just too old. Her reasons were sound enough—money, time, the stress of another body filling up the space in our lives. Probably the smartest decision she ever made.

John told me to relax, that Lucy was healthy as could be, but I still spent many nights kneeling next to her, running my hands through her thick winter coat. She lay on the birthing bed I'd made for her, an old wool blanket wrapped around some pillows, and I'd set my head gently on her belly and listen to the pups' heartbeats. They were fast and out of rhythm.

I spoiled her, too. At the end of the fifth week, I bought T-bones and cooked them rare. Claire didn't like them so bloody, and she ate only a small portion. I gave the rest to Lucy, who gulped it down in three bites and then cracked the bone and ate it as well. I ate mine slow but left hunks of meat clinging to the bone and set it in her food dish.

About this time, Claire began sleeping on the couch. It happened without comment from either of us. I'm not even sure she planned it. Maybe one night she just fell asleep there and when she woke, realized she wasn't going back. We perfected the practice of living in the same house and leading two different lives.

At nine weeks, Lucy's belly was round and full. She wolfed down bowl after bowl of food and plodded around the house. I ran my hand along the skin of her gut. It was tight and pale and felt thin. I shined a flashlight to it, thinking I might see the pups squirm inside. Her abdomen glowed red, and I traced a spider web of arteries and veins with my finger but couldn't see into the blackness of her womb. She stared at me with dark eyes and whimpered. At least five times a day, I led her outside to relieve herself. Her belly hung off her like a wet sack. I worried it would split and spill her pups into the snow.

On a Thursday, during the tenth week of Lucy's pregnancy, snow filtered down out of a low sky. Lucy yelped and yowled all afternoon. The pups' shapes pressed against her skin when

she moved. Claire paced through the house for awhile, then closed herself in our bedroom. I knocked on the door.

“What’s wrong?” I asked through the door.

“Just a headache. What’s wrong with Lucy?”

“Think she’s ready.”

“Call John, then.”

I stood at the door awhile without saying anything. I heard her breathing through the wood and couldn’t help but think of her laying next to me when we were first married, her breath warm in the curve of my neck.

An hour later, I stood at the bay window in the front of our house, and headlights crept up my driveway, illuminating thick, white flakes. John stepped out of his jeep, went around to the back, and pulled out a black doctor’s bag. He shuffled to my front door through the thickening drifts. I met him there.

“Sorry it took so long,” he said, shaking snow from his head. “Really coming down.”

“Wasn’t even supposed to snow today,” I said.

“Weathermen. Ha.” He smiled. “How’s she doing?”

“Same. Not happy.”

“Let’s take a look.”

I led him through the living room and downstairs to the basement. Lucy raised her head when she heard us, let out a short yowl, and laid her head back down.

“Been wailing like that all afternoon,” I said.

John knelt on the concrete floor next to her. He placed a short-fingered hand on her belly and whistled.

“Lot of pups in here,” he said over his shoulder. He scratched Lucy behind her ears. “She needs some help.”

He reached into his black bag and pulled out a syringe, a handful of needles, and a small glass vial filled with a clear liquid.

“This’ll get her going.” He unwrapped a syringe, popped a needle out of its plastic wrap, and locked them together. “Hold her head?”

I knelt and placed one hand on Lucy’s neck and one on her muzzle. Her breath burned hot in my palm. “Didn’t know doctors still carried those little black bags,” I said.

“We’re a dying breed,” he said. “Hold tight. She may jump.”

He sunk the needle into Lucy's hip. She yipped but didn't move. "Good dog."

Lucy quieted some after that. Claire came to the landing, sat on the top step, and asked how things were going. We told her fine, and she asked John about Susan and about the church, then thanked him for coming by and went back upstairs. An hour passed, then two. A chill seeped into the basement. John and I settled into our familiar icehouse banter.

"How's the mill?" John asked.

"Talking about more layoffs, but what's new. My job's safe enough for now." I didn't know if that was true, but I'd stopped worrying about it a long time before. Jobs up here were steady until they weren't, and there wasn't much you could do about it.

"How's the church?" I asked.

"Didn't get into it for the job security, but it's one of the perks." He reached over and rubbed Lucy's nose.

Lucy panted fast and shallow. Her belly stretched larger.

"Here they come," John said.

The first pup slid out, a slick orangish lump. Lucy licked it clean. Then another and another. She cleaned them each as they came. Five more pups, all more or less like the first. Then out dropped a pale ball, the color of birch bark. I stared, not comprehending, and looked at John. He laughed.

"Mixed litter," he said.

"That's possible?"

He nodded, and I remembered the night Lucy had tramped off into the woods and not come home until dawn.

Four more pups after the surprise, all golden. I felt the proud papa, and already worried about taking care of the little things, worried that I wouldn't know how to watch over them, how to keep them safe.

That night, I fell asleep next to Claire, her back to mine, but woke in the middle of the night. I got up off the bed, and Claire let out a small murmur but didn't wake. I went down to the basement to check on the litter. All dry now, they laid in a heap against Lucy's belly. The white one sprawled on top. She opened her tiny mouth in a yawn. I wrapped my hands around her and lifted her to my face. She sniffed at me and suckled the end of my nose. I pulled her away and set her

down, next to the other pups. She climbed back to the top of the pile.

During the next two weeks, Lucy barely left her bed in the basement. Her hair came out in clumps, which John said was normal but still scared the hell out of me. While the pups nursed, I sat and stroked her neck. This was where I was when Claire left. It was undramatic. She told me she needed a break. I said ok. She said she would be at her sister's. I nodded. She said she was sorry. I said nothing. I couldn't move from my spot next to Lucy. As much as I'd like to call this strength or stubbornness, it really boils down to shock, though I'll admit to a sort of pride in it. Nothing I said could have made her stay anyway.

The pups grew, and the white one began to stand out. I wondered about her father. I named her Gypsy, the only one of the pups I gave a name. She looked like a Golden, but her snout was longer and her white coat coarser. On top of that, she was larger and faster, and quickly asserted her dominance. All the pups tugged and tore at each other, but Gypsy wrestled each into submission. She stalked from pup to pup and pinned them between her paws. They whimpered and laid their heads down, and she bounded away. The other pups soon quit challenging her. When they were out in the yard, the litter followed her around like a school of fish. She cut through the snow, and the other pups mimicked every turn.

Gypsy led her little pack but also spent more time near her mother than the others. They nursed and then weaned and then spent most of their time clumped together. Gypsy slept with her head pressed into Lucy's belly and, when she wasn't tormenting her brothers and sisters, followed her around the yard. If another pup approached, she chased it away.

John stopped by a few times to check up on me and the pups. He kept asking me to come out to the icehouse, and I kept refusing. John said the dogs would be all right on their own for an afternoon, and I believed him, but I still couldn't leave them. With Claire gone, there was no one to watch them but me. I offered John pick of the litter, but he snorted and said he had enough animals to deal with.

At six weeks, folks came to look at my batch of Golden. I

kept Gypsy hidden, stashed in the upstairs bathroom. I knew that people would want her most. She whined and scratched at the door. After the people left, their new pup howling and barking, I'd find her sitting, head cocked to one side, questioning.

On more than one occasion, I picked up the phone to call Claire at her mother's but never dialed. I'd just slam the phone down and set myself to one chore or another. It's easy to mask fear with fury.

March faded to April, and I still had two Golden pups left. One I gave to Leonard, who said he needed a watchdog. I tried to tell him Golden will play fetch with anyone with a stick, but he just laughed and said all dogs know to protect their master.

The last I gave to a young girl driving to Duluth from Canada. She was pretty. The wind pressed her shirt to her chest and whipped her long brown hair back and forth. I felt like a fool talking to her, old enough to be her father. She wanted to pay, but I wouldn't let her. While she held her pup and soothed it, she told me she was a student at the U and her family lived in Thunder Bay. After college, she wanted to move someplace south, anywhere warm. She said that when the world ended it wouldn't be much different from a northern Minnesota winter. When she left, I watched her car until it passed over a hill and out of sight.

Then it was just me and Lucy and Gypsy. The rest of the spring was quiet. Each cool, April day blended into the next. After work, I fed them and let them off their chains. They trotted around the yard while I carried the last of the firewood or pumped well-water. Some days, when they tumbled and played, I jumped in and wrestled them to the ground. After dinner, I tossed them scraps. As the sun went down, I sat on the porch and called to them. They came running from the trees or around the corner of the shed, Lucy in the lead, Gypsy loping close behind. They'd lie down next to my chair, heads on their front paws, and we'd sit still into darkness.

Twice, Claire left messages telling me she'd be stopping by to pick up some stuff. You'd think the woman could have gotten all of her stuff in one shot, but she dragged it out over months. Looking back, I'm sure I missed something there.

An opening. An offering. At the time, it just made me mad. I made sure to be gone, and when I came home stalked through the house, dogs at my heels, building a mental list of everything she took. It's strange what you miss when it's your spouse making off with it, not to mention what hurts when you discover she left it behind. I didn't give a damn about the old photos, but I went through the house top to bottom when I couldn't find the cutlery set we'd gotten as a wedding gift, a set so garish we'd never even used it. And when I saw a book I'd given her in passing still on the bookshelf, I threw it in the trash out of anger.

John continued to come by. He said that now that the pups were gone, he wanted to check on me, see how I was doing on my own, but I think Gypsy drew him. He followed that dog around like he was attached by a string. There were times I felt a twinge of jealousy when watching them play tug-of-war or fetch.

Claire called a couple more times, but I was in no mood to clear the air between us. I'd spent too many nights imagining her happy. I couldn't handle the image of her on her own, making it clear how little she ever needed me. Summer moved to fall, and we didn't speak once. What I've realized since then is that it's still a choice when you make no choice at all.

When she stopped by in mid-September—no phone call, no warning—to pick up the last of her things, I said hello, and went to the shed. The metallic smells of winter were faint in the back of my nose. I watched her through the small, streaky window. She moved back and forth between the house and her car. I saw her with things I considered mine but said nothing about it. I couldn't stand the thought of confronting her because I knew I would spill out more than I wanted. Even when our marriage was solid, she hated it when my emotions took over, good or bad.

When she finished pillaging, she came to the shed and poked her head inside. I kept my back to her.

"I'm done, Robert," she said.

"Get everything?" I asked.

"All the stuff I wanted."

I looked back over my shoulder, tried to look angry.

"I want you to keep Lucy," she said and put her hands behind

her back, twisted at the waist, like she used to do when she wanted me to do her a favor.

I turned around and faced her. "That's a kind gesture."

"I'm just trying to make peace." She stepped inside.

"Then peace has been made."

Neither of us said anything for a moment, and I hoped she would just leave. But she stood there, giving me that look that said she doesn't think I'm able to take care of myself. That look that makes me wonder if I am.

"The white pup sure turned into a beauty," she said.

"Thanks," I said. "I spent a lot of time fixing her up."

Claire laughed at my absurdity, and so did I.

"Robert Larsen, dog mechanic." She smiled, but there was more than a little bitterness in her voice. With that, she turned and walked out of the shed. I almost followed her, almost grabbed her around the upper arm to stop her. I don't think it would have done any good, but I guess I'll just have to keep guessing about that.

John came over that night with a bottle of whiskey. We sat in the dining room and talked. Lucy lay under the table as we drank. For once, Gypsy didn't lay next to her, but paced back and forth in the kitchen until I got annoyed and shouted at her to go lay down. She tucked her tail and plodded into the back porch.

"Claire get the last of her things?" John asked.

"And some of mine."

"Are you planning on fighting over it?" He poured whiskey into my glass.

"What's it matter?" I took a long swallow, drained my drink.

"Can't say I like the attitude, but you got the right idea. Let it go. It's just stuff."

I leaned forward, poured myself another glass. "What would you do if Susan left?" Even half-drunk, this felt like a dangerous question, but John smiled.

"First, I'd have to figure out how to tie my own shoes again."

I laughed loud, the alcohol taking over, and Lucy hopped up, startled. Gypsy poked her head around the corner. I called to them both, and they came to me. Lucy laid her head on my leg. Gypsy nudged her way between us, so I grabbed her collar and pulled her around to my other side. I petted

one, then the other, enjoying the feel of their soft coats in my hand, thinking that these dogs might be enough. John spoke again.

“Honestly, though, I’m afraid I might just fade away.” He held his whiskey against his cheek, shortened fingers gripping the glass. I scratched my dogs behind the ears, and Lucy sat up and put both paws on my lap. I pushed her down.

“Sorry,” John said. I shook my head. We changed the subject and finished the bottle. A bright moon rose, clouds covered it, and a freezing drizzle fell.

It got real cold, real early that year. Two days before Halloween, a blizzard came charging out of the west, lightning flashing across the sky and thunder rumbling in the low bellies of the clouds—something I’d never seen before, or even heard about, in a snowstorm. I left the dogs inside when I left for work.

Most guys had called in sick. Their trucks didn’t start, or the roads were too icy. Leonard and I spent much of the morning doing inventory and routine maintenance on the machines, stuff that would get done during the normal cycle of the mill but was a good way to pass the day. After our morning break, I cut a few planks just out of routine. Leonard and I talked some. He told me I was right about Golden’s not making great watch dogs but he’d never had a dog so loyal. Mostly, though, we worked in silence, and I thought about Claire, about how, on days like this, I never went to work when it was the two of us. We’d both call in, stoke the fire, and curl up under a blanket on the couch, watching movies, or reading, Lucy buried at our feet.

On my way home from work, snow fell through my headlights in dizzy patterns. There were empty cars in the ditches, and it took me a good hour to get home, but I felt happy and calm for the first time in months. It came just like that. I turned up my driveway, following the twists until it spilled out of the trees. I parked and walked through snowdrifts to the shed, where I filled two pails with dog food, still feeling that lightness that comes with emancipation.

As I carried the pails into the house, Gypsy sneaked past me. She took off into the woods, running at full speed, blending into the new snow. I dropped the pails, made sure

Lucy couldn't get out behind me, and stepped out onto the porch. I yelled Gypsy until my voice shivered and broke. It had stopped snowing, and the air was dry, like salt in my throat. Spittle froze and cracked at the corners of my mouth.

When I knew she wasn't coming back, I went inside and peeled off my coveralls. Sawdust spilled from my hair. Grease and mill-sap invaded the crevices in my hands and the pits of my elbows. A quick, hot shower would've washed it all away. I threw on layers of clothes instead. Two pair of wool socks. Long underwear, plain old waffled thermals, top and bottom. Over that, a pair of fleece-lined jeans and a wool sweater. Back downstairs, I loaded into my thick, goose-down parka. Even with it unzipped, sweat beaded on my forehead. Lucy followed me around while I dressed, and whined the entire time. When I was ready, I stood with the door open, trying to decide whether to take her with me. I worried it might be too cold for her, but, in the end, I let her outside because I didn't want to be alone.

With my stocking cap pulled down to the ridge of my brow and my parka zipped up to the spongy tip of my nose, I slipped my hands into a pair of choppers and plunged outside. Ice seared the back of my throat. I buried my face deeper in the upturned collar. The wind scoured tears from my eyes and froze them on my cheeks. I took heavy steps over the snowdrifts until I got to the semi-shelter of the trees. Lucy ran on ahead but stayed in sight.

Gypsy had always stuck close. When we were outside, she might disappear on her own for a few minutes but usually came back before I even thought to call for her, and always came running when I did. I couldn't figure what had changed.

Once we got between the trees, Lucy ran out of sight, but it didn't worry me. We were in it together. For twenty minutes, I trudged uphill to the stream, calling Gypsy with no luck. As the word passed my lips, the trees knocked it down, and the icy air swallowed it. Long shadows sprawled out on the forest floor, black on white. Numbness tingled in my feet. I pictured them dead-black, like John's fingers. The only sounds were the wind in the trees and stream water flowing over rocks and small ice-floes. Everything else was muffled by the snow and cold. I called Gypsy again, but my voice scratched. Felt

like my throat had been sanded away. I came to the stream and sat down on a large granite slab on its banks. The cold crept through my layers. The woods were dark. I stood and shook my head to break the daze. My toes had lost all feeling and numbness seeped into my hands. It was at this moment, when I didn't know whether to go on or turn back, when I was either going to have to piss myself or risk frostbite, that a bark cut through the dusk-light.

Rigid muscles cramped as I jogged alongside the stream. I heard another bark, and saw a golden patch in the darkness. Lucy limped around the base of a tree, foreleg tucked underneath. She stared up into the tree and barked again. I didn't want to scare her or whatever she had treed so I kept my steps slow and quiet. Gypsy was nowhere to be seen.

When I reached Lucy's side, she sat, like she knew I was there all along, but never took her eyes from the tangle of branches. In the tree, there was a shape, movement. My hand rested on Lucy's head, and I felt a sticky wetness. The tip of her ear was gone, and a red streak of blood slashed across the back of her neck. I pulled her away from the tree, yanked hard on her collar. At first, she wouldn't go, and let loose a flurry of barks. Whatever was up there scrambled higher. I pulled again, and this time she turned away and limped along with me. I didn't want to leave Gypsy out in the cold, but I knew I could stumble through the woods all night and never find her. Lucy was here, and hurt, and I needed to get her home. I called Gypsy's name as we walked and hoped to see her come running, but she never did.

Lucy couldn't cross the stream without getting wet so I carried her. It felt good to have her heft and warmth in my arms. I kept her there until we got home, and she didn't struggle once. Even in that bitter cold, sweat soaked through my shirt and matted my hair.

Under the kitchen lights, I cleaned and dressed Lucy's wound. The creature had torn away a jagged piece of flesh. She whined some as I worked, but didn't twitch even when I scrubbed the dirt out. Mostly, she just looked at me the way dogs do, the way you often wished people did.

While I worked, I forgot about my own pain, but once I finished, I shivered and couldn't stop. My feet were numb so I

pulled off my boots and socks and held my toes in my hands. When that did nothing, I went upstairs, filled the tub with cool water, and submerged my feet. Sharp cracking pains ran along the bone. I prayed they weren't frostbit. I thought of comparing shortened digits with John. While I sat there, I worried. Outside, the wind pressed against the windows and intricate patterns of frost grew out from the corners. Gypsy was a good dog, a smart dog, a tough dog, but all that didn't amount to much in this cold. Mostly, though, I was angry. Angry at her, yes, but more angry at myself for leaving her out there, for what I hadn't done.

A sharp tingle leaked into my heel. Sensation bled into my toes but not warmth. I emptied the tub and dried off my feet. I dressed in long underwear and wool socks, hefted my parka over my shoulders, slipped on a stocking cap, and went to sit on the porch. I shouted Gypsy's name into the cold, dry air.

I thought about picking up the phone to call John, to call Claire. I wanted to ask John what he felt when he knew his fingers were lost and maybe even to pray for Gypsy. I wanted to ask Claire when she knew we were done. Instead, I called to Lucy. I wanted to head back into the woods and find my other dog, but for the moment I needed warmth. She came and burrowed at the bottom of the chair, where I buried my feet beneath her.

As I sat there, a memory came to me from the first year or so of my marriage, when I still believed we were happy, long before the dogs entered our life. I had awoken in the middle of the night, frightened and disoriented, flat on my back, sure that something awful and irreversible had taken place while I slept. Claire lay with one arm draped over me, our bodies clinging with surface tension. She shifted in her sleep and pulled me closer. I slipped my arm beneath her and held her tight, and a strange thought came to me, a strange way to keep her safe. I wished that she loved someone else, that she was laying in another bed, next to another man, holding him the way she held me. And I wished that I loved another woman, even though I couldn't possibly see how.

Valerie Cumming

Among These Very Trees

“All narratives, even the confusing, are implicitly hopeful; they speak of a world that can be ordered, and thus understood.”
Lucy Grealy

Later, looking back, they would talk about the camping trip as the night that Lynda Greenway was lost. To their parents, to police and reporters—later, much later, to their own spouses and children—they would describe Lynda with this one word, *lost*, as if she had been misplaced somewhere and was waiting, patiently, for them to find and retrieve her.

It implied accident, and mistake. A lack of intention. A blip in the natural, intended order of things.

Only with each other did they sometimes use a different word. That word was *taken*. Taken by what, they didn't know. Yet time and again, it was the word they returned to. It was the word that implied guilt, and intention, and fault.

It was the word that seemed the most true.

Every autumn, for six years in a row, twenty members of the junior class of Centerburg High School went camping: twenty students, led by Mike Newman, the school's Biology and Life Sciences teacher, for three days, in the woods twenty miles east of town on land rented from the local Girl Scout council. After the first year, Lucy O'Dell, who taught English, came along too, as a result of complaints from the parents of some of the female students that it was inappropriate to send their daughters out into the woods all weekend with only a male chaperone. The weekend of the sixth and final campout, the earth was dry and hard and brittle, scented with rotting leaves and the ever-present autumnal tinge of smoke. In the day, the sky glowed a brilliant, cloudless blue, still warm enough for shorts during the few hours each day when the sun was directly overhead and not broken by the trees into shadow. By mid-afternoon, however, it had slipped low enough in the sky that its light filtered through red and gold leaves, so that the woods, during that magic hour, shone

like stained glass. But the shadows in the woods were always long, and it was into these shadows that Lynda Greenway disappeared.

The female students who had once been Girl Scouts themselves and knew the woods showed the others where to find the best tucked-away hidden spaces: pockets among the trees where you could smoke a cigarette or two or let your boyfriend lower you down into the dried and crunching leaves without anyone—even Mr. Newman, with his legendary outdoor skills—finding out. Year after year, the girls taught their classmates how to jimmy the lock on the pool house, and told stories about the old hermit who was rumored to be living in the hills and who was blamed whenever a bag of chips or a two-liter bottle of soda went missing without explanation. They pointed out the secret places where they had marked their territory as children by carving with pocketknives into the rotting wood frames of the bunks: names usually, and the occasional peace sign or smiley face, and on one bunk, inexplicably, the words *Batman was here*. Lynda Greenway herself had once, when she was eleven years old, carved a single “L” into the wood of the cabin wall itself, just below the window frame, where it was partially hidden by a ragged curtain that looked as if it had been made from a recycled dishrag.

Years later, after Lynda was gone and the annual campouts discontinued, groups of students still made their way out to camp and busted through the padlocked gate. For years, rangers found empty beer cans and condom wrappers littering the floor of the cabin where Lynda had stayed as a girl, where her single carved initial remained. It was as if—the rangers told police—the kids needed to get a look at that L, even the ones who were younger and had never known Lynda to begin with; it was as if they needed the proof that she had ever really existed in the first place.

Mike Newman grew up a Boy Scout and had studied, for a time, to be a naturalist in the National Park Service, before getting married and shifting gears to teach high school science instead. A year before he proposed the idea

of the campout to the school board, he had agreed to lead a teacher in-service entitled “Disaster Preparedness,” which turned out to be the best-attended session of the semester, despite the fact that, as a few of his resentful colleagues pointed out, it had no direct relevance to teaching itself, or to the science curriculum. Mike showed his fellow teachers how to create a disaster kit out of an empty Altoids tin, and how to start a fire with nothing but a piece of flint and some twigs, and the seven steps to surviving a zombie apocalypse; he even demonstrated a few of his jujitsu moves. At five feet and barely seven inches tall, Mike Newman modeled, before a room packed with nearly fifty of his colleagues, how to put six-foot-two-inch assistant principal Bruce Foster into a sleeper-hold, releasing him just before Foster would have lost consciousness and slumped into the podium.

It was the first time during any in-service that anyone could remember that the participants actually stood up and clapped for a speaker, and after that day, it was said, Mike Newman could have proposed a field trip to the moon, and the school board would have happily written the check.

His rules for the campouts were simple: Safety first. Stay within the boundaries of camp at all times; take a buddy with you to the latrines, especially at night; no long hair or loose clothing near the campfire. No climbing trees taller than six feet, or taking the canoes out without an adult; no drugs, booze, cigarettes, or sex, though it was said among the students that both Mr. Newman and Ms. O’Dell had had a habit of turning a blind eye whenever a boy snuck into the girls’ cabins after dark, or one of the girls snuck out of them. Fighting was forbidden, though it had happened a few times in the past, and then parents were called to come to camp to retrieve the offending students.

Later, of course, it came out that Mike Newman had confessed to smoking pot regularly, even dealing it a bit in his youth, but that he had not been high the night of the campout: had, in fact, never been high or even intoxicated, had never even so much as smoked a cigarette, at any school function of his career, on campus or away from it. Transcripts of court hearings and depositions also tell of how Lynda’s friends, once they realized that she was actually missing and not just

playing a game, ran to Mike Newman's tent for help, and found him missing as well; and that when he was eventually located, it was in Ms. O'Dell's cabin, despite the fact that he was a married man, and that when he emerged into the frigid night, he did so while still buttoning up his shirt.

The rumor was that Lynda herself was drunk the night of her disappearance: that she'd been drinking steadily from a bottle of rum hidden in her luggage ever since she and her friends got off the bus. There were those who said she could barely even walk the wooded paths without stumbling, that she dropped her flashlight twice, that she shivered uncontrollably. But such a bottle was never found, and without proof, these are only stories, passed down by word of mouth. It is possible that her level of drunkenness was exaggerated, or invented altogether. Like so many of the facts surrounding that weekend, they were left behind in the woods with Lynda herself: lost or taken, though the difference, in the end, matters little.

Lucy O'Dell was the one responsible for keeping track of the food, and was the one who noticed first whenever any of it went missing. She stored it all in the picnic shelter next to her cabin, in sturdy eighteen-gallon plastic totes with a brick placed on each one to keep critters out. The morning of Lynda's disappearance, while Mike took a dozen of the students fishing—those who weren't too hung over from the night before, or too squeamish about baiting their own hooks—Lucy, rummaging through her coolers and bins to prepare breakfast, noticed that a significant amount of food was missing: three bags of jumbo marshmallows, several cans of fruit cocktail, a package of turkey dogs, and an entire loaf of bread had somehow vanished in the night.

"The hermit," Mike joked when he got back from his fishing trip and she pulled him aside to tell him the news; he laughed about it, and touched her face, and after a moment, she laughed too. There was still plenty of food, after all; they would hardly go hungry. It was only later, after Lynda was gone— vanished, or taken—that Lucy thought again of the missing food; and by then, in light of all that had already been lost, it seemed too trivial a detail to mention.

In a twist of fate that later became a cruel irony, Lynda Greenway's mother had made a career for herself writing stories about missing and murdered persons. Elizabeth Greenway grew up on Cape Cod and chronicled the deaths that had occurred there in the past fifty years, explained and unexplained, in three volumes of books which, while they didn't exactly make her a household name, nevertheless cemented her as a local celebrity on the East Coast. Each summer she left Lynda and her sister at home with her husband and travelled to bookstores in Falmouth and Hyannis and Provincetown, where she would give readings and autograph copies for her fans. *A Haunted Land*, the books were titled: difficult to locate in Ohio, but front and center on the shelves of just about any guest house, gift shop, or museum on Cape Cod.

When Elizabeth Greenway's daughter went missing herself, the books gained a brief cult following in the Midwest. People interested in the case of Lynda's disappearance perused the volumes again and again, searching for clues hidden among the stories of mysterious shipwrecks and unidentified women found dead in the dunes. The English teacher who replaced Lucy O'Dell at the high school even taught a semester-long course on the books, entitled "Haunted Places," before parents complained and the class was removed from the roster for its "inappropriate content" and "poor taste."

Those who read the books called them beautiful, like love letters, filled with melodious descriptions of the changing light in Truro, the expansive Wellfleet moors, the shifting sands and tides of the Outer Cape. They wondered what life had been like for Lynda, growing up with a mother who was so often absent or distracted, whose mind and heart were thousands of miles away. It was possible, some theorized, that Lynda's disappearance was a fake, that she'd staged it herself as a way to finally gain her mother's attention. Even as weeks and then months went by, and this scenario began to seem less and less likely, there were still those in town who whispered to each other behind closed doors that disappearance was the next logical step for a girl who had never truly been seen at all.

Going through Lynda's things revealed nothing out of the ordinary. In her duffel bag were three T-shirts, two hooded sweatshirts, long johns, three pairs of underwear, two bras, an extra pair of jeans, and a zippered pouch containing her toiletries and a pack of filtered cigarettes. Under the bed she had lined up neatly her creaking shoes and her rain boots, which meant that she must have been wearing her canvas tennis shoes when she disappeared, though of course everyone already knew that from the police report filed by her friends, the ones who were with her that night.

On her pillow was a flowered case, the pink roses muted and pale with age. Her sleeping bag, by contrast, was obviously new, practically shining, with a smoothly-working zipper and no frayed edges. Plenty of the students had brought along fancy equipment—battery-operated lanterns, water purification disks, unbreakable silverware, towels that folded up to the size of a dollar bill—but Lynda had brought only a flashlight, which they assumed had disappeared with her too until it was discovered two weeks later by one of the search parties combing the woods: its batteries dead but still fully functional, which seemed, to the cold and weary searchers, like a positive omen.

Those students who believed that Lynda was still alive and hiding out in the woods somewhere wanted to leave her things as they were, on the chance that she would wander back for them; it was late September, after all, and the nights were getting colder. She would need the expensive sleeping bag with its strong zipper and thick quilted lining just to survive. But the police were adamant, and the items stopped being Lynda's possessions and became evidence: like the woods itself, and like all of them who had been there that night, who had witnessed it all, and yet somehow seen nothing.

The game had been Lynda's idea. Hide and seek in the woods, by flashlight: four of them followed her, stumbling on the paths, tripping over dead wood, laughing and shushing each other, to the abandoned, weed-choked archery range, the trees so high on either side of the meadow that they left only a narrow rectangle of sky in between. They thought, clicking off their flashlights, that they would be left in utter darkness;

but there was the brightness of the moon to consider, the orange haze of the nearby highway in the distance. Grayson counted first; through eyes that looked closed, but were not really, he watched the others become blur, become shadow, as they dashed across the meadow and vanished into the trees; later, he would not be able to say for sure which blur had been Lynda, or which way she had gone. He only knew that, after he found the others, they called together for her for nearly an hour before they gave up, flying down over the same paths back to camp, falling on roots, bloodying chins and elbows; he remembered that the girls were crying, but wasn't sure if he himself was.

When they found Mr. Newman's tent empty, he'd had the sudden, gut-wrenching fear that all of the others had packed up and left them, that the four of them were all who remained, the victims of a cruel practical joke, until one of the girls suggested that Mr. Newman might be with Ms. O'Dell and they found him there, his eyes—caught in the beams of their multiple flashlights—wide with fear, buttoning up his shirt, pulling on his vest and boots, grabbing his own light and following them back out to the trail, although it had been Lynda who led them before and they argued now over which path was the correct one, wandering blindly until they somehow, through fate alone it seemed, made it back to the archery range. Grayson said that he half hoped Lynda would be sitting there in the middle of the field when they returned, laughing at their panic, at Mr. Newman's hastily-buttoned shirt shoved haphazardly into the waistband of his jeans; if he'd found her there, he told police later, he would have killed her and cried with gratitude at once. But she was not there, of course. Not in the clearing, and not in the woods that surrounded it, hidden away in a hollow log or tree trunk. Nor, as the weeks went by and rescue teams searched the woods, did they find her body; she had simply vanished. Lost or taken, the friends whispered to each other, shivering at the fate that was so nearly their own; though even they knew that the things they called it were only words, and didn't make much difference in the end.

Once, when Mike Newman's youngest daughter, Ruby, was three, he lost her.

They were fishing out at the pond near the high school, he and Ruby and his older daughter Amy, and he was watching the way the spring breeze shifted the pattern of sparkles on the surface of the water and thinking of Lucy O'Dell when he glanced around suddenly and noticed that he could no longer see Ruby. "Where's your sister?" he asked Amy, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Don't know. Maybe she went into the woods to pee."

"You didn't see her go?"

"You didn't either."

He looked around for her fishing pole but that was gone, too. It seemed unlikely that she would take it with her to pee. Like an icy, burrowing insect, the thought entered his brain that it was possible that she hadn't gone missing after all, possible instead that she had slipped from the bank and drowned, had seen a silver flash of fish and leaned over too far to graze it with her fingertips.

True, there had been no splash. But wasn't that what everyone always said about children drowning: that it wasn't loud like the movies, that the victims slipped beneath the surface and sank like a stone, silent, with very little ability even to struggle?

When he cupped his hands around his mouth and, in desperation, bellowed the girl's name, he was shocked by how far his voice carried. How it reverberated off of trees and sky like he was the last remaining person on Earth.

When he found her—and of course he found her—she had only gone as far as the clump of daffodils under a tree at the edge of the woods a dozen yards away. She looked up in surprise when he called her and said, "Daddy, where *were* you?"

As if it was he who had been lost, and not the other way around.

Nearly a decade later, he would have that same feeling again on the night he was summoned from Lucy O'Dell's bed to find that Lynda Greenway, one of the girls in his care, had gone missing in the woods during a game of hide and seek. It was the feeling that Lynda was the one found, and that it was

he, somehow, who had become lost and alone in the woods.

The difference was that this time, no matter how long or loud he called, no matter that he destroyed his vocal cords to the point that he couldn't speak above a whisper for days, she never answered.

The night of September 25—two weeks after Lynda Greenway's disappearance—the temperature in outlying rural areas dropped to forty-eight degrees; by the end of that week, the average low hovered around forty. On the morning of October 3, the town woke to the first frost of the year. Those who knew of the case, which would have included nearly everyone within a fifty-mile radius, turned their eyes up to the wooded hills surrounding the town, commenting to each other that the curtain of reds and golds to which they had become accustomed had now become bare, frozen, almost threatening.

They tried not to think about Lynda.

They wondered if they would ever again be able to look out at the hills and think about anything other than Lynda.

The early frost killed the apple crop and decimated the pumpkins; jack-o-lanterns that Halloween were so rotted and caved in on themselves that they could barely stand up enough to hold a candle. Still, though, it didn't snow, which everyone agreed was a blessing; the handful of local men who still dressed and drove faithfully to the woods each morning to search were able to carry on their mission of hope or stubbornness.

Snow did not fall until the second week of November: a light dusting that silenced the rush of cars on the nearby highway and clothed the dead lawns in a white carpet. But the silence felt less cozy than foreboding; with it, the last of the search party abandoned their hope and stubbornness and stumbled back home from the woods, empty-handed once again.

As weeks passed, stories were born and died again, some with more staying powers than others. A student came forward who claimed that he had seen Lynda and Mr. Newman emerge together from one of the supply closets a week before the campout; another said that Grayson had been witnessed

threatening Lynda in the school parking lot the day they left.

It was Lynda's younger sister, Jo Ann, a freshman, who first came forward with the story that Lynda was pregnant at the time of her disappearance. By then, Lynda had been missing for eight weeks, the rescue effort called off with the first brittle November snows. Everyone blamed the story on the delusions of a bereaved sibling, until Jo Ann produced Lynda's diary, which had been hidden in a shoebox on the top shelf of her closet and, until then, overlooked by the sheriff and his deputies, who had combed the house for clues a week after Lynda's disappearance. She had written in the diary all about buying the test, and taking it, and watching the little pink plus-sign appear in the stick's transparent window; she wrote that Grayson was going to kill her, if her parents didn't do it first.

It was the kind of thing any sixteen-year-old girl in her predicament might write—words of panic, not to be taken literally—but it was enough evidence, in the sheriff's opinion, to revisit the case. Grayson Scholl's neighbors were no strangers to police cars on their street—Mr. Scholl was well-known as a drinker who had once wrapped the family's pickup truck around a telephone pole—and so they thought nothing of it at first, when the line of cars with their flashing red and blue lights made their way down the familiar road to the house, until the deputy knocked on the Scholls' front door and returned, almost instantly: not with the man, but with the boy.

According to the police report, Mike Newman and Lucy O'Dell and their students had spent the day canoeing on the lake; Mike was a certified instructor, and except for the usual horsing around by the kids, nothing unusual had taken place. After canoeing, after rest, they began plans for cooking dinner, and sent the students into the trees for kindling and tinder. It was five o'clock, the sun already dropping quickly behind the trees; in another six hours, Lynda Greenway would be gone.

For one semester, in the spring of her sophomore year, Lynda Greenway had been Mike Newman's faculty assistant.

Each day during her free period, she came into his lab to help him grade papers or set up for the next day's lesson. They didn't talk much; Mike preferred to work silently, and she didn't appear to have a problem with that. He noticed that she was a nail-biter; grading papers, she would sometimes chew her nails down to raw, bloody stumps. According to her permanent record, which he retrieved from the office, the nail biting had been problematic since elementary school, when one of her teachers had recommended that she see a therapist for anxiety; but the elementary school guidance counselor, a sixty-year-old man, had determined that nothing was the matter. She was simply a girl on the edge of her "change," he wrote—something that every girl could be counted on to deal with in different, sometimes odd or antisocial, ways.

By the time that counselor retired and a new, more competent one instated, Lynda had already graduated to the middle school, where teachers had more significant habits to watch for in their students, like cigarette smoking and bulimia. There were girls who drank in the morning on their way to the school bus stop, girls who smoked a joint each day on the way home, girls who carved messages into their arms with the sharp metal points of the compasses from the geometry classroom; there were boys who punched each other black and blue behind the movie theater, and girls who starved themselves or threw up every meal, and boys who drove too fast, who came home late or not at all.

Lynda kept her grades up, the high school counselors said later. She stayed out of trouble—out of big trouble, anyway. It seemed silly to get worked up about something as harmless as nail biting.

Her beautiful hands, Grayson Scholl cried when he was called back to the police stationing for questioning, in the days after Lynda's sister had uncovered her diary. He stared at the ceiling, witnesses reported, to hide his tears. *Her beautiful, fucked-up hands*.

Once, Mike Newman caught the girl watching him. He was preparing slides for the next day's lesson, placing an eyedropper-full of water between two thumbnail-sized pieces of glass, and when he looked up, she was staring at

him, chewing on her hands in the way he'd grown used to and come to expect.

"You look sad," she said, cocking her head to one side as if studying a specimen. "Were you thinking about something sad?"

And Mike Newman, who, up until that point, had been thinking about nothing more significant than finishing up quickly so that he could beat the student traffic out of the parking lot and get home to his wife and girls, surprised himself by saying, "I suppose I am a little bit sad."

She nodded, as if this did not surprise her. The thoughts in his head now, the thoughts that had come rushing in, as they did a thousand times a day, whenever he completed whatever task immediately engaged him, were of Lucy. He thought of touching her face, of smelling her hair. But Lynda Greenway didn't ask him anything further. If she had, he would have said, "It turns out I'm not the kind of man I thought I was." But she didn't ask, and only returned to her work, which was grading a stack of multiple-choice midterms he'd given earlier that day to his Life Sciences class; and eventually he returned to his work as well, until the bell rang and they said goodbye and she left, and the moment, no matter how many times he went over it in his mind later for clues—for evidence—was gone forever.

There were those who said that you could hear a baby crying out in the woods at night, if you were quiet enough, if you listened hard enough. The nearest houses were ten miles away, on the other side of the highway; there was no chance of such a sound carrying that far, even on the clearest night. For a while it became the thing to do, after the Homecoming dance or Prom, for couples to drive out to the now-abandoned campsite and make their way along the overgrown paths, listening for the cry of Lynda Greenway's lost baby in the woods.

Grayson Scholl, for his part, was one of the few who stayed away. There was something wrong with those woods, he told anyone who would listen, until everyone got bored of the tragedy and started to move on to talking about other things again. *You couldn't get me back into those woods again if my*

life depended on it.

Still: couples kept going out to the camp and returning with their stories of a crying infant in the woods; until the sheriff, under pressure from local parents, finally agreed to investigate. For two weeks, after the first thaw of spring, the sheriff and his deputies and a massive team of volunteers once again combed the hundred acres of the camp and the woods beyond it. For those few weeks, there was something in the air in town that was almost like excitement; wives again took to waking early each chilly dawn to pack tomato and cheese sandwiches for their husbands, wrapped in waxed paper, with a Diet Coke and a bag of chips; each evening, when their husbands came home empty-handed and without even the faintest sliver of news, their wives picked their filthy, sodden clothes up from the floor of the bathroom and washed and dried them and laid them out so that they would be ready to wear again the next morning.

By mid-April, the sheriff had once again called off the search, chalking the noises up to what he liked to call “group hysteria.” With the search parties called home, the woods became once again a place of mystery, impenetrable. Evil, some people called them.

Lucy O’Dell, looking out at the trees each night from the window of her new apartment, knew better. She knew that nature was only a backdrop, after all, and not to be blamed for what had happened in its midst.

The word she thought, when she looked at the woods, was not *evil*.

The word was *indifferent*.

In July of the following year—twenty-two months after Lynda Greenway’s disappearance—one of her shoes was found, sunk in the dirt and half rotted, less than a hundred yards from the cabins where Lynda and Lucy O’Dell and the other girls had slept.

By then, the camp belonged to a local church; the Girl Scouts, unable to convince parents of the safety of sending their daughters to spend their summers in the woods where Lynda had disappeared, had finally given up and sold it to the church, which used the campgrounds as a place for retreats

and marriage-encounter weekends. The shoe was found by a couple out for a walk during a break from a session. At first there was some doubt about whether or not the shoe was even Lynda's to begin with. It was a cheap canvas sneaker of the kind that had been trendy a couple of years earlier; any number of girls camping that weekend might have been wearing the same color or style. Its advanced state of decomposition made it impossible for the forensics team to determine anything other than that the shoe had been in the woods since the previous autumn, roughly the time of Lynda's disappearance. Still, the search opened anew: a dozen or so local men once again donned boots and gloves and returned to the woods, linking arms and combing the same patch of ground they'd been over dozens of times before, with renewed hope this time that any number of clues could lie just beneath their feet, hidden beneath a year and a half's worth of decomposing leaves and loam.

It wasn't good for the church's business to have the sheriff and his team traipsing through the woods, every shift of a tree branch a constant reminder of the unsavoriness of all that had happened there in the past. Eventually the church, too, was forced to abandon the property, and this time, when the camp closed, it closed for good.

“Tell me now,” Lucy O'Dell said to Mike Newman ten weeks after the girl disappeared, the one time they agreed to emerge from their own self-imposed exile long enough to meet for a cup of coffee. They chose a popular, well-lit spot, one where they were sure to be seen together, and sat on opposite sides of the table, careful not to touch, though by then, neither of them had any particular desire to. When Lucy spoke, she leaned forward a little; in response, Mike turned himself a bit away. “Tell me right now if there was anything going on between the two of you, please,” she said. “I, of all people, have a right to know.”

When the first snowfall of the year came, Mike Newman watched it from the window of his new apartment, the one he'd moved to after his wife asked him to leave and he no longer had the heart to argue. The apartment was really

a townhouse, with two small bedrooms upstairs for his girls, who were supposed to stay with him on the weekends but were teenagers now and so often busy with their own school activities and social engagements. The winter that year was the harshest on record; one night in January, Mike woke in the night and went downstairs for a snack and looked out the window to the houses on the other side of the street and saw a man there shoveling his roof, so that it would not give under the weight of the wet snow and collapse on his family while they slept. Mike watched the man for the better part of an hour, fascinated, imagining the satisfaction of this man who was working so hard at protecting his sleeping family from the elements, who would wake to the alarm clock in a few hours' time with blistered hands and a sore back and be filled with an exhausted pride. Eventually, the man raised one glove and, looking directly across the street into Mike's lit window, waved; and Mike, in his warm kitchen with nothing but the two empty bedrooms upstairs, with their view of the woods and all of its misery in the distance, looked away, and could not bring himself to wave back.

In time, the high school set up a scholarship fund in Lynda's honor, and a tree was planted just south of the flag pole with her name engraved on a plaque beneath it.

To Grayson, and to everyone who had been there that night, it seemed like a cruel joke: that to remember a girl lost in the woods, the school would choose to plant a *tree*.

The planting ceremony, held before the first bell rang on the morning of April 24, 2008—what would have been Lynda's eighteenth birthday—was widely attended: though, with the exception of Grayson himself, very few of those present had ever even spoken to Lynda before her disappearance. Her parents had long since divorced, her mother and Jo Ann departed back to the East Coast; no one ever saw the father, who had stayed on as a shut-in in the same house where Lynda and Jo Ann grew up. The other students who had been there that night had scattered to private schools and other districts, moving on in their new lives with people who had no memory of their old one.

Mr. Newman and Ms. O'Dell, having been relieved of

their positions by the school board the previous winter, sent flowers. Separately.

The other students who had been present the night of the disappearance refused to have anything to do with the ceremony, which was no surprise. They wanted nothing to do with Grayson, period; they passed him in the halls between classes without even a hello, though their eyes slid over him carefully in class when they thought he wouldn't notice, eyes that he knew were watching him for evidence, for some kind of sign.

Bruce Foster, now principal, suggested that Grayson say a few words, and he did; he stepped forward from the crowd and took his spot next to the open hole, which was freshly dug and was awaiting the sapling to fill it; he would not later be able to remember what he said, though Foster and some of the other staff assured him that it was lovely.

When the bell rang, and everyone else went back inside to the warmth of their first-period classes, Grayson Scholl stood alone in the grass, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his jeans, watching as the custodian placed the sapling's bagged ball of roots into the ground and then began to cover it with shovelful after shovelful of dirt; and when it was all over he sat down right in the grass at the edge of the mound and hugged his knees to his chest and rocked back and forth with his face down and his shoulders shaking.

Several of the students witnessed this from the windows of their various classrooms, though no one raised their hand and asked to be excused to join him. There was a time when seeing a guy like Grayson Scholl break down would have been all anyone could talk about. Now, though, nothing he did surprised them or interested them much. He was always alone. He moved among them like a ghost, like someone who was already gone.

By the time he left town for good a month later, people barely even noticed.

When his girls were little, Mike Newman would sometimes find himself watching them, calculating how many years he had left until they would become the age of his teenaged students. Once they became that age, and everything that

was destined to happen had already happened, he could not look at them without thinking about Lynda Greenway, and thinking about all the ways he had failed her and them, ways both real and imagined and which were permanent in their scope and could never be undone.

Mike Newman never forgot that he was a lucky man. He watched his girls graduate. He drove them to their first college dorms. He walked them both down the aisle.

Always, through it all, Lynda was right there beside him: Lynda, the girl he could not save.

Mike's daughters were forgiving; they met his gaze with kind, tolerant eyes. "A good father," they reassured him, before looking past him to other things, to husbands and children and jobs, to the parts of their lives which were secret, and did not include him.

And so, he lost them, too: in a million smaller ways.

He supposed it was that way for everyone.

Though always, it was Lynda who eclipsed these other, more benign losses: Lynda he lost all over again, each time his own daughters brushed his cheek with their obligatory kisses; Lynda he lost each time they smiled, each time they stepped away.

Jenny Belardi

The Girl in the Leather-Bound Notebook

My sister was twenty-one when she fell to her death down the stairs in our parents' house. It wasn't the first time she'd tried it. When she was eleven and I was thirteen, she'd made her first attempt. I was in the living room and was running upstairs to grab a marker for a school project. As I turned the corner to the bottom of the stairs, there was Vanessa, standing at the top. I started up and was at the third step from the bottom when I realized she wasn't coming down as she normally would. Of course, being sisters, we'd passed on those stairs a million times, for a glass of orange juice or a notebook or a field hockey stick from the floor above or below.

That time when she was eleven, Vanessa stood in her spot. She seemed to sway from side to side and she didn't really seem to see me. She stared to the side, to the wall where our mother had hung photos of our family vacations to the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and Niagara Falls. Then, in a swift second, she put her arms over her head, as if about to perform a gymnastics routine, and leaned forward. I jumped out of the way as she tumbled past me. The noise she made as she fell wasn't terrible like I had expected. It sounded like the sound a cat might make, muffled and small.

I expected her to have glazed eyes or something when she looked at me from the floor. She must've been on drugs to do something so stupid, I figured. She's always been the more reckless one of us. She ran around with my what mother would've called "a tough crowd", except my mother thought Vanessa still hung out with the neighborhood kids we'd grown up with—Cynthia the concert pianist and Gabby, whose favorite hobby until she was eighteen was making friendship bracelets.

When Vanessa looked up at me, she looked like she always did, her brown bangs swooped to the side, her green eyes intense, but in a good way, like she was ready for a good time.

She popped up, seemingly unscathed, and took a Diet Coke from the fridge like nothing unusual had taken place.

“What was that?” I asked.

“It’s a stupid rule.”

“What is?” I asked, not following.

“That only Mom can drink the Diet Cokes.”

“No,” I said. “I meant, why did you just fall down the stairs?”

“I wanted to know what it would feel like,” she said, as if this explanation was perfectly reasonable.

“What did it feel like?”

“It was okay.” She took a swig of soda. “I’m okay,” she said, as if I doubted it. It hadn’t occurred to me to doubt it, not yet. Even though I was a geek who liked science fiction movies, I knew girls like Vanessa in my own grade: girls who snuck out of their bedroom windows on school nights to party down by the lake and who made out with boys in the janitor’s closet at school.

We’re not good at talking about serious things in my family. During the first two years I’d been away at college, I spoke with my parents pretty frequently via phone and email, but it was always about the surface subjects: the weather, my dad’s new car, my mom’s book club. Once, when I got a C on a test (my worst grade ever), I dialed the first eight digits of their number six times before I hung up and decided to send an email. I expected my dad to call me immediately for further explanation, but instead, I got an email back: “You’ll get ’em next time.” When I next saw their number on my caller ID, I was worried my mother would bring it up, but we never talked about it.

So, I wasn’t surprised that the first time Vanessa was in the hospital, I didn’t receive a phone call. Instead, I woke up one morning, grabbed a cup of coffee from the pot in my dorm room, and woke up my laptop. There I found an email from my mother. “Dear Lydia”—so formal, like a business transaction. Vanessa has been admitted to McGregor Hospital. It didn’t say why but I knew; McGregor is a psychiatric hospital.

As I’d find out later, she was first admitted to the emergency room at the closest city’s general hospital, then transferred and put on psychiatric hold and suicide watch, after she took

forty-two Tylenol. After she took the pills, she went out with friends and said nothing. An hour later, she returned home to find my mother doing a crossword puzzle at the kitchen table. I could see my mother sitting there, as she always did until both of us were home safe in bed. She'd barely look at us and try to act nonchalant about it, but Vanessa and I both knew what she was doing. As soon as we were upstairs in the bathroom brushing our teeth and washing out faces, we'd hear her put her empty mug in the dishwasher and climb the stairs to her own bathroom where she'd do the same.

I was two hours away and immediately felt guilty. My parents had only let me know thirty-six hours after Vanessa had been admitted. I wanted to call them and berate them, but I knew their email was right: there was nothing I could do, and besides, Vanessa's doctor didn't want her to have contact with us for a few days. They didn't need to say that it was in case we were part of the problem.

Even though there was nothing I could do, I boarded a train without telling my parents, then caught a cab at the train station and showed up at my childhood home unannounced. I didn't realize how relieved I'd be that no one was home until I arrived. Maybe my parents had lied to me and they were off visiting Vanessa, or maybe not, it didn't matter. I had only come to get a whiff of the sister from whom I felt intensely far away the moment I heard about her latest troubles.

Vanessa's bedroom door still held a sign she'd made when she was twelve and I was fourteen, telling everyone (my parents and me) to keep out. I pushed the door open. I expected the room to feel different somehow. Vanessa had had her troubles, but nothing like this. The room looked the same though: the photos of her friends, all with heavy eye shadow; the varsity letters for field hockey and tennis prominently displayed on a bulletin board; the bedspread with its purple gerbera daisies. It looked like any teenager's room, which was more apparent to me now that I was in college.

Vanessa had a number of notebooks stacked on her desk, which looked out of place because they weren't the normal spiral ones we all used in school. There were three with leather covers, one each in blue, green, and red. I picked up the blue one, which was on top. I was curious, then terrified.

I thought this might be like the scene in *A Beautiful Mind* where Jennifer Connolly discovers her husband's mad writings and realizes that he's crazy. Maybe Vanessa was that crazy, but she was just very, very good at hiding it, and likely not as smart as John Nash.

The notebook held a story, written in Vanessa's curly handwriting. I began to skim it and then to read more closely. It was about a court case, something about a pharmaceutical trial gone wrong. I couldn't tell if the story was true or not, though the inclusion of dialogue and the occasional crossing out and replacement of words made me think it was fiction or at least a fictionalized version of a true story. I picked up the green notebook, which held writing in a similar style, something about a run-down hospital. The words on the page couldn't have been less connected to my sister, yet I was in her room and it was her handwriting. The stories seemed so at odds with the photographs with red cups taken at house parties, the yearbooks with hundreds of handwritten notes from friends, and the old pairs of running shoes flung on the ground near, but not in, the closet.

I heard the front door open and close. I'd left my monogrammed canvas bag in the front hall, so my parents knew I was home. My mother yelled up the stairs, "Lydia!"

I walked down calmly, trying to act as if I'd just come home for Thanksgiving and they were expecting me. "What's wrong?" my father asked. He was wearing jeans and a Red Sox hoodie—he had clearly not been at work.

"Vanessa's in the hospital," I said, as if it were me giving them the news when it had been the other way around.

My mother let out a loud sigh and walked towards the kitchen. I knew to follow and the three of us sat at the table.

"First of all, it's not your fault," my father said.

I was so taken aback, first that he would suggest this, and then that he'd known that I felt I'd abandoned Vanessa when I went off to school. "I know," I said, even though I didn't.

"And it's not her fault either," my mother quickly chimed in. I'd never seen my mother without perfectly manicured nails, but now they were shorter—bitten—and in need of a touchup of her pale pink polish.

My mother needed to be doing something, so she stood

up and took a gallon of Oreo ice cream from the freezer and began to scoop it into three bowls.

“Where were you guys?” I asked, wondering of course if they’d seen Vanessa.

My father laughed and looked at my mother who dropped the scoop into the ice cream container.

“What?” I asked.

“We just went out for ice cream.”

The first time Vanessa visited me at college was for my twenty-second birthday. I was almost over binge drinking myself at that point, so I wanted to do something quiet. There was an independent movie theater not too far away, and I imagined we’d watch a girly movie—something that took place in Paris or Tuscany—while we ate copious amounts of popcorn before walking home in the rain. It would be like a date, except with my sister. We’d once had a relationship where we could do that.

My friends wanted to go out. I told them Vanessa was coming and that she wasn’t twenty-one, but they said we’d go somewhere nice where it wouldn’t matter, out for steaks and wine. I knew we couldn’t afford Ruth’s Chris, so the steak would be tough and the wine would give us extra rough hangovers, but I liked the idea.

We decided to pregame a bit in the apartment. My roommate, Claire, made Jello shots in blue and green because those were my favorite colors, with tequila because that was my favorite alcohol.

Vanessa came in on the train early Saturday afternoon. She should’ve been away at college herself by then but she wasn’t. She was taking creative writing classes at the local community college while living at home and trying to work on a book of essays. My parents found this “courageous”, something they never would’ve said about me. I found it entirely idiotic. What did Vanessa have to write about, particularly if she was focusing on nonfiction? She’d never left town, which I viewed then as necessary to write anything worthwhile. And what are the chances she’d “make it” as a writer? I, on the other hand, was majoring in physics.

Vanessa stepped off the train wearing black opaque tights,

a cotton dress in pale pink, and a black leather lanyard necklace. She carried a camel leather backpack slung over her shoulder and no other luggage though she planned to stay for two nights. She looks like a writer, I thought. She gave me a quick hug and said, “Happy birthday, sis.” It was the first time she’d ever called me sis, like she now truly embodied the part of cute younger sibling, like we were a John Hughes creation.

I felt myself relax. I’d been nervous for her visit, particularly when I knew birthday-level drinking would be involved. I’d been worried that she’d spiral into a deep depression and that the next (inevitable) hospitalization would occur on my watch. Now, to see her, she looked confident and tranquil. It softened my anxiety.

Vanessa made my apartment seem like her apartment. She flung her backpack down by the door where the backpacks of my two roommates were stored. She helped herself to a glass of iced tea in the kitchen. Claire was territorial about her beverages, so much so that Teagan and I always asked to have a glass of iced tea. Vanessa grabbed her glass and set it down on the coffee table. She slouched on the couch and picked up an old issue of *People*, new to us but old because we stole issues from our neighbors’ recycling bin. “What did you think of her wedding dress?” she asked me, holding open a page.

“You look amazing,” I told her, not answering her question but unable to keep my observation to myself any longer.

She rested the magazine on her knees. “Thanks,” she said, nodding.

We didn’t mention her illness, but we both knew what I was talking about.

The pregame drinks ended up lasting all night. We never made it out for steaks. Instead, we ordered Indian takeout, which was a splurge because it was so much more expensive than the greasy pizza from the place on the first floor of our building. Even with the Indian food sitting in front of us, we could still smell that damn pizza every time someone opened the door to the apartment. People streamed in and out, some people I knew and who came because it was my birthday, some I knew but who were surprised to discover the reason

for the party, and some I had never met but were friends of my roommates. With each entrance, someone would pose a toast and we'd raise our glasses—to my birthday, to youth (sarcastically), or to the sickeningly sweet Jello shots.

“Are you having fun?” I asked Vanessa.

She nodded that she was. She didn't elaborate, but the music was loud and I wouldn't have heard her answer anyway.

A few hours later, when there'd been a subtle shift in the mood from people funneling out to hit the bars or head home with new crushes or old boyfriends, I couldn't find Vanessa. I checked the fire escape, where several guests had wandered out for cigarettes. I checked the hallway, where I heard tears that didn't end up being Vanessa's. I checked both bedrooms in our apartment. I found Claire passed out in her bed in her underwear with her eye liner and lipstick already smudged onto her pillowcase. I found our friends Brett and Hazel making out in my own bedroom; normally I would've given them grief, but now I just closed the door as panic began to rise in my throat.

Then I noticed the bathroom door was closed, with a faint line of light coming from underneath. I banged on the door. “Vanessa?”

I heard a muffled voice that I knew belonged to my sister.

“What?” I asked. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she said, sounding aggravated.

I debated my options. I could leave her be, as most people would do for their adult sister. Maybe the Indian food or the tequila shots or both had bothered her stomach. But then again, I hadn't seen her in what seemed like hours. It was hard to tell when the alcohol and the festivities had trumped an acute sense of the passage of time.

That was when I started to cry. My sister wasn't like most people's sisters, and I couldn't treat her like she was. I wasn't like most people, because of who she was, or at least because of what she was like, or had. My parents told me over and over again, “It's not Vanessa, it's her disease.” But standing in my very first adult apartment, did it really matter?

I pictured my sister finding the Tylenol in the medicine cabinet, or worse and more immediate, breaking the mirror and using the glass for things I didn't even want to think

about. I took off my heels and brought my leg up to kick in the door. It didn't work.

"What are you doing?" Vanessa yelled from the other side of the door.

"I'm coming in," I yelled, as I kicked again, this time successfully.

I didn't see broken glass or pills all over the floor. I saw Vanessa with her dress pulled up and her tights pulled down, and I saw Claire's friend Adam hurrying to zip his fly.

Vanessa glared at me but didn't yell. She knew what I'd suspected and she too began to cry.

After Vanessa's funeral, I returned to campus a different person, at least to those around me. My roommates didn't seem to leave the apartment for weeks, just in case I might crack at any moment and need to be scooped off our linoleum floors. I was perhaps the most different to the friends of friends and other students in my classes who didn't know me very well to begin with. Now, to them, I was that girl with the dead sister. Some of them had known me as that girl with the crazy sister for years, or at least I thought so in my head. Before her death, nothing strange came up when you Googled Vanessa's name—only field hockey awards and a piece in the local paper about her appearance on the homecoming court. Now, there were obituaries that stated simply, "Vanessa Monroe died unexpectedly at home." Everyone knew that meant one of two things when you were healthy and young: drug overdose or suicide.

My advisor thought I'd struggle in my classes and told me it was okay if I did. We'd figure something out so I could still graduate six months later, he said. He looked at me from across his desk, which was piled with papers filled with equations I couldn't understand. Everyone knew that Dr. Luck was one of those professors who only cared about his PhD students, not the lowly undergrads the university required him to teach and in my case, to meet with quarterly about my progress towards a B.S. in physics. For nearly four years, we'd both attended our quarterly meetings out of a sense of obligation; I didn't really need him since I was an excellent student, and he certainly didn't need me.

When he emailed me to meet him after he heard about Vanessa's death, I wasn't sure what to expect. I certainly didn't expect him to artfully play the therapist, which is what he ended up doing.

"This is hard," he said as I sat down. At first I thought he meant facing me and figuring out what to say to the only surviving daughter of my parents.

"It is," I acknowledged. I was holding a notebook and a pen, though this clearly wasn't a meeting where notes would be taken.

"Whatever you need . . ." He didn't finish his sentence.

"Okay."

"Believe it or not, I've been in your shoes."

I didn't reply.

"My brother jumped off the balcony of his apartment building when we were forty."

"You were twins?" I asked, as if that was what Dr. Luck wanted me to take away from his story.

"Yes." He waved his hands, as if that didn't matter. Of course he didn't want me to feel like Vanessa's death wasn't as important, since she wasn't my twin.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It was a long time ago."

Dr. Luck barely looked forty so I doubted it was too long ago, but I nodded. He looked as though he thought his news might create some sort of bond between us and cause me to stay in his office longer. But the opposite was true. The only thing more annoying than the people who couldn't possibly understand the guilt I felt was someone who actually knew how I felt and wanted to rehash his own story.

I decided to switch gears rather drastically, but it was the reason I had agreed to meet in the first place. "I'm changing my major. To English."

Dr. Luck crossed his hands on his desk. He opened and closed his mouth several times, stifling the advice he wanted to give me but already knew would be unwelcome. "You're very good at physics," he said.

"I know. But I want to do something important."

He couldn't even nod at that one, and I regretted my words immediately. He thought physics *was* important, and I had

too until only weeks before.

I was more afraid to tell my parents than I had been to tell Dr. Luck. As soon as I left his office, I became a girl he might occasionally think of, and only because both of our siblings had decided they liked the lack of a world better than the one we lived in. My parents had more riding on my decision, and worse, they'd know my reasons.

Fortunately, the first time my father came to visit me after Vanessa's death, he didn't bring my mother. He didn't seem to want to talk about Vanessa at all, which wouldn't have been possible if my mother had come. I hadn't been back home since the funeral, but I could guess that Vanessa's room was the same as it always had been, including the untouched colorful leather-bound notebooks piled on the desk.

Dad took me to a new restaurant. He'd asked me over the phone to pick a place we'd never been. He said, "What's the new hot spot?" like he'd ever cared about that before. We both knew he didn't want to go somewhere he'd been with Vanessa, and that was fine, because I didn't want to either.

I picked somewhere so fancy I'd barely have gone there for a special occasion. I regretted the choice. It was a tiny restaurant and we appeared to be the only pair not on a date. My father ordered the salmon and I had a steak with mashed potatoes.

"How's school?" he asked.

"It's good. I'm switching my major."

He put down his fork and then picked it up again and took another bite. I knew he kept eating so that he didn't interject with words he'd want to take back.

"I think I can make more of a difference. And English majors are more employable. There are so many more things I can do." I had no idea if this was true, but it seemed reasonable.

"What about grad school?"

"I don't want to go to grad school anymore. I'm sick of school."

"Will you still be finished in May?"

"Probably not. I'll probably need an additional semester."

"So it's actually more school if you switch?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Not in the long run. It's three more semesters, but no grad

school. So, less school altogether.”

“We should talk about this,” he said.

“We are talking about this.”

What I wanted to say and didn’t was, “I want to be like the girl in the leather-bound notebooks. I want to figure her out.” I had this vision of trying to *be* Vanessa, so I could figure out how it all went so horribly wrong.

I also wanted my father to understand this unspoken idea and to oppose it. He didn’t. He backed off. It was the moment I knew that neither of my parents would ever fight me on anything again in my life. Maybe no one would, once they knew about Vanessa. They didn’t understand that I wasn’t like her. They thought I had it too, somewhere deep inside, something their words could set off.

Chris Belden

Private “I”

The girl at the door saw me coming, and the usual cycle of emotions played on her face—sadness, pity, fear. I was headed toward her, she could see that now, and she tried to prepare herself.

“Hi!” she said loudly, as if I were deaf.

“Hi,” I said, staring at the tight T-shirt with BEEYOTCH written in sparkly silver letters across her chest.

“It’s five bucks to get in,” she said.

I pulled a ten from my pocket and held it out. She took it gently from my hand and paused.

“Was that a five I gave you?” I asked. She looked closely at the bill, as if she hadn’t noticed.

“You gave me a ten,” she said, taking a five from her fanny pack and pressing it into my hand. At least she was honest.

“Thanks. Say, can you point me in the right direction?”

After some hesitation she said, “Okay,” and took my arm and aimed me toward the door. “Straight ahead.”

“Thank you,” I said, poking my red-tipped cane at the ground as I stepped into the club. They were three-deep at the bar, and most everyone moved out of my way as I came through. But there was one young buck with his back to me, tall with wavy hair. I gave him a good whack on his cowboy boot with my cane. He turned and delivered a withering look, then his face softened and turned pink. “Sorry,” he stammered, his soul patch fairly quivering.

“Quite alright,” I said. “Just coming through.”

In the back of the club was a wide, rectangular room with a small stage at the far end. Little round tables and chairs—two-thirds of them occupied—filled out the rest of the room. In the corner, next to a jukebox, sat Mrs. Kemper, alone. It was clever of her to sit there, so close to the blaring music. I stood in the doorway a while before a waitress approached.

“Can I help you find a seat?”

She was refreshingly unafraid, without the pointless fake smile so many people trot out in such situations. She took my

arm and led me to the nearest unoccupied table.

“Can you seat me nearer the juke box?” I asked.

She looked surprised.

“The music,” I said. “I like it loud.”

“Of course.”

She led me to a table about ten feet away from Mrs. Kemper’s.

“Here you go,” she said, pulling out a chair. She had to speak loudly because of the jukebox. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“That would be great.”

“What’s your pleasure?” she asked. “Beer? Wine? Hard stuff?”

Her eyes were brown, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a short T-shirt and low-riding jeans, exposing the peach fuzzy strip of skin just below her navel. I ordered a Guinness and as she headed toward the bar I could see there was some kind of tattoo just above the crack of her ass.

It’s a challenge to watch someone without appearing to do so, even behind pitch-black glasses, even when people assume you can’t see them. They expect that subtly unnatural posture, that Ray Charles cock of the head that facilitates a sharpened sense of hearing. Any movement that could be interpreted as sight-related—say, turning my head to blatantly follow the waitress’s progress—might arouse suspicion. Therefore, I have perfected the stationary-head/roving-eyes technique that hen-pecked husbands will recognize from their experience at the beach.

The loud song ended, replaced by a slow, insipid ballad. Mrs. Kemper sat nursing what looked like a cosmopolitan as she nervously eyed the quarrelling couple at the table between us. The woman was upset, but composed, almost as if she relished the lashing she was handing out. The man kept looking around, hoping no one would hear.

“All you care about is yourself,” the woman said. “When I needed a ride from the airport, where were you?”

“You knew I had work to do. I told you.”

“But when you needed me to mend your sweater, I was expected to stay up half the night, even though I had to get up the next morning for a double shift. You’re such a selfish prick.”

“Shhh.”

“Oh, I don’t give a shit.”

“Caitlin, please,” the man said.

The woman pushed back her chair and stood up. “Go fuck yourself,” she said, and walked off.

The man stood and followed, calling out her name.

“Ain’t love grand?” the waitress said, having appeared at my table. She set down a pint. “You wanna run a tab?”

“I’d better not,” I said, admiring the chocolaty dark stout. I gave her a ten and asked her name. “In case I have to shout for you.”

“Tina,” she said. “But don’t worry. I’ve got my eyes on you.”

“That makes one of us,” I said, and she laughed in a way that said she laughed a lot. “Keep the change, Tina.”

She took the cash and swooped off, like a bird ascending.

At another nearby table sat three girls, college age. Two blondes, one brunette. They were talking about me, I could tell. There were whispers and quick glances. The brunette said, “You don’t have to pretend—he can’t *see* you,” and they all laughed. One of the blondes stared right at me. She had a heart-shaped face, and a red stain on her white blouse. Blood? Lipstick? I sipped my Guinness, then slowly ran my tongue across my upper lip to gather in the stray foam. I made a show of it, and she continued to stare while the other two moved on to another topic.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Kemper kept glancing at her watch.

She was a looker, our Mrs. Kemper. Blonde hair to her shoulders, big green eyes, kewpie doll lips. She was in her mid-thirties, tall, probably as slim as she’d been in college. Maybe she went to the gym four times a week. Or maybe she was one of those high-strung people who stay lean out of nervousness. Her eyes seemed tired, perhaps from crying, and she slumped in her seat, but otherwise she was looking good tonight, with the dark red lipstick, the sleeveless sweater, the tight black slacks that flared at her ankles. She glanced my way while I was sizing her up but I continued to stare right at her until, a little unnerved, she turned toward the doorway. She grinned, waved at someone, and her eyes blazed up like carnival lights.

He was older than her by at least five years. Blue shirt,

khakis, loafers. He wore glasses and a sloppily trimmed beard, his graying hair artfully tousled. His name was Philip Asher. He walked over to the table and leaned in to kiss her. They kissed for a few seconds longer than would a married couple, and then he sat down close to her.

Burt Kemper had called me earlier that day. I hadn't seen him in a good twenty years, since high school.

"Lucas Wolf?" he said when I answered the phone.

"Yeah."

"Burt Kemper. Remember me?"

"Sure I do." In the old days Kemper had been what we called a geek—wafer thin, gawky, thick glasses, president of the Latin club. Now the geek ran a multi-million dollar software business.

"Blast from the past, huh?"

"What can I do for you, Burt?"

He wanted to meet and have a chat. I knew what it was about. No one calls me out of the blue to chat about the Tigers or the stock exchange. I'd seen Kemper's photo in the newspaper now and then, galas and society functions. I'd seen the gorgeous woman on his arm in the photos. And I'd always wondered: how long is *that* going to last?

We met at the Gilded Boar, where I made him buy me drinks. He hadn't aged well—pot belly, hair transplant, skin pale and blotchy from sitting in front of a computer all day—but there was something cocky about him now, as if all that money sat stacked up behind him, like a row of tanks. He told me about his wife, and his suspicions about Philip Asher.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Oh, some professor. She wanted to take some classes, said she was bored, so I thought, why not? Keep her occupied while I slaved away earning the money that pays for the tennis and shopping and all that crap. Pretty soon it's 'Professor Asher this' and 'Professor Asher that.' I thought it was a schoolgirl crush on some daddy figure."

"Professor of what?" I asked.

"I don't know. Literature? All I know is she's reading all these goddamn books."

"Terrible thing," I said. "Reading."

“Worse than computers, in my opinion.”

“How sure are you?” I asked. “That something’s going on, I mean.”

“Pretty sure. But that’s where you come in. I need to know.” He gulped from his martini. “If I can prove it, she won’t get a dime.”

“I see.”

He leaned in closer, blinked a few times. “I never thought this would happen to me, Lucas. I’ve had business deals go sour, I’ve lost millions on the market, I’ve had partners run off to Mexico with my money. None of it stings like this.”

I wasn’t sure how to take this little speech. Was his heart broken, or his ego?

I asked him some basic questions—where they lived, etc.—then got a little personal. Though he and Mrs. Kemper were well into their thirties, and had been married for more than five years, they had no children. I got the sense it was a sore subject. I don’t enjoy poking at wounds, but I thought it might be pertinent, so I poked.

“She’s barren,” he said.

“Barren?” What year *was* this—1910?

He made a dismissive gesture, as if this line of questioning was irrelevant. “Something to do with her ovaries, I don’t know.”

Over another drink he asked how much my services would run him. I quoted a figure, and he grimaced. The richer they are, the more they gripe. I told him he could shop elsewhere. He pulled a checkbook from his briefcase—more like a ledger, really, with multiple checks per page. It’s a simple equation: the more checks per page, the more money in the bank. “Make it out to cash,” I said, noting the time. If I hurried I could get to the bank before it closed.

He told me he’d called his wife earlier to let her know he had to work late. “Maybe you can find out something tonight,” he said.

“You in a hurry for bad news?”

“I just want to get it over with.”

On our way out, he said, “I always liked you, Lucas. You weren’t like the other popular kids. You were more . . . mature or something.”

“You think so?” I wanted badly to tell him I was the one who had painted the windshield of his daddy’s car bright pink in the school parking lot.

“I hope I’m wrong about her,” he said. “You think I’m wrong, Lucas?”

Of course I thought he wasn’t wrong, but I didn’t say anything. I left him standing next to his pearl-blue Audi, looking forlorn. We did not shake hands or say goodbye.

The slow song ended, and a fast-tempo’d pop tune came on the jukebox, all drums and synthesizers. Tina took Asher’s drink order. He and Mrs. Kemper barely looked at her, as if they didn’t want her to recognize them later.

Meanwhile, up on the stage a pony-tailed kid started setting up a drum kit. Two more musicians arrived lugging amplifiers and guitar cases.

Mrs. Kemper was talking animatedly to Asher. She seemed to be complaining, though not about him, apparently. He held her hand and listened. Mrs. Kemper paused when Tina brought a beer for him and another cosmo for her, then started up again after she left.

“Looks like you’re almost done with that,” Tina said to me. “Can I bring you another?”

“Better not,” I said. “I need to keep my wits about me.”

“Hope you’re not driving.”

I laughed. “Not tonight, anyway.”

“I’ll check back in a bit,” she said, then walked away. It was a pink rose—the tattoo that peeked out from the back of her jeans.

The drummer started banging away at the snare and toms, fine-tuning their placement. The others removed guitars from cases and plugged them in. I could tell the band would be awful—they had Holiday Inn lounge written all over them—but there was nothing I could do until Mrs. Kemper and Asher left the club. He leaned in closer to her, listening intently to her story.

I was bored. I wished Tina would come over and sit on my lap.

After cashing Kemper's check that afternoon I went home to get ready. By six o'clock I was driving by the Kempers' home, a massive monstrosity in a subdivision made up of similar monstrosities. Theirs was especially offensive, with its beige vinyl siding and the ubiquitous round foyer window above the front door. There was no place to park without being noticed, so I pulled in to a gas station just outside the subdivision entrance. Kemper had given me a description of his wife's car, a red Range Rover. Why these people need cars designed to survive the outback is beyond me. Three or four of the damn things emerged from the subdivision, none of them red, before Mrs. Kemper made her appearance. She turned west, and I pulled in behind her.

She drove cautiously, never ran a yellow light or turned left when there was oncoming traffic. I figured that, if she was indeed stepping out on Kemper, this was her first affair. Serial philanderers, in my experience, drive like assholes.

She parked in an upscale strip mall and went into a salon. Manicures, pedicures, bikini waxing—that sort of place. I sat in the car imagining her getting waxed. It helped with the tedium.

I'd forgotten how dull my line of work can be. This was my first gig in a while. Two months earlier I was following a man named Chandler Tate, suspected by his wife of sleeping with their real estate agent. For three days I tailed this guy all over tarnation—he was a sales rep for a shoe manufacturer—and never saw him do anything but work, eat, and take a leak. Then, on day four, Tate wakes up next to his suspicious wife, climbs into his minivan filled with shoeboxes, drives out onto I-94, parks on the shoulder, and steps out into traffic. I damn near ran him over myself before pulling off. Looking back I watched as he placed himself in front of an eighteen-wheeler. When the driver jerked left into another lane, Tate moved with him. In that moment I wished I was truly blind. It would blow your mind, what a 10,000-ton object traveling at 65 miles per hour can do to the human body. I decided then and there to take a leave of absence. But I was now short on funds, which is why I answered the phone when Burt Kemper called.

The guitarist and bassist started tuning up, silently, using modern tuning equipment. No one knows how to do anything without a machine anymore. Meanwhile, Mrs. Kemper and Asher kept up their conversation, leaning in toward each another. He reached out to touch her cheek. She flinched a bit, but didn't pull away. She scanned the room, worried that someone might see this display of affection. Again she looked right at me. I sipped my Guinness and stared back.

Onstage, the guitarist stepped up to the microphone. "Check. Check. One, two. *Check.*" Tina walked past and unplugged the jukebox in the middle of a song. In the brief lull between the recorded music and the band's opening number, the room filled with the sound of chatter. Somewhere in there I could make out Mrs. Kemper's voice:

"I don't know if I'm ready for this."

Asher said something that I couldn't hear, but his tone was pleading as he leaned forward and squeezed her hand. Then the drummer clicked his sticks four times and the band started playing a sensitive pop song with vague lyrics. Asher leaned in farther, pleaded some more. Mrs. Kemper wiped an eye with her knuckles. Then they stood up, rather quickly. I wasn't ready for that. After they left, I got up and followed. As I passed the three college girls they watched me poke my white cane at the floor and giggled. I stopped, leaned down to the blonde, and said, "You have a stain on your blouse." She looked down at her blouse, then up at me. She smiled, as if to say, *I knew it.*

The front room had grown even more crowded. I couldn't see Asher and Mrs. Kemper anywhere. I should not have stopped to speak to that blonde; sometimes my pride gets the best of me. I pushed my way toward the door, "Excuse me, excuse me," banging at people's ankles with my cane. Out on the sidewalk I ran to the curb, looked up and down the block. No sign of them. I cursed, then turned to see the girl at the door staring at me.

"What the fuck?" she said.

I shrugged. "I once was blind. But now I can see."

I ran to Mrs. Kemper's car, but it was gone. Did they leave together or separately? I walked back to the bar.

"Ten bucks," the girl at the door said.

"I paid already. And it was only five."

"That was a blind guy. Ten bucks for the sighted."

"So I owe you five," I said, handing over a Lincoln.

She took it and waved me in. I pushed my way through the front room, not bothering with the cane. I found Tina and waved her over. As she approached I removed my dark glasses.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I know, I know. I'm a private investigator, I was on a case."

"So you're not . . .?"

"Nope."

She looked a tad disappointed in me, but less than I'd expected.

"The couple that was sitting at the table over there," I said, pointing. "Have you seen them here before?"

"Once or twice, I guess."

"What is it? Once, or twice? Or more?"

"Maybe three times."

"Occasionally, or has it been three times in a short span of time?"

A man at a nearby table called for her. She waved and held up a finger: one minute.

"Three times in the past couple weeks, maybe. What's this about, anyway?"

"I'll tell you later," I said.

She cocked her head. "Is that right?"

"When are you off, Tina?"

The customer called for her again, and she threw him a dirty look.

"Two, two-thirty."

"See you then," I said.

She looked me up and down. "I think I liked you better when you *couldn't* see."

"I'll wear my dark glasses, just for you."

I swung by the Kemper house, though I suspected there'd be nothing there for me to see. The two lovebirds weren't

stupid enough to go to her place. The house was dark except for a lonely light in the front hall. I pictured Burt Kemper in his 25th floor office, adding up numbers and fantasizing about me informing him that his wife's relationship with her professor was innocent. Sorry, Burt.

Still, I didn't have definitive proof. An intense chat at a downtown club did not necessarily translate into a torrid affair. I'd have to get more evidence.

Earlier, I had dug up Asher's address from the university website, and I drove over there now. He lived near the campus in an old Craftsman-style house that sat dark and quiet mid-block. Maybe they went to a motel, I thought. I'd have called it a day if I hadn't spotted a red Range Rover parked toward the end of the block, woefully out of place among Subarus and Hondas. I found a spot around the corner and headed back on foot. Streetlights cast yellow cones of light on alternate sides of the street, but Asher's house sat in shadow. I slowed a bit as I walked past, listening for any sounds coming from inside. No lights shone in the front of the house, and I heard nothing but crickets. I walked on, making sure no one in the neighborhood was out on their porch taking in the lovely spring evening, then at the end of the block I turned back. When I reached the house I ducked up the driveway. Peering into the detached one-car garage I saw a dark sedan. From there I crept toward the back of the house, pausing to peek through a side door into a darkened kitchen. I quietly swung open the off-kilter white picket fence door and entered Asher's back yard. It was small, with a deck table and chairs, a brief stretch of scraggly grass, and a few shrubs around the perimeter. Clearly the professor was not the gardening type. I stepped toward the rear of the yard, and from there I could see that the back bedroom, on the second floor above the kitchen, was dimly lit, perhaps by candles. It figured. These English professors. I wondered how a physics or accounting teacher would woo a student.

Watching the candlelight flicker across a patch of bedroom ceiling, I couldn't help but imagine what was going on up there. Sure, this job can be monotonous sometimes, but I have to admit it can also be titillating. Errant wives and husbands, in the throes of a passion that drives them to this

sort of treason—there’s something about it that makes my heart pump faster. To feel that deeply! To abandon loyalty and the holy pledge of marriage! Think of the excitement coursing through Mrs. Kemper at that moment. Was she weeping quietly as Asher kissed her bare shoulders, or was she laughing as she felt, perhaps for the first time, the kind of lust that can make you thrillingly stupid? I’ll fess up: I got an erection thinking of these two. Whatever was to happen later on between me and Tina paled next to this kind of intensity. I felt bad that I had to tell Kemper about it, that he would initiate divorce proceedings, that his wife and her lover would then have to abandon this exhilarating game and come out into the open. Of course, it wouldn’t last. Half the excitement comes from meeting at dingy bars and looking around the room to see if anyone is watching. At first they’ll feel relief, sure, but with that comes a void. When your lover can call any time he pleases, when you can meet anywhere at any time, something is lost. The relationship starts to rot from the inside. But for now, tonight, these two were on fire.

Kemper had told his wife that he’d be home around ten, and sure enough, at 9:30 a light went on in Asher’s house, and Mrs. Kemper emerged onto the front porch. Asher, in a terrycloth robe, stood in the open door as they spoke for a moment. Mrs. Kemper combed her hair, laughed, then kissed Asher, a long, lingering kiss meant to last them both for a while. From across the street, behind a minivan, I snapped a few photographs.

Mrs. Kemper finally pulled away, turned, and headed down the porch steps. Asher watched her go. She looked back and waved. He waved back, but there was something about his manner that confused me. He didn’t have that look I’ve seen so often, a combination of loss, longing, and satisfaction. His look showed something else. Relief?

I didn’t follow Mrs. Kemper—I knew exactly where she was going. I stayed and watched Asher as he shut the door. I crossed the street and headed up the driveway. The kitchen light switched on. I edged close to the side door, my back against the clapboards. I heard Asher talking to someone on the phone:

“. . . headed home . . . I'm sure he saw us . . .” Then a bitter sounding laughter. He was talking to Burt Kemper.

I stood for a while with my back against the house, long after the kitchen light went out and Asher headed upstairs. I looked at my watch: 10:30. More than three hours until Tina got off work.

I headed back to my car. I sat inside and brought up the photos on my camera. Mrs. Kemper kissing Asher. I felt foolish. Ridiculous, geeky Burt Kemper had pulled one over on me. He probably knew all along that I'd painted his car way back when. He was home by now, waiting for the photos to appear in his inbox. Maybe *he* had something going on the side, someone young and fertile and greedy enough to overlook the hair transplant. Or maybe he just wanted to be on his own. I pictured him lying in bed next to his wife, in the dark. Smiling.

Then I deleted the photos.

The next day I drove downtown to Kemper's office. On the elevator ride up I was feeling a little wobbly. Tina, it turned out, had a taste for bourbon. What could I do? I had to keep up with her. Remind me to tell you about it sometime.

Kemper's assistant showed me right into his office.

“Whatcha find out, Lucas?” he asked.

I looked at his face for a moment. Even hung over I have a pretty sensitive bullshit detector, but I have to admit the pin did not go into the red. If I was right about him, this guy was a great liar. But then so am I.

“I got nothing,” I said.

His face crumpled a bit, and I was pretty sure I had him pegged correctly.

“Nothing? Well, did you follow her?”

“Yup.”

“And did she meet Asher?”

“Yup.”

“And?”

“All innocent stuff, as far as I could tell. They met at a student hangout, talked about literature and that sort of thing.”

“Literature?”

“*Gatsby*, I think it was.”

Kemper spun his chair around and gazed out the window. He had a view of the whole town, and it was making me a little queasy, to tell the truth. I started to sweat, certain that an anxiety attack was coming on.

From behind the high-backed chair Kemper asked, “And after?”

“They went their separate ways,” I said, glad for the distraction.

He spun back around and eyed me. He probably did this to business partners when they told him profits were sagging.

I smiled. “Good news, right, Burt?”

“Mm.”

“I could try again,” I said. “Tonight. Of course I’ll have to charge you for another day.”

He waved me off. “No, no. Never mind.” He stood and escorted me quickly to the door. “Well, it was great to see you, Lucas.”

“Glad to be of help, Burt.”

Next thing I knew, I was in the outer office looking at his assistant.

“Is everything all right?” she asked, eyeing my pasty anxiety face.

I noticed then a little bump beneath her blouse. She was pregnant. And no wedding band. Was Kemper sleeping with *her*? She was about thirty, pretty, with the morally flexible look of a supplicant.

“Everything’s great,” I said.

The elevator ride down to the underground parking garage took forever. Men and women in suits got on and off with their briefcases and grim game faces. As I stood at the rear of the car watching the well-barbered backs of their heads I wondered, how many of these people are up to something? How many are sleeping with an assistant or embezzling from petty cash? How many are desperate enough to step out in front of an eighteen-wheeler?

In the parking garage I searched and found Kemper’s blue Audi, taking up two spaces. From my inside coat pocket I removed a small spray can. In a moment the car’s windshield was painted entirely pink.

Sometimes I love my work.

Lindsay R. Mohlere

Last Cast at Indian Falls

The dream is always the same. The Perfume River, South Vietnam. 1968.

Ray is waist deep pushing against the current. He pulls leeches off his painted face and struggles for traction. Each breath of the seared flesh air makes him gag. The river glows with red-hot lava and silver streaks of mercury float on the surface like vinegar on oil. Vinnie and Doug are in a camouflaged raft caught in a violent eddy. They're naked and bloodless pale as dead men should be. Sunlight rays through the bullet holes punched from their bodies and they laugh like drunks stumbling down an alley. Vinnie plays the M16 air guitar and Doug clog dances chanting "Hail Jesus, You're my King."

Ray claws through the burning liquid trying to intercept the raft. His sleeves are on fire and his tattoos melt. He's inches from the raft. A blinding white light tears his vision. Incoming mortar rounds blast deep holes along the riverbank and walk toward him one by one, shattering everything in the way. A round hits the raft and Vinnie and Doug vanish, detonated into transparent confetti. Debris is suspended in the blackness and glows like fireflies at midnight.

Ray can hear the echo of Doug's final scream through the whistle of incoming. "Where were you, Motherfucker? Where were you?"

"Ray! Ray! Wake up," Roxanne says pushing his shoulder. "Wake up. Shane's here. Time to go."

Ray sits up in a startle and breathless. His face is wet and he can taste the salt of fear. He's sweated his T-shirt. The burn scars on his forearms shine like molded plastic. His hands shake. "Goddamnit."

"Ray. Calm down. It's the dream again," Roxanne says as she rolls over and scoots around to face him on the bed. She reaches out and puts her right hand over his heart. "Calm down."

Ray takes a deep breath and counts as he exhales to gain

control just like they teach you. Visualize calm they say. He looks into Roxanne's chocolate eyes; tangled waves of silver black hair roll across her shoulders. He can feel the strength and heat of her hand on his chest. It's her way of taming the beast after living with his demons for so long.

"You okay? Shane's out front. It's time to go." Outside, the rumble of Shane's revved up dual exhaust rattles the windows. It's louder than a 747 at take-off.

"Yeah, Rox. I'm fine."

Moments later Ray is out the front door with gear-bag; the new Spey fly rod Roxanne gave him for Christmas and a cooler loaded with sandwiches and beer she'd packed the night before. He tosses the load into the back of Shane's Dodge pickup truck and climbs into the cab.

Shane chuckles as Ray fumbles with the seatbelt. "Dreams again, huh?"

"Yeah. Same one. Same shit, different night. Started up again a couple months ago."

"Fucking great. Means I get forty-five more years of that shit on top of what I already got, huh?" Shane says tapping his left leg with his aluminum coffee cup. It rings metal on metal. "Dreams are a bitch. Like they're real, but I always got both legs. Guess that ain't that bad. Just a closet full of left shoes, huh?"

Ray looks over at Shane and nods. They're years and worlds apart. Afghanistan and Vietnam. Ray an old white haired warrior from the Age of Aquarius and Shane, the model of the modern day American "twentysomething" soldier. Part hip-hop; part dragon slayer. Bonded together on the VA med line by experience and blood loss. Grasping at an uncertain sanity only those without can see.

"Fuck it," Ray says. "Let's go fish. Di di mao."

Two hours later as the sun zeroes at eye level and the road looks like a stainless steel ribbon, Shane ditches the freeway at Exit 88. Turning south, they motor through the hills where spring is painted in white cherry blossoms and green swaths of winter wheat. Ray dozes until Shane crosses an iron cattle guard at the start of a gravel access road to the river.

“Let’s check out the falls turnout first,” Ray says, assuming his usual command attitude.

“Roger that, LT.” Shane stomps on the accelerator and fishtails across the gravel. Both men laugh.

Halfway to the takeout where the road hugs the river, Shane growls like a crazed pit bull as they rumble past the BLM boat ramp and parking lot.

Three medium sized school buses are parked down the hill from the road. At water’s edge, over 30 life-jacketed youngsters cluster around several eight-man rafts lined up like a NASCAR pit stop. They wave at Ray and Shane.

They’re the first group of rafters they’d see this year, but not the last. In the weeks to come thousands will descend to clog the river in every kind of floatation device known to man from the main reservoir to the final BLM take out, a mile above the falls.

“Looks like the Christian school booby hatch is on the water,” Shane says, flipping the youngsters the bird.

Ray chuckles.

“Those little snots are a real pain in the ass,” Shane says. When it comes to rafters, Shane has the patience of a cobra and strikes without warning. As far as he’s concerned, rafts have no business on “his” steelhead stream. “Maybe Indian Falls will eat those kids,” Shane barks.

“Yeah, that’d screw the fishing good,” Ray laughs, egging Shane on as he pulls over and stops at the turnout near the trail down to the waterfall.

Called “Indian Falls” by fishermen because of the Tribal dip net scaffolds on one side and a fish ladder on the other, the falls is a mass of violent white water exploding at the bottom of a 30-foot drop into the last major obstacle migrating steelhead and salmon have to navigate on their way up river to spawn.

It’s also a killer. In the old days crazy daredevils and beer-fueled idiots ran the falls in everything from 12 man rafts to plywood-topped inner tubes. When the body count became too much of a P.R. problem for the BLM and the Tribe, everything from rafts, tubes, canoes, drift boats and such were prohibited. Now it’s the DMZ for recreational watercraft.

“Chill. We won’t even see ’em.”

Ray and Shane string their rods and pull on waders and wading boots. The daytime temperatures will reach 80 degrees, but the water still has the bite of snow melt run-off.

They hike down to the river through a crease in the canyon crowded with fir, pine and alder. Shane leads with a skip and swing leg motion to compensate for his artificial limb. The sound of the falls breaking over the edge vibrates in the trees. As they emerge from the thick forest pocket, the roar of tumbling water becomes a visceral tremor adding a frightening power to the river only sound can deliver. When they reach the path along the bank, Ray flips a quarter. Shane calls tails and wins.

“Pin ‘em, dude,” he says turning downstream to hike several hundred yards past the first set of rapids after Indian Falls tails out. At some point he’ll turn and fish back upstream. He’ll meet Ray later.

Ray hikes up river along the edge of the tight basalt cliffs that pinch the water before it breaks out over the falls. Like Shane, he’ll walk up several hundred yards picking his spots, and then fish back downstream.

He passes the first set of rapids and around another set boiling in a tight curve. It’s a Class 5 run of angry waves, two steep drops and river sharpened boulders known for killing a few kayakers and rafters dumb enough to take it on, legal or not. He traverses the canyon wall following a worn fisherman’s trail above the river until he spots the first place he intends to fish.

Dropping down to the bank, Ray steps into the water. He eyes an unusual run on the far side cutting out from the main fast water and slowing near the rocky edge.

“There’s gotta be fish in that slot,” he says to himself as he pulls the thick yellow line from the reel and plays it out with his two handed Spey.

Wading in the current to mid-thigh, Ray strips several feet of line off the reel to anchor it, then lifts the line up to begin the cast. He’s a rookie with the rod and his casting technique shows his inexperience. It takes several attempts to find the rhythm he needs to produce the fluid motion to shoot the florescent line out far enough and drop the fly into the spot

he wants. Finding the right tempo to cast, Ray steps further into the stream above his target.

After swinging the fly through the seam several times, Ray moves to shore and walks down river. He studies the water, looking for particular stretches he thinks hold fish. Seams of flat water adjacent to faster flows, pools in the cusp of tail-out riffles and shaded runs where the water swirls over hidden obstacles are perfect hide-outs for weary steelhead fighting the heavy strength of the river as they swim upstream.

Ray repeats the process, moving to the bank, hiking over boulders, shuffling along the shore with a keen eye on the water. He sees a section to fish and wades in, knees bent to brace against the current. He shoves his way across the flow to a point where he gains his balance and casts to the slice of water he's sighted.

Not staying too long in any one section, rounding the first bend, then the next, wading in and wading out, Ray passes on fast runs and fishes the soft water. When he reaches the Class 5 chute, he climbs up the facing wall to the trail and makes his way around back down to the bank. A large eddy formed several yards from the tail-out wraps back into the flow with a smooth seam that looks promising.

Ray wades in. The surface appears easy, but the charging undertow shoves him deeper than he wants to be. Its power skids him along the gravel bottom. He fights for stability but is pushed to waist deep water. The flow takes him further out.

Water slaps his face and fills his nose. He coughs up the taste of melted snow and spits it back. Another step and water spills over the top of his waders, sending icy streams down his chest and back. A hard smack knocks his hat off. It's caught in the current upside down and is gone. Fighting against the flow, Ray tiptoes along like a primo ballerina touching the bottom, bouncing up and thrusting at a slight angle toward the quiet, shallow waters closer to the bank.

When he reaches shore, he sits on a deadfall alder and bends over with his elbows on his knees drawing deep breaths and looks down at his feet.

Around him, the forest snaps with bees and beetles keeping time with songbirds flying sorties back and forth across the river. The sun begins to warm the crisp air crowded around

the shade alders.

Woodpeckers pound the bark for beetles. Black squirrels argue with the jays over campsite treats. Overhead, an osprey dances across a razor-sharp blue sky screaming a hollow monologue. The wind ricochets off the tips of trees and sweeps through the canyon, shuffling the bushes to rattle out a low, trembling hum in harmony with the purr of the river cutting through the canyon.

On the opposite bank, a morning hatch of tiny midges swarms and bounces in the thin breath of wind over a small eddy punched out of a basalt cliff. Looking down past his boots to the mossy, tufted ground cover, Ray can almost hear the bickering of ants as they trudge back and forth lugging huge chunks of whatever to wherever they're going.

Like a room full of babies, everything is crying for attention and breakfast.

On the tip of the wind, a slight echo catches his attention. It's a shrill hint of terror.

Up river, in the massive white water run he'd passed, an orange blur of a raft stands on end, frozen in air. Locked in a violent shimmy, it flips backwards and recoils off the canyon wall, disappearing into a foaming wall of water. The raft shoots back to the surface. It's launched skyward looking like a Polaris missile blasting off a submarine. It cartwheels in the air and drops down into the folding torrent disintegrating as it slams against the rocks. The rapids swallow the shredded remains.

A faint panic scream carries in the breeze. Then another. At first it's a whisper. Ray squints through the bright sunlight and turns his ear toward the brutal roar, not sure what he's heard.

The shrieks become clear. Two heads attached to waving arms and orange floatation jackets bobble in the vicious foam racing towards him, screaming. Children.

Adrenalin replaces fatigue. Stumbling over rocks and deadfall branches, he runs to the cries as they push his way.

Ray drops his rod and starts to rip off his wading belt and vest.

"No way I can swim," he says. "No way."

The first kid is seconds away from sailing past him. The

other disappears, but pops up to the surface in front of a huge boulder and is spit back into the rage. Both kids pick up speed.

“Hold on,” he yells, screeching his voice as if he could will the force of the river. “Hold on!”

Ray’s options explode inside of him. What can I do? He flashes through his life. Laughter and giggles pierce echoes of horror. Children plead for mercy. The river howls a deadly howl. Doug screams. “Where were you?”

Ray chokes down panic. He grabs the Spey and strips line from the reel. It might be strong enough to hold a kid.

Ray anchors the line into the current. The river pulls the line tight and with both hands on the grip he hauls it back over his right shoulder and swings the line into a “D” loop, snapping his arms toward the target the instant he feels the line load. The force generated by the move sends it out into the center of the river, several feet ahead of the first screaming child.

“Goddamnit, missed,” Ray shouts. “Hold on. Hold on. I’ll get ya!”

Again, he hauls the line back up and swings the rod. He feels the line load and fires again. The thick yellow line streaks through the air and drops down over the screaming kid.

“Grab the line. Grab the goddamn line and pull.”

The youngster doesn’t understand.

“Grab the line and pull.”

The current controls the line. It curves out and begins to slip through the kid’s hands as the rush of water drives it downstream.

“Grab the line.”

As the line threads over the kid, the No. 6 Purple Marabou fly snags his life jacket. He grabs the line and is swept across the water like a cat’s tail sweeps the ground right before it pounces. In seconds he’s into shallow waters.

“Stand up and let go of the line,” Ray orders. “Get out of the water.”

The kid, maybe ten years old, struggles to stand and drops the line in the water. He trembles with cold and his eyes are on fire with fear.

Ray looks back into the boil of rapids searching for the other child. The young boy races past in the swift current and

stares at Ray in hopelessness. Is he too far, Ray thinks as he runs down river after the now silent kid?

The first boy walks out of the water wailing an eerie-pitched moan as Ray sprints past. The kid is shivering blue inside his orange life jacket.

Leaping over broken logs and dodging larger rocks along the waters' edge, Ray narrows the gap between the floating child and himself. The river flow is at a bend and churns into a broad sweep to the right. Rocks, taller than men and wider than cars form a slight bump that sticks out into the river.

If he can push harder, he'll over take the boy and make it to the point where he'd have time for one last cast to save the child. If he doesn't, they'll add the kid's name to the body count at the bottom of Indian Falls.

Ray pumps his legs; his thighs burn against the confinement of the waders. Slipping over mossy rocks and stumbling through sand, he braces against falling by pushing off the ground with his free hand. He gasps for air. His lungs are shredding. His heart beats violent explosions.

He closes the distance and slides to a stop. Again he slaps the water with the rod, playing line out into the current. The boy floats into the beginning of the long sweep and Ray snaps the line and rolls it out a few feet ahead of the kid.

"Grab the line. Grab the fucking line and pull."

The boy grabs the line with both hands.

"Got him. Ho, ho, I got him," Ray rants in a wheeze.

Pulling hard on the rod, Ray swings the frightened boy through the current to the thin water on the edge. The kid tries to stand but falls backwards. Ray throws the rod down and runs to the boy, diving for his legs as the river seizes the kid's body, snatching it back into its deadly vortex.

Ray hits the water hard, smashing his nose on a rock but manages to wrap his hands around the kid's ankles. The current flips him over and water charges into his waders, filling his pant legs with deadly weight. Together, they're thrown into deeper, faster water and slammed against a submerged boulder, then another and another. Ray holds the kid with one hand and claws at each rock they bounce off of, trying to find a grip.

Grabbing a clump of weeds growing out of a grass-covered

rock Ray pulls himself and the boy to a stop.

Inching himself to the backside of the rock, he feels the bottom under his feet. He flops the boy over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, and with both hands free, tugs along the rocks until he reaches the bank, collapsing in a heap.

Ray rolls to his hands and knees, fighting for breath. Blood runs steady from his nose and from an abrasion on his forehead. The kid lies in a fetal curl retching and moaning.

"Buddy? You okay?" Ray asks as he pulls the boy up to a sitting position. "Take a deep breath and let it out slow . . . Real slow."

The kid stares at Ray, wide eyed and bewildered. He tries taking deep gulps of air, but manages only to spit up water and cough.

Ray hears voices coming towards them. They're muted by the groaning of the river and hidden behind boulders and alder brush hugging the bank.

"Jason! Jason! Where are you?" It's a wild shriek of a mother, a frantic plea near hysteria. Ray steadies himself on a large rock and stands up. Searing pain runs up both legs and his knees buckle. Lurching against the stone for balance, Ray waves his arms at the approaching crowd and sits back down. The run and tumble through the rapids beat him bad. The closer the crowd gets, the louder they scream, the more the pain pushes him into a daze.

"He's over here. He's okay," Ray groans and vomits blood red river water as several adults and a few orange-vested youngsters scurry over the rocks to where he and the boy are huddled. Two adults grab Ray and help him to his feet. One woman kisses him full on the lips and smears her face with his blood. "I'm so happy you were here. You saved them both. Praise Jesus."

A half-hour later, after he's regained his composure, emptied the water from his waders and collected his gear, Ray slips away from the crying pack of grateful parents and rafters. He refuses to give them his name or much else, saying it was "no big deal."

By the time he reaches the truck, he's sweating. The deep cold from the river and the pain has been chased away by the hike up through the wooded ravine. His nose has quit

bleeding and the scrape on his head is congealed. He changes into dry pants and a shirt, grabs a sandwich and a beer from the cooler and sits on a folding chair he'd left in the pickup bed.

One bite from the sandwich and a half a beer later, Ray is asleep, slumped in the chair with his chin on his chest.

“HooRah, LT!” Shane roars as he stands in front of Ray hoisting a glistening 10-pound hatchery steelhead above his head. “Dude. Did I pin a big one, or what?”

Lora Hilty

Some Terrible Beauty

Spencer thinks that there is nothing worse than the happy stars winking through the darkness of a night spent in the unsheltered streets of Cambridge, Ohio. Foot-weary and bone-tired, he walks the solitary and lightless alleys of his hometown. His hair sticks to the back of his head and gives him a crazy kind of look—Einstein or Don King—but unlike these two, somewhere under the clumps of creek dirt and head grease lurk real and urgent problems; problems which keep Spencer's lids from closing, of wanting each and every person encountered on his nightly jaunts to slip away into nothing. These good citizens, gainfully employed and secure in their homes, want nothing more than to see him gone. He's a rumor, a story used to keep teenagers off the street after dark, a man molded from hazardous waste, stored, forgotten, and extremely toxic.

Without money or the will to work for it, Spencer hunches behind the dumpsters in the back of Louie's pub most nights collecting remnants of food. He feels much older than his twenty-five years, has lived too much ugly already. Drawn back to this place, this town, he can't escape the empty store fronts and muddy alleys, hidden paths for a boy cultivated for a singular violent purpose. A man has returned to finish what a boy started seven years ago. He's back to put an end to his memories, his guilt. He thinks he's back to murder his mother.

At three a.m., one of the three cops in town patrols the bridge above him. Spencer stuffs himself into a small space, the bridge abutment, a mere crevice in concrete, the only place he can find to lie down. When he sees the spotlight used to survey the creek-bed in the dark, his legs itch like ants have found a way under his jeans. He hides from the light like a specter, a shadow moving within shadows. Inside the confines of his secret place, he waits for his courage to mount as he watches that house, Mother's house. Days turn into weeks, and weeks into months as he squats alone, unwanted and unmissed by anyone or anything.

On the first Tuesday in September, a yellow school bus drops the children on the corner and rouses him from his daylight slumber. Happy faces laugh with after-school freedom while teasing a small girl with thick glasses. Rachel Longstockings, they chant, probably due to the striped tights and pigtails dancing alongside the child's face. He smiles until the teasing hurts in a familiar way. Something moves within him.

When he was little older than this child, this Rachel, Spencer's mother hit him with the belt of her polyester work suit, a leather belt so thin and whip-like that it had branded sharp welts into his hide. His blood seeping through thin cotton pajama bottoms often condemned him to yet another beating, this time prompted by the offending liquid that messed up her furniture. He hurt then too, more inside than out, and the proof of this was revealed some years later when he set the couch aflame and the skin seared from his mother's drunken face. She had molded him into what he became, and it was fitting that it would end here, in this little town of secret horrors that smeared him neatly within its cracks like mildew in damp grout.

Rachel's deflated frame picks along the sidewalk burdened with weeds and long-legged daylilies, and Spencer thinks she's another of his kind. He watches her from within his dark envelope until she reaches number 229, Mother's house, and when Mother opens the door, his spirit sieves through the soles of his feet.

Mother made it through the fire, but barely so, and now she's somehow managed to get hold of another child, his replacement. He watches as the pulled and stretched pig-skinned face peeks through the doorframe to greet this child, and what Spencer thought he'd come home to do morphs into something else, something more urgent and complicated in a way that twists him up. He watches Rachel Longstockings peek through the crack, the familiar closed blinds, like a trapped little turtle in a tank full of slime. He feels something more than curiosity, more than concern; he's bewildered beyond what he thinks he can bear.

Mother looks older now, much older, than before he went away. Gray tufts of hair have sprouted on her head like new

grass in the spring. But Spencer knows that the skin on her face is no longer her own. It shines in the light like a plastic mask, her beauty, lost long ago to a terrifying demeanor. Now, her back bends under the years she's lived poorly, and her outside matches her inside, a rancid soul obvious to anyone bold enough to look. It feels like a sigh after a good meal, his satisfaction. Now everyone knows what he alone always knew. He taps dirt-lined fingernails against the cool concrete and contemplates his next turn.

Long hours pass before he's convinced that this small girl is running out of time. He will save her from it, and after his mother is gone, the authorities will dutifully take over. They will end up in the right places, he and Rachel; they will both end up where they belong. Rachel Longstockings will not live any more of what he'd endured as a child.

The doctors, unaware of his arson, were convinced that the episode snapped some kind of important nerve in his head; the refusal to speak signaled trauma to those-in-the-know. The fire, the beacon that bolstered good intentions, prompted the hospital staff to run gloved fingers along his legs and back. The staff prodded him to reveal something with water colors and writing paper. What the professionals missed was that the fire wasn't his problem; it was the answer to his problem. Spencer thought that his misery was over and done and not worth the pain of dwelling, but he remembers the caring brown eyes of a therapist, a woman he'd almost talked to once. He busied himself with painting landscapes and flowers instead. He lived a separate life within his mind, went places he only read about in books, places he wanted to go when he got out of there, like Alaska or South America. The weather didn't matter as long as he could be alone and free to enjoy the silence.

They gave him pills that he was sure he didn't need, but he took them with the expectation that if he complied, release would come. Three months in, the white coats did just that, and Spencer, deemed harmless, was sent packing on his eighteenth birthday with fifty bucks in his pocket and good wishes from the staff. That was seven years ago. He threw the pills in the trash on his way out.

Never looking back, he's been on the run, sometimes working a few weeks washing dishes or cars to pay for an occasional stay in some fleabag motel, then roaming the back streets and alleys of what seemed an endless array of small towns, each the same as the one before, filthy, backward, stagnated.

He spent seven years alone, seven years to this very day, the day he sees Rachel exit the bus. The number of days that it took God to create the whole earth is the number of years he's been totally fucked in it.

But how could they possibly let his mother breed again? How could they let her keep another child in that place?

He wonders how no one noticed the condition of the house after the fire, the week-old take-out from Happy Wok and Taco Bell rotting on the floor. How did they miss the cat urine and feces stuck to the carpets? The house wasn't fit for the cat, never mind a child. He regrets not telling what he knew. He runs his tongue over his teeth and tastes the filth of it.

Spencer buries his head in his arms and rests. Tonight is the night he will pay Mother a visit. Tonight he will hike out to the truckstop and take a shower. Tonight he will return to 229 Main Street and see what can be done about it.

He lies down in the cool shade to wait until dark, the troll living under the bridge. A restless sleep devours him and brings visions of pinkish new flesh chasing him through the dark corners of his brain. He will face her for Rachel, the bandy-legged girl he'd vowed to protect as soon as he'd spotted her, a helpless and innocent lamb locked in that woman's arms. He sleeps a fitful sleep as the afternoon passes away. He lifts his head now and then to ensure that he is alone.

It's well after midnight when Spencer creeps from hiding and slinks along the back of Dave's Pharmacy, avoiding any streetlights and the occasional vehicle that ventures through the alley. The highway in the distance hums, a quiet and lonely sound made by the occasional rush of wheels on hard pavement. Crickets sing in the tall grass surrounding abandoned buildings and lots. The sounds call him to walk on, away from this place, down the road and onto what's next. A parched scrub of trees lifts branches toward a dark and

empty sky and remind him of Jesus on the Cross asking why his Father had forsaken him. He shakes his head and wills his weird thoughts silent.

The truckstop is deserted. The large glass doors are smudged with greasy prints, old men wanting coffee, kids in need of rubbers or rolling papers. The clerk, Dora, he knows from school. He thinks the love affair they shared in high school has enough memory in it to keep her from turning him away. How many times has he sucked hope from their time together these last years? How many times has he dreamed about the one night when he'd allowed Dora to know him? Still bookish and meek, Dora has already allowed him to use the showers once.

She starts at the sound of the bell hanging above the door and hurries to stand when she sees him there. She lifts a bar of soap saved from before, luring him inside as if he were a feral dog as she grabs a worn maroon towel from under the counter.

“Spencer,” she says, her words laced with sweetness, a lonely girl.

He nods and takes the items, a bit surprised that she doesn't recoil. Her eyes are great brown wet pools.

“How come you haven't come for so long?” She presses him, closing the space between them with one look. She's a flighty bird with no place to land but with him in the dirt. He feels sorry for her, stuck here in this rotten space, and he wonders why she hasn't found a way out. He remembers how smart she was in school, how she helped him get through his homework, her patience while he fumbled to focus on the work instead of her lips and tiny ears.

He watches a desperate pulse beating within her delicate neck. Her small beak of a nose, muddy brown hair, and flat chest remind him of an unfair universe, a wisp of nothing going nowhere. She is a good soul that is much too trusting, a quiet girl that he thought he loved once, exactly the kind of girl that he'd choose if things were different and he were normal. He smiles when she adds a toothbrush and comb to the pile in his hands, and he thinks such kindness shouldn't exist in this world. He doesn't trust it; he needs to know what

she wants from him.

“Why are you so good to me?” He’s surprised with the deep sound of his voice bouncing up from the tiled floor.

Her eyes light when he speaks. “I knew it. I just knew you were still in there.” She points to her head and taps a forefinger to her temple.

He thinks that she knows where he’s been and wonders if she suspects what he did to his mother. He can’t look at her any longer, and he stares at his boot intensely aware that the sole of the right has separated from the body. The space between the hard sole and the soft leather yawns like a carved pumpkin’s mouth a month after Halloween, a fitting accessory, a good example of what he’s earned, what he deserves in this life.

Dora squeezes his arm and pulls him toward the back of the station, down the long aisles filled with food, umbrellas, and T-shirts. “Come on, Spence. We don’t have all night.” His arm tingles where she touches.

The shower stall is cold and lined with the small aqua blue tiles found in a gym room or swimming pool shower. Mildew seeps into the grout, the room, a musty hole. He places the toiletries on the hard seat outside the stall and starts the water before stripping the thin layers of fabric from his body. He allows each item to drop to the floor and steps inside.

Spencer stands a good while in the stream of hot water and allows it to soak into his skin. He washes his hair first, lathering the rich soap generously behind his ears and neck before working his way down. His chest is pale next to his hands, his legs wobbling under his tall frame as he works. He lathers each and every crevice to a fault, eager to become some shade of human. When finished, he sweeps the curtain aside to find a stack of fresh clothing.

Dora has gathered new jeans, white T-shirt, denim jacket, and black socks. A razor and a trial-sized can of Barbasol sit adjacent to the clothing. He shakes his head, unable to bend his mind around her kindness, moved, ashamed because of what he’s become and how he uses her. He remembers a night they had talked until five in the morning, the way she listened, really listened, when he told her how he felt about

things, and for a moment he forgets the rest. How he's longed for this connection. He holds himself there as a knot forms in the back of his throat. He swallows the hardness deep, buries it in the pit along with the rest of his weaknesses.

He dresses quickly, observing the crisp twenty-dollar bill stuffed into the front pocket of his new jeans before placing it inside the chest pocket of the coat. The scrubbing increased the tangling in his hair; it takes a long while to get the comb through. The scruff is gone from his face when he peers into the mirror.

His eyes are set deep into his face. Wise green irises hover above stark cheekbones, all housed within a slim, but mildly handsome frame. He brushes his teeth. Unable to lift all of the stains, he welcomes the mint taste on his tongue.

Dora is back at the counter when he emerges. She's turned the radio up loud, oblivious to him in this moment, a young soul, he thinks, when compared to him. On the counter, the telephone looms like a monstrous black snake. He knows that she's been talking to someone, and worries that she's called the authorities this time. She's picking her cuticles, biting her nails. He studies her face for some sign, a twitch, some quiver of deceit, before deciding that he shouldn't push his luck any further. Dora brushes her hair from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Boy, you clean up good," she says, a trembling smile lighting her skin.

If he were a normal guy, he would wrap his arms around her thin waist and kiss her, wrap her up tight and long like he remembered doing when they were seventeen.

"You hungry, Spencer?"

Heat creeps up his neck and flushes his bare face. He shakes his head.

"You always were a handsome one."

He remembers a tattoo on her thigh, a tiny strawberry that he licked once, and for this moment, he wishes he could take it all back: the fire, the hospital, the seven years spent in guilt-ridden silence. He can't look at her; her voice, a siren beckoning him to forget his plan. He shuffles his feet, unsure of where he should go from here.

“You plan on going on home this time?”

He speaks slowly, relishing the words as they tumble from his lips. “That’s exactly what I’m going to do. I’m going home.”

A shadow drops across her face. The skin across her chin pulls tight. She bites her lip and stares hard at the phone. Her voice becomes small as she peers through wispy brown bangs. “Well, I guess it’s about time, Spencer.”

He nods, wilting, ashamed of himself and the microscopic way she studies him, but in love with the sound of his name from her mouth. “I’ll pay you back when I get some work.” He shuffles his feet. His boots leave black marks on the tile, and he tries to wipe them away but only succeeds in making more. “I gotta go, now.”

He hurries toward the door and the comfort that darkness brings. Pausing, his hand on the door, he stares into the night and he soars above the trees toward Main Street in his head, a way to disconnect from here and now, regain structure, remember his purpose. “I really mean that, Dora. I won’t forget what you’ve done for me.” He chances one glance, and she’s looking back at him in that way that she has. She reaches into his soul when she does this, and it disturbs him in a way that he can’t explain.

“Spencer . . .” She drops her eyes to the floor. “There’s something we need to talk over.”

Her body is taut; her shoulders hold some kind of strain between the blades. He looks into big brown eyes, tearing like a kid’s, a sweet little kid’s, and it hits his gut that he hates himself for noticing. He doesn’t want to hurt her this way; he never meant to care.

“I gotta go, now.”

Spencer explodes through the doors like the thief he’s become. He’d held onto it, their memories, fed from them time and again through the years like a pathetic parasite, but the thought of Dora pining for him after all this time makes him weak. He feels guilty for involving her in his mess, a predator, a low-life that takes more than he gives. He doesn’t want to lose control; he doesn’t want to do something stupid. Girls, a mystery he’s never solved, make him feel disjointed.

He looks back through the glass, and he sees her punching numbers into the phone. She’s holding the counter like she

needs to hold on tight to something, and she lets go only to pinch the bridge of her nose, scrunch the hair on the crown of her head. Spencer knows he won't be back this way again.

The night air is cool and tickles the small hairs drying on the back of his neck. He fights for control of his rolling stomach and the twitching in his left eye. He walks toward the distant lights of town and calms.

He feels naked, as if seen for the first time when he walks openly through the street lamps lighting the main drag of town. Rushing past the shops, eyes look into him, bore into his freshly washed skin and clean face. Exposed for who he once was, he feels their eyes following him. Cecil Struthers, his best friend in high school, calls, "Spence?" Spencer makes a line in his head, and he walks it while looking down at his boots, scrambling along the crumbling concrete past Barker's Bowling Alley.

Cool air stings his face as he stands across the street in plain sight of the house. He's not far from his bridge, and he thinks about crawling back under there where it's safe. He watches the house, the view perfect from this angle.

White light hits the drywall above a blue couch. The light, cast by the television set, dances like fairy wings across Rachel's face as she sits with her legs folded under her body. Mother drapes a thin arm loosely across her shoulders. They huddle close, snacking on popcorn from a large, red, plastic bowl. Canned laughter wafts through a crack in an open window to reach Spencer's straining ears.

It smells like September; the crisp night air and the warmth collected within the pavement collide to form a hardened smell in his nose. But September is a sad month for a kid. Shortened daylight and teasing warmth moves summer into memory, and this feels like saying goodbye to something precious every day. A new school year wearing last year's tight clothes is always miserable, and so are fistfights and recesses spent lined up against the wall, a form of punishment since paddling went out of style.

Summer was best. Summer meant Dora and the drive-in. There was a night before his life turned, a night talking with

Dora on the swing-set in front of the big screen. That night, the light cast fairy wings across Dora's face, and Spencer was so completely taken with her that he spent the entire evening watching her instead of the film. There, in front of everyone, he felt alone with her, close with her.

He spits on the sidewalk. He could walk away. He could melt away into the darkness and never return to this place. But Rachel's crooked grin compels him to cross the street, makes him need to know what happens inside that house. He wants to know why his mother never tried to find him, and if she knew what he did to her, that he was to blame for her present condition. He needs to know why he wants to know these things.

Seven long years he's waited; seven years he's wasted trying to figure out what Mother thinks. He knows he shouldn't care, had no right to care, but it was there in his chest like a millstone sliding under his skin, crushing him while holding him still for the crushing. What Spencer really wants, what he needs in his core, is to be free of thinking that his mother's life holds a future worth allowing her to continue to breathe. He's wise enough to know that choices will be made tonight. One way, or another, this night will end life as he and his mother have been living it.

A cat meows as he pulls himself toward the porch stoop leading up to the door. A crumpled candy wrapper blows across the concrete and catches in the bushes under the bay window. A dog barks somewhere close. The air grows still; this frozen moment is a bleached and mind-numbing thing. He reaches for the bell. His stomach churns as the lock turns, metal sliding against mettle, nerves grinding against bone. He thinks about joining the candy wrapper in the bushes.

Blinded as the porch is bathed in light from a lamp above the mailbox, he can see her standing there, squinting beyond the screen, a wrinkled brow adding a comical twist to her warped face.

"Spencer?"

She fumbles to unlock the screen door.

"My God," she says. "It is you." She doesn't seem too surprised to see him there, and he shudders to think about

what surprise would look like on her face. Her voice rasps like the buzz of cicada in the trees.

He doesn't know what to say, or what to do with his hands. He is aghast when he looks at the damage to her face; known but immeasurable from a distance, it is now monstrously close. Captured by the grotesque and absurd way she speaks, tongue sliding across exposed teeth on one side of her face, he gawks.

Mother's hair, once full and dark, is absent entirely from one side of her head and exposes an ear, melted like the toy Army guy he burned with a lighter in the backyard when he was ten. But the eyes, her eyes, now soft and warm, remind him of a time when he was young and she read to him before he slept, a time before his father left and she started to drink. Her eyes bring him back to the reason he's come here.

"I know, I know," she says, "it looks bad." She brings her hand to her cheek. "A blessing, a curse." She turns her hand flip-side up as she says this. She looks his way again, the warmth in her eyes, a certain fake that he's surprised to wish genuine.

"Come on in, Spencer." She moves aside, bowing her head, he suspects, to make him more comfortable.

Rachel hugs a purple blanket, and a white bunny slipper hangs from her toe on one foot. She removes her glasses and wipes a lens on the silken corner of the blanket, quick little circular swipes. Spencer finds her open face fascinating, perfect, a six-year-old Dora.

"Who are you?" Rachel asks.

"Rachel, this is my son, Spencer," Mother says, but her eyes never leave Spencer's face. "This is Rachel." Mother pats his arm and leads him inside. "Let me get her to bed, and then we can visit."

"Ahhhhh, man . . .," Rachel says.

Spencer finds himself smiling, a little hell-raiser there. He watches Mother walk toward the girl, and he doesn't want her to touch Rachel. He holds himself where he stands; arms wrapped around ribs, he grabs the back of his jacket in his fists tight enough to stretch the seam. He imagines it ripping and forces himself to let go of the fabric.

"Make yourself at home. Get something to drink." Mother

points with her elbow toward the kitchen.

He's nauseated, sick of this game she's playing. No way is she like this; no way is she sober on a Friday night. She's heading down the hall; a limp makes her slow. She turns left, into his old room, into his old life, and he's watching her take Rachel back there.

Alone in the room where the fire happened, the air feels lighter than it did back then. New carpet and celery green paint warm the floor and walls. He runs a finger along the wooden end table, no dust, no food stuck on the surface. An overstuffed leather recliner is in the corner, and he can see small scuffs in the footrest. Across the beige carpet, no evidence of mice, no clutter, no piles of old newspapers, clothes, or unopened bills he needs to find a way to pay. But he thinks he can smell it, the smoke, lingering in the room.

He walks to the kitchen to check the cupboards for booze. She's behind him; he feels her there watching with those eyes of hers. He stops rummaging and turns to face her. She pulls a kettle from the stove and fills it with water, making tea like nothing has ever happened, like she makes tea all the time. He can't look at her, a fragment of the woman she was because of what he's done. His head hurts; the lights are too bright in the small space. He needs to sit down.

"We've got a lot to catch up on," she says.

A joke of some kind, he thinks, she's playing a joke. He watches her dip the tea bags into the mugs. Any minute she'll add some; she'll fill her cup with vodka and give him the tea.

"There are things that have happened while you were away." She adds sugar and cream to her cup and offers him some of the same.

He shakes his head. A pit has opened between them now, a dark pit he thought sealed and out of reach.

"The hospital called when you were released. I was still very sick and didn't think you wanted me there anyway."

He nods, rippling waves of searing pain in his head. He follows her back to the living room. She places the tea on the table by the recliner. He sits; a rush of air escapes from the cushion.

Her good side faces him; the other creeps into the shadows

cast by the lamp. She drinks. Head back, she tilts toward the good side, controlling the liquid in the right direction. A small slurping sound follows as she makes ready to swallow.

“I’m different now,” she says.

He runs a hand through his hair before wrapping both hands around the sides of his head as if to hold his brain inside his skull.

“I can see that you’re upset.”

He doesn’t know if she knows what he’s done. He thinks he’s going to tell her; he thinks he should just do it and be done with it all.

“Did they give you some medicine to help you through?” she asks. “Do you still take it, the medicine, I mean?”

“I don’t need that crap.” He’s startled by the sound of his own voice.

She snaps her head toward him. “Well, now,” she says. “I can see that now. Yes.”

“I never needed that stuff.”

“Then why?” She sips her tea. “Why wouldn’t you speak?”

“Because I didn’t have anything to say.” He’s seventeen again, and he wants to hurt her the way she hurt him, confused him. He wants to make her take it all back, but he never meant to lose it, never wanted her to live this way. A clock ticks above his head.

“You are here to stay?” Her lips quiver, as if she wants him with her.

How could she possibly want him with her? It might be easier to lock it back in his head and just go down the highway until he found a new place, a new life. But Rachel’s tiny hands and feet, her thick glasses and long suffering walk back to this house each day call him back to it, his mission, and he knows that he must follow through for her sake. He knows he needs to finish it this time around.

“For now,” he says.

“I’m glad, Spencer.” She’s crying now, full wet tears drawing lines down her plastic face. “I know I was terrible to you.” A ragged whelp, she’s clutching her stomach; her trembling robe amazes him. He studies her, a miserable lump of flesh that the two of them, Spencer and his mother, have crafted from hurt. An ache, a terrible yearning, pulls at him to believe her.

“That fire changed me, cleaned me up inside, Spencer. That fire caused me to start living again.” She pauses to slurp from her cup, a sickening sound caused by the shortened lump he’d seared away that now forms her gaping mouth. “I got help after that, worked it all through. I worked the twelve steps, all I could work without you, that is. I’m afraid to know the things I can’t remember.” She’s facing him, her cup trembling against the air as she speaks, her words surreal. “It’s my fault, all that misery after your father left, and I’m so sorry for what I put you through. It’s all on me, Spencer. Understand? I’m different now. We can be different now.”

It’s been too long since he’s felt anything but anger, and the hurt in this moment seems too much; he thinks it too raw to release into the world.

“Can you forgive me?” she asks.

Forgive? He dreamed of this once, even wanted it more than anything.

“You don’t have to answer.”

Thank you, Mother, for your permission to keep my mouth shut.

“Do you remember? Do you remember what happened?”

He doesn’t want to talk about that night, wants to know more before he spills what he’s done. “I want to know about the girl,” he says. “I want to know about how you managed to keep her here.”

“Rachel?” She looks down the hall.

“Who did you fuck, Mother? Who would have anything to do with you looking that way?”

“Oh, my God, Spencer . . .”

“God has nothing to do with this.”

“They didn’t tell you. Dora tried to tell you.” Her eyes look like wide green holes.

“What do you know about Dora?” He tries to fit these pieces together and watches, dumbstruck and twisted up, as she gathers herself and adjusts her robe tightly around her small frame. She holds the neck close against her chin. “She’s not mine. Rachel’s not my child.”

The air goes out of him. “Then who . . . ?”

“She’s Dora’s,” she says. She fumbles, stroking the collar of her robe like she’s attending her last confessional. “And yours.”

Heavy legs, heavy heart, heavy. Knowing this thing pins him in place.

“Dora gave birth nearly nine months to the day after the fire. You were gone, and I was healing. We’ve helped one another since.”

It’s too late to put me back together. It’s too late to try and make me live again.

“She called me, Dora did. She called me to tell me you were coming.”

She’s fluttering, a fragile bird that he could crush.

“She must be so worried. I should call and let her know everything’s okay.”

Spencer doesn’t move, can feel her branding him as her own as she moves toward the phone. She wipes her nose with the sleeve of her robe. He bores a hole with his eyes through the carpet and under the house.

Forgiveness, something he doesn’t know how to ask for nor how to give, has always seemed like a fairytale. But the girl is his, he thinks. He loved her before he even knew her; he felt it when he watched the way she walked with her head down, the way she peeked up from under her brows; her gangly legs and long arms told the story in his heart. This much his mother told right.

Rachel sleeps in a white bed with a canopy on one side of the room. Dappled light from the street bathes her hair in surreal silver. Her small body curls around a stuffed unicorn, and Spencer can smell her newness, a clean scent that smells to him like the first winter wind blowing in the warmth of Indian summer. He can see himself in the way her little body forms a perfect “C” as she sleeps, his most comfortable position. He thinks about the kids from the bus, and he wants to beat them back for her, give her his strength. Spencer knows what it was like to be the kid of the drunken divorcee who lived on Main Street. He wants to teach Rachel what he’s learned about bearing up under the weight of this kind of shame.

Another single bed presses against the adjacent wall, and a white bureau sports a picture of him in his high school football uniform. He is smiling, kneeling, pretending to block

the opposition with the football cupped in his wired and cut forearm. The room is ordered, clean, and every inch of what he wished for once.

He stands there a long while watching Rachel breathe while remembering the misery of his youth, but he marvels in the miracle he has made in this same instant. He understands the reason behind Dora's special attention; he understands and feels sorry for leaving her in this alone. It was just the one time, a celebration after the game against Watkins. It was a week before the fire at best, just seven days before he'd struck that match.

That day, the day of the fire, his mother slapped him and sent all of the plates sailing from the cupboards. He picked up the shards, cleaning the mess as she made it, listening all the while to her calling him names, damning him for being alive. She said he was no good, said he was just like his bastard father, and he hated her more with each word that she spat at him.

Spencer watched his mother's mind close down and fall into a deep nothing as she passed out that day. He waited for her breathing to grow regular, watched the vodka slip from her glass and soak the pillow next to her head before he lit the cigarette and placed it between her sleeping fingers. Then, the pillow lit, and he simply walked away, left the rest to fate.

And now, fate has come around to catch him up like a giant cog in a grinding gear. Fate is here to teach him something new, something so humbling that he isn't sure if he can bear up under the weight of it.

He retraces his steps, exploding into the front room to find his mother standing there, face buried in her hands. He needs to tell her, needs to cleanse his guilt before they go any further with this thing.

The wall clock stops ticking. The lack of noise closes around him; the moment hangs in the air like mist in a cloud.

"I have to tell you about the fire," he says.

She cuts her eyes to him; her mouth works like it's full of cotton. "I don't want to know." She wraps her thin arms around his neck and brings his ear to her mouth. "I don't care

to know it.”

He thinks she’s known all along. He thinks she’s known and wants to keep it safe and buried between them. She wants to forget, leave it untended, but he doesn’t know if he can keep it quiet inside his head.

“That fire gave me back my real life,” she says. “Don’t forget that for an instant.” She takes his face in her hands and brings him close, kisses his cheek. Honest tears, a wet and warm memory saturating his mind. “We won’t talk like this again.”

Her words are like nectar he’d craved while he waited for her in the hospital, an impossible turn that he gave up wishing for a long time ago. Her guilt birthed his guilt, and it weaves their lives together, a perfect and complete terrible beauty. It is up to them now, Spencer, his mother and Dora. It is up to them, right in this moment, to try something new, to change the rest of their lives into something else, something better than it has been.

Spencer feels lighter now, taller, more of a man than he was just an hour before when he left the truckstop and Dora. He thinks he believes in his mother again; he wants to believe in her, wants to try to go on.

The lights from a car in the back alley bounce through the kitchen window and force them into their own spaces. He wonders how he missed it, Dora’s car in the alley for so many months. Another kindness, her hiding the car in the back alley, or was it simply fear for her child? Spencer watches Dora through the small window in the kitchen as she moves through the yard. She turns her key in the lock. Mother puts a finger to her lips, shakes her head, and wipes her face with the arm of her robe.

Spencer stands erect, rigid. He pulls at the bottom of his shirt; a tic dances across his cheek and makes him blink. He thinks he can do it; he hopes that they can forgive each other good enough to make it work. He doesn’t know if he can press himself into this new form, but he lifts his frame tall anyway, pulls at the waist of his new pants, and waits for the hope he feels to mass into something solid. He waits for his future to enter his mother’s house.

Katherine Enggass

Ghost Floor

During what we all knew was her final illness, my mother gave us jobs to do around the house. Mine was to keep the bathroom clean. It had a black and white checkerboard floor, one sleek stripe of black tiles accenting the white tiles surrounding the bathtub, red towels, and a built-in black soap dish above a freestanding sink that looked like a birdbath.

My father no longer slept upstairs with my mother. He spent the nights dozing on the couch in the living room where he listened to her rustles and sighs via a baby monitor, its speaker placed on the piano like a metronome. Evenings, instead of conversations back and forth we got only my mother, continuously, and she didn't get us.

While I cleaned I often thought about a certain boy, a friend of my older brother Thomas. Sometimes I would find myself sitting on the chipped toilet lid with a cloth in my hand staring in an unfocused way at the floor. That's when a second floor would appear, floating about a foot above the original one. I would automatically call up this ghost floor, which soon began to seem more real than the actual floor, while I thought about the boy. I liked him because of the way he would never face me but would always stand sideways to me, alongside me but a little bit away, as if I were particularly skittish or potentially dangerous.

The boy I'd noticed, this young man, loved baseball. He often played catcher, which made his thighs bunch up in a way that was hard to ignore. He had small perfectly formed ears that were tilted flat on a line parallel to that of his jaw, and I would imagine putting my palms along his jaw and sliding my hands up until my thumbs tucked behind his ears and my fingers cupped around the curve of his skull. There's a good hollow place for a thumb to touch, just behind the jaw's hinge. I carved it once into a block of basswood. When I was done I gave the wood a kiss and a few dried shavings clung to my lips, until I blew them off.

Names. Joseph, Joseph Dupolos. I never spoke his name

in vain, I mostly just said *He*. Joseph of Polos, I sometimes thought, polishing porcelain. Polos to me was a Greek island with bleached ruins perched high above unbelievably aquamarine water. I imagined the scene in miniature. My brain in those days was a panorama set in a shoebox.

When my brother and I were very young my mother would plunk us down in the bathtub together, the very bathtub that was now mine to clean. We'd lather up with soap, close the shower curtain, and slide in circles past each other until the water turned milky opaque. Afterwards my mother would scour the tub. When years later she was pregnant with my sister Carolyn she would climb right into the tub to clean it.

Names. My name is Olivia Lusk. My piano teacher (old Mrs. Chavez) once told me with a sigh while she was trimming my fingernails that my name was right out of a romance novel. She trilled a waltz. She envisioned great feminine escapades for me in spite of the condition of my nails.

The chorus room at school had a high ceiling and a sloping floor like a swimming pool. That winter of dwindling days I could not get rid of the feeling that we were all under water, that the sounds we made were released encapsulated in bubbles. The teacher, an energetic woman with masses of golden hair and thick glasses, wavered in the deep end facing all of us. Our desks were arranged on curved tiers that looked down on her. We groaned when she made us stand to sing.

I had a clear voice but couldn't carry a tune unless I stood next to a strong singer, so I parked myself near another alto, Michelle Ashida, who had sparkling baby-sized teeth, a broad face, and black hair that had an unusual musty smell that I thought of as dried caterpillar. The scent was instantly addictive. Whenever we swung our heads together, giggling for no particular reason other than we were simultaneously bored and thrilled with ourselves, I'd always take a deep sniff of her scalp.

In class when we were supposed to be doing our breathing exercises Michelle Ashida bent down and ran her hand along my calf. "I thought you were wearing nylons," she said, flushing a little when she realized what she'd done. When she came over to my house we snuck looks at my father's magazines

and ate cherry cough drops until our tongues were as numb as rubber. I showed her my mother's collection of desert roses. When Michelle talked she always played with her hair, tucking it behind her ears, forming little paintbrushes with the blunt ends and painting along her delicate brows.

One night I went skating with Michelle in the false winter of an indoor rink. I skated better than I ever had before because with her I was not afraid of falling. We spun around together under lights like close-up stars until out of nowhere my brother appeared. "You look happy," he said to me suspiciously. Michelle sailed up to him and grabbed his arm, almost knocking him over. I wondered what was wrong with her. Her cheeks were bright red.

"This is my brother Tom," I said.

"Tommy, I love you, Tom." Her breath came out in cherry puffs. "It's love at first sight." Then she laughed in a crazy way when he pulled off her hat. It wasn't that cold; she didn't even need a hat. Her hair was full of electricity. Tom followed Michelle carrying the hat when she skated off.

I picked up my sister Carolyn outside the elementary school at our spot by the flagpole and we drifted toward home, the mountain blue in the distance. For a while we balanced on the neighbor's railroad ties, Carolyn slipping every so often onto perfectly raked gravel. The neighbors were retired and had nothing better to do than to groom their property and sit at their plastic-covered picnic table watching their prickly pears grow. Our yard in front looked respectable enough, but the back was overgrown with snarled tumbleweeds and fierce yellow tufts of desert grass. This we blamed silently on my mother's condition, as if it had somehow spread to include the landscape.

That day on the neighbor's picnic table sat two fat striped watermelons in a puddle of water and a knife. Something about watermelons nestled side by side stopped me there. Carolyn ran ahead and I walked up to the table and touched one of the melons. It was warm and clear sap oozed steadily from its stem. I thought about two pinstriped thighs straining toward knees. I wanted to see exactly, to strip away and study how *His* legs tapered abruptly to those improbably slim knees.

How did the muscles work, and how did he even walk with all of that going on? My hand curved around the melons. On the ground nearby was a shallow wooden bowl, like a trough or a small dugout canoe with two gloves curled together in the center. Inside the house the neighbor's little dog began to yap. The neighbor appeared as a gray shadow at the back door. I left, pretending not to see her.

My piano teacher was in her yard plucking dead leaves from her rose bushes when I passed by.

"Are you crying?" she asked. She came out to the sidewalk and touched my shoulder. I was taller than she was, and bony enough to intimidate. "Are you hungry?"

She didn't think anyone took care of me. But—I have always wanted to tell her—people *did* take care of me well enough, as well as people can and people aren't everything, so she shouldn't have worried. During her illness, for example, my mother had made a ritual of speaking to each one of us alone each day in her room. Sometimes she made sense and sometimes she didn't. At times she slept through the visits, but that wasn't the point. One at a time we would sit next to her on the bedspread, ducking under a sort of scaffolding my father had rigged so that my mother could prop her arm up all day without effort. The lymph nodes under her left arm were swollen several times their normal size. She had a plum-sized lump high on her neck, too, which had made her deaf in one ear. We weren't fazed by it. We talked into her good ear. My grandmother, a former nurse, gave my mother morphine and for the rest of us cooked spaghetti, stews, and piles of chicken—food for an army. She also kept the kitchen clean, did the laundry, and took Carolyn away with her whenever I couldn't stand her. My brother looked out for me, swept, vacuumed, dusted, and brought Joseph Dupolos around. My father worked. I cleaned the bathroom and watched Carolyn. Carolyn picked up her toys. That was my mother's list and we followed it.

I assured Mrs. Chavez that I was fine. My piano teacher's job was to hear the beautiful melodies behind stumbling efforts. Like my ghost floor she conjured them up.

A mysterious elusiveness, almost obliterated by false notes, kept us going.

During our breathing practice, our chorus teacher made us stop and start over, stop and start over, cutting us off with her hands. She counted in a loud, determined way while we did our tongue exercises, way out, side-to-side, tilt. She pushed and pulled and pounded at us, but we were as sluggish as cold, old clay. Michelle whispered to the girl seated on her other side, “Just little circles,” she was saying. “Rubbing your back in little circles means they *want* to.” The other girl nodded, widening her eyes at Michelle’s wisdom. Down in front a tall boy staggered out of the seats, retching, his hand over his mouth. *Splat*, he flung a pool of plastic vomit at the teacher’s feet. A few people laughed. Our teacher picked up the sickness and handed it back to him, then removed her glasses and set them on the scarred piano. The tall boy bowed and dropped back into his seat with his long legs sprawled in front of him.

“I’ve tried and I’ve tried,” our teacher said finally, blinking. Her eyes looked soft without the glasses. “I’ve tried everything I can think of to reach you people.” Michelle sighed impatiently. I tried to think of something I could whisper to her so that I could sniff her hair. We waited. I forgot Michelle. The teacher’s hands hung at her side. I was amazed by the wide-open defeat in her posture. She didn’t even lift her hands to hide or protect or wipe her face. She didn’t hunch over or collapse or walk out. In cold silence we watched her cry until the bell rang.

In the garage my father was working on another cedar chest. He sold these and benches, headboards and bed frames, cabinets, decorative shelves, doors, and lamps. Sometimes customers would request that he fasten all sorts of hardware to these pieces, scalloped false handles, ornate knobs designed to look like shells or swords or twigs, brass corner fittings, elaborate hinges. During such projects he would always murmur sadly about the wood lost under all that junk.

I poked through his pile of scraps and found a block of cedar just larger than a man’s hand. Above the noise of the sander I asked if I could have it and he nodded without looking.

I wanted that block because I had a picture in my head of the neighbors’ watermelons and I thought I might make

something for my mother. I didn't want her to think that I was wasting all my time on thoughts of boys, even if I was. She had given me her woodcarving tools when she got weak again, after my father had forbidden her to use them because she had the habit of becoming too absorbed and cut herself too often. My hands were fine, strong, large for a girl. I knew I had done something right when my father once said that I was like him, I thought with my hands.

Upstairs I found my grandmother changing the sheets while my mother, wearing a striped shirt and nothing else, nodded nearby in a wicker chair.

"Where is Carolyn?" my grandmother asked, puffing a little as the cloth billowed and settled. "Downstairs," I answered, even though I didn't know for sure. I set the wood block down and helped my grandmother with the pillow cases, and then, as we eased my lightweight mother into her diaper underwear and then onto the fresh sheets, I saw that wicker had marked her thighs with curved bands like the stripes on her shirt but with depth. I saw how her shape was formed entirely by lines, as if she were standing behind partially closed blinds. My grandmother swung the scaffolding back into place, and my mother draped her arm there and was instantly asleep.

I picked up the wood. "I'm making a sculpture."

My grandmother sighed. "Well, carve away from yourself," she warned.

My mother's tools had faceted wooden handles and faded yellow stickers that said *made in West Germany*. Each blade was engraved with two cherries joined at the stem, although in some the mark had been nearly worn away. There were flat and curved blades of all sizes, some sharper than others. The flat blades produced rough chips and were hard for me to control but left a strong, satisfying texture. The curved ones sailed, making smooth troughs. As I worked with a curved blade I followed one of the golden veins running through the block, then cut across the reddish grains to round the ends. The wood's sawdust scent made me sneeze. Part of the way through when I stopped to rest my fingers I realized that the watermelons were being pushed together due to the shape of the block, that what I was carving had turned into

more of a deep groove than an actual separation.

My piano teacher's son tuned pianos for a living. Even though he was at least forty years old and had a sad face full of folds and creases, he was called Bobby, not Bob or Rob or Robert or Mr. Chavez, due to his minimal shy and clumsy speech, his formlessness, and his pigeon-toed toddler feet. Underneath all that he had perfect pitch.

Bobby stayed for almost an hour bent over the piano's exposed guts, pressing keys and pushing pedals, playing his discordant tuner melodies, while I sat nearby holding the baby monitor and jiggling my leg. My brother and Michelle climbed the stairs, holding hands, leaving me down below, while all those padded hammers tapped directly on my vibrating nerves.

After Bobby was done I walked with him back over to his mother's with the check my father had written in advance. She thanked me and told Bobby that she had a sandwich waiting for him in the kitchen. When he ducked in there she turned back to me and in her concerned way asked me if I wanted to stay to lunch. I had a choice of salami, cheese, bologna or peanut butter. "I'm having cheese," Bobby showed me. I asked for peanut butter and milk, remembering too late that she always made her milk from powder.

Bobby chewed and chewed each bite, politely, with his mouth closed, and wiped his lips often with a pink paper napkin. It looked like he needed a shave. How did he shave all those droops and crumples? When his napkin fell his mother bent to pick it up and I reached over and quickly touched Bobby's cheek. There was no stubble after all, just the beginning shadow beneath the surface. His skin was as velvety as a bulldog's. Bobby smiled at the remains of his sandwich. My teacher tucked the napkin back on his lap. She wasn't eating anything. What would happen to Bobby when one day his mother died?

Peanut butter stuck in my throat so I took a good drink of that milk, which tasted just like you would expect: dried bones dissolved in water.

Summer came. Tom and Joseph Dupolos began working for a landscaper named Rick. They dug trenches for railroad ties, hauled and spread stones, poured cement, planted trees and bushes, laid sod, leveled dirt, and built up hills where there were none. Everywhere they went the land underwent subtle shifts, views changed, old fences fell and new ones blocked access.

My father decided that Rick and company should fix up our back yard so that my mother would experience peaceful and cultivated last visions from her bedroom window. Rick had eyelashes so black that it looked like he wore eyeliner and had a soulful, deferential droop to his stance. The first thing he noticed was a small dark pouch, a bat, tucked under the eaves right by our front door. My father lifted a rake from Rick's truck and poked at the bat with the handle. The bat hissed but didn't move.

"I don't mess with bats," Rick said. "I got nothing to do with bats, nothing." He kept his eyes on the eaves. "A bite will make you sick." He nodded gloomily at me. "He'll fly off there right into her pretty hair and get caught." I laughed. "Hey, she laughs. I'm serious," Rick said.

My father gave me a frown I didn't understand and returned the rake to the truck. I trailed a ways back as they walked around the house to check the yard. My father pointed out what he wanted done, a yucca there, a circle of grass surrounded by bricks, a place for the garden, river rock, cobblestone.

"Cobblestone." Rick shook his head and scribbled something on a piece of paper. As they examined the ancient patio I quit listening and wandered near the wall, where I found a splintered baseball bat under some sagebrush. When I pulled, it came apart easily into two pieces, a broken wishbone. Make a wish.

At bedtime Carolyn got away from me and ran downstairs. I finally found her curled against the door outside in the dark shadow of the front step. I picked her up. "Leave me alone!" she shrieked, fighting me. In her nightgown she was like a bag of cats.

I wanted to, but I couldn't hold her, she was that wild.

Through the kitchen window I watched them work. They were beautiful in the sun behind glass, bending and lifting, their arms vibrating as they took turns pushing a tiller back and forth inside a flat circle made of bricks and mortar. I poured a glass of water and stood in the middle of the kitchen, drinking it down with my eyes closed as I thought about a woman so greedy that she always tilted her head back and gulped at whatever she wanted until puddles of excess formed at her feet. I remembered tears flowing down my chorus teacher's face. Water would take a long time to flow from my head to my feet. I'd grown so tall that I suddenly missed the intimacy of being right down there with my feet, or maybe I missed Carolyn as a baby playing with her toes. I missed my father being himself. I missed something that wasn't even gone yet. I kept drinking the water, feeling it go down. I might as well say goodbye to my feet, I thought, and because that made me laugh I quit swallowing but kept pouring and let the cool water flood over my chin and down my neck, where it broke into rivers across my front.

Someone knocked on the window. Rick was standing right outside, motioning. He wanted to use the telephone. I let him in and he carefully looked away from my wet shirt.

After Rick finished and returned to work I wiped the floor and then took a lawn chair and my sketchbook out to the patio and sat in the drying heat next to Carolyn, who was weaving a potholder on a cardboard loom. My shirt became stiff where the water had spilled and dried. Joseph Dupolos paused in his digging and nodded once at me.

From the other side of the house I could hear the whine of my father's saw change pitch as it hit wood. The mountain shimmered. I could see every bristling antenna on the peak, every twig and needle on every stubby piñon. Ants linked in trains of two crawled on the neighbor's wall. Each moment was so heavy it could barely tip into the next.

Eventually Rick showed up with rolls of sod stacked on a flatbed. White roots were matted in the dirt. After Joseph and Tom had broken up the plot of earth, they crawled back and forth laying the sod over the lumpy ground. It was as though they'd lost a precious coin or gem and were desperately searching for it, or maybe they were on hands and knees in a

cemetery, crawling with grief, sweat falling from their faces like tears. The knees of their jeans and the palms of their hands and the toes of their boots slowly stained green. When they took off their shirts I turned a page and drew their bent backs as they trimmed the strips of sod with long blades to fit the curves of brick.

When my grandmother appeared next to me, they were rolling a large heavy drum over the living circle they'd made in the dust. I flipped the notebook shut. Joseph and Tom quit working, brushed themselves off, and stamped their feet. They went inside.

"The sun will give you wrinkles," my grandmother said. "Or worse." She was the wrinkled one, I thought but didn't say. Rick came up to us, wiping his forehead with a smudged work glove, commenting on the heat. He asked for a glass of water and some salt.

"Salt," I said.

"For the avocado."

The kitchen smelled of raw earth, grass and perspiration—the odor was stronger inside than out—but Joseph and Tom were gone. I got the water and shook some salt into my palm. Outside I poured the salt into Rick's dirty, cupped hand and he stood there with it, sipping the water.

"I never know what she's thinking," my grandmother said, leaving and returning with more salt in a cup. Rick tipped the salt I'd given him into the breeze and took the cup. He walked past me to the new, seamed sod. Gloves poked like boneless hands out of his back pocket.

Carolyn had a dreamy look on her face. Her hand was moving under her shirt, scratching or rubbing.

"Stop that," my grandmother said, and Carolyn jumped. "Watch the game."

Michelle Ashida leaned forward and picked up the bottle of Coke at her feet. When she lifted it drops of condensation sparkled and fell dark on her lap. On the field Tom seemed to wait forever for a fly ball to drop, shifting a few feet to the left and then to the right. He caught it with a delayed smack. Michelle whistled and clapped. "He's good, isn't he," she said. Joseph Dupolos bent to touch his toes, stretched until his ribs

nearly popped free, then turned his hat around and crouched down. The back of his uniform dipped at the waist.

Carolyn was at it again. Some new kid was at the plate. He swung. I reached and held Carolyn's arm and out of the corner of my eye I caught a blur as we ducked.

Joseph began playing with my hand with one of his, turning it, catching it and releasing it, bending the fingers into a fist inside his fist, and I had been watching as if the hand weren't mine but just an object or maybe a small silly animal. Then we were playing that game with stacked hands, on the kitchen table, both our hands, pull one out from underneath and slap it on top. Suddenly he pressed down and I couldn't move my hands at all.

He smiled, raising his eyebrows, which were thick like thumbprints but set far apart. His eyebrows were more like tufts than arcs, riding his expressive brow. They made him look ready to please, unable to frown, eager as a puppy. His eyes were deep-set with dark smudges beneath as if stained by leaks, not like his eyebrows at all but sadder, cautious old drains.

In the morning I placed the nameless sculpture in her good hand, her free one. The bones in her hand stood out like the ribs of a rake, extending below her white robe. Her starved wrist with its bracelets that fell unencumbered to the elbow, a wrist so starkly feminine compared to my own, as if maturity meant not filling out but becoming a skeleton.

Her thumb slid naturally into the dark indentation I'd carved as she asked me if I knew how sick she was. She'd asked me before. I said I knew. She said it was my turn to tell her anything.

I decided to say, "There's a boy I like."

She said, "Oh—"

I waited but that was enough for her, the whole story, or maybe she already knew the story. She set the carving on the spread, pushed the top-heavy diamond of her ring back into place, and asked for my father. I brought him, and she asked him to help with her bath.

As the water ran, I read a story to Carolyn. My grandmother

prepared the meatloaf. Thomas swept crumbs out the back door. Carolyn replaced the book on the shelf when we were done.

My father lifted my mother from the water and wrapped her in a towel. She was pumice, light enough to float, and yet smiled in a slow, knowing, contented way, as if she had a secret. “Like the cat that swallowed the canary,” my father said to us many times afterwards. The next day my grandmother found my sculpture lodged in a way that would have been painful to the living, tucked under the small of my mother’s back, right where all the purpling blood had begun to settle.

The sound of disembodied breathing from upstairs used to fill our living room after dark. What a labor breathing was, a cough, a moan—always, it seemed, more air struggling in than coming out. When it would stop, my father’s eyes would move. He’d be lying on the couch just outside the circle of light from the lamp, a lamp he had made and my mother had decorated by carving the base with crisscrossing ferns. A sudden intake, and the breathing would start up again. My father would reach for his glass. Listen, wait, drink.

In the end there was no real reason to keep using that monitor, now tuned to some haunted frequency. For months we depended on it, though, relied on that crackle of dead airspace kicking in for the night, as familiar as the hum of the refrigerator or the rattle of that loose fan blade, the turn of a page, the howls of the neighborhood dogs when rabbits came out after dark to chew on the false oasis of our lawns.

Lee Houck

Real as Life

Olivia sits at her kitchen table eating Club Crackers straight from the box while ShiShi the cat spreads out on the table near the laptop. Five days ago the cat began acting strange, severely more affectionate than normal. She stared at Olivia for an hour at a time, hardly blinking. Four days ago the cat didn't come out of her hiding place in the closet, not once, the whole day—not for treats, not for the laser pointer, not for even a tiny warmed patty of fresh ground turkey. She wouldn't eat, or sometimes she would try to eat and then stop. Three days ago the cat started sneezing a lot, and drooling, and this went on until yesterday when the drooling got worse, and turned from the thin, clear stuff you might leave on your own pillow at night to a thick, opaque mucus that got on ShiShi's fur and then turned matted and brown. ShiShi's arthritis, already bad in her shoulders and hips, must have been flaring up again—she could never get comfortable, always shifting, over and over. Olivia thinks that after eighteen years spent alongside this creature—her longest chosen companion—maybe it's time to take ShiShi to the vet for the last time. Olivia calls to make the appointment, which they set for the early afternoon.

Then the crackers are gone and it is already 9:00 a.m. For a few minutes Olivia scrolls through CNN.com, then an email from her retired father pings into view in the corner of the screen:

Hello Oli. Yesterday I made an adapter to hold Scotch Brite disks in the die grinder and used them to clean charred material off the underside of the pans on the stove. Then I walked along the Riverwalk and pointed out some turtles to children on bikes and one on some kind of modern skateboard. It was a very productive day. I went to WalMart. Parked very close to the door and there was no line.

Olivia works as a real-as-life model. She is of real proportions. She lacks that ethereal, cervine quality a

runway model should have. They used to call it “plus-sized” but that terminology fell out of favor for some reason Olivia suspects has to do with the softening and shrouding of all culture and directness, everywhere. Six months ago her agent asked her to change her resume and website to read “real-as-life,” and immediately she started getting better bookings. Olivia considers her schedule—commute, shoot, commute again, vet. Canceling her morning gig is not an option; the only way to make the appointment is to take the cat with her.

Olivia snatches ShiShi up and guides her into the cat carrier. Olivia attaches some fabric to the front so that ShiShi doesn't hurt herself pressing her face against the metal grate. ShiShi is howling the worst of all howls the entire eight blocks to the train and then she urinates, either on purpose or because she's scared, and it drips out of the back of the carrier onto Olivia's leg and the sidewalk.

In the train car there is a print ad for a Sheepshead Bay language school that features Olivia standing at the front of a classroom full of adult students, with the words LEARN ENGLISH TODAY written on the chalkboard. In the image she is smiling and holding a thick textbook. It was *The Complete Guide to Environmental Careers*—nothing to do with language; they just handed it to her. Olivia is looking at herself in the ad and ShiShi is wailing and scratching at the holes in the side of the carrier and the other passengers are staring and Olivia starts crying.

Olivia arrives at the loft space on 37th Street. ShiShi has stopped wailing, and curls up, panting and exhausted inside the carrier, which Olivia places in the corner. Then, an assistant hands her a tight black bodysuit with tiny yellow spheres sewn along the limbs, and in three lines down the front and back. Behind a dressing screen, Olivia squeezes herself into the suit.

A redhead with a clipboard gestures for her to step to the center of the room—walls and floor and ceiling all painted the same shade of froggy green—and Olivia eases her body into the space. A camera on a tripod stands in each corner. Cables covered in tape the same shade of green pour out of each, then snake along the floor and disappear into the wall. There is a man in a beret sitting behind one of the cameras, the

director maybe, and he does not turn away from the screen of his phone to look at or say anything to Olivia.

“You’re my real lifer?” asks the redhead.

“That’s me,” says Olivia.

“Nice of you to bring that,” she says, pointing to ShiShi in the carrier.

“Sorry,” Olivia says, “I couldn’t make other arrangements.”

“Okay,” says the redhead, “We’re gonna have you do ten or twelve different walks, five different ways to maybe look at apartments, enjoy the amenities, hang out along the waterfront, you get the deal.” The redhead’s voice is pinched but blurry, she runs words together, and she is very loud.

Olivia says, “Honestly, I’ve never done a job like this.”

The redhead continues, “Great, that’s no problem. You’ll move your body and your body will move the sensors and the cameras in this big green room will record the movements of the sensors. Got it?”

“Got it,” Olivia says. “Where’s this going?”

“It’s a package for an architectural firm,” says the redhead. “A new development is going up in the spring, so there’ll be TV spots and some subway presence, busses if they decide they have any money left.”

Olivia is usually hired to play real people, or at least human beings in real space. Last week, she was asked to portray a “mid-30s urban woman without insurance” in a television announcement for the Essex County Department of Health. The week before that she sat in a dental chair for three hours while eleven dentists from the SmileBrite chain came through, one at a time, and pretended to work on her open mouth. They shot print and web ads for eleven different neighborhood circulars.

“We hired you to perform many female prospective renters, then we’ll create different digital skins and combine them in groupings. In the end it makes for more natural, more real-looking renderings.”

“I see,” says Olivia.

“Because they’re from a person, not a computer. People like the feel of it more.”

“Right,” says Olivia.

“And it’s cheaper,” says the redhead.

Olivia says nothing. “Sorry,” she goes on, pretending to bonk herself in the head with the clipboard. “What I mean to say is we hired you for you. Just be you. Feel free to move around a bit, to get a feel for how the suit reacts. It’s Olive, right?”

“Olivia,” she answers.

“Okay,” says the redhead, “Let’s have you do your regular walk. Like the most normal walk you can do without any kind of acting or affect.” The director puts his hand on the camera and leans over to look through the viewfinder. The redhead points, “Start over there and end up over here.”

No one has ever asked Olivia to walk as normally as she possibly can, and upon hearing this request her body becomes stiff and cartoonish. She feels eyes, both real and mechanical, watching her.

Olivia walks.

“Great. Now back,” says the redhead.

Olivia walks two more times, and then back to the starting place. “Okay, hold there for a minute,” says the redhead, who leans in close to the director. They are talking and gesturing and periodically looking back at Olivia. The redhead walks over to the wall, somehow opens a door, which seems to have no handle or knob, and slips through it. A minute later the redhead returns holding a man’s tweed blazer, and Olivia takes several deep breaths. The redhead is talking quietly when Olivia hears the director say “She is kind of mannish.” The blazer has dark leather elbow patches and reminds Olivia of the dandruffy professors she had at Oberlin. Professor Proctor who gave everyone Ds. And Professor Norris, who everyone called by his first name, Gerald, and then eventually Geraldine, since he walked the fine line of whatever gender he was or eventually was. Some of the freshmen were uncomfortable and silent for weeks.

The redhead walks over to Olivia, holding the blazer away from her, like you would a dirty diaper, and Olivia realizes that the blazer is for her. She smiles, “Can you try this?”

“Won’t it cover up the sensors?” Olivia says, running her hands along the lapels.

“They’re dynamic,” the redhead says, “the cameras will capture them through the fabric.”

“Oh, okay,” says Olivia, not sure how this will happen. But she is trying to do a good job, so she puts the coat on. It’s too small. It fits in the shoulders but it won’t close around her belly and the arms are too short. The redhead seems excited and goes back to talk with the director behind the camera, so Olivia thinks they’re probably going with it.

“Okay, walk again,” says the redhead, and Olivia does, sharply. “And again,” says the redhead. “Again, back and forth, three times!” The redhead is ecstatic, and Olivia paces, walking with her feet and then with the weight in her shoulders, and then head first, like Professor Proctor would, through every door of every room like he owned the world.

When Olivia was twelve, she and her classmates were selected to participate in an international penpal program. Each of them was paired with a student of the same age in a similar town in Japan. Olivia had to bring six self-addressed envelopes to school, and those envelopes went into a box with all the others and that box would go to Japan. Then every other month a letter from Miyako Kuta arrived addressed to Olivia in Olivia’s own handwriting. She never got over the shock and excitement of the letters arriving, the confusing flash of her own markings, a minor but indelible part of her, moving across the ocean, unharmed—as if part of her had made the journey itself. All these years later, Olivia still remembers the first sentence of the first letter she ever wrote to Miyako. At the time it was all she could talk or think or write or feel anything about: “Today I got a kitten and she is perfect and her name is ShiShi.”

At the vet’s office, Olivia signs some paperwork and checks the box marked “group cremation.” No, she doesn’t need a custom ceramic paw print made post-mortem, although she agrees with the vet tech that it is a precious and unique memento for someone who wants that sort of thing. They ask her if she has any questions and she has a lot—Can you bury animals in Brooklyn? That is, if she hadn’t already chosen cremation? Would they give ShiShi back to her? After? Will her eyes be open or closed? But she doesn’t ask any of these.

Olivia waits in room number three with ShiShi panting

and growling and drooling all over her brown and matted front, her back half wet with urine and her fur in clumps from where she can't reach to clean herself properly. The vet explains that they'll give her a sedative before they give her the drug that does the thing that it does—Olivia doesn't know what happens, exactly. Does the heart stop? The vet explains that what they'll give ShiShi is actually Ketamine, and Olivia thinks this is kind of charming and weird—the same stuff she used to do at The Rave back in Atlanta when she was a teenager and ShiShi was the only creature in the world awake to greet her when she stumbled home, dehydrated and aching, as the sun was rising. The vet gives ShiShi the Ketamine and ShiShi lays her head down on the blanket they've brought for her, relaxed and glassy. They tell Olivia she can step out of the room at any point during the next part of the procedure, but she stays.

Every night when Olivia sleeps she dreams of how the world will end. In Olivia's version there are no plagues or radiating explosions, no catastrophic dust storms that black out the sun. There are only things that people do to each other, with small, rusting handguns that jam easily, and most people use their bare hands. Olivia sees a child running down the street, naked but wearing a backpack full of homemade arrows and metal throwing stars. The girl leaps onto Olivia, knocking her to the ground, driving her tiny hands into Olivia's face, which is suddenly like Play-Doh, and collapses into a brown, unseeing ball.

A few minutes later, alone, Olivia collects herself. She wraps ShiShi in a towel, and leaving her still and empty body on the table, walks back out into the day.

Dear Oli. Today I dug post-holes for the railing. The soil was soft maybe because of all the rain. I did encounter one head-sized rock that gave me fits. I could only do about 25 minutes in one go but I took my time and now it is finished. Then I made a trip to Ace Hardware and BI-LO and have been resting since. Bad news: my Milwaukee 1/2" Hole Gun stopped working but I have used it loyally since 1978 so I suppose things go the way they are supposed to go. Very productive!

The next morning Olivia fills the French press and then while she waits for the water to boil she empties the cat's dish, pouring what's left of the dry food into the garbage and then putting the bowl into the sink. She looks around at the toys on the floor and the scratching posts in the living room and she wonders if the animal rescue center nearby takes donations.

Then Olivia's older sister Ruby calls from Virginia.

"Hey," Ruby says. "What's shakin'?"

"Hey," Olivia says.

"How are you?"

"Fine, same. Are you getting emails from Dad?"

"Yes, they are so weird and so him." The first sip of coffee is too hot and tastes strangely soured, and Olivia wonders if coffee beans get freezer burn.

Ruby says, "Every time I go over he's watching something about the Civil War on YouTube, what are those called? Re-enactors? He watches videos of all the different battles. And he looks at eBay constantly."

"I hope he isn't buying everything in the world."

"I don't think he buys much," Ruby says. "But I saw an email on his screen the other day and the subject line was 'Your eBay alert for "*Dremel attachments rare*" has returned the following items.'"

"That's cute," says Olivia.

"It's boring," says Ruby.

"Not to him," says Olivia, and Ruby laughs. Olivia loves the sound of Ruby's laugh—it has been this way even when they were children, never changing, rough and throaty, and Olivia is happy that after all the years, out of everything, this has stayed the same.

"Ruby," Olivia says, "ShiShi is gone."

"Gone?"

"Well, dead."

"No way, I'm so sorry. Shit. You're kidding?"

"Not kidding," Olivia says.

"What happened?"

"She was eighteen years old. Everything stopped working all at once."

"Wow, I can't believe it," Ruby says. "The end of an

era.” Olivia feels the strange weight of grief on her chest, and she stares at the mug. Ruby sighs, and there is a brief moment where neither sister says anything.

“I’m going to come down this weekend,” Olivia says. “I’ll take the train, I’ll let you know.”

“Oh good, I can’t wait,” Ruby says, and they hang up.

Everywhere Olivia looks, a phantom moves like a brown blur—in corners, in the bathroom, at the foot of the bed. We remember them first with our bodies. They live forever in our cells, and we conjure their ghosts by rote.

Olivia calls out into the room: “Is it you?”

Hello Oli. That is great news. I am looking forward to the visit. I got some things at BI-LO and WalMart both in anticipation of the weekend. Doing two stores on the same day is very nearly as exhausting as a full day of work! There were children running around wildly and riding in buggies and not at all supervised. When I got home I worked on the leaves and made large piles that I put into the shredder and the best part was that the shredder started right up.

Penn Station is Olivia’s least favorite place in New York, and she is glad only for the rushing, ticking sound of the departures board, which tells her that the Northeast Regional leaves in twenty minutes. She will arrive in Charlottesville at just past dinnertime. She goes looking for snacks and magazines and buys three kinds of granola bars, a bottle of water, and a bag of Fritos. She buys a People, a Cosmopolitan and a book of word search puzzles that she will leave at her father’s house, maybe he’ll do them. In one aisle there is a brand of herbal supplements that she once modeled for, but now the box features another woman pretending to have a migraine, and this seems fine to Olivia since she posed for it so long ago, and now it is not even in her portfolio. A voice announces the track number and Olivia streams down the escalators with a hundred other people. She settles into a seat by the window, on the right side of the train so she can watch the stations and parking lots go by—she especially likes the sea mammal murals at Wilmington, their blocky, hard proportions and the soft teal color someone chose for

the sky. Olivia keeps her luggage in the seat next to her, and no one asks if she will move it. Soon she has eaten everything and she rolls her jacket into a ball, tucking it between her head and the glass. For a while she sleeps, and there are no dreams, no lurching journeys into a broken and burning future, and when she wakes the conductor is announcing the stop in Manassas, which sounds to her like a place from the history books. Olivia wonders if maybe this is something they could talk about—what happened there and what it was like.

They will try not to talk about Olivia's mother. In fact they will do everything possible to avoid talking about Olivia's mother, who sits every day in a wheelchair near a window, because that's where the nurses leave her, who has not spoken since the day she arrived in the extended care unit, except to moan and mumble incoherently when the moon is full, or on Thursdays, no one can say what brings it on. Olivia was eight years old when her mother went out for cans of beans—she made them with brown sugar and strips of bacon—and something in her brain snapped. That's how it was described to Olivia later, like a circuit, like a string suddenly cut in two. So her mother stood in the middle of Seminole Road, miles from the store, refusing to move, until the police put her in the back of an ambulance. Olivia didn't actually see it, but since then she has turned the moment over in her imagination and now it replays like a dim reel of old film: Metal cans stacked in paper sacks on the double yellow line. Her mother standing out in the road, crying and screaming, waving her arms.

As a girl, Olivia had no real answer to the question that seemed to inevitably arise at the sleepovers and toenail painting parties. There were long strips of paper and pens with metallic ink and everyone wrote questions to pull from a big Tupperware bowl: What boy would you kiss? Are there any teachers you would marry?

Then it was Olivia's turn. What is your most embarrassing moment?

The train arrives and Olivia walks along the platform to the parking lot. Her father is there, waving from the window of his car—a giant pale blue thing, restored over years and years in the garage; she is surprised that it is even running. It

feels like a boat moving down the freeway.

“Do you like Chinese food?” her father asks. “There is a place I like to order from, but they don’t deliver like Domino’s, so we have to pick it up on our way to the house.”

“That sounds good,” Olivia says.

“Chicken and beef, lots of rice,” he says. “It will be fine when we re-heat it.”

She sets her bag in the spare bedroom. There are photos of her and Ruby from over the years, from all the years, in the shelves—no books or back issues of magazines. The frames seem to be all he kept in the move. He sold the house that she and Ruby grew up in a few years back, and landed here, in something smaller, but with more yard, plus acres of forest and hills surrounding. If something were to happen to him, Olivia sometimes thought, who would ever know it? In one of the frames is a picture of Olivia and ShiShi in their first apartment in Jersey City—a horrorshow of leaks and crooked floors and blaring insistent Bachata music all day and night without end—but she is smiling and ShiShi looks bright and healthy. Olivia mailed the photo to her father about six weeks after moving away—she meant it as a promise, a reassurance. See, she wanted it to read, we are here, we made it, we are okay. Olivia puts the frame into her purse.

“It’s too bad about the cat,” her father says.

“Yes, it is.”

“I tell you, though, every day there are a dozen of them in the newspaper listings, any kind you want, some free, some for charge. I think they ask for money so, you know, it’s not some kind of teenagers doing sadistic devil worship, where they do crazy animal sacrifice.”

“I don’t think that happens,” Olivia says. “I think that’s just urban legend.”

“Probably you’re right,” he said. “But they do ask for money, I can tell you that. Good way to make some, I guess.”

They settle into the couch and her father turns on the TV, zipping through his DVR, landing on *The Price is Right*. The room fills with ambient applause and plinky, pastel music.

“I record it,” he says. “In case I’m outside doing something. You don’t mind?”

“I like it,” she tells him.

Olivia divides the food between two bowls and puts each in the microwave for two minutes. They sit together on the couch and the food tastes good, everything hitting the same brownish note, but it is warm and salty and she finishes quickly. A bronzed lady in a cotton candy-colored bikini is lounging on a speedboat, fake wind blowing through her hair. A college student wearing a Nebraska sweatshirt stands frozen behind a chalky-colored podium, staring into the audience. He wins and her father seems happy. "Dammit, Oli, amazing. Would you look at that," he says. They move on to the \$25,000 Pyramid, a few episodes of Match Game, Jeopardy! and finally Wheel of Fortune. Her father is a pro and guesses all the puzzles before the contestants. He narrates everything out loud. "R-S-T-L-N-E," he says. "C-D-M-A."

Olivia cleans up the coffee table, wipes the spots of sauce from the glass, and washes the plates and plastic containers. He switches the TV over to The History Channel and for an hour they watch something about airplanes in the Second World War, tiny snippets of jumpy, static-filled footage. In every clip, bombs pour like strands of beads from their berths.

Then her father points the remote to the screen and the picture fades into a tiny white dot. He moves around the room, clicking off lamps and re-checking the latch on the front door.

"Goodnight, Dad," Olivia says.

"Goodnight," he says. "I'm so happy that you're here."

Olivia finds a bottle of Revlon ColorStay in her purse, an almost purple red called "Queen of Hearts." She sits at the small kitchen table, dipping the brush into the polish and drawing it over her nails, one then the next, coat after coat. She waits for her fingers to be dry, and then an hour has gone by, maybe three, and the night is in full bloom and everything is quiet.

"What is it, Oli?" her father asks.

Olivia turns to see her father standing in the kitchen; his pajama bottoms seem as bright and pale as the moon. He is without a shirt and Olivia notices for the first time how much older he looks, older than she remembers. Vulnerable, like a body she has seen in medical books. He

does not seem like the man who raised her, all those years after, without real help or a companion. His house, his truck, his two little girls and his nutcase wife tucked away in a home.

“What are you doing awake?” her father says. “It’s almost three o’clock in the morning.”

“When I go out in the city I don’t see young fresh faces. I see people not aware of how messed up they are. They’re moving through the world with no place, just tourists.”

“What are you talking about?”

“And when I sleep I dream the most awful things, and sometimes I don’t know where I am. And the only books I can read are memoirs. Hikers and long-distance sailors and Food Network chefs. Even Sally Jesse Raphael, remember her?”

“I think I do,” he says. “Oli, are you okay?” Olivia leans back in the chair, lets her body slide down, her posture has always been the worst.

“I don’t know,” she says, “The other day I put whole coffee beans in the coffee press, and I wondered—”

“It’s not genetic,” he says.

“Isn’t it, though? Mom was only 39 and I am getting closer to that number every day. I realized recently that in only a few more years I will have been an adult longer than I was not an adult.”

“You will always be my wonderful, caring, beautiful daughter.”

“I get it, dad. I get it.”

“Olivia, you’re confusing me,” he says.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “Go on back to bed. Everything is fine.”

He stays still in the doorway like a wax figure, his hands at his side held in fists.

After her father has gone back to bed she calls a taxi before gathering up her things. She didn’t bring much and it only takes a minute.

“Airport?” the driver asks.

“Four Oaks Community Care,” Olivia says.

“Coming right up,” he says. They pass through the university campus, then out onto the wide roads on the way to Monticello, where there are gnarled rows of apple trees. Olivia asks the

taxi to wait in the parking lot. She goes through the double doors, which send a burst of cold air smelling like bubble gum and too many cleaning products across her face. She stops at the desk, as the large signpost says to do.

“Hello,” says the receptionist. “What can I do for you?”

“Hi,” says Olivia. There is a propped-open box of Dunkin’ Donuts on the corner of the counter, glowing and pink.

“Did I . . . Sorry,” the receptionist says. “But you’re from TV, aren’t you?”

“Oh, you might have seen me in a commercial,” says Olivia, which is the line she has practiced and used time and again. It could have been anything—Wendy’s or American Express or AirBnB. She will never learn how to navigate and deflect this sudden intimacy. It’s not really her they saw, anyway.

“I just came to leave something for one of the residents. Can you deliver this to Mrs. Gilbert?”

“You’re her daughter, right?”

“Um, yes,” Olivia says. “Her younger daughter.”

“Patty,” the receptionist says, calling out to someone sitting in another room. “Patty, come look, Mrs. Gilbert’s daughter is someone from TV.”

“Oh, no, I’m not really an actor. They just call me when they need someone.” Olivia hands over the frame, “Could you maybe put it near her bed? Somewhere she can see it. She might ask about it. I don’t know.”

“Sure thing,” the receptionist says.

“Thank you,” says Olivia, and she goes.

The train back to New York leaves at 4:25am. The taxi drops Olivia at the station where she waits on the platform with only a few other travelers, quiet coffee sippers and two cigarette smokers—everyone seems resentful of the strange hour. She boards the train and the conductor motions for them all to walk to the front. “Empty seats in the first two cars,” he says, over and over as everyone boards. They walk down the aisle together, like a team. She sends apologetic texts to Ruby.

Olivia worries the edge of her skirt between her fingers as they pull away from the station. The train moves heavy and loud, across the land, through the night.

Hello Oli. I understand. Hope you are ok. Today I walked again along the RiverWalk. There was cloud cover from all the way at the bridge at Ringgold Road to the veteran's park and then up each side of the mountain. I extended the afternoon by walking on to the far part of Hunt's Pond and saw some herons there fishing and standing and being together it was glorious. Haven't seen so many out there in years since you were a kid I think. Its not that far to walk if you are following it on a map. But it is the farthest I have walked in quite a while.

Benjamin Schachtman

Gomorrah

Because ‘it’ (the very word, even unspoken, caused Colin to grind his wisdom teeth) was on a Saturday, he’d been left no choice but to come into the city on a weekday if he wanted any chance of stopping it. Now, wedged in traffic, the baking heat radiated up from the blacktop and made the Hudson River below appear like a massive, cruel mirage. The air conditioning in his pickup sputtered and coughed warm air; he turned the fan back on. The smell of rabbit shit and Beagle piss—faint and almost homey on the interstate with the windows open—was now curdling into something noxious. From beside him, the sub-sonic pulsations had been for twenty minutes shaking the truck and with it Colin’s tender bladder (which he called ‘arthritis,’ and refused to be corrected by the one doctor he’d seen). He had gone at the last rest stop, where from the parking lot the new Freedom Tower was visible. But then, for reasons that escaped Colin, twenty lanes of traffic had collapsed into one, suspended above the water. He rolled down the window again and, for the first time, was struck (‘assaulted,’ he would have said) by the lyrical counterpart to the over-amplified bottom end.

Black G.I. Joe, money, guns and hoes, nigga—

Colin tried to look away but *that* word (he was insensitive to ‘ah’ and ‘er’ endings) set off in him a bewildering panic and, like most panicked people, he stared doe-eyed at the thing that had panicked him, willing the lyrics to stop. The sports car’s window rolled down and a young Latina stared out the window at him, stone-faced for a moment before cracking into a slight smile as the volume—impossibly—ratcheted up further. The lyrics continued, unrestrained by Colin’s will.

Black American hero, commas and zeroes—in my paycheck, respected on tha blocks I stay set—

The woman shouted at him—‘what the fuck, Gramps?’—but Colin was hypnotized by the sound of the words, vowels popping like wet peas, the consonants cracking (like the harsh Teutonic edges of those words his older brother had

come home from the war with). He tried to narrow his eyes, to look unaffected. Perhaps they only wanted a reaction. He thought of his own children, who would goad him by waiting until he left the living room for the bathroom and then replacing his Bing Crosby records with Chuck Berry—and later, Lynyrd Skynyrd and Led Zeppelin (those band names that struck Colin like the words spoken in tongues at Pentecostal churches). Back then, he would return, calmly ignoring the transgression; now he found himself staring.

Howitzers and forty calibers, titty-fucking at all hours ah—bitches suck my dick or get the kung-fu grip

A chorus of horns shook Colin and he realized a dozen car-lengths had opened up ahead of him. The pickup belched and rolled forward and, when the traffic settled to a stop again, the sports car and its noise safely enough behind him. The spell broken, he realized he had been holding his breath. He felt the lingering unease of sexual obscenity on his skin like motor oil (had anyone else been there, Colin might have said, ‘how could anyone, let alone a woman, listen to *that*?’). His abdomen hurt, a dull pressure that broke into lacerating pain until he removed his seatbelt. He glanced at the red plastic scoop, a reverse watering can—‘a trucker’s urinal’—and sighed.

He’d use it if necessary. He didn’t want to stop. He wasn’t sure he’d have the nerve to start up again, now that the flow of traffic was pulling him into the city. He’d be in that maze—those dazzling canyons, those thousands, millions—and he’d either find his grandson’s apartment (on West 13th Street, in the West Village, a place that Colin, more than a bit behind the times, had just begun to associate with homosexuality) or flee the labyrinth entirely. And he couldn’t flee. His grandson John was going to make a fool of himself. *A marriage?* Colin knew there were people (‘like that,’ he would say). His brother Patrick had joked, once or twice, about *queers* and *nancies* in the Army. His grandchildren called each other ‘gay,’ but seemingly in jest. And there were those ubiquitous stories about prison. But a marriage? To stand up before God, before *people* (‘for Christ’s sake,’ the post-war Patrick would have been bold enough to say) and make a mockery of marriage. And to ask *him* to bless it? He was glad Miren was gone,

that she had been spared this, the mad decadence of her grandchildren. And he was glad he had time, still, to stop it from happening.

The last time Colin had been to the city was late spring, 1945. The streets had erupted in Cherry blossoms and ticker-tape; the Lexington Amory was buried in what appeared to him to be an unseasonable and slightly pink snow-bank. And, from things he had overheard from his parents about the city (Colin had, from an early age, developed excellent hearing), he believed this—pink snow—to be possible. As his mother said, ‘the city is dazzling, just don’t be dazzled.’ A smart woman, God rest her. But he *was* dazzled; they all were—his younger brother and sister, his father, even his mother. They pressed their faces to the windows of the Packard and their jaws fell open: the blinding gleam of the Chrysler Building, the incomprehensible height of the Empire State Building, the hundreds upon thousands of people, the roar, and the smell. And of course the men—the soldiers, like Patrick—in their uniforms, their medals, and their star-struck Red Cross nurses and WACs clinging to their shoulders. Patrick was a war hero, two purple hearts—one in Cologne, another outside Berlin—and a Congressional medal for mounting a Nazi (‘gnat-see,’ Patrick pronounced it) tank and stuffing a canvas satchel full of grenades into the turret.

When the parade was over, Patrick pulled Colin aside and told him, ‘The gnat-sees had vampire soldiers, they bred ‘em in secret labs in Norway. They captured beautiful blonde women and made them give birth to the *Untotenkommando*. I staked one, caught him creeping up on me when an artillery flare went off over the trench. There he was, blood-red mouth open, fangs dripping with my buddies’ blood. I staked ‘em and he turned to dust. But I kept this.’ And Patrick showed him a ring, much like one he had won at a carnival game in Camden the previous year. It was a metallic skull with lightning bolts framing its black and gaping eye-sockets; unlike the carnival ring, this one was heavy, pulling Colin’s hand downward as Patrick placed it in his palm.

He had been ten. The world terrified and delighted him, Nazi vampires and pink snow, atomic death and girls in skirts

with sheer stockings. He wanted in, wanted all in, wanted to be a part of it, to get a part of it, more than part, all. All, all, all—that was the bullhorn mantra of New York City.

But he had never gone back. He married his high-school sweetheart (a term that would eventually burn off its earnest shell and leave a charred ironic pit, but that at the time was unquestionably the mark of a blessed American life). He had children. He worked in a printing press until the advent of desk-top computers economized his job out of existence. His children had children. Retirement. Rabbit hunting, fishing. Great-grandchildren. Miren, his wife, died in her sleep, and even his most cantankerously secular grandchildren agreed she was a saintly candidate material. Now the end was near. There had been a mild stroke, last year, and medication that he frequently neglected to take. Colin was reconciled to it. He had lived a good life, raised a family—two generations—and secured his acre of Earth. He was ready, save for this thing about his grandson.

And so he had left it, the peace and quiet, fishing in the morning, a beer on the dock, stacks of *Reader's Digest* to be read—undisturbed—in the bathroom and battered Bob Hope tapes warbling through the stereo (his grandchildren had explained that *all* of his music, Sinatra, Crosby, Irving Berlin, could now be put on a tiny metallic device, but he had recoiled—‘what if I lose it?’—and the children had let it go). Now he was sitting in his truck, his bladder an angry, heavy cyst sinking in his gut, the distant throbbing voices of angry black men like the baying of hounds behind a rabbit. The city stunk and screamed, towered before him. It was a wonder God hadn't destroyed it. He had certainly threatened. But here was Colin, not just looking back but *going* back. What had been dazzling had become an abomination, the sublime pushed into the grotesque, magnified and approaching horror. And Colin was driving headlong into it, in a finicky pickup truck with no air conditioning.

After a dizzying sequence of elevated switchbacks—Colin thought of his one abortive attempt to drive through the Catskills—he arrived on the campus of Columbia University and—for the first time since leaving the last rest stop—felt

some manner of control over the pickup, where it went, how fast he drove. The campus was crowded with students who reminded him, pleasantly, of his grandchildren. Their dress was of the same ridiculous sort and, for the young girls, almost obscene, but on this spring day they were shouting and laughing, nearly all of them smiling and singing along to the music in their tiny metal devices. A group of students, sitting on a long sloping lawn, were listening to something on a portable juke-box that sounded very much like Arlo Guthrie (who, although Colin repeatedly denounced him as a Communist, was one of Miren's favorite artists, and not completely unlistenable, and—anyway—'Alice's Restaurant' was a staple at their house around Christmas). He waved out the window and the students waved back (they were likely tripping on industrial doses of psychotropics).

You can have anything you want, at . . .

The blocks rolled by, couples walking dogs, more students, older men in smoking jackets with patched elbows. Colin was starting to feel at ease, thinking—at least—there must be one or two history professors, maybe even a religion expert? If he was stranded here—if the truck died, if his bladder mounted an insurrection—he could find some common ground with these people. Communicate. At least hear himself over their music. And then the light changed and Colin crossed a broad intersection, bigger than the block he had grown up on, and on the far side an oversize truck—an SUV, though no sports were ever entertained in something so excruciatingly polished and waxed—pulled alongside him, its stereo hammering words into the cabin of his pickup.

Yo, hack-saw a nigga's trigger finger off, then kick it at my crib with the ringer off—

Colin instinctively braked—to the angry peeling of rubber and honking of horns—and let the truck pass him. It was a Cadillac, though nothing like the one his father had always dreamed of owning (the one Elvis had driven after the war, the same one Patrick had bought with a G.I. loan and, in a fit of self-destruction to rival the King's own, ran off an intra-coastal bridge down near Stone Harbor in New Jersey, taking it with him to a brackish grave). The Cadillac emblem made Colin think of his father, but the vivid shard of lyric—

‘trigger finger’—summoned Patrick’s face, floating like a mirage over the roasting asphalt. There were not enough years to bury the memory of Patrick, describing with wicked glee how he had sawed the finger off the hand—‘my Bowie knife went right through the flesh, but his super-soldier bone was harder than steel, so I had to get a blow-torch from the quartermaster’—even though his previous story had the vampire soldier evanescing into dust. When Colin pointed out the discrepancy, Patrick had smiled, held the skull-ring up to the light, and said ‘leaving only the hand, Colly-boy, the hand of the *Untotenkommando*, the hand of *fucking* death.’

Another fusillade of horns jolted Colin back into the center lane in time to stop for a traffic light. He could see signs for the Central Park and the brilliant knife tips of the newest midtown skyscrapers appeared above the walk-up tenements. A brief gust cooled him for a moment, a wave of chills settling over his back. His stomach gurgled—bullied out of alignment by his swollen bladder, he assumed—and he undid his belt buckle. He would buckle it again when he got to his grandson’s apartment. He gritted his teeth. The traffic light swayed, the red light prised into rainbow halos by the wet, roiling heat. Through the crosswalk a man pushed a shopping-cart, full of broken electronics and topped with a large portable stereo. The man was swaddled in snow-pants and an oversized ski-jacket. For a moment, Colin smiled—pink snow in early summer—and then the words, on their feeble battery power, made their way to him.

So many fucking keys they call me mister piano—straight from Columbia! Fucking Columbia!

Colin tried to ignore it, wondered whether they meant the college or the country—was it near Mexico, or maybe further south, and weren’t they at some point Communist?—while trying to block out the relentless obscenity.

I got the money, cuz, I got those fucking tools—like Juan Valdez I got Columbian mu—

The song abruptly stopped and a new barrage of lyrics, these somehow sharper and louder, cut through the air.

. . . got a fat ass and birthing hips, dick sucking lips and nursing tits—

The light changed and Colin pressed the gas down hard.

He disliked it when people spoke to their inanimate things—guns, cars, fishing poles, outboard motors—but he begged the pickup to respond; it felt like he was pushing the pedal down into briar muck. The pickup's beleaguered inline four spat and whined. Colin was left shuddering down the avenue, slowly making his way down from 120th Street to the nineties to the mid-eighties, trying to clamp his mind's eye shut, trying not to think about Miren, or—more to the point—Patrick's ungentlemanly assessment of her beauty (what Patrick said, Colin had never repeated, but it was apparently 'beyond the pale,' ever for a man like Patrick). The only sound was the rushing noise of cars passing him on both sides, but he could hear his brother's words.

And then he could hear Miren, in the quiet hours after the children were asleep. She had been, to his private mortification, more worldly than him—she kept up with the news, the revolutions in Asia and South American, the revolutions in literature (Colin finished full stop at Dickens), and in the children's music (he did once actually once ask, in an attempt at civility, 'which one is Pink?'). And she knew things about the other revolution, too: the discovery (really only the latest the rediscovery) of physical love beyond the rhythm method of the Church. She had suggested things and, when she did, she had seemed more like the woman Patrick had described—more like one of Patrick's women—than the chaste Junior he had taken to the prom. And the image of her body threatened to coalesce in space, but Colin shook his head.

'They're dead,' he shouted inside the cramped cab, 'they're dead, Christ almighty, let them be dead in peace.' Then, embarrassed, he drove in silence for a dozen blocks. He was now deep in midtown; gone were the discount stores and fried-chicken joints and pizzerias, gone was the booming music. Steel and glass rose up around him, faceless and seemingly unpeopled. It was frightening, in a way, but also soothing, awing his mind into relative silence. He quietly said an 'Our Father,' and apologized for taking the Lord's name. He focused. Thought about printing fonts—Perpetua, Garamond, Times Roman, Courier—thought about the gentle shaping of serifs. Once, when Miren was in a difficult childbirth (with

Mary, John's mother), and Colin was banished to the waiting room with nothing to do and no way to help, he had consoled himself with the fonts. But now, every thought, every word, seemed like a live wire, a raw nerve, which he'd no sooner touch than recoil in pain. In remembrance. Patrick and his women—his father called them 'lady friends'—but Colin's friends knew they were prostitutes. Patrick himself would tell Colin in twisted detail about the things he did with them. About the 'go-pills' he had saved from the war and, later, the newer, more potent ones he got from black musicians in the city. About being awake with two or three girls for days at a time, drinking case after case of beer. And then there were the other stories, the ones he heard from his friends, from people at the local pub. About Patrick in the city.

Colin was saved, momentarily, from the reverie by the appearance of West 14th Street—one of several signposts he had forced himself to memorize—and turned right. The stabbing pain returned, the most forceful spasm yet, and he momentarily considered pulling over to use the plastic urinal. But he was close, too close to stop now. He undid the button on his slacks and made a series of quick turns, feeling he was drawing closer. The streets were quiet, cobblestoned and tree-lined—this was a neighborhood he could handle—and pleasant looking couples strolled down the sidewalks. Colin waved at a few and they waved back. Then he came to an intersection—West 4th and West 13th—and the sting of panic touched his chest. The clear grid of the city—like the rows and columns of the printing press—had twisted in on itself. The pain spiked and Colin—thinking that he at last knew what all those gut-shot rabbits felt like before he took Patrick's old Bowie to their throats—doubled up in the cab, pressing his head against the steering wheel. Looking up he saw a car pull out of a spot. He pulled in behind it (unaware that this was a spectacular piece of Manhattan luck) and struggled out into the street. The pain was spreading up to his sides and, embarrassingly, down into his groin, but he tried to keep himself together, looking up at the street signs.

Two men approached him, holding hands and Colin stumbled out of the way, fumbling the scrap of paper with John's street address out of his pocket. His vision was going

blurry and he wanted to sit down. But he feared he'd be unable to rise again. He headed down West 4th—not thinking, hoping only that he would see his grandson—and then onto Horatio Street when he saw a small park with a bathroom. Holding his pants up around his waist and thinking only of the relief, of the razor-wire cinching around his guts, he rushed headlong into another couple, two men, who cried out in surprise and amusement—‘watch it, pervert’—at this white haired old man, limping like a wounded animal towards the playground. Colin’s head spun, the bathroom twinned in his shaky vision. Then something pounded in his chest (‘the big one,’ Colin would have thought) and words thudded in his ears.

I have descended from the Heavens, with wings like the Albatross—

He leaned against a fence, panting.

Eyes made of fire and plat-i-num Kalashnikovs—

Still thinking he was having a coronary, he whispered to himself, ‘no, Jesus, not like this.’

The king of all kings, the boss of all bosses—crucifying motherfucking doubters to the crosses—

A black Cadillac pulled up—Colin couldn’t be sure if it was the same one, the city was full of towering, hulking vehicles—and parked across the street. Out of the driver’s side stepped a tall, light-skinned black man dressed in a flowing clothes (likely a dashiki, though Colin wouldn’t have recognized one). He crossed the street and Colin felt a terrible certainty: this was the angel of death. He thought about his father, and Patrick, and the vampire commando, blood dripping from his teeth. He thought about the death’s head skull. Then man came closer—he was saying something but Colin couldn’t hear him—and suddenly Colin felt a sense of calm. The man was surely an angel, but not an evil Nazi angel. His features—so far from Aryan, the broad nose, the thick lips, the dark eyes and densely curled hair—were somehow comforting, familiar. He looked, for a single moment, like the son of God. And then a great release came over Colin and he felt light and warm. He blacked out.

Out of the darkness, resolving slowly, came an image: cedar water lapping at a corn-colored cove. It was summer, and it could have been any summer between '45 and '50, when Colin's family spent the month of August at Lake Lenape. In those years, Patrick was in college on the G.I. Bill. He had kept the Army muscle on and hadn't let his hair go long yet. Girls from other campsites would come by and flirt with him. He'd take them out canoeing, his strokes so powerful that the girls, sitting in the front of the canoe, would be lifted up out of the water. Colin would watch from the beach, at fourteen an early sexual inkling in his mind.

Now, Patrick takes Colin with him (this is how he knows, in some sense, that it is a dream), in a larger rowboat. Two girls—sisters, from the summer camp across the lake—sit in the prow, and Colin and Patrick sit side by side, each with an oar. Patrick rows gently and Colin with all his might, and still the boat lists, their course forever nudged to one side by Patrick's strength. They row to an island and have a picnic. Patrick gives Colin and the younger sister two bottles of beer, still improbably cold from the store, and then disappears with the older sister. Without fanfare, the younger sister pulls her shirt off, tiny breasts pale and freckled. She sits on Colin's lap and kisses him and whispers in his ear, 'I want you.' Such a timid thing, by modern standards, but Colin's head is a supernova of joy and fear.

The younger sister takes off her shorts and for a brief moment Colin is mesmerized by the dark patch of hair at the juncture of her thighs. She walks into the woods—the island is suddenly much larger—and Colin follows her. The woods grow deeper and darker, until Colin realizes that the thicket has become brick and the sand under his feet has become concrete. It is so dark Colin can see only the glowing pale skin of the younger sister, the curve of her hips. She turns over her shoulder, an act too erotic for a girl her age—but this is, after all, a dream—and Colin is caught by the way the tips of her front teeth glisten beneath her swollen upper lip. He follows her down what is now an alley and then she is gone into the city night.

Instead there is Patrick, on his knees, hair hanging long in front of his face, hands grasping the caramel colored thighs

of a young man. The man is thrusting himself into Patrick's face and Patrick is moaning and then looks up at the man with a half-smile and kisses his hip. And then, from out of the darkness, the vampire soldier appears, laughing, blood dripping from fangs—not just two but a whole mouthful of fangs, each like the tip of a Bowie knife—and pointing at Colin. Patrick stands and watches as Colin backs away, screaming, the pitch of his voice slipping up into an inaudible range. Colin finds himself pounding on the vampire's chest with a broken piece of his oar but the vampire just laughs again, wrapping both hands around Colin's neck, each finger heavy with a death's head ring. The vampire squeezes and forces Colin to kneel and Patrick, looking on, shakes his head and whispers, 'you aren't man enough.'

Colin woke to see John standing over him—whispering, 'Grandpop? What are you doing here?'—and then realized, with a hot stab of shame, that he had urinated himself. The black man from the car was also standing over him, speaking to his grandson—'Jesus, baby, who cares why he's here. Let's get him inside'—and then looking down at him. Without realizing it, Colin gave his hand to the man and allowed himself to be helped up. The man gave him a towel to wrap around himself and Colin nodded with mute gratitude. They walked back up the block to where he had parked his pickup. John touched Colin's shoulder and said, 'I saw your truck, I thought maybe you'd just call. You didn't have to come all the way into the city.'

The black man elbowed John, 'just get him inside okay?'

A few doors down from where Colin had parked, the three of them walked down into a garden apartment. Colin had not had concrete expectations about John's apartment, but he had not imagined this; the décor (not the word Colin would have used) reminded him more of his own mother's house, or the way Miren had decorated her sewing room, than the fragmentary images he had conjured up: boarded windows, an old wooden cable-spool on its side as a table, a broken stove full of odds and ends. They sat Colin down on a couch, still wrapped in the towel. John asked if he wanted coffee and Colin again nodded silently. The man introduced himself,

‘I’m Terrence, John’s friend.’

Colin spoke before he could think, ‘I know what you are.’

Terrence crossed his arms and sighed, then said, ‘I think we’re about the same waist, let me see if I can find you some clean pants, okay?’

Colin tried to apologize, but his throat had gone dry. He managed to croak out ‘Sorry.’ Sitting alone in his urine-soaked pants, Colin could hear his grandson and the young man whispering in the kitchen, their voices so low that he could only make out fragments, unsure of whom had said what.

Don’t need. Do. You do. What? Blessing? Don’t. Don’t. You do. You do. Family.

Colin touched his forehead; it was warm and sore, like sunburn. His mouth tasted dry and salty. He tried to remember all the things he had been prepared to say. About John’s grandmother, his family. About what people would say. What would people say? What had people said about Patrick? The words, like shards of glass in his ears. *Queer. Cocksucker. Nigger-loving faggot.* Patrick the Nazi killer, the vampire slayer, the war hero. Who had stood at the gates of Dachau and seen people like himself (‘like that’) in cages. In graves, bodies ten deep and a thousand across. (And though he never told Colin about it, Patrick had in fact caught a *Totenkopfverbände*, a death’s head guard, loading a belted machinegun, preparing to massacre a hundred or so men jailed in a long, narrow cage—triangles and stars, yellow, pink, black, and blue, at that point all mixed in together. He had beaten the guard severely but not quite fatally and, while the man was bleeding to death, Patrick had sawed a finger off of his hand and taken the SS ring. Why he told Colin the vampire story—for Colin’s protection or his own, or simply as a sick B-horror joke—remains unknowable, as Patrick took his stories and memories alike to the grave.)

It still stung Colin, all these years later. Korea came too soon, Vietnam came too late, and too openly, publicly horrible. He’d never had the chance to prove himself. Miren had always said it didn’t matter. That there were other ways to be a man. Colin shook his head. She had been speaking about both of them, of course, but he hadn’t realized it. She meant

too much with her words, they dug too deep into things. She had seen clearer than him, and without her, he couldn't see at all.

The arguing was still percolating softly in the kitchen.

Bible-thumping. Yes. Racist. Don't. Your. No. Grandfather. No. Yes. No. Family.

Outside his grandson's window, the city roasted and clanked like some industrial forge. Inside the apartment, it was quiet and cool. On the mantle over an old brick fireplace, there was a family portrait from the early eighties or late seventies. It was all three generations, Colin and Miren standing in the middle. Mary stood next to Miren, a baby in her arms. John. A man, now. Standing in the kitchen. The man Colin had come to, what? Confront? Convert? Convince? Convict? The words chased their tails in Colin's mind, fading into echoes. Nonsense. His grandson.

He looked so much like Patrick it made his heart ache.

Terrence came back into the room with a pair of khakis and said, 'there's a bathroom, through the kitchen, down the hall.' John stood behind Terrence, a hand on his shoulder, and held a cup of coffee in a large porcelain mug, stenciled with all the old font designs. It had been a gift to Mary when she'd gotten her first apartment, many years ago. She must have handed it down to John.

John smiled, 'here, this'll help. Terrence makes great coffee.'

Colin looked up, eyes wet, and opened his mouth—to say 'thank you'—but all that came out was a low, wordless cry.

Kelsey Tressler

The Chrysalis Center

When they arrive, I give them ginger chamomile tea. The ginger is good for their stomachs—relaxes the tangled knot of intestines. The chamomile pours like honey over their exposed nerves, and holding a hot mug between two cold hands is better than any medicine.

When she came in, I started the tea like usual. The Chrysalis Center is tucked away from the main street, down a cobbled back road. The entrance is humble and windowless with an empty front desk and one waiting room chair. We've had people wander in before and just sit—people looking for solace and knowing instinctively that they've found it.

She came to us the way most do, with hands reaching, but I knew right away she wasn't one of those wandering people. She was here for a purpose. I peeked through the hidden eyehole and then opened the side door.

"Come on, dear," I said, and gestured her into the real parlor. I set down the tea and two teacups while she eyed the small table of finger foods. The girls never eat on their first trip here, but we always put out the snacks anyway. I've found that access to food is more comforting than the actual eating.

She was all dark features and strong, clean right angles. Her wavy black hair fell to the middle of her back and was lovely even in tangles. Her skin reminded me of whipped mousse, smooth and delicate. As she took off her coat, I wasn't surprised to see a waif underneath it. I was even less surprised to see the dark marks on her skin. They perched on top like the shadow of a fist.

"Come on, blossom," I said. I put my hand on her arm, lightly, the way a school teacher might to lead her tiny charges, and she coiled back like a snake. I saw the venom at the edges of her wide eyes, and she raised her open hand. It stayed there, crossing over mine so that both were hovering in the space between us—one raised to comfort and the other to strike.

I took back my hand and tucked it into the front pocket of my old flower apron. After a moment, she lowered hers, too.

“Some women,” I began, talking straight into the whites around her eyes, “react to violence with more violence. And it just rolls on and on, like the devil’s cycle.”

She looked away, shaking her wild hair out of her face.

“There is no violence here,” I told her. “Not toward you, and not from you. That’s one of the rules.”

“I understand,” she said, her hands sliding behind her back and knotting together. There was a beautiful lilt to her voice.

“What’s your name?”

“Mari.”

“I’m Susanna,” I said, cupping my hand in the open air. “Now come.”

We have people for the girls to talk to. Specialists, men and women, all vetted and approved by the director. A lot of them have framed degrees from the universities. I have no degree or formal training. What I have is a lifetime of mothering instinct with no one on Earth to mother.

Mari wouldn’t talk to them. She settled into the routine of the house, keeping her room tidy and doing her laundry on Tuesdays and taking her share of the cooking. She was a great cook, but the kitchen was never stocked well enough for her. She deigned to cook with the ingredients we had, muttering all the while how they weren’t good enough.

She never mingled with the other girls. Our guests group off one by one, drawn to each other for some reason or another, in couplets or small gaggles. But she stayed in her room most days, or out on the patio by the atrium.

Her conversations with me weren’t great those first few weeks. When I asked her how she was settling in, she remarked on the chilly weather and the imperfection of the knitted gloves we gave her.

Then one day, as I was scouring some particularly dirty dishes, she brought the rest of the plates to the sink. She set them there and I thanked her, expecting her to turn and go.

“How long have you been here?” she asked instead.

I waded backward through time, flicking through decades and girls. “20 years or so.”

“Why?”

“Why did I come here, or why do I stay?”

“Both.”

“Well, the answer is the same,” I dried my hands on a dish towel and then turned toward her. “I love you. Every one of you. I see you here, and I love you.”

She didn’t say anything, but she stepped up to the sink and picked up the scrub brush. She’d been with us three weeks by that point, but I’d never seen her do a chore she wasn’t assigned. Her shoulders sloped down, her hands rough over the dirty dishes.

“How long for you?” I asked.

She didn’t look up. “Ten years.”

My throat strained with the effort it took to control my voice. The girls never liked pity. “Is there a child?”

The scouring brush scraped so hard over the china, I worried she’d send glass careening into the sink. “There was.”

I could feel it, the invisible wall you sometimes hit with these subjects. Two decades with girls like Mari and I knew when to stop asking questions. And I’d tempered my own curiosity by then, so it didn’t buzz incessantly in my ear. What they tell me is never about me.

“Help me finish up the dishes,” I said. “Then I’ll make you some tea.”

The screeches echoed all the way down to the atrium.

The sound of women arguing is a lot like the canaries bickering up in the trees. Fights between the girls are usually small, focused on laundry or telephone use or how one roommate isn’t keeping up her side of the housekeeping. But with so many different backgrounds under one roof, and with so many women used to having a front-seat to violence, it can get dangerous. A punch to the jaw can knock out teeth—a bout of hair-pulling can rip strands out by the root.

I hurried up the stairs, watering tin still in hand. Mari and another girl, Laurel, catcalled at each other across the short hallway between their rooms. A group of girls gathered around Laurel, patting her shoulders and bolstering her on. Mari stood alone.

“Girls!” I commanded. I don’t like shouting, but I’ve learned how to get my voice to echo down these long halls.

The rest of the girls went quiet, but Mari just kept going—a

long diatribe that buffeted up into Laurel like a bitter wind.

“Mari!” I said, louder this time. She stopped and turned. Her dark skin was damp, like she’s been swimming, and her chest was heaving up and down like that too. She met my eyes, and I could see there was a power there—a darkness.

“What’s going on?”

“She started it,” Laurel defended, jabbing her finger at Mari. Mari turned and stared at Laurel, cool enough to freeze over the surface of a lake.

“Mari,” I said, curling my finger toward her. “Come with me. Girls, I’m sure you all have things to do.”

Mari followed along after me, and I led her into my room. It wasn’t unusual for me to have two or three girls in here, draped over my sofa or leaning up against my desk. The atmosphere was decidedly stiffer as Mari sat down on the wicker desk chair.

“What?” she asked, perching on the tip of the chair, straight-backed and proud.

“You tell me.”

“I didn’t start it.”

“What happened?”

“*Dios mio*, some of these girls here are so *stupid*.”

“How so?”

“They all just sit together and discuss their situations, as if this helps them. They bounce off each other, each trying to sound worse than the last. *Perras tontas*.”

“I still don’t understand why that makes them stupid.”

She stayed silent for a moment. Then, “Some things should not be forgiven.”

“You think they’re stupid to forgive the men who hurt them?” She didn’t answer, and I continued. “Maybe you’re thinking about it the wrong way.”

“How should I think?”

“Forgiveness isn’t for the soul of the man who hurt you,” I said, leaning forward. Her eyes were wide again, showing off the whites like that first time in the waiting room. “It’s for yours.”

She didn’t say anything, but her shoulders were tense and raised, her arms a harsh criss-cross over her middle.

“No more fighting with the other girls,” I told her sternly.

She nodded, but her stance stayed tight and bundled. I didn't believe her.

They came running to get me, but I could already hear the cacophony from my room. They were scared, all of them—a man's voice echoed through the halls. The director was careful about raising his voice; the psychiatrists were strictly told not to. The girls chattered and bickered sometimes, but it was never like this. This sound went through the house like ice water through veins.

“Go back to your rooms. Now!”

They scurried off in pairs, huddling into each other's rooms instead of fleeing separately. That didn't matter—let them draw comfort where they could. I rushed down to the real waiting room and peered through the crack into the fake one.

He was tall, a gaping dark figure blotting out the faint sun from the open door behind him. His mouth was open, arms flailing—the voice boomed out, pulled up from some evil place in the center of him. Horrible words, the worst words—and a name punctuated them like a period. *Mariposa*.

I felt her presence unfurl behind me, but I didn't turn. I just kept watching the tall, screaming man. She walked to my side and stooped to peer out at him. Her face was pushed up against the wall, her nose flattened into the wood, and I was suddenly afraid he would see her.

All the time she'd been here, I'd been wondering what sort of man it took to break someone like her. Now I stared at him, and it was like staring at a special cranny in the corner of hell.

“Go,” I said quietly.

“You go,” she said. She straightened, and I could feel her gathering her forces, turning her soft parts to stone. I grabbed her arm, the only other time I'd touched her since she almost hit me. Her reaction was much different now—the stone bled out of her, and she was soft woman again.

“No,” I said. “You go on upstairs, *Mariposa*. We'll take care of this.”

She looked at me, and there was an ancient pain in her eyes. It was not her pain alone but ours—all of ours.

She went back up the stairs, just as the director came down

them. He looked out at the man now ripping through the false waiting room. The secret door loomed close to the monster's left.

The director was a small man, slight—with sandy blonde hair that was always a shade too long and big round glasses that magnified his eyes. We had limited security, which stemmed from a desire to keep unfamiliar men away from our girls. This place relied very much on secrecy as protection.

"He's come for her," the director said.

"Someone must have told him."

"He'll keep coming," the director answered, peering through the wall. I looked too, and for a moment the man stopped in his destruction to stare at exactly this wall. We met eyes, except he didn't know that. Then he started shouting again, this time a slew of words I didn't understand.

"Yes, he will," I answered. Nothing in this man was willing to quit or compromise.

I knew what the director would say, just like I knew he'd be right to say it. I waited for the words anyway.

"She can't stay."

"No," I said quietly. The man outside huffed and puffed now, his shaking limbs visible through a solid wall. He would tire soon, but not completely—never completely. "No, she can't."

I worked for weeks on laying out the plan before saying anything to Mari. I wanted to have all the pieces gathered before I told her we were sending her away—I didn't want her to feel the sting of abandonment. I wasn't abandoning her. We'd done this for a few other girls when they were violently pursued; gotten them to another safe place out of the city. It wasn't abandonment—it was another form of protection.

I put the soup on simmer and covered it with a pot. It was chickpea, her favorite—but she called it something else. Mari taught me the recipe a few weeks ago, when the dreadful coldness bouncing off the cobblestones called for something hot.

When I was sure the soup was done, I lowered the temperature and walked through the house calling for her. I looked in the atrium, but it was still chilly and the girls didn't spend much time out there this time of year. I checked the

common area next.

The television was running, a newscast from one of the popular stations. The girls did this often—turned on the television and left it burning there unattended, the faces looking out with nothing looking back at them.

When I didn't find her there, I went by her room and knocked on the door. I checked the knob after a moment—unlocked, which was unusual. She was very private, very careful, and she didn't like the other girls.

The room was empty and made up nicely, the bed folded over in the way I kept reminding the girls to do but they always somehow forgot. The only sign that she even occupied the room was a collection of colored pencils on the desk and a few sheets of blank paper. She hadn't gotten those from the center.

Pressure built in my chest, like my lungs were slowly filling up with steam. She wouldn't be in any of the girls' rooms, and I'd already been to the kitchen. Our guests were allowed to leave, but most of them didn't—most of them wanted to stay off the streets where they could be recognized.

I slid my shaking hands into my apron pocket, playing with the frayed edges of the papers I'd been carrying. They included a train ticket, an itinerary, and notes of recommendation from the director and me. It took a bit of convincing to get him to write it. There was another train ticket on my dresser—I planned to make the trip with her, maybe stay a few weeks to help her settle in. I don't abandon my girls. I never abandon my girls.

The steam rose up from my lungs to my head, and I felt faint. I sat on the windowsill, curling inward and resting my head against the foggy gray panel. After awhile, I stood up and headed back to the kitchen.

There stood Mariposa, shaking some seasonings into my soup.

"You forgot the *azafrán*," she said, businesslike, back still toward me. There was a brown paper bag next to her, and I recognized it from the supermarket down the street. "It's nothing without the *azafrán*."

"I'll remember that," I said, walking up to her. She nodded and dipped a wooden spoon into the mix, trying the new

version of the soup.

“Better?” I asked.

“Much.”

There were so many things I needed to tell her. She had no business leaving the center, not when he was out there, lurking in these streets and waiting for a chance to see her. She had to leave, and my plan would help her do it. She had to go. No matter how we cut this situation, she had to go.

I tasted the soup when she held it out to me—it really was better the way she made it.

I told her so. I didn’t say anything else.

I walked into my room to find her holding the train ticket. In both of her hands, but gently, like it was a birth certificate. She sat on my dresser with her legs crossed at the ankles. My throat worked, pushed the sadness down my throat into my belly.

“Two of them,” she said, but she only held one. The other sat on top of the dresser.

“I’m going with you,” I said. There was no point in trying to make an excuse—she was too smart not to have come to the right conclusion. “Help you get settled.”

“Settled,” she repeated, and by the way she said it, I knew she’d never been settled.

“There are other places like this,” I said. “For situations just like these. You’re not the first girl whose abuser is—” I stopped, unable to describe the monster of a man I saw in the lobby, clawing at the wallpaper and ripping up floorboards.

“I don’t like places like this,” she said, very quietly. She set the bus ticket down on my dresser. Then she slid down to her feet, like a dancer landing an arabesque.

“Then why have you stayed so long?”

She looked at me with that ancient wisdom in her eyes—the kind that comes from the common place in all of us. I knew why she’d stayed so long. I knew exactly why.

“Child,” I said softly. “There are other mothers like me.”

She leapt toward me with the wild look she wore the first time we met. Her hands flattened on my back, her arms wrapping around me like I was the only thing she’d ever really held onto in her whole life. She had a boxer’s body—

strong and thin.

Then she walked out of the room, leaving both tickets on the dresser behind her.

She arrived on a Tuesday, and she left on one. I felt the shift in the air before I got out of bed—the particles were less charged, like she took all the energy out with her. The two train tickets glared at me from my dresser.

I put on my robe, made the knot big and loopy with shaking fingers, and walked down the hallway. Her room was at the very end, past all the other girls' rooms and right next to the exit. It was like she planned it that way—like she'd been looking for an escape since the day she stepped inside. Maybe she had been. A loving cage was still a cage, even filled with pieces of ribbon and hot cups of soup.

Her bed was made just the way I liked it. The whole room had been scrubbed over—not a speck of dust, no wrinkles in the covers to indicate she ever slept underneath that white cotton comforter. All the emotions rolled to the base of my throat like fallen apples. For a moment I hated her, though there was surely no point—she had always been like this. She had always been a handful of sand tossed up to the wind.

I ran my hands on the underside of her simple wooden desk, felt into the corners of her empty drawers, but there was no note. She'd left nothing of herself for me to find—no phone number, no trajectory of her flight pattern.

She did leave all of the clothes I'd given her over the course of these six months—the white cotton shirts with the peasant sleeves, the long floating skirts. She'd looked like a child of the Earth in them, her hair all loose around her face. But they were never her style, and that was why she left them. She was like that, lovely and bright but with an underside like a knife held to a stone sharpener.

I reached past her clothes into the corners of her closet. Nothing for one, two, three corners, until I got to the fourth—and there, tucked up behind a particularly long skirt she always tripped on but never let me hem, was a rolled-up paper. I pulled it out, slipping a finger into the long tube to test the paper's durability. It was strong and rigid, just the kind of paper she'd use.

I unfurled the tube slowly, and the image took shape: in fierce color, dominated at first by a set of wings that stretched over the whole of the paper, butting up against the corners like the canvas was too small to contain them. They held patterns inside—all of these complex, mirrored images. Then, as if she'd planned it that way, the drawing pulled me into the body of the creature, which was partway-sheathed in a cocoon so black Mari had nearly shaded through the paper.

The creature was half-emerged, half-caged in the black cocoon, prying with antennas at the dripping split. There was purpose in every line—the creature could succeed, would succeed, but had not succeeded yet.

It was glorious and fearsome.

The apples were back at the base of my throat, rolling up and choking me. I rolled up the drawing and slid it into the pocket of my robe. Then I retreated from the tidy room and closed the door behind me, walking back down the hall. The slight weight of the drawing hit my hip, the paper rustling with each step.

Glorious and fearsome.

Mariposa.

Luke de Castro

Funeral for Max and Greta

Okay: Max and Greta, right? My grandparents on my mother's side. He was 98 and she was 97. Max died from a cardiopulmonary infarction, which is a fancy way to say "heart attack," and the next night, Greta went to sleep on her side of what must've felt like a particularly empty bed and never woke up again. *That's so sweet in its way. They loved each other so much, so endeared to one another*—that's the sort of thing friends and family were saying. Especially Aunt Paula, who wrote to everyone in this group email, drawing it to a close with *Bless her, sweet Greta died of a broken heart.*

My sister Carmen—and bless her, bless Carmen, that's who I think deserves a blessing here, just for being the way she is and coming out with it—called me up and said, "Clark—dude—did you see this shit? From Aunt Paula?"

"Yeah, I saw it."

Even over the phone—me in Washington, D.C. and Carmen all the way out in her little island house on Puget Sound—I could feel her eyes rolling, I could feel it.

"Fuckin 'broken heart'?"

"I know."

"You know there was enough oxycodone in that house to kill a rhino?"

"I know."

"And she told me she was ready to go. That she was just sticking around for him."

"She'd been saying that for years."

"And at Cleo's wedding?"

"I know."

I heard the raspy click of a lighter as Carmen lit up and drew in breath around a fresh cigarette. "Aunt Paula with all that crying? Jesus, who cries and goes on like that? At a wedding? That's the kind of shit they'd reject on a soap opera. *'Don't say that! You can't die, Greta! You can't die!'* Who does that?"

The scene came pulsing back—cousin Cleo's June wedding

four years ago, Max still in the hospital from his first heart attack—and I cringed at the memory of Aunt Paula. So much turquoise jewelry, so many beads in all that hair, pressing a hand to her chest with a wrist full of silver bracelets, rattling like a tea set. I push it back but still see her, the mask of her face, wet mascara pooling in the rims of her eyes. ‘*You’re my heart,*’ she said—she actually said that—‘*and you can’t die.*’

“I know,” I said, moving the memory aside, willing it away. “I know, I know, I know.”

“Grandma Greta was no bullshit. She told you what was up. And all she said to Paula was that she was ready to go. ‘I’m ready to go,’ that’s all.”

There was a pause then, and in the same way I could feel her eyes rolling, I could feel her thinking.

“It’s like I already miss Greta,” she said. “She had that photograph of Amelia Earhart. With that quote.”

“*I fly better than I wash dishes,*” I said, seeing the framed photo she’d had for as long as I could remember. It was right at eye-level when you walked in the kitchen, Earhart gripping the wing strut of her biplane, wearing goggles and a leather flight cap, giving the thumbs up with a gloved hand. “Greta was cool. She had that easy way about her.”

“I couldn’t say the same for Max, though,” a flat sort of laugh in Carmen’s tone. “Max wasn’t exactly *chilled out.*”

“No, he was not.” The thought of him, right then, was like stirring a drop of food colouring in a clear glass of water, the rush of memories coalescing into a remarkable image that I could not ignore. His face, suspended against a black field, floating in smoke like the Wizard of Oz. If you took a hand axe and chopped a face out of wood? It’d sort of be like that.

“Dude was intense,” said Carmen.

“I know,” I said.

Greta, for much of her life, never ventured far from the city where she grew up. She was in her fifties before she ever fastened a seat belt or raised a tray table on a commercial airliner. But Max came from Germany. He grew up in a farming town that doesn’t exist anymore, and there was always uncertainty about exactly when he’d arrived in the United States. 1928? 1938? The story changed, sometimes making him seven years old, sometimes seventeen, but either way, he

never lost his accent. Pointing to the contestants on *The Price is Right* with his open hand, you could hear him from the next room. ‘*Vas is this bullsheet? No one pays this for digital radio receiver, no one pays this sum.*’ But one detail about his crossing never changed: He came to the United States in the cargo hold of an iron steam ship. Goddamn. A steam ship.

I’m skipping ahead here, but at the funeral reception (Or is it still called a wake? Do people still say that?) I stood close enough to hear Carmen speaking with Aunt Paula. I could tell how Carmen was feeling from the way she tightened her shoulders. I moved down the table, scooping hummus on my plate as I edged nearer to the two of them. Aunt Paula did a lot of talking with her hands, and I could see them darting about like minnows in a stream before she touched Carmen on the arm. “They carried the whole of old Europe across their backs. The two of them.”

There was a rise in Carmen’s voice before it settled. “Greta was born in Chicago. She hardly ever left the city.”

Paula smiled. “In a larger sense, they all did. Their whole generation.”

“I’m not—are you saying—what does that even mean? *In a larger sense?*”

“Those traditions, all that history. They shared the burden. A generational burden.”

“A generational burden? That’s . . . huh,” she said, looking away as she nodded. She paused, shifting her tack. “David tells me you’re making your own candles now.”

“The Inner Light Collective, we call it. I render my own vegetable tallow.”

“Huh,” said Carmen.

“It’s vegan,” she explained.

I bit into a celery stick, heavy with dip.

Carmen forced a smile. “That is . . . well, that’s just super,” she said, her head counting beats like a metronome. “Just super.”

When our parents were splitting up in a nastier sort of divorce—I was eight, which made Carmen ten—the two of us spent a summer with Max and Greta in Chicago. Their

house was modest, but clean and well-appointed. I remember walking up the driveway, side by side with my sister, and lugging a suitcase with a broken wheel. Greta met us at the door, wrapping the pair of us in a huge hug, and led us to the dinner table. Mac and cheese with bits of hot dog. And chocolate milk. Greta did a crossword puzzle while we ate, glancing over with warm smiles.

Like looking through a viewfinder, the dining room window framed Grampa Max talking to our mother in the driveway. Carmen claims that she saw him take out his wallet and pass her a thin stack of bills through the passenger side window of our silver hatchback. But what I remember is the sound of her backing out of the drive, the low thrum of the muffler receding down the street.

He came in and stood to the side of the dinner table, hands clasped behind his back. Adults always seem taller in a child's memory, larger, but Max really was a big guy. He wasn't just built like a dock worker, he was a dock worker, with broad shoulders that filled a doorway and legs as thick as tree trunks.

He was silent for a moment before he spoke. "I take the bags to your room now." He gave Carmen and I a quick and precise nod before he headed up the steps, a suitcase in each hand.

You could say that Max Hasenkamp was a man of few words. You could say he was stoic. Taciturn. Not known for sentimental expressions of warmth or emotional generosity, you could say.

Greta looked up from her puzzle, smiling and kind. "We're both so pleased to have you here," she said, her eyes ranging to where her husband trailed off up the stairs. "Both of us," she added, turning back to her crossword and filling in the blanks.

That night there was a terrific storm; lightning that lit up the whole bedroom in pulsing white flashes. Carmen and I were both awake.

"I'm going downstairs," she said, and I followed her down to the front room. We stood watching the storm through the big bay window, raindrops the size of grapes and thunder

that shook the windowpanes. “It’s crazy out there,” she said. “Just look at it.”

The lightning flashed again, turning the window into a weird, black mirror. Whenever I’ve told this story to other people, this is the part where they say ‘. . . and he was standing right behind you.’

And of course he was.

Dressed in a black bathrobe and looming behind us, the reflection made his head look suspended in mid-air. The lines in his skin were craggy and deep, his nose a fierce concentration of clashing angles, and his whole face was huge—wide and huge and bigger than God’s.

We were more than startled, scared we might be in trouble, that we’d broken some unknown rule.

Max pointed at the window, at the storm. The robe’s thick sleeve hung like heavy black drapes from his extended arm, and in that singular moment he was a wizard in a stone tower. The thunder boomed again, rolling through the whole house. “We call it the sound of the Devil,” he told us. “The sound of the Devil beating his horse.”

We stared at him, breath frozen. Carmen’s eyes were like circles cut from paper.

“We say this in German,” he said. “This sounds different in German.”

It scared the hell out of us in English, and it was a long time before either of us got to sleep that night, even after the storm had passed.

Carmen picked me up from the airport on the day before the funeral. “Look in the glove box,” she said.

I opened it to find a manila envelope. Inside was a postcard from Barcelona: a picture of that Gaudi church with its curved and pointed spires towering over the nave, the apse, the narthex, and all those architectural vocab words they quiz you on at Catholic school.

I flipped it over. Apart from an unmarked Spanish postage stamp in the upper right corner, the card was blank.

I held it up, a sort of visual question mark. “What’s the story with this?”

“I meant to send that to her,” she said, “to Greta.”

I slipped it back into the envelope. “What happened?”

She turned off the interstate, easing the car along the gentle slope of the exit ramp. “Life happened,” she said. “You know how it is.”

We drove along the surface road, stopping at a red light. It was dark, getting late, and we were the only car at the intersection. She leaned back in her seat, looking straight ahead with one hand casually draped over the top of the steering wheel and the other supporting her head, tilted to the side. “I’m gonna put it in her casket. Send it off with her.”

“They let you do that?”

“I don’t know if they ‘let’ you,” she said, “but I’m doing it.”

“Are you putting anything in with Max?”

The light turned green and we moved through the intersection. “I didn’t think about it,” she said, checking her side mirror as she made a right on Farrington.

“Did you ever wonder what she saw in him?” I asked. “I mean, they were married for like sixty-five years.”

“Sixty-seven years,” she corrected. “Any marriage, you can’t be sure . . . how can you really know, unless you’re right there in it? Inside it.”

“I know, right?”

She moved her head in a slow, measured nod. “The dude was intense.”

I shifted to the side, forehead pressed to the window. The night glow from the city was gauzy and dim through the spot where my breath hit the glass. We drove on for longer, bumping over a set of railroad tracks, then turned down a small gravel road that I remembered well. We both did.

I turned to her then—one shoulder arched a bit higher than the other—and said, “You’re sure this is—I don’t know—acceptable? Staying at Max and Greta’s cottage?”

Carmen looked at me sideways. “Acceptable? Why wouldn’t it be?”

I blinked at her. “Well . . . because they’re dead.”

“Clark,” she assured me, in very much her Big-Sister-explaining-things-to-Little-Brother tone, “I’m quite sure it’s all more than acceptable. Aunt Paula gave me the key. Besides, it’s not like they own it anymore.”

“And why’s that?” I said.

And then she blinked at me—a blink followed by a curious squint. “Because they’re dead, dude. Just like you say.”

Max and Greta’s cottage was on a small lake about an hour outside of the city. Like their home, it was small but well kept. We lit a fire. We draped blankets over our shoulders and sat on the floor, tapping cigarette ash into the mouth of a Schlitz beer can as we laughed and talked and polished off two bottles of wine.

“I’m gonna sleep out here,” she told me, settling into the couch and pulling a second blanket up to her chin. “You take the bed.”

“You sure?” My eyes were big, my chin lowered, affecting a puppy dog stare without even thinking.

She extended a hand from beneath the blanket, presented a tight fist, and popped out her middle finger. “Just stop with the eyes.”

I stood and stepped to the bedroom, returning with an extra pillow.

Her eyes were half closed. It was getting late and I was feeling it, too.

“I think it’s cool that you’re slipping that postcard to Greta,” I told her. “You’re cool for doing that.”

“I know I am,” she said, smiling as she faded off. “Cooler than you, anyway.”

I didn’t get to sleep right away, hazy from the wine but not tired. Propped up on my elbow, I leafed through a magazine. *Conde Nast Traveller*, out of date by at least two presidential administrations. Carmen snored—and loudly—a habit she’d denied her whole life. “*I don’t snore*,” she’d snap, but it wasn’t her snoring that kept me awake.

I got up and put on a jacket and shoes, legs comically bare and goosebumped in the cold. Carmen’s snore was like the last bit of dishwasher gurgling down the drain, and she did not stir as I passed through and went out the front door, into the dark.

Max had a workshop that stood on the side yard, a detached shed no bigger than a one-car garage. The key was kept under the doormat—of course it was—and I felt for the light switch

with the flat of my palm. I hadn't been inside the workshop for years, but it was the same as I remembered. Ordered and linear, not a thing out of place. The workbench was well-lit. Heavy red toolboxes with stainless steel clasps flanked both ends of the bench, the work surface clean enough to serve high tea. He had mounted a two-by-four to the bottom of a cabinet with a row of baby food jars attached to the plank by their lids, arranged like the lightbulbs of a stage actor's vanity mirror. The jars were filled with nails and screws and bits of hardware. A thin rectangle of white athletic tape was pressed to each one and marked with what was certainly a fine point black Sharpie (a half dozen of the pens—all black—stood in a plastic cup next to a tape measure). WIRE BRADS, they read, written in his precise and unfaltering script. HEX CAP SCREWS, WASHERS, EYE BOLTS.

I backed away from the bench and let my eyes take in the whole room. Lining the wall to the left were rows of evenly stacked cardboard boxes, each of those bearing a label, as well.

CAMPING SUPPLIES

XMAS DECORATIONS

NAT GEO (JAN '79—DEC '85)

"Dude was intense," I said, with no one to hear me but myself.

My thoughts drifted and doubled back, filling in the blanks with brushstrokes of memory and taking me back to that summer years before. I remember it was late in August, in that handful of days at the end of summer that are shorter and cooler at night, when the season is downshifting into autumn.

Carmen and I were riding out to the cottage with Max and discovered that the place was infested with field mice. They'd gnawed open a sleeve of saltine crackers and spilled them across the kitchen table. Most of the mice scampered like mad the moment a human foot touched the floor, but one of the whiskery little things was still there in plain view, poised on top of a cracker and stealing quick bites from its salted edge. The mouse looked like a kid sitting on a beach towel. Carmen said, "Look," and then it bolted, disappearing behind

the stove.

My grandfather bent down and picked up what must have been mouse droppings, squeezing the crud between his fingers. “Each year they come,” he said, “these mice.”

“Mice,” said Carmen.

“Yes. Mices.” He stood and addressed the two of us. “Wait here,” he said, and headed out the door to his work shed.

He returned a moment later, armed with a paper sack. He held the bag open, showing us the sort of old-fashioned mousetraps made with a coiled spring, a metal bar, and a wooden base, like the kind of thing you’d see in a Tom & Jerry cartoon.

The interior of the cottage was suffused with muted light, like a dream scene shot in soft focus, a thin layer of sheer fabric stretched over a camera lens, making it feel like dusk even though it was the middle of the day. It was also very quiet, save for the song of distant birds, but after a moment you could hear something else.

A scratching sound, a faint skittering in the walls.

Carmen was switched on, electric. “You hear that?”

Max tilted his head. “Yes, yes . . . the sound of vermin,” he said. “There are vermin in the larder.” We then went about baiting and setting the traps, putting them under the sofa and behind the refrigerator, carefully hiding them near the dark and tiny places where mice are known to tread. We used peanut butter as bait.

Later that week, we returned to the cottage, my sister and I eagerly checking the traps. Of the dozen or so we’d set, three bore the fruit of dead mice. The last trap we checked was a different story, though. There was something else in that trap, something larger and darker and clearly not a mouse.

It was a rat. And it was not dead.

The trap had sprung and pinned the rodent across the middle, the metal bar crushing its abdomen but leaving its front paws and pointed head free to move around. The rat was very much alive and alert when we found it. I remember reading somewhere, years later, that a rat can live for more than fourteen days without food or water. Its black eyes were like tiny drops of oil, darting in every direction as its paws scrambled in a desperate but hopeless attempt to escape.

My grandfather dropped to one knee and put his hands on his hips. He looked at the rat with a squinted eye, the same way you might look at something through a microscope. He made a clucking noise with his tongue, his way of saying 'Hmmm,' and asked out loud, to no one in particular, "Vhat to do, vhat to do?" Carmen and I could not stop staring at the twitching, frantic rat.

After a long moment, my grandfather stood up and took a step closer. "Here is the thing to do," he said, putting the thick heel of his work boot on top of the rat's skull and I can still hear that noise. I can still hear that wet and sickening crunch even today, even now, like egg shells cracking on a marble countertop, like celery stalks snapping in half.

"That is what we do," he announced, giving a small and matter-of-fact nod. "That is what we do with rats."

His boot still covered the dead rat's head, a thin trickle of blood oozing from beneath his heel. My sister and I were silent, and for a second I couldn't even move. I looked up at him. He loomed large over me—over all of us—and stood like a bear in the mouth of a cave.

And did I mention his face? That it was bigger than God's? Because I should've mentioned that. Because it was.

Carmen tapped on the bathroom door. "We're rolling, Gladys. Get your curlers out and let's hit it."

I straightened my tie. "Motor's running," she said, the screen door creaking shut.

She was drumming her fingers on the steering wheel as I came around the side of the cottage. I slid into the passenger seat and gave her a smile.

Carmen hit me with a look, eyebrows arched as high as they could go. "What took you so long?" She put it in drive and we took off bumping up the rutted gravel road. "We've got miles to make, man. It's all the way across town."

I couldn't help smiling.

"What?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's just . . . you're a good sister."

I was wrong about the eyebrows—they arched up even higher than before, her face looking like she smelled a carton of bad milk. She gave a nervous laugh. "What's with you? Are

you gonna ask me for a kidney or something?”

“I’m glad you’re my sister,” I told her. “Can’t I just say that? You’re my favorite sister.”

“I’m your only sister,” she reminded me.

“Even still.”

She brushed a stray lock of hair from her forehead and quickly checked her face in the rear view mirror. “For real, what took you so long back there? What were you doing?”

I touched a hand to the pocket of my suit jacket. “There was something I had to get.”

“Well, did you get it? Whatever it was?”

“I got it,” I said. “The funeral’s at eleven, right?”

Carmen looked at her phone. “We’ll be fine.”

We drove on for a bit in silence, each of us, I imagine, thinking of Max and Greta in our own ways. When we reached the intersection at Farrington and idled at the red light, Carmen turned her head and gave me a quick once over.

“You pull together ok,” appraising me with a nod and a glance. “You look good in a suit. You look cool.”

“I know I do,” I said breaking into a smile. “Cooler than you, anyway.”

What can you say about a funeral ceremony for two people in their late nineties? That it was respectable? That it was somber? Quiet and reserved, but not melodramatic or gloomy. I mean, look: they had their share of health problems near the end—Max with his heart, Greta with her hip and bad eyes—but they didn’t linger on, suffering. They had a good run, they had full lives. They were ready to go.

Try telling Aunt Paula that, though. She was the first person we saw when we entered the church, standing next to our mother right in the middle of the narthex (thank you very much, third grade spelling bee at St. Margaret’s Catholic Elementary School) clutching a handful of rosary beads and openly sobbing beneath the high, vaulted ceiling.

Paula drifted over from across the vestibule, seeming to almost float just above her airy, floor-length skirts. She spread her arms out and enveloped the two of us in an unsanctioned group hug. Carmen, like a department store mannequin, visibly stiffened at her touch, her neck at a sharp angle.

Paula shut her eyes and lowered her head, speaking in a stage whisper. “They’ve become part of eternity now. It’s not for us to understand. We need to embrace it. Embrace the unknown.”

There was a shift in Carmen’s face. Her eyes narrowed and her mouth flashed open as she drew in breath, gearing up to unload—but I stopped her before she could. I caught her with a pleading look, locking eyes and shaking my head.

She blinked at me and we let the hug happen. “Embrace the unknown,” I repeated, nodding at Carmen until I saw her jaw close on its hinge, and let myself be drawn into Aunt Paula’s bear hug, breathing in the scented oils of her earthy perfume. “Become part of eternity,” I said, smiling with my eyes and almost believing it—almost—for just half a second.

Max and Greta were positioned in their coffins, side by side, at the open space before the altar. We formed an orderly line of procession and I took my place behind Carmen.

She bent closer to Greta, whispering something that I couldn’t hear as she slipped the postcard into the casket, looking back at me as she did. I wouldn’t say that she was crying—not Carmen, no way—but the light caught her eyes and her eyes were wet.

I moved into the gap between the two caskets, paid my respects to Greta, then turned my attention to Max.

It doesn’t matter what I said to him—to either of them—it really doesn’t.

Not what I said, but what I did. Maybe that matters.

I took a mousetrap out of my pocket—a mousetrap I found in his workshop that morning, from a box labelled MOUSETRAPS—and I slipped it inside the breast pocket of his navy blue suit.

The sun was bright as we exited the church, like walking out of a movie theater in the afternoon, and the drone of the interstate hummed all around us. Carmen put a hand on my shoulder as we neared the car, ready to drive to the reception.

“Did you put something in with him?” she said. “You did, didn’t you?”

“Maybe,” I told her.

She looked at me from over the roof of the car, standing on her toes and straining for eye contact. “What was it,” she said.

“What’d you put in?”

“Embrace the unknown, Carmen,” and gave her another quiet smile as I got in the car. “Embrace the unknown.”

L. L. Babb

The Religion of the Rich

That afternoon, my only intention was to walk the dog and earn some brownie points in the process. It was one of the last summer days before school started. I was fifteen. I had managed to hold on to a girlfriend for an entire three months, a record for me. I spent every spare moment I could at Lisa's house. We swam and lounged around her pool in the mornings then stayed inside during the long, hot afternoons, putting together jigsaw puzzles and playing Scrabble or practicing trick shots on the pool table, the forced air of the central A/C whispering a cool, comforting shhhh, shhh over our heads. Lisa was an only child and the whole household seemed to revolve around her, and subsequently, me. There was a cook to make us meals, a maid to pick up after us, and a butler for everything else. I never wanted to leave.

To say my home was different would be an understatement. Ours was a classic big Italian family with a crucifix hanging in every room, pictures of Mary and Jesus flanking the television, and eight of us kids, all boys. There was never a minute when someone wasn't talking or whining or punching someone else. My parents bickered constantly, about anything, about nothing, as a way of saying "Good morning," or "I love you," their voices rising and falling over the constant clamor of children. Nobody ever closed a door without slamming it; no one ever spoke without yelling.

Lisa's parents never fought. They were calm, reasonable, sophisticated people, though they were an odd-looking couple. Both of them were very attractive (Mrs. Roth especially, I thought) in that sleek and manicured way that wealthy people are attractive—perfect, really, until your gaze reached their hips. Then they were suddenly and alarmingly shaped like pears. Very large pears. When Mr. Roth waddled through the door in the evening and Mrs. Roth leaned forward to kiss him hello, they looked like two of those children's punching bags that pop right back up when you knock them down.

According to my mother, the Roths' wide butts were the

topic of a lot of gossip at the beauty parlors and book club meetings in town. “It’s such a shame,” my mother sighed. “There’s nothing you can do about that kind of body type. You can’t exercise or diet it away. All that money and there’s nothing they can do.” My mother herself was overweight, everywhere, and would continue to be for her entire life but she maintained that it was just leftover baby fat which would magically disappear as soon as (or if) she stopped getting pregnant.

“You’d better hope your girlfriend is adopted,” my father said, clapping me on the shoulder, “otherwise, that’s what you have to look forward to in twenty years.”

I didn’t care what Lisa’s parents looked like. It was Lisa that I was interested in, or Lisa and her rack. I thought of them as two separate entities. Or three. Lisa was sweet and pretty and the richest girl in town, rich on the same level as royalty and rock stars, but what really made her popular at Canyon High were her gargantuan, porn star breasts. No one had ever seen them unclothed or touched them, of course. For one thing, Lisa and her parents were super religious—they belonged to a church no one had heard of that was in another town an hour away. And there was this other thing that was harder to overcome than Christian chastity.

No one could tolerate Lisa’s laugh.

Her laugh. Her tragic flaw. Even now, I don’t like to think about it. That summer, I came to dread its onslaught even if I was the only one around to hear it—the long, hoarse intake of air, the dramatic pause at the top where I could still hope that it wouldn’t begin, that Lisa might simply be gasping in shock or choking on her lunch, and then, horribly, there it was—a tumbling, downhill series of barks and yips and honks and braying that left the listener numb. It came in waves, one long cacophonous peal after another, leaving Lisa gasping, her face the unflattering hue of a ripe tomato. To tell the truth, it scared me. Over the course of our courtship, I became a sober and sedate adolescent, fearful of any inadvertent slapstick moves or witty asides that might set her off.

I believe it was my mature demeanor that made Mr. and Mrs. Roth fond of me. They invited me to stay for dinner almost every night. Mr. Roth took to calling me “Dude,” not

in a mean way, I thought, but affectionately. I liked both of them too. I felt like one of the family. So when, a week before Labor Day, Lisa fell off her horse at a riding lesson and broke her collarbone, I took over the job of walking the Roths' dog, Lenny, as a way of paying them back for all the kindness they had shown me.

Lenny was an ancient Golden Retriever, with a head the size of a picnic ham, but he was a cowardly giant. If we encountered a random cat on our walks, Lenny would look the other way, pretending that the cat didn't exist rather than confronting it. He was also a dawdler, sniffing every tree, and snuffling the weeds along the side of the road.

That afternoon it was hot, the hottest it had been all summer. The heat radiated up from the asphalt driveway in waves. As soon as I stepped onto the street that ran the length of the Roth property, I wanted to turn back. I decided that when I finished this torturous half hour walk with Lenny, I would have earned the right to jump in the pool to cool off, something I had not allowed myself to do recently, since Lisa, with her broken collarbone, could not join me. I had been accommodating Lisa all summer it seemed to me, playing the board games she wanted to play, never going further with her than a swift feel of her breasts over her blouse, always stopping when she said no. I realized that my self-control was close to the breaking point. The more I thought about what was under Lisa's blouse, now entirely off limits with the broken collarbone and the sling and all, the hotter and sweatier I became.

Lenny was taking his sweet time, painstakingly marking anything that stood more than three inches off the ground. It seemed like Lenny was taking longer than usual and I began to feel that he was doing it on purpose, that he somehow felt entitled to abuse me in this way. Who was I to him anyway? Just some dumb kid. And I began to feel that Lisa was doing the same thing, teasing me, leading me on just for the joy of watching me grow more and more uncomfortable. It wasn't fair. Didn't I deserve some kind of reward for my exemplary behavior? The combination of the heat and the sense of being taken advantage of made me so angry that I decided to cut our usual walk short and beat a path through the woods to

get back to the Roth home instead of sticking to the road.

I pulled Lenny along behind me. It was cooler walking through the woods. The ground was covered with dry oak leaves and the undergrowth wasn't so thick that I couldn't step over it or mash it down with my tennis shoes. Every so often we would come across a fallen madrone, its black branches like twisted fingers reaching out of a grave. We had to backtrack a couple of times to make a wide circle around a patch of poison oak or blackberries. Soon I could see the back of the south wing of the Roth house through the trees.

The south wing was the bedroom wing, a part of the house that was off-limits to visiting teenage boyfriends, but I knew that Mr. and Mrs. Roth's master bedroom was on the first floor and the other bedrooms were directly above it on the second and third floors. I had never been to this side of the house and I paused at the edge of the woods to take in the redwood deck with steps leading down to a grassy sitting area. There was a fountain there, a monstrous circular thing, with a statue of three leaping dolphins in the center. It would have filled my family's entire living room. Water shot straight up from somewhere in the center of the dolphins, splashing down over their backs and peppering the stone wall surrounding the fountain with cool, dark spots that evaporated almost immediately. I was standing there, contemplating whether to stick my head into the spray, when a naked woman rose from a lounge chair on the deck.

I didn't recognize her at first, of course. She had her back to me and I experienced a moment of disorientating dizziness. I wasn't accustomed to stumbling across women who didn't have any clothes on. Despite my best efforts, the only place I had ever seen a naked woman was in my older brothers' tattered *Playboy* magazines. I felt an instant erection press against the front of my jeans and I took a step back into the shadow of the woods, afraid that she might look over and see me standing there with my mouth hanging open.

The woman reached up, stretching both her arms above her head before turning in my direction. When I saw that it was Lisa's mother, I can't recall anything making me so scared and confused and aroused at the same time.

It was Mrs. Roth. But it wasn't Mrs. Roth's body or it was a

body with her head attached but it certainly wasn't the body I would have imagined under her clothes. Not that I had ever thought about Mrs. Roth that way. Looking back, I calculate that Mrs. Roth was in her mid-to-late thirties, an advanced age that seemed unfathomable to me at fifteen, but I now realize would have been quite young. Her body was thin and lithe, with no hint of that enormous behind and belly. The sight of her breasts nearly made me stop breathing. Her skin was brown and smooth, everywhere, as if she spent all of her life outdoors naked, as if she were some wild woodland creature, a young doe perhaps. With perfect boobs.

My thoughts scattered, trying to think of an explanation, all the while my eyes never leaving the sight of her. This couldn't possibly be Mrs. Roth. Maybe Mrs. Roth had a twin sister. A twin sister who was visiting from out of town. Of course that would be the explanation.

The woman stretched her arms further up over her head and twisted from side to side, giving me a full view of each of her breasts from several angles. I felt a whimper caught in my throat fighting to fly out from between my lips. Lenny was panting obscenely at my side and I thought if the woman saw me there, she would surely think I was a pervert or worse. But I couldn't move. My legs were too heavy. I prayed the splash of the fountain was drowning out Lenny's heavy breathing.

Then the woman lowered her arms and heaved a big sigh. She picked up what I thought was a mound of laundry from the chaise lounge and proceeded to step into it. The laundry turned into a pair of gigantic white panties that appeared to have been padded with foam rubber pillows. It was a grotesque sight, watching that lovely body disappear inside what could only be described as some sort of clown bloomers. It was definitely Mrs. Roth. She struggled into an oversized pair of jeans and slipped a shirt over her bare breasts, flipping her hair back over the collar.

She then picked up a book from the chaise lounge and headed back into the house. But just before she reached the French doors, she stopped, turned and looked directly at me, standing there in the shadows. I didn't know if she saw me there or not. It was the absence of any expression on her face that caused me to bolt, terrified, into the woods, dragging

Lenny behind me.

We ran headlong through the woods, crashing through the underbrush. We ran straight through poison oak and blackberry bushes heedlessly, dodging only for the massive oaks until Lenny dug in his feet and wouldn't budge another inch. He collapsed on a pile of leaves and rolled onto his side. His tongue fell out of his mouth, thick and pink, and immediately it was spotted with soil and leaves. I dropped the leash. I considered leaving him right there.

Then my legs felt weak and I sank down a few feet away from Lenny. I didn't know where I was exactly but the Roth's property was only 40 acres or so. If I walked in one direction I would eventually come to the road or back to the Roth house

I was never going back to the Roth house. Not ever.

A twig snapped somewhere behind us. The image of Mrs. Roth as a deer flitted through my mind. Was she coming after us? What would she do to us if she found us? All of a sudden, I didn't want to leave Lenny there. After all, he was just an innocent dog. Wasn't he?

I stood and walked over to where Lenny lay, still panting. As I approached, he lifted one back leg to offer his belly up for a scratch and thumped the tip of his tail twice. I squatted down next to him and poked him with one finger. Then I ran my hand down the length of his body and parted the fur on his chest. Rubbed one of his ears between my fingers. Stared into his eyes. Brushed some of the leaves off his tongue. He licked at my fingers. He seemed pretty real.

A woodpecker erupted in a wild cackle over my head and for one terrifying moment I thought it might be Lisa coming to get me. "C'mon, boy," I whispered, standing and pulling Lenny to his feet. "We gotta go. Come on."

We didn't run this time. We walked. Slowly and carefully. I looked down at my arms and saw that something, probably the blackberry bushes, had scratched deep red lines into my skin. My T-shirt was torn. My mother was going to have a fit. Thinking of my mother made me want to rush home and hug her, put my arms around her rolling waistline. My mother was really fat. For the first time in my life, that thought was comforting to me.

I hoped we were traveling away from the Roth house. I had

never been an observant boy; coming from a big family, you learned to tune things out or you might go crazy. But that day, when it seemed that I was in incredible danger somehow, I tried to pay attention. The sun was starting to slip in the sky and the slant of sunlight was coming in at my back. I knew the sun set in the west. Where that was in relation to the Roth house, I had no idea.

And then the road appeared before us without warning. This wasn't a well-traveled road, barely two lanes snaking through the trees but I suddenly felt safer. Lenny pricked up his ears. I supposed he thought we were going back to his home and supper.

I remember thinking at that point, now what? If I walked home, my parents would make me take Lenny back to the Roth's. If I refused, one of the Roths would come to get him. They'd want to see me, to talk to me. I'd probably broken the law standing there gaping at Mrs. Roth. The Roths could have me arrested. Or worse. The Roths were what my parents called filthy rich. I had seen something that had to be a secret, a deep, dark secret that the Roths might do anything to keep quiet. They might have me killed.

And what about Lisa? Did Lisa know this about her mother? How could she not? A horrible thought struck me and I almost stumbled as I hurried along the road. What if *Lisa* wasn't real? Was that why she wouldn't let me put my hands under her blouse? In my terror and confusion, I failed to remember that no girl, ever, had let me put my hands up under her blouse. But now, Lisa's refusal to let me feel her up seemed sinister, not virtuous.

From somewhere down the road, I heard the roar of Mr. Roth's Lamborghini racing towards us.

Panicked, I turned to dash back into the woods. At that same moment Lenny decided to rush to the opposite side of the road, the result being that we ended up going nowhere. Mr. Roth screeched around the corner and slammed to a stop in the middle of the road. I could have, at that point, let go of the leash and taken off into the woods. But for some crazy reason, I felt like I couldn't abandon Lenny; we were in this together now.

"Hey, Dude," Mr. Roth said. He had the convertible's top

down and he ran a hand through his hair to smooth it. “Let me give the two of you a ride back to the house.”

My mouth went dry. I knew how Mr. Roth felt about his car. The Lamborghini was off-limits to everyone except Mr. and Mrs. Roth. Lisa herself had never been allowed to ride in it. The interior had been custom made for Mr. Roth. The seats were a buttery-soft leather, the dash was teak; the probability of either Lenny or me tearing or scratching something was about 100%. My shirt was soaked with sweat and one of my arms was still bleeding. Lenny’s fur was covered with dirt and leaves and twigs.

“That’s okay, Mr. Roth,” I said, barely above a whisper.

“Get in the car,” Mr. Roth said.

I stalled for time, trying to wrestle Lenny over to the car. Mr. Roth gunned the engine a couple of times and gave me a strained smile. Finally, because I couldn’t think of anything else to do, I opened the car door, dropped into the seat, and pulled Lenny in on top of me.

We sped to the house in silence. I was aware of Mr. Roth’s powerful forearm where he had rolled up his sleeve and his tan hand moving the stick shift. This was the arm of a man who worked out and yet his massive hips and thighs spilled over the bucket seat.

He’s fake too, I thought. Somehow, in my panic, I’d left Mr. Roth’s butt out of the equation. This new realization made me lightheaded and I clutched Lenny to me like a life preserver.

We pulled into the garage, tires chirping against the polished concrete floor. “Thank you for the ride, Mr. Roth,” I said, my voice quavering.

“Open the door,” Mr. Roth said, “let the dog out, and stay in the car.”

I did what I was told though my hands were shaking so badly that I could barely grasp the door handle. Lenny lumbered out of the car and out of the garage into the sunshine. Mr. Roth turned off the engine and clicked the garage door opener. The door slid shut as if sealing us into a tomb. In the dim light I could see the other cars covered in grey shrouds. The scent of car wax and my own sweat filled my senses, making me numb. Mr. Roth didn’t look at me. The only sound that broke the silence was the tick-tick of the Lamborghini’s engine

cooling.

Dozens of scenarios raced through my mind. They were spies. Or aliens from another planet. Or maybe they were in the witness protection program. No matter which plot line I chose to follow, they all ended badly. For me.

Mr. Roth stared straight ahead as if searching for something in the neat shelves against the wall of the garage, shelves stacked with rows of motor oil and carefully folded chamois. I could see a muscle working in his jaw. His smooth tan skin, his perfectly level sideburns, his white shirt ballooning out to accommodate the bottom half of his body—nothing about him seemed real. If he had suddenly sprouted another head, I don't think I would have been surprised.

"Christopher," he said. He had never called me by my first name before; he seemed uncomfortable saying it. "Mrs. Roth told me what happened this afternoon."

I bowed my head and waited. I prayed that whatever happened next, it would be quick.

"Be not proud for the Lord has spoken—Jeremiah 13:15," Mr. Roth intoned to the row of oilcans. "Being wealthy is not easy for truly religious people, Christopher. Mrs. Roth and I are just trying to remain humble in the eyes of God. It's what our church requires us to do."

"Everybody in your church is pretending to be fat?" I blurted out, stunned into speech. A picture formed in my mind of his congregation, all those wide bottoms arranged in pews, row after row.

Mr. Roth snorted. He turned and looked at me like I had insulted him "No, of course not. Our pastor decides what form each parishioner's humility will take. It's a sliding scale based on net worth. It can be as simple as a bad toupee. Some of our wealthier believers have had plastic surgery to augment their ears or their nose."

He continued on but I barely registered at first what he was saying—it was if he were speaking a foreign language. I remember thinking that this might be one big elaborate practical joke or that I was being secretly filmed by a camera crew, but there was no denying the earnestness in Mr. Roth's voice. He seemed less concerned that I had seen Mrs. Roth buck naked than he did about convincing me that what he

believed in was right. His church's interpretation of the Bible was perfectly rational, he said. That whole business about a rich man getting into heaven vs. the camel fitting through the eye of the needle could be circumvented. There was always a loophole for the wealthy. One just had to read between the lines to understand what God truly wanted. Mr. Roth put a hand on my shoulder. Maybe he could arrange for me to visit their church, and one day, if I were lucky and worked hard, I would make enough money to join them.

And it suddenly hit me. Lisa's tits, those tantalizing breasts that I wanted more than my next breath, weren't real. I looked into the future and saw myself standing next to Lisa, her mandated padded bosom now enhanced to the size of a sleeping bag, both of us singing over an open hymnbook, our freakish children, all fake ears, rubber noses, and buck teeth, gathered around us like dwarfs in a fairytale. Disappointment hit me like a punch in the stomach.

"Of course," Mr. Roth said, "it's very important to our family that this," and he gestured to his hips, "this, remains confidential. A secret—like what happens in a confessional at your church. I'm sure you can understand that, right, Christopher?"

What the Roth's were doing was about as far from what happened at my church as the Milky Way but I nodded. I just wanted this to be over. I wanted to go home to my normal family who worshipped God in the normal way.

The door into the house opened on the opposite side of the garage. Lisa peered in, looking worried. "Lenny came back all covered with dirt," she called over to us. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine, Pumpkin," Mr. Roth said. He ruffled my hair with his fist. "Isn't it, Dude?"

"Fine," I said, my voice cracking in three places.

"Well, mom says dinner is about to be served," Lisa said.

I followed Mr. Roth into the house like a zombie.

I took my usual place at the table across from Lisa but I couldn't make eye contact with her or Mrs. Roth. Mr. Roth chatted about his day as if nothing had happened. Mrs. Roth didn't even glance my way. If Lisa suspected something was wrong, she didn't show it. Her sling held her right arm across

her chest in a way that made it difficult to see her plate, what with her “breasts” and all. It took all her concentration to use her fork with her left hand. As far as I was concerned, my relationship with Lisa was over. The entire family was crazy. I’d wasted the whole summer pouring my energy into trying to touch a pair of tits that didn’t exist. All I’d find in that gigantic bra of hers was foam rubber or wadded up tissue paper.

“And do you know what Henderson said when I challenged him on the Tate account?” Mr. Roth waved his fork in the air.

“What did he say, dear?” Mrs. Roth said.

“He said—,” Mr. Roth began and that’s when Lisa, struggling with her salad, shot a pyramid of iceberg lettuce and Thousand Island Dressing towards me, leaving an orange skid mark across the white tablecloth. There was a moment of silence and Lisa frowned. She looked at me then at her dad and mom, and then, as if suddenly remembering what she was supposed to do, she started to laugh. She snorted in enough air to last her five minutes and proceeded to guffaw and gulp and whoop and wheeze her way through a litany of one of the worst attacks of laughter I’d ever heard from her. In terms of volume, she outdid herself. The maid dropped a serving spoon on the table and ran from the room. Lisa kept on going—a tsunami of honking and shrieking and snorting with no end in sight. Both her parents paused, utensils poised over their plates, and beamed approvingly at her as if she were waving a perfect report card in front of them.

It would be a few more years before I would begin to question the teachings of the Catholic Church—by the time I finished high school, I would refuse to genuflect or cross myself or even mumble the benediction along with the rest of the congregation. I would stop going to church altogether, berate my parents when brother number nine made an appearance, and rage against pedophile priests. I’d move on to mock my Jewish college roommate who could leave the television turned on all day on the Sabbath but not be allowed to use the remote to change the channel. I’d condemn the jihadists with their seventy-two virgins and the Mormons with their magic underwear and the promise of their own special planet

to live on after death.

But that afternoon, sitting at the Roth's dinner table, watching my soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend gasping for breath, her eyes watering, her face turning the glistening purple of an eggplant, *that* moment was the beginning of the end of religion for me.

And I knew those breasts were real.

Julie Zuckerman

The Book of Jeremiah

Jeremiah rips the packaging, hands quaking and breath drawn. His fingers feel nimble, like those of child tearing open a gift. The brown paper lies in shreds on the floor and he clasps the thick volume, holding it at arm's length for the initial assessment. His eyes take a few seconds to focus on the title: *Globalization and Crisis: Essays on the International Political Economy in Honor of Professor Jeremiah Gerstler's 80th Birthday*. Eighteen essays—six of his own and 12 of his colleagues and former students—reflecting a lifetime of scholarship. A faint smell of glue springs from the spine, and he inhales with gusto. He fingers the crisp, sharp pages. As soon as he clears the lump in his throat, he'll phone his editor to commend him on the final product.

Jeremiah's read and commented on all the articles, seen the galleys, and had one of his grad students proof them three times. The one thing he hasn't seen—Peter wouldn't let him—are the introductory dedications. "Trust me, you'll be pleased," the editor had said.

"A Festschrift," Peter had said, proposing the idea a little over a year ago.

"Get outta here," Jeremiah had replied, swatting away the suggestion with a fling of his wrist. Secretly he was thrilled, and had wanted to run home to tell Molly. A book written in one's honor symbolized the pinnacle of an illustrious career, and truly he did not know the appropriate reaction. "Is this the University's way of telling me to retire?"

They'd bantered back and forth—Jeremiah insisting he didn't want anyone fussing over him, Peter rolling his eyes and ticking off a list of potential contributors. Ten minutes of weak protestations before he'd acquiesced. *The Book of Jeremiah*, Peter had taken to calling it. ("Oh, I hope not," Molly'd said of the nickname. "That's all doom and gloom.")

Now, Jeremiah brews a cup of tea and parks himself in his reading chair, deliberately not extending the footrest. He wants to be fully awake to examine the volume, to savor its

freshness. Pity his parents aren't alive to see this moment. Though he could guess what his father might say: *Never mind the fancy honors*. Abe Gerstler's accented English rings inside his head. *I just want my boy should be a mensch*.

There are four dedications in the volume: the poli sci department chair, two former students, and "Reflections of a Daughter" by Hannah Gerstler, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of International Affairs at Williams College. He swells with pride every time he sees Hannah's name and title. Her piece is lovely, a testament to his influence on her and on his field, but as he reads the other dedications he gets a clammy, sour taste in his mouth. *Feh!* They extol his research, mention the four times in his career he's foreseen events or trends, but nary a one mentions his devotion to students, family, community, or anything remotely personal. A goldfish could have written more inspiring tributes. Perhaps in his excitement, he's missed the gratifying phrases. He skims the pages, seeking words and anecdotes to make him sound more likeable, not just someone with a "quick analytical mind" or "sharp intellect that's transformed the field."

Again he hears his father's voice: *What's to expect? Es libt zich alain shemt zich alain. He who praises himself will be humiliated*. Though Abe, when he'd been alive, had boasted to his friends about "my son, the professor," Jeremiah is skeptical as to whether his father—a simple but generous, convivial soul who performed quiet acts of charity—had truly valued his chosen profession. A life in medicine, or some other helping vocation, would have made his parents prouder.

"Professor Gerstler is deeply committed to a correct reading of the sources. Woe to the student who comes to class unprepared or attempts a less-than-airtight analysis," reads one dedication. "He demands rigorous standards of his students and does not tolerate academic laziness." *These, you call dedications?* He wants to scream. *Woe to the student?* The underlying message is that Professor Jeremiah Gerstler, despite his academic achievements, is mercurial, volatile, and impulsive.

Jeremiah heaves himself out of the recliner and hides the book in his desk, slamming the drawer shut. He wanders into the kitchen in search of some chocolate or a piece of his wife's

blueberry pie as a temporary assuagement. Hanging on the fridge is the invitation to the reception in honor of the book's publication. Molly will try to drag him. "Forget it," he says aloud to no one. "Not on your life!"

Molly takes her time reading the dedications, every so often glancing up to mention a nice phrase. "They're not bad at all! I don't understand why you're so upset."

He grunts. He could have predicted she would say he's being too sensitive, too touchy. "You don't get it. I've seen other Festschriften in my day. The dedications are much nicer. Trust me." What kind of testimonial, he wants to know, speaks of the honoree without any mention of character, without any affection? He hates that she won't admit to an honest reading of the text.

"But can't you see the bigger picture? This whole thing is a testament to you. A huge honor!" She adjusts her reading glasses and points. "Here, in Jim Blackwell's dedication, it says that the university's been able to attract top students because of your reputation. That's gratifying, isn't it?"

"Forget it!" He snaps, frustration growing. They've been together more than 50 years, and she's always trying to whitewash slights against him. He'd feel better if she would just grant his indignation some legitimacy. "I'm sick of talking about this with someone who can't understand!" Not that he has anyone else to talk to. He doesn't want to be around anyone right now, even her—especially her. He grabs his car keys and bangs out the front door.

"Where are you going?" Molly calls. He trudges down the driveway, waving her off. The oppressive August humidity gives the Berkshires air a stiff, suffocating quality. "Fine. Be that way!"

He slams the car door and turns on the A/C at full blast, starting to drive without any destination in mind. His favorite spot on the campus? The library? He can't face Peter yet. Or Marcella, that obtuse grad student, who'd seen the dedications and failed to mention anything. He drives along Route 7 for a few minutes with half a mind to drive all the way up to Williamstown to see his grandson, or just sit in a shady spot, gazing up at Mount Greylock, but it's too damn hot. His

navy and white gym bag lies on the floor of the passenger side; he'd forgotten to bring it inside yesterday. His bathing trunks and towel will be a bit damp, but a swim will do him good.

The façade of the Jewish Community Center is a diamond lattice grid meant to look like a repeating Star of David, though in Jeremiah's mind it resembles an egg carton. Six- and seven-year-olds from Camp JCC race past Jeremiah, their counselors trailing behind and admonishing them not to run in the halls. The building buzzes with activity; the walls are decorated with pictures from nursery school graduation and recent swim team meets. A photography exhibit of Buddy Glantz's recent charity mission to Eritrea is on display in the main foyer. The bulletin board features upcoming activities and events: a Holocaust film screening, a volunteer trip to New Orleans to help rebuild after Hurricane Katrina, the usual flyers advertising tours to Israel.

The tiles in the men's locker room are lizard-like, pukish green and scaly, but Jeremiah doesn't mind. He welcomes the familiar, comforting odors of mildew and body sweat. He lets out an animal-like yelp, "aaauugh," and changes into his trunks. A younger man, post-workout, casts a questioning glance in his direction, as if to ask after Jeremiah's welfare, but he waves him off. "Fine, I'm fine. Terrific, in fact."

This is not strictly true. On any given day Jeremiah experiences at least three or more minor physical annoyances, some causes for concern and others mildly irritating. Today's aggravations included pain in the back of his knee and a drop of water stuck in his ear since yesterday's swim. He'd tried to extract it with a Q-tip, but no matter how much he stretched his neck to one side and thumped the opposite ear, the water remains, sloshing around, taunting him. *Enough already with the self-pity*, some inner voice tells him when he starts to feel sorry for himself. *You swim 50 laps, several times a week. Not bad for an old man.* Is this his father talking, or himself? He's never sure.

Thank goodness for the water, some laps in the pool. As he strokes, images of the black faces from Buddy's pictures surface in his mind. He's always donated to Buddy's causes,

but he's never himself taken off a full week to donate his time to a charity mission. When his thoughts swirl to the Festschrift somewhere along his ninth lap, he rationalizes to himself that the dedications don't matter, and by lap 32 his attitude is "screw 'em!"

He'd like to believe Molly—that it's just a case of him being too sensitive—but he's not sure he can trust her instincts on this. She's never fully grasped the pressures and politics of academia, though despite her failings Molly is his rock. A gem, he'd boasted all those years ago when he was first married, and still true today. And wasn't his family—two children and five grandchildren—some kind of accomplishment? Most credit to Molly, of course, but he'd had a hand in raising them. Hours spent reading to them, discussing current events, trying to shape them into thoughtful, independent people. Indulging his grandchildren, like the time he took his then-baseball-obsessed grandson to Cooperstown. Benjamin had wanted to read every sign under every exhibit. Six hours to go through two floors, God help him, though now he cherishes the memory.

Jeremiah emerges from the pool transformed, and makes a short stop in the locker room before heading to the *schvitz*. He loves sweating out his toxins in the wet sauna, shaving cream dripping down his face. He takes a seat and senses pressure in his ear; terrific, he's now got two water-logged ears. He bends his neck to one side and thumps his ear to extract the water, much to the amusement of Herb Cohen and Buddy Glantz. They are 10 years his junior, *schvitzing* after their weekly squash game. Best friends since childhood, he's never seen one without the other. He wonders what it would be like to have a best friend for 60 years, or even 20. When he'd had a regular racquetball partner, they'd rarely socialized off the court.

"Q-tips, Jeremiah," Herb says.

"Never mind!" Jeremiah waves them off. "Nice pictures, by the way. I mean from your trip to Ethiopia."

"Eritrea," Buddy corrects.

He hopes they can't see the flush creeping up his neck; a professor of international political economy should remember his countries! "Right, that's what I meant."

“A fantastic experience.” Buddy reports that he and his wife are headed to New Orleans soon. A regular *tzadik*, this Buddy. Again the thought niggles at Jeremiah; yes, he gives charity to a number of worthy causes every year, but what of other good deeds? He resolves to take a closer look at those flyers in the foyer of the JCC. Of course, as a retired dentist, Buddy has a lot to offer some communities. What use can an old political science professor be to a war-torn / natural disaster / impoverished area?

“Power to you, Buddy,” he says, getting up to leave.

He tilts his head in one last effort to rid his ear of the water and again they say, in unison, “Q-tips!”

On the day of the book reception—Molly hadn’t given him a choice—Jeremiah grits his teeth and dons a lightweight sports jacket and slacks. He combs the thinning strands of white hair on the top of his head as well as the thicker curls in the back. “It’s a bad idea,” he says, warning his wife. “No one’s going to come.”

Molly takes his hand and kisses it. She wears a pale yellow summer sweater and floral skirt. Her hair is newly dyed for the occasion, the burnt carrot shade unbecoming for a woman of 74—or a woman of any age, for that matter—but he’s learned not to reveal his true thoughts on her hair. “Come on, this is going to be nice. They’re honoring you, and your book.” She speaks as if he’s an unpopular teenager, a mother encouraging her son to make more of an effort in social situations. “You can do this.”

His gut tells him otherwise, but somehow he allows her to take his arm and lead him out of the house to the car. His mind is numb for the 10 minute drive to campus. Save four or five cars, the parking lot behind Dalton Faculty House is empty. He winces. “Let’s get this over with.”

Molly rummages in her oversized handbag and produces a boutonniere.

“Oh, for God’s sake!”

“Shhh. You’ll be fine.” She pins to his jacket.

Inside, he’s vindicated: no one attends book receptions. Certainly not one planned with the spectacularly bad timing of a Sunday afternoon in mid-August, when people are on

vacation. But here is Jim, his department chair, along with the department assistant, and two younger faculty members, not yet tenured. Peter and another editor from the university press munch on canapés and mini-cucumber sandwiches. Two waiters from the dining service stand with their hands folded behind their backs, ready to serve.

They'd invited a dozen couples, but as Jeremiah glances around the room he sees only four friends: three of Molly's plus the on-again, off-again companion of one of them, a man Jeremiah's only met in passing. The other husbands—the ones who are still alive—are probably out playing golf. A notion, previously skimmed over and ignored, hits him with terrific force: “their” friends are Molly's. Jeremiah files through the names of men he'd been close with at one time or another: some have died or moved away, but he can't blame everything on death or distance. His former friends include Phil and Sam Cohen, brothers whom he genuinely likes but whose wives he'd managed to offend on separate occasions. Raleigh Fox, his old colleague from DC, but he'd messed that up in his typical, blundering way decades prior.

A wave of exhaustion sweeps over Jeremiah, and he scans the room for a comfortable chair. When was the last time he had a conversation of personal significance? Sure, he can bluster about politics and the economy, boast about children and grandchildren and talk baseball, but he can't recall the last time anyone has sought out his advice on a personal matter. His son, perhaps. One or two of his graduate students over the years, but these were research complications or thesis-writing blocks.

Molly chats with each person, thanking them for coming, though the slight crease in her forehead indicates that she, too, is anxious. She brings him a plate from the dessert table with mint brownies and a cinnamon pastry. The gooey sweetness of the sticky bun does nothing to alleviate his dejection. There is food for 50 but he counts a dozen people. “Whose brilliant idea was this,” he whispers to her. “To have a book reception in the middle of August?”

“Think positive!” She shushes him again—he hates when she does this—but her voice has an urgent pitch to it, akin to restrained hysteria.

Hannah arrives with her husband and son, and Jeremiah brightens a bit. He greets his daughter with an embrace, shakes Tom's hand, and cups Benjamin's face in between his hands, planting a kiss on both cheeks. At 16, Ben towers over him. A good boy, his grandson, despite his unhealthy obsession with video games.

"Well," Hannah says, biting into a mini sandwich and looking around. "These are tasty."

"I *told* your mother we should cancel the whole thing," he whispers. "Can I just get up there and say, 'thanks for coming, enjoy the food, I've got to run now?'"

"No, you cannot," she says. "Smile and try to be gracious."

He grunts. A few more people file in—colleagues from the history and economics departments, the dean of academic affairs. The room is a third full.

Sunlight filters through the large bay window. Jeremiah can see a few summer students—orientation leaders who'd moved in mid-August—lounging on the grassy mound called College Hill. They wear tank tops and flip-flops, reading books or fiddling with their mobile phones. Ah, the relaxed, carefree youth of today.

Jim Blackwell clanks his fork on a glass. He welcomes everyone and congratulates Jeremiah and the university press on the book's publication. Peter speaks next, saying what a pleasure it's been to recruit and edit the essays in the volume, how he's enjoyed learning new facets of the international political economy, and how working on a *Festschrift* is always a privilege. Jeremiah is no longer listening, all he hears is "wah, wah, wah," like the teacher's voice in the after-school Peanuts specials.

Someone nudges Jeremiah towards the front of the room. Despite a sickening, nauseous sensation in his stomach, his legs obey. His mouth is dry and he motions for Hannah to bring him water. He glances at the small crowd, now close to 20. "I kind of figured nobody would show up, so I didn't really prepare any remarks." A complete lie; inside his jacket pocket are five single-spaced pages of musing on the international political economy. "Thank you all for coming. Thanks to Peter, my editor, and to Marcella, my research assistant. Where are you, Marcella?" He doesn't see her. "I guess she had other

plans.” One of Molly’s friends emits a nervous titter. He clears his throat and tries to continue. “It’s funny to see a thing like this out in print. I mean, who’s going to read it?”

Peter’s face turns pale. Molly’s eyes are urging him to *do something, to say something*, but he can’t understand her meaning.

“Sorry. I really am . . .” He searches for words, coughing into his hand. “I am very honored. And I probably could give a synopsis of some of the conclusions in the book. But if you want to know what they are, you’ll have to buy it.” He looks at Peter triumphantly. “That way we’ll have at least a few sales. Ha, ha.”

His forehead is slick with sweat and his mind goes blank. He can’t seem to form a single intelligent thought. “I think the only one who wants to be here less than me is my grandson.” At hearing his name, Ben goes wide-eyed, his face flushes red. “Ben, whadya say we skip out of here and head over to O’Sullivan’s? Whoops. I forgot, you’re not allowed in there.” His attempts at humor fall flat; he can’t control his mouth, it seems. “Sorry, I guess I’m just a little *faklemt*. That’s Yiddish for ‘overcome.’ I actually haven’t had a thing to drink, though I probably should have.”

Molly is at his side, whispering in his ear, and he holds up a finger to the crowd. “Just say thank you and how much this means to you, and then goodbye. That’s it,” she says.

He ignores her. “My wife is reminding me that no one wants to hear from a has-been professor. Anyway, when I decided to go into this field, something like 50 years ago, it wasn’t even really a field. I was helped along the way by many scholars. Triffin, for example. I hope we’ve made a difference in people’s understanding about the complexities of political and economic power and the way they interrelate. Of course,” he paused, “it’s too bad the guys in Washington don’t get it.” He cringes at the futility. “Anyway, who gives a damn, right?”

Nervous laughter, but he soldiers onward.

“To tell you the truth, lately I’ve been wondering if we political economists make one bit of difference.” His voice waivers. His entire career dedicated to the field. And now he sees his wasted potential. Has he saved a life? Alleviated anyone’s suffering or done one bit of good? He thinks of

Buddy the dentist, going off to provide care wherever he can. He feels faint and glances around for something to hold onto. There is no podium. Molly stands by his side, and he thrusts his arm around her for support. She nearly stumbles as he leans his weight on hers. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees her blinking, the way she does when she's trying to hold back tears.

"Anyway, I could go on, but never mind. Thank you to my lovely wife and family for putting up with me. Thank you all for coming. And now I think I really could use a drink." Everyone is silent. "Dismissed," he says, a bit too aggressively, like his old grammar school principal. "Dismissed! Scram! Enjoy the food."

Molly takes him by the arm and leads him over to a sofa with floral cushions. She's taking shallow breaths. He feels bad he's put her through this.

"Tell your friends I'm sorry," Jeremiah mumbles. She and Hannah huddle around him, with his son-in-law and Ben a step behind.

"Our friends," Molly corrects. "Maybe you were right—this was a bad idea."

"Don't say I didn't tell you so."

"I made him come," Molly says, close to tears again.

"Mom," Hannah says softly. "Keep it together. He's just having a bad day."

Isn't he entitled to a bad day sometimes? He has a ready list of gripes about his life. *No*, the rational side of his brain fights back. *You weren't abused as a child. You have a dedicated wife. A daughter, smart and accomplished, and a son, though far away in California, who's turned out alright.* What's the matter with him? His father's voice again: *A life with more blessings, you couldn't have asked! He wants more, yet!* He hangs his head in shame, listening to this battle, his intellect on one side and his jumble of emotions on the other. To be in the spotlight brings to surface all the old fears, the anxiety of being called out as a fraud, like the prophet in the real Book of Jeremiah.

Molly mumbles something to Hannah and Tom about helping Jeremiah to the car, but at that moment the waiter wheels out a cake and everyone starts singing "Happy

Birthday.” He’d forgotten that Molly had planned this as a belated birthday celebration. He draws a deep breath, forcing a smile. The room, by now, is half full, and he glances around at the people who’ve come to honor him. An image flashes in his mind and for a second he sees everyone holding paper cutouts of his own face in front of their own. Like that John Malkovich movie. A comical notion. Being Jeremiah Gerstler. His days have not been the stuff of high action, supreme sacrifices, or major tragedy.

“Oh, brother,” he says. “Ben, come over here.” He leans on Ben’s arm, hoisting himself off the sofa, and blows out the candles. Thankfully there are not 80 of them. In the slight lightheadedness that results from his exhalation, a thought crystalizes. He closes his eyes and tries to recall the details of the flyer. He hopes his family won’t dismiss him as foolish. He’s now reached an age his father never saw, long past the time he should do something to truly honor his memory.

“Dad?” Hannah asks. “Do you want to go?”

He shakes his head. He’s beginning to feel more like himself, the heavy mood lifting. “I’m okay.” He sits back down and gathers his family to him. “I just had an idea. A revelation, if you will, of something I need to do. Or maybe not *need*, that’s not the right word. Something I should do, or at least try.” He explains about the trip to rebuild New Orleans. Volunteers of all ages needed for tasks both physical and non-physical. “There’s library work, cataloging, mending books. Stuff like that. And I was thinking maybe Ben could come with me.”

Hannah’s mouth drops open, and Ben says with excitement, “Are you serious?” His grandson has never been to New Orleans. “Nice!” He looks to his parents for approval. “Can I go?”

“Um. We’ll talk about it.” For once, his daughter is speechless.

Molly shakes her head and gives a little laugh. “If that’s what you really want, dear.” He can see from the look on her face, and Hannah’s too, that they’re thinking: there he goes again, Mr. Impulsive. But this is the flip side of impulsive, the sunny quality. Madcap decisions turning out well. As a boy during the Depression, he’d convinced his mother to bake cakes for the local slop house. Today it would be called a soup

kitchen. If he delves into the far corners of his memory, he is sure he can come up with a few more examples. He feels his father standing behind him, proud and beaming, ready to place a kiss on his forehead.

“Maybe you’ll come with us, Mol.”

“I’ll have to think about it.”

“Good. Then it’s settled.” Even though, he knows, of course, that it isn’t. He’ll need to coax Hannah into the idea of letting Ben come with him. He’ll take the family out to dinner, equipped with the full details, and try to listen to her concerns. And he knows that one week of volunteering does not make up for a lifetime of not. But for the moment, he feels youthful again, energized by his idea. Excited for another trip with Ben. He rises from the couch, this time without the assistance of his grandson’s strong hand, and ambles over to the waiters serving the cake.

The chocolate icing doesn’t hold a candle to Molly’s but he savors the rush of sweetness in his mouth. He gulps down two cups of water, finds a napkin, and wipes his face clean of crumbs. He joins a group of colleagues standing in a small circle, and they each take a step back to make room.

“Actually I did prepare a little speech, but I decided not to bore you.” They smile politely, as though they hadn’t all just witnessed his near breakdown. He knows they think he’s a relic from a past era, with his bowties and brown briefcase and lunches his wife still packs. But he’s not quite finished yet. To those standing nearby, he announces the trip with his grandson as if it’s been planned for months. If Hannah hears, he can count on his daughter—even in her annoyance—to give a private reprimand, not a public one. “You!” he calls to Ben, motioning him over and cuffing his shoulder playfully.

Intelligent thoughts and speech return. Jeremiah begins expounding on the domestic political economy; he might make this trip into something of a research project! He speaks with the feverish excitement of an adolescent about to embark on a journey. Perhaps the *Festschrift* is a testament to his career, but the Book of Jeremiah is still a work-in-progress. Can they see that? He keeps talking, even as the circle around him dwindles, and people drift towards the dessert table and out of the room.

Contributor Notes

L. L. Babb has been writing since shortly after she learned to read. Her fiction and personal essays have appeared in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Rosebud*, *Dos Passos Review*, *Kalliope*, *The MacGuffin* and elsewhere. She has been a teacher at the Writers Studio San Francisco and online since 2008 and a student since 2007. She lives in Forestville, CA, along with her husband, her toy poodle, and two crazy cats.



Jenny Belardi has been longlisted for the Fish Poetry Prize and was a semi-finalist in Concordia University's Summer Literary Series contest. She earned her M. Litt. in fiction writing from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. Jenny lives with her husband and two daughters in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She writes at 5 a.m. before her day job as a university fundraiser.



Chris Belden is the author of the novel *Carry-on* and the story collection *The Floating Lady of Lake Tawaba* (winner of the Fairfield Book Prize). His novel *Shriver* will be reissued by Touchstone/Simon & Schuster in September 2015. Chris is a graduate of the Fairfield University MFA program and teaches at the Westport Writers Workshop and at a maximum-security prison.



Valerie Cumming received her MFA in fiction writing from the University of Michigan in 2002; since then, her stories have appeared in over two dozen publications and received several awards. She works as a freelance writer, teacher, and editor based in Columbus, Ohio, where she lives with her husband and four daughters. She is currently at work on a novel, *Grief and Other Dangers*.



Luke de Castro started in Michigan and worked his way across four continents, filling his passport with as many stamps as possible while writing creative fiction along the way. His work has appeared in print and online, including spoken word in *Litro*, and short stories in *Red Weather*, *Alloy*, and *50 Square*. He is currently working on a Master's degree in Creative Writing at the University of Edinburgh.



Katherine Enggass is a freelance writer and editor in New Mexico. She recently completed writing a memoir.



Absolom Hagg received his MFA from Boise State University, where he won the Glenn Balch Award in Fiction. He was a finalist in Glimmer Train's Fiction Open and has been a two-time attendee of the Tin House Writer's Workshop. He works as a science editor and recently read about the fluid mechanics of bird flocks. He lives in Portland, OR, a city that made him a soccer fan. Please feel free to contact him on Twitter @ajnumber17.



Paul Heinz is a writer and musician in the Greater Chicago Area. A two-time winner of the James Jones Short Story Award in Illinois, his stories have also been published in *Sucker Literary Magazine* and *Prairie Light Review*. His personal essays appear regularly online and occasionally on Milwaukee Public Radio, and he performs keyboards in multiple rock bands in and around Chicago.



Graduating in 2012, **Lora Hilty** earned a Master of Fine Arts in writing from Spalding University in Kentucky. Her work appears in various print and online journals, including *Literal Translations*, *The Battered Suitcase*, *Newfound Journal*, and *94 Creations Literary Journal*. Her short-story collection placed in *The Blotter Magazine's* Laine Cunningham Novel [and book-length manuscript] Competition in July, 2014. When she's not writing fiction, she critiques manuscripts, edits, and teaches writing at Ohio University.



Lee Houck was born in Chattanooga, TN, and, in 2015, celebrates seventeen years of living and working in New York City. His writing includes poetry, essays, short fiction and interviews that appear online at The Nervous Breakdown, Chelsea Station, and The Billfold; in print anthologies including *The Outrider Review*, *Where the Boys Are*, and the Australian art book *Hair*; and in his own old-school b&w zine, *Crying Frodo*. His novel, *Yield*, was published by Kensington Books in 2010. More at LeeHouck.com.



Raised in Montana, Idaho, and Oregon, **Lindsay R. Mohlere** has been at various times a poet, a journalist, railroad gandy dancer and conductor, able bodied seaman, husband a few times, restaurant chef, house painter, advertising entrepreneur, boxing referee, photographer, fisherman and hunter. His short stories have appeared in various magazines, including *Gun Dog Magazine*, *The Upland Almanac*, *Sportsmen's News* and *Timber West*. His latest novel, *The Grow*, is available at Amazon and Barnes & Noble.



Benjamin Schachtman is an ex-patriot of New York City, currently hiding out in an anonymous town on the Carolina coast. He's a fiction editor and contributor at *Anobium Literary*; his work has appeared in print in *Anobium*, *The Conium Review*, the *Dig Boston*, *Confingo* (UK), and the *Bad Version*, and online at *Slush Pile Magazine*, *Pif Magazine*, *Eckleburg Review*, *Foundling Review*, and others. Visit him at BenjaminSchachtman.com.



Kelsey Tressler is a creative and freelance writer in Tampa, FL. She graduated from Florida Southern College in 2012 and has been writing ever since, passionately and about things that matter to her. Her work has won awards from *Creative Loafing*, *Cantilevers Journal of the Arts* and the Florida Press Association. Once, she even participated in a literary death match. For what it's worth, she won.



Julie Zuckerman hails from Connecticut but moved to Israel twenty years ago, where she works in high-tech marketing and lives with her husband and four children. Her stories have appeared in *Sixfold*, *descant*, *34thParallel*, *The MacGuffin*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *The Dalhousie Review*, and *American Athenaeum*, among others. "The Book of Jeremiah" is the title story of a collection she hopes to publish. When she's not writing, she can be found running, biking, or baking.

