SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2016

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CONTENTS

Scott Tucker

Suicide Without Dying

My first rat of the day is the size of a small dog, hit by a car overnight and lying dead in the gutter. Its eyes are open and startled. Its body has hardened against the pavement. I think the weather must have confused it—something is wrong this year, to have such heavy fog so late in May. I scare Jean-Pierre in the truck by holding the face of the rat against his window with my bare hands.

"Bastard!" he yells at me, calling it a Yankee Rat, or calling me a Yankee Rat. I don't understand his French through the glass. "Get in the truck, we're late!" he shouts.

This is how it is with Jean-Pierre.

Later he will laugh, or I will laugh.

I place my broom in its holster and climb into our small, bright green truck. Jean-Pierre is driving us ahead to the Place St. Michel. We'll skip a section of the route.

"*Ou es tu,* Yankee?"

"*Boul'Mich.*"

"*Menteur!*"

She is calling me a liar.

This is Amira's voice, crackling over the radio. She is our dispatcher, tracking where we are in the city and which cleaning crews are running late. To tell you the truth, we could do without her, although we probably couldn't. She is right. I am a liar.

She is Algerian, and some days when I close my eyes I hear love in her voice.

"*André des Arts.*"

I point.

Jean-Pierre doesn't look.

I've been pointing to the same landmarks from my life for three years. The Hôtel St. André des Arts is six stories tall and two car lengths wide. I lived there, in hiding, my first month in Paris, using up the last of my cash while Amira's friends arranged a city job for me and a false identity. In room 25, I

became Luc Distang.

"It looks like 'luck,'" I told her.

"It isn't," she told me.

It was Luke.

I sweep streets now for the city where it's too narrow for any truck but ours. We work in cleaning crews of two and I wear thick green pants and waterproof shoes and a lime-green vest that's visible a block away even in the fog. Across my back it reads, *"Propeté de Paris."*

Paris owns me. I've grown used to the broom by now, but of course it's a ridiculous tool for a grown man to use. There are long neon-green bristles at the end, like a witch's broom in a child's cartoon, comical until you find a rat and then you appreciate the design.

My job in the early morning is to use a large, square-ended turnkey which I carry in my pocket to open the water valves along the curbs as we work our way from block to block. I use my broom to sweep the trash from the street into the gutter, and then along the slow, shallow current of water there until it reaches the drain. I pick up what I can with a metal dustpan and place it in the back of the truck. The rest goes into the sewer. I turn off the water. We move on to the next block.

My job is to make small rivers in Paris, and hope, as they do, for a better life.

Because of the fog, we can't see the traffic problem developing ahead of us on the Île de la Cité. The city wears a false innocence this morning, empty of human suffering and conflict and disappointment. There is only my neon broom and the earnest movement of trash ahead of me in the gutter, our small green truck revving into gear, the sour smell of standing water and oil beneath my shoes. I close my eyes for a moment and inhale deeply. This is the Paris I own.

Nearby, in front of expensive cafés, wicker chairs are stacked four high on the sidewalk as a reminder—the rest of Paris I do not own. I am a renter, and Paris can evict me at any time. It throws me pennies for sweeping its litter along.

In the distance are the spiked shoulders of St. Séverin Cathedral, wrapped in a gray cloak of ambiguity, hiding the church's faith in God even from its strongest believers.

I've finished sweeping the Place St. Michel and Jean-Pierre picks me up again to drive us onto the Île de la Cité. "How is the moon looking this morning?" he asks me.

"The moon. Very well," I tell him. The moon is a narrow crescent of faded paint, over-sprayed onto the pavement of the Place St. Michel, unintentionally Islamic in appearance, left behind by a street artist years ago. The moon is in constant peril, only a step away from a sidewalk used by thousands of rough soles each day. We carry strong solvents in our truck to clean street graffiti and paint stains like this one, but instead we protect the artist's mark.

Someday I will tell you the story of the moon and the artist, but today Jean-Pierre has taken us over the bridge onto the Île de la Cité and we can see the trouble ahead.

Jean-Pierre is ten years older than I am, in his late thirties, but he acts like a pensioner, overweight and sedentary and ready to retire. He exhibits all the mannerisms of the French—what I've seen of them, anyway—crying out suddenly in delight over nothing, or wincing at a bad idea as if I've squirted lemon juice into his eyes. His hands fly out at me when he speaks; his cheeks inflate like a blowfish; his head nods like a boxer avoiding a punch. He is busy with everything in life but work. His feet are ruined from a decade of cleaning the city.

I sweep for both of us and he drives the truck. My driver's license is a forgery and I use it as little as possible. My passport is a forgery. My record of birth in France is a forgery. We are ranked the lowest team in productivity among the city cleaning crews because I'm doing the work of two, but this is how we protect each other. What he doesn't understand—what I haven't told him—is I'm wanted by U.S. authorities for what I would call the mercy killing of my addled mother in her Connecticut home; an assisted suicide by suffocation. To me, she was already dead. To the police, she wasn't. To them, I am wanted on charges of premeditated murder.

Heavy traffic surrounds us on the Île de la Cité, a parking lot of delivery trucks and vans and morning taxis. With our city truck lights flashing, Jean-Pierre tries to move some

of it aside but there is nowhere for it to go. We are now the rats in the street. Amira is talking to other crews on the radio about the situation and Jean-Pierre vows to stay with the truck. I will take my broom and walk ahead to where I might still be able to work. He will pick up my piles of trash as he reaches them.

In this way I come to witness the woman from America standing on the parapet of Notre Dame Cathedral, preparing herself to fall silently through the fog, like a bundle of clean laundry, to meet her God.

"You may have faith in God," Jean-Pierre told me once, "without believing in God." I remember this phrase because I wrote it down in my pocket notebook at the time. I was trying to learn French and I wrote down whatever people told me, for decoding later. I later gave up on this. I don't have the brain for learning French. I'll never be mentally quick enough. I still write in English in my pocket notebooks to keep from losing my mind. I thirst for English like a prisoner in a foreign jail, dying to hear the voice of a cellmate, a captor, anyone—the barking of dogs through an open window—directed at him.

"You can have *hope* in God," Jean-Pierre says.

"You can have hope. Yes," I reply.

My French is only good enough sometimes to repeat what I've heard and add a "yes" or a "no" at the end.

The police are working the scene near Notre Dame Cathedral. I carry my broom upright in one hand like a toy horse's head on a stick, its neon face ripe with the smell of the gutter. Most of the drivers stuck in traffic don't understand what's happening ahead of them, but the streets have been cordoned off in all directions and the police are negotiating with a woman barely visible in the clouds. I have a sudden vision of Our Mother the Virgin Mary. *Notre Dame*. I hope for this woman's sake there is a God. I rub at my neck, at the long, smooth scar there, a burn from a rope, and I feel more alone than ever standing in the middle of a crowd filling the streets in all directions.

Because of my city uniform and my broom, I'm able to

work my way through the people to the front. The police are using bullhorns to hold back pedestrians and to speak with some compassion to the woman above. She's holding onto a gargoyle—a random demon, but *her* demon—out on a ledge 20 or 30 meters in the sky. She's ready to leap, I can feel it in my chest.

"This nonsense has been going on for half an hour!" a man shouts at me in French from the open window of a taxicab, checking his wristwatch to be sure of the time.

Angry drivers are standing outside their cars, some of them yelling at her, "Jump and get it over with!" "If you're going to do it, do it!" In the quiet morning air, with the sound of voices carrying so well in the fog, I'm sure she can hear them, even at her height on the ledge. They've been waiting in traffic a long time, they are delivering produce to markets, wine and beer to restaurants, these are not fat bankers and politicians who can afford to be late to work, these are men paid to make their deliveries before the start of business, taxi drivers with passengers who need to catch their trains, their flights, who need to reach their morning meetings. This has gone on too long and it should be resolved.

Officers in riot gear unfold from a police van and run to the front lines. So often there is riot gear in France. The organizers of strikes and demonstrations are known to complain if the police do *not* send a riot squad—indicating the authorities are taking their cause too lightly. Even so, a suicide is not a strike, and I'm surprised to see the riot squad. They push roughly through the crowd and I'm not sure what the woman could be thinking at this point but someone screams and points at her, and I see the bag of clean laundry tumbling from the sky.

Then, just as abruptly, it strikes a set of scaffolding halfway to the ground and tumbles in a new direction, into the treetops, rustling loose the tender green leaves of May and snapping small branches, which chase her gently to the earth.

The police run to the woman and I'm drawn along by the crowd of pedestrians as they follow at an uneasy pace, wanting a closer look but not wanting to see. We can tell the woman is still alive, screaming in pain and trying to stand, out of instinct, although a moment before she wanted death. The police reach her and try to keep her still. The medics arrive

quickly. They were on standby near the scene, although I hadn't noticed them waiting. The woman fights against them, swinging one unbroken arm, but she can't move her legs. She yells at them like a cat near death still defending her notion of territory and pride.

I don't know what to think. I never do. I look at the people around me, to identify an emotion in their faces, horrified but fascinated. They begin to close in on me and I feel the same rush of heat and panic I feel when the small elevator in my building stops unexpectedly between floors, trapping me inside for a moment, until it can free itself and move on.

The people in the crowd smell strongly now of nicotine and perspiration. The stench of the dead rat on my hands, on the bright green bristles near my head. The pool of water and litter at my feet, calling me back to work. I use the broom, held at my waist in one hand, to clear a wide path for myself. I'm nudging at people gently, I believe, but they scramble to avoid me. All the while, my other hand is at my throat.

The woman survives. A gift from the Virgin Mary herself. They take her to the nearest hospital to continue her suffering. A spokesman informs us she is American, living in Washington, D.C. She is 56 years old and she is distraught over her husband's televised announcement to the nation that he is leaving her. This was meant to be their anniversary trip to Paris. She is the wife of a U.S. Senator. Thus, the riot gear. Thus, what marriage has done to another woman. As my mother lay dying of schizophrenia caused by her children and her husband.

"We're two hours behind," Jean-Pierre complains to me. "Couldn't she have used a gun, like other Americans?"

Radio talk shows in Paris are stirring already with debate over the behavior of the drivers who stood outside their cars yelling at the woman to jump. "This wild mob was deplorable," the host begins. "Something you would see in America, not in Paris. Don't you agree with me?"

"Sacrilege! On her part. Leaping from our holy Notre Dame!" a caller argues.

"An insult to our nation!" another says.

"This behavior of the drivers was understandable! People!

I was there!"

Who calls into these talk shows, after all, but the drivers themselves, listening in their cars and trucks as they drive: "We are all working at this hour, to make the city great! Who is a woman like that woman to come to Paris and behave so badly?"

Jean-Pierre listens and enjoys the debate. He calls out to me as I work. "You and I, we are at work before any of these drivers! We are the greatest workers of all!" he shouts. I sweep like a madman, trying to return to our schedule and erase my memories of the morning and everything I know about America. My broom is a poor eraser. I am cleaning Paris with a toothbrush, and all the while the fog of the past interferes.

Jean-Pierre reminds me there are two winters in every year. The first, in January, when the year begins, and the second in December, when a new winter starts.

Sweeping the streets, I have time to contemplate such tricks of logic. Sometimes there is real wisdom to what Jean-Pierre is saying, and sometimes it is nonsense. I am a stone in a stream when I work, he tells me, or I am the water flowing around the stone, or I am the source of the water, turning my square key as I go. I don't understand his words. I write them down in my notebook. These are not the usual phrases of the streets and shops and the zinc bars after work.

Later-morning traffic is moving quickly past me now as I sweep, making a sound like the years of my life rushing ahead to catch the others. The exhaust they leave behind smells sweet for a moment, like food, before turning to poison in my lungs. I feel caught between two winters and I worry this is all I will ever have.

"You need to relax," Jean-Pierre tells me. "You are wound up as tightly as any American I have ever known."

"Who have you ever known from America?" I ask him.

"You are the first," he answers.

"Tell me again about the water in the river," I ask him. "I want to write it down correctly."

"The water is a metaphor," he tells me. "You and I, we need to breathe underwater to stay alive here. Not like a fish breathes. Like the riverbed breathes."

"Get in! You're the last two out!" Amira yells at us over the dispatch radio in our truck. "Where are you?"

"Canal St. Martin," Jean-Pierre tells her.

"You are hopeless, both of you! Come in now, tomorrow is a holiday, I must get home."

"It isn't a holiday for your people, what is the hurry?" Jean-Pierre asks her.

"It's everyone's holiday."

"Don't worry, Amira, we'll be there very soon," I tell her.

"Liar!" she says. Then, with desperation: "My husband will beat me if I'm late!"

"She's joking," Jean-Pierre tells me.

"I don't think she's joking," I tell him.

"Leave the keys for us, Amira, we'll lock up," Jean-Pierre tells her.

"I'll be fired if you forget," she says.

"You will never be fired," he tells her. "The President of France himself could not fire you."

We are all speaking French, of course, although Amira's French has an Algerian influence, and mine is like a schoolboy's. Her eyes are black and guarded and sometimes dangerous—the eyes that were introduced to me by the night clerk at the Hôtel St. André des Arts, after I woke him one night to ask how I could get a new identity for cash. No phone. No Internet. No electronic trail.

I imagine Amira's eyes as I listen to her words crackling over our radio. I can smell the harisa on her breath—the Guajillo chilies, the garlic—something like coriander, or caraway, also. She is of the lowest caste in Paris. Jean-Pierre spars with her on the radio partly because he has nothing better to do and partly because he is free to say whatever he wants to her.

He drops me off beside the canal. Our friendship goes no farther than this. I will walk home from here to my poor apartment building on the fringes of the 19th arrondissement, and he will drive our small green truck back to Amira at central base and then take the train home to the suburbs where he lives, far from the expense and the *haute couture* of central Paris.

I carry a small bag of clothing with me. Sometimes I stop at

a zinc bar on my way home to try to meet people and I change out of my uniform there. Before I knew to do this, the owner would walk me outside and ask me not to return.

I pass an old couple sitting on a bench by the canal. They don't look up to greet me. They are arguing. They've been married too long.

"Why do Americans always kill themselves when they don't get what they want?" I hear the woman say.

"*Bonjour, ma sentinelle*." I bow to touch the head of Madame Huguette's pet hen as I enter the Bar Fleuri, a zinc bar in the 19th. The hen is a good luck charm. She is not a fancy bird, but she will hurry to greet you with a round of friendly clucking if she recognizes you as a regular.

The Bar Fleuri is on the rue du Plateau. Its doors are open all day long, serving coffee, breakfast, lunch and aperitifs, dinner, whiskey, carafes of inexpensive wine into the night. People sit on mismatched wooden chairs at solid tables with Formica tops. An old, beat-up gas pump, painted green, stands inside the front door with a nozzle and a hose, looking ready for use.

The customers are mostly men these days—North Africans and Arabs and ex-Americans like myself. There are days one would call it a seedy place, depending on which men come in and how long they stay. In the morning, they stand and argue over the news in a lively way as they drink strong espressos and head to work, or head out to look for work. In the afternoon, they sit and drink half-liters of house wine and argue about the lack of work until they are bleary-eyed and ready to go home to their families.

"Why is this place called the Bar Fleuri?" I once asked a man there.

He looked up. He had no answer.

The waitress pointed at the wall behind us to tell me the bar was named for the roses painted on the tiles there.

I hope someone will talk to me today. I hope I will hear English.

In the small bathroom, where a person can barely turn around, I wash my hands and face clean of work and change my clothes. I am thin enough now that a small bathroom doesn't

bother me. My face in the mirror is strangely distorted. I've lost the rounded look of an American.

Modern times have come to the Bar Fleuri. There is a television set mounted on one of the walls. The patrons are watching images replayed again and again of the woman leaping from Notre Dame. A local news crew had time to set up and capture it all in dramatic fashion, a woman falling out of the fog and caught by scaffolding and then the treetops and then the saving arms of the soft earth. The debate continues in the Bar Fleuri over the behavior of the drivers and the miracle of the woman's survival on the eve of Ascension Thursday.

"An insult! Tomorrow! A holy day!"

"She was a tourist, what would she know of our holy days?"

"She was a Catholic. She knew."

"A person doesn't plan her suicide with reference to the church calendar."

"It was a miracle. At our own Notre Dame."

"It's a matter for her family now."

I have seen and heard enough of the woman leaping from Notre Dame. This is what the media do. For a day, they prod us all into caring about a complete stranger. Then the day passes and we cease to care. How else can one survive? It would be overwhelming.

There are laws in America governing how many turns a noose can have before it is considered illegal. The noose is so dangerous a knot, it's a crime even to tie one as a joke for a friend. Something I wrote down once in my pocket notebook. Something a policeman told me, waiting for me to answer his questions about the rope burn he noticed on my neck. My first attempt to escape my life. A week later, I slipped out of America on a container ship.

"If you replace all the parts of a bicycle, over time, is it the same bicycle?" A question from Jean-Pierre. It helps him pass the time as I work and he drives. "It would seem odd to argue that such a bicycle is the same as the original," he tells me, "and it would seem just as odd to argue it is a totally new bicycle. There are no clear solutions."

I assume you are who you say you are.

I assume you are who you were yesterday.

"I'm not sleeping well these nights," I tell Jean-Pierre. "Your questions bother me."

Jean-Pierre once read in a book that inmates in London prisons lost their minds because they were kept too long in solitary confinement. Practices had to be changed. A person given no connection to another human being will cease to be human. It's suicide to do this to yourself.

We all need at least one other person.

"You do not need me, however," Jean-Pierre clarifies. "You need someone else."

I have been told, when men return from war after killing so many other men, their wives wait and wait and wait for things to return to normal, but they never return to normal. That place is gone from the map. It has been dismantled.

"And what if all the time your neighbor is taking the old parts out of your garbage can," Jean-Pierre asks me, "and using them to build a bicycle of his own?"

Listening to the news at the Bar Fleuri, we are told the woman who leaped from Notre Dame will never walk again.

This can be desired, I tell myself—reducing life to a single option. There are studies showing, one year after the event, paraplegics are as happy with their lives as lottery winners. I think of the woman and I hope she is one of them.

Her husband has already been asked by reporters if he will divorce her anyway, despite her paralysis.

"Who is to say what is right or wrong between two people?" he answers, and for once the men at the Bar Fleuri are uncertain.

"He is a wise man," I tell them in English. "A U.S. Senator." They finish their wine, as if I have said nothing to anyone. I think about Amira then. And Jean-Pierre. Tomorrow is a holiday, but after that we go back to work.

Deborah Spera

Ohrail Sex

We're all crammed into this tiny kitchen: Mamaw, Mom, my two aunts, and me. Mamaw stands at the stove stirring a giant pot of boiling vegetable soup, her fist on one big hip and a cigarette dangling out of the corner of her mouth. She's got this unspoken motto, "If it hurts, feed it," and her frame confirms that belief. There are a lot of big-assed women in my family. I am the exception, but only because food holds no lure for me. It's a worry to my family.

The rest of us sit around this little round kitchen table, drinking coffee and popping the last of the green beans from the garden to put up for later this fall. I'm peeling potatoes for the soup. Papaw and the menfolk, along with my boyfriend, Ricky, are squeezed into the living room watching the U of L—UK football game. The room is divided in its loyalties, so somebody will likely go home with a black eye. It's a fracas in there.

Mamaw has been unusually quiet today, and we're all worried sick about her. She's having these fits of confusion. The last hospital test showed abnormalities in her brain, which we all know isn't good. So we're all here, and Ricky and I are coming back at the crack of dawn tomorrow to take her into Louisville to see the doctor, since he has a car, I don't have classes till Tuesday, and everybody else has to work. It's weird, all the quiet in the kitchen, because normally Mamaw's the biggest talker and half the time doesn't care who's listening. She talks to herself like the world agrees.

Her hands are scarred from bacon grease and early years of cotton picking. Aside from the bottles of Tab stacked in the fridge, cigarettes are her biggest habit, but not because she's addicted—she never inhales. Back in the forties some doctor told her cigarettes were good for the nerves, so she sets one between her lips when she cooks, or gives us grandkids a bath, or washes the dishes. Her head is in constant motion to keep the smoke out of her eyes. She says her nerves have been bad since her first husband, Sonny J, died suddenly after

World War II. Mom and her sisters are all Sonny J's kids, and Mamaw had three boys with her second husband, my Papaw. But this ain't no Brady Bunch.

Today she's been staring into the soup like it's going to conjure something up. It's not till Mom asks what's on her mind that Mamaw turns and looks squint-eyed at her three daughters.

"I was reading this article the other day about ohrail sex. Now, just what is that exactly?" She picks up the half-drunk bottle of Tab from the center of the stove and takes a swig.

Even though I am almost twenty years of age, she ignores me. She thinks I'm too young to know. We stare at her in shock. First, there's a pause as we all try to figure out what on earth she's asking, then that aha moment where we all know exactly what she's asking, and then we finally realize somebody has to answer. The whole thing takes less than ten seconds. Mom and her sisters exchange shocked looks. I am a breath away from a snort, but don't want to draw attention to myself when Mom screams with laughter, grabs her crotch, and runs for the bathroom. She's not coming back.

My face is hot. I pray Ricky doesn't come in here to see what the ruckus is, but luckily the men are riveted to that game. If anybody in this kitchen looks at me hard, they'll know my secret. A week ago, I had my first ever orgasm. I finally let Ricky use his tongue on me, and it's all I've been thinking about. I didn't know it would be like that, like riding a wave, not that I know anything about that since we live in a landlocked state, but I did spend some time this summer at the new swimming pool that has a wave machine over at the Marriott, so I figure that must be the sensation—free and wild, riding a forever wave. Smooth, like a good cup a coffee topped by a Reese's peanut butter cup, so rich and sweet that you just want to wallow all up in it and never leave the ecstasy. You can lose your mind in all that goo.

I met Ricky at a bar named Bambi's on a Sunday night, when they let underage kids in to dance. I had my eye on his friend, but Ricky kept saying, "Hey good lookin'" every time I walked past him. He convinced me to dance the last song with him, which, ironically, happened to be the Donna Summer hit "Last Dance." Afterward, he picked me up in

his arms and ran me to my car in the rain. He wouldn't let me down until I kissed him good-bye, so I did because who wants to drive home soaking wet?

If I'm honest, the kiss wasn't great. All that sounds romantic, but it was too rough. He called later and I agreed to go out, mostly because he makes me laugh. He's got a mean imitation of Muhammad Ali. We've been together eighteen months now.

I know Ricky is hoping tonight will be the night to consummate what we started. We still haven't gone all the way. I'm staying over at his place since we have to get up so early. Now he's gone out and bought champagne and the *Off the Wall* Michael Jackson album. He likes the song "Rock with You." It's thoughtful, I know, but I'm nervous about all this planning. It feels like he's lining something up, like it's the scene of a crime instead of something that should just come natural. But what do I know?

Mamaw sits in the chair Mom left vacant and stares the other two down. She's not talking anymore until she gets answers. Somebody is going to have to speak up and it's not going to be me—I don't need to add flame to this fire. She worries enough about everybody as it is. She still lines us up outside the bathroom door every Friday night after the church fish fry to dose out Milk of Magnesia by the tablespoon to six grown kids and their spouses and offspring. I hide out front in the bushes but she always finds me. If she is the wheel, we are her spokes. This woman is determined to keep us all alive.

"You read an article about what?" Sally Anne asks.

"You heard me," Mamaw says.

Sally's mortified. She puts her head down on the table and shakes it back and forth, one long no. She's easy to mortify. Just say her name out loud in a crowded room and she goes all white and shaky. Mamaw says she's like that because she's the baby that never knew her daddy. I don't know, I think some people are just like that.

I'm still a virgin. The oldest one I know. Here I am a sophomore in college, not a single soul in this kitchen was a virgin for as long as me. Mom got pregnant on her sixteenth birthday at the drive-in movies where *Arrivederci Roma* was playing. It was the first time she had sex and she got

me. She tells that story like a warning. She and Dad ran off to Tennessee, where they didn't need parental consent, and came back hitched. Mamaw and my other grandma were so mad they wouldn't let them inside. My parents spent their first night of marriage sleeping in the car in the alleyway behind the house, Mom puking the whole time.

The only person ever to tell me what to expect about real sex was the drunk lady who lived next door. She leaned into my car one Friday night a couple of winters ago and asked what we girls were up to. There was a carload of us heading out for a cruise around McDonald's.

"You girls had sex?" she wanted to know.

Everybody said no, but looking back I know that isn't true except for my friend PJ, because she is the one who asked, "What's it feel like?"

That woman laughed her horsey laugh and said, "Oh, baby girl, it hurts so good."

Maggie, she's the middle sister to Mom, is shocked at Mamaw's question, like the rest of us but not for the same reason. She wants to know how Mamaw got to fifty-five years of age without knowing more about sex.

"Mom! You don't know what oral sex is? Do you know what a blow job is?"

"Why would I ask if I knowed what it was?"

A couple of years ago, Mom, Mamaw, and me were driving to South Carolina to see my great-grandmother, Mama Gert, and I asked Mamaw if she was a virgin when she got married. Mamaw laughed. "A virgin? Hell, no!"

I could tell that really bothered Mom, who always felt bad for getting pregnant so young and then, being the first born, finds out she probably came from the same circumstance as me. At a rest stop near Maggie Valley, Mamaw went into the bathroom and I heard her giggling, but when she came out she wouldn't tell me why. Inside the bathroom was a condom machine selling French ticklers. I heard her tell Mom she couldn't wait to show Papaw. But nobody has ever said anything to me directly. Not about sex anyway.

I do love him. Ricky. That much I know, so I don't know why I've waited. Both my aunts married at eighteen to have sex, but Maggie is the only one still married to the same man.

Sally Anne is on her second marriage to a guy we all secretly call Butterball because of the shape of his head, plus he cuts up food for her. None of us knows why.

My parents finally got divorced when I was twelve, which was for the best. No more threats with the butcher knife, no more belt whuppings, no more dinner at 5:30, and no more liver and onions. Thank God! Mom's gone through some bad spells with the bottle. Every once in a while she'll go on a bender and me or my aunts have to go pull her out of some bar to get her home. I spent my junior and senior years living with Mamaw so Mom could get back on her feet.

In the living room somebody's on the ten-yard line, which judging from the noise could be positive or negative depending on who you are rooting for.

Maggie starts asking basic questions like, "You know how many holes a woman's got, right, Mom?"

Sally raises her head like it's a pop quiz and answers, "Two!"

"Two?" I jump in. "We don't have two holes!"

"Yes we do," she says, like she's the expert.

"I assure you we do not."

"Oh really, Miss Scholarship to College? How many holes do you think we have?"

"What hole do you think babies come out of, Sally Anne?"

Sally and I have a mind-boggling fight about pee holes and their flexibility, or lack thereof, while Maggie explains to Mamaw in detail what a blowjob is. I just want Sally to shut up so I can listen. Since Mom is the oldest of all six kids, Maggie and Sally act more like my sisters than my aunts. I remember them as young and they remember me as competition.

I know Ricky wants me to give him a blowjob but I worry about gagging, plus I don't know how clean it is. I almost did one night. I was planning to, but then he got drunk, threw a beer bottle at me, and called me a fat ass, so the mood was gone. He isn't usually like that. His mother never once told him she loves him. I don't know how you have a kid and not tell him you love him. I don't care if you are an orphan with no good sense—you don't do that. Usually he leaves me little notes everywhere telling me I'm beautiful or reminding me to have a good day. We have long talks on his front porch about our future. I imagine us in a faraway place that doesn't have

subdivisions or pickup trucks with monster wheels or cheap beer on sale for a buck twenty.

Papaw hollers out from the next room, "One of you girls bring us some beer."

I hop up and grab a couple of six packs of Old Milwaukee from the fridge and take them into the living room, stepping over everybody to hand them off. Ricky pulls me down on his lap for a kiss. I give him a peck so as not to endure my uncle's endless jokes. They're like a pack of wild dogs when they get together.

"Have you told Ricky why you were nicknamed Bone Woman in high school?" my Uncle Junie Bug asks. He's drunk again and thinks he is hilarious. I slap him on the back of the head on my way back to the kitchen, and they roar with drunken laughter until Papaw yells at them to shut up so he can hear the game.

I got that nickname because I am so tall and skinny. I struggle to eat. I'm a lot better, but there was a time it got dangerous. Food sometimes gets caught in my throat. It's like something is wedged in there, a block or lump that won't let the food get by. I was down to ninety-two pounds my senior year of high school which for my height, I'm five-nine, isn't good. Everybody was up in arms, which made it worse. But Mamaw told me to ignore them, and every night she made me a hot bath and bathed me like she did when I was a child. She sat on a small white wooden child's chair with her rump hanging off either side, her knees up against the rust-stained commode, scrubbing my body with nubby cotton washcloths till I was fresh pink. She'd always have that cigarette in her mouth, the ash growing longer and longer until I was sure it would fall into the bathwater. It never did. At the last possible moment, she'd flick it into the toilet, never missing a word in a sentence. She was hypnotic.

After, she tucked me between clean sheets and spoon-fed me whatever was left over from suppertime, mostly soft foods cut up small, things that could get past the lump. She'd sing old songs her mama sang to her, bitch about Papaw and what dumbasses men are, and talk about growing up in the low country with her sisters and Mama Gert. Always just one long stream of consciousness that, I don't know, I always

found soothing. She talked and sang, and I would eat and cry. Sometimes it would take two hours to feed me, but she would do it until I came around. Every night she told me I was her favorite but swore me to secrecy from the other grandchildren. Now I am, what they say is, on the low end of normal weight, but sometimes I still can't help but look at myself and wonder if I am repulsive.

In the kitchen, Maggie has moved the lecture on to how a man pleases a woman.

"Do you know where your clitoris is?" she asks.

Mamaw has no idea where, or even what, a clitoris is. She didn't even know she had one. Sally rolls her eyes and bolts to go sit with Butterball in the living room. Maggie, sitting in the chair next to Mamaw, pivots, gives a look out to the men to make sure nobody's coming, pulls up her skirt, spreads her legs, and yanks her underwear to the side to show Mamaw this little button at the top of her vagina, just under the lips. The vulva to be precise, which is the area from the perineum to the mons pubis—I learned that much in biology. Mamaw sets down her drink and bends over to see. I'm leaning in too. I'm not gonna lie, I don't know where mine is either. None of us has ever been shy about our parts. Mamaw doesn't even close the bathroom door to do her business, just hollers out orders from the toilet, but Maggie takes brazen to a whole new level.

"It's like magic, Mom. This little thing here, if you rub it long enough it gets hard and swells like a mini penis. This tiny piece of flesh holds the key to amazing!" Satisfied she has pointed it out properly, Maggie adjusts herself and proceeds to tell Mamaw she deserves more than she's getting, tells her she doesn't know what she's been missing all these years and how it's the woman's job to teach a man how to please her. Mamaw stares at her like she's been shown proof there are extra planets in the solar system.

They don't know I am in the room anymore, which is fine by me. Mamaw says nothing, just lights another cigarette and goes back to the soup. I know I could ask Maggie about sex, but she's got a big mouth and I don't relish the aftermath. Maggie once told me she likes when her husband talks dirty to her, but he won't do it because he finds it embarrassing.

Imagine how he would feel if he knew she was spreading that around.

After that whole craziness is over, we all eat soup and cornbread and pie. When everybody leaves Ricky pulls me into the alcove off the kitchen, near the back door, and tells me he misses my smell. I start a fit of giggles.

"What's so funny?"

"Just something Mamaw said. I'll tell you later."

Mamaw is an ongoing source of amusement for Ricky. Once, she told him she rubbed WD-40 on her sore knees because she heard it was good for joints—swore it helped. He tells everybody that story.

"You ready to go?"

"Let's help clean up first."

Ricky wipes the table and I help Mamaw with the dishes. She washes and I dry as we watch the last of the light fade over the hill out the window. Soon it will be daylight saving time again. She stares out at the cool of the day, hanging on to a clump of silverware, and when I ask if she's all right she says wearily, "Yes, child, I'm all right," but I know she's lying. I catch Ricky's eye and we finish in silence.

After, I pull him aside. "She's not right."

"She is awful quiet."

"I think it's better if I stay with her and we can be together tomorrow night. Is that okay?"

"You're killing me, you know that?"

"I'm sorry. I just don't know what else to do."

I know he's frustrated but he is good about it, and he tells me I'm worth the wait. I give him a long kiss 'cause I feel bad for him. I ask him to get my books from the dorm so I can study while Mamaw gets her tests done, and then I stand in the driveway waving until he is out of sight.

Mamaw and I have our baths after Papaw goes to bed. She lends me one of her cotton nightgowns she keeps in a suitcase under the bed. We're sleeping in my old room because we don't want to wake Papaw in the morning, since we've got to get up early for the two-hour drive to the city. I know she's scared. I am too. I can't imagine my life without her. Mamaw is my mainstay.

I call Ricky and say goodnight. He tells me he called my

friend Anna and she dropped my books at his place, then puts in a request for hoecakes for breakfast. Mamaw never turns down a food request. I tell him they'll be hot and ready when he gets here.

"Kinda like me right now?" he cracks.

"Yeah, like you, right now."

"Woman, you really are torturing me."

"Tomorrow," I promise.

Once we're all tucked in, Mamaw takes out her teeth and puts them in a water glass on the side table before she flips off the light. The moon shines full through the window, lighting a path to her face. I can't be sure, but I think she's talking to me when she says real low, "Sonny J came to me through the TV set last night, told me it's almost my time."

I say, "What?" and ask if she's all right.

She looks so sad, but then she laughs and rolls toward me in the dark.

"I tell you what, I don't think I'll be able to look that Maggie in the eye anymore ever since she told me she does that oral sex."

I want to tell her about the wave. "Maybe we ought to consider what she says as fact, Mamaw. I mean, what if it's fact?"

She laughs, runs a rough hand over my head, plants a wet kiss on my face, and whispers to me like we're sisters. "I can't hardly even look at that thing, let alone touch it."

I drift to sleep watching her breathe.

I don't know what time it is when I wake but it's dark out, still the middle of the night. No light comes from the window, only the quiet sound of a light rain. The weather has turned. When I finally adjust my eyes, I see Mamaw standing at the foot of our bed pointing a gun at the window.

Mamaw's. Got. A gun.

It's the family hunting rifle, and she's pointing it toward the window next to her side of the bed. When I sit up she says low, "Somebody's out there. I'm gonna go see who it is. You stay here and keep quiet. Don't wake up Daddy—you'll give him a heart attack." Ten years ago Papaw had a bad heart attack, and now Mamaw's really strict about sudden scares, and she's cut the butter in her recipes by half.

In the dark I hear a light tap on the screen and someone call my name. The voice, a girl's, is recognizable. I hop across the bed on my knees, part the curtain, and see my best friend from college, my sorority sister at Alpha Delta Pi Do or Die, Anna Banana. Banana is not her real name, obviously, but I like how it rhymes. So now she is and will always be Anna Banana to me.

I lift the window and she says quick, "You can't be the last to know, I'm not going to let that happen." I don't register what she is saying because she is about to get shot. I push my head to the screen, and see Mamaw at the side door lifting the rifle.

I whisper-shout, "Don't shoot! It's Anna!"

Anna falls to the ground and covers her head, like that will stop a bullet.

I hear Mamaw say, "Lord, child, what you doing out here? You scared us half to death."

Anna gets her bearings and I can see in the yellow light of the kitchen she's upset. She keeps apologizing for waking us up, but Mamaw puts on the percolator and says, "I wasn't sleepin' and ain't plannin' on it now, so we might as well sit and hear what you got yourself in a fuss about."

I know she wouldn't have come all this way if something hadn't happened.

"Just say it," I tell her.

Anna levels me with an eye-to-eye stare. "You know the Lambda Chi's threw a party tonight?"

"So?"

"Well, Ricky was there and he left the party with a freshman girl—that redhead."

That redhead is in the theater department. Her name is Linda or Leslie, something like that. She slept with one of the guys at the fraternity who has a girlfriend, and when the girl confronted her about it that redhead told her that her boyfriend was good in bed. She would know the difference between good and bad in bed. That redhead is making a path straight through the male population of Western Kentucky University.

Mamaw gets up, sets the gun upright in the corner, and leaves the room. When she comes back she has her purse and

her coat thrown on over her gown. “Go on and get dressed. Let’s go see.”

Anna scrambles up alongside Mamaw, and together they are waiting on me to move. I pull on my jeans, and in minutes we are in Anna’s two-door green Dodge with the heat blasting, Mamaw in the backseat. As soon as we’re settled Mamaw asks Anna, “You ever hear of a glitterus?”

Anna looks at me confused and I shake my head—best not to start that.

“No, ma’am,” she tells Mamaw, “can’t say as I have.”

Mamaw gives a little harrumph like that’s all the proof she needs, and none of us say anything the whole drive to Ricky’s place. It takes about twenty minutes. He’s got a tiny one-bedroom on the main floor of an old Victorian house four streets over from my dorm. I’ve got a key.

We pull up in the alley behind the house and Anna stops the car, throws it in park, and asks, “What are you gonna do?”

The rain is really coming down now. I hadn’t even thought what to do, but Mamaw says, “Go on in there and see if he’s with that girl.”

I get out of the car and trudge around the hedges and through the wet to his bedroom window at the front of the house. I cup my hands to the glass.

I wish I couldn’t, but I see. I see what’s going on in there. I see him between the legs of the redhead. Even in the shadows I see his perfect butt. I pull away and squat in the rain with my back against the house. Somehow this is going to end up my fault.

I wrench the key out of my pocket and slip through the side door into the kitchen where it’s dark. This is the door they would have come through because Ricky hates neighbors knowing his business. His jacket and hers are thrown on the futon by the refrigerator. Her jacket, so obvious, is pink with a fur collar. A redhead with a pink coat and a fur collar is definitely advertising something. I quietly grab her jacket and am out the door. I don’t bother to pull it closed—what’s it matter? I toss it up into the chestnut tree by the driveway. It snags a good branch and hangs. They’ll find it.

I circle round back and climb into the front seat of the car, out of breath and drenched. The shiver runs deep inside me.

"He wasn't there."

Anna grips the steering wheel. "I saw him leave with her, Peg. I saw him!"

I shake my head and Mamaw lets out a breath.

"I'm so sorry. Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry," Anna says.

I pat her knee. "It's okay. Maybe he was just walking her home. Let's go. Let's just go." The only things talking on the way back are the windshield wipers swatting at the rain.

When Anna drops us off it's four in the morning. Mamaw lights a cigarette and makes me a hot bath, then heads to the kitchen to roll out the hoecake dough. I climb in and soak until the shiver leaves my body. By the time Ricky pulls into the driveway, the rain has turned to sleet and I am bracing for the long ride ahead.

When he comes through the door I see he's wary, which suits me fine. He gives a "Hello, ladies" and sits down to eat. Mamaw slides a plate of food and a cup of coffee in front of him.

"Rough night?" she asks. He confesses he didn't get much sleep. Mamaw sets a plate of food in front of me too: hoecakes with molasses and a fried cheese egg. But I can't eat.

Papaw joins us at the table in his T-shirt and boxers, says hey to Ricky, and fixes his coffee the way he likes it—three teaspoons of sugar and some milk. He has to be at the post office in a half hour for work. "Gonna be a cold one today. You go careful on that road, son, you hear?"

"Yessir, I will. Got precious cargo."

That's when Papaw notices the gun propped in the corner. "Alma, why is that gun out?"

Mamaw looks at me, and I look at her. Ricky stops midbite.

"We thought we heard something outside last night."

"Woman, wake me up when you hear things."

"Old man, nothing you can do that we two can't. Wasn't nothing anyway."

When we're alone in the kitchen Ricky pulls me to him wanting a kiss. I duck away. He asks if I'm okay. I tell him I'm just worried about Mamaw. That's a truth. I am worried. I'm more worried than I've ever been in my life.

He holds me and says, "Aw baby, everything's going to be all right."

I say, “Yeah, I know,” but now I’m crying. “I’m gonna sit in the backseat with her for the ride, okay?”

He wipes my face with his shirt and looks at me, searching. “No problem, honey, whatever you need. We good?”

“Yeah, we’re good.”

So this is what it looks like when two people lie to each other.

He lifts me off the ground, gives me another squeeze, and is out the side door to warm up the car.

When Mamaw comes back, I see she is having one of her spells. “Where we going, Peg?”

She hasn’t changed out of her slippers. I don’t want to embarrass her so I lead her into the living room and sit her on the couch. She’s confused and scared.

“We’re just going into Louisville to see the doctor. We’re going to get you fixed up. Okay?”

She nods. She looks so much older than fifty-five. I don’t know what that age is supposed to look like, but I am guessing it isn’t this. I change her shoes. We climb into the back of Ricky’s Buick, and I pull Mamaw’s seat belt over and click it shut.

“Radio or no radio?” Ricky asks.

I look at Mamaw, who shakes her head. I tell him we don’t care, and he puts on the country station. The car edges out the driveway as Willie Nelson serenades us with his warning to mamas about cowboys.

Just before we turn onto the freeway I reach for Mamaw’s hand and squeeze it three times—our “I love you” signal. She gives me one hard squeeze back, and we sit like that, hand in hand, all the way to the city.

Eileen Arthurs

Socks and the City

I slide onto a stool at the lobby bar of the William Penn Hotel, scene of the crime. My crime. I take in the carved bar, the hushed conversations, the ultra-spongy carpeting, all under lighting that's both moody and classy. Everything is as it was on that fateful day. I've returned on a professional mission, to discover why I sabotaged my relationship with Oscar. Oscar was the love of my life. He was, and probably still is, an Altoid-crunching tech nerd and supreme realist. I say probably because he won't answer my calls anymore.

As for me, I'm an eco-psycho-experientialist. That means I study the relationship between the physical, psychological and experiential landscapes of peoples' lives. Even if I made up that field, which I did, it's huge. Lucky for me I'm in Pittsburgh, the perfect setting for my work.

For starters, Pittsburgh spills, dips and plops itself along the banks of three rivers: the Allegheny, the Monongahela and that shining ribbon of compromise, the Ohio. The town's psychic runoff floods these waters, washing them with schizophrenic serenity or eddying them with unrest, although, admittedly these conditions are often related to the performance of the local sport teams.

Today, the rivers are muddied, roiled, as if they don't know whether to adopt their saleable postcard finish or revert to their more frequent sheen of self-deprecating sludge. I sense indecision, forks in the road, a situation awaiting a solution. I take this is as a sign for Oscar and me.

It may seem strange, but people actually pay me to do this sort of thing. I have superlative powers of observation. At work, I ask my clients simple questions, for example, what they see out their windows, where they like to vacation, if they prefer lace to leather, sand to soil. I find the map in their streaming output, and reconnect them with their lives. If someone loves stands of wild hibiscus and bouillabaisse and holes up in a hovel on the Swissvale-Etna bus line, they're practically engraving an invitation for disaster. Trust me,

it happens every day. I've counseled lots of people right out of their self-made prisons. Unfortunately, it's a lot harder to work on yourself. Selfie-appendectomy? See what I mean?

With my clients, I employ all sorts of strategies. For example, I probe their memories of pivotal events to discover omens. Think young Meryl Streep in The Deer Hunter when that drop of red wine hits her wedding gown. The instant her bridal white reddens, movie-goers grip their seats. Omens like that happen every day.

The trick is to read your own. That's my mission here right now.

"So, sweetheart, what can I get for you?" The bartender leans toward me. I note that he wasn't here that day two months ago when I gouged the heart out of the love Oscar and I had for each other. I'm not sure how to interpret that piece of information, so I turn my attention to the drink specials.

Naturally, today's feature is a banana daiquiri. I gasp. It's another coincidence in a string. Oscar and I split up the day I learned the sad news about bananas. If you've managed to shield yourself thus far, our beloved Cavendish banana, the one you smell and taste when you so much as hear the word banana, is on the verge of extinction. This is scientific fact. And today's special is a banana daiquiri? Coincidence? I think not.

When we were together, Oscar called me a starless astrologist, a root-reader. That was when he was in a jesting mood. When he was cranky, he called me a crackpot and a coincidence whore. But I know better. I understand that a coincidence is a message from God, an anonymous note pointing us down the right path if we can just interpret it properly.

"Give me a minute," I say to the bartender. I close my eyes and picture a pack of feverish lab researchers in a sweat to create an acceptable banana substitute and realize that no matter what they come up with, it will never be the same. Just like Oscar and me?

"I'll check back," the bartender says.

I sigh and look around me for help. But the middle-aged blondes to my right are portraits of cluelessness. One fishes a tube of fuchsia lipstick from her purse and stabs at feathered

lips. The other spelunks in her giant bag and emerges with a wad of tissues, sending a roll of breath mints crashing to the floor along with a couple of those orange-brown vials that harbor prescription drugs. The professional in me is tempted to tell these ladies that all the magic in their Mary Poppins' bags won't help them until they honor their woefully neglected egos. I see these things in a nanosecond. It's my job.

Like I say, it's always a whole lot easier with other people.

But back to coincidence. What if I told you right now that Oscar's last name is Cavendish, just like the doomed banana? I swear on a stack of lovely yellow peels, soon to be blighted, this is the honest to God truth.

Now I'm getting somewhere. I sink deeper into my banana-charged reveries to zero in on the apocalyptic fight Oscar and I had at this bar two months ago. I immerse myself in the memory and I realize I'm angry.

I'm angry because I'm here doing all the work, and I'd bet my favorite pair of jeans that Oscar has already moved past our nasty fracture. He always had a formidable ability to ignore his surroundings, to lose himself in the flat vastness of his computer.

The truth is, Oscar just isn't reflective. Once he told me life wouldn't change even if we figured out the point of it, so I might as well quit the fortune-telling shit and do something constructive. Like cook without setting off the smoke alarm. Or knit, like his grandmother. The Argyle socks she'd left him were his ultimate cherished legacy. He wore them everywhere and people were always admiring them. I admit that Oscar had a point about the socks. They were definitely cool. But he was wrong about almost everything else.

For starters, no matter what it looked like to him, it wasn't infidelity that happened two months ago at this bar, swallowing our love like a karstic sinkhokle. I was merely exploring possibilities, kind of like what the banana scientists are elbow-deep in at this very moment.

The bartender saunters my way again. I spot a bottle of Campari on the shelf above his head, its pinkish-red nicely bloodless and comforting. Oscar once told me that shade of red comes from insect shells, maybe even cockroaches. Like Oscar, cockroaches probably wouldn't change their behavior

one iota no matter what they figured out.

"A Campari," I say. I laugh and add, "On the rocks." I laugh some more. "Not just on the rocks. Shipwrecked."

A slight widening of the bartender's eyeballs tells me he isn't sure how to respond. I almost divulge my mission, but I don't have enough cash on me to tip him to listen. Promise him my firstborn? Deed over my car? In the end, I'm the eco-psycho-experientialist, not him. Still, he lingers in front of me as if it's his bound duty. What a thankless job. I'll have to leave him my card after I sort out my own mess, maybe even offer him my friends and family discounted rate.

The blondes distract him, knocking over full glasses of water as they conduct what seems to be their final excavation in their purses to settle up. "Campari on the rocks, coming up," is all he manages before he runs for a towel.

I wait for my drink and go over in my head what happened here two months ago. The events are as clear as the wine glasses hanging overhead. I'd parked across the river in the South Side, my sadness palpable as I switched off the radio, fresh from learning the bleak prognosis for the Cavendish banana. I hopped the T at Station Square, banana extinction thoughts heavy in my heart, and arrived in the heart of Pittsburgh, the Golden Triangle, which, by the way, truly is a triangle wedged amid those living and temperamental rivers. I planted myself at the William Penn lobby bar and began my vigil, waiting for Oscar who was annoyingly, inexplicably, and seriously late.

As I mull over these events, a group jostles my bar stool and I scoot out of their way. The jostlers are a pack of young office workers, law or finance I would guess by the well-draped suits the guys sport. The women are in dresses, cut to suggest the toned muscles they conceal, their high heels teetering on the brink of titillating. The sexual heat is so palpable I shed my scarf in a sweat. Rounds of glasses pile up around them in no time as shoulders touch, arms brush, coiffed heads incline. Lucky them. A bunch in Pittsburgh semi-formal mode, oversized team jerseys over generously cut Levis, laughs and weaves its way over to a corner. The noise level ratchets up to happy-hour-heaven mode.

My gaze falls on a skinny guy in a white shirt at the other

end of the bar. Like me, he's alone, hunched over an amber something, reading a newspaper. He's so nondescript it occurs to me that maybe he's been there all along.

The bartender sets my Campari in front of me and escapes without so much as eye contact. Maybe I won't offer him that discount after all.

So back to that terrible day. As I waited for Oscar, more irritated by the minute, up the maroon and gold carpeted steps walked a man who could have been his twin. Or his brother. Or at least cousin. He edged up to the bar, leaving just one mahogany stool between us.

So naturally, I studied him.

He ordered some complicated vodka drink with very precise instructions—so beyond the James Bond shaken-not-stirred dictum that Bond seemed a dilettante in comparison. Oscar's lookalike is a heavyweight, I thought, a man who knows his way around this world. I wondered what would happen to my love for Oscar if he were similarly sophisticated. Would it finally blaze into that sort of cinematic firestorm I always dreamed about? My next thought was: where the hell was Oscar?

I remember that I tried to be discreet while I observed Oscar's suave doppelganger. The trouble was, I was getting really hungry and when I nearly slipped from my stool, I realized I was pretty tipsy as well. I needed food, pasta arrabiata, or the cauliflower and pine nut tapas from that new restaurant in Market Square. Anything, and the sooner the better. I got out my cell phone. No missed calls. No texts. I started to call Oscar, but aborted. I wolfed down a very unsatisfying handful of the salty, crunchy bar mix.

Just then, pseudo-Oscar leaned over the empty barstool between us, right into me. "I like a girl who knows what she likes." He sort of purred this and licked his lips.

Aha. That was the moment of doom. I see it now. My training should have kicked in even when instinct failed, meaning I should have realized he was full of shit. A girl who knows what she likes? I didn't even know whether I should order another drink, call Oscar and nag, or just worry. But right then, face to face with full-of-shit-pseudo-Oscar, all my immersion in omens and coincidence and reading the

situation fell away, like a pair of last summer's shorts on a raging Jenny Craig success story.

I was experientially naked. As an eco-psycho-experientialist, that's what I call it when people lose their grip and fail to see the obvious, such as the proper way to behave. It happens all the time. Just watch the evening newscast, when supposedly smart lawyers or dedicated teachers get led away in handcuffs and orange suits. I warn my clients, you see what happened to them? For God's sake, people, keep your wits about you.

But there I was, as experientially naked as my most deluded client. I said to myself, yes, you will believe this Oscar-clone who has in a flash sized you up all wrong and is one hundred percent toxic with his mind-numbing Sith-Lord ways.

He told me his name, Ben, and we made jokes about Pittsburgh's more famous Ben, the legendary quarterback, and just how big can a Ben be, and exactly what parts of a Ben are the biggest. Arm in arm, we peered into each other's eyes, dredging up childhood stories and in slurred certainty, vowed that we two had met through some providential chain of events.

We were on an epic drunk, Ben on some vodka version of perfection and me on a run of slushy and very pink umbrella messes when a wounded and very real Oscar, admittedly a blurred and moving target, appeared out of nowhere. In his hands, he held a turquoise box from Tiffany's, and began to explain something about being so late because of the traffic between the Ross Park Mall and downtown. My gut squeezed into knots, the pain of which I did not manage to expel with the remnants of the umbrella drinks sometime later in the lovely but echoing William Penn bathroom.

"Another Campari?" The bartender notices my nearly drained glass and brings me back to present reality.

"What do you have in something a bit less, well, pinkish?"

He nods and sets to work. All around me, the sexually charged office bunch has proceeded to organize itself into couples, matching up inflamed body parts and migrating to shadowed corners. My psychic radar picks up a thrill of the forbidden here and there. I sense one couple in particular closing in on the hunt, probably each with partners at home

making dinner, wondering why they're late. I have to remind myself that it's not my issue.

The bartender brings me a mojito, fresh and green, and I sip while I wonder how I could have been such a jerk. I watch as the high priestess of the beer drinkers in the corner, a young thing with severely flat-ironed hair and Lemieux shirt over skinny jeans, leads the black and gold crowd out.

In a blink, the pale skinny guy planted in the corner of the bar and me are the only ones left. He's still hunched over his amber drink and his newspaper.

My mojito is reduced to leafy sediment and chips of watery ice, and I can't make any more sense of bananas and Bens and Oscars and Tiffany blue than I could two months ago. I signal for a check. Maybe I need a therapist like myself to lead me through my trademark exercises. It's funny, in that tragic human way.

The really tragic thing is, had Oscar-impostor Ben and I met at any other time, we would have gone our separate ways. So what if we indulged in a few alcohol-laced promises and kisses? I never even knew his last name. It was my farewell dalliance, that last hurrah moment of singlehood that bachelorette parties celebrate, only this time without the bother of invitations and rickety tiaras bought online. Unwitnessed it would be rightly unconfessed. Oscar and I would be together today, the contents of that Tiffany-blue box tight around my ring finger.

I stand, still waiting for the check.

"It's covered," the bartender says.

"No, don't be silly, you can't be giving out drinks on the house."

"Not me. The gentleman over there." He points to the pale skinny guy with the amber drink and the newspaper.

I debate a moment, then wrap my scarf around my neck and amble over to thank him. Easy does it, not another William Penn Hotel bar fiasco.

I dredge up the blind-justice monotone I use with my clients. "You didn't need to do that, but thank you."

He shrugs. "Figured you could use the lift."

What does that mean?

He looks down and adjusts the legs of his trousers to cover

the too-big expanse of socks that stick out. Argyle socks. I try not to gasp. What the hell?

"Last time I saw you here, you really had a time of it," he says.

So, he'd witnessed the scene with Oscar and me. Despite its fuzziness, I could vouch for that night's memorability. Golden Globe caliber hysterics, messy tears, wracked sobs and nose-running, and even the grand finale of a Tiffany blue box in flight over the bar like an evil drone. Unlike almost one hundred percent of our time as a couple, the falling out between Oscar and me was not subdued.

"So you were here that day? Sorry about that." I'm not in the mood to discuss it. Clearly this bar just doesn't work for me. Could it be that it was built on cursed territory, site of a mass convention of angry spirits, maybe lives and lungs consumed by old steel mills and coal mines? I'll make a note of that for future research. Now I need to leave.

"Well, thanks for picking up my tab." I start to walk away.

"So, which one did you end up with?" he asks my retreating back.

I turn around.

"That night. Mr. Tiffany Blueballs with the hangdog face, or Happy Drunkard? I haven't been here since, so I don't know how the story ended." His smile wrings the rude sting right out of his words.

"I haven't been here since then, either, but if you must know, the answer is neither one of them."

"Well, good for you." He gives me a little nod and plunges his head back into his newspaper.

Good for you? Really? Easy for him to say. Anyway, how dare he pass judgment?

And then, all of a sudden, I see it. Bright as if it were in lights on a marquee. It was sitting in front of me all the time, as visible as the blotch on Meryl Streep's gown. The two blighted Cavendishes. The weird Oscar clone. Could it be that all along, Oscar and I were just close enough to compatible that we'd never bothered to figure out how ill-suited we really were for each other? It hit me like a Halloween blizzard. Big Ben Pseudo-Oscar had entered my life in the nick of time and vanished the same way.

And now, this timely stranger in the Argyle socks emerges from behind his newspaper to reveal the truth of what happened with one simple statement, *good for you*.

It was good for me. Why hadn't I seen that? Of course I missed Oscar, but I missed him in the way I missed the recliner chair I had to pitch after my college roommate's cock-a-poo claimed it for a personal urinal. That is, it might have been a really great chair if things had gone better. Sure, when I heaved it onto the sidewalk it left a gaping hole in the feng shui of the apartment, but even necessary losses leave their peculiar scars. What kind of eco-psycho-experientialist doesn't know that?

Like I always say, it's hardest to see these things when you're in the middle of them.

I drop the therapist voice. "Hey, really, thanks for the drinks."

"Least I could do." His voice is a surprise, nice enough for radio.

I'm out the door and halfway to the T stop when my feet disobey my order to move. My body knows I am missing something here. And it's something huge.

I use the strategies I use with my clients. I go over the facts. I was drawn to the William Penn Hotel lobby bar today. The stranger with the newspaper was drawn to the William Penn Hotel lobby bar today. Sure, he was thin, and his trousers were too short. But he was funny, even a little gutsy. Mr. Tiffany Blueballs?

And, he was sporting a gangbuster pair of Argyles. As I said, Oscar was wrong about most things, but he was absolutely right about those classic socks. A sign for sure.

I'm almost dizzy as the pieces come together, merging. Positively copulating. If I don't turn around right away and find out his name, I'm not worthy of my profession. Those banana researchers and I are the same, hell-bent on searching for options until we find the right one.

I race back to the regal William Penn Hotel lobby bar and take the carpeted steps in twos. I burst into the bar and he's still there.

I stride right up to him, and he looks up from his newspaper, his expression a bit quizzical. We stare at each other in a long

buzz of awkward silence. “So. Can I buy you another drink?” he finally asks.

I shrug.

“The special is a banana daiquiri.”

Silence.

“I have kind of a weird thing going on with bananas right now,” I say.

More silence. He ruffles his paper, sips his drink and leans back in his bar stool. “Funny you should say that. I was just reading an article about bananas. Seems there’s a nasty blight already in progress. If you haven’t heard, I’m sorry to tell you we might have to cast our lot with some other fruit, although the banana is technically a berry. I digress, but the point is,” and here, he points to the newspaper as a grieving witness to the calamity, “bananas these days are in a bad way.” He clears his throat and adjusts his socks.

All of a sudden, my scarf is way too warm. “I agree,” I say as I loosen it and mount the vacant stool next to him. “By the way, I really like your socks.”

Kim Magowan

Family Games

Mel and Phil tell themselves they are doing this for the kids, that after weeks of tears and whisper-fights, normality is restored. Family game night is a way of staging "Look at how well Mom and Dad get along!" It's jazz hands.

The truth is more complicated. This truth is exposed when first Silas and then Cora retreat, yawning, to their respective bedrooms, Silas to his iPad, Cora to *A Wrinkle in Time*, and leave Mel and Phil by the fire, still duking it out.

This new game is a weird one. Phil bought it at a store called Marbles—"games for the brain." It's a bit like Chinese checkers, a bit like rubbing your stomach while patting your head. Mel can't quite get the hang of it, but the player tokens fascinate her. Such different sizes and shapes, they seem to have migrated from six entirely unrelated games. Phil's token, for instance, has octopus tentacles and is made of stretchy rubber. The thing has the wingspan of his forehead. Whereas Mel selected the smallest token, a spiky, mud-colored sphere the size of a gumdrop.

"What is this supposed to be?" Phil says, inspecting it.

"Prickly pear?" Mel speculates.

But privately she thinks it is a landmine, or a spiny rockfish, lying in wait for an unsuspecting foot.

"Time for bed?" Phil says.

But now that bed means separate rooms—Phil sprawled out, tentacles spread, on their California king, Mel whorled like a snail shell in the lumpy guest bed—neither of them is in any hurry to quit playing.

They always liked games. Back in grad school, they first met at a get-to-know-each-other picnic for their cohort in Levy Park. The poets and fiction writers, all from elsewhere, were stunned and dopey in the Florida heat.

"Hydrate," second-years told them, handing out beers, water bottles, plastic cups of lemonade. "You'll get used to it."

Mel never did. The Florida sun always felt like a padded

mallet bonking her on the head, whack-a-mole style. Perhaps she would have curled up in the shade with the moaning poets, had it not been for Phil, glossy with sweat, loud and stubborn.

"Hey, does anyone want to play badminton?"

He had brought a badminton set to Tallahassee when Mel had brought barely anything at all. When she had packed as if for a lifeboat, limiting her decorations to a few moody postcards, a blue ashtray from Caviar Kaspia.

"Sure, I'll play." She helped him shake out and extend the net.

To excel at Scrabble, you must be able to anagram: live, evil, vile.

For Pictionary, go for efficiency: the compact doodle. Don't get distracted getting the details right, perfecting the curl of an antenna.

For Clue, you need a system. Mel keeps track when everyone passes. Her Clue sheets are columns of initials: S, C, and P have all passed on the Revolver. Phil has an entirely different system, inscrutable to her. After games, she looks at his sheets and puzzles over what the annotations mean.

Always, they stick with the classic versions. There is a new Clue that has incorporated unfamiliar weapons. Poison is one. A new Stratego reverses the power spectrum, so now the Marshall, instead of being #1, is #10. But #10 makes no sense! #1 is, intuitively, the most powerful. She and Phil shake their heads over this boneheaded revision. In stores, examine the boxes carefully. The most desirable Clue of all, though hard to find, has the Miss Scarlet she and Phil remember from their respective childhoods (Mel's in Fresno, California, Phil's in Des Moines): the one where Scarlet has dark, straight hair and hooded eyes, and wields a cigarette holder.

When they were graduate students, Mel and Phil played a game they invented called "Four Letter Word Game."

"It's not what you think," they would tell their friends. Think of a four letter word where all letters are different, no duplication. The other person guesses the letters. It was like Hangman, but you contained the data in your head.

Lying on the guest bed, Mel remembers one time when she finally had Phil's four letters nailed down. "Is the word wolf?"

"No."

"Flow?"

He was giddy with delight. "No!"

"Fowl!"

"On the third try!" He was crowing, so pleased. Their poet and fiction friends, at the same bar table, though long since disengaged from this bizarre Phil and Mel game, laughed, because Phil's glee was infectious. It is his great talent, pleasure.

Mel was skeptical. "I bet you were cheating. I bet it was wolf."

"I never cheat!" Phil said, shocked. Then he amended, making his Borscht belt comedian face: "I mean, I never cheat at games."

Mel knows Angie by sight from school drop-offs. Her hair, a fluffy nimbus, looks like a dandelion. Nonetheless, they have never been formally introduced. Mel feels like a seventh grader, trying to ratchet up nerve to approach some intriguing girl. She makes herself extend her hand.

"Hi, I'm Mel Garrick. My kids are Cora in fifth grade and Silas in third."

Angie nods. "Oh, right. I know who you are. The writer's wife. You're married to Phillip Garrick, right?"

Mel flinches, which makes Angie wince. "Sorry! What a terrible thing to say."

"Well, actually," says Mel, "That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

Another game, more compelling by far to Phil and Silas than to Mel or Cora: baseball. The boys sit in the stands watching the Giants, Silas marking his scorecard. K, Mel knows, stands for strikeout (knockout). Mel doesn't like baseball, but she understands its rules, this one in particular: three strikes and you are out.

The three strikes in this case:

Sharon, whom Mel thinks of as "the acolyte." Skin so pale she reminded Mel of a glass of bluish milk. She was one of

Phil's students. When Mel pictures her, she imagines that scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where a lecture room of enamored girls watch Indiana Jones teach. One has "Love you" written on her eyelids.

Strike Two is Anna Atkiss, a writer whom Mel has read but never met. Before Phil had an affair with Anna, Mel loved her novel. She recommended it to Phil. "Not really your style, babe, but so good." It had a starfish on the cover. When Phil met Anna at a conference, the first thing he said to her was, "My wife loves your book!" He told this to Mel on the phone that night, before he stopped talking about Anna, before Mel threw away her book.

Strike Three is Nadine.

When Angie discovers the nature of what Mel wants to discuss, she upgrades their coffee plan to a drink. "Best canvassed over booze."

It turns out that Mel is not the first wife to seek her out. Angie explains this over Manhattans. She has become something of a local celebrity at their school, the poster girl of the amicable divorce. "I should hand out business cards," Angie says grimly, shaking the ice in her glass.

She tells Mel her story. Her husband fell in love with an associate at his firm. The thing that Angie finds retrospectively annoying is that she liked this woman. Well, she liked Martha's boyfriend more. They had the couple over for dinner, several times.

"I actually wondered what the boyfriend, a dynamic, interesting guy, was doing with Martha. She seemed a little drab."

"She wasn't attractive?"

"Well. She has big eyes, short hair. She looks like an extraterrestrial. She's attractive, I suppose, the way an extraterrestrial is attractive."

Mel laughs so hard she spits out a mouthful of Manhattan. This is the moment she knows she and Angie will be friends. Years from now, she might elbow Angie and say, "That woman over there is attractive the way an extraterrestrial is attractive."

But this forecast also makes Mel's eyes tear. Because it

used to be Phil that she would have these private, silly jokes with, not some stranger-friend who looks a little startled, then laughs.

Angie continues. Even though she clicked more with Stephen, the boyfriend, she considered Martha a friend. So when Angie found out about the affair, her initial reaction was rage. She talked to herself in the shower. Though she often addressed these monologues to her husband Bob, just as frequently she berated Martha.

"How could you?" Angie says. "That's what I kept saying to invisible phantom Martha. How could you?" She sighs. "So I don't mean this to sound all fluffy and Zen, because fuck that. But here's what I realized: hatred corrodes the vessel." She shrugs. "I know! I sound like a fortune cookie. But all this bitterness I contained, all this vitriol, was torqueing me into a sour, injured person. Of course it was also terrible for our kids. So I 'womaned up,' is the verb I use. Because let's face it, men have no capacity to do this shit. Even though Bob was squarely in the wrong, it took me saying, 'Okay, enough already, olive branch,' for us to normalize things. Only then could he stop being an asshole about money, because you know lawyers, the stinginess is structural. Only then could we make things less toxic for the kids."

Amicably divorced women are safe to admire, is Angie's theory, because it involves no envy. Everyone admired Mother Teresa, since no one wanted to be her.

"So tell me," Angie says. "What's it like to be married to a famous writer?"

"Barely married. Unmarrying."

Now they call it, Uncouples Therapy. Dr. Beckman has been with them for the haul, since Strike One. They have graduated and then slunk back to him more than once; "We're recidivists," Mel and Phil say.

But ever since Mel's revelation that there is no getting over Nadine, that she simply cannot forgive (pretend to forgive) and forget (pretend to forget) one more time, it has been Uncouples Therapy. As such, it has ceased to be the Phil Garrick show, their status quo, even back in grad school when Phil was merely glittery with potential, but exponentially

more so since his prizes. Even a venue that is structurally geared towards balance, like couples therapy, has historically been Phil's show.

But now Mel directs the program. Ever since her announcement, "I don't want to be married anymore, but I want to do this right."

Civil. Kind. Supportive. But no awful, phony, Gwyneth Paltrow-esque "Conscious Uncoupling" shit.

Dr. Beckman praises Mel's candor and generosity. But Mel gets Angie's point about the admiration, about what makes Mel palatable: there is nothing to envy about her situation.

San Francisco has become insane. At night, Phil snoring away in the giant king bed like the giant king he is, Mel looks through Craigslist and panics. She will need at the very least a two-bedroom for the kids—assuming she can force Cora and Silas to share a room. Phil likes to say Cora and Silas get along about as well as Republicans and Democrats in Congress. To this, the kids respond, like the Blue State children they are, "I don't want to be the Republicans!" So Phil designates Republicanism as a penalty: "Last one to the car is the Republicans!"

Crappy two bedrooms in the Mission are going for five grand. She should have left Phil in 2008, after the real estate crash, after Strike One. Mel refreshes and refreshes, as if a new search will scrub away this Googlification of San Francisco.

Phil's position with the house is like his stance on the master bedroom: she is very welcome to come back, he always says, when she complains about not sleeping well in the lumpy guest bed. This is her choice, not his. One morning, watching her sigh over Craigslist, he points to the 12-by-9 shed in the backyard.

"You could live there!"

Mel stares at him. He is obviously being serious, though when he absorbs her expression, he tries to rearrange his face to convey, instead, joking.

"Phil," she says. "I am not a dog."

"I was thinking of you more like a garden hose. Or a rake."

"Dude," she says, "You are the rake."

Sometimes Mel thinks Phil hands her these lines, like they used to set up each other's stories.

"You tell the next part."

Stories for Mel and Phil, at least the good stories, were community property, something to refine collaboratively. They were a relay team. But the downside of being a couple who composes stories, is that the story supersedes the lived experience. At age thirty-nine, with Phil now for fifteen years, Mel remembers not so much how they met as the retold story of how they met: unfurling the badminton net together like a scroll, trying to rally the faint, sun-stunned poets and writers: "Come and play!"

Then, no one would play with Phil except Mel. Now, there's a line of volunteers.

Mel once read a Facebook thread where a writer friend, a guy from their MFA program, posed this question: "Writers: when did you start identifying to strangers as a writer, instead of as whatever job actually pays your bills?"

The thread, by the time Mel came across it, was already mile-long. The upshot was that most writers did not (though as more than one pointed out, of course they all privately considered themselves such. Why else were they responding to Dave's address to "writers"?). Officially, though, most introduced themselves as teachers, editors, sommeliers. Very few writers were in Phil's position, with his prizes, his best-sellers, his tenure at Stanford.

Yet what stunned Mel about this thread was that she always identified as a writer, even though she hasn't written anything in six or seven years. Anything, that is, but checks, and notes Silas demands for his lunchbox ("I'm so proud of you! Love you, Mom"). She's like a fat person who doesn't consider herself fat. While ninety percent of writers might suffer from crippling insecurity, she has historically been so confident that it shocks her to realize she is thirty-nine, virtually unpublished, and her husband keeps cheating on her. That even though she always thought they were a perfectly matched team, they are in fact on opposing sides, and she has lost this game.

Back in grad school, they called themselves Philomel: the woman in Greek myth who was raped by her brother-in-law Tereus. He cut out her tongue to keep her from telling on him. Stupid man to assume that communication could only happen vocally! Maimed Philomel wove her story into a tapestry for her sister, and the two sisters took revenge by killing his son and feeding him to Tereus. Afterwards, Philomel transformed into a nightingale, communicating through song instead of speech.

"That is a fucking creepy domain name," said their friend Dave, the same Dave of the Facebook query, when they told him the story. They took turns: Mel told the rape part, Phil the cannibal part.

More about names: Mel never liked her given name Melanie (too cheerleader-ish), and as an eight-year-old chose Mel as both nickname and penname. Mel was jaunty; Mel was abbreviation for "mellow," "mellifluous." Now it seems to stand for grimmer things: melancholy, melanoma. She considers readopting Melanie, in the same way she considers other transformations (dying her hair dark blue, shaving her head).

Phil's name connotes plenitude. It lends itself to dirty jokes, sex talk ("Phil me," Mel used to say in bed). He had never much liked Phillip ("Fillip: it's a snap, it's a finger-flick"). And yet, for years, for his entire publishing life, he has been Phillip Garrick. People say, "Oh, you're the wife of Phillip Garrick!" and stare at Mel, as if she can tell them secrets.

She hears him, these days, introduce himself as "Phillip Garrick," both names. She wonders, like the caterpillar with the hookah in the Alice story, Who are you?

Another family game night, the kids long since gone to bed, Phil drops his token with the rubbery tentacles down Mel's shirt. She shrieks.

(Mel wonders what one's selection of a particular board game avatar says about a person. What does it mean that in Monopoly, Phil is the elongated car, while she is the thimble? What does that finger-armor signify?)

Watching Mel pluck the octopus from its clutch onto her

bra, Phil laughs. When she extracts it and looks up, his face becomes more solemn.

"Is it okay to say?" he says. "I mean, to say I love you?"

"Not after five o'clock," says Mel. "It's the reverse of cocktail time. No declarations of affection after five."

Their neighbors in the family housing complex in Tallahassee were a pair of PhD students in English literature, who got into screaming fights about Hegel. Mel and Phil would lie in bed and listen to them through the cardboard walls.

"I am not your Foucault warden!" shouted Ethel, the woman. "Don't stick me in your fucking Panopticon!"

I am not your Foucault warden.

She's attractive the way an extraterrestrial is attractive.

These scraps float in Mel's brain. She curates; she discards one, inserts one. She has never been good about clearing debris. If you haven't worn it in the last year, send it to Goodwill. But Mel can always imagine an occasion in the future where she might wear that striped jumpsuit. This is why she used to fail the written portion of her driver's test: she treated the multiple choice questions as tricks. She thought of circumstances (walls of opaque fog) that might require that otherwise counterintuitive answer C.

But she is trying to get better about this, to treat letting go as a skill to develop.

Even their wedding was a game. They threw a Halloween costume party the second year in Tallahassee, and dressed as a bride and groom. Well, vampire-victim bride and ghoul-groom: on Mel's neck, she painted puncture wounds, exuding a perfect teardrop of blood.

Towards midnight, Phil clinked a fork to his glass, and they rounded up their guests for a surprise ceremony. Only their officiant, Eliza, knew in advance.

Phil always tells the punchline of this story: "We were married by a gumball machine."

Mel rubs her neck. "So tired. I hate that fucking bed."

"You can always come back," Phil says.

She wonders. Her resolve (Three strikes and you're out) has allowed Phil to claim his position: he wants to make things work. His door is literally open. This is the story he presents in Uncouples Therapy.

Sometimes Mel looks at Dr. Beckman and imagines herself as the star student, the one who shines, as she never shone in the MFA program (that was Phil). Though in her heart she knows, if Dr. Beckman brags about them to his wife, if he insinuates when he sees someone reading a particular book that he knows the author, that the star is Phillip Garrick.

Still, Beckman approves of Mel: her compassion, her humor about the bleak rental market. The rake in the garden shed story made him laugh: she and Phil are still performing their relay routine.

And Phil approves too. Mel has become, once again, the game girl he met fifteen years ago, with the tattoo of the fly on her collarbone.

How would either man react to some dissolve of will? To Mel in retreat?

It's a risk, and Risk is the one board game Mel hates (exhausting, the pounding of soldiers onto soldiers, the unthrilling goal of world domination).

If she says, "Okay, you're on," what then?

Would she call Phil's bluff? Force him to concede that the open door is only rhetoric. He doesn't really want her back after all, he's already casting his eyes down the line of volunteers, the starry girls with "Love you" painted on their eyelids?

Celebrities like to trumpet the value of old friends, the people who knew them before. These are the people they really trust, celebrities say, because their love is authentic. These love the "real" person, not the construct.

But the obverse of knowing someone before fame is that the unfamous identity is always part of the composite picture. Mel knew Phil when he was a sweaty grad student with a unibrow, trying unsuccessfully to rally poets to play.

His first book, after the title page, reads, "To my Mel, this dedication for her dedication." At age thirty, Mel loved the double play: it seemed to forecast her own book in the future, to take it for granted. She could see her novel's spectral

outline, calling back to him.

If she says “Honey, I’m home,” or “Okay, you win,” might he say, as their kids do, as she herself when a kid did, “No backsies”? Would his mask finally drop? And if it did, would Mel feel, at last, actually free? No longer on her thirty feet of bungee cord, tethered to the California king. She imagines she would stretch her nightingale wings, open her non-uttering but still vocalizing throat. She might, like Philomel, kick-start her flight away.

Wendy S. Palmer

Rescue

The little carnival sparkles in the morning sun, only shabby where it doesn't show. A Ferris Wheel, a carousel, some kiddie rides, a few tents, unloaded before dawn and set up on a grassy field across the road from a beach. Much better than last week when they were in a church parking lot with no shade and nothing to do on break. Three o'clock to four o'clock is Azure's only hour away from the show.

Azure sometimes sells fried dough but mostly she runs the baby boats and that's what she's doing today. Loading, unloading, buckling, unbuckling. Three in a boat. No hands in the water. Parents *outside* the fence. Azure looks older than eleven, a big girl with tired eyes and stringy hair. Her mother is a Main Attraction, a freak, with her own tent, separate admission and a hand-painted sign.

Marabella!
The Fattest Woman in the World!
Takes Four Men to Hug Her, a Boxcar to Lug Her!

A boxcar would be better than the tiny trailer they live in, parked in the back of the lot. Marabella can barely turn around in there. Azure is only fat enough to be invisible and has no desire to follow in her mother's footsteps. She wants to win a makeover and be a movie star, even though she knows Hollywood California is nowhere near anywhere they ever happen to be.

Barely June and it's hot and steamy and packed like August, all of them yelling and laughing and spending big. Ice cream and sno-cones going like hotcakes, a boisterous line for the baby boats. Azure works non-stop, squinting in the glare. The heat and noise and dust are constant, everything in motion but the clock.

"No hands in the water!" she yells again and again. They don't listen so she finally stops telling them. Soon they've splashed so much water out of the tank anyone can clearly

see the revolving track underneath and see the boats aren't actually floating at all. If three o'clock ever comes, she's going to sit on the beach and watch what she wants to watch without having to do anything about it. She's never seen an ocean up close.

At exactly three o'clock Azure unloads, shuts down, hangs the chain and flips the sign. On her way off the lot she grabs a warm fried dough with extra sugar, the biggest on the counter, no charge of course, and eats it as she waits to cross the road. Cars pass in an unseeing stream until she puts up her hand like a cop and steps off the curb. She doesn't have all day. An hour is two hundred kids on and off the baby boats. At the beach it will be harder to tell. Last week she lost track of time in a comic book store with a clock right there on the wall. Ten minutes late and they docked her the whole hour. She glares at the driver who stopped for her and trudges across the street licking sugar off her fingers.

The beach is a bright mass of colorful umbrellas and blankets, the ocean even brighter. Families are set up for the day with coolers and magazines, big blow up turtles and whales. Ribs in a bucket, jugs of lemonade. Mothers and fathers and babies, grandmothers and grandfathers and who knows who all. Azure can hardly squeeze through without stepping on someone's blanket or bumping someone's folding chair. Nearly poking her eye out on a beach umbrella.

She walks until the jangly carnival music is out of earshot, then finds a spot of sand and sits down, half-in, half-out of the water. She's wearing shorts and a flowered tank top but can't imagine going in further even if she were wearing a bathing suit which she isn't and wouldn't and she can't swim anyway.

Frosty little waves spill over her feet and ankles up to her knees then slide out, drawing her heels deeper in the wet sand. The sun is behind her, out of her eyes at last. Everything looks sharp and clean. Blue water, blue sky. Bright white sails on the horizon, the zigzaggy spray of a jet ski closer to shore. Real boats.

Azure picks up some little pink shells and lines them across her thighs, arranging and rearranging them like jewelry. She has an artistic eye. When the Sword Swallower skipped town, they let her re-paint his sign. Dark brown first to cover, then

GIANT RATS! in yellow capital letters. And they let her take her time. She tucks her pale hair behind her ears. Her ears are her best feature she feels, delicate and close to her head.

She tastes her salty fingertips and watches two boys fill their plastic pails with damp sand, voices muted by the offshore breeze. They pack down the sand with their little shovels then carefully turn the pails upside down, lift them off and smash the pail-shaped towers. Over and over and over. The boys are slick with sunscreen and their mothers leap up if they venture deeper than their ankles. Nobody notices Azure.

And nobody's wearing a watch, not one she can read without getting up anyway. Ten minutes gone so far, she figures. If only you could stop time altogether. Step right up! Hurry, hurry, hurry! See Time Stand Still! Check your watches, ladies and gents. The hands do not move! Seeing is believing! She'd make a killing if she could work that racket.

Somewhere in the distance a siren wails. Whenever Azure hears a siren, she likes to think the police are coming to rescue her, coming to return her to her real parents who are rich and wonderful and never stop searching for her and probably live in Hollywood. This might be the town they find her, a nice town with nice families. A beach and trees, flowers instead of broken bottles in the grass. She hears the siren again. Handsome policeman maybe, a nice policelady. She picks out the most nearly perfect pink shells, brushes the rest off her thighs, and waits.

A seagull drags a shred of cotton candy through the sand. A freckled teenager in a tiny blue two-piece rolls over on her towel and reaches for a book. Azure decides to wear a two-piece like that when she lives in Hollywood, maybe in red. Whenever Azure sees a pretty girl, she pictures her face in a mugboard. Olive Oyl or the bald old Queen of England. Or if she's very pretty, the tipsy cow with huge pink udder. If that girl comes over to the show with her friends later, Azure will get one of the guys to pull key to the Midway on her.

She's close enough to read the blocky letters on the other girl's book. Algebra One. Azure passed Algebra a year ago. Not in actual school, she's never in one place long enough, but Marabella is making her read through the encyclopedias stacked under the bunk in their trailer. Azure's in Book Three

of twelve not counting the index. Algebra was in Book One, where she also learned her name is the blue of a perfectly clear sky as well as a semi-precious stone, which she prefers.

Marabella says she reads too slowly.

"A to Zed before you turn fifteen," she warns and threatens to leave Azure on the doorstep of some school out in the highgrass if she doesn't. Azure's not so sure that would be a bad thing and doubts she'll ever find out what a zed is either way. She's only as far as Fiji and hasn't looked ahead, except to peek at Hollywood in Book Four.

Her father sold encyclopedias. He left a set behind when he moved on to pots and pans which were more lucrative and got him into more houses where the husband wasn't home.

"Encyclopedias go out of date," he told Azure the last time she saw him. "Pots and pans only dent." He said to look him up if the carnival ever came through a town where he might be working. Even at six years old Azure knew that wasn't enough information.

The ocean flashes with a million tiny lights. The boats sail right through. If she could make time stop, Azure would strand herself right here. On break, on this beach, the carnival far enough behind. She'll never make it to Hollywood anyway.

As she reorganizes her pink shells by size, the sirens wail again, closer now. She turns to look. Two fire engines and an ambulance come screaming around the corner and to her surprise, turn sharply and race across the field to the carnival. She puts the shells in her pocket, hauls herself up off the wet sand and maneuvers back through the umbrellas up to the road.

Right away she can tell the Ferris Wheel is turning much too fast. They aren't coming for her. No need to cross the road. The engines stop abruptly at the base of the Wheel. She scrambles up on the concrete wall above the beach to watch. Sand prickles the backs of her legs and she hears shouting. There's a crowd under the Ferris Wheel. People start to come from the beach and gather at the wall with her, even the girl in the blue two-piece. They don't cross the street, all their stuff is on the beach.

Then suddenly the music stops and all the rides go dark like somebody pulled a big plug. The seats on the Ferris Wheel

jerk then rock in place. Riders near the bottom slide from their seats and hop off. The ones further up scramble down through the struts and jump to the ground. Parents yell at kids in the highest seats to sit still.

When the ladder on the fire truck starts to lift and lengthen, both sides of the street go silent. The ladder extends taller and taller then tips gradually sideways to lean against the Ferris Wheel. Immediately an orange-suited man with a rope over his shoulder starts up the ladder.

This is all very interesting to Azure. Nothing much happens in the carnival. One of the snakes escaped once and they had to reveal it was de-fanged. The boy who brought it back alive got free rides all afternoon. Another time, a farmer found a cockroach in his cotton candy but luckily, since it turned out he was also the mayor, it was closing night. They dropped awning and were gone well ahead of the morning paper.

Azure can make out a few carnies bustling around under the Wheel. Somebody's in big trouble. Not her. And her late shift will never start on time. She picks at a scab on her arm and watches as one after another of the remaining riders is helped down the ladder until there's only one left. A blonde kid in pink shorts and pink sneakers in the very top seat. Five or six years old and bawling like a baby.

Azure hasn't cried since she was three. A good whack on the backside takes care of that, as Marabella advises parents of crying children, even though the children are apt to be crying because Marabella is scowling at them, her eyes pale dots in the terrifying folds of flesh. Marabella gives everyone their money's worth.

"My baby! My baby!"

The distraught voice carries clear across the road and Azure sees a woman racing back and forth under the Ferris Wheel. The fireman is on the very top step of the ladder now. He reaches for the girl but she shrinks away and when her seat rocks she wails even louder. The fireman grasps the frame of the Wheel with both hands and steps cautiously from the ladder to a support cable. As he inches closer, the child screams "No, no, no!" at the top of her lungs.

Other firemen unfold a net below. The crowd presses in. Some grip their hands in prayer; some cover their mouths

in fear. Everyone holds their breath. Azure can't believe the fuss. The girl is not in danger. Azure has a King Kong poster over her bunk in the trailer and likes to imagine she's the blonde in the gorilla's huge paw. That's danger.

The fireman reaches the little girl's seat and clambers quickly over the bar. As he slides in beside her, his big hat falls off and bumps down to the ground. The crowd gasps. The screeching woman tries to climb the fire truck. Azure spots Marabella, big as a house in her red-striped dress, head back and mouth wide open, staring straight up like everyone else.

Then the screaming stops. The fireman has the girl. He slings her over his shoulder like a sack of beans and backs down the ladder. Two men in white rush to meet them with a stretcher and the crowd closes around them.

Moments later they emerge to loud cheers and Azure can see the girl lying small and still on the stretcher holding a huge bunch of pink balloons and the giant blue frog. The impossible-to-win prize, a perfectly good piece of flash just so they won't have to leave in the middle of the night.

Azure is disgusted. She slides off the wall with a little grunt and adjusts the back of her shorts. Her shoulders are hot to the touch, her thighs bright pink. The ambulance drives by with no siren this time. A police car comes from the other direction and pulls onto the field. Two cops emerge and prowl around under the Ferris Wheel, shining their flashlights up into the Wheel and all over the ground beneath even though it's daylight.

The music starts and the merry-go-round begins to turn but the crowd is already streaming away from the carnival, parents clutching their children's hands as they go. The girl in the blue bathing suit returns to her spot on the beach and reapplies suntan lotion.

Azure pulls the pink shells from her pocket and drops them on the wall. Her break never comes fast enough then it's gone too fast. She trudges back across the road and cuts through the field heading for her late shift. If there is a late shift tonight. If not, she'll be back in the trailer, bumping along some back road to nowhere with the Fattest Woman in the World. Maybe the next town will be the town they find her.

Jeseca Wendel

Willow Creek

I was living with my parents in my childhood bedroom with baby blue walls and a ceiling painted to look like the sky. The rim around the overhead light was painted yellow, my own personal sun I could control with the flick of a switch. The deal was that I could live either in their house or at the other place. Living alone was not an option. My parents checked on me constantly, like I was a cake they were afraid to overcook.

I spent my days floating through the house like a wraith. At nights I sat in my room writing poems about drugs I'd never tried and boys I'd never slept with. I'd start a book and then put it down before getting through the first chapter. I listened to music with vocals so sorrowful and bellowing that my dad said it sounded like I was listening to whale calls. I could only watch television under their supervision. I wasn't allowed to look at magazines.

One night my mom brought me a copy of a Nurse's Assistant Training course pamphlet. There was a smiling Asian girl on the front with a stethoscope wound around her neck. Her smile was so rigid I thought she'd be able to keep smiling even if the stethoscope had been a boa constrictor. The rest of the brochure was just as artificial. Phrases like *concentrating on quality, building blocks for successful* were bolded. My mom was a sucker for brochures like this. The doctors at the other place were always giving her trifolds filled with what I'm sure were invaluable bits of knowledge.

"You wanted to be a doctor. This is almost the next best thing," my mom said, pressing the brochure into my hands. I knew where this was coming from. My therapist thought—and my parents agreed—that I needed to find a job. They thought I needed direction and stimulation. I had promised that I would try harder so I said okay and took the course.

Personally I've never wanted to get old. I have never been able to imagine myself living long enough to develop gray hair, have grandchildren, and cash social security checks. I liked

to think I'd off myself before I became incontinent or forced to use a walker. It seemed like the worst possible future for me, living to a ripe old age. According to my therapist I have a death wish.

I went in for an interview at the Willow Creek retirement home and got the job.

On my first day my mom made me breakfast: a bowl of yogurt with chunks of strawberries in it, two hard boiled eggs, and herbal tea. The strawberry's juices were bleeding out into the yogurt, staining it pink. My mom busied herself in the kitchen, but I knew she was watching me. She was in charge of my meals. Every time she heard me pick up the spoon in the yogurt bowl she would tense.

I looked at my upside down and distorted reflection in the silver spoon, thinking that since the human eye sees everything upside down then this was my true reflection. I flipped the spoon over and there I was again, right side up. I brought the spoon farther away from my face, my reflection lengthening into an oval. I thought of what my doctor in the other place told me, *we see what the brain tells us to see, not what's really there*.

What unreliable things reflections are.

When my mom saw what I was doing she said, "Eleanor eat your breakfast."

I wasn't supposed to look at mirrors for too long.

The senior nurse at Willow Creek was a woman named Selma Alvarez. She met me in the lobby. "You'll be on the long term care floor," Selma said. She pressed a button on the elevator and the lift shuddered up. We came out onto a floor shaped like an H. There was a sallow faced woman behind the nurse's station, writing notes in a binder. "This is Beth, she'll be training you today. I'll leave you two to it," Selma said and trudged off.

Willow Creek reminded me of the children's ward in the hospital; they tried to make the kids feel more comfortable by painting balloons and circus animals on the walls, but in my experience even the most whimsical décor doesn't make you forget you're dying. At Willow Creek they tried to make it cheerful with bright flowers and oil paintings of landscapes

and country roads; piano music played over the speakers. I suppose the intent was to bring a touch of the familiar to the unfamiliar, but it was about as effective as putting a party hat on the grim reaper.

Beth started walking me through some paperwork when a patient came up to the desk. She was a petite woman who walked with her hips thrust forward; it was a determined gait. She wore a surprisingly coordinated outfit of shades of pink—even her jewelry and lipstick matched. Her white hair was combed back and set with hair spray. She would have seemed out of place were it not for the fact that she never stopped grinding her teeth, like she was trying to work out a problem she couldn't quite get right.

"Excuse me," she said, her voice a severe chime.

"Good morning, Anita," Beth said.

"Where are we right now?" She appraised us with her wide hazel eyes. The green ran through them in veins like a leaf. They were bright with intelligence but dull at the edges like a mirror starting to fog.

"We're at Willow Creek, Anita. You're staying her a few days while they fix your hot water heater," Beth said, not even looking up.

"There's nothing wrong with my house," the woman—Anita—said.

"They're playing Bingo in the recreation room, why don't you go join them?" Beth said.

"What I'm going to do is figure all this out," Anita said. As she walked away I saw the psoriasis on the nape of her neck, as scaly as a chicken's leg. There was a dusting of white flakes on her shoulders and back, marring her illusion of dignity.

Beth reached for a half-eaten donut that rested on a grease stained cocktail napkin. Crumbs fell everywhere as she took a bite, her teeth gnashing into the doughy circle. I looked away.

"You ever deal with Alzheimer's before?"

I shook my head.

"Well that was Anita," Beth explained, her mouth thick with donut. "She's been here two years. She has dementia real bad. She'll ask you every day where she is. Thinks she's still going home. Whatever you do, don't tell her she's here permanently."

"Why, what happens?"

Beth just snorted and finished her donut.

That night I went home and wrote a poem about a woman who dies old and alone but doesn't mind since she can't remember anyone anyway.

In the training course they told us to never compare the elderly to children; they said it took away their dignity. But it's all I could think to compare the patients to. They were just as needy and temperamental. There were the patients you couldn't leave alone or they'd wander away, the ones that went into hysterics if you told them no, then there were the ones you couldn't leave alone or they'd fight. And then there was the piss and the shit; at one time or another, they all piss or shit themselves. I felt like a glorified babysitter. Sure they had the wisdom of the ages but what good was the wisdom of the ages if you couldn't even remember your own name? I couldn't help but appreciate the cyclical nature, the symmetry of life. Ashes to ashes. Shit to shit.

The thing about working at a nursing home was that it was predictable. Life followed a carefully structured routine, giving order to chaos. Even the most disorientated patient could find their way from place to place. The floor was designed the same way prisons and schools are, linear and intuitive. You could survive on nothing but muscle memory alone, zero reliance on the brain's messages and synapses.

Even their responses were repetitive. They were like drunks restating themselves over and over again. Every time I said, "Hi Anita" she'd say, "What?" the word snapping like campfire wood. I'd say, "I was just saying hi." She'd say, "Oh, hello."

You could tell time by Anita. She was more reliable than my watch. She followed the same path every day, making her rounds like the second hand of a clock, never deviating. She woke up at 8:00 and came to the nurse's station asking where she was. She went to breakfast at 8:15. At 9:00 she came to the nurse's station to ask where she was. At 9:15 she got her morning pills. She attended the daily activity at 10:00. Board games, puzzle time, bingo, chorus. Chorus was her favorite. She had a lilting soprano voice, but always complained about her tone-deaf counterparts. She loved the song *Catch a*

Falling Star. She'd hum it all day long and it would inevitably get stuck in my head. Lunch was at 12:00 followed by her afternoon med pass. At 4:00 she'd sit on the bench in the hallway and call her son and daughter from an outdated flip phone. Neither would answer. Then she'd ask where she was. At 6:00, after dinner, Anita came to the nurse's station and asked where she was. At 8:00 we gave her her nighttime meds. At 9:00 she was in bed. The routine gave her sense. It limited the choices she had to make. There was no question what tomorrow would bring because it was already decided for her. In the mind of a patient with dementia time does not shift, it is forever suspended. At the end of the day the slate is wiped clean; there is no tomorrow or yesterday, living each day on repeat.

My life was much the same. My day was regimented and structured. I was just like Anita, a second hand on the clock ticking away the time until a new day began.

"I think I'm getting through to Anita," I said one night at dinner. "She remembered my name today."

"Oh honey," Mom said gently. It was the same tone you use when soothing a sick child (and I'd know). "People with dementia don't get better like that. I'm sure Anita likes you because you're kind to her, but you shouldn't get your hopes up."

I could never watch my mom eat at the table. She had this habit of combining all the food on her plate, letting the different components touch, running into each other like two armies clashing. One bite could contain rice, fish broccoli or chicken, asparagus, pasta. To make matters worse, she talked with her mouth full. She was an otherwise polite woman, but liked talking so much that even a full mouth didn't stop her.

Me, I chewed like a cow chews its cud, slowly and unenthusiastically.

I once heard that slow eaters are better in bed. It shows patience, the ability to delay pleasure. But, as my sister so lovingly pointed out to me, no one wants to fuck a skeleton.

"There's no cure, Elly Belly," my dad said.

Mom gasped like Dad had just cut the wire of a ticking bomb. He wasn't supposed to call me that. Dr. Prickett said

the word belly could be a potential trigger.

"I know there's no cure," I plowed on. "But I think we are starting to have a connection."

They were right of course. Like the capsizing of a sinking ship, all there was to do with dementia was slow down the damage. One way or another, the ship was going to sink.

"Well I think that's great," my mom said.

"Me too," my dad said.

I was sitting with Anita in her room. She'd been here so long she'd scored one of the few private rooms. It was almost 9:00 and had been a quiet night; I only had one hour left in my shift. Anita was showing me her costume jewelry which she stored in a massive walnut armoire. Anita delighted in showing off her jewelry collection. This had become one of our other routines.

There was a knock on her door.

"Come in," Anita cooed—she loved company.

It was the shift nurse, Tanya. "It's time for your medicine, Miss Anita," she said. Tanya was a jovial woman with an infectious laugh. She was seven months pregnant and even when she complained about her swollen ankles and swelling belly she did so with a smile. She shuffled her girth through the door, leaving the med cart outside. "Ellie, can you go check on Mr. Hussey? He needs help with his TV."

I said goodnight to Anita and walked outside. That's when I saw the unattended med cart, keys still in it. I looked down the hallway. Empty. I approached the cart like it would spook if I came at it too quickly. I felt my pulse quicken as I tried one of the drawers experimentally. It opened. I didn't know what I was looking for. I recognized most of the pills—antidepressants, antianxiety (I was already on those), blood thinners, cholinesterase inhibitors. Painkillers. The powder bill pills stood out like a robin's eggs in a nest. I picked up the clipboard and made a quick adjustment, marveling at how easy this was. I picked up one of the pills and put it in my pocket, thinking of the song Anita always sang, *Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket, save it for a rainy day.*

The pill sat in my pocket for the rest of the night. When I got home I took it out and held it in my palm, cradling it as

gently as a delicate flower.

I began to spend every shift looking for opportunities to take pills. It amazed me how lax the security was; there were fail-safes for the heavy duty drugs, but nothing a few alternations on the paperwork couldn't fix. I worked most often with Tanya, whose pregnant-hazy brain and swollen feet were my allies. Every time I smuggled a pill out of the med cart I felt like a prisoner chipping away at her cell brick by brick.

I kept them behind a framed picture of a field of wildflowers in the bathroom. Every time I added to the collection I felt a thrill. I thought of my growing collection as my insurance policy, my rainy day fund.

"So, Eleanor, how are you feeling today?" My therapist, Dr. Prickett ("Call me Ned") was the handsome dad type; the kind of guy his daughter's friends probably had school girl crushes on. He was both masculine and trim. He had a sharp jawline covered by a thick but well maintained beard, he wore black rimmed glasses that suggested intelligence. His clothing was immaculate from the perfect Windsor knot of his tie to the shining golden wedding band. His various medical degrees were framed and displayed with prominence on the wall behind his desk, the blackletter font spelling out his accomplishments.

"I'm fine," I said.

When Dr. Prickett looked at me he saw an obstinate girl who refused to help herself. A petulant child acting out. When I looked at him I saw a jackal.

Dr. Prickett tapped his pen against his notepad. He crossed his legs, resting his foot on his knee. "Come on, Eleanor, this is a safe place."

"I'm fine."

The first few weeks out of the hospital did not go well. They had me on a cocktail of drugs that was making me as bloated and swollen as a water-logged corpse. It kept me in such a fog that it was like I was seeing the world from behind a veil. So I started ferretting the pills away. I could feel my body itching to shed the layer of fat that had grown on me, as sickening as mold and just as hard to get rid of. I wanted it gone. I started

feeding most of my meals to the dog. But it wasn't enough. I snuck out at night and ran around the block, a phantom in the breeze, until my lungs felt like fracturing.

And then they caught me.

Enter Dr. Prickett, who was staring at me like a disappointed parent. He tried a different tactic. "How's work going?" His mouth quirked into a self-important grin at this, work had been his idea after all.

"Fine."

He looked at me exasperatedly and wrote something down. I imagined it was something like *maintains hostile attitude*. "How can I help you, Eleanor, when you won't talk to me?"

He was always doing that, punctuating his sentences with my name like he was a hostage negotiator and I was a terrorist keeping my mind hostage from him.

"What's there to talk about? You have the notes, you know my story."

"Yes, but I'd like to hear it from you."

I crossed my arms over my chest and sank further into the couch.

"Let's try something else." He put down the pad of paper and his pen in a gesture of defeat and reached into his desk and pulled out a manila folder. It was a worksheet. Dr. Prickett loved worksheets.

He had me keep an ongoing Thought Log to help me counter negative thoughts or anxiety. I was supposed to write the negative thought and a rational counterstatement. He wrote me examples in his slanting, half cursive script. Negative thought: *"I forgot my daughter at daycare, I'm a bad parent."* Rational Counterstatement: "*I made a mistake and I'll be careful not to make that mistake again."*

Negative thought: I hate my life.

Counterstatement: I have a cache of pills if it gets too bad. Save it for a rainy day.

He passed the worksheet over to me. It was a sheet of paper with adjectives. It was titled "My Positive Traits."

"Take a minute to look through this list of words, Eleanor. I want you to circle all of your positive attributes."

I looked down the list. *Friendly, Helpful, Generous, Creative, Hard Working, Funny, Brave, Insightful,*

Empathetic, Serious, Attractive, Confident. I circled *Determined*.

"Good, good, Eleanor. Would you like to share a story with me of a time you were determined?"

I glowered at him. "How about the time I tried to starve myself to death."

He put his pad of paper down.

"I think that's enough for today."

When the patients weren't acting like children they were acting like teenagers. I was talking to a patient named Glenda at the nurse's station when Anita started coming down the hall, "Yoo hoo!" she called.

"Oh no, here she comes," Glenda said in a tone so haughty it made me feel like I was back in middle school and that Glenda was one of the popular girls trying to avoid an undesirable. She wished me a quick goodbye and dashed away.

I liked Anita. She was proud and venerable; she thought herself above it all and had just as much contempt for the world as I did. Her interludes to the nurse's station broke the monotony of the day. She'd complain about the other patients, her room, the food, the service; in a way her discontent echoed my own. At least Anita still had a personality, the dementia hadn't stripped her of that yet. I marveled at her ability to maintain her dignity in the face of her disease.

Anita came up to the station. She was wearing the same outfit as yesterday and smelled like moth eaten furniture, but her jewelry was gleaming, her hair was set, and her lipstick was fresh.

We went through the usual routine of questions. I told her that her hot water heater was being fixed.

"Are you married yet?" Besides asking when she was getting out of Willow Creek, this was her favorite question to ask me.

I'd told her that I wasn't.

"Well you're going to be an old maid if you don't watch out."

Though she was widowed, Anita had a family. Her daughter was robust woman who was the type that looked like she was always coming back from some physical activity. She'd storm into the ward in her leggings and expensive sneakers and spend twenty minutes with her mother, leaving the corridors

smelling like sweat and chlorine. Her son Daniel paid for her care, but I never saw him in person. He must have thought the money made up for not visiting.

"It's a terrible thing, to be alone," she said, clenching her jaw. "I'm like a lost soul."

This was something that I would have said sardonically to the doctor's and I laughed.

My mirth was all it took. I'd seen pictures of the Roman god Janus before, double faced and grim. Even though both sides looked the same they represented opposites. Even though Anita's face didn't change, it was like some cosmic switch took place. The face turned around and I was dealing with the side of her that harbored all the anger and hurt and confusion that her brain couldn't make out.

Her voice scratched me like a cheap wool sweater with all the coarseness and none of the warmth.

"I'm not staying here forever, you know. God almighty. I wouldn't expect you to understand. No one consulted me about this. And they just drag me everywhere. I don't know anyone here. This is making me nuts."

I couldn't calm her down. She was agitated and making a scene, pacing and throwing her hands up, chest heaving.

"Why don't you try locking yourself up in your room all by yourself. It makes me so angry. I didn't come here to make friends you know."

"Would you like me to take you back to your room?" I said, scrambling for purchase.

"Oh would you just shut up."

Even though all scientific inquiry was working against me, I realized that I had hoped I could help Anita. If I put enough time in and made enough of an impression I thought her brain could fight against the dementia. Why would she make an exception for me? I was nothing special to her. She was beyond recovery, but I wanted to throw her a life raft and give her something to grip on to as the treacherous depths of her mind grew more difficult to navigate. But I might as well have been throwing her a Styrofoam pool noodle in the midst of a hurricane.

She'd been here for two years and at a different home for six years before that. Who knows how many years she spent

living in a fog, behind a shade of the world, having her identity flayed piece by piece while her loved ones watched helpless on the side. Her disease was like being stripped naked and sent to a place where no one spoke the language, where you could not tell friend from foe. Each day, each hour consumed with questions, with answers that cannot satisfy; like when you were young and you asked your parents why the sky was blue and they said *it just is*.

I thought of how my mind had betrayed me. *Body dismorphia* they called it, when your reflection shows you a distorted picture of yourself. My brain had made me as big as a bus. Even when it got to the point where my thighs had a gap between them and my ribs showed through my skin like I was a walking anatomy lesson still the mirror told me where my flaws were.

Anita wasn't allowed to look at mirrors either. She would look and ask who the woman in the mirror was because it didn't look like her.

"Where are we?" Anita said.

I didn't answer.

"Hello?"

"You told me to shut up," I said. "So I'm shutting up."

"I never said that."

"Yes you did."

"Well I apologize, but that doesn't answer where the hell we are right now."

Anita had a stroke. I came into work to find her in a hospital bed, one side of her face slack; her mouth was frozen in a grotesque snarl. There was a bedpan under her ass. As if her condition hadn't been any worse, now she was trapped within her own mind.

These things happened all the time. In my time at Willow Creek I'd seen patients die, I'd seen them get worse, but Anita had been such a fixture. It was like having a constellation from the night sky suddenly disappearing.

Since she couldn't talk Anita learned to communicate in other ways. She threw things; sometimes her outbursts became so violent we had to sedate her. She groaned in pain and discomfort, her wails so despondent that they made my

skin crawl. And she cried, her silent tears trailing down the crevasses of her wrinkled face.

Any time I could find time to spare I would go to Anita's room and sit in the rocking chair by her bed. We dressed her every day in a medical gown and nothing more. Her hair lay flat and thinning across her head. All of the jewelry in her armoire sat unused.

She was a husk. Just the casing of the woman I knew. Only her eyes were expressive, a demonstration that a kernel of the ferociously proud woman was still aware. They responded to people and things, her pupils dilating and contracting at her pleasure and displeasure.

Anita had a small CD player and a collection of choir and opera music. On the nights that I had time I'd play one of these CDs for her, the volume on low like we were fugitives. When I played the music she'd close her eyes in content, both sides of her facing slackening in peace.

I'd just finished a CD of a collection of arias when I heard voices outside Anita's room.

"I hear they're moving Anita."

"Where?"

"A low income home."

"When?"

"As soon as they can get her a bed."

I registered the look of shock and panic in Anita's eyes. She may not have comprehended the details of her situation, but she knew that change—and not good change—was in her future. She seemed to beseech me. Her hazel eyes turned to me in the halfdark of the room. *Help me*, they seemed to say.

The rumors were true, Anita's son couldn't afford Willow Creek with all of Anita's new care needs. They were moving in in two days. I was walking towards Anita's room when I saw her daughter and a man were coming out of the doorway, lugging Anita's jewelry armoire between them. The man must have been Anita's son. They were bickering.

"She won't need it at the other place, Denise."

"Mom's gone everywhere with that jewelry armoire. She can't not take it."

"Well it's not Mom anymore."

They didn't even see me as they passed by.

It's not Mom anymore.

When I was first admitted to the other place—ninety pounds, heart barely pumping blood, temperature low because I lacked the energy to heat myself up—my mom threw herself across my body like a blanket sobbing, *this isn't you Elly, this isn't you.*

Watching Anita's two children leave I realized that I came back, I got better—was getting better. Anita had no such luxury.

When I walked into the room Anita's eyes were fixed on the empty space where her armoire had been. Another piece of her identity taken away from her. I kissed her forehead, breathing in the day old scent of her and the saltiness of her tears.

"I can help you," I said.

The next night I wore baggier pants than usual.

Anita could still take medication. She took pills with water, one sip per pill. Every time she'd swallow a bit of drool would escape her prim mouth.

"I want to give you something, Anita." I sat next to Anita's bed and pulled the bag of pills out of my pocket; I set them on her nightstand. It was my entire supply.

I wondered if I was wrong. Was it better for to live and suffer or choose to end it? Would her life be so terrible at the other place? Were her children doing this for her or for their own selfish needs? Was I? This could all go wrong, so wrong. Do no harm, that's what they teach you in med school. Well I didn't get that far. Harm was making Anita suffer the indignity of a drawn out death, harm was robbing her of her agency, harm was terminal pain, terminal misery. Anita's eyes caught mine, wide and pleading like a wild thing caught in a trap. She recognized the pills.

I explained to her what to do, keeping my directions as simple as possible. As I walked her through it Anita's eyes blazed with understanding.

I stroked her hair, making it as neat as I could. I clipped an old pair of earrings onto her lobes. She jerked a nod of approval when I showed her the tube of lipstick and I applied it on her thin and cracked lips.

As I walked out of the room I thought of the song Anita always sang.

Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket.

Never let it fade away.

I wouldn't.

Tony Burnett

Old Sol

The pale yellow bathrobe fell away just above the knee, exposing a roadmap of raised blue veins. She tapped the newspaper with the eraser of her pencil. Tap, tap, tap, then to her lips. Three taps, mouth, repeatedly as she peered over the top of her glasses searching for the next letter.

Although, back then I was a gangly 13 year old growing an inch a month and I only stood two feet away, I knew she wouldn't acknowledge me before her next sip of coffee. Finally, she laid the pencil on the crossword and reached for the cup. Yesterday's Ruthless Red lipstick aligned perfectly with the stain on the cup rim, both in color and placement. When she felt my presence she pushed her glasses up her nose and focused her owl-eyes on me. The bloated pupils made me feel miniscule.

"What?" she asked. "It's Sunday," as if I weren't allowed to participate.

I tucked my splayed left foot behind the other. "I'm hungry."

"So eat." She turned her attention to the puzzle. "I've got to whip the devil's ass a'fore I do anything else. Can't let old Sol get the better of me." Though her piercing cackle defied any religious affiliation it did stir the pile of cousins and neighbor kids sleeping in the living room floor. The fact that I'd wandered in from my very own bedroom should have awakened some level of privilege, but Terri occupied that pile. Terri, not a cousin, at least in any biological sense.

The mound of blankets and bodies came to life like a nest of snakes suddenly exposed to sunlight; maybe less intimidating. Maybe not, depending, I suppose, on your perspective. There were less than a dozen today; extended family, kids from town, folks from down at the edge of the suburbs. We had horses. We also had goats, sheep, pigs, rabbits, a boatload of floppy-eared hounds and 20 acres of running room.

"The more the merrier," Mama said when folks with some connection to the real world dropped their kids off Friday evening. It happened every summer as far back as I could

remember. I reckon Mama charged for this service but I never saw any money change hands.

Mama took another sip of lukewarm coffee and penciled in a few letters. "Go get your brothers up and y'all feed the animals." That got the snake-pit really squirming.

"I'll help." "No, me." "I get to feed the goats." "Can we ride horses?" You'd think somebody had come in the living room with a fully-charged cattle prod the way everyone instantly went from somnambulistic repose to bouncing around Mama. I just wanted breakfast. Not happening. I stomped off toward my brothers' room.

My twin brothers shared a room. I had my own but it was tiny and had been added to the side of the house by some one-legged transient carpenter my dad befriended a few years back. It took the guy about four months to build it. He had to knock off by noon every day to go to the liquor store, not usually making it back until dark. Daddy ran him off before he installed any heat or AC, but it was mine. My stereo record player and all my albums and books fit in there. That and a sagging twin mattress was all I needed.

My little brothers were none too happy about getting up. Kurt grumbled toward the bathroom. Heath threw a football at my face and pulled the covers over his head.

"Mama said," I warned, but he and I both knew it to be an empty threat. I know what folks say about twins but these two had nothing in common but a birthday. Kurt was a nerd, like me, if I'd been a zombie. Heath was a jock, complete with muscles, dexterity and an attitude that made me mostly want to smother him in his sleep.

Back at the front of the house all the blankets and sleeping bags were piled in the corner. Everybody milled around like they were waiting for me to open the escape hatch. Still no breakfast. No surprise, I knew the drill. I take everyone outside, keep 'em occupied, *then* Mama will eventually make breakfast.

"Let's go." We piled out into the blue-white morning, gulping lungs-full of the petroleum-laden air wafting over from the chemical plants across the river. One of the smaller boys, a new town-kid named Jesse or Jesus or something, stood on tiptoes trying to reach the leather strap hanging from a big

iron bell bolted to a corner fencepost by the feedlot.

"Don't! Mama will be on your butt like chickens on a June bug!" I warned. There weren't many rules around our place but one that you better not break: *kids do not ring the bell*. Any kid that rang it could expect their butt would be set afire by Mama's switch. The loud iron bell had only one purpose. You could go anywhere you wanted; our place, the neighbors pasture, down in the swamp to look for baby gators, even the old abandoned plantation house down the road where we held séances to try and talk to the spirits of slaves. No matter where you were when Mama rang that bell you better come running. The sound traveled over a mile. If it rang—come home.

Even before I hollered at that kid, Jesus or whatever, Kurt grabbed his hand pulling him back. I reckon the panicked look on Kurt got through to the kid. He didn't even look at that bell again.

Most of these kids just ran wild, chasing the goats, wrestling in the hay barn. A few would help Kurt and I feed the animals. I saw Terri pick up a metal bucket and walk toward the stables. She liked to feed the horses. Usually I tried to pawn that off on my brothers. The rabbits and goats were a lot less work, but today I followed her, grabbing another bucket on my way.

"Want some help?" I loved her skin. "We can brush them while they eat. They like that," I said. She had so many freckles. Not just a few on her cheeks, but on her shoulders and her elbows, her legs and feet. Once I even saw the back of her neck when she bent over and her hair fell forward. Yep, freckles. I loved them. They seemed like some kind of confectionery coating. I wanted to find out if they had a smell or taste.

We were friends, went to the same school and all. I'd pretty much known her all my life but that summer was different somehow. We'd made it through elementary school and the next year we'd have to both ride the bus to another town 18 miles away for junior high. Our lives were in flux, leaving our younger siblings behind.

One weekend that Spring, just before school ended, we were in the garden digging out the last of the potatoes. We kneeled down, up to our elbows in rich black dirt, and I got

close enough to smell her. She smelled organic in a damp summer-drizzle kind of way. Her skin glistened and those little chocolate freckle drops almost seemed like they danced with her every move. I don't know what I was thinking when I leaned in toward her. Was I going to put my cheek against her shoulder or lick her arm? Who knows? She noticed me and after a flutter of confusion she smiled and stared right into my eyes. I cleared my throat and went back to digging potatoes. After that, though, she hung around me more, or I hung around her more. Hard to say. Anyway, whenever she comes here we stand closer and help each other with stuff.

Last week when she was here, we were feeding the horses and we both dipped our buckets in the grain bin at the same time. When our heads touched we just let it happen. The smell of her mixed with the oats made me almost dizzy. When we stood up Heath was right behind us.

"Avery and Spot sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love . . ." I hit him in the chest with a bucket full of oats. Hard. Knocked him down. I thought I'd killed him but he caught his breath and wailed. He ran in the house hollering for Mama. I didn't know what to do at first, then I followed.

"He tried to kill me." He was overplaying something fierce.

"He made fun of Terri. You're supposed to treat girls with respect," I countered. "Dad said so." Mama raised her brow. "He called her Spot," I said. I hated when he did that and he'd done it a lot lately.

Mama wrapped her hand over her nose and mouth. I think she didn't want us to know how angry she was. She took a minute. "You boys need to get along," she said, "and, Heath, leave them alone. Find someone your own size to pick on. Y'all git." She waved us away. It wasn't very satisfying. He didn't get in any trouble. I guess, though, I didn't either looking back.

After the chores Mama had a pile of sausage and biscuits ready. We ate and then we could play outside as long as we *stayed* outside. Boundaries were ambiguous. I found Terri or she found me. Who knows? It's not like we were hiding from each other.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "Heath can be a butt hole."

She giggled. "That's nothing compared to what I get at school."

"What? Why?"

"How about 'leper' or 'speckled trout'? Kids are just mean. I'm used to it."

"But your freckles . . . they're cool. They're really pretty!"

She looked crooked at me. "You're weird." Then she glanced back down at the back of her hand. "But, thanks."

We sat there a minute. She checked out her hands some more. So did I. Then I looked at her hair hoping it would part enough to see the back of her neck again. When it didn't I reached up and moved it. She tightened up, not quite a flinch, then just kept staring at her hands in her lap.

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"I know where there's a tree we can climb pretty easy." I wanted to be alone with her but I wasn't sure why or how.

"Okay."

"It's in the Rollins' pasture behind our field."

"Okay, cool."

"It's a pretty long walk," I said.

She stood. "Let's go."

The grass in that section of the pasture was almost knee-high. It swished against our legs. As soon as we were out of sight of the house she walked closer until the back of her hand bumped against mine. I held it and ran my thumb across the back of it near her wrist. She held our hands up. We both looked at them and chuckled. "Do you know what this means?" she asked. I'm sure I appeared confused. "When you wake up tomorrow you'll be covered in freckles."

"Cool!" I said, "as long as they're yours."

She put her head on my shoulder and I slipped my arm around her waist. It was really hard to walk in the tall grass like that but we did it anyway.

The tree was one of those spreading oaks like you see in groves but this one stood alone in the pasture. Actually it didn't really stand. It had leaned over and grown back to the ground and then made another attempt at height, failing once more before finally breaking contact with the ground, giving the illusion of a giant wooden sea serpent slithering through this ocean of clover. Near the outer end you could straddle the diminishing trunk like a horse with your feet barely touching

the ground. We did, facing each other.

We both had that sheen of clean prepubescent sweat from walking through the field. My heart square-danced in my rib cage. I'm guessing we both knew where we were headed, just didn't know how to get there. So we talked—about, stuff. Finally, I ran my hand down her arm, staring at the place where I touched.

"What did you expect?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"They don't rub off."

I laughed. She closed her eyes. I figured it out from there. When our lips touched we were puckered up like grandmothers. I'd seen movies, passionate powerful kisses in spaghetti Westerns and Technicolor love stories from Hollywood, but I didn't want to frighten her in broad open daylight. But when she laced her arms around my neck I slipped my fingers in her tangled hair to pull our faces closer. She leaned in so I would feel her heart thump against my chest. We wallowed lips together like we'd seen on the big screen, her taste the most glorious, tantalizing dessert. It could've been one minute or twenty when we had to separate, both panting, having forgotten to breathe. I leaned back on a branch to make more room in my shorts and she lay against me, the weight of her head warming my shoulder.

"Are we in love now?" she asked.

I was confused by her question because my being had surrendered back when I observed the lovely sprinkles on her neck. Still, a true answer eluded me. "I think this is where we start."

She snuggled against me, her breath on my ear warmed me from the inside. I turned to her and kissed her between the eyes. She brought her mouth to mine. This time we remembered to breathe so we wouldn't have to stop. The ecstasy formed a beautiful ache in my abdomen. Her breath on my lips, salt sweet and heavy, filled my head with a dizzy foam. Our shirts became damp and adhered to our flat stomachs.

In the distance I heard church bells. This was supposed to happen. I'd read about it in books. Her hushed moan was a question as she pulled away. "Don't we have to go back?"

she asked.

"Why?"

"The bell, it's calling."

I took her by the waist, holding her snugly. "It's probably someone playing with it," I assured her, preferring brutal dismemberment to releasing this heady moment. "If it rings again we'll go back." Our thrill ride on the stationary oak resumed. At some point I do remember a ringing on the periphery of consciousness that I effectively disassociated with through a series of grunts and sighs.

We'd given our lips a break to let me nuzzle her neck while her fingers dug into my back. I heard a growl from the pasture and spied Mama stomping across the field, cleaving the weeds from her path with a five-foot buggy whip. She burned with vicious anger .

"Damn you, Avery! Don't tell me you didn't hear the bell." She acted like she didn't notice what we were doing but some of that dense layer of anger had to be related. "And you, Miss Terri! I know you heard it too, and what's all this?" She screamed, flagging the whip. She was almost upon us.

I looked at Terri, pale and trembling with tears forming in the corners of her eyes. Putting my lips to her ear I inhaled one last whiff of perfect desire and whispered, "Run, my love, like a gazelle." Corny, I know, but she took it to her adrenaline inflamed heart and darted away. Mama started toward her, then I did the only thing I knew. I laughed. Mama glared at me, raising the whip. I faked left, darted right, then jumped past her within inches. She swung but only grazed me with the handle of the whip. No real discomfort. I zigzagged through the weeds allowing Terri a huge lead. Mama charged toward me with purpose, the latigo tongue of her instrument of justice licked the back of my calves, marking me with red welts. It should have stung like being branded. It didn't. I continued my maniacal laugh. "Is that all you've got?" I taunted. She lashed my legs twice more. "You need to start exercising," I hollered, continuing my disjointed course through the field. She was bellowing incoherently now, lashing crazily as I guffawed. Terri had gained a good 50 yards on us. She looked back in horror but I waved her on.

I laughed so hard I could barely stand but I continued

stumbling forward. Mama swung wildly now, nothing but mindless rage. The tip of the whip ripped across my bicep and a line of crimson trickled down my arm. I raised it in a mark of victory, licked it off and spit it toward Mama. She screamed incoherently and charged in my general direction, cutting at the air, the whip singing, sometime making contact, usually not. I danced the perimeter of her radius exposing various patches of my skin to her assault while still taunting.

She raised the whip above her like a medieval battle ax and lunged, bringing it down across my cheek. The lunge was too powerful for her to keep her footing. She collapsed to the ground, rolling into the fetal position. Sobs racked her. I knew I'd passed some devastating point in our familial dynamic. I panicked and rushed to her side. The deep growl emanating from her when she realized I stood over her was an unearthly inhuman sound. It terrified me.

"Mama? Are you okay? Get up." She clutched her legs tighter. When I offered my hand to help she looked up at me. Her lack of recognition bordered on fear.

"Mama? I'm sorry," I said, not even thinking about the several red lines where blood oozed from my arms and legs. I kneeled beside her for several minutes before helping her get her footing. We leaned on each other as we trudged the final yards back to the house. All of the friends and cousins stood around the bell, silent and subdued. The sight of blood on me and the walleyed skittishness in Mama caused them to back away from us, opening a path to the house. Later we all sat on the front porch waiting for various parents to pick up the kids who didn't ride their bikes home. Terri tentatively touched my various welts and lash marks. I grinned at her. "Don't worry they don't rub off." I hoped she'd giggle or at least smile but she looked at me like her heart was bleeding.

The next weekend only a couple of cousins came, and the next weekend, and the next. After about a month most returned, but not Terri. She never came back. We did manage to squeeze in a few more make out sessions during school lunch breaks that fall, but it was never the same. There was an apprehension to our touches like maybe back on that day something did rub off, and we couldn't put it back.

G J Johnson

Writing Life

Three pills in her palm.

For a moment she forgot what they were. Or why she had them.

Suddenly she smelled spaghetti. How long had it been since she'd eaten spaghetti? Months. Years.

She was in a hospital room. A murmur out in the hallway. Just minutes ago someone had given her the pills, a warm hand enveloping hers.

Pain clawed up her, as if trying to get out. But it was familiar, a too familiar feeling. She sat up. The pain lessened slightly. Dad had come, was it that morning? His long Stan Laurel face. And then longer when she demanded to go home. *I want to go home. Please take me away from here.* The old family home wasn't that far away. There was her bedroom, and Felicia's across the hall now used for an office. Set up with legal pads and pens and the drafts of her memoir. Dad helped her feel like a real writer. He had made the desk himself. And the chair with its special ergonomic cushion.

You are in high cotton, he'd say.

Smelling of sawdust from his workshop, a sweet odor. And his hands, smooth yet rough, patted her cheek. Like the pill hand. Had he given her the pills?

Three. Why three?

Then she realized. *Three* for the sections of her memoir. *Hair. Mumbai. Cancer.* Right. It was a mathematical clue. Dad loved the *Alice* books, the riddles. And the pills were for each section. A magic spell.

With his glasses on his nose, tablet on his knee, Dad had read the pages and liked them. He really did. What an amazing life she had—

And would have, of course.

My Katie, he said. *My Katie bug.* Katie *did*, an old family joke. On the wall was a cartoon drawing of a katydid.

Katie did . . . Yes, she did.

And would.

Dad wasn't a reader, his judgment not the best perhaps. But he knew how to build things. He naturally compared her book to building a house. Strong, sturdy sentences, words aligned and stacked like bricks. He was a carpenter and woodworker. He made armoires for senators and crafted Veronese flora at Folger's . . . They lived in Alexandria, on the Potomac. Stench of fish, crab in milky mist. Colonial houses like illustrations in a book.

In his workshop Dad also made Rubik's cubes. He manipulated the painted wood faces . . . Twisting, twisting.

He handed her the cube. *Now you solve, Katie bug.*

Katie didn't. Can't.

Mind not logical like his. Sorry. For years a social worker and now a writer. The laptop stayed shut, however, the LED too painful. Putting actual pen to actual paper, she joked that she felt like a nineteen-century Russian. Everyone loved her writing at Candlelight, and encouraged her to continue. She took the opportunity to read aloud in-progress selections. At the podium, shaking a little, she cleared her throat. *Some think it's an affectation to not use a computer, but I promise I draw the line at using a crow quill.* Laughter, an oceanic sound. She read for fifteen minutes. At the end, breath gulped, breakers of applause. Never had she received applause before.

Katie did.

Can.

But Felicia mocked her. Hated her, even, for taking her old room. The hours Katie sat in the room writing and feeling a cold presence, Felicia just . . .

No, no, not Felicia. She was always forgetting that.

Fatima.

Felicia had changed her name after 9/11, adopting Muslim dress and customs. And then dated only Muslim men. She wore a headscarf and complained about people whispering in restaurants. When she couldn't get jobs, it was clear religious discrimination.

Like the whole family, Fatima was white, just a white girl from Virginia. When this was pointed out to her, that it was hard for someone like her to plausibly claim discrimination, she grew furious. Then one day she disappeared on her recumbent three-wheeled bicycle.

On Facebook she claimed Katie had tried to murder her. And that Dad was a tool of Satan.

A bastard file, Dad said smiling.

But he wasn't worried. *She'll turn up*, he said. *When she's least wanted.*

Katie didn't think it was funny. She hated being alienated from Sis. She spent hours obsessing over where Felicia could be, wondering if she was safe and calling various shelters and filing a missing person report. It was the social worker in her. Then months later, just as Dad had predicted, Felicia showed up during a rainstorm, soaked through under her headscarf and accompanied by a very young Arab man. They needed money.

No, it wasn't funny. And Katie resisted putting her sister into her book. If Felicia wanted to be in a book, she could write her own. In fact, she could write about her mental illness . . .

Yet just like in real life, Felicia popped up in her book anyway.

During Katie's wedding reception, Felic—*Fatima* stood up and made a toast in Arabic. Felicia actually knew very little Arabic, not even that much about the Koran. But she had memorized a blessing. And she practically sang it for the baffled, awestruck crowd.

The phony theatrical toast became the perfect symbol for a phony marriage. A great way to end the first chapter.

Katie had met Zach at a Halloween party. He'd gone as a Pepsi can, while she was a sexy nurse. Her friends dubbed him *Pepsi One*: he had pep for about one minute, and then he stood around utterly inert.

But he was sweet and gentle and had a sly sense of humor. And he was a great kisser. He actually bought her flowers on their first date and picked up the restaurant bill. On walks he had no problem holding her hand. She had met a real man at last.

Hands. The difference between Zach's and Dad's. One veiny, protuberant. The other feminine, languorous. She wrote a paragraph about them, never expanded upon. Like so many notes and fragments and scrawled slips of paper across her desk.

Zach was like an aborted note, unfinished. Soft and fuzzy,

the lines of his face never came into focus. Then he met someone at a software conference, a Thai lady who may or may not have been a hooker.

The morning after Zach moved out, I woke with my head almost completely bald. A light bulb of shock and pain. Like a field worker I picked out clumps of hair from the bedsheets and sinks and carpet. I picked out hairs for weeks, something that became an almost ritualized ceremony. Goodbye, hair. Goodbye, me.

It took her a long time to find herself, regain her center. In those days even oxygen came dear. When she was fortunate enough to have forgotten him and his stupid blurry grin, the baldness reminded her.

Oh, no you don't, her head said. *This grief is real. Real as a motherfuck.*

She initially found comfort in wigs. *Cranial prostheses* they were called. Like mounted butterflies, purple and piled and frosted, the wigs sat ready to fly up onto her head, waiting to assume an identity, a strutting player before Dad's wooden castles.

Her serious writing began from that period. She wrote and published online an essay about mirrors and being accepted by society. The pressure of conforming to the male gaze. The idea of beauty, of baldness. The meaning behind it all.

Then there was the scene a year later when they ran into each other at a Starbucks. Zach gaped at her. *You look like Joan Jett*, he said, and laughed. She patiently explained that she had alopecia and that it was triggered by stress. Zach nodded, not seeming to make the connection. Distracted, holding a coffee, he said he had to get back to work. After he left, waving through the window, she realized she felt nothing for him. He was a total stranger. And Joan Jett looked back at her in the glass. Another stranger.

Not long after, she switched to headscarves.

Scarves, red and blue and printed with paisleys, were simple and attractive. And were much cheaper. In her excitement she published another online essay entitled *Down with Wigs!!*

But Felicia was angry again. She saw a picture of Katie's new look online and felt she was being "bullied." After several nasty email exchanges, Felicia showed up at Dad's birthday

party to borrow money and then demanded Katie take off her "disrespectful" headwear. Katie told herself her sister was being irrational, but Felicia knew just the buttons to push. *You've never had an original idea in your life. You're always copying me! Just like when I was playing with Kristy Schaak and you tagged along on your bike!* . . . Katie retorted that Felicia's own headscarf was just a political fiction. A delusion versus a medical reality! Felicia started wildly slapping, a tactic from her childhood, and tried to pull off the offensive scarf. Yelling that it was his birthday, their father jumped between them and all three landed in the cake.

After that the sisters didn't talk for two years.

Three pills.

Katie couldn't remember if she was supposed to take them all at once, or one at a time, or two and then one at intervals.

Wasn't someone supposed to help her?

Dad?

No. I have to get out. I have to go.

Pain clawing.

If she was going to die, she wanted it to be at home. The colonial with the white paneling, the screened porch. Her cool friendly bedroom, smelling of cherrywood, surrounded by her books and photo albums and stuffed animals. Katydid smiling down on her.

And the other room, Felicia's, filled with the precious handwritten sheets. Her many friends on Facebook encouraged her. Candlelight writers offered to critique her latest chapters. An agent had expressed interest. It was all there, just inches away, just needing a little more shaping, a little more pruning . . .

At the end of *Hair* she thanked her ex-husband: *Thank you, Zach, for being the jackass I needed you to be.*

But the next two sections still needed work. In the chaos of the last few weeks (months?) she had lost her way in the labyrinth of her writing. She had repeatedly begged people to bring her the manuscript pages, but no one ever did as far as she knew. If she could just see the sheets, have the pulp of the papers palpably in her fingers again, she'd feel better. Touch the core of her life. Bring sense to everything.

I have to go. GO.

She raised her hand. She was suddenly feeling strong, centered, focused. Inhaling deeply, she unhooked and pulled off her oxygen.

The machine beeped.

Fuck you.

No one came.

With a triumphant gesture, she threw the pills across the room. Then she pushed herself from the bed as if from a tar pit.

I pushed myself out of bed as if from a tar pit.

The machine complained.

Beep beep beep . . .

On legs like spaghetti she made her way to the door. A cart went past. Muttering voices from somewhere. Her bare feet stepped across the cold tiles, hips clicking. Her gown billowed and she caught it with her hands. She hugged herself as she passed the nurse's station.

A voice called after her. The elevator doors opened and she slipped inside.

Ding, ding, ding . . .

Light brighter and brighter. More voices. She trotted. The doors swung, air whooshing, the outside tilting vast.

Out!

Out!

She squinted.

The sunlight was butter.

But, no. That wasn't hers. Josie, her travel companion, had come up with that when they were in India. *Butter on the domes*, she had said.

They had been pretty hungry when she said that.

Josie had helped her get a teaching job in India, and it couldn't have come at a better time. But India turned out to be more of a trial than a deliverance. All on her first day, she lost her luggage, a man yelled at her in Hindi, and a camel shot poop right by her face. Then in Jaipur she took a ride on an elephant and threw up everywhere. In Agra she had colored powder thrown on her, which brought on a violent sneezing fit. She spent most of her time sweating and looking for toilets. Then Josie had to leave because of

a family emergency. Stranded in Ramthambore, truly alone, Katie told her female students they didn't need to obey their husbands or their fathers and brothers. She was fired. Crying, she called Dad and asked for money to get a flight back home. Waiting for the wire transfer at a café, she met a dapper silver-haired businessman. He greeted her politely and asked if she would like work as a nanny for his three children. Katie said no, she wasn't interested. Being a nanny seemed beneath her education level. But most importantly, India had defeated her. She was exhausted and demoralized. The adventure that had promised rejuvenation after her divorce had instead been a nightmare of Hieronymus Bosch proportions. The man persisted. He had a calm, confident manner, the kind of personality who always got his way. He bought her a good meal, one he knew an American would enjoy, and placed a thick roll of rainbow-colored currency bills by her elbow.

His name was Raju and he lived further south in Mumbai. His wife was a renowned concert pianist, playing in Asia and Europe. A week later, Katie met the children. They were docile and adorable, two older girls and a toddler boy, four years old. Gupta stared at her with his father's preternatural calm. Eyes like she had seen in Hindu temples.

The pay and situation was good. It wasn't until later she learned that she was just unattractive enough, lacking hair and being a little overweight, for Raju's wife to find Katie acceptable. The previous American nanny had apparently caused problems. This Katie learned from the older sisters who loved to prattle during their English lessons. As for Gupta, Katie often took him to the nearby park and they would laugh at the monkeys jumping in the trees.

Trees swayed and sighed. Down the streets, her bare feet getting scratched on the sidewalk, Katie hugged herself and kept her head down. Any minute she expected to be shouted at, to be fingered, to hear sirens . . .

Dad's house was on North Ripley. She crossed Polk.

The bones in her feet felt like teeth.

Felt like teeth.

For a moment she paused and considered going back to retrieve the pills she had so wantonly thrown away. What if they were keeping her alive? Over and over she had turned

in the furious blue water. Breathing hard, confused, she sat down in the grass. Her fingers tore at the blades and brought them to her face. Yes, this was real. Gone was the white air of the hospital. The blades were brown, yellow. Like hair.

The planet was losing its hair.

She went on.

Pleats of thick air, diesel exhaust. A bus rumbled by. The sun drooped in a varicosed sky, drops of rain.

Raju and his wife were often gone, very busy people. Alone, drinking hot chai on the terrace, Katie watched birds wheel over the ocean and marveled at the turns her life had taken. Twisting, twisting. Time itself braiding, forming exquisite knots . . . She started keeping a journal, intending to publish an essay or two based on her experiences.

A letter came for her. To her surprise, it was from Felicia. Without mentioning the Great Headscarf Controversy, Felicia wrote about having an abortion and then learning recently of her pregnancy with a new Muslim boyfriend and needing to sneak out to have an abortion again. The abortions both happened on the same day of the year, like a negative holiday. The letter was so rambling and convoluted that Katie had to read it three times. Felicia finished by complaining that Allah was testing her, that her womb was a place of death. And she needed money.

That night, Katie forgot about her sister's difficulties and instead felt grateful she had inherited all the writing talent in the family.

Home wasn't far. She turned up streets. Knox, Truman . . . A car slowed and pulled to the curb.

You lost, sweetheart?

Katie waved, shaking her head. The car pulled away, tail lights like bindis.

Raju asked Katie if she was lost. In life, he meant. His hand touched hers. She pulled it away. He was a nice man, eyes wrinkled with a wise sadness, and he seemed lonely. At night Katie indulged in erotic fantasies and even penned a romantic *Passage to India*-ish story in her journal. She later tore out the pages.

Rainbow haloes and sweet smells, butter and oranges, hydrangeas and lotus. Mumbai and Alexandria flashed in

double exposure. Memories amok.

Was that a monkey up in that tree? No, a plastic bag.

Potomac to her right. Arabian Sea to her left.

Then it happened. On a generous jewelled day the ocean swelled. A wall, dull and roaring, rumbled. And then WHAM. Water crashed through the house. Screaming, Katie managed to fall on Gupta and they were dragged out like criminals, cartwheeling through the violent ferocious water, impossible to tell what was up or down. She only knew to keep her arms around little Gupta. Then her foot hit something. A body, or something more solid. A boat's hull maybe. She propelled herself through whirling chains of bubbles and exploded to the surface. Gupta wailed and coughed. Arms and legs thrashing, she pulled the child and herself to a blurry horizon. Closer and closer, the shore boiling. Buildings wept, brown waters gushed out demons' mouths. Distant cries, sirens. Up the tangled sands she stumbled and fell. Gupta was with her, alive. They gasped and coughed and cried. All around them a broken city.

For days the giant fronds poured crazy music.

Everyone was accounted for except Raju. He had vanished. There was a suspicion he had used the disaster for his own purposes . . .

That was her tsunami story. Everyone at Candlelight agreed it was very powerful. They were amazed she had survived such an ordeal.

Yes, she had cheated death. And saved a little boy.

Katy did.

It wasn't until she was home again that she realized what she had been through. And to truly appreciate having survived.

Staying longer in India would have only tempted Fate further. I decided I was done dancing with Karma.

Out of work, savings gone, she moved in with Dad. He was only too glad to have her back. With Felicia having disappeared again, it seemed okay to take over her old bedroom and use it as a study. Katie had received so much positive feedback to her letters and Facebook posts about India that it was time to get serious about her writing career.

Here it was. The old home. On Ripley and Union. 1132. No way to miss it. There was the American flag hanging alongside

the red FSM flag. Flying Spaghetti Monster. That was Dad.

Spaghetti.

She must have been smelling God.

Like a roll of dice her feet clattered on the porch steps as she fell.

The rain had stopped. The low sun burned gems in the pavement.

She sat up. She had been passed out on the porch.

How long? A minute? An hour?

Hush in the trees all around. Dark humid shapes of birds, or monkeys. Watching. Water wept into her eyes.

Wiping at her face, she climbed the porch stairs. The door was open. Deep wood smell. And an alien smell. Cigarette smoke. Also something sweet. Cinnamon.

A distant whine in the pipes. *Gupta swept into the ocean, wailing.*

On the kitchen counter was an unopened pack of Trident gum. Felicia's favorite gum. Katie paused, confused. A tickle, an itch, traveled down her leg. Blood shone on her knee. She had cut herself on the porch. Her skin was barely holding herself in. Made of paper.

The house stood empty. She called out for Dad, but no one answered. She went for the stairs. Close to her old room now, like Moses. A familiar pattern of light, lozenges of buttery pasta, trembled on the wallpaper.

Voice of God in light.

Felicia hated the Flying Spaghetti Monster. It was an insult to Allah and Islam and to her belief most of all. The flag was raised as a provocation. *If you come to my house, you must laugh at God. And take communion with marinara . . .*

Creak.

Creak.

Each step made her shrink like Alice, her pinafore drenched in sepia.

Out of breath, Katie paused on the landing. Then down the hall to her bedroom. The notches on the jamb. Not her child-spanning height, but how many boys she had kissed during a torrid period in high school. Any one of them would have married her, and yet she had settled on Zach. The notches a

rebuke, mocking gashed mouths. *Stupid, stupid.*

The smell of her old room. The sneakers with the pom-poms, the posters, the closet full of Barbies and stuffed animals. Here, clutching Petey the Cowardly Lion, she had dreamt of all the things she would have in her life. And what did she finally get? A bad marriage. Hair loss. A Biblical disaster that should have killed her. Now disease. Inflammatory breast cancer, IBC, the worst. Hard to detect, and nearly always fatal. The doctors originally said she had about a year. That had been two years ago. Or three.

Being under a death sentence lent her writing an extra urgency. Lightning shot off her pen, words crawling from the primordial blankness . . . She wrote and wrote for hours until her energy gave out. But there were also some days, brutal days of chemo, that she couldn't manage even a sentence. A word, maybe. *Mumbai. Prosthetic. Pepsi.* Little notes, grains hopefully gathered someday into a castle of prose . . .

And then the irony of her headscarf. Years ago someone online had criticized her for adopting the look of a cancer patient, as if it were something trendy. Now that she really had cancer, the headscarf seemed a spooky harbinger. A curse, even.

While she thought superstitions were ridiculous, and sometimes mocked them in her writing, in her weakening condition she caught herself believing some of them. Maybe if she had stuck with the wigs? Or wore nothing on her head at all . . . ?

She started a fragment about not wanting to be just a cancer patient, or a cancer survivor, or a cancer anything. She was more than just a headscarf. A head flying under a flag meant to represent some larger cause.

I'm just Katie. A nice girl from Virginia, trying to do my best in this thing we call Life . . .

Across the hall was Felicia's room. It was the laboratory where Katie had tried to fit her life together, twisting, twisting, to turn the chimera into a swan. She went to the desk. On it were piles of sheets, all handwritten, all waiting to be typed up by someone brave enough to make sense of it all.

But how could she possibly pay a secretary? Her medical expenses had long ago drained away her savings. The alimony

from Zach barely covered her groceries. Dad often claimed to be broke, despite the money constantly going out the other way to Felicia. Yes, Katie knew. She knew he was still supporting Felicia. Probably even supplying her with Trident gum.

The pages were slightly crisp, the edges brownish. How long had it been since she had actually sat in here to do any writing?

Months. Years.

The window, half open, had a hairline crack like lightning. The curtain stirred. And how long had the sun and wind and even the rain abused her memories . . . ?

Suns of pain burst through her chest as she sat down. Her shaking fingers sifted the sheets. Nothing made any sense. She knew for sure she hadn't left her manuscript in such bad shape. Had Dad gone through it? Straining, muttering, she tried to assemble the pages and chapters in the right order. Post-it notes covered some of the sheets like a leprosy, like a . . . And some of the handwriting didn't look familiar. It almost looked like . . .

That fucking bitch.

Who gave her the right?

Pages about the Cancer were mixed in with the Hair section, while Mumbai was scattered across all three.

She was feeling faint. Spots burned and bloomed at the edges of her vision.

The curtain suddenly came at her. She jumped. A wall of blue . . . !

There you are, came the voice.

It was Felicia. Fatima. Standing in the doorway.

Then, behind her, a wood-colored man appeared. Smoking.

It was Imad. The latest. Dad had told her about him just that morning. With a friendly, or perhaps patronizing, smile, he took out his cigarette and said it was nice to meet her at last.

You can't do this, Fatima said. *It's not good for you.*

Katie clawed up the sheets. *Leave me alone. Please! Just let me finish . . . !*

Come on, sis. We need to take you back.

Did you mess with this? I had them all in order! Did you

go through . . . ?!

You're tired. Did you take your medication? I gave you your pills . . .

Just go!

We'll bring you your writing. Okay? Everything you need. Come on. Just leave it and come with us.

No! You can't make me! I want to work on my book!

Look, we promise. Okay? Just—

NO!

We're trying to help you! Here, give me . . .

Felicia was edging closer. Imad hesitated in the doorway, looking off down the hall. But then Fatima hissed at him. He came in.

We're going to take you where you can get better. Don't you want to be better . . . ?

Fuck off. Fuck you! Get away from me!

They fell on her. Katie shrieked.

I'm home! I'm home! Leave me alone!

Papers scattered, flew. A spaghetti monster.

Just, please—Hey! Get her—

Let go!

Look, do you want me to call Dad? He's downstairs working on a project but he'll come up here, don't make him come up here!

You're lying. Dad's not here. I saw your gum!

What?

Your gum is here. It's just you! He doesn't let us chew gum in the house! Daddy said!

Come on, you need rest, Katie. Please . . . !

I don't want to! I don't want to!

One hand gripped the side of the writing desk, while the other clamped pages to her chest. Cigarette clenched, amused, Imad pried her fingers. They both pulled on her until she was up in the air, shrieking and kicking, and carried her as she stuffed papers into her screaming mouth . . .

A very pregnant woman went to the podium. The audience at Candlelight hushed, their faces curious and attentive.

The woman looked out at the crowd. She placed a stack of printed sheets on the lecture stand, and then smiled. On an

easel was a framed portrait of Katie Marie Empson-Richter, her smile matching her sister's.

"This . . ." Her voice broke. "This is for Katie. She was the bravest person I knew. And I loved her with all my heart. Here is some of her story . . ."

Someone whispered to their neighbor.

"The headscarf? It's in honor of her sister."

Max Evans

Other Oceans, Other Motions

For three days, I've been stuck in the crotch of California—Moreno Valley—for a yawn of a conference. The president concludes this "retreat" to a standing ovation; I clap twice and politely duck toward the door. No, colleagues, I don't want to shake hands and dine at a restaurant you love so we can lie to each other about how interesting it was to learn what we already knew. Instead, I'm recycling my lanyard in the bin and tipping the valet extra to sprint. But as I pull away from the convention center, I see the standstill on the freeway overpass . . . cars budge forward . . . more break lights. At that crawl, I won't make Long Beach until after dark.

Coffee.

I need coffee.

Inside 7-Eleven, I fill a cup with dark roast and wait behind a kid with an energy drink. I've always wondered how those things taste but never tried one. And especially not after my heart attack in June. He gets ID'd for cheap cigars. From his corduroy shorts, he swings up a chain wallet and the rip of velcro explains he's about twenty-two. Kid's all grin and baseball cap as he bops toward his hatchback and tosses the pack to his girlfriend on the passenger side.

I haven't had a Swisher in years. Without thinking, I order a single and leave 7-Eleven relaxing my tie. Settling inside my silver sedan, I glance toward the freeway onramp. Bumper to bumper. Honks and yells. A mess. I go to push on the engine button but stop short.

I search the parking lot for my wife. Even though three hours of congestion separate us, I feel a tinge of guilt because Jen hates when I smoke. I unwrap the cigar and recall when they were shrink-wrapped in clear plastic, not this pink cellophane stuff. The sweet scent of its brown skin takes me back. Way back. Back when I wasn't bald from a mortgage. Back when my under eye bags didn't resemble tombstones from paying two college tuitions. To when my car radio was for music, not endless sports chatter and political rants. Behind

my tinted windows, I inhale from the Swisher's sugary tip. Yet as I breathe out, I'm returned to a summer night from my early twenties . . . drinking on a balcony . . . those brown thighs and sharp eyes—Noelani.

I met Noelani while serving tables across the bay from the Queen Mary. I remember the morning she submitted her application because I had just left Bryce with his mom (my first wife) and I was brewing decaf in the side station when Chauncey dropped a lemon from the slicer. He peeked around the corner toward the front desk: "I'd hire that ass on the spot."

To this day, Chauncey's nickname—*The Sampler*—is stuck in my head. He earned it from sleeping with anything that landed on his plate, including a knuckle-throated German tourist with narrow hips who'd only take it doggystyle. So I didn't pay him any mind and kept on with my opening duties. But then the busser charged through the double doors, dropped the silverware caddy on the counter, and joined Chauncey in the open doorway. Cupping his balls, he whispered, "*Aye,* mi corazon."

Since the busser was this sometimes-smooth Latin dude, I had to see this girl. Being the tallest, I peered over their heads and witnessed this absolute dime with warm skin tone and jet-black hair. The kitchen window popcorned with white hats as the manager accepted her resume. At the sushi bar, while she slid into a booth, I studied the plumeria print of her skirt. Those poor flowers were forced into bloom by her thighs. The kind of thick thighs that women fret about in the mirror but men love to squeeze beneath tabletops.

"That's a bad chick," Chauncy said.

"The illest," the busser confirmed.

At first, I thought she was Pinay but the almond shape of her eyes leaned toward Hawaiian. Everything about Noelani looked great until she laughed; the canines in her smile were molar-sized. And slanted. Her lips draped each into hiding.

"Nuh-uh," Chauncey grunted. "Her grill is jacked." He scrubbed the air around his mouth. "I can't do chicks with all this messed up."

"But you'll smash a fat chick under the pier?" the busser said.

"I'm saying," Chauncey said.

"And don't forget '*Heil, Hitler!*'" I said.

The manager shook her hand and the chase was on for the new girl.

The Sampler wasn't the lead trainer in the restaurant so he didn't get the chance to sit alone inside the break room with Noelani on her first day. My heart sped from nerves and free espresso. My vision bounced around the room—from the stacked booster seats to the metal lockers, the Employee of the Month frames to the empty kegs. I was so close to her I could've slid a pinky over her wrist.

"You okay?" she said.

"Hung over," I lied, tongue dry as a loofa. I cracked open the training manual and stared down. "First things first, you need slip-resistant shoes, black socks, and a wine key."

While explaining the clock-in procedure, I built the courage to lift my gaze. Each iris before me was a sea of grassy paint strokes that shored up flecks of sunshine. Immediately my own plain browns plopped back down to the training manual as if clinging to a raft.

During the tour of the restaurant, I breathed easier, especially as we sampled food in the pantry: crab taquitos, lobster stuffed salmon, macadamia crusted mahi. For dessert, we shared the crème brulee but I was caught off guard by the tip of its chocolate spoon sliding out past her lips. She tilted her head back, the thin muscles in her caramel neck swallowing.

"This is the best thing I ever tasted," she said near moaning.

A dab of the sweet custard remained on her mouth as we carried our dishes to the scullery. Her words "best thing" and "tasted" repeated in my head. Luckily, my black apron covered me from embarrassment.

For the reminder of the afternoon, I felt like the trainee because I was the one forgetting ingredients, losing my reading place, dropping my pen. When Noelani went home for the day, I immediately went to the freezer by myself. With no one else around, I unzipped my backpack and stuffed in a quart of milk.

That night, I microwaved dinosaur-shaped nuggets for Bryce. He had recently outgrown the wooden highchair I stole from work but since he'd tip back in his new plastic seat, I had to stabilize the legs by taping on *Chef Boyardee* cans.

His mom was out for the night bartending. We only saw each other between shifts. That was our routine since the divorce. Even though it had been finalized for months, the fees left us strapped. Seemed like every time I'd get close enough for a deposit on my own apartment, my car needed brake pads or we'd be late on Bryce's tuition.

He dipped a pterodactyl into a ramekin. "Wha wrong, Daddy?"

"Tired," I said.

He bit a dinosaur's left wing.

"Wan to whach Elmo-pa-woo-ah?"

No matter who watched Bryce, he had to watch *Elmopalooza*.

"Later," I promised.

He looked at me. "When mommee comin home?"

"Drink your milk."

"Can I have i'creem?"

Dishes stood in the holder: she washed them—I put them away.

"Finish those raisins," I said. "Mommy said you didn't poo. You gotta poo, dude."

He chomped off the head of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. "Can I sleep on cowch witchu?"

After we showered, he ate mint chip ice cream while watching his favorite show. Never the type of kid to sing aloud, Bryce moved his lips along instead. But sometimes, he'd whisper with Elmo the chorus that went, "Be yourself . . . Easy as A-B-C . . . Can't be no one else . . . Just happy to be me!"

For the sake of Noelani, I should have listened to Elmo.

When I saw her the next day, I kept it by the book and quizzed her on table numbers and entrée pairings. But as we chatted about other stuff, I found out Noelani had played college volleyball until her ACL tore—surgery, rehab, all that—yet she was a year away from teaching elementary school. I could have told her that my son was entering kindergarten and continued the conversation in that direction. But she

commented on my height, asking if I played volleyball.

"Snowboarding's my thing."

She shook her head.

"Skiing?" I threw out.

"I don't . . . I don't do mountains."

"You joking?" I said.

"They're my phobia," she said. "There's some special name for it."

"Really?"

"I swear. When I see them in a magazine, I whip the page. Or when I drive somewhere far, I map myself around them."

"That's weird," I said. "I mean . . . different."

She said, "Did you ever see that movie about that airplane that crashed into a mountain? The one where the survivors ate their dead to stay alive?"

I nodded even though the only movies I watched were *Bedtime with Elmo* and *Elmo's Potty Time*.

"My teammates freaked during the scene when the passengers were cutting chunks of frozen ass," Noelani said. "But the whole time I was in that theater covering my eyes—those mountains were ginormous!"

I thought about my own hang up. For whatever reason, I couldn't carry Bryce along the edge of a high surface for fear my arms would involuntarily throw him.

But what we connected on was Hip Hop. She'd been to more live shows than I owned burned CDs because while growing up in Hawaii, she had helped her older brother carry record crates into house parties across the islands. He never spun for radio stations but instead cracked into Vegas clubs, banking six-figures a year without a high school diploma. Hearing about the emcees she had met backstage, my crush on her boosted since at that time—turn of the 90s—to find a nonblack girl who was deep into Hip Hop was the equivalent of a woman scoring a guy who hates sports but just *loves* musicals.

Noelani certified her training. After shifts, while everyone else drank their tips away in a pub, we were in her car, head nodding to break beats and arguing about what mattered most in lyrics: skill or emotion. I rifled through her CD visor as she passed over a picture of her brother in his backyard

holding a Corona. She pointed at everything he bartered from working private gigs—patio, fence, pool. But I kept staring at his face. In comparison to her, he was almost pale.

"Your bro looks," I said, "lighter than you."

"We're hapa haole."

"Happy who?"

Noelani's incisors showed.

"'Hapa haole' means we're mixed. My mom's from the main island but my dad's German. That's how I got these." She batted her gems then slid in a CD. As I listened to her brother scratching the wax, my finger pads rubbed the top of my knees to copy his fast hands.

Looking back now, I should have mentioned my situation to Noelani. But at twenty-one years old, to have to admit you're a divorced parent—still living with the kid's mother—borders on you disclosing cancer. When do you tell? If you lay your cards flat during the first conversation, they fold up and—*pyung!*—ditch you on the dance floor holding the drink you bought them.

During one of our private kickbacks in the empty parking lot, I was determined to tell Noelani about Bryce. But that was the first night we hooked up. As I nibbled on her lower lip, the thought nagged me until I pulled my hand out from beneath her sweatshirt.

"What's up?" she said, adjusting her strap.

"Something I want to say real quick."

I looked deep into Noelani's eyes and as I was about to come clean, I lost my nerve in the sheen of her black hair. Black as a record. Like you could run your fingers through it and sample every track in her heart: the quiet slow jam, the up-tempo R&B cut, the underground classic.

"There's a party Friday night," I said instead. "Wanna go?"

The night of the party, I stood in full uniform inside my living room while telling Bryce's mom that I had picked up a shift. I then drove to the gas station to change into my jeans and stuff the car seat inside the trunk. While I checked my hair in the rearview, the night hid the melted crayons on the floorboard.

I picked up Noelani and as soon as we entered the party,

smoke hit us. The host was travelling to Europe and wanted to survive their dance clubs so he bought two boxes for everyone to smoke. Near the bookcase, the high schoolers coughed like crazy but the pros in the hallway chimneyed three at a time.

The first thing Noelani said: "I can't be in here."

"Too smoky?" I said.

She grabbed my arm, stared at the carpet.

I hated cigarettes, too, I told her. It was like inhaling cardboard.

"Get me out," she said.

I had never seen her act that way so I scanned the room. Nicotine clouds hovered beneath the red ceiling bulbs. But through the haze, above the futon, I saw what bothered her—a painting of Catalina.

"That's not a mountain," I told Noelani. "That's an island near here. It's like Long Beach's version of Hawaii."

She shut her eyes, clamped my forearm. I placed her hand inside mine and guided her to a narrow balcony outside: two lawn chairs, a string of white lights, cactus pot with a *Sublime* sticker.

"Need a drink?" I said.

She cracked her knuckles.

"Hold tight."

I coursed back through the party. The smoke was thick and chewy as the pot brownies disappearing from the kitchen counter. I stirred two vodka-crans and tasted my finger, wondering when to tell Noelani about Bryce. In a year, I'd be out of the apartment, away from his mom. The ice cubes cracked as I imagined Noelani moving in with us. Adding more vodka, I envisioned the three of us eating cookie dough and watching *Elmopalooza*.

I couldn't have been away from Noelani for no more than two minutes before guys were surrounding her like vultures. But one mention of the disappearing magic brownies and the small balcony cleared again.

"Uhhh!" Noelani said, followed by a sip. "That guy who was here, Breathasaurus, melted my mind when he bragged about his hundred-dollar tip. I had to lift my arm and smell my own deodorant."

She pulled from her purse a pack of strawberry Swishers.

We traded drags on the girly smoke and I chuckled because I had never lit one up without gutting the tobacco and relining the belly with weed. But I'd given up on herb when Bryce was born; I needed money in the worst way then.

Noelani and I ashed that first one as the scent blended in with the warm night. My buzz intact, details stood out at that moment. Noelani's face was neon green from a text message. Her chin tilted down and I stared at her shiny brown shoulders jutting out her black tank top like a bonus pair of small titties. She kicked her pink suede Pumas on the stucco banister, her jean shorts dangling white threads. She had premature thick momma-thighs and the only distraction from the yellow turtle inked above her ankle was the low banister, easy enough to step over. I wouldn't have dared held Bryce on that balcony.

"My old team is in town for a weekend tournament," she relayed. Her thin fingers attacking the little letters. "You have to meet them!"

First the friends, then the family.

"No doubt," I said. "Your cup looks low."

As I stood up, I touch her shoulder. I just had to.

I came back with a half-bottle of vodka and juice. We turned our lawn chairs towards each other and began to freestyle to the music.

Before that night, she and I had passed the time at work by scribbling rhymes in our server pads trailed by *dot-dot-dot* for the other to complete. The rhymes were about anything. Dumber the better. I remember she wrote about an obese momma in a muumuu tucking lard pancakes in her armpit-pantry. Then, the rhyme hit a corner and we went back and forth about a drunk drowning in the Pacific Ocean while downing a six-pack of Pacifico.

But since we were freestyling for the first time on the spot, we resorted that night to the simple style of Southern rap. '*Err* had to end everything

Noelani's went: "I wave my Swisher in the '*err*. Like I just don't k'*err*. So please don't st'*err* or you might get sc'*err*'d."

Afterwards, her hands caved around her mouth to kick the cutest little beatbox. But as I took over the rhyme, her bare thighs between my jeans tripped my tongue.

"Wick-wick-whack," she teased, fingers flicking across invisible wax. "Wick-a-wick-*whack*."

She giggled like a girlfriend with a secret and inhaled the Swisher, the skin on her clavicle sinking deep. The smoke drifted toward the pier where diehard fishermen huddled beneath lampposts.

The sliding glass door behind us wiggled with bass, everyone inside was grooving. The foggy red light gave the room a soupy appearance. As if our coworkers were ingredients shifting inside a bowl of Manhattan chowder. For all I cared, they could have partying in Manhattan and viewing us on giant screens because at that instant my big moment had arrived.

"Noelani," I started. "I'm feeling you to a deep degree and—"

A fire truck turned the corner. Lights spinning, siren blaring.

An upstairs neighbor had thought the complex was on fire.

Party over.

Noelani nor I could drive but the warm night was perfect for a stroll. With a corner-mall next door to the party, we were a hop, skip and a *Jack In The Box* from the beach. Curly fry scent in the air, the salty winds passing through the palm trees melted the ice inside our red cups. We held hands mitten-style, my thumb stroking her palm, as we journeyed beneath a sliced moon toward the bar. I was excited because upon our arrival, her friends—future bridesmaids—would bear witness to our interlaced fingers.

I had envisioned Noelani holding more than my hand since her maiden name was horrible to the ear: Hortchenberger or Hitlervragen. During the previous brunch shift, I had watched her face squint as she landed Mimosas on her tray and hurried toward a large reservation. The ocean glistened around her form while she listed the cuts from the carving table. The guests were smiling up at her from their seats and I imagined her standing before Bryce's kindergarten class. I could even hear his small classmates greeting her in unison: "Hell-lo Miss-es Va-len-te!"

We were blocks from the bar as my knuckles slid down the moist lanes of her hand. A full squeeze and I said, "Can I tell you something?"

Noelani nodded as I explained everything, my practiced words spilling out like cereal.

But after a look of serious contemplation, she released my hand. "You-are-a-committed-father," she said, trying to hide her drunken lisp, sounding like a robotic telemarketer. "That-is-great-to-hear. Very-honorable-of-you."

Bla bla bla, yadda yadda yeah—I had heard it all before.

She walked ahead to the bar, turned to me at the door.

"James, this is like . . . weird. You have this whole other world to you I never knew about."

Noelani hung out with her teammates while I found a barstool. I plunged quarter after quarter into a Trivia machine I've never been good at. She introduced me to her friends, including a Brazilian beach player in a zipped up Adidas sweatshirt. He was square in the shoulders as the pool table they played on.

When the bartender said last call, I hoped Noelani would come to her senses and walk with me so we could talk more outside.

But it was too late because Noelani was grinding against the pro volleyball player. Her eyes were closed and her lips were sucked inside her mouth. To top it all off, they were dancing next to a Coors Light poster and Noelani was oblivious to the Rocky Mountains stretched to the ceiling. The Long Island in my hand slipped to become a long puddle.

Chauncey agreed to pick my drunk ass up since I promised to buy him a turkey sandwich at work. Rolling down PCH on the drive to his place, I shoved my head out the window toward the waves and screamed my love for Noelani.

"You're retarded," he complained. "Other oceans, other motions."

"You don't understand," I blabbered. "You don't understa-*a*-*a*-nd!"

Inside his apartment, Chauncey guided me into his bathroom and left me to wobble in the dark. Splashing pee all over the tile. I plopped down on the soaked seat while my mind replayed the worst part of that night: another guy taking away my girl.

While lost in agony, I thought of Bryce. He was just starting to walk when I took him to the Queen Mary for the first time.

He lifted his hands because he wanted to see over the edge of the ship but I told him no. But then I felt ridiculous for my paranoid thoughts so I picked him up and brought him to the edge of the cruise liner. As he peeked at the ocean water hundreds of feet below, I felt instantly sick. Because in my mind, I was preparing to throw him overboard. Or an earthquake was about to shove me against the banister and my instincts would drop whatever I had in my hands.

But then I imagined I was Bryce being held by Noelani. Instead of gripping me tight, she flung me away, gravity stealing me from her world. That was the moment I teetered from Chauncey's toilet and landed into his bathtub.

"Fuck Noelani!" I yelled, shoving the shower curtain from my face. "That snaggletooth bitch!"

"Quiet!" Chauncey said, flipping the brightest light ever. "Don't wake my roommate."

Chauncey let me fall asleep there. My jeans were drenched.

After that night, Noelani and I stopped scribbling to each other. No more hangouts in her car either. She quit months later and I skipped her bon voyage party. Heard it was fun—luau theme, beer pong—but I was checking off school supplies at the ninety-nine cent store for Bryce's school.

From that point forward, I was upfront with women since I knew they'd find out I had a kid anyways. So on my second date with Jen, I explained, "Okay, here's my deal."

She listened intently, more so than Noelani had, and for a moment, I lost track of my thoughts. A hard truth was unfolding before me: boy tells girl about son, boy loses girl, after girl after girl after girl—enduring the scratch in his life's record—until his son turns eighteen and marries a sweet girl before dear old dad can.

I stopped talking and braced for Jen's rejection. Instead she told me about her daughter who was a few months older than Bryce. Years later down the line, so the story goes, we tied the knot. Friends and family know us as the downsized Brady Bunch. I have to admit, nothing's been perfect but our form of imperfect has suited us just fine.

My phone's ringing now, returning me to my car. Caller ID says it's Jen.

"Ugh," I answer.

"I hear you," she says. "I picked up a rotisserie chicken. Want me to pack your lunch for tomorrow?"

Across the parking lot, I notice the young couple in the hatchback. Their windows are rolled up. The boy passes the Swisher to the girl.

"Sure," I say near whisper.

"I bought avocadoes for guacamole," Jen says. "And put in Tapatio."

Noticing that they're hot boxing, I forget to respond to Jen. "Good," I throw in.

"It's been a long week," she says. "But Sunday should be fun!"

Sunday? I'm quiet, clueless. Our anniversary?

She reads my mind.

"Sunday is Father's Day," she reminds me. "Hey, you okay?"

She knows me too well.

"I hate traffic," I say.

"Roll down your windows, stay awake. When you get here, I'll open a bottle and light the massage candle."

Before we get off the phone, I roll the cigar's last inch between my fingers, promising to be in an improved mood soon. My fingertips feel hot so I take in a final puff. Holding in the smoke, my mind slips back to that balcony ... Noelani ... the drinks ... salty air. My chest burns yet I hold it in a few seconds longer. I decide this is my last Swisher ever and exhale her memory out the window. Lightheaded, I see the kids in the other car kissing in a cloud of smoke. I no longer miss those days as I sip my coffee. I push on the engine and blend into the traffic.

Bill Pippin

A Puma for Lucille

After the worst week of her life, Lucille phoned her best friend. Harriet lived in New Mexico and despised sob-sisters. Lucille bit back tears as she described holding her beloved Tabby in her arms while the vet put her to sleep; breaking up with Jason the very next day; and getting laid off on Friday from her longtime job as art director for a small mail-order company.

Harriet whistled. "Rough week all right. What went wrong with poor Agnes?"

"Kidneys," Lucille said. "She was sixteen. She was in agony. The vet said if he had to rank ways for animals to die, he'd place kidney failure near the bottom."

"And Jason?"

"Jason's into heroin again. Destroying himself. I gave him an ultimatum—drugs or me. I shouldn't have. It was cruel. I was upset over Agnes."

"And what the hell did you do to get fired?"

"Made too much money . . . I guess. I wasn't the only one. The company's struggling. We all suspected a layoff was brewing, none of us thought it would be us."

Harriet was silent for a minute. Finally she asked, "How much will it cost to get out of your apartment lease?"

Lucille hesitated. What did that have to do with anything?

"What you need to do, comadre, is come live here with me. Chuck the nonessentials. Concentrate on your painting. Get back your mojo. You'll love it up on this mountain."

"You're not serious."

"We'll fix up a bedroom for your studio. Silver City has beaucoup galleries where you can display your stuff. In no time you'll be famous."

Lucille laughed. She had sold an odd painting or two, but her talent was limited. On the other hand . . . if she could devote full time to her art. She had enough savings to get out of her lease. But after that . . .

"Money's not an issue," Harriet said. "Sarge took good care

of me."

Lucille drew a deep breath. "Lord, you really are serious."

"It'll be like old times, except this time I'll be the one bailing *you* out of a jam."

"I'm not in a jam. Not yet. I'm just fucking miserable."

"Sounds like a jam to me, amiga. How soon can you get here?"

Lucille needed to sleep on it, though it took her most of the night to go to sleep. Should she give Jason one last shot? But how could she ever compete with his habit—his true love? Turning down Harriet's offer could end up being the biggest mistake of her life.

Over the next few days she paid off her lease, had a used furniture store pick up her furniture, tied up loose ends. She loaded a U-Haul trailer hooked to her Ford Escort with clothes, paintings, art supplies, a treasured bronze bust of Monet she'd found at a yard sale. The rush that hit her as she drove away from San Diego was surely comparable to the thrill Jason got shooting smack into his veins.

Her thoughts were primarily on Harriet. Funny how all through college her roommate had been the lost soul Lucille now deemed herself to be. Lucille had been the self-assured one, chiding her wayward chum with clever remarks like, "Love you, girlfriend, but why does everything you touch turn into Chernobyl?"

Truth be told—and this was her sore spot—Lucille thought she was smarter than she was talented. Harriet struggled to maintain passing grades. When she had to write a critical paper on Joyce's *Ulysses* she asked Lucille to help her explain what made the novel great. Lucille read as much as she could stand, including Molly Bloom's long unpunctuated soliloquy, before deciding the novel wasn't that great. *Ulysses* was merely the product of a great writer showing off. Harriet ran with that and earned a rare B+, for which she was gushingly grateful.

Oh, Harriet, Lucille used to moan, Harriet, Harriet, Harriet. A chaotic life glutted with booze, drugs, and sex. One fiasco involving all three had resulted in an abortion that Lucille helped pay for. Lucille worried that her roommate could wind up dying of AIDS, a drug overdose, a botched S&M

rite. But bless her reckless heart, the girl never once broke stride. Lucille couldn't help but admire her friend's stubborn fearlessness, while at the same time smugly believing in her own superiority.

Now Lucille was the one floundering. Her downward trajectory had seemingly started in her twenties, when she married a charming, handsome cop, expecting to have a slew of kids and live happily ever after. She got pregnant on her honeymoon, only to suffer a miscarriage. A year later a ruptured tubal pregnancy left her sterile. On her twenty-sixth birthday the man she loved, who she suspected was cheating on her, accused her of cheating on him, and went on a drunken, abusive tear that landed him in jail and her in the hospital. A messy divorce followed. Then came a series of affairs with high expectations that failed to pan out. Until here she was at age forty-four, without a job or anyone to come home to at night. Not even a cat.

Thank God for a friend like Harriet.

A little before dawn on the morning after Lucille's arrival, Harriet woke her. She had someone she'd like her to meet. Lucille was hung over, after dipping guacamole and downing tequila shots with beer chasers far into the night.

Harriet led her through the house to the screened-in back porch. The screen door looked out on a gravel and flagstone courtyard enclosed by a low adobe wall. A wide double-gate in the back of the wall opened onto a dirt road that wound up to the house through a forest of oak, juniper, and pine. Lucille wore a flimsy pink nightie and shivered in the chill mountain air. Harriet had on gray sweats and sandals. Without makeup her face was ghostly, her strawberry-blond hair in disarray. But her green eyes lit up as she nodded beyond the screen.

Lucille could barely make out a shadowy figure crouched statue-like in the opening to the courtyard. After a minute the figure rose and crept forward, stopped to stare, crept forward again, stopped again, then padded quickly up to the porch steps.

Lucille was captivated by the undersized feline face, erect rounded ears, and long whiskers. With its thick chest, sleek grayish-brown coat, plump padded paws, the cougar was as

exquisitely proportioned as any creature she'd ever seen.

"Good morning, Prince Puma," Harriet said, in a sleep-husky voice.

The cat ducked his head to snap up a raw chicken. The porch light was off, but enough light from the kitchen spilled over for the cat to view them through the screen. He showed no alarm at Harriet's voice, but gazed questioningly up at Lucille, comically so with that chicken dangling from his jaws.

"Meet my friend Lucille," Harriet said. "She adores cats."

The cougar turned and retreated a few steps before pausing for a backward glance. Then he broke into a graceful lope, ears twitching, long, black-tipped tail rippling. A tremor snaked along Lucille's shoulders as the big cat slipped through the opening and headed up the dirt road to veer off into the trees.

"Aren't they dangerous?" she asked.

Harriet shrugged. "If you run across one out hiking, stand your ground and make yourself as big as possible." She stretched her arms above her head. "Never run. Never, never, *never* run. Do nothing to look like prey. In the unlikely event that one attacks, shout and fight back. If all you have are your bare hands, use them. Aim for the eyes. At all cost stay on your feet."

"Is it wise to feed him?"

"Wise?"

"What would Sarge say?"

Harriet sighed. "I got lonely after the sergeant checked out. As much as I love this place the quiet gets to me at times. Prince Puma appeared one morning like he'd sought me out. If only I could believe in reincarnation. . . ." She chuckled at Lucille's blank stare. "Most likely he smelled the bacon I was cooking for breakfast. I'm hoping you'll want to paint his portrait."

"Not a bad idea," Lucille said.

When Harriet first began seeing Sarge, not long after she graduated, Lucille warned her friend not to let things get out of hand. When Harriet decided to marry Sarge, Lucille waved a red flag. Not only did she question the sincerity of Harriet's feelings, she questioned Sarge's emotional stability. He still suffered from the terrors of the Vietnam war. And he was

more than thirty years older than Lucille.

But Sarge was also rich. He'd retired from the Marines to start a business in San Diego, manufacturing a gizmo he'd invented that enhanced battlefield night vision. When he decided to sell the business he asked Harriet to accompany him to his home state of New Mexico. Harriet didn't hesitate.

Turned out Lucille was wrong about Sarge: Harriet really did love him. And he worshiped her. They had nearly eighteen blissful years together. Until the day Sarge strolled into the woods right after supper, smoked half a Camel, knelt down beneath an oak tree, stuck his .45 into his mouth, and squeezed the trigger. A man of few words, Sarge left no note.

Lucille drove from San Diego to attend the funeral. She offered to stay as long as Harriet needed her. Harriet was grateful. Her means of dealing with grief was to start smoking again and pound the hell out of a beat-up piano she'd found at an auction sale. She played boogie woogie like she was fighting off an assailant, eyes shut to dam her tears, lips parted, head thrown back, body rocking to the rhythm.

At the service Lucille met Garret Abraham. Harriet's closest neighbor lived in a small trailer a mile or so away on an acre of bear grass, yucca, and cholla. Sarge had built his Santa Fe-style adobe house on eighty wooded acres that adjoined a vast national wilderness area stretching from southwestern New Mexico into Arizona. Garret's trailer was wedged into one corner of the national forest boundary and Harriet's property. A disabled vet, Garret used the opportunity the funeral afforded to distribute handwritten cards featuring a caricature of a beggar with a tin cup, wryly billing himself as a jack of all trades, master of none.

Besides selling Sarge firewood he'd cut, Garret had built the adobe wall encircling the courtyard, laid the flagstone, spread the gravel, and tackled myriad other odd jobs. He was gaunt and sinewy, sported a gnarly gray beard, cryptic tattoos, and tied his long greasy hair in a pony tail. He looked to be a few years younger than Harriet and Lucille. Lucille found his smell—akin to a horse barn baking in summer heat—strangely arousing. At the cemetery, when Garret stood beside her and surreptitiously pinched her ass, she moved just as surreptitiously away. She never mentioned the incident to Harriet.

Now, nearly two years after Sarge's death, Lucille was sure Harriet had something going with Garret. Two or three times a week her friend drove off in her Jeep Renegade without saying where she was headed. When she returned hours later—limp, sweaty, glassy-eyed—she always took a leisurely shower.

Lucille had the run of the property. To earn her keep, she took on as many housekeeping chores as Harriet would allow. On her morning hikes she often passed mule deer, alert but unafraid, grazing in meadows flowing with purple and yellow wildflowers. All around, rugged mountain peaks speared the sky, surrounded by mysterious spires and arches, cliffs and crannies, blue shadows and light. She couldn't wait to capture it on canvas.

One morning Lucille peeked into Harriet's bedroom to ask if she'd like to hike up to the point—she wanted to snap a picture of the canyon in preparation for a painting. Harriet declined as usual, then warned her to be on the alert for Garret.

"On the alert?"

Harriet sat up on the side of her bed and stretched. "Garret is deeply spiritual. Don't be surprised to see him sitting up in those rocks looking out over the canyon like some naked Buddha, smoking weed and recharging his karma. He often eats breakfast up there." She fished around for her house-shoes. "He thinks you're a prude. Might try to shock you—guy's hung like a bull elk."

"And you would know that how?"

Harriet gave her a sly wink.

Lucille avoided the overlook and stuck to the less exotic trails.

She returned from her hike to find Harriet dancing around the living room, squealing like a teenager at a rock concert. Someone from her Oregon high school had called to invite her to her class's twenty-fifth reunion.

"It's next week. And guess who tracked me down for the invite."

Lucille shook her head.

"Aaron Hildebrand! Told you about Aaron—remember?"

"One of many I seem to recall."

"He was my first. Aaron and I were such dip-shits. Oh my God, the carnal delights we discovered in the back of his dad's station wagon. Some we actually invented."

"Better than Garret?"

Harriet only smiled. "Aaron joined the Navy right after graduation. I went off to college. He was married for a time. Not any more."

"Which means you'll be at the reunion."

"Can you handle things here for a week or so?"

"What about Garret?"

Harriet blinked. "Garret? I don't expect you to take care of Garret . . . unless you want to."

Lucille laughed.

There were chickens in the freezer for Prince Puma, Harriet said. If Lucille ran out, she should drive down to Silver City and restock. Harriet showed her the loaded .38 she kept in her bedroom. Lucille refused to touch it.

Early in the morning Lucille drove Harriet to the El Paso Airport—a three-hour trip one way. When she returned that afternoon the house was eerily silent. Following a light supper, she sat in a rocker on the back porch, sipping wine and enjoying the sunset. She hoped the cougar might make an appearance—by now they'd grown familiar with each other. By nine o'clock, when that hadn't happened, she was about to turn in, when an ancient Dodge pickup drove up to the gate. Garret got out and moseyed over to the porch, hands in his jeans' pockets, whistling softly.

"How's it going, Lucy?" he called out.

"Fine, Garret," she said. "Just fine. What can I do for you?"

"Stopped by to see if you needed anything."

He stood at the screen door peering in at her, wearing a crooked grin and stroking his beard. She didn't get up. She didn't feel threatened. Garret wasn't that sort.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Well . . . if you ever do need something, you know where to find me."

"That I do."

"Night, Lucy. Sleep tight."

"You too, Garret."

After his taillights disappeared up the road, she locked the

door, set a chicken on top of the freezer to thaw, and went to bed.

She was up before sunrise. She'd just stepped out the screen door to place the chicken on the flagstone when the cougar slipped through the open gate behind her. Before she was aware of his presence he'd advanced alarmingly close.

Lucille backed away, careful not to make a sudden move. When the cougar stopped to study her she thought to raise both arms. The big cat had a musty cave-like scent. With enough nerve Lucille could actually reach out and stroke his fur. For what seemed an interminable time they observed each other. At last the cougar gave a soft *mowwww*, grabbed the chicken and loped away.

She should've been afraid. It pleased her that she wasn't. Maybe she was getting to be more like Harriet, which pleased her even more.

After her hike, Lucille showered and ate breakfast as usual. She unplugged the phone before going to her studio. Harriet had allotted her a spacious corner room with large rectangular windows facing south and west. She slid a CD into the player and removed a half-finished landscape painting from the easel. She replaced it with the largest canvas—forty by sixty inches—in her wooden rack.

For a time she stood motionless before the window, entranced by the layered brown mountains stretching to the horizon. Ottmar Liebert's flamenco guitar set the mood. At last she slipped into her flowered smock and turned to the high chest where glass-fronted drawers housed her painting paraphernalia. On a wooden stool she arranged half a dozen brushes. She dabbed her palette with titanium white, alizarin crimson, cadmium lemon, Prussian blue, burnt umber. Payne's gray for a subtle base, a touch of linseed oil. In her mind she visualized the composition before making a quick sketch of the cougar. Awash in ecstacy, she then began to paint.

With each passing day the communion between Lucille and the cougar grew stronger. Once she went so far as to allow the creature to tug a chicken from her grasp, triggering a convulsive quiver in her loins.

One evening, just before dark, a Department of Game and Fish pickup drove up to the house. A wiry, narrow-hipped man stepped down from the cab. Lucille set her wine glass aside and went out to see what he wanted.

He told her his name was Steve Jurado and asked for Harriet. Lucille explained why Harriet wasn't there. Jurado wore a white straw cowboy hat, blue Western-cut shirt, black Wranglers, cowboy boots. A holstered gun hung from his wide black leather belt. He asked if she'd seen a mountain lion roaming about.

"Mountain lion?" Maybe it was best not to seem entirely unaware. "You know . . . one evening I did see something. It was getting dark. Thought it might be a coyote or one of those javelinas."

"This one's a renegade," Jurado said. "Grabbed some campers' fox terrier right under their noses. Big fella, not at all shy."

"Hope the dog is okay."

Jurado shook his head with a grimace.

"How sad. Well . . . we don't have any pets."

"You still need to be careful. This may be a case of familiarity breeding contempt. Human familiarity. Cougar contempt. If you know somebody's feeding this lion, please report it."

"Yes . . . of course."

He turned to leave, then swung back to extend his hand. His calloused palm felt warm and dry, strong but gentle. Lucille surprised herself by imagining how that hand might feel caressing her breasts.

"If you don't mind me asking," he said, "you expect to be here awhile?"

She smiled. "Too soon to tell."

"Well . . . hope we'll be seeing more of each other."

His mannered swagger as he returned to his truck, macho as it might be, appealed to her. Jurado was also attracted to her it seemed. He was nice. He didn't wear a ring, didn't look married. Something to think about.

The following morning, with Steve Jurado in mind, Lucille closed the gate and didn't leave a chicken out. The cougar easily jumped the wall. Lucille hung back in the kitchen with mixed emotions as the cat sniffed around the steps and

scratched tentatively on the screen door. After a time he slunk away like a pouting child.

Two days later Jurado returned. Lucille invited him inside, but he remained standing on the back porch with his boots apart, hands on hips, lips compressed. He didn't offer his hand this time.

"Anything wrong?" Lucille asked.

"You acquainted with Garret Abraham?"

"Lives in the trailer, I believe."

"Not any more . . . he's dead."

Lucille stiffened. "*Dead?*"

"That mountain lion I told you about?"

"Yes?"

"Killed Garret . . . early this morning."

"Oh my God!"

"I can spare you the details."

"No . . . please. I'm not squeamish." Although her heart was pounding like a roofer's hammer.

"State Police Crime Lab's performing an autopsy. But to me it looks like Mr. Abraham tried to run from the lion."

"And . . . it chased him?"

"Chased him, caught him, brought him down like a deer." Jurado made claws of his hands. He raked his belly, bared his teeth, took a fierce bite of air. He did this with paradoxical reverence, like he was praising some exalted warrior. "Propane delivery man found human remains not far from the trailer. Garret . . . running for home most likely. Running from the overlook. Liked to sit bareassed up there I hear."

"Yes . . . I heard that too."

"Parts of him were . . . consumed. Other parts the lion likely buried. Like cats do. We're trying to locate those parts for his family. . . . Own a firearm?"

Lucille shook her head. "I carry pepper spray on my hikes."

"Advise against hiking for now. Try not to be out early morning or after dark."

"Whatever you say." She hesitated. "But why? A little dog . . . but why would a mountain lion attack a grown man? Because he ran—I get that—but why would Garret run?"

"Wild animals can be unpredictable. Maybe the lion did something to scare Garret." Jurado looked down at his boots

before raising his eyes to meet hers. His bushy black mustache belonged in some smoky border cantina. “My bet is someone fed him. Maybe Garret, though he should’ve known better. Piece of sausage was found at the site. Toast. Pie pan. That lion wasn’t just hungry . . . I picture that lion seething with contempt.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“Once a cat tastes human flesh . . . this one’ll likely return to dig up what he buried. What we’ll do is set a snare. I’ll keep you advised.”

“Thanks . . . thank you,” Lucille said. She searched Jurado’s face for some sign of warmth. Today he was all business.

He drove away leaving her sick to her stomach. Harriet had fed the cougar, but Lucille had stopped feeding him. Out scrounging for food, the cat may have been enticed to the overlook by the smell of Garret’s breakfast. Jurado was probably right—something the cougar did panicked Garret. Now Garret was dead. God in heaven—could she be responsible?

The sun was setting. A cooling breeze wafted down from the heights, bringing with it the scent of pine. She shielded her eyes and scanned the area beyond the adobe wall. Might the cougar be crouched in the trees watching her suspiciously? She caught herself actually sniffing the air for *his* scent.

She couldn’t concentrate on her painting. At supper time she forced down a few bites of brie, a bit of French bread, a sip or two of Cabernet. During the night she got up more than once and walked barefoot to the porch to check out the moonlit courtyard. As bad as she felt for Garret she felt just as bad for the cougar, its instincts muddled by human meddling.

In the morning she expected the cat to appear in the courtyard. But it was Jurado who showed up to tell her the lion had indeed returned to the overlook. He was wily enough to avoid the snare, Jurado added with grudging admiration, but a load of buckshot had found its mark. “He’s even bigger than I figured. One-fifty at least. Maybe more. Left a bloody trail. Hounds’ll track him.”

Jurado’s guarded tone and sad eyes told Lucille he had reason to share these details. “You think I’m the one feeding him, don’t you?”

He pursed his lips. “Are you?”

The lie fluttered on her tongue before she reeled it back. Jurado smiled thinly at her silence and let the screen door slam shut.

That night in bed, squirming from one side to the other, she kept seeing the wounded cougar out there in the wild, struggling to understand what was happening in his world. Shortly before dawn the distant cacophony of baying hounds awoke her. She scrambled out of bed. In a fuzzy haze she threw on a robe and hurried to the porch. The courtyard was empty.

It was mid-morning when Harriet called to let her know what a great time she was having. She wanted to stay in Oregon awhile longer—if that was okay.

“No problemo,” Lucille said.

“Aaron owns a fishing lodge near Coos Bay. He brought pictures but wants me to see his place in person, wants to take me fishing. He’s got this godalmighty boat. You should see the size of some of the fish he’s caught.”

“Sounds like things are moving right along.”

“How’re you and Prince Puma making out?”

Lucille was expecting this. “Haven’t seen him lately.”

“Oh?” Harriet said. “Guess I shouldn’t have worried.”

“Worried?”

“I was afraid he might start liking you better than me.”

“Not a chance.”

“Seen Garret?”

“Nope.”

The lie came out that fast. She couldn’t take it back. And why should she? What purpose would it serve to ruin Harriet’s good time?

The cougar returned the following morning. Lucille was in her robe and house-shoes, curled up in the porch rocker with a cup of coffee. The first trace of vermillion revealed the cat as a gray phantom in the center of the road. His head seemed tilted at an unnatural angle. He paused to look all around before coming on, treading gingerly, as if each step brought pain.

When headlights flickered at the crest of the road, about fifty yards beyond the cougar, Lucille set her cup down. The

lights switched off. The vehicle backed out of sight. Lucille jumped up. Anticipating what was coming made her weak in the knees.

But what could she do about it?

She kept watching the road, expecting Jurado to appear on foot with his shotgun. The cougar stopped and looked to his right. Lucille looked the same way. For a minute she could make out nothing within the forest's impenetrable gloom. Then Jurado emerged from behind a pine tree.

Lucille flung open the screen door and ran straight for the cougar. Waving her arms, she shouted, "Shoo! Shoo! *Shoooo!"*

As she reached the gate, the cat's rear dropped. He crouched. Tendons tightened in his blood-spattered legs. Jurado's shotgun jerked up. He yelled something. Lucille kept running. Even when Jurado yelled again, even when one of her house-shoes flew off, even when the shocking roar of the shotgun knocked her off stride, she kept running.

She only stopped running when the lion shuddered and collapsed.

She skidded to her knees a few feet from the motionless form. Jurado cocked another shell into the chamber and advanced to stand over the animal. The tip of the barrel touched the cougar's bloody ear. Finally, like a man succumbing to exhaustion, Jurado sank to his own knees. Laying the shotgun aside, he placed a hand on the cat's head.

For a time they remained that way, not looking at each other, the world around them silent and still. Until a bird twittered in a nearby tree, an obscenely cheerful sound that made Lucille want to scream. She tried to rise, but lacked the strength. She heard a soft whimper, a plaintive whine like an unwanted puppy trapped in a plastic bag might make. On hands and knees she made her way over to the cougar, hoping he might still be alive and with a nudge get up and go loping back into the wild.

Then she was jolted back to her senses.

She reached out and grasped the cougar's limp paw. The fur was still warm, the spongy pad coarse, the claws smooth and hard and lethal. Jurado's eyes slanted at her from a contorted face. She tried to say she was sorry, strained to summon the words. They seemed inadequate and hung in her throat.

Jurado whimpered again, caressing the cat's head. With cautious tenderness, Lucille released the cougar's paw and placed her hand over Jurado's.

Slater Welte

Yip

Orange juice in the morning, tomato juice by noon, tonic through the afternoon, straight from the freezer at night, it all adds up to a bottle of vodka a day, that and the beer.

I sit in the 19th Hole and watch Tommy move behind the bar, a slow and deliberate man, careful to make his drinks just right, measuring out the doses by some private mysterious law, a jigger here, a double there, all done as if he is a doctor prepping his potion at an operating table. Tommy nods at my empty glass and I nod back for another. For me he pours the vodka up near the top and levels it off with a splash of tonic. He knows my day ahead.

Tommy nods over my shoulder. He is a man of few words and those words are usually 'yep' or 'nope'. Here he says 'yep' and I turn for a look.

Mrs. Harmon is at a corner table with her stepson and they are waiting for Mr. Harmon. She wears her turquoise golf outfit, a light blouse and long shorts, even her visor and shoes match, and she has her dark hair up in a severe ponytail. Today Mrs. Harmon reminds me of a ripe fruit, maybe an avocado. She sips at her white wine and talks to her stepson.

Tommy whispers to me, "Unplayable lie."

I leave my drink on the bar and wander over to say hello. Mrs. Harmon gives me her careful smile and polite stepson Ben stands to shake my hand. He thanks me for joining them for a round on my day off. Mrs. Harmon smells of sand and coconut, her Sunday scent.

"Lovely day," she says.

Outside it is a Carolina sky, that bright, delicate blue. Wispy clouds dot the horizon. I'd hoped for rain, a real deluge, a tornado or two, weather big enough we would have to close the course, rather than spending an afternoon with the Harmon family. They are the town's royalty and they live on a high hill in a giant white house, porticos and Greek columns, and you can see it from anywhere you go. We call it the Acropolis.

I've been there once, the Acropolis, for a staff party, all of us

up there on a Tuesday afternoon, standing by the big outdoor pool and drinking mimosas and margaritas, listening to Mr. Harmon give a long speech about history and honor. He raised his glass and toasted the South and its culture. There was a rented Port-O-Let by the diving board. We weren't allowed inside the house, even after it began raining a little, huddling like refugees under a party tent as the drops caused ripples across the blue pool water. It was us and the bartender and the margarita machine all scrunched together. Mr. and Mrs. Harmon had disappeared inside.

I do like Ben, a sturdy fourteen year old, and his stepmother and I have a thing, and his father is the town tyrant, owning the bank, the pharmacy, whatever else, but Sundays are my own time and I usually spend the day on the couch in front of the television, just biding my hours with my vodka and my football, maybe a woman by my side, maybe not. Though I have no choice, when Mr. Harmon calls you answer.

Mrs. Harmon asks if I like her new outfit. "Everything matches," she lowers her voice, "everything." Her stepson hears her and rolls his eyes.

Ben is by far my best student. He has a wicked three wood where the ball explodes off the club and streams into the sky and levels at its apex before falling to the fairway two hundred yards ahead. It is magical. It makes you want to write poetry. My job is to get the rest of his game to come about, especially the short clubs around the green, and he's getting close, except the putter, which continues to give him all kinds of trouble, but that happens to all of us.

The 19th Hole is packed on this Indian summer Sunday, everyone happy and safe, the club members at home with their wealth and privilege, spending their afternoon among their own kind, reveling in the best life can offer, sheltered from anything even suggesting the big bad world outside the guarded iron gates. Many of them are my students and when I survey the room I see hooks, shanks and slices. Some give me a slight nod, others ignore me. I am a hired employee of the club, above most of the staff but still nothing more than a servant.

Mrs. Harmon stares at me. Her green eyes have that searching look, as if she expects me to read her mind. Those,

I know, are thoughts better left alone. Under her polished surface roams an accident waiting to happen. Drama should be her middle name. Her painted nails tap the table. She waits for me to return her stare. It is a game she plays and I know it well.

Ben checks his watch, nervous his father might be late, our start time coming soon, and he is not a boy who handles stress well. He leaves his putts short all the time, hesitant with the blade, timid as he bends over the ball. He needs a girl, something sweet, a girl more physical than emotional, a girl who knows what to do and how to do it. That would set him straight.

Then again, we all need that, no matter who we are.

Back at the bar I take a long swallow at my drink and I feel Tommy keeping an eye on me. It is a troubled eye, one laced with care and concern. "Take the drop," he says, "mind the hazard." Sometimes Tommy and I speak in golf runes. I reply that I have relief from an immovable obstruction. This actually makes Tommy smile and that makes my day. He is not one who smiles much.

I have him make me just one more and carry it to the table. Mrs. Harmon keeps her stare going. Ben tells me he hit the practice green for a while and he thinks he has his lag down right. Behind them I see Mr. Harmon enter the room and everyone seems to take a breath. The club has a little junta, a secret group inside the board of directors, and these men control everything as if they are generals in some third world country, commanding all that goes on inside this private enclave, and they are led by Mr. Harmon, him and his silver spoon pomp and prosperity. It is easy to imagine him wearing a uniform with hundreds of medals dripping from his chest as he strides across the barroom floor, his eyes taking in the crowd, as if sizing up the members and finding them lacking, a tyrant among his toadies .

"Hank," he says to me. To his son and wife: "Ben, Claudia."

Mr. Harmon, in his pressed slacks and ironed golf shirt, club crest on the breast, asks me if I am good. I say sure. He always seems to vibrate with barely hidden rage, as if someone is about to steal something valuable. He taps his toe, standing over the table, while Mrs. Harmon arranges stuff

in her turquoise purse. He tells me women are mysterious things.

He is the type of man who calls women things.

As we leave Tommy whispers, "Stay out of the rough."

8:30 Tuesday and Thursday mornings I sit in my living room and drink my vodka and orange juice and wait for the sound of tires on the gravel drive and then heels coming up the walk. Mrs. Harmon doesn't knock. She locks the door behind her. She turns her back and begins removing her clothes, carefully placing them on the chair, smoothing the silk and linen to keep wrinkles out. My duty in her undressing happens at the end. She stands very still and lowers her head and lifts her hair, revealing the nape of her neck, and I unhook the clasp of the chain that holds the small gold and diamond cross that nestles in her cleavage. There is no How are you. There is no Good morning. She lies on my bed and stares up at the ceiling while I get my clothes off. Our accoutrements are ready and waiting on the bedside table. She likes household objects, a hairbrush, a spatula, sometimes a clothespin or two. Romance won't ever enter the equation. She pulls me to her.

Now I can call her Claudia. She wants her name whispered, spoken with lust, passion, adoration, liking me to shout Claudia just as she begins her climax, hearing her name echo around my threadbare bedroom. Claudia. Claudia. Claudia.

After we are done she likes a cup of coffee while she dresses. Her coffee must be made just right, dark and heavy with a hint of sugar.

"Umm," she says, "perfect."

I hold her coffee while she touches up her makeup in my bathroom mirror, taking her time to get her face perfect. She has her purse in my sink and she reaches down to find the blush, the rouge, the eye shadow, watching herself in the mirror as if she is painting a masterpiece.

"Hank," she says, "do you like me, like me as a person?"

"Sure," I say, adding a soft flat Claudia.

And now we talk, mostly about her, her and Mr. Harmon, her favorite subject, her common complaint, his cruelty, his demands, his mistresses, those women who will do what she

won't do, and it is here she becomes almost human for a while, showing a side of her kept under heavy wraps. These are the moments I wait for during our mornings together. The sex is okay, pleasant given her parameters, but when I sit and drink my vodka and tomato juice and listen to her go on about her life holed up in our town's Acropolis I come close to liking her a whole lot. She knows what she is, what she has done, though that doesn't mean that she has to take it laying down. She doesn't do too well being on the bottom.

She is the second wife, his quality pick. Mr. Harmon found her in Atlanta, where she was doing just fine, thank you very much, working in sales at a brokerage firm, engaged to a local celebrity, and he stole her away, courting her like a southern gentleman, sending flowers and buying diamonds, his chase resembling a business deal, a merger and acquisition plan, and these days she feels like a bought commodity, a piece of property, a piece of art, an object, an investment, she laughs, a piece of ass.

Using a golf term, she is an albatross, at least physically, and a bogey to snowman on the emotional side.

Mr. Harmon partners with me, which isn't good. I'd expected he'd pair with his wife and I'd have Ben in the cart by me, a simple way to pass the day, my biggest worry being how to make small talk at the tees and greens, keeping the time light and friendly, trying to get through the round as smoothly as possible, but Mr. Harmon occupying the driver's seat, because he has to drive, because he's Mr. Harmon, that pretty much ruins everything.

At the first tee Mr. Harmon practices his level, compact swing, arcing the club, making a swishing sound like a machete cutting through the clean air. He takes first honors and his drive lands halfway down in the middle of the fairway. He plays corporate golf, safe and careful, steady drive, long iron near the green, easy chip within one or two putts to the hole, ending in a par or bogey, perfect for business out on the course, his game secondary to the purpose at hand, bled dry of anything creative and dangerous, staying out of nasty problems and embarrassing situations. He is, above all, a businessman.

Ben hits next and his shot finishes a bit further. I hold my drive back so I am behind Mr. Harmon and his son. It is best that I play a little bit less; no reason to show off and better them. I don't get paid for that.

Mrs. Harmon hits from the ladies tee and her shot straddles the rough until it finds the near side bunker. She lets out a funny Dammit!, full of off-key frustration.

At the bunker, addressing her ball, she does a little wiggle with her rear end and it's apparent what she means. Mr. Harmon watches me watching her. He asks, "You like that?"

Well, of course I do. And who wouldn't? Golf, by its nature, is a sexual game. You have your chips, your approach shots, your lags, your high fades, your low draws, and you are always trying to get it in the hole. But he is Mr. Harmon and she is Mrs. Harmon so I do a half-shrug and leave it at that.

I tell Mrs. Harmon to keep her head down and spread her legs a bit more.

Mr. Harmon gives me a short glance, as if I have been too clever. He says the course looks in good shape for late in the season. He says he knows my contract is up for evaluation at the end of the year. He says I should expect some competition, not much, but some.

Golf is in a bad way all across the country, clubs closing down left and right, the game suffering an extended twilight, hardly catching an ember in the ashes left over after the great economic debacle. Golf, they say, takes too long, that it's too expensive and too hard to play. Well, those are its benefits, its charms, why you learn the game. We get sent faxed resumes from just about every area code, golf pros searching for employment, and this is a plum position, maybe not Augusta or Riviera, but it's steady and it's comfortable and it pays well.

At the third green Sarah, wearing her short-shorts and tube top, shows up in the beer cart. Mr. Harmon looks at her like she's naked. Mrs. Harmon doesn't acknowledge her existence. Ben stares at his feet. Sarah tells me she's had a good tip day, a nice surprise this late in the season. I order two tall Buds. Mr. Harmon gets a Heineken. Mrs. Harmon has white wine. Ben can't get his eyes above Sarah's tube top.

Mrs. Harmon, as she brushes by me, whispers that we need to talk. Her husband points his canned beer at Sarah and says

it is always a pleasure. Ben takes me to the side and asks if he should use his driver or three wood off the fourth tee. I drink my Bud.

In the fifth fairway Mr. Harmon asks me if Sarah has fake tits. He thinks they look real. He likes them like that, big and firm and real. He says his wife's are big and firm and fake, though the job is so well done that it takes a practiced hand to know the difference.

I have no idea how to respond to any of that and it's obvious he doesn't expect me to. He wants me to ruminate on the idea. I worry why.

I'm immune of tit lust, after being on the tour, all of a season, where when you arrive at a new town you ask where 'the bar' is before you ask about the course, 'the bar' meaning where women, mostly blond and lower middle-aged, go to meet golfers. Every town and city is the same. Golfers do something for certain kinds of women.

I learned to like the situation more than the woman and the woman more than her body parts. Call me ass backwards.

Mr. Harmon, as he watches Ben ready an approach shot, asks me about his son, if he has enough talent to think about sending him down to a Florida golf camp next summer, and I suggest we wait until spring to see where he is. The Florida camps can be rough if you don't have the right stuff. What he is really asking, without saying it, is if Ben has what it takes to think about a pro career, and that is not an answer I want to give. Of course the boy doesn't have a chance. His three wood might be miraculous but true professional golfers, the ones you see on Sunday TV, those are as rare as shorting a par four dogleg left and the ball hitting the green and rolling across for a hole in one. They are born, anointed, crowned, not culled or taught. They are freaks, savants, mutants, and I should know. I'm not one of them. You always know best what you can't be.

In the cart Mr. Harmon says they went to church this morning. He says Reverend Jones gave a great sermon, describing what we need to lead a big life. We must have faith, obedience, discipline, honor our work and family. We must be firm and dedicated, valiant and determined. I expect to hear the word vindictive. That is my word for religion.

They, the Harmons, are Baptists, the Southern kind, and they attend services every Sunday, like pretty much everyone else at the club. There are a few Methodists here and there, some Lutherans, keeping a low profile, an uncomfortable minority hiding among the chosen elite.

Mr. Harmon says, "You keep what you take in life."

He gives me a look like I should know what he is talking about while we are waiting for the group up ahead to play out of trouble. He puts his hand on my shoulder and gives it a hard squeeze. His thumb and fingers press in as if he is trying to send me a silent message.

"God watches," he says. Adding: "So do I."

He grips my shoulder even harder. He must know it hurts, but he doesn't care. I stand firm and try not to wince.

Mr. Harmon slices one into the trees and I know there is no way he will ever find it and I watch him walk around like he is searching and then I see him drop a ball out of his pants pocket onto the short rough and he acts surprised as if it is a miracle from heaven.

"Look at that," he says. "Who would've thought?"

Mrs. Harmon sprays the ball everywhere. There's not a trap or hazard she doesn't find and by the sixth hole she's given up trying to hit out of trouble and she just finds a new ball out of her bag and hits it from where her last shot disappeared.

Ben plays steady, but he's trying too hard, going for greens when he should lay up, swinging for flags when he should settle for the middle of the green. He never lags, every putt heading for the cup and sliding too far by. He's lucky to be only four over par.

I miss shots here and there, doing my best to screw up enough to keep even with them. Mrs. Harmon has stopped keeping score and when I look at Mr. Harmon's card all I see are omissions and small white lies.

At the turn Mr. Harmon takes a call, standing over by the practice green like a statue, probably thinking he's a David or Zeus, while he whispers in his phone like he's giving what they call pertinent information. Ben talks to me a bit about his front nine, looking for instruction, concerned with his five iron on the fourth and his mugged wedge out of the

greenside bunker on the seventh. He's good at taking criticism, taking it in, letting it slide off, and he listens patiently while I tear apart his course management, how he tried to do too much with too little.

"It's my dad," he says. "I get nervous."

I think, Don't we all, but say, "Pretend he's not here."

Ben says he wishes he could.

Home must be rough, from what Mrs. Harmon tells me, the house run like a bank, a business, the country club, Mr. Harmon ruling the roost with a bark and a glare. She says there are times where she and the boy hide in their bedrooms afraid to make a sound, wary of incurring the wrath of one of his dark moods.

She sends Ben off for another white wine and she nods to Mr. Harmon and lowers her voice. "He's talking to her. I can tell."

Her is the new mistress, a woman in Charlotte, where he supposedly goes on business twice a week, a constant subject during our after sex conversations the last couple of times. She's worried about this one. It's been going on for a while.

"He's a beast," she says.

I try diverting the conversation, telling her she needs to straighten her shoulders and pause before she addresses the ball and relax as she begins her back swing, that way, if she's lucky, she will be able stay somewhere near the fairway.

"He knows," she says, and the way she says it doesn't leave any doubt. "I told him last night."

"Why did you do that?"

"He wanted me to do something, you know, something, and I wouldn't do it and he got mad. And I got mad. I said he should get his Charlotte thing if he wanted to do that. He made me do it."

"He made you tell him?"

"No." She shudders. "He made me do what he wanted. Somewhere in there I told him. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? Christ. You're sorry?"

"He's not happy."

"What's he going to do?"

"I don't know. It won't be good. I am so sorry."

I have two water bottles in my bag, one for water and the other filled with vodka and tonic, and I had planned to leave the second one alone during the round, trying to remain half-sober while I am with the Harmons, but after her little revelation I am sipping at the thing like it is my last drink before being led to the guillotine.

We're on the par five 12th, in the middle of the fairway, and Ben and Mrs. Harmon have laid up on their second shots, and Mr. Harmon motions me over with his hybrid, asking me if I think he can find the green. I say he better hit it solid. I tell him to at least wait for the forward group to finish putting into the hole.

He makes a couple of practice swings and then balances the head towards me, pointing it like a pale harpoon.

"Let's say you were screwing my wife." He holds my gaze. "Let's say it was hypothetical. How would you go about it? Would you be on top or go on bottom or would you go at it from behind?"

I say I know he knows.

"I don't know shit. Tell me what I know."

I keep my mouth shut. The group ahead has finished putting and left the green, their carts already by the next tee box. Ben and Mrs. Harmon sit in their cart, watching us, waiting for us to hit. Mrs. Harmon has her visor off and she is adjusting her ponytail, setting it right.

"Come on, dad," Ben calls.

"I suggest from behind, for obvious reasons."

He hits a nice shot, his ball landing hole high ten feet from the flag, fair distance for an eagle.

As he drives he grabs the vodka and tonic water bottle from me and sniffs it and says he thought so. "Drinking is for cowards. Are you a coward?" I say no. "Well, I think you are. Tuesdays and Thursdays. You think people don't see her Mercedes in your driveway?"

So he always knew.

The breeze through the valley on this beautiful afternoon smells of leaves slowly going orange and yellow but it also carries a scent of sewer and decay. A gentle autumn can't disguise that winter is coming.

"I should maybe thank you. I was thinking about it but you

got me started, getting my finances in order. There's ways around the pre-nup that will break her heart. She'll never know what hit her. I'm not going to thank you."

I sit in the 19th hole and watch Tommy clean up behind the bar. He is an efficient man, stacking glasses, toweling the sink and granite, polishing the gold and silver face plate, the whole time eyeing me as if I am about to dissolve and disappear. Behind me Carl the waiter is busy running a carpet sweep under the tables.

I can hear the night staff and their vacuum cleaners and floor shine machines echo in the empty clubhouse. My bag and everything out of my locker are already in my car. They will send my last check in the mail.

Tommy sighs. It is one of those dark sighs that you normally hear at funerals. "Abandoned ball," he says, "two stroke penalty."

He makes me one last drink, telling me it has been an honor.

Mac McCaskill

Sign

The light in the distance held him on the railroad tracks. Silver rays, elastic and blurred in the darkness, tickled his skin. The small orb of light pulsed brighter in some places, changing its shape and dancing through the air.

There was warmth in that light, Kris thought. Not like the sear of New Mexico's high desert sun, it was the soothing glow that radiates from a blanket steeped in the body heat of a good night's sleep. It made you forget; made you feel safe.

He'd seen a similar light before—on the road not far from the tracks. Seen it break through the persistent orange strokes of the summer sun. And it had held his gaze then, too. He hadn't moved quickly enough that day—the day of the accident.

That day, he'd been playing with the boy on the road near the mile marker sign—number 49. The boy was on his bicycle and Kris chased from behind. The light had twinkled at the road's bend. A flash bouncing off the sign's reflective border and numbers, but it was enough to get his attention. He had to listen to what he saw, what he felt and smelled, more closely than other people. For more than thirty years now, he'd studied the silent world around him, sifting through what his other senses offered. So, he'd stopped and turned toward the light.

It reached out for him in white spikes. Blue-orange bright spots bled through, and then brown and gray and black, until he could see a car breaking through the glare. The light grasped for him from the windshield and silvery chrome of a bumper and grill. The colors and shapes weaved back and forth, as the car gently swerved between lanes. The rocking motion was soothing. But the angles grew extreme and jerky as the car closed the distance.

Kris turned from the approaching car and saw the boy pedaling away, not looking back.

He didn't know the boy's name. It couldn't be communicated between them. But Kris thought of him as "Little Bear,"

because of how he'd torn through the bushes and brush to get to his mother for safety.

The day they'd met had been bright also. Everything was renewed in spring's groggy warmth. Sprigs of wheatgrass clawed their way from the ground. Green nubs punched through the cottonwood limbs. Everything smelled leafy and green. Kris had been walking up the hill along the Rio Grande, coming from the where the farmer kept his bees.

The bees were a favorite place for him. The farmer kept a regular schedule, checking the hives in the early morning hours when they were less active. The boxes were handmade and rough, white with cheap paint that never lasted more than a couple seasons. They rested among the wild chamisa and sagebrush, across the dirt road from the *chile* pepper fields. Spaced a few feet apart, they looked like forgotten headstones in an old graveyard.

After the farmer left, Kris had visited. He didn't have the farmer's bulky coveralls or hat and net to protect from their stings. In fact, he liked to take off his coat and shirt to walk among the hives, his arms stretched out, eager to feel the murmur of the bee's wings and their tiny legs dancing on his skin. The teeming insects covered him, hugging him in a mass. There was the occasional sting, but Kris forgave them, seeing it as an excited mistake. And he knew they didn't survive the attack, as he often found a dead bee still attached to his skin by its small barb.

He opened a box and slid out a flat. He drew a finger along the musky honey and sucked it into his mouth. Grainy on his tongue, the honey was sweet but with a hint of the nearby *chiles*. He never took more than a finger. The honey belonged to the bees. They slaved through the hot days to produce the delicacy and the theft left him a little sad.

After, he walked to the river, weaving between the bank and the budding cottonwoods. There was a house ahead, set back from the road and nestled into the *bosque*. He usually skirted the property, staying as close to the river as possible. But gazing up at how the sun filtered through the trees without their fully developed leaves, he strayed.

Little Bear burst from a stretch of sagebrush, chasing a dog. The dog, a young German shepherd, ran to Kris and

nudged his knee with a wet nose. The boy froze twenty yards off, as still as the two cottonwood trunks on either side of him. Then, he turned and charged off in the direction of the house. The boy's black, coarse hair furled out behind him, the sun bouncing off it in a glimmering symphony. Without thinking, Kris followed.

The dog stuck its head between Kris's legs, tripping him on the edge of the property. He felt the dog's warm, sandpapery tongue and the cold slime of its nose on his neck as it prodded him to get up and run again. He raised his head and saw Little Bear standing at the back door in a frightened woman's arms.

Her black hair, streaked with morning-sky-silver, was gathered up in a bun, loose strands flapping all around. Wild eyes glared from her thin, angular face. Her mouth pistoned up and down in a vicious rhythm as she clutched her child.

Kris had seen faces like hers before. It was why he spent so much time wandering the Pueblo and desert alone. Maybe people thought he was crazy. Or maybe they reacted that way from fear. He was a striking figure—stocky and naturally dark from his Indian ancestry, but more so from the grime of living rough. Long, wavy hair rioted from his head, obscuring a thick bearded face. What people said was lost on him. But reading people was different from hearing them, and this woman was scared and angry.

He hadn't chased the boy out of meanness. It was instinct, like the dog's instinct for a game in the chase. But he didn't have any way to explain, at least not in the typical sense. So, he acted on instinct again.

Raising himself to his hands and knees, he crawled over to the woman and boy. He laid himself down, his entire body flat on the ground at her feet. He stretched his arms out to the side and opened his hands palms down. Legs straight and feet together, the soles of his shoes pointed upward. He put his face in the dirt. And he didn't move. Not until he felt the woman's warm hands cover his cheeks and ears.

She turned his face to one side so that he could see her out of one eye. Her face had softened and her mouth was no longer moving. The once harsh eyes were thick with tears. Up close, she smelled like the wild mint he picked and chewed as a

treat in the summer. Using her hands, the woman moved him until he was seated in the dirt, facing her. She knelt in front of him and held his gaze with an intensity and compassion that made him almost as uncomfortable as the normal reactions from people.

The woman placed her hands over her own ears. She shook her head slowly and then placed her hands over Kris's ears, continuing to shake her head. Her soft hands on his face were comforting, like the bees' delicate skittering legs. Behind her, Little Bear mimicked his mother with his own hands and ears. The woman removed her hands from Kris's ears and put them over her mouth, one atop the other. This time, Kris placed his own hands over his mouth, and shook his head to the same cadence that the boy and the woman were shaking theirs.

It was the first time understanding had come so quickly and easily; the most intimate human interaction he'd had in years.

For weeks after their meeting, the woman tried to communicate with him. She brought out books and pointed at pictures. One time, she swept her hands in the air. At first, he thought she was trying to spook him away. But he realized that she was using the movements from that school up north where his parents had left him for a time when he was young.

Another time, she gave Kris a present—a necklace with a cross. The cross had double bars, a mixture of the Isleta traditional dragonfly symbol and the cross of Christ. Below the bars was a silver bird, wings raised in flight as though it might carry the necklace away. It was like the ones he had seen his grandfather make. The kind his family sold in the diner, where the smoky green *chiles* on the burgers roasted his tongue. Taking the chain from around her neck, she placed it in his open hand and closed his fingers around the pendant with her own.

A few days later, he walked up from the front of their house, a route he didn't normally take because it took him from the safety of the trees. The garage door was raised and a man was bent over a rough-hewn bench. Little Bear was standing on a crate next to the man. Kris stopped at the garage's threshold and stood there quietly, waiting for the boy to turn. But it was

the man who sensed him.

When the man turned, he was hard in all the places where the woman was soft. Leathered, crevassed skin twitched on his face. Steely gray eyes burned over a mouth that started gnashing up and down. As Kris backed away, the boy ran to him and stood between the two. The woman appeared from the house and ran to take up a place next to the boy. With her back to him, Kris couldn't see what happened. But eventually, the color in the man's face reduced to a soft pink. The woman led Kris from the garage. When they were out of the hard man's sight, she pointed back toward the garage and shook her head.

The woman trusted Kris with Little Bear, in whom he sensed a kindred remoteness. Their play was simple, usually involving a chase, the dog harrying them at every step. When the boy grew bored, he followed Kris through the *bosque*. They leaned over the river, minnows and catfish caressing their hands buried in the water. They sat in cottonwood trees, playing with the lengthening cotton beards hanging from pods. When coyote scent alerted Kris to a den, he showed the boy where glimmering yellow eyes peered out from a dark hollow. And Kris tried to point to the differences in the sun's light as it reflected off something.

Such a reflection caught Kris's attention the day of the accident as the car swerved up Highway 67 toward Little Bear. No longer playing a game, Kris ran like never before. But the boy saw it as a new challenge, looking over his shoulder just enough to see his pursuer but not the approaching car. Pumping his little legs at the pedals with a new urgency, his wild dark hair fluttered in the wind. The sticky asphalt, softening in the summer heat, grabbed at Kris's feet and the dog nipped and nudged him.

He had pulled even with the bicycle and was reaching out to grab the boy, when he felt the air around him change. There is a vacuum that surrounds a collision, as though the atmosphere is inhaling in anticipation.

The bicycle crumpled and Little Bear was pulled down out of reach. Kris stepped back as the car slid around him, the driver's eyes bulging at him through the car's side window.

Before the car skidded to rest on the dusty shoulder, Kris

was already hiding in the trees. The driver pushed himself out of the car and scowled at the dog which stood at the rear bumper, its scruff standing up like a mane. After the driver looked at the crumpled bicycle in front of the car, he inched his way to the back.

From the trees, Kris saw Little Bear stuck underneath a back tire. Red oozed from him in a variety of shades. Gummy, pink liquid seeped down his head. Some snailed down his lumpy, twisted neck. A *chile*-red flow soaked through a tear in his shirt. The brightest blood rhythmically spurted from the boys left leg where a sharp bone pierced through the flesh. A puddle collected: apple-red at the edges where it was freshest, drying in the middle to a strawberry shade before turning rusty brown, like the volcanic rocks across the road near the tracks. The spurts hungrily reached out for Kris, but the tempo slowed and reduced to a drip before stopping altogether.

The driver knelt, peered under the car, and returned to his door. But he didn't get inside right away. He rummaged a small bottle from a bag on the seat and shook a pill from it. He put it into his mouth and arched his head back, swallowing. Then, he got into the car and drove, dragging the body a few feet in the soft dirt before it broke free and rolled into a heap. The dog padded over, circled the body, and lay down.

Kris ran out of the trees after the car. He stopped at the mile marker sign. Watery legs and shaking, he held on to the sign, surveying the car's path. Never speeding or swerving, it lazed around the bend in the road and down the hill toward the Pueblo.

There had been nothing special about the driver. He was average in every way, in build and height and weight. His hair was the color of brown that goes unnoticed, neatly cut but not too short. His skin was brown, but not dark like Kris's. He was wearing a pale green shirt, like the ones people wore at the Pueblo clinic. He was so average as to avoid notice altogether. But Kris would recognize the driver from that day on, walking or hitchhiking—never driving—this same stretch of road.

Over the following months, Kris wondered whether the driver purposely walked this road looking for him. Maybe he

wanted to kill Kris so that no one else would know. Or maybe he blamed Kris. Whatever the reason, the driver continued walking through the place, sometimes breaking into a run until he got past the mile marker.

Now, standing on the train tracks in the warm summer night, the bright, white orb continued to approach. Kris could see the dirt shoulder across the road where the boy's body had finally come to rest. A wooden cross was now sticking from the dirt, marking the spot. Like the cross he wore, it had two bars. And he had watched the hard man from the boy's garage, build the cross and put it into the ground there earlier this afternoon. From the edge of the trees, he had watched the man work, pausing occasionally to weep.

Kris knew the man's grief. He'd seen it stream over the man's hard, red face the only other time he'd seen him—when Kris had tried to confess. Many times after the accident he had watched the house from afar, looking in through the open garage. Eventually, his guilt outpaced his fear of the hard man, and he walked into the garage again.

Perhaps it was Kris's smell that announced him, or the movement of his shadow stretching up the garage's back wall. The hard man turned and stared. Kris reached into his shirt and pulled out the cross. He let the cross swing on the chain, giving flight to the bird's wings. The man snatched the cross and pulled it toward him as far as the chain would allow.

Kris grabbed the man's arm and pulled him, urging him to follow. When the man refused to move, Kris summoned up what courage he had left and tried to speak. It was one syllable, but it sounded like several.

"Bwwwuuuudaa" was what the hard man heard.

Kris groaned the word several more times and waved his hands in time with the sounds, until the man's shoulders began to shudder. With the effort of speaking, tears streamed down Kris's face, too. With each iteration of the word, Kris pulled the man with more urgency, willing him to follow. If he could bring the man out to the road where Little Bear died, he thought he might be able to communicate what happened there.

Eventually, the hard man's knees buckled him into a kneel. His whole body shook, and he wept.

That was the last time Kris had seen him until this afternoon when he watched the man make the cross and put it in the ground. Kris had not been the only one watching, though. The driver was there, too.

Running up the road from the Pueblo, the driver disappeared behind the rocks on the opposite side of the road, popping out on the mesa above. He sat down with his feet dangling over the edge to watch.

The hard man dug in the ground with a large tool, stopping only when a dirt devil chased him away from the hole at his feet. Little Bear's dog, who'd come with the man, dashed through the flying dust, and bounded into the trees where Kris was kneeling. It circled him and nudged him, trying to get him up and running, the way they had run with the boy. But the dog lost interest when Kris didn't respond and followed its nose somewhere else.

With the cross in the ground, the hard man knelt and prayed like Kris had seen people in the old Pueblo church praying, with his head bowed completely to the ground.

Watching from the trees, Kris began to think that he might finally be able to unburden himself. In this place, with the man praying at the cross that stood where Little Bear had bled, and the driver looking down on them from above, maybe he could be understood. But before he made the tree line, another dirt devil swept through. It knocked Kris back to his knees and the hard man to the ground, pushing across the road and up onto the mesa, battering the driver onto his back.

When the dust cleared, the man loaded his tools into his truck, collected the dog, and drove away. Kris ran across the road and climbed the mesa. He could taste the metallic dust from the brittle, sharp rocks as they crumbled under his feet. When he crested the mesa's ridge, the driver was laying back on the edge of the mesa. Kris waited until the driver sat up, watching him put something in his mouth and arch his neck the way he'd done before.

Approaching from behind, Kris wasn't sure what to do. Maybe he would try to speak again. The driver would understand how Kris felt, how nothing mattered but the mounting weight of the boy's blood. Kris could bring the

driver down from the mesa to the cross the hard man had built and they could commune, if only in their sin.

Having closed all but the last few feet, Kris smelled the driver's sour sweat. An internal heat, not from the sun, pulsed from the driver's slick skin. Blood oozed from scratches on his neck and shoulders, mixing with sweat and red, black dust. It was not the bright, accusing color that had flowed from Little Bear but a dull brown color—it already looked dead.

As Kris stretched out a hand, the driver's head dropped to his chest. The weight carried the driver forward and he tumbled off the mesa. Kris shuffled up to the edge of the mesa. Below, the driver was on his back, looking up and rapidly blinking.

Kris went down the mesa into the rocks.

The driver's body was draped backwards over a boulder, arms and legs hanging slack and still. His eyes were milky, like in dead animals that had lain out for a few days.

Kris took the necklace from his neck, laid it on the driver's chest, and then sat down among the rocks.

No one would ever understand now. He had tried with the hard man. But, beyond their shared grief, there was no context for what he had tried to communicate. And now the only other person who could understand was gone. The finality of it held him motionless as layers of purple and blue and gray pushed the sun into darkness.

He had remained there until the orb winked at him in the distance. The warmth it promised pulled him out to stand between the rails in anticipation. He sensed restoration in that light, a place of release. He watched it dance closer and closer.

By the time the orb had grown large enough to swallow him, his body was singing. The hair on his head blew back in waves with the rushing wind. The tiny hairs on his arms and legs tingled with electricity. The ground rumbled, rocks and dirt bubbling on the surface. The greasy, rail tie on which he stood tried to buck free, like an untamed animal. The air was heavy with soot. Diesel and oil fumes snaked up his nose, filling the back of his mouth with an acrid taste.

But the light was beautiful up close. A kaleidoscope swam in his eyes, breaking into thousands of colors and pirouetting

in perfect time. Blues spun around reds, and greens twirled in the hands of oranges, until they all fractured into new shapes and began anew with a faster rhythm. Kris longed to dance in that light, to feel the colors whirl around him, wanted to feel the push and pull as they carried him along in the measures of their song.

He reached out to touch the light, hoping to feel the warmth clasp his hands and pull him in.

Contributor Notes

Eileen Arthurs' short stories have appeared in *The Madwomen in the Attic Anthology*, Carlow University's *Ten* anthology, and three times in the reader-voted Sixfold Journal. "Reading Between the Adelines" was a finalist for the 2016 Van Dyke Short Story Award. Her novel, *Lorelei's Family*, is available through Amazon. She has participated in the Madwomen in the Attic workshops, and is a charter member of the The Liars' Club writing group. She lives with her husband and cats near the confluence of Pittsburgh's three rivers.

Educated at University of North Texas, Tony Burnett is an award winning author, poet, journalist, activist and songwriter. His work has been published in over 50 national literary magazines and anthologies. He serves as Board President of the Writers' League of Texas and is Editor-in-Chief of *Scribe*. He makes his home in rural central Texas near Temple with his trophy wife, Robin.

Max Evans (MFA, CSULB) is the author of *Where's Pops?*—the only short story collection to focus exclusively on fathers as central characters. In Long Beach, he sets up community events to celebrate dads. Visit www.wherespops.com

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Kim Magowan lives in San Francisco and teaches in the English Department at Mills College. Her stories are published in *Arroyo Literary Review, Atticus Review, Bird's Thumb, Breakwater Review, Broad!, Cleaver, Corium Magazine, Crack the Spine, descant, Fiction Southeast, 580 Split, The Gettysburg Review, Gravel, Hobart, Hotel Amerika, Indiana Review, JMWW, Literary Orphans, Parcel, Sixfold, SNReview, Squalorly, Valparaiso Fiction Review*, and *Word Riot*. She is working on a novel and a story collection.

Constant reading inspired Mac McCaskill to write his own stories, but he came to it late. Instead of practicing law after graduating law school, he enlisted in the US Army as a bomb tech. Then, he joined the FBI and has been a Special Agent for almost 18 years. This is his first publication.

Wendy S. Palmer lives on an island where there are no Ferris Wheels except the metal sculpture in her back yard. Her short fiction has appeared in *Rosebud*, *New Millennium*, *Nimrod*, *Confluence* and other magazines. Her non-fiction has appeared in *Women's Running* and *Martha's Vineyard Magazine*. Her current project is historical fiction.

Bill Pippin's story "Century" placed first in the Summer 2014 edition of Sixfold. His short stories, articles, and essays have appeared in the literary anthology *Tattoos, The MacGuffin*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Newsweek, Field & Stream, Writer's Digest, Philadelphia Magazine, Delaware Today, New Mexico Magazine*, and many other publications. He lives in the mountains of southwestern New Mexico with his wife Zona.

Deborah Spera was recently nominated for The Montana Prize in Fiction for her story, "Alligator," and was a finalist for the Kirkwood Literary Prize through UCLA for her story, "Ohrail Sex." She was chosen to be a writer in residence at Hedgebrook for a book of essays entitled *Mamalogues*. She has had short stories published in *The Wascana Review*, *Pennsylvania English*, and the *LA Yoga Times*. Actors Theater of Louisville produced a musical she co-wrote a entitled *On The Road To Kitty Hawk*, and Samuel French has published two books of monologues she co- wrote. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and three children. She is working on her first novel.

Scott Tucker was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico and raised in Helena and Great Falls, Montana. His stories have appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Blood Orange Review, Main Street Rag, Mayday, The Meadow, Narrative Magazine, Pif, The Portland Review,* and *Prick of the Spindle*. He has a journalism degree from Northwestern University and a law degree from the University of Michigan. He lives in Seattle with his wife.

Slater Welte is traveling.

Jeseca Wendel majored in English at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York. She currently lives in New Hampshire with her dog, Rowdy, where she is working on a young adult novel.