SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2017

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Mary Lucille Hays

Tribute in Black, White, and Gray

The party was in honor of some visiting artist, and Ruth hadn't told her husband, David, that she didn't want to come. She liked parties. At least she liked the vegetarian hippie parties her friends had, the kind where people sat around on the floor or on cushions and talked easily, and laughed. If anyone wanted to smoke they went outside, and there were candles—a lot, to make it friendly. She could wear whatever she wanted without feeling like a pumpkin. Ruth was sure that nobody else at this party was pregnant.

The moment they arrived, Ruth began to wish that they had stayed home after all. The back of her throat felt scratchy, her nose still raw and sore from a cold she had caught from Ya—which he had picked up at playgroup—and she sneezed the moment she got inside. Ruth felt clumsy all over. She had worn the wrong dress; it was too tight around her arms. Pregnancy had bloated her whole body—her face, her ankles, even her fingers—were puffy. Her skin felt too small.

David helped her as she shrugged heavily out of her woolen coat. Then they slipped through the crowd, between conversations and under curtains of smoke to deposit it, with David's winter jacket, on a heap in a bedroom.

David's black hair was freshly washed, and it floated behind as he walked ahead of her back out to the front room. Ruth felt a sudden stabbing attraction to him. She reached for his hand, but just managed to brush his fingertips. He turned and smiled at her. His eyes were a bold green this evening. Their color varied in shades of hazel, green, and grey, depending on his mood or the lighting. They had once lived on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, and Ruth was surprised to find that some days it was the clearest blue and some days a rocky grey. She finally figured out that the sea reflected the sky and so was always changing. David's eyes were like that.

Here everyone was standing. Ruth looked for someplace to sit. She glanced at the sofa and the two easy chairs placed tastefully around a low wooden table.

"You want to sit down Ruth?" David steered her by the elbow to one of the chairs. A woman came toward them, smiling at David, and he let go of Ruth's arm.

The woman wore a black sleeveless dress with a short tight skirt. Her straight hair was cut above her ear on one side of her face, then slanted down, almost to her shoulder on the other side. Her dark hair and her dark dress were sharp against her pale skin, and Ruth thought she must keep herself out of the sun.

"David. I'm so glad you could come. Listen, you have to meet Paul." The woman exuded a feline self-satisfaction as she pulled David by the arm toward a cluster of people. She didn't look at Ruth, but David turned back and motioned for her to follow. Ruth shook her head and indicated the sofa. David shrugged an apology as he allowed the woman to lead him across the room.

Ruth made her way to the sofa and sat down. She wondered if David felt so out of place when they went to the parties of English grad students, who also smoked, but not as much as the art students, and at least they went outside to do it. She looked around. Most of those people that she recognized by name were painters. She knew some of the others by sight but had never been introduced, although David seemed to be acquainted with most of them. They were all unique in the same way, dressed in black with sophisticated haircuts and avant-garde jewelry. They seemed pretty comfortable in these costumes, in this setting. Ruth looked down at her dress in earth tones—dusty colors, with a high bodice that even had a ruffle. She felt countrified.

Ruth looked up and saw Tristan, smiling at her from across the room. Every time she saw him, he wore a different pair of wire-rimmed glasses. Tonight's were round and tiny, sort of exaggerated John Lennon. He had told her once that he bought old glasses in antique shops and had his prescription put in them. His hair looked just slightly wind ruffled. It was thinning a bit, and made him look older than he was, ever so slightly professorial. Tristan was a painter like David, though his recent pieces didn't have too much paint on them. She had watched him progress from paintings on canvas to more three-dimensional collages. He prowled the junkyards

for scraps of furniture and old cast iron and wire and shoes. Ruth liked his work, earthy and quirky. His pieces often had punch lines.

At Tristan's opening last month, Ruth had loved a stairway-shaped sculptural work made from dresser drawers and chair backs and railroad spikes. The wood was roughly stripped by wind and weather and so had a maritime feel to it. But her favorite that night had been a wooden piece shaped like a harp without strings. It was immense—taller than David even, and delicately constructed. She felt it must be hollow, and she wanted to bang on it like a drum to hear the sound it would make. Tristan had pasted pages all over the surface. She read a few snatches and discovered the words were from "The Wasteland."

She was reading parts of it aloud to David when Tristan approached.

"She likes this one, Tristan." David indicated the sculpture with his drink, red wine in a clear, plastic cup.

"I *love* it." Ruth looked up at Tristan, who was blushing, and brought his own wine cup to his face, hiding his smile.

Ruth turned back to David. "The more I look at it the more I find. Listen to this part." She bent down and cocked her head, pointing to a page pasted sideways at waist level.

"The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all but the desert with the inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
'Jug Jug' to dirty ears.
And other withered stumps of time. . . "

David laughed. "And just who is this 'barbarous king,' Tristan? Anyone we know?"

But before he could answer, Ruth chided, "Come on, don't you know your mythology?" Ruth told him how King Tereus raped his sister-in-law, the lovely Philomela, then cut out her tongue and locked her away, so she couldn't tell the world. But when his wife—Philomela's sister, discovered the treachery, the two women cut up the king's son and served him to him

for supper.

"Wait. They killed his son?"

"Her son too." Ruth was absorbed in reading the words and didn't look at David. She walked around the other side of the piece to read more pages. Tristan was drinking his wine and nodding. His face was a little flushed.

"Nice folks, all of them." David turned to Tristan, grinning. "But if she couldn't talk, how did the sister find out?"

But again, Ruth answered for Tristan. "Philomel wove a tapestry that told the whole story. You remember this, David—I wrote a paper on Eliot one semester. Philomel was an artist too—Hey," she interrupted herself, "a stringless harp and tongueless Philomel. I get it now. Is that what you meant?" She looked at Tristan, pleased that she had found the connection.

"Sure." Tristan sipped his wine and winked at David. "How astute."

"So, it's about feeling inarticulate?" Ruth felt the sudden flush of understanding, and her buoyant heart opened to both men, then to everyone in the gallery. "I can't say I ever got that entire poem, but I know a big part of it—for me anyway—is about women being silenced, by force or circumstance or whatever." Her words grew louder as she grew more excited. "And Philomel had to find another way to communicate since she was mute, and so she must weave her story into a tapestry—" Ruth's hands made weaving motions in the air as she got more animated—"and this harp had to find another way to sing, so it has Eliot pasted all over it." She turned back to Tristan. "Is that right?"

"Exactly. I'm so glad someone *gets* this piece."

David was snickering, and Ruth shot him a look, but continued.

"So, where does the Prufrock fit in?"

"The what?"

"The Prufrock. You have 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' pasted all over down here." She pointed to the base of the sculpture.

"What do *you* think it means?" Tristan tipped his head down and looked kindly at Ruth over his glasses.

David snorted, and then Tristan was laughing.

"What's funny?" Ruth looked from David to Tristan and back again.

"Can't you tell he's bullshitting you?" David was laughing now too.

Ruth quickly looked back at Tristan. "No." Her eyes narrowed. "He wouldn't."

"Yes. He would. He told me last week that he used this book because he failed a Lit class in college. He wants to make another one out of a physics book."

"Whatever." Ruth shook her head. "Why did you guys let me go on like that? Nice joke."

"Oh don't get mad. We all do it." David tipped his head back and drained his wine cup. "We paint something, and everybody's got to find some grand meaning in it. Nobody believes you if you say 'I made this part green because I ran out of brown paint.' They want everything to be symbolic."

"Besides," said Tristan, "if you found all that meaning in my piece it must be there, whether I planned it or not."

But Ruth was already walking away. "No need to patronize me, Tristan. I'll just go fill up on crackers and cheese now."

Of course they came after her to apologize, and David was especially conciliatory, but Ruth felt that earlier, expansive understanding spoiled, like a broken paper kite.

Now, at the party Tristan was coming toward her. He wore a bulky, grey sweater with two wine-colored stripes and random speckles in between them.

He sat down beside her on the sofa. "Are you still mad at me?"

"Not mad, Tristan. Disappointed." Now it was Ruth's turn to have fun at his expense.

He looked at her sideways. "Oh?"

"I can't believe you failed Lit."

Tristan threw back his head and laughed his hearty belly-laugh. "Touché. I'd clink glasses with you, but you don't have a glass. You want me to get you some wine? It's really bad wine, but it's wine."

Ruth remembered how much she liked Tristan and laughed with him. "No, thanks. I'm not drinking these days."

For a second, Tristan looked puzzled, then nodded.

"Oh, that's right. You have one in the oven. How's the little nipper?"

Ruth put her hand on her belly. "It's pretty active. Always stepping on my kidneys or bladder or something. I'm perfectly aware of the miracle that's taking place in my body, but can I just complain for a minute? Look at my hands." She held them out for him to see. Her wedding ring was cutting into her finger. "They look like sausages."

Tristan took her hand and patted it. "Oh, you'll be back to your svelte self in a few months." He gave her hand a squeeze, beaming at her, his face just slightly flushed with the wine and the warmth of the party. "And where's Ya tonight?"

Ruth always had their five-year-old, Ya, in tow when she stopped by the grad student studio, an old house on the east end of campus. Ya liked Tristan's studio best, which was next door to David's. Tristan's room was filled with antique toys and shoes and odd blocks of wood. He had mounted insects—a preying mantis and a Madagascar hissing cockroach—in frames on the wall. A hammock was slung across a corner of the room, and Tristan was good-natured about letting Ya climb into the hammock and chat with him while he painted.

"He's at my mom's. Ya is easily bored with stuff like this." Ruth swept her hand in front of her to indicate the cocktail conversations surrounding them. She looked for David too, trying not to be too obvious about it. He was in a corner of the room, still talking with the slant-haired woman. David laughed at something she said, and the woman reached up and flicked a piece of lint off of his shoulder.

"Who's that with David?" Ruth kept smiling and indicated the direction with her eyes. She could hear David in soft conversation, though she couldn't understand what he was saying.

Tristan looked over his shoulder. "Oh that's Loren. This is her house. Didn't you meet her?"

"Almost, but when she breezed by and grabbed David, he sort of forgot to introduce us." Ruth felt jealousy bubble up like a panic. She thought she'd done a good job of modulating her voice, but when Tristan looked sharply at her, she wasn't sure she had.

"Don't worry about Loren, my dear. She'll drop him like a

hot potato in, oh . . . twenty minutes."

Ruth laughed. Tristan had a way of relaxing her. Now she wanted to change the subject. "Nice sweater."

"You like it?" He held out his arm and looked down at the sleeve. "I just finished it."

"You knitted that? I didn't know you could knit. It's really nice."

"Thank you. I'm pleased with it."

"Did you use a pattern?"

"No. I get dyslexic when I try to read those patterns. My mind doesn't work that way. I don't see how anyone could knit by looking in a book. You knit too, don't you?"

"A little. I've been knitting booties again for this baby. I had some I knitted for Ya, but I can't find them. I do use a pattern." Ruth laughed. "In fact, I taught myself to knit from one of those books."

"You're kidding. My grandmother taught me. God, she was knitting all the time. I don't think her kids ever wore a sweater that she didn't knit herself. I still have a pair of slippers she felted for me when I was little. They don't fit anymore, but I still keep them."

Tristan went on to tell Ruth stories about his grandmother, how she raised a hog in her basement when Holland was occupied during the war. When she couldn't get wool to knit socks, she knitted them out of newspaper.

"Newspaper? How in the world did she do that?"

"I don't know. She spun it somehow, and knitted it. I suppose she had to do stuff like that. She had nine kids—Hi, David."

Ruth looked up. David was handing her a glass, and she reached for it. "Thanks." She took a sip, then looked down at the glass. "What is this?"

"I don't know," said David. "Loren didn't seem to have anything without alcohol on the refreshment table—so I raided the fridge. It was this stuff or water."

"It tastes like Hawaiian Punch."

Tristan snorted. "Hawaiian Punch? Loren has Hawaiian Punch in her fridge?"

"Fruit Juicy." She smiled.

The three of them talked together for a long while and laughed irreverently about artsy affectations until Loren

came up and began gushing about Tristan's show. She still didn't appear to notice Ruth, but when she led Tristan away to meet the famous Paul, David remained at Ruth's side, and she was sorry that she had felt so neglected before.

Later when David went back to get their coats Ruth found Tristan talking to Loren and Paul and another man with short brown hair bleached white at the edges.

"What was her name?" Ruth asked Tristan confidentially, during a lull in the conversation.

He sipped his drink absently. "What was whose name?"

"Your grandmother."

"Oh, her. Liesbeth."

"*Leesbet*," she repeated slowly, trying to get the accent right.

After the party they stopped at Ruth's mom's to pick up Ya. David carried the sleeping boy out of the dark house, and together they buckled him into the child seat in back. Ruth put her hand on his cheek and smoothed his hair, and he pursed his little lips. She got in the front seat and looked back at him, feeling content. Now she felt the baby moving gently, turning over.

"Baby's moving," Ruth said sleepily.

"Let me feel." David reached across through the dark and laid his hand on her belly.

"I don't feel it."

"Press harder. Right . . . here." And she guided his hand to where the tiny elbow rippled across her belly from the inside.

"I felt it that time." He smiled out at the dark road.

Ruth leaned back into the bucket seat, closed her eyes and rested her head. She felt soft and luminous and round. Even her cold felt better. "It's funny how fast my moods change." She was thinking about David's eyes and the sea again.

"Mmmmn," said David, still smiling.

Ruth began to think about knitting newspaper. She imagined ripping it into strips and twisting it. You would have to crumple it first, she thought, to soften it. Then it would be more like fabric. Maybe she really could do it. She wished she had asked Tristan how long a newspaper sock would last. Did his aunts and uncles wear holes in them, and did Liesbeth then darn them with more paper?

Now she wanted to try it herself, and she saw in her mind a series that she wanted to make and put on the wall in honor of Tristan's grandmother. The first piece would be a square of knitted newspaper, like Ruth used to practice when she was learning to knit. The second would be a flat piece knitted in the shape of a sock. The third, the same, only knitted with Sunday morning funny papers, and the fourth, an actual three-dimensional sock that someone could wear.

Then she thought that the first three ideas were dumb, and that she'd seen too many pretentious art shows. Maybe she should just make the sock. But she decided to try the others while she was learning to use paper. If they looked good she could call them a series, and if not, she didn't have to show them to anybody. She liked the idea of recording the process of learning, so she might as well try it.

Ruth realized that they were almost home, and she was no longer sleepy. She needed to move, so she opened her eyes and stretched.

"David," she said. "I've just thought of a piece I want to make."

"A piece?" He kept his eyes on the empty highway.

"Yeah. Tristan told me this story about his grandmother. She used to knit socks out of newspaper."

"Why would anybody want to do that?"

"It was during the war. I guess she couldn't get regular yarn."

"You mean she wore them?"

"I think her whole family wore them."

David snorted. "I'd rather go barefoot."

"In the snow?" Ruth asked. "I think it's beautiful that she did whatever she had to do to keep her family warm. She was a survivor."

David rolled his eyes.

"Well you can make fun. I'm going to try it."

"Try what?"

"I'm going to knit a sock out of newspaper."

He looked at her, and then back at the road. "Hmmn, that's an idea." He turned to her and smiled. She could tell that he was suddenly interested, and she smiled back. The party hadn't been so bad after all. She felt a scintillating

contentment with her family enclosed in the little car, her plan for the sock rolling around in her mind.

"What a great idea, Ruth." He looked back at the road, still smiling. A car turned toward them and flashed its high beams. The lights lit up David's face and he shielded his eyes with one hand and clicked off his own brights. "If you knit a sock," he said, "I'll use it in a piece."

"What?" Her eyes smarted from the sudden light. When the spots cleared from her vision she said firmly, "It'll be my piece if I make it. I was thinking of a series."

"You want to make a piece?" he asked. "Where would you show it? You can't get into a gallery with one piece."

"That wasn't really the point." Ruth stared out the window into the night, then turned to him. "Why can't I make a piece of art if I want to? Why can't I hang it on my own walls? And if I do it will be for me and for Liesbeth. Not for you."

"Who's Liesbeth?" he asked, but she refused to answer.

The following day was Sunday. David was painting in the attic studio, preparing for his upcoming show. Sunday was supposed to be their family day, but today they each had their separate concerns. Ya was building a spaceship with his Lincoln Logs. Ruth was trying to finish a book she was reading to review for the school's journal, but couldn't concentrate with Ya's whining every time the spaceship wings collapsed. She discovered it was way past naptime and put down the book. Ruth sang Ya to sleep and then sat down to knit on the hat she was making for the baby.

After knitting a few rows she realized that she was thinking again of the newspaper socks. She set aside the hat and got some papers from the recycling bin. When David came down later to get something to eat, she was sitting cross-legged on the living room floor next to a pile of strips of newspaper. She had one long knitting needle anchored under her right arm while she slowly twisted the paper. She pulled too hard and it broke off in her fingers. Three or four stitches were looped loosely over the needle, and she picked up another strip of paper and began twisting it to the broken strand.

"What are you doing?" asked David.

"Casting on," she said. She did not look up.

Ruth worked steadily until she felt a headache coming on. She had knitted only two rows and already her fingers were black from the ink on the paper and sore. The knitting itself was lumpy and stiff, like homespun yarn when it's knitted on needles too small. It was disappointing—not at all like she imagined. She put it aside and went into the bedroom. Ya was up from his nap and David was showing him a book of Chagall prints. Ruth loved that book: the bright colors, the floating people, the chickens and goats. David looked up from the bed.

"Did you make it? Let me see."

"Well, I did a couple of rows. It's out in the living room. I'm just trying to figure out how she did it." She showed him her hands. "I didn't think about the ink."

David got up off the bed, and he and Ya went to the living room. "I like it," he called to her. "It's got a neat texture."

A few days later Ruth found David sitting in the living room. He had her newspaper knitting in one hand and the baby's hat in the other.

"When are you going to finish this?"

"I don't know. I got kind of discouraged. It isn't nearly as easy as I'd imagined. And I have a lot to do to get ready for the baby. I still want to try it though."

"Could you teach me to knit?" David looked up at her like a little boy.

"Why? Are you going to steal my idea?"

"Sure." He smiled. "It's a great idea."

"But I want to do it." Ruth heard a whining quality in her voice, and she felt suddenly and irrationally ashamed to talk like that in the baby's presence, as if the baby could hear her from the womb and understand not her words, but her tone.

"So we'll both do one," he said. "They won't be the same."

"No, they won't be." Ruth felt the whining turn to anger, and her voice began to rise. "Yours will be 'art' because you're an artist. If I make one they will say I copied your work. Who will believe that it was my idea, even if I do it first? You're the real artist."

"Don't yell at me." David's voice was calm and even, contrasting with her own frenzy. His eyes were a cloudy grey.

He stood up and put her knitting down.

"I'm NOT YELLING."

"Come on, Ruth. Don't be mad. Artists always steal ideas. Hell, didn't *you* steal the idea from Elizabeth, or whoever?"

Ruth hadn't thought of it that way. She wished she could get her feelings straight. First she felt like a logical argument had been proven. David was trying to take her idea. QED. But then, like the sea changes colors when a cloud clears the sun or the surf churns up detritus from below, she discovers it isn't so simple. She sort of *had* stolen the idea from Liesbeth.

These thoughts gave David time to smile and put his arm around her. "I wouldn't steal it if it wasn't a great idea."

He began nuzzling her hair, and she leaned into his warm weight. Maybe he was right. They could both do it. Maybe even work together on it.

"Will you teach me?" he asked. But something about his smile made the sea change once more, and she pulled away.

"Here's the book I learned from." She drew it from the shelf and tossed it at him. He flinched as he caught it, and she walked out of the room.

The next Wednesday Ruth picked Ya up from daycare and found David with the book propped up on the kitchen table. He was hunched over in concentration. The knitting needles looked absurdly delicate in his heavy hands. He was wrapping green yarn around the needle so tightly that he couldn't pull the old stitch over it.

She laughed at him. "David. Relax. Your body's too tight and your stitches are too tight. You're going to bend my needles pulling the yarn like that."

He straightened up and rubbed the back of his neck. Suddenly he looked to Ruth like a little boy. "I keep messing up."

Ruth began to roll over the problem in her mind, like she would turn the baby's bootie this way and that, looking for a dropped stitch that had thrown off the whole pattern. Liesbeth had grown from a character in Tristan's story to become someone important to Ruth, but Liesbeth wasn't knitting for art's sake. No. The socks were originally knitted from a place of desperate need. From a place of danger. Now

Ruth thought she could knit some kind of connection to this courageous woman, to honor her. Or was it to honor her own self? Liesbeth's idea had inspired Ruth, just as Ruth's idea had delighted David. Maybe they were all part of the same thread. What would Ruth be sacrificing if she helped David now?

"For starters, you could use some bigger needles. Those are too small to learn on."

She got out a thicker pair of needles and sat down next to him. She showed him how to knit and how to purl. She explained that knitting patterns were just different sequences of those two basic stitches. With her there to demonstrate and correct him he picked it up very quickly. Soon he had produced a little knitted rectangle.

"Good," she said. "Now you need to work on keeping the tension of the yarn even. Knit ninety-nine more of these and you can make an afghan."

"Forget the afghan. Will you show me how to make a sock?"

"There's a pattern for socks in the book." Ruth felt suddenly heavy, and braced her legs to lever herself up from the sofa.

After that David picked up on his own where Ruth had left off in the science of knitting paper fibers. His latest two paintings remained unfinished, and Ruth missed the fresh paint smell when she came home. After putting Ya to bed they spent the evenings knitting together, she on a new sweater for the baby, and he on the sock.

He had given up on using newspaper. He said it had too much acid and would yellow and fall apart. Instead he had torn out pages from a Bible. She resented that at first. She had always intended to read the Bible cover to cover, but he pointed out that she wasn't even religious, and they had two or three other copies around somewhere.

"That's not the point," she said. "It doesn't seem right." Just because she wasn't a believer didn't mean she couldn't take sacred texts seriously. "It would be another thing, if you were doing this to honor Liesbeth. But I don't think she would have used the Bible."

"And who's Liesbeth, again?"

The thin pages made a much finer, more delicate fiber to work with. And when his sock began to take form, it had much more fluidity than her first sample.

Ruth gradually got over resenting the project and even suggested that he twist a cotton thread along with the paper to give it strength. It was a good idea and cut down on breakage.

The sock itself was an elephantine thing, out of a Dr. Seuss book. It was the exaggerated, stylized type that people hang up at Christmas, and it was massive. Ruth thought that David was right: It was nothing like the sock that she would have made. But in spite of herself, she began to like it. There was a sweetness about him when he sat hunched over the sock. He looked childlike and vulnerable. And when he finished it two days before his show opened, she celebrated with him.

"What should I call it?" he wanted to know.

"I don't know. What about . . . 'Persistence'?"

David rolled his eyes.

"Too corny?"

"Too something."

In the end he put it up without a title. "Let people figure it out on their own," he said.

For the opening Ruth made bread and cut up melon and pears and cheese. She made a punch, and there was apple cider too. The gallery provided a few bottles of wine, but she always wanted at least a little bit of a spread. She fussed with the refreshment table for a while, then walked around talking to people. They had invited a lot of her friends who were only connected to the art crowd through her and David. She always felt freer to have an opinion about a painting when there were other people around who weren't looking at the art through an MFA.

She loved seeing David's paintings displayed in a proper gallery. Of course she had seen them all at home, had seen them as they were evolving. But they always looked like different images when they were illuminated and hung up on a white wall. There was so much space here. In David's studio you couldn't just look at a painting—there was such a jumble of tubes of oil colors and photographs and brushes and crumpled paper towels, all claiming your attention.

At one point she walked alone around the gallery, sipping cider and pausing at each piece. As always it was as if she were seeing the work for the first time and she kept finding things she hadn't noticed before. She paused in front of one of his latest paintings. It was the self-portrait he had just finished a few days before, as soon as the sock was done, gouache on paper. She had seen it, had helped him carry it in here. Dancing along the outer edges were scribbles, painted lightly in black. But now she saw that what she had thought was random embellishment was the outline of the sock.

The sock was painted over and over, surrounding and celebrating David's figure. And suddenly Ruth was angry. David had no connection with the sock, not with what it was really about. She remembered how he was excited by the idea, but made fun of the story behind it.

She turned and looked across the gallery at the sock. At the moment, no one was looking at it, and almost without realizing it, she crossed the room and stood in front of it. She wanted to pull it off the wall and run outside with it. It didn't belong here. It belonged to her. She thought about holding a match under it. It would catch slowly, then burn furiously, leaving smoke and a blackened place on the wall. People would cry out in startled tones, dropping their glasses. Someone would take off his jacket and beat at the flame.

She held her fists close to her sides. David and Loren came up and stood next to her, gazing at the sock.

"I love this piece," said Loren. "Maybe I'll buy it," she teased. They stood in silence, Loren looking at the sock and David watching Loren.

"It's wonderful, just wonderful," she said finally. "What's it about?"

"I'm not sure." David turned to Ruth and smiled at her for a long moment. His eyes were as blue as the sea. "What's it about, Ruth?"

Anne McMillan

Garajonay

Phyllis González wanted to be anonymous. She was sick of the news reports, seeing Hernán's picture over and over, his life in review, the circumstances of his death. The press devoured the details of their marriage, his ruined career, their son. The more salacious, the better. All over Twitter too—like binging vultures, that's what they were. She shut down her account—and Facebook as well, after his face came up in several photos from a previous year, celebrating their twenty-fifth anniversary. Facebook wanted to know if she would like to share these happy memories with everyone.

Phyllis stood smoking outside on the terrace of the hotel, watching the sunset over the ocean. She extinguished her cigarette in a bowl of white sand and went back inside to wait in line with the others in the group, who were checking in. She had signed up for a hiking trip in the Canary Islands, which was only a two and half hour plane ride from her home in Madrid. It seemed exotic enough; the islands were off the northwest coast of Africa, and this way, she could be with people—anonymous but not completely solitary.

It was a diverse group: a couple of newlyweds and other young people in their twenties, sporting sturdy boots and wearing bandanas with the logo of their hiking club. There were geologists and researchers as well as a photographer from National Geographic, and several women dressed in matching sports outfits who were, to judge from their cheery voices and boisterous laughter, overjoyed to be on vacation. Only one other person seemed to be traveling alone: a small bony woman, thirtyish, with a grim expression chiseled onto her face.

Phyllis had just turned fifty. To celebrate—or rather to mask the truth and make herself feel younger, she had gone shopping, bought herself a floppy straw hat, a happy yellow sundress with bright orange flowers and matching sandals for the trip. She was feeling rebellious, non-conformist. She had also bought new hiking boots, which she hadn't broken

in yet, along with thick socks, sturdy pants with side pockets and a red Gore-Tex rain jacket.

The sky was lit up in hues of pink and violet, with a few trailing clouds. She untied the cotton sweater around her neck and put it on. What she would give to lie on a beach. Forget the mountain hiking. It had been six months since Hernan's death. Three years since Luis, their son, had kissed her goodbye for the last time, wearing his new climbing gear for the Pyrenees, the backpack stuffed with her sandwiches. A special trip with his father.

At the reception counter, Phyllis was disappointed to find out there were no single rooms available. She protested and even offered to pay extra, but she had already been assigned a room with Elena, the slight, grim-faced woman, who now glared at her.

Afraid she had hurt the young woman's feelings, Phyllis decided to make the best of it. She arranged her things tidily on one side of the room, put her cosmetic case on the shelf above the bathroom sink, her toothbrush in the glass, her clothes folded in a drawer, her jacket hung in the closet. She asked Elena which bed she preferred, secretly wishing for the one nearest the bathroom.

"This one," Elena said, pointing to the other bed.

"That's good. I usually get up in the middle of night—I've got the smallest bladder in the world." Phyllis laughed, relieved.

"Like my mother," Elena said in a tired voice. She unzipped her vest and threw it on the bed, then sat down to unlace her boots. She wore a long-sleeved shirt and brown nylon pants.

"You look like a seasoned hiker," Phyllis said.

Elena frowned. "No. I just needed to get away."

"Me too." Phyllis smiled.

"You look familiar," Elena said.

"Do I?" Her heart skipped. "People always think I remind them of their sister." Phyllis laughed faintly. She should have gone to Greece. Or taken a Baltic cruise.

"No, you don't remind me of my sister."

Phyllis yawned. "Well then, maybe your mother—or your grandmother." She forced a laugh.

"No, you're not that old." Elena kept staring at her.

Phyllis kicked off her sandals, turned to plump the pillows

on the bed. How old did Elena think she was? Didn't one age with grief?

"My grandmother is dead," Elena said.

"Oh, well. Your mother, then. Maybe it's just *déjà-vu*."

Elena shrugged.

Nothing more. The moment passed, and there was that silence—like a ghost had passed through. They both got ready for bed. Phyllis read for a while, scrolling on her iPad, while Elena tapped her phone, studying an app about birds on the Canary Islands. After a while they said good night and Phyllis turned off the light.

Elena immediately began to snore. Phyllis lay on her back, thinking about Hernán, how she would tap him on the shoulder and try to make him change position when he snored. It was usually after he had too much to drink, or on those long plane trips—or after the trip to the Pyrenees, barely alive, and then later, worsened by sleeping pills. Their sex life gone. Like two mummies. Elena snored on steadily with rhythmic precision and a soft flutter of the lips. Sleepless, Phyllis got up and stuffed cotton balls in her ears.

Early the next morning, the group boarded a bus with their tour guide Damian, to visit the rim of the volcano, El Teide. Capped with snow, it rose before them on a blue cloudless day, a majestic cone surrounded by jagged mountains and centuries-old rivulets of lava, thick black, rusty brown and ochre hues, frozen in time. Standing at the base of the volcano, the jarring landscape made Phyllis feel like she was on another planet, or the moon. Even the weather had changed, from a balmy seventies down by the beach, where they wore shorts, to a sharp bitter cold. They had all donned fleece jackets. She shivered, in awe of the view.

Elena had climbed up on top of a large rock formation and stood defiantly, arms crossed over her windbreaker vest, her eyes narrowed, surveying the land as though she were calculating the distance. Her small body was taut and compact, the Spandex shirt outlining the muscles in her arms. Definitely a loner, thought Phyllis, which was just as well.

The group set off towards the cable car station at the base of the volcano, where all twenty squeezed themselves into

one glass-enclosed tram that brought them mid-way up the peak. From there, they trudged uphill with their backpacks, weaving along a zig-zag path, stopping only to catch their breath or drink water. Phyllis and Elena followed, last in line. Phyllis, having slept poorly, heaved for air and had to stop. She was out of shape. Her boots were too tight. The other hikers eagerly scrambled up to the edge of the crater. Phyllis and Elena straggled behind but finally managed the reach the top. The group rested, snapped photos of the rock formations below, the fabulous view of the ocean, with the islands of La Gomera and Hierro in the distance.

The crater itself was desolate, a circle of chalky white rock with no plant life, just a faint mist emanating from its depths and a stench of sulfur, like rotten eggs. Phyllis' heart pumped in the thin air. She longed to get back down to the hotel where she could put her feet up, smoke a cigarette and have a drink. Elena, on the other hand, seemed to have gotten a second wind. She shouted when she got to the top, raised her fists to the sky and asked Phyllis to take her photo, smiling tightly. At least Elena was rested, thought Phyllis, irritably. On the way down, Elena thrust forward and passed everyone else with renewed energy, waving her visor cap triumphantly and spitting like a man, when she arrived first at the cable car station. Phyllis was completely spent.

The next day the group took a ferry from Playa Los Cristianos to the smaller island of La Gomera. Phyllis watched for dolphins that never appeared. The women with matching outfits chattered away, the younger couples snapped selfies while the researchers compared notes. Elena stood off by herself on the top deck, her chin jutted, face to the sky, arms crossed like a Viking explorer. Phyllis looked back at the snow-capped volcano, El Teide, amazed to think they had been on top just the day before.

Hernán would have enjoyed this, she thought. An avid hiker, historian and cartographer, his lifelong passion had been tracing paths, studying the routes of the Spanish explorers in the New World. He collected maps as a hobby. Now of course, with Google maps, all that seemed obsolete, which annoyed him to no end. People had their noses glued to their smart

phones, he complained; they had lost common sense, and missed familiar landmarks right before their eyes. Of course, he admitted, it could be useful in the mountains—but what good was a GPS, thought Phyllis, when you were buried under seven feet of snow?

Phyllis had met Hernán at a conference in Boston in 1992. A visiting scholar from Madrid, he was participating in forums marking the five centuries that had passed since Columbus' discovery of the New World. She was a simultaneous translator and this had been her first important job. Nervous, but euphoric to be at such a prestigious event among renowned scholars, she found it easy to translate for him. Afterwards, he thanked her for her efforts and there was an instant connection; love flowed between them easily, naturally. He was curious, a seeker, as was she.

After a brief courtship, they married and travelled widely. Once they went to California, retracing the route of the Spanish Jesuits, from south to north. In San Francisco, Hernán knelt among the tombstones in the Mission Dolores, and under the shade of the palm tree, surrounded by rosemary bushes, he had prayed. Later, living in Spain, they continued to travel and hike in the mountains around Madrid. Luis was born, and they took him along, toting him in a baby carrier. When Luis was older he collected wild flowers with his mother and learned from his father how to distinguish which mushrooms were edible. Hernán taught him to read maps and pitch a tent, to secure the ropes and clamps on their rock climbs. He made him promise never to travel alone. The high point was to have been a trip to the Ordesa National Park in the Pyrenees, which Hernán organized for Luis' nineteenth birthday, just the two of them.

The ferry landed on the island and the group boarded a bus, which wound its way slowly up and around the mountains. As the bus swerved left and right, Damian pointed out the effects of the volcano, offering colorful anecdotes about the isolated inhabitants. Phyllis swayed in her seat, feeling sick. She bumped shoulders with Elena, who had reverted into her shell, sitting by the window again looking grim, fists clenched. Phyllis tried to maintain herself upright, hands folded primly in her lap, feet and thighs pressed together just

as she had as a young girl on the bus in Boston, on her way to elementary school.

They stopped at a restaurant for lunch and afterwards there was a demonstration of *silbo*, the whistle calling which had developed into a language of its own over time. It had been used to communicate on the island, from the top of one mountain peak to another, but was now a dying art. To demonstrate, one waiter cupped his two hands together, as though he were holding a large conch, then gave a loud blow, like a shrill bird call. Phyllis was startled by its intensity.

"I need water!" "I'm thirsty!" cried another waiter, feeding him phrases so that the whistler could translate.

"Fire!" "Help!" The other man whistled, varying the intensity and inflection, adding a little flair at the end, like a flute glissando. "Bananas!" "Whiskey!" The group laughed with approval and tipped the waiters generously. Elena guffawed like a truck driver and sputtered, trying to make whistling sounds with her hands. Phyllis marveled. It was like an old-fashioned Twitter, she thought. She tweeted Hernán mentally: you would have enjoyed this, dear. Imagine, sending each other little messages of love, a hint, an invitation. Luis. I loved you. Hernán. I can't forgive you.

That night, Elena retreated into their room, studying her phone apps on birds and the weather. Phyllis went outside to smoke. It was a crescent moon, and the outline of the mountains stood in relief, the sky pulsing with stars. She whistled between her teeth, the way her father had taught her. A sliver of sound. What could she say anyway? Hernán. Why? When Phyllis returned to the room, Elena was fast asleep, snoring.

At breakfast, Damian urged them all to try *gofio*, a typical food on the island. A rust-colored flour, it was known for its nutritious qualities, an essential food source during times of famine. Elena heaped several spoonfuls on her cereal and ate with gusto.

"Try it," Elena said, between mouthfuls. Phyllis had no taste for it, but Elena insisted. It seemed unpalatable, a nuisance, mixing it with her granola and yoghurt, which was perfectly fine the way it was. Elena munched away noisily, like a horse. Phyllis looked away, finished her fruit, then went to fetch her

backpack. Elena was getting on her nerves.

"I'll go with you," Elena said.

Elena's backpack was twice the size of Phyllis' and packed with God knows what. Phyllis was used to a light pack—it was Hernán who always carried the heavier one, with plenty of water and the first aid kit. He packed everything just so: the plastic tarp first, then the crampons and boot covers, the extra clothing, compass and maps in the top pocket; the jack-knife and binoculars in the side flaps. Phyllis carried sunscreen and the lunch, usually ham and cheese sandwiches but sometimes her favorite, peanut butter and jelly. She also packed dried apricots, just in case. Hernán was diabetic. Funny, how he had been reorganizing his equipment that last night, before he died. Looking for the carabiners and climbing rope. Of course, she should have suspected.

They were on the trail. Phyllis bent down to tighten the laces on her new high-cut Salomon boots. They had thick rubber soles, reinforced at the toe, but she hadn't broken them in sufficiently. They were hard as rocks. She had been silly not to break them in beforehand as the salesperson had advised—of course she knew that, she was an experienced hiker after all. She had brought along Hernán's old battered poles because the springs on hers had broken, but now wished she hadn't. Too many reminders.

Trekking single file, Elena walked behind her, breathing heavily, the rhythmic thud of her poles digging into the earth with each step. The other women in the group chattered and flirted with the photographer and the geologists, while the researchers discussed their findings; the younger people marched ahead at a faster pace. Phyllis fell to the back of the line. She didn't feel like engaging in conversation. She wanted peace, to get in touch with nature, the volcano and the sea, blissful in her anonymity.

She smelled the ferns, the moss, the moist earth, while keeping her eye on the path, watching out for ruts and stones. She daydreamed, trying to block out the annoying thump and clatter of Elena's poles. But when the trail steepened before her, she gasped for air. She wondered if she'd make it to the top. Her heart beat ferociously. She stopped to sip water, and

lagged farther behind the rest of the group. Elena struggled past her without saying a word, grunting and plunging her poles into the ground with a fury. Phyllis waited to catch her breath, enjoying the quiet. Her feet had begun to bother her and she could feel the blisters forming, her big toe rubbing painfully against the leather. The boots were too snug; she hadn't bought the larger size, as the salesperson had advised, out of pure vanity.

Hernán would have chided her. Why wasn't she wearing her old boots, which were already broken in? She did have plenty of water at least, and the dried apricots and other things for emergencies or a change in the weather. But none of that had saved Luis, had it?

"You okay, Phyllis?" asked Damian, who had come back to the last of the stragglers, to make sure no one was left behind.

"Yes, fine." She got up and plodded on, determined to ride it out stoically. She hated complainers, people who made a fuss.

Soon the group began their descent through Garajonay Park. Down the canyon they went, where a deep mist had settled over the laurel forest. The gnarled trees, drenched with thick moss, were covered with a spidery veil of fuzzy green lichen. With curved trunks and knobby branches, they seemed to be listening, like stooped old women wearing fishnet shawls. The ground was soft underfoot; an owl hooted and small lizards skittered under the brush. Phyllis pushed branches out of the way; thistles clawed at her skin. The mist grew denser.

The rest of the group headed off briskly but Phyllis and Elena fell back once again to the end of the line. Phyllis clutched her poles, keeping her eye on the trail, trying to ignore the blisters. Elena, with determination etched on her face, stabbed the ground, her poles striking dirt and rocks in her way. She jerked this way and that, the backpack sliding to and fro, dodging between the trees. They crouched and squeezed their way under and around like mountain goats, shuffling and slipping up and down the trail.

Forging through the thorny brush, Phyllis tripped, hitting her toe on a big tree root which lay broken and twisted, like a dismembered arm. She cried out in pain. As they progressed,

the sky darkened and the shrubs and walls of the canyon seemed to close in on her. After struggling up a steep hill, the mist cleared, then on the descent, it returned, enclosing them in an eerie white veil. She kept her knees bent and her weight forward, as Damian had instructed her, so she wouldn't lose her balance and land on her rear end.

Exhausted, Phyllis dropped back to rest. Damian came up from the rear and asked her if she needed help but she told him to go on, she would meet them at the top of the next peak. She removed a boot, examined her toes and put new Band-Aids on. Her feet were a mess, she was ashamed to admit.

Elena straggled up to her. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Blisters."

"Doesn't look good." Elena removed her backpack and sat down. She guzzled some water from her canister, then offered some to Phyllis.

"I'll wait for you. But first I need to find a place to pee." Elena tromped off, whacking at the bushes, the branches crackling under her feet. Phyllis heard a cry, and a sharp snapping sound.

"Elena?" A light rain had started to fall. Phyllis laced up her boots quickly and limped over in the direction where Elena had gone. She called out again.

"Where are you?" She reached a precipice and looked down. Elena had fallen onto a narrow stone ledge, about three meters' steep. She was rocking back and forth, holding her ankle, groaning in pain.

"Oh God," she moaned. "I think I've broken it."

"I'll get help."

"No! You can't leave me here, goddammit."

Phyllis pondered. The rain came down steadily.

"Wait, maybe I can slide down." Phyllis sat on her butt, and slid on the rocks. Her pants caught on a branch and ripped. She landed with a thump.

"I have my phone," Elena said. "Call Damian." But the phone was useless, there was no coverage. The wind picked up.

Elena began to cry.

"Now stop it," Phyllis said. This was the last thing she needed—Elena, falling apart on her. All this time, pretending to be so strong, but she couldn't live without her phone.

Phyllis hated public outbursts of any kind; she was like her mother, who had always told her not to make a scene, to control herself. This wouldn't do. Phyllis took out her first aid kit, found the gauze bandage and wrapped it around Elena's ankle.

"Elena, please stop it," she said, but Elena snuggled closer and clutched her arm, grimacing with pain. Phyllis wasn't used to these displays of affection either. Her mother had never hugged nor indulged her. And Hernán wasn't the type either—except for the beginning of their relationship. Their healthy lust, the one thing that had carried them through those early years. How sad that sex had become so perfunctory, apart in bed, a dry kiss in the morning.

"Damian will come back any minute—when we don't show." But he seemed to take forever. A wind came up, and the rain continued. Elena's swollen ankle had doubled in size and they were both chilled. Phyllis wished she had brought her heavy rain jacket. She had left it behind, thinking it was too much weight, since the sun had been shining that morning. Hernán would have scolded her too, for taking this unnecessary risk. She searched Elena's backpack and found a plastic tarp to protect them from the rain.

They huddled together, shivering, wedged into a crevice in the canyon wall. From time to time they shouted for help but no one came. Her mind wandered with its usual trickery, replaying the past. What did one think of in that last doomed moment?

"It'll be getting dark soon," Elena said.

Another hour passed. Phyllis shared the last of her sandwich, then they finished the dried apricots and a few almonds.

"They'll find us." It wasn't like they had wandered way off the path. But mountains had a way about them, capable of treachery at any moment.

"Can I tell you something?" Elena said softly. Here it was. "My mother was in a terrible car accident three years ago. Now she's a tetraplegic, in a special care center south of Madrid, in Aranjuez. My dad died in the crash. My older brother is married, with two kids, and my younger sister moved to London with her husband and children, so I'm stuck, the

middle child. I'm single, no kids, so I'm the one that has to be with my mom, talk to the doctors, make sure she takes her medicine and does the exercises—the little that she can do. She can't speak. She looks at me with those eyes—and I know this is a terrible thing to say, but those eyes say, let me die. I try to bring her back to life, I spoon feed her like a baby, comb her hair, read to her; I touch her forehead to see if she has a temperature, the way she did to me when I was little. In between, the physical therapists do what they can—which is nothing. It all falls on me. I told my brother and sister I needed a break. So I came here, to get away."

Elena's voice quavered. "My mother used to be an Olympic swimmer."

"I'm sorry," Phyllis said.

"Do you know what that's like?" Elena burst out, her words sharp as knives against slate. "To see your own mother, unable to move, her scared face, the atrophied muscles, the bedsores and the scaly skin, who can't feel a thing when you massage her toes or press her hand, stuck inside in a cold metal wheelchair for the rest of her life. Do you know how I feel? I'm cursed! Sometimes I want to kill her!" Elena sobbed. "I didn't mean that, I didn't—"

"It's all right," Phyllis said. "Of course, it's a terrible burden. You've had it all bottled up inside." Elena covered her face with her hands.

Phyllis patted her on the back, the way she did sometimes when Hernán was despondent; a useless gesture, their physical intimacy long gone, her body a dried-up fig. Of course, other people had their tragedies too.

They heard Damian calling for them and were finally discovered. Damian slid down the rock, landed easily on the shelf, and surveyed the pair of women in silence. After bandaging Elena's leg, he managed to hoist them up to the main path with the aid of another guide who had come with a stretcher. Damian was livid.

"You're my responsibility. If anything happens to a member of the group, I'm screwed!"

"I'm sorry," said Phyllis, noting his guilty face, thinking he shouldn't have left them alone in the first place.

Reunited with the main group, they called an ambulance. While they waited, Damian related the legend of Gara and Jonay, two ill-fated lovers who lost their way in the forest after a powerful earthquake. El Teide erupted and the sea around La Gomera turned a glowing red. The lovers, unable to find their way out, took a lance made of laurel, sharpened at both ends and stabbed themselves in their chests. They died in each other's embrace. Hence, the mysterious misty forest was given the name Garajonay.

Such were life's choices—so confounding, thought Phyllis, bitterly. What a lot of fuss, that could have been avoided.

Phyllis woke up the next morning with a headache, dizzy and exhausted from the events of the previous day. Elena had been taken to the hospital, where the doctors put her foot in a cast. It was their last day on the island. Before leaving, the group went to visit the Casa de la Aduana, a white square stucco building from the fifteenth century with a red tiled roof and wooden beams. In the center of the inner courtyard there was a well, with a plaque dedicated to Columbus. Supposedly he had drawn water there right before he set off for the New World and had used it to bless the trip.

How odd, that in all her travels with Hernán, retracing the footsteps of the Spanish colonizers, they had never been here, where it started. She walked around the stone well; the bucket and pulley, still attached with a thick rotted cord. She peered inside and spit into the dark space, to see if she could hear it hit the waters' surface. She heard a faint plop. She craned over and thought she saw her face reflected, then was taken aback.

It was Hernán's.

Here he was again, staring at her oddly, as she had found him. His eyes, open and accusing; the mouth and purple tongue—mute. His body swinging gently over his desk. The smell of urine. The climbing rope and carabiners hanging from the ceiling. A crumpled note. The dove cooing on the window ledge, unperturbed. The lowered blinds, the deadly heat, the fan whirring, the trellised wallpaper like a ragged cage, closing in on her. A hush, and a scream. The phone call, the paramedics, the shattered glass and the map, torn into

a thousand pieces; picking at shards with bleeding fingers, then scrubbing the rug uselessly in an insane moment.

Phyllis hurried back to the bus, ignoring the others. She found a window seat near the back and pressed her forehead against the cool pane. She put her sunglasses on, closed her eyes, folded her hands. When they arrived at the ferry terminal for their return trip to Tenerife, Phyllis waited until everyone else had boarded and then went to stand by herself at the rear. As the ferry pulled from shore she looked back at the island, the wide swath of the wake, the seagulls soaring in its path. Columbus must have had this view as he bid farewell to this last bit of land, still uncertain of his final destination.

Hernán had missed this part completely. She hit the railing with her fists. They were supposed to forge on—together. That's what he said they must do. But instead, they had lain, side by side like those granite tombs of Spanish royalty with their likeness engraved on top—she could hardly remember the last time they had made love.

"Phyllis!" Elena called from behind her. Phyllis could hear her clomping along the deck, hobbling on crutches. She stood next to Phyllis, looking out over the ocean.

"Beautiful island, isn't it?" Elena said.

Phyllis began to sob.

"Oh no." Elena paused. "I'm really sorry—maybe my story upset you. And now this." She groaned and tapped the cast with her crutch.

"Oh," Phyllis said. She felt weak, her body trembled. Sniffling uncontrollably, her sunglasses slid off her nose; she grabbed them and wiped the tears hastily with the back of her hand. Elena turned and stared at her. A sudden recognition.

"Phyllis, I meant to tell you—thank you—for listening. It was like a weight just lifted off me. I know you—"

"Stop it will you!" Phyllis cringed. She wasn't going to accept any more pity. She kept her lips closed in a tight line, wordless, resisting. Elena looked out to sea. They said nothing.

Phyllis' blood surged, her sorrow burned and smoldered, more tears flowed. Elena reached for her and the two women stood, hand in hand, braced against the wind, while Phyllis let the horror of the avalanche overtake her, suffocating her in its cold whiteness on Monte Perdido—Luis, Luis! Hernán

had dug himself out, but left his son there, cocooned forever. Her hair blew back in her face like the fan whirring over her husband's body, hanging like a sack. How to forgive?

Faith Shearin

Sand

The summer of my parents' divorce, my mother, Ruth, and I moved two miles away to a cottage by the sea while my father, Henry, stayed on in the neighborhood of my childhood, in a house that quickly became dark, dusty, and silent. That first summer, I was with my mother during the week, and with my father on weekends. It was humid, and my skin felt wet, whether I had been swimming or not.

For much of June and July I was either floating on a raft in the ocean, or attending grief group with my mother because my sister, Beth, was dead. She had driven off the three mile bridge that connects our island to the mainland, with her boyfriend, Caleb, and two girls named Amy and Heather. Sometimes I dreamed of Beth's car filling with water: how no one could open a door or window, and all the time they were descending into that strange unbreathable world beneath the surface. Sometimes, in the dreams, I was my sister and sometimes I was watching her as the car grew heavier.

The first week of June, my mother's sisters, Anne and Frances, came to visit. They were large women, prone to tearful outbursts and, because my mother was the youngest, they hovered over her as they must have when she was small. They came with six heavy suitcases, and at least three of their bags were devoted to mysterious creams, ointments, and hairsprays, vibrant lipsticks and nail polishes. Frances also brought her cat, Christmas: a plump, white creature, under abundant fur, with a pinched face. This was an immediate problem because our cottage had a crooked tree in the yard, and that tree was full of cats.

Our island is hospitable to feral cats: seafood washes up daily, and it is rarely cold, so they wander our beaches, and sleep under abandoned cottages, and multiply; it is not unusual to find a tribe of cats sunning themselves at low tide; they drape themselves over our gravestones, our outdoor furniture, our stairs. When my aunt's cat, Christmas, went out to relieve himself, he wound up in a hissing match with

the cats who occupy our property: hair raised, swollen back, sounds formed deep in the throat.

Afterwards, I found myself driving with my aunts, in the slow traffic of tourists; each June they arrived on our island to get sunburns, buy post cards, and return home with tiny lighthouses inside globes of water that rained glitter if you turned them upside down.

"This is some kind of traffic," Frances said, as she steered us onto the beach road.

"Is it always like this, Hazel?" Anne asked.

"Yes," I said, "In summer."

I felt a headache coming on, from my aunts' perfume; I was alone in the wide back seat and I shifted to one side, turned my head to look out the window. In this way, if I did not turn around, I could imagine Beth and I were together. In the months since Beth drowned, I had tried different positions in the back seat: the middle made me feel sick—emptiness opening on either side—but if I sat on the left, the side Beth favored, I felt worse: my own abandoned space by the window suggesting I was the one who died.

"How is your mother?" Anne asked me.

We stopped so three middle aged men in bathing suits could cross the street, to the beach, with a cooler, and a stack of folding chairs.

"She's okay, I guess," I said.

I thought of my mother, who had spent the past month on the porch of our cottage, among cats, looking out at the ocean as it writhed and changed color; she was not hungry and she did not drink the hot tea I brought her but let it sit, growing dark and cold.

"It's never the same," she said, and I was not sure if she was talking about the ocean, or our life without my father and Beth.

"We did not need a litter box this badly," said Anne, after another twenty minutes.

We passed the huge dunes that formed a park, Jockey's Ridge, where children climbed and flew kites. From the top of those dunes, you could see both sides of our island: the blue ocean, the darker sound, and the sand itself, in between,

shifting and changing shape. I began thinking of the sand blowing through my childhood: on the floors of our cars, in my sheets, in buckets Beth and I filled together. Sand was the irritation that caused our oysters to make pearls; there was the sand we could never sweep out of our house, and the sand that blew into our sandwiches whenever we had picnics, so we had the sensation of eating glass.

"Have I told you about my neighbor, Nancy?" Frances asked Anne.

"No, I don't think so," Anne said.

I could tell Anne didn't want to know about Nancy.

"She had a rash on her breast and, of course, she thought it was nothing," Frances said, "She thought it was probably an allergic reaction to her laundry detergent, or that she was wearing a bra with an irritating fabric."

I rolled down my window and there was Beth again, in the sinking car with her friends. If she had just waited until they were half sunk in water, and pushed very hard on the door, it might have opened and now I imagined her rising towards the surface, the water filling with light.

"But when Nancy went to the doctor," Frances went on, "they told her it was stage 4 breast cancer, and you know how she always had that beautiful, long hair? It's all gone now; she's as bald as the moon. We have been making casseroles for her at church."

"Is this our store?" Anne asked, pointing to our left at an old cement building with a burned out sign.

I thought of a bald woman named Nancy eating casseroles; I imagined how she would die and meet my sister in a place like Atlantis where they would swim through hallways and float over their own furniture.

On Saturday, my father came to get me, and my mother's sisters stared out at him through the slits in the blinds. I was sitting with my suitcase in the living room, where Christmas had been trying out each piece of our furniture: his white fur drifting over chairs and accumulating near a window where he liked to languish on a pillow; he turned his big albino head to watch me leave, his gaze indifferent.

My father was now the owner of a golden retriever named

Ino, after the sea nymph who saved Odysseus from drowning. My father did not come to grief group with my mother and me, but had a psychiatrist of his own: a man with a Spanish accent who recommended he get a dog so he would not feel alone in the new silence of his life. The dog was devoted to my father; she went to work with him, crouched under his desk, while he fashioned arguments and briefs; she wagged her tail for him whenever he came home from buying groceries, and she slept beside him at night, turned on her side, her chin resting on his pillow.

My father took me to fly a kite on a beach in Nags Head and, while he threw sticks in the ocean for Ino, I unwrapped a kite shaped like a dragon and ran along the shore until it lifted, riding the currents of air I could not see: its tail swishing in a cave of wind, fire flapping in its mouth.

"I've started going to church," my father told me, when we sat down together in the sand.

"I thought you were an atheist," I said.

"I am," he said, "But my psychiatrist told me I should allow myself to ask spiritual questions."

"Are we going to church tomorrow?" I asked.

"It only takes an hour," he told me.

Ino stepped out of the ocean, a stick in her mouth, and shook herself very hard.

At the Unitarian church on Sunday, my father and I were late and sat at the back; the minister was describing how Cain killed Abel, and was banished to the Land of Nod: marked by God. He said there were none among us who had not been jealous, as Cain was when his father praised his brother's offering, and insulted his own. It was natural, the minister said, to feel competitive, but these first brothers showed us that rivalry can ruin the goodness in our hearts. I thought then of Beth, in her last months, opening the window late at night so she could sleep on the beach with Caleb. I was angry with her as soon as she fell in love: I felt abandoned, lonely, unimportant. In the weeks before she died, I often sat with my back to her, pretending to read a book. Even Cain's descendants were too flawed to survive: erased by a flood; I imagined him, East of Eden, where rain clouds gathered.

We went back to my father's house, so I could pack my suitcase, and the street where Beth and I rode our bikes led to the driveway where we once found a snapping turtle. Beyond that, was the beach where we sometimes slipped off our suits in the evening and swam with the water against our bare skin. Beneath a tree, there was a hammock where every member of our family had slept with a book over their chest. I did not stay in my old bedroom when I visited my father, but on a bed in the laundry room where our grandmother used to sleep.

"Your mother should have been more careful," Grandma Hawthorne said to me in April, after the funeral, when everyone began to place blame. My sister hadn't been at the wheel; it had been Amy and Heather in the front seat, Caleb and Beth behind. No one had been drinking; there were no other cars on the road; they were just driving home from a school dance, in a light rain.

I was searching for socks when I found some of Beth's clothes, folded on a table beside my father's shirts; I decided to take them with me, to wear them sometimes when I was alone.

At the cottage, my mother and her sisters had been playing cards and eating take out Chinese food. The white boxes that were once their lunch formed a miniature city on a counter in the kitchen.

"How is your father?" my mother asked me.

"Fine," I said.

Aunt Frances and Aunt Anne sat together at a table by the window, painting their nails; they had opened one of their suitcases and spread the contents over a wilted newspaper.

"Want your nails painted?" Aunt Anne asked me.

"No, thank you," I said.

"Did you do anything fun over the weekend?" Aunt Frances asked.

"Dad took me to church," I said.

"He did?" my mother asked.

Christmas, who had been on the ground swishing his tail, leapt onto the counter and the city of leftovers trembled.

That night, I wore Beth's clothes and went walking on the beach with the wild cats. They came out of their tree to follow me, their tails in the air like question marks. We walked under a pier, and past a doomed sandcastle; we walked where a baby and a bird once passed. Sand has a short memory: a shape pressed against it for a day before the wind or tide erases the story. I'd brought a bottle with me, with a message inside, for my sister, who now lived in the sea. In it, I told her about grief group, and our father's new dog waiting for him to come home, and about Cain living in exile, knowing he had no brother. I told her about our mother, sitting on the porch, looking out at the waves, and eating nothing; I said I was sorry I had not been a better sister. Then, before I went into our cottage, I poured all the sand from my shoes.

James Hanna

Tower Duty

When cancer took Murray, I was such an ingrate. Weren't my forty years of marriage to him enough? Weren't the two daughters God gave us enough? He lived almost a year after Doctor Diver diagnosed his brain tumor—wasn't that enough? Why must we set our hearts on things that must be limited? The Lord gives, the Lord takes—we should let it go at that.

How I wish I could follow my own advice. When that dark shadow fell across Murray's bed, I bawled like a calf. "Not yet, Bunny," I said. "Not yet." But he slipped away from me without saying so much as a word. My God, I'd have given my very soul for another day with him. But souls like mine are a penny a dozen. Why on earth would God make an exemption for a dumpy little housewife from Newcastle? A bailiff's daughter who'd lived her whole life in a podunk Indiana town.

Yet the Lord wanted *Murray's* soul—why I can't imagine. A TV hound, a sloppy drunk, and an absentee father, he was in *no way* remarkable. The Lord might have just as well left him with me for all the good he was. Goodness, was he really worth all my tears? I think some women are criers and that's all that needs to be said about it.

Still, I was such a wreck at the funeral that Billie and Sarah Jean, our daughters, had to hold me up. Afterwards, I went to see Father Mulligan at The Holy Family Cathedral. Father Mulligan is such a well-meaning man—I wish I had treated him better. "We cannot understand God's ways," he told me in a voice that could butter pancakes. "But know that he loves you, Loretta."

I wanted to scratch his eyes out, I wanted to slap his face. "If you *ever* want me back in your parish," I snapped, "you will have to say more than 'God loves you.'"

After Murray was laid to rest, I volunteered at the Newcastle Food Pantry. I had to keep myself busy so as not to lose my mind. So every day, for three hours a day, I handed out Spam and boxes of cornflakes to people down on their luck. It

helped to not be so selfish, it helped to think about others for awhile. Sometimes, I even held hands with them and we said a little prayer.

But each afternoon after working in the pantry, I visited Murray's grave. The small things were what I remembered most: how he hogged the covers at night, how he always drove five miles under the speed limit, how he liked his morning coffee black with four teaspoons of sugar. One afternoon as I stood by his grave, his voice popped into my head. It gave me such a fright that I dropped my memorial roses. *Stop wasting your time, Loretta,* he said. *Go back to the church, I'm not here.* How sanctimonious he sounded—is that what death does to a soul? If he wants to nag me like a bill collector, I'd rather he just moved on. He was a whole lot nicer before God took him—I guess because he was soused half the time.

One afternoon, as I stood by Murray's grave, I noticed two trees on a hill. One of the trees was lush and flowering, the other was leafless and gnarled. And I realized my life was just like those two trees. My youthful bloom was gone—I was pretty when I was young. But now I was like the second tree—twisted, old, and droopy but still of some use to the birds. Thank God, I was learning to look up.

Murray never earned much money as a representative for Universal Windows. He was mostly paid in commissions, and he wasn't that good a salesman. But although I know how to make do with little, I still needed to find a job. That isn't so easy for a woman of sixty who hobbles like a goose. Thirty years ago, I broke my knee when I fell off a step ladder. Doctor Diver said I needed surgery, but who has time for that? With two daughters to raise and a husband to feed, I had to stay on my feet. "Don't tell me how to run my life," I said to Doctor Diver. That was the last time he ever spoke to me about surgery.

A month after Murray passed, I went to Wal-Mart and asked for a job. The manager said they weren't hiring. I also applied at Target, but they didn't want me either. I even went to the local college and asked for a job in the cafeteria. "I make a real mean pot roast," I told the personnel director. He was a pleasant man with a comb-over and a little pot belly

like Murray's. Well, he put me on a waiting list, but never called me back.

I finally got a job as a guard at the Indiana Penal Farm—a factory farm correctional facility five miles out of town. Imagine me wearing a blue uniform and telling grown men what to do. But they're always hiring at the Penal Farm, I should have gone there first. They have to staff three shifts so they hire any warm body.

Major Bundy, who interviewed me, asked so many questions. "Can you say no to inmates?" "Could you shoot a man from a tower?" "Do rapists and thieves disgust you?" I guess he was trying to frighten me, but he didn't scare me one wit. We're all God's children under the skin. We all need the love of the Lord. And since the job was mostly sitting, it wouldn't be hard on my knee.

They sent me to a two-week training academy at the Westville Correctional Facility—this enormous fenced-in complex beside Lake Michigan. I learned how to search a bunk; I learned how to fire a Mini-14, which is a lot like a squirrel gun. I also learned how to keep my mouth shut when the instructors were trying to talk. Lieutenant Brady, who ran most of our classes, took me aside on my first day of training. Such a serious little man he was, and he scowled like Old Man Winter. "Loretta," he said, his voice sharper than a tack. "You've told me, 'God bless you' six times today. *Nobody* needs that much blessing."

When I showed up at the Farm for my first morning roll call, Major Bundy summoned me into his office. "Can you say no to inmates?" he repeated—my, what a tiresome question. I told him he needed to say no to doughnuts—that man must weigh four hundred pounds. He said, "Honey, we don't need wise apples here."

"Apples for you would be wise," I said.

Major Bundy laughed like a donkey—I guess the man has a good heart. "Be careful here, Loretta," he said as he rubbed his heavy jowls. "This work's not for everyone."

They paired me up with Officer Whitley who worked in the intake and processing unit. It's a long narrow building with unwaxed floors where newly arrived prisoners are housed.

Our job was to assign the new inmates to cells when they got off the prison bus. We also marched them to the dining hall for meals.

Officer Whitley, a silver-haired gentleman in his seventies, gave me a piece of advice. "Let 'em know when you're walking the range," he said. "Rattle your keys, shuffle your feet, whistle a tune real loud. You catch 'em doing drugs or something, you'll have to write 'em up. If you write up too many of these scumbags, you may end up getting jumped."

But the inmates didn't seem mean to me—not as mean as Officer Whitley. They nodded politely and called me ma'am and asked me for something to read. The fish—that's what they call new inmates—are not allowed to have books. They just sit in cramped cells day after day while they wait to be assigned jobs. My God, even robbers and thieves don't deserve to be that bored.

On Sundays, we marched the fish to the prison chapel where they listened to Chaplain Clayton. The man is half saint and half banty rooster—he's always quarreling with someone then apologizing for his temper. But that man can belt out a sermon much better than Father Mulligan. I guess it takes a congregation of felons to bring out the fire in a preacher. He's a handsome man too—his shock of white hair makes him look like Martin Sheen.

Each day, Chaplain Clayton left the chapel, laden with Bibles and pamphlets. And he handed them out to the fish. He said the prison can't stop the men from receiving religious material. Even a fish is allowed to have literature that might bring him closer to God. So I went to the Christian bookstore in Newcastle and got the seller to donate a bunch of books. Books about criminals and heretics who turned their lives over to Jesus. And I gave these books to the men on the fish range, and they all said, "Thank you, Missus Yoakum." The book they liked best was the one about the Manson Family.

Well, Major Bundy stopped me in the parking lot and scolded me like a parrot. "You can't run a lending library, Loretta," he said in his big gruff voice.

"I'm not lending those books," I snapped. "I'm giving them away."

"You're bending the rules, Loretta," he said.

I said, “Jesus bent ’em too.”

Major Bundy shook his head and said, “You gotta learn to tell inmates no. If you try to be friends with these bojacks, you’re going to end up in their trick bag.”

The next day at roll call, the Major announced that I was being reassigned. I was going to go to the school dorm, and I’d be on the afternoon shift. “Be careful of the cons in that dormitory,” Major Bundy advised me. “All that education is making them smarter crooks.”

This time they paired me up with a female officer. Her name was Officer Collins and her shoulders were as broad as a man’s. She also wore her hair short like Ellen DeGeneres. I can’t say I approve of that kind of lifestyle, but she was nice enough to the inmates and liked to crack a joke. I suppose the love of the Lord can even be spread by sinners.

Officer Collins was very patient as she coached me through the job. Not that I needed a whole lot of coaching—there wasn’t that much to do. Three times a shift, we counted the inmates while they sat upon their bunks. We then compared our totals to make sure the numbers matched. We also searched footlockers at random to check for weapons and drugs. If an inmate had any contraband, we put him on report. And once every hour we phoned the key room and gave a status report. I think they made us do this so we wouldn’t fall asleep.

Most of the inmates in the school dorm were boys around twenty years old. And a few of them liked to hang around the officers’ desk and chat with me. Like all boys, they were a little bit mischievous, and they started to pull my leg. “Ain’t choo scared to work here, Missus Yoakum?” one of them said.

“Why, are you going to murder me?” I asked; they got a big laugh out of that.

One of the boys, whose name was Bubba, started calling me Mother Yoakum. “Hippity hop!” he’d call out to the dorm whenever I announced count. “If yer butt ain’t on yer bed, Mother Yoakum gonna cut a switch.”

Bubba and I had some lively chats, which helped pass the time. He was a skinny boy with crooked teeth and tattoos of women on his forearms. He always had a foolish smirk on his face, and he seemed a little bit simple. My goodness, the things he told me would have made a sailor blush. “Didja

know," he said, "that I dropped out of high school 'cause it interfered with my jacking off?"

"Too much of that, Bubba," I said, "will *keep* you simple-minded."

"Yer right," Bubba said, "'cause I did a dumb thing. I robbed a Seven Eleven to get money to buy myself porn."

"Bubba, that's so silly," I said. "Why didn't you go to church?"

Bubba said he now went to church to listen to Chaplain Clayton. He said he was going to get baptized and spread the word of the Lord. He also told me that in a couple of months he would have his GED. When I told him I was proud of him, he snorted like a colt. "I gotta serve four more years, Missus Yoakum. What can I do with that kind of time once I got my GED?" I assured him I would pray for him and I hoped the time passed quickly.

After I'd been in the school dorm three weeks, Major Bundy gave me a lecture. He told me I was being much too friendly with inmates and I needed to cut that out. "You can't be buddies with them, Loretta. I explained that once already." When I told him those poor boys needed to talk, he said, "Let 'em talk to the chaplain. If a con spends too much time with an officer, it makes him look like a snitch."

Major Bundy said I was being reassigned—he was pulling me out of the school dorm. He said I'd be going to the northeast tower to work the midnight shift.

The following evening at midnight, I started my new assignment. They put me in the guard tower at the remotest corner of the prison. The tower shack was a concrete room atop a fifty foot pillar. It was empty except for a desk, a chair, and a toilet that needed cleaning. The room was surrounded by windows, which gave me a bird's-eye view of the grounds and the dormitories behind the double wire fence. A rack by the desk held a Mini-14 to shoot escaping inmates.

The shift supervisor, Captain Hodgkins, was a lean little man with the face of a weasel and a temperament to match. He told me to keep my eyes open and to report anything suspicious. He said I could take a snack with me if I put it in a paper bag. He said, "Don't be taking no lunch box up there. I searched an officer's lunch box last week and found a

television in it."

"I'll bet he got good reception," I said; Captain Hodgkins didn't laugh.

"If I catch you sleepin' on duty," he said, "I'll fire you on the spot. If you let an inmate climb over the fence, I'll fire you on the spot. If you show up one minute late for roll call . . ."

"You'll fire me on the spot," I said. Goodness, what a tiresome man; I wanted to box his ears.

It was quiet as a morgue in the tower, but I didn't feel lonely at all. Sitting fifty feet above the prison made me feel so much closer to God. Each hour on the hour, I punch-dialed the intercom phone to check in with the key room officer. "All's well here, hon," was all I ever said. Since the inmates were all sound asleep in their bunks, I had nothing else to report.

Of course, Captain Hodgkins did what he could to catch me nodding off. I never knew when that silly man would sneak up the spiral staircase. I think it was a bit of a game to him so I decided to play along. Every time he appeared at the doorway, I offered him cookies and coffee.

On my third night in the tower, I saw movement inside the fence. Two shadowy figures were dawdling behind it like lovers out for a stroll. At first, I thought they were guards; a perimeter light wasn't working too well and I could barely make them out. But when they started to climb the inner fence, I knew an escape was happening. I punch-dialed the key room officer. This time, I got no response.

I slid open a window and gave them a shout; they had already scaled the inner fence and dropped to the ground below. They looked brighter now because they had taken their shirts off to cover the razor wire. Their shirts hung down from the wire like flags.

I racked the slide of the Mini-14. "I can see you both real plain," I called out.

"How ya doin', Missus Yoakum?" one of them answered. I recognized Bubba's voice.

"I was doing just fine 'til you got here," I said. "Bubba, you need to stay put."

"Why? You gonna murder me?" Their laughter fluttered like moths.

Well, duty is duty but oh my God, my hands were shaking like Jell-O. "Bubba, you're going to miss breakfast," I said. What a silly thing to say.

"Can't talk with you no more," Bubba said. "What church do you go to, Missus Yoakum? I'll meet you there on Sunday and buy you a *pancake* breakfast."

As they started to climb the outer fence, I could feel Murray lurking beside me. *Loretta, stop your chatter,* he said. How annoying that man had become.

Bubba was the first to reach the top of the fence so I pointed the rifle at him. When I released the safety, I felt more alone that I had ever felt in my life. It must have been just like Jesus felt the day he was nailed to the cross. The day they marched him to Calvary and hung him between two thieves. *Why, Lord?* I prayed. *Why this test? Why did you give me this test?*

As my finger found the trigger, a shadow fell over Bubba. It was the same dark shadow that fell over Murray before he left me behind. I squeezed the trigger gently, as though I was milking a cow. The report sounded hollow, the gun had no kick—so it startled me when Bubba froze before climbing over the top of the fence.

"*Damn*, Missus Yoakum, I'm sorry," he said then he didn't say anything more. He just swayed like a bough struck by lightning then fell to the ground with a thump. Even when his friend started shaking him, Bubba lay as still as a log.

"Don't shoot no more, please!" his friend shouted, and he kept on shaking Bubba. "Bubba," he cried. "You sack of shit! Just look what you made her do!"

As a puddle grew around Bubba, I said a little prayer. I can only hope that the good Lord heard it. The prison alarm was now wailing so loud it could have awakened the dead.

Things are topsy-turvy—they don't add up anymore. Do you know they gave me an assembly for shooting that wretched boy? I received a color guard salute, and a bagpiper played a march. And the superintendant made this speech about how well I'd done my duty. Goodness, from all the fuss they made, you'd have thought I had won the lottery.

After the ceremony, Major Bundy called me into his office. "Those boys profiled you, Loretta," he said. "They knew you

were in that tower. The only reason they climbed that fence was because they didn't think you would shoot."

A month later, I went on medical leave—Major Bundy signed off on it. A plum-size lump had shown up in my lung, and I couldn't catch my breath. Doctor Diver ordered a bunch of tests and he looked like he was concerned. But I can't really say that I dwelled on it much. Winter comes to all.

I don't want to go to heaven though—not if it's full of Father Mulligans. My God, I would be bored to death there. I don't want to see too much of Murray either—he's turned into such an ass. I guess forty years of marriage to him really were enough. No, I want to be where that poor boy is—wherever the Lord chose to put him. I want to spend more time with him. I want to box his ears.

Nektaria Petrou

Black Lace

Savina stared at the black menace peeking out from the crevice between the velveteen cushions of her husband's couch. A sock, surely. Andreas was always leaving his socks around, along with orange peels, apple cores, stray note papers, underpants with overstretched elastic, and whatever else he couldn't be bothered to find a place for. And yet his socks didn't have scalloped edges like that, nor diaphanous designs. Almost like lace.

Savina looked out the window, toward the cypress trees of Saint Eleftherios Cemetery, jutting up like ragged, overused paint brushes behind the weedy stone wall. Istanbul, she'd always said, was the City of the Dead. Her husband, a native of the place, would disagree with her: over fourteen million lived there, and three thousand "of us" still remained. By *us*, he meant the native Greek minority, a tiny community doomed to extinction. A community that Andreas himself refused to call Greek: they were Rums, he'd say, the last descendants of the Eastern Romans. Those who hadn't left in the wake of the 1955 pogrom were rotting in cemeteries like Saint Eleftherios, surrounded by Soviet-style cement, gypsies, broken asphalt, and dozens of stray cats.

Savina took a sip of American filter coffee—a preference she'd picked up during their thirteen-year teaching stint in Brooklyn. Bitter and stale. Too lazy to make a new pot, Andreas had probably reheated the coffee he'd made that morning. Savina glanced at the couch cover, now a heap of blue-flowered polyester on the laminate floor. It wasn't quite as dirty and disheveled as the rest of the apartment, but the coffee stains and crumbs showed a need for washing. She'd been about to take it to the kitchen, where Andreas was cooking stuffed vine leaves, when the black menace caught her eye. She felt an abrupt, unwelcome awakening, like when she wore her sleep mask, ripped it off her face in her dreams, and burst through the layers of sleep into her bright bedroom. But she only wanted to remove the *feeling* of the mask, not

the mask itself. And she certainly never wanted to wake.

Savina pulled the black thing by the scalloped edge. It unfolded, one tug at a time, a nothing-thing that would belong to a woman half her size. It wasn't even a regular thong with a substantial crack piece, but a daring triangle held together by mere threads. With it came a string of memories. Twenty years ago, while they were teaching at Saint George School in Brooklyn: Andreas had been so helpful to that widow teacher, Lena Kosti. Fifteen years ago, just after they'd moved back to Greece: he'd answered his cell phone while driving and said, *Hi, baby*. And then he'd started visiting Thessaloniki too often. Once Savina had snuck up on him in his attic study and heard him describing his ideal blow job into the telephone.

There were explanations. He'd helped Lena Kosti find an apartment in a difficult city. The *Hi, baby* had been for their eleven year-old daughter. Andreas had taken a church cantoring job in Thessaloniki to make more money for Savina and the kids. The blow-job woman had been a telephone sex worker. A distraction. Telephone sex wasn't infidelity, after all. Neither were blow jobs: the American president had proven that.

But Andreas was a family man, a theology teacher. He changed diapers (their children's, his mother's, their grandson's), did the grocery shopping, called repair men, and dealt with everyone from construction workers to the butcher. He was so busy. How could he have time for *that*?

But the black lace thong.

In her hands.

Savina herself had sent Andreas to Istanbul from their home in Kavala. After the crisis struck in Greece, their retirement stipends were cut in half. Not one of their three adult children could find steady work near home. And Savina certainly didn't want the children to emigrate. When job opportunities came up in Madrid and Amsterdam, Savina, whom the children called Buddha for her succinct pronouncements and sage opinions, said, "Too far." Besides, Andreas was a good cantor, and Istanbul churches paid cantors far better than Greek churches. His departure (along with his mother's, of course, because the old woman had to go with him) brought relief. Andreas no longer complained about the stinking pots in

the sink and the cobwebs in the rafters. She no longer heard him say, "You didn't make dinner *again*? Why do I have to do *everything*?"

But lately people had been talking about a Brit who was leaving heart symbols on romantic songs that Andreas posted on Facebook. Their daughter Viky had sat Savina down on the porch, facing the pines and olives that Andreas himself had planted. "Mama," she said, taking Savina's hand, "Baba might have someone in Istanbul. You need to bring him home."

Andreas? Sixty-one? Bald? With a limp? A grandfather? Could he even get it up anymore? Not that Savina would know. Sex had never been her thing, not even at thirty. So much mess for just a small bit of pleasure (which one didn't always get anyway). And who could feel anything for a furry old man with a lopsided belly, an ogre who left orange peels all over the damn house, even on the piano?

Savina held the thong to her nose: it smelled of roses.

She marched into the closet of a kitchen, displaying the thong before her face, stretching it between the tips of her fingers. Andreas looked up from the gas camp stove.

"I found this in the couch," Savina said. "I suppose it belongs to your Brit?"

"Nicoletta's not a Brit, just lived there for a while. She kept her stuff in the storage space under the couch this winter."

"*This* wasn't in the storage space."

Andreas wiped his hands on a dish towel and draped it over his bare shoulder. "So?"

Under other circumstances, Savina would have questioned whether a man with so much chest hair should be cooking without a shirt, but the black thong was more important. She said, "While I was taking care of the kids at home, you were—"

"I just helped her out." Andreas pulled up his drooping trousers, which he hadn't bothered to button.

"You can't fool me anymore." Savina snapped the thong in front of his face. "This is exactly what women like *that* wear for . . . *adventures*. Lace! Black! All string!"

Andreas's snake lips curled over greying teeth. "It's a thong. What's it supposed to have?" He turned off the flame beneath the vine leaves. "I told you about Nicoletta. She translated the kids' resumes. Would I tell you about her if I was fucking her?"

Savina examined the thong again. At the tip of the triangle, an inch above the spot where the crack-string attached, was a thin, dry, shiny film. "You can't deceive me any longer," she said. "Get out of my way."

Savina's posterior was too wide for the narrow clearance between her husband and the kitchen table, so Andreas stepped into the hallway. Savina pushed inside the kitchen, threw the dirty thing into the rubbish bag that he kept atop a plastic stool, and washed her hands with dish soap. Through the curtainless window she could see the pale tombstones of Saint Eleftherios, lonely crosses and dirty monoliths dotting the fading greenery of early October. She wanted to scream. But however upset she was, it was best not to wake his mother, who was dozing in the next room, hooked up to her nebulizer.

Savina hissed, "God save your soul!"

She returned to the living room and crumpled onto the couch, the same couch where . . . how old had Viky said the Brit was? Thirty-nine? A pseudo-poet or something? Andreas could be her father. He'd be humiliated in the eyes of their grandson—if the baby were old enough to understand, which he wasn't. Viky had forced Savina to look at a Facebook picture of the culprit: thin as a column, long brown hair. But the photo hadn't shaken Savina. Firstly, because the Brit was too attractive for a man like Andreas. Secondly, because the Brit's breasts were so small, and Savina's so large. What man could be turned on by lemons like that? Savina didn't say any of this to Viky, who was herself meagerly endowed with lemons.

Now, through the open window, Savina could hear a man on a loud speaker hawking something in Turkish. She went to the balcony. Below, a red pickup filled with apples and pears was crawling up the hill. Syrian refugee children, sitting on their broken doorsteps, were singing in Arabic. Older boys, the same ones who always kicked around a beat-up, half-deflated ball, shouted in Kurdish. This was Tatavla's *Son Durak*: Last Stop. Perfectly fitting. Savina hated the garbage in the streets at sunset, the satellite dishes covering the cement facades like barnacles, the bathroom pipes that smelled like sewage. She wanted her salt air and pines, her wormy apple trees and geraniums, the weedy fennel beside the porch of the four-

story house they had built overlooking the Gulf of Kavala and the three hills of Thasos island, sprawling like a woman on her back, arms above her head, knees slightly bent.

Why had Savina listened to that priest, thirty-six years ago? She should've known that Andreas's sudden enthusiasm for her would eventually be transferred elsewhere. Besides, his feet were the ugliest she'd ever seen, crooked clubs with thick yellow nails. She was embarrassed when they went to the beach. Worse yet, he defended the Turks when anyone mentioned Greece's suffering at their hands. She'd only spoken to him because she'd wanted to spend more time with Vasilis, his best friend, a swimmer with blond curls and the feet of an Ancient statue. A patriot whose brother had been killed in Cyprus. A man who was proud to call himself Greek.

Savina refused Andreas's first proposal. He insisted she see Father Dionysius, an abbot with a long white beard, who told her, while sitting on a stool outside his cabin, that Andreas was the man for her. "He's a gift from God, a provider, a man who will run about with fire in his feet to get things done. You'll be able to build a home, have children. That's all a woman really wants, isn't it?"

"But I don't love him," twenty-three year-old Savina replied.

"It would be a pity to break his heart. Besides, you're not the kind who can manage on her own."

Savina *was* very bad at everything. She couldn't even cook. Her mother said she was irresponsible, and yet Savina desperately wanted children and a name: *wife*. Perhaps she wasn't worthy of a man like Vasilis. With Andreas, she wouldn't have to worry about life overwhelming her. She would be Mrs. Yannopoulou. Respectable. Situated. Legalized. Authorized by the church to procreate. Wasn't that enough? All a woman really wanted?

She accepted Andreas's proposal. Within six months they married, packed one suitcase each, and boarded a plane for their first teaching assignment: Saint George's Greek School in New York. Three children were born. Thirteen years in America, during which Savina managed to learn the language but not to ride the subway alone, drive a car, fill out a tax return, or socialize with anyone besides her first-grade pupils and their parents. Finally they returned to her native

Kavala and built their house on a lot given to Savina by her baba, who understood her need for two-hour coffee breaks, even when the dishes were piled up in the sinks and there was nothing for dinner.

After retirement, Savina learned to cook a few things: cheese pies, stuffed tomatoes, moussaka. She started ironing Andreas's shirts, but she still took two-hour coffee breaks. At their parties, Yorgos, their only son, would play the violin. Savina would get drunk on ouzo while Andreas fried meatballs. Sometimes she would eat so many that there would be none left for Andreas when he finally finished frying, but by then she would have had so much ouzo that his complaints wouldn't matter.

Andreas shuffled into the living room of his Istanbul apartment, his pants nearly falling off, the dish towel still slung over his hairy shoulder. Why couldn't he buy tighter pants? Or shave his back of the hairs that crept up his spine like sickly ivy, like a disease? He set the plate of stuffed vine leaves on the table. Their meaty, pickled aroma gave Savina a break from the apartment's insistent frying-oil-and-fish stink. Andreas gathered up the sofa cover and took it to the kitchen. She heard the hollow metallic sound of the cover being stuffed into the washing machine, then the tick-tick of the cycle choice and the groan of the motor starting. She sat at the wobbly dining table and picked up a stuffed grape leaf. Heavy, soft, moist like a ripe fig, but messily wrapped. She took a bite. After his high blood pressure diagnosis, Andreas had stopped using salt. The mixture of ground beef, rice, cinnamon, onion, and lemon juice was tasty, but disappointingly lacking.

"Disgusting," she said when Andreas returned with the plates, cutlery, and salad.

He dropped the silverware onto the table with an offended clang. "But I tasted one—"

"Not the vine leaves. The screwing. At your age!"

"I told you—"

"Where does she live?"

"On the straight road." Andreas served her a large helping of hot pepper and tomato salad. They didn't bother with glasses. Instead, they drank from the same one-liter plastic bottle.

"I want to see her building," Savina said.

"Later." He leaned toward the hallway and said playfully, "*Cadı!*" Andreas was always mixing Turkish with Greek when he spoke to his mother. Especially when he didn't want Savina to understand.

"What did you call her?"

"Witch."

Had she not found the lace thong, Savina would have laughed.

Andreas called out again, "Cadı, are you going to eat?"

"Not with *her*!" shouted Grandma from her bedroom. Savina had tried hard to please her mother-in-law, inviting her to Kavala, braiding her cottony strands, buying her powder and creams for wrinkles that nothing could improve. But after thirty-six years, the old lady was still sick with jealousy.

They ate listening to the rattling hum of Grandma's nebulizer. Savina wondered if she should kick Andreas out. He already was out, of course, but permanently, publicly. Stand on her own like the single mothers of New York. Then she thought of the Kavala gossips. "Savina Yannopoulou didn't know how to keep her man," they'd say. Savina wouldn't be able to stand the *rezili*, the shame of it.

She looked at the pink lily decal peeling off the white canvas that hung crookedly above the couch. That wall decoration had seemed so original, so *different* when Savina bought it at IKEA. Now the decal was shrinking from its place, separating, unsticking.

"I'll have to fix that," she said.

The meal over, Savina turned on Grandma's favorite Greek music show, beamed in by the satellite dish on the balcony. She pulled her wool poncho over her head and waited by the door.

"See you later, baby," said Andreas, donning a patchwork newsboy cap that Savina had never seen before.

"Don't be late, my love," Grandma called back.

They set out on their walk, up the asphalt hills that put Savina out breath. They passed through the open square of Son Durak, where buses lined up, waiting to leave for better, more human parts of the city: Taksim, Beyoğlu, Eminönü. Two stray mutts with tagged ears curled up on a narrow

curb, oblivious to the danger of the taxi traffic. Young men with puffy Elvis hairdos sped by on motorcycles. African prostitutes with purposely ripped jeans headed downhill, toward corners in even worse neighborhoods. Men with wives in full burka rattled in Arabic.

Savina followed Andreas up the straight road of Tatavla, whose Turkish name she could never remember. This formerly Greek neighborhood, Andreas said, had once been full of wooden houses with oriels, gardens, and springs—all destroyed in the Great Fire of 1929. Now Tatavla was an ugly mess of concrete, sidewalks too narrow for pedestrian traffic, Kurds and gypsies in outrageous colors, and Iraqi and Syrian refugees on a stopover, because even they didn't want to stay. After twenty minutes of walking, Andreas touched Savina's elbow. They'd never walked hand in hand, not even before they were married. Back then he'd begged her to, but his arms were too heavy and sweaty. Besides, she didn't like public display.

"That's it," he said, pointing at the top floor of a narrow cement block.

Savina imagined a studio with a moldy bathroom, dirty clothes tossed about, takeout boxes of half-eaten food in the kitchen, sordid scenes of the Brit on her knees, giving a blow job to a man who should have been playing trucks with his grandson. "Who knows what went on up there," she said.

"Coffee," said Andreas. "And dinner. She's an excellent cook."

Savina felt slapped. She struck back: "Surely not much of a housekeeper."

"The place is spotless. Remodeled by an architect."

"So you had a falling out?"

"No." Andreas continued up the road, doing the waddling shuffle that always made Savina think of the Humpty Dumpty rhymes she'd read to the children while in Brooklyn.

She would forbid him to return to Kavala. The children would hate him for what he'd done. They'd hate the Brit as well. That would be his punishment. Savina would be the saint. Shamed, but vindicated.

As they proceeded up the straight road, the crowds changed: fewer headscarves, shorter skirts; less Arabic, more

Turkish; fewer ungainly buildings, more 1930's attempts at style. But still, there were plastic garbage bags piled up between the parked cars, broken sidewalks, and Africans hawking bracelets and carved wooden statues on tablecloth-covered patches of sidewalk. There were crates of blackening okra, soft tomatoes, overripe bananas, and other unsellables abandoned in the street outside the green groceries as an offering to the poor. And then there were the awful, roped-off construction sites that forced pedestrians into the street, where they would be at the mercy of bus drivers trying to keep to schedules.

Savina wouldn't ask Andreas if he still loved the Brit. During their first year of marriage, he had told Savina he loved her every day. But she'd never been able to say, "I love you, too." When she was eight months pregnant with Viky, Andreas had insisted Savina say something, either I do or I don't love you. Savina had replied, "I feel *something*." He never said he loved her again.

As they turned the corner of the road that Savina called *Cemetery Street* because it ran along the wall of a Levantine Catholic graveyard, heat came to her eyes. She was going to be alone. How would she manage? The driveway needed to be repaved. There was a leak in the roof over the bedroom. The olive trees needed trimming and the lawn mowing, the tomato beds weeding. And how could she face anybody in Kavala ever again if she were nobody's wife?

A drop fell from beneath Savina's glasses. What if someone she knew saw her like this? One of those people in the cafés that encroached on the sidewalk, one of those pouring out of the subway station up ahead? Tatavla was like New York's Astoria. You always saw someone.

"Let's turn around," Andreas said.

"And go back to Grandma?" It wasn't like him to want to go home before his mother's bedtime.

"I'm tired."

Savina glanced up the street, toward the traffic mess at a big intersection: buses, taxis, cars, motorcycles, jaywalking pedestrians, all caught in a me-first deadlock. Andreas had to have spotted *her* in that crowd. His bid for home was an effort to avoid a collision between wife and mistress.

"See somebody you know?"

"No," he said, glancing down at the tips of his worn Dockers. "Besides, she walks so quickly she probably wouldn't even notice you. She does Pilates. Twice as strong as both of us."

"Then what could she possibly like about *you*?"

Andreas looked into Savina's eyes. "Has it ever occurred to you that not everyone sees me as you do?"

Savina didn't reply.

Andreas turned into a downhill side street. "It's quieter here, less traffic."

"And less likely that we'll run into anybody," said Savina.

"Not really. This is her shortcut."

They heard shouting up the street. A woman from a second-story window was shaking her fist at the green grocer opposite. A crowd began to gather around the defendant's shop. They could pull out guns any moment. Savina could be shot. Her twenty-six year-old son would have to do his own laundry, make his own breakfasts in the morning, change his own sheets. "Maybe we should turn around," she said.

"Nonsense. It's just a neighborhood spat."

"Please."

"Would you trust me for once?"

She quickened her pace, keeping closer to Andreas. The angry woman's unintelligible curses stormed in her head. What could the grocer possibly have done? Given the lady rotten pomegranates? Blackened walnuts? Overcharged her for celery root?

Andreas pressed his hand against Savina's shoulder blade, directing her around a corner. "Come on," he said.

Savina glanced ahead: another incline. Everything was so up and down in this city, nothing ever level, nothing ever the same. It was all deep ditches, abrupt hills, surprises. "Slow down," she said, panting. "Grandma won't have gone to bed yet."

He stopped outside a trendy café with the word *Marika* painted onto an imitation vintage sign. The café's wooden tables, cactus centerpieces, and chalk-board menu all said expensive. Not Andreas's kind of place. And nothing like the rest of Tatavla's cheap, bleach-smelling, plain-as-sliced-white-bread teahouses.

Andreas walked straight through the semi-outdoor smoking section, past the common table where young trendies worked on Macs, to the bar at the back of the café. He placed an order for himself in Turkish and then said in Greek: "For you?"

Savina stared at the English menu on the wall: Los Pecos Microloft, Kenya Gratuya AA, Burundi Mudusi, Rwanda Kamiro, Mutheka Muthvani AA. Were these coffees or tourist destinations? What was the suffix AA? Automobile Association? The tears that Savina had mostly been able to hold in during their walk now spilled over her lids and fogged her glasses. "A filter coffee. Or Nescafé, or . . . where's the restroom?"

Andreas pointed to an orange door. Savina rushed to it, locked it behind her, and let her fears come out in sobs, just like she'd often done during their first years of marriage, when she realized that she'd never be able to respond to the brightness in his eyes. But she'd grown used to him being there, beside her in bed at night, even if they slept with turned backs, and even if he spent weeks at a time in Istanbul. She knew he was coming back. But what if one day he didn't?

She splashed water on her face, wiped with a scratchy paper towel, and looked in the mirror: her eyes were slightly red, but it was nothing her glasses wouldn't hide. Thank God she'd never worn makeup. When painted women cried, they ended up looking like abused hookers. Savina remembered her baba, who had thought that Andreas wasn't good enough for her. Baba had been right.

She left the restroom and sat down at the white metal table that her husband had chosen near the bar. That was strange, too. Andreas was obsessed with sitting beside windows. Did the Brit have a fear of drafts?

"Madam," he said.

Why did he call her that? She took a sip of the coffee in front of her. Tepid. Milky.

"Savina?" someone called out.

Savina turned. By the large open window, Andreas was sitting at a pine table with two steaming coffee cups. She looked again at the mug in front of her—a half drunk cappuccino—and then at the man beside her: a bald Turk of roughly Andreas's size, wide like an American football player,

but wearing a shiny grey suit rather than Andreas's sloppy jeans and windbreaker.

"I'm so sorry," Savina said in English.

The man put his hand over his heart and bowed slightly. He said something in Turkish, too, but Savina didn't understand. She skittered like a mouse seeking cover.

"What's gotten into you?" Andreas said.

Savina emptied a paper tube of brown sugar into her mug, stirred, and drank half the hot, nutty brew. "I wish I could hide," she said.

Andreas and the man exchanged a smile. "Don't worry. I think he enjoyed it."

"Let's go home."

"We haven't finished."

She gulped her coffee so quickly that it almost choked her.

"And mine?" he said.

She reached for his cup, but he pulled it away, spattering coffee onto his hand. "I'm not as generous as your boyfriend."

Had she lost him already? There had to be a way to get him back. What did her friends do—at least the ones who weren't widows—to keep their husbands? Baklava? Pastitsio? Blow jobs? Savina remembered the Asian porn videos she'd caught Andreas watching during his last stay in Kavala. "Those videos," she said. "The Japanese ones. Nice, aren't they?"

"*What*?"

"You know, with the nurse giving the patient a *special treatment*."

"We're talking about porn now?"

"I like porn," said Savina.

"Since when?" Her statement was so unbelievable that it didn't even merit a scoff.

"Well, *you* like it, don't you?" Savina tried to sound seductive, like her cougar hairdresser when she spoke to buff young clients, but it didn't work. Savina always sounded like a mommy. "If Grandma is sleeping when we get back, maybe I could—"

"Another time," said Andreas. Which meant: No, thanks.

His penis in her mouth would probably have made her sick, anyway, but his refusal showed the seriousness of the situation. The kids were her only cards. "I've been thinking,"

she said. “We’ve got to divide up the house into apartments for the children. They’ll never be able to afford their own, and we definitely don’t want them to emigrate or move to Athens. Could you talk to a contractor?”

Andreas stared at the wall painting of two Spanish women collecting flowers from a field.

“Can we go now?” said Savina.

He followed her to the door. Just as Savina’s foot touched the pavement, she lifted her head and caught sight of a speed-walking woman, brown hair, unmistakably long, all the way to the inch of taught waist exposed between yoga pants and cropped shirt. The woman’s eyes were obscenely smeared with black eyeliner. Her cheeks were shiny. Seeing Andreas and Savina, she covered her mouth with her hand, convulsed, stepped backwards. Savina noticed the basement staircase behind the woman: a void cut out of the pavement. For a second Savina hoped the woman would fall in. Then she said, “Careful!”

The woman stopped. She understood Greek.

“Nicoletta?” said Andreas. Savina recognized the fake cheer in his voice, as if he still believed he could pass the girl off as a friend or acquaintance. “How are you doing?”

The Brit stifled a moan—like something Savina had once heard from a lamb about to be slaughtered for Easter—and darted into a side street.

Andreas took a step forward. Savina stared him into place. “Are you going to leave me?”

He fixed his gaze on the stunted trees of the side street into which the Brit had disappeared.

Savina said, “The children will never forgive you.”

Andreas bit his bottom lip so hard that, when he released, there was blood. “If I haven’t done it yet, I’m not going to do it now.”

As soon as they entered the apartment, Andreas went to the kitchen to wash the dishes. Savina took a mug of linden flower tea and a plate of butter cookies to Grandma’s room and sat down on the fleece blanket, her hip touching Grandma’s knee. This was so out of character for Savina that Grandma immediately removed her nebulizer face mask, coughed, and said, “What the hell has gotten into you?”

"Do you know anything about the Brit?" Savina said.

Grandma turned her good ear to the kitchen. Having confirmed that Andreas was still washing dishes and therefore unable to hear them, Grandma whispered, "Don't think she was the first. But it's nothing to worry about."

"*Nothing to worry about*?"

Grandma held her fingers to the side of her mouth as a sound shield. Her formerly long, red nails were bare and split by fungus. "He wanted to divorce you years ago," she said. "When he had the first mistress, but I told him *over my dead body*."

"You didn't want to get rid of me?" said Savina.

"We're Istanbul Rums," Grandma said. "We don't divorce. I couldn't bear the rezili."

"You couldn't bear me either."

"True, but things worked out. You don't love him, he doesn't love you, and he can't have her, so I get him all to myself. Besides, you make good cookies."

Andreas closed his bedroom door without saying goodnight. Savina changed into the old sweat suit with a hole in the left armpit, turned the couch into a bed, and put her eye mask over her head like a hairband. She tried to adjust the pink lily decal canvas, but it swung back to its crooked position. She pulled the sleep mask over her eyes and wondered what that Turk in the café had said. *Stay if you'd like? I'd be more than happy to live at your side, take two-hour coffee breaks, and tend to the garden? I wouldn't expect anything that people our age shouldn't?*

But romance was too much trouble for Savina. For everybody, in fact. Even for the Brit, even for Andreas. Everyone was better off the way things were.

Rebecca May Hope

Coyotes from Kazakhstan

Faith shot up in bed, her heart pounding. Lance rolled onto his side, moaned, and plastered his pillow over his head. He had a meeting in the morning, and she had promised Isme's slumber party wouldn't keep him awake.

"I'll find out what's going on." Faith stumbled to the chaise lounge for her robe and poked her feet into her slippers. She tiptoed out the door and swung it closed. Still groggy, she gripped the handrail. Motion-activated stairway lights illuminated her descent. In the family room, lights blazed on a babbling huddle of six ten-year-old girls wearing PJs.

Faith squinted against the glare. "Isme?"

Arms encircled her waist. "Mommy! Coyotes! There's coyotes out there!"

Isme's back was sweaty underneath the silky shirt where Faith stroked it. The crazed, wide-eyed faces of the girls, ruddy despite the air conditioning, turned toward her. "Don't worry, girls. They're far away, back in the preserve. Isme, you know that. We've heard them howl many times."

Isme stepped back and raised her hazel eyes. She tightened her lips in a determined line and shook her head with three defiant twists of her neck, making her brown hair flap against her cheeks. "We saw them. Two of them. We saw the coyotes stand."

"Where?"

Isme pointed toward the west wall of the room, made up entirely of windows, floor to ceiling. The glass reflected back the line of girls as they all turned, joined by their left arms, and pointed in unison with their right hands like a wonder of animatronics. The blinds, tight accordions eight feet above the floor, were almost never lowered. This side of the house backed up to the nature preserve, and their privacy was assured, situated as they were on three acres at the bottom of a five-hundred-foot drive.

"Let me see." Faith switched off the light to see the back yard better.

The girls shrieked.

"Shush!" Faith scolded, eyeing the stairs. A couple of whimpers answered. Great. The girls would tell their moms she'd yelled at them. "Isme's daddy is trying to sleep. It's very late," she whispered as she cupped her hands around her eyes, resting her nose against the glass. Only the eerily yellow full moon and a dim security lamp lit the edge of the pool. But any movement out there would activate the lights next to the walkout entrance below.

Isme positioned herself at Faith's side and mimicked her stance. "They're gone now, Mom. But they were right there." She pointed to the north side of the swimming pool. "That's where we saw the coyotes *stand*."

"You didn't see them move?"

"Yes, we did. They kind of crept along by the pool fence." Isme hunched her shoulders and rotated her hands to simulate the skulking animals. "And then they both stood, like this." She straightened to her full four-and-a-half feet and curled her hands before her like a dog begging for a treat.

Faith squinted at her daughter in the faint light that filtered in from the hallway. For a fleeting moment she took her seriously. It wasn't like Isme to prank. She must have given in to the other girls. Faith rolled her eyes and let out an exasperated sigh. "Isme. That's enough."

The devastation on the child's face stabbed Faith to the core. Isme had never learned to act. She had no siblings.

"They did, Mom," Isme sniffed.

Faith squatted and held out her arms. Isme flew into them. "Isme, honey, coyotes don't stand on their back legs. I don't know what you saw, but it wasn't that. Okay? Maybe you just saw a reflection or something."

Isme pulled away, her lips drawn tight again. She posed like a begging dog. "They were just like this. Everyone saw them." She raised her voice. "You guys! Didn't you see the coyotes stand—like this?"

The line of girls had reshaped itself into a semi-circle. One by one they held up their paws. Faith clenched her teeth. She couldn't resolve this now, but Isme—and perhaps the girls' mothers—would hear more about this tomorrow. She looked at her watch: 2:15. No, today. But after they'd gotten some sleep.

"Okay, well, no harm done. They're not there now. Everyone into your sleeping bag. Last one in is a rotten egg!" She shooed them forward, forcing a playful smile.

The girls, stifling giggles, scampered into their sleeping bags. Faith pulled Isme's up to her chin and kissed her on the cheek. Isme turned her face away.

Faith slumped into her office chair and tapped the space bar, waking her computer. The last of the girls had been bundled into her mother's minivan, draped in a beach towel, still dripping from one last morning dip. Faith had sent Isme to bed for a nap—sans protest. She could use one herself, but her prime writing hours had already slipped away. Hopefully the whole summer wouldn't be like this. Even when Isme was at school, working from home was full of interruptions. And lately it didn't take much to distract her.

She ignored the words of the obstinate half-finished novel on the screen. No use trying to focus on it until she figured out how to handle the coyote incident. Coyotes standing hadn't been the end of it. An hour later she had jolted awake again. More screaming. Isme claimed that one coyote had come back—that she saw it sneak under the deck and heard it scratch against the walkout door. "It scratched five times. One, two, three, four, five." At each number she made a vicious, curling grasp with her right hand. "We were so lucky it didn't get in, Mom." All the girls who were still awake—two had fallen asleep—insisted they'd heard the scratching, too.

Faith checked to make sure the walkout was secure and then calmed the girls, sleepiness smothering her anger. But thirty minutes later she was back in the family room, rocking Isme and her best friend, Maddie. They insisted they'd seen the coyote slinking away from the house, dragging its rear leg as if injured. By that time the girls were delirious, worn out from imagined terrors. Maddie fell asleep on Faith's shoulder while Isme dozed on her lap. Finally Faith extricated herself and crept back into bed. A few hours later Lance, in an awful mood, barely growled two words before leaving for work.

While the other girls were in the pool, she pulled Maddie aside. Maddie admitted that the girls hadn't seen or heard anything at first, but when Isme seemed so convinced, they

played along. Eventually they started believing it. But in the morning light, no one could remember actually seeing or hearing anything. They might have. But they weren't sure.

Isme had never made up tales. She'd been raised in Sunday School and took her lessons seriously. But she clung fiercely to these stories. Faith would sit her down for a long talk when she woke up from her nap—before her father came home. Best not to get Lance involved. Now that he'd made partner, his law practice was more stressful than ever.

Faith rolled her shoulders and neck, cracked her knuckles, and typed a few words. The phone rang. Of course.

"Faith? Good, I caught you." Brian, their personal banker, sounded relieved.

"What's the problem?" They couldn't be overdrawn. She kept plenty in the reserve line.

"We had some major hacking last night." His voice was low and confidential. "I've closed all your accounts."

"Seriously? Do you know what a hassle that is?" More distractions. It would take hours to update all their auto-pays.

"I know, I know. I'm really sorry. But this was a big one, and the fraud department thinks they've got the goods on the guy this time. He's been planting Trojans for years, stealing identities. Goes by the moniker Lucky12345. They traced him to Kazakhstan."

"Coyotes stand," Faith murmured. She wandered from her desk and gazed out toward the pool.

"What? No, Kazakhstan. It's by Russia."

"Yes. Yes, I know where it is." Faith blinked hard and jiggled her head. "Tell me what I need to do." Brian's answer barely registered. She scanned the tree line beyond their property. "Do you know when—what time—our account was hacked?"

"Mmmm. Hold on." Keys clicked on Brian's keyboard. "I've got the report up. This is an internal page—I'm not supposed to share it with clients. So don't spread it around. Okay, got it. The first attempt was 2:04 a.m. CDT. Next one: 3:10. Those were unsuccessful, and he got away. And the one we nabbed him on—that was 3:42. Crazy, huh?" Brian was geeking out about the fraud department's prowess.

"Yeah, crazy."

Faith disconnected, plopped down at her desk, and dropped

her head into her hands. Her brain buzzed. A nefarious creature, begging outside. Scratching at the door, *one-two-three-four-five. Lucky* he didn't get in. Slinking away, wounded. Kazakhstan . . . coyotes stand.

She rubbed her neck and her forehead. She needed sleep.

"Yeah, yeah. That's good. I like it."

Lance had flipped off his computer monitor when Faith came into the den. After years of her nagging him, he'd finally learned that she couldn't stand it when he kept eyeing the screen while she talked. She poured out the story of Isme's fantastic visions that coincided perfectly with the hacking. But he remained detached.

"What do you mean you like it? Our accounts were hacked, and our daughter sensed it somehow."

"Best idea you've had since *The Graveyard Whistler.*"

That was her first successful crime thriller. Three years ago now. "It's not a novel synopsis. It really happened. To us. Last night—I mean, this morning."

"Huh. Is Brian on it?"

She ran her fingers through her short hair. "Of course. But what do you think it *means?* How could Isme have known?"

"It means you got a story idea dropped in your lap. I'd run with it." He kept glancing at his darkened monitor, bouncing his knee almost imperceptibly, anxious to get back to whatever he'd been doing.

"You think it's just a coincidence."

He was probably right. What else could it be?

"Could be the Universe trying to send you a message."

If anyone could shed light on this weirdness, it would be Collette, collector of all things kooky. She had agreed to meet for lunch at her favorite organic place.

"You said Monday, right?" Dressed in a peasant dress and flip-flops, Collette didn't look like someone who lived in a two-million-dollar mansion on Lake Minnetonka. Her husband, Steve, had made partner a couple years before Lance had, but Collette was as casual as if she were still backpacking across Europe and living in hostels. "The night of the honey moon. First time in seventy years we had a full moon on the summer solstice."

"Sure. Whatever." Raising her shoulders, Faith squinted across the table. "But why send me a message through my daughter? My banker has a phone."

Collette fingered the crystals on her funky necklace, custom designed to balance her moods and magnetic field. Her red hair fell in kinky waves onto her shoulders, and her freckled face had that second-trimester glow. As she closed her eyes in concentration, her pretty rounded belly rose and fell hypnotically under the swirling paisleys of her sundress.

Collette opened her eyes slowly. "You're thinking too small. Think bigger, outside the box. Not about Isme, but about the hacking."

"Nothing mysterious about that." Faith coaxed a cucumber slice into the dressing. "Happens all the time."

"Yes, but Isme's vision augurs the real meaning." Collette's bicolored cat eyes, with their central golden circles rimmed by blue, bore into Faith. Sometimes she could look truly spooky. "That your greatest treasure is in jeopardy."

Faith's heart skipped. "I know. I'm really worried about her."

Collette squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, then laid her fork across the arugula. "How are things between you and Lance?"

One of Collette's hobbies was improving her friends' lives—recommending workouts, supplements, meditation techniques, whatever. She fancied herself a life coach who never charged a fee.

"He's stressed out, as usual. More cases than he can handle, I guess. But that's a good problem to have, he always says. Who knew there were so many crummy products out there, right?"

Collette held a jicama stick between her fingers like a cigarette. She nipped off a bit. "That's why they brought Katrina on. Have you met her?"

"Katrina who?"

Collette's eyes scolded. "Katrina Williams. The new junior counsel."

"Lance tries not to bore me with office stuff." Collette's stare showed she wasn't satisfied. "Well—I think he doesn't want me putting his office into my novels. You know."

Collette finished off the jicama. “She’s a knockout. Striking. Long black hair, blue eyes, great shape. If Steve wasn’t so crazy about me, I’d be worried.”

Faith dropped her eyes. The arugula, limp with vinaigrette, was easier to confront than Collette’s intense gaze. Was she probing for the details of her and Lance’s love life? That would be a bland story.

“Lance prefers blondes.” Faith looked up, armed with a good angle. “Every girl he ever dated was blonde.”

Collette’s dangling earrings, etched with some Celtic symbol, waved skeptically as she rocked her head from side to side.

Faith squirmed. “So you think Isme is psychic?”

Collette speared a cherry tomato. “Maria could find out. She could put her under the pendant.” Maria was Collette’s energy consultant. Collette met with her twice a month and always left laden with nutritional products that Maria said Collette, Steve, and the boys needed. Collette’s supplement pantry, centrally located in her designer kitchen, was legendary.

Faith swigged down the last of her bitter green tea. She needed something more credible than a swinging crystal.

Google delivered 231,000 results for *Mass Hallucinations* and 19,900,000 results for *Group Hysteria*.

“Mass hysteria. Not a doubt in my mind. Google it,” Wanda, Lance’s mother, had commanded. As the former precinct coordinator for Al Gore’s presidential campaign, she felt she’d assisted with inventing the Internet, so she did her part to keep it afloat. “Lots of strange stuff can be explained that way. Not just the Salem Witch Trials. Those didn’t even make the top ten. When you find that list, make sure you check out number two. It just shows how fragile men’s egos are. Lance’s too, you know. Gotta keep stroking them all the time.”

When Wanda called, Faith had quickly run out of information about Isme’s ballet and swim classes, so she divulged the sleepover incident—but not the hacking.

Wanda’s keyboard clattered in the background. As usual, she had her phone on speaker. “But those other girls are as much to blame as Isme—probably more. You tell those mothers that.”

"They've never mentioned it."

"Good. We can't let Isme's social standing suffer from this," Wanda's voice reverberated.

Faith scowled at the phone. Isme had *social standing* now? "I'm sure the girls just thought it was a fun slumber party game." Wanda, like Lance, worried too much about pleasing the right people, as if their fall from grace might be as meteoric as their rise. Not that long ago Faith and Lance had lived in a two-bedroom apartment while she supported him through law school on her teacher's salary.

Faith scrolled through the items on the "10 Most Bizarre" post. A laughter epidemic in Tanzania in 1962 that closed schools and lasted more than a year. Workers in a textile factory who got mysteriously ill from June bug bites—also 1962. Four hundred people who danced themselves to death in France in 1518. Nothing remotely similar to what had happened with Isme. There it was, Wanda's favorite—something to do with men's egos. Number Two: Thousands of men in Singapore who feared their private parts were shrinking. Faith shuddered to think what search terms Wanda had entered to bring up that page.

Psychology Today gave a more recent report of a woman who called the police because she saw eight men slicing the roof off her car. The woman was taken to the hospital and found to be normal, but four people who touched her, including two policemen, started hallucinating. The woman's opioid patches might have been to blame.

Faith went to the family room and started opening every drawer of the entertainment center, looking for mysterious powdery residue. The more drawers she opened, the more foolish she felt. That Lance could be using drugs was as ludicrous as his having an affair.

"Whatcha lookin' for?"

Faith jumped at Isme's voice and slammed the drawer shut. "Nothing, sweetheart."

"Can we make some cookies for Daddy?"

Isme—tan, lean, and bright-eyed—looked perfectly healthy and normal.

"Faith? Gretchen here." The pediatrician's voice was crisp yet concerned. "The nurse gave me a note saying you had a quick question. I have just a minute before my next patient."

Faith shut the door to her office in case Isme came back inside. "What does it mean when kids start lying? And won't admit they are?"

"Isme's lying?" Gretchen sounded surprised.

"No—uh—I'm asking for a friend. One of Isme's friends." From the window she spotted Isme and Maddie playing Frisbee.

"Of course." Gretchen's skepticism came across clearly. "Tell 'your friend' it's called *pseudologia fantastica* or *mythomania*. In adults it's an attention-seeking behavior, but in kids it can be a form of compensation. Is everything okay between you and Lance?"

"Sure. Fine." Faith's pulse quickened. She was a feeble liar for someone whose career was fiction. "What's the treatment for pseudo-whatever?"

"I'll get you the name of the children's psychiatrist we refer to. She's great. I know things haven't been easy for you guys. A stillbirth is traumatic for the whole family—children, too. Especially after you tried for so long. Even though it was a year ago, Isme might be—oh, they're signaling me. The front desk can give you that name. Call me tonight if you want to talk."

Faith stared at the silent phone. She'd wanted to ask what it meant when the lies the child told turned out to be true, but in a nonliteral way, but the child didn't know that, and the child still wouldn't admit to lying. But that might have prompted a referral to the adult psychiatrist.

"Of course you're not crazy." Jen reached her arm around Faith and gave her a squeeze on her upper arm.

They sat together, soaking up the sunshine, on a bench at the playground. Jen had texted—as she had so many times over the past year—and this time Faith had taken her up on her offer to meet at the park. Jen's four kids and Isme were playing tag on the maze of tunnels, bridges, and slides.

Faith relaxed, easily settling back into their old friendship. "But isn't it odd?"

"I think it's awesome." Jen jumped up, ready to run toward her youngest, who had just taken a tumble, but her oldest was already there, brushing off the little one and making her laugh. Jen sat back down, turning partially toward Faith. "It's more common than you think. They're like living parables. Real-life incidents that have spiritual meanings. Symbolic meanings."

"That's a thing?"

"Oh, sure. God often speaks in symbols. The Bible's full of them, right?" Jen should know. She had majored in Bible and music at the Christian college where she, Faith, and Lance had all met. Now her career was motherhood—and homeschooling her brood.

"Okay, but what's the point? What does it mean?" Faith sucked hard on the straw of her water bottle—as if enlightenment lurked at the bottom of the Nalgene.

"Foreshadowing. Sometimes a warning." Jen tapped her fingers together rhythmically in front of her chest as if to some internal melody. "Or maybe just to let you know: God is protecting you. The coyotes never entered, and the hackers didn't steal. Because God has your back."

Had Jen just composed a praise and worship song on the spot?

Faith hadn't paid much attention to God lately. It didn't feel like He was watching out for them. "About the parenting class—sorry we dropped out. Lance has been so busy—Sunday mornings are one of the few times we can spend together." That was the reason they'd given each other when they stopped going to church—but mostly Lance slept in on Sundays or played golf.

"I'm glad you're prioritizing your marriage." Jen nodded toward the playground. "Look at them! So cute!" The five sweaty children sat in a ring, shaded by one the platforms, playing a boisterous clapping game. "By the way—do you want to go to the marriage retreat? Registration's closed, but I could probably still get you in. It's next weekend."

Prioritizing your marriage. Didn't that take two? Lance wouldn't be caught dead at a marriage retreat. "Oh, sorry!

That's Lance's annual convention. He'll be out of town." Faith shifted uncomfortably. Somehow that truth felt like a lie.

Jen shrugged. "Maybe you can make it to the next one."

Faith watched Isme give Jen's youngest a hug. Her heartstrings quivered. Isme would have made a wonderful big sister.

"Do you think Isme could be psychic?"

Jen studied Isme as she sifted pebbles through her fingers onto the giggling toddler's toes. "Some people are especially sensitive spiritually. They can be more in tune with God, but they can be targeted by the Enemy and tempted to use their third eye on their own. You can pray and ask God to close it."

The third eye could be developed, evidently. Clairvoyant children, according to the websites Faith found, had an open chakra that, without deliberate training, would naturally close as they grew older.

The sooner the better. Those sites about children and ESP creeped her out. Ads for psychics kept popping up—offering to teach your child the ropes. Not a chance! This one incident had consumed her for three weeks. Isme had never talked about it, but Faith had spent hours upon hours researching and getting advice, trying to make sense of it. Hours she should have been writing.

But who was she kidding? Her writing career was an ego booster only. Just one of Lance's product liability cases brought in more income than she could earn from ten years of teaching—or twenty of writing. But if she didn't have her career, she'd have nothing—except Isme.

She closed all the open tabs and maximized her novel. Before she had typed a full sentence, her sister's ringtone interrupted. She wanted them to join an impromptu family reunion at Wisconsin Dells. Would Lance be okay with that?

"I can't get away." Lance put up his hand to decline the dinner roll Faith passed him. "I'm already gone the end of that week for the convention."

"Aw, Daddy! It's a water park!" Isme flashed a pleading pout.

"You and Mommy can still go."

They'd be gone four days and get back a few hours before

Lance flew out for his trip. Isme was thrilled. Faith needed a break. No coyotes, no hackers, no visions.

The vacation worked. Faith had resolved to not mention coyotes, and they had nearly vanished from her mind. On the four-hour drive home, she figured out how to turn her languishing novel into a trilogy of novellas—complete with a child psychic. Why not? Lance would be happy she'd taken his suggestion. She couldn't wait to run the idea by her agent.

Lance set his suitcase at the front door and pulled her into his arms. He gave her a long, lingering kiss, rubbing the sweet spot in her lower back. Tingles rippled through her body—more tingles than she'd felt for the last year—and she pressed into him.

"I wish I was going with you." She whispered seductively into his ear and curled her tongue behind his earlobe.

After one more kiss he pulled away. "Too late now. Flights are booked. I'll see you Monday." He brushed his hand under her chin the way he used to in the early days.

She watched him stride down the sidewalk, stop to twirl Isme around, and hop into his Lexus. Her heart swelled. They *were* a happy family.

As she started a load of laundry, she heard Isme call, "I'm biking over to Maddie's!"

After unpacking the food from the cooler, Faith headed toward her office to call her agent. She shook her head. Isme, in her excitement to see her best friend, had left the front door wide open. Faith closed it and reset the alarm. She retrieved her cell phone and tapped her agent's number.

Three short beeps sounded just as Faith disconnected. Isme had returned and was heading upstairs. Maddie must not have been home. Faith powered up her computer, excited to tackle the rewrite. Her agent loved the idea.

"Mom!" Isme appeared in the doorway, a look of wild surprise lighting her face. She beckoned with her arm. "Come quick! There's a cat on your bed!"

Faith rose. "A cat?" Possibly a stray had wandered in through the open door. "That gray and white one we've seen hanging around?"

"No, Mom." Isme shivered with delight. "It's all black—with blue eyes."

Faith steadied herself against her desk. A sick feeling washed over her. "Isme, black cats can't have blue eyes." She had discovered that while doing research for *The Graveyard Whistler*.

"This one does. They're the same color as the pillow case and sheets. It's laying with all the rumpled sheets piled up around it—like it's Queen Cleopatra or something. You'll see!"

Isme ran down the hall and bounded up the stairs, two at a time. Faith trailed behind, her stomach burning. There were no blue sheets for their bed.

Entering the master bedroom, Isme blinked hard. "It's gone."

The bed was made. Faith set her jaw.

Isme teared up. "It was laying right there!"

"Lying."

"I am not!" Isme clenched her fists at her side.

"It's *lying*—not *laying*. 'It was *lying* right there.'"

Isme's hands unclenched, and fear spread across her face. "Who made the bed?" she quaked.

Faith folded Isme into a hug. She was sweating. "Go drink some water, hon. You need to hydrate."

Isme padded down the steps.

Faith inched toward the bed, her heart pounding. She slid the layers of decorative pillows aside. For once Lance had arranged them perfectly. She braced herself before turning down the silky mauve comforter. Sweat popped up along her hairline and under her arms. Slowly she drew back the cover to expose the blue pillowcase. She lunged for the pillow and heaved it across the room. It came to rest against the leg of the chaise lounge, the single long black hair still sticking tenaciously in place.

John Maki

There Are No Angels Singing

Dylan wrinkled his nose. The hospice, an old reconditioned house, smelled of cabbage, candles, and dogs. There were birds too, but no cats. On his way to his mother's room, he had glimpsed laptops, wine bottles, guitars, takeout food, and a mini trampoline. Apparently, anything was allowed, including recreational drugs. The hospice philosophy, *don't die sad*, suited his mother perfectly.

"So?" asked Dan Stewart, the hospice manager. He and Dylan were standing over his mother's bed. She was *blissed out* on morphine, Dan's words.

"Her plan mentions a party. Singing? Tribal dancing? Will there be visitors?" asked Dan.

"I doubt it," said Dylan. "Just me."

"Pets?"

"Nope."

"A favorite movie?"

"Nope."

Dan frowned. "There must be something. Music?"

"Judy Collins," said Dylan.

"Excellent," said Dan "We'll start there." He was well intentioned, an orchestrator. He knew how to hold death in his hands and blow on it. He was forty-six, five years older than Dylan, and used a cane, his left leg damaged in an accident. Dylan liked him. They had met before, briefly, when his mother was still conscious.

"She goes by 'Ma Sara'," said Dylan. "I changed it on the white board."

"Wonderful. I wish I knew her better. And you too."

"I'm not sure you do," said Dylan.

Dan explained that Ma Sara would probably not regain consciousness. Despite his pleas, the hospital had dithered and delayed in moving her. Most hospice residents have more time.

Dylan mentally cataloged what he knew about Ma Sara's last wishes. Her cremation and scattering were prepaid.

The Goodwill had agreed to take her few belongings. Three pre-posted letters were to be mailed, each stamped with a different Disney character. Ten I-Ching coins were to be tossed off Mission Beach into the Pacific Ocean on a Thursday, precisely at 12:44 PM, after which Phil Smithers, the bartender at Lyons, would pour shots of Galliano gratis. Sip it slowly his mother had advised Dylan in an email. Think of an ice cream cone.

That was it. A simple life and a simple death.

Dylan stroked his mother's hand and considered that he might not follow her instructions. Even near death, she looked restless. Her tugged her sloppy blue smock and covered her bare shoulder. Tomorrow he would bring something attractive for her to wear; she liked to look good, especially for strangers. This visit, his sixth in as many months, would be his last. Before the cancer came, they had visited exactly once in the past twelve years.

It was dark by the time Dylan got to Ma Sara's apartment, a small 13th floor section eight one-bedroom overlooking San Diego bay. He had flown in earlier in the day from Portland, Oregon and usually stayed in motels. This trip was different. This time he would have to pack his mother's belongings and say goodbye.

He put his suitcase in her bedroom and walked out onto the lanai, the best part of her otherwise tiny, mundane living space. It was warm outside. He liked the heat and the spectacular view. Not bad for $550 a month and a voucher. Her budget didn't allow for more.

Inside the apartment, Ma Sara's unframed nature paintings covered an entire wall. Dylan remembered a day when he was ten. Ma Sara was painting and sunlight was streaming into her studio. Green and orange paint blotted the canvas and scratchy brush strokes guided their conversation.

"What is it?" Dylan had asked. A bottle, a vase, a pear, a factory? The ghostly under-sketch held no clue.

"It's our life," she had said brightly. "Us. You, me, and dad." It looked like a bridge to Dylan but turned out to be a horsetail fern.

He remembered Moishe, Ma Sara's painting instructor,

and feeling strange when the man held his mother's hand. He remembered a yellow flower that had earned Ma Sara a hundred dollars at an amateur art show. She paraded like a queen, fanned the bills, and shouted with joy. Moishe loved it. He may have loved Ma Sara.

Dylan remembered his father not loving it.

All of this was before Dylan knew that his mother would never stray from nature and would always say, "It's our life."

Around the time of the art show, Dylan's father left for good. Ma Sara called him a bad man, Moishe too. Both of them were too demanding and critical.

At the time, Dylan wondered how so many bad men and lovely flowers could co-exist in the world. It didn't make sense.

The next morning, Dylan picked out an African caftan and head scarf for Ma Sara to wear. He piled paintings into the back seat of his rental car and drove to the hospice. He was almost to Ma Sara's room when he heard the plaintive voice of Judy Collins.

I've looked at life from both sides now
From give and take
And then somehow
It's life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all

Dylan pressed his ear to the door. He felt like a voyeur. Judy's flimsy words made him angry. Illusions were bullshit. After his father left, he and Ma Sara moved often and everywhere, Washington to Oregon, city to town, apartment to trailer home. They moved when Ma Sara lost her job and when Dylan failed a class and when her boyfriends lied. He survived by analyzing small details, the sound of a key, the smell of the kitchen, or the speed of a car, and avoiding conflict. When that failed, he simply did what was asked, sometimes with harsh consequences. He had learned not to have illusions. If the lyrics were a balm to Ma Sara, they were a lament to him.

He opened the door, walked to his mother's bed, and kissed her forehead.

"Much better," said Dan a half hour later. Ma Sara was dressed in the caftan and scarf. Her eyelids fluttered

involuntarily. Paintings filled the room. Dan pointed at an abstract arrangement of circles, squares, and squiggles and said, "Wow, flowers."

"Anything happen last night?" asked Dylan.

"She mumbled a bit. The name Judy. The singer?"

"My daughter, her granddaughter," said Dylan.

Dan laughed. "She wants Judy to brush her teeth more often."

"So do I," said Dylan.

"And the music?" asked Dan.

"It's fine."

"You don't like it."

"I don't like how it invites people to be confused."

"Fair enough."

Ma Sara stirred. The two men sat in silence. A heat pump kicked on outside and laughter floated in from somewhere deep in the house.

Dylan smelled pot.

"You really believe in this, don't you," said Dylan.

"Believe in what?" asked Dan.

"Making it light. Fun. A fucking trampoline? Seriously?"

A few moments passed before Dan responded.

"I believe an effort has to be made. That it is the right thing to do. Whatever your beliefs or relationships or fears, endings matter."

"I suppose," said Dylan. "You're a saint."

For the next two hours, Dylan and Dan talked about Ma Sara's paintings and watched her shift uncomfortably from side to side, sighing and moaning. Dan checked her morphine to make sure it was flowing. Watching Ma Sara die reminded Dylan of sitting in a hospital room with a newborn baby.

The hospice doctor arrived to examine Ma Sara. Dan left to visit other rooms and Dylan went outside to get some fresh air.

The meditation garden behind the hospice was surrounded by shrubs and flowers. Dylan sat down on a cement bench and read a metal plaque, vague words about the interplay of nature and life. He hated the inflated coaxing of grief. A teenage girl

joined him. He ignored her. He had long ago carved out the emotional space necessary to survive his mother's death and he didn't want to share. The girl's thumbs flickered over her phone like hungry baby birds. Behind her, a shed's door stood slightly ajar. A hospital, the one where Ma Sara had fought her disease, towered behind the shed.

Some movement on the hospital's face attracted Dylan, a window washer in a harness, working quickly, belaying himself from pane to pane. He could fall so easily. Why doesn't he fall wondered Dylan? Why does he do something so potentially fatal? Suddenly the shed's door swung open, revealing a dark empty space. The girl saw it too and was startled. A few seconds later an orange cat appeared, slumped onto some blue tiles, and started to lick its paws, as if it had just eaten something.

Dylan did not feel better knowing that the cat had caused the door to open. He looked at the teenage girl and wondered when his small daughters would start asking questions about Ma Sara's death, who she was, what she meant. He wondered if he could keep any of his promises to Ma Sara and what type of karmic retribution was in store for him if he didn't. His youngest daughter, Judy, had just started second grade and didn't understand why he wasn't home. Last night on the phone she had yelled, "I hate Ma Sara," and Dylan had admonished her, telling her that she couldn't hate someone she didn't know. "Yes I can," she said. "Hate, hate, hate. There." He worried that the sharp, out-of-proportion anger he often felt toward his children would never diminish.

The girl completed her text and stuck her phone in her purse. She inserted her hands under her legs and extended her neck to absorb the sun. She nodded at Dylan and smiled. He let her wander into his space.

"Could you do that?" she asked, pointing at the window washer.

"I've done that," said Dylan, "metaphorically speaking."

"Don't you just want to pluck him off, see what happens?" asked the girl. She had the expression of someone who wanted to talk about anything except what he or she was really thinking and feeling.

"I know what happens," said Dylan.

"What's that?" asked the girl.
"He climbs up and does it again and again."
"Why doesn't he do something else?"
"Because it's all he knows."
"I hate that," said the girl.
"Don't say hate," said Dylan.

When Dylan got back to Ma Sara's room, a hospice worker was hand bathing her. His mother had always loved to be touched, handled, soothed, and caressed. Dan, or the doctor, had moved a painting onto a desk—purple roses scattered across a dining room table. It was her best piece in Dylan's opinion, a gorgeous balance of color, technique, and darkness.

"Let me help," said Dylan. The worker handed him the sponge. He dipped it in the warm water and wrung it out. His placed an arm under his mother's body to support her. Her face was up and her right arm, her IV arm, was flat at her side. He gently washed her face, neck, shoulders, arms, and hands. Her skin was soft and pale, bordering on jaundiced. He knew her swollen knuckles well. Too well. Too many restaurant jobs and too much punching. He could say it out loud now, punching, and talk about it freely, the result of hundreds of hours of therapy. He had even discussed it with her the last time they spoke. She was somewhat remorseful. She acknowledged that she had spared him most of the physical, but not the psychological.

Dylan stroked his mother's temple. Her thick brown hair was still full, no gray anywhere. He gently pushed some strands back behind her ear. He remembered her licking her hand and rubbing it hard against his cheek when he was a kid. He remembered the sour lactic smell. He remembered her stories, how she had grown up on a rural farm, one of several children born to harsh, unforgiving parents, and how she had struggled in school, too ill-tempered to fit in. He remembered how she had liked boys and later men and how she had given her charms freely and how greedily she was consumed. He knew all of this from the whispering and comments and recriminations shared and repeated over the years around dinner tables and during car trips, recollections hardened by

repetition. He hated his sharp judgment of his mother. He hated how many times she had changed her name, originally Susan then Chandra, Kim, and Pat. A recent Indian boyfriend had suggested Ma Sara. She said it conveyed the divine.

Dylan finished hand bathing Ma Sara. He gripped her hand and hoped for something in return but there was nothing. Her shallow breathing scared him. Dylan wished the hospital had transferred her sooner and that she was alert. He had wanted his wife and children to say goodbye, but they said no; they had other things to do.

That evening, Dylan took calls from Ma Sara's brothers, both Chicago laborers, both divorced, both still pounding nails and laying floors.

"I'd fly out, but I gotta work," said the first one. "Jesus, I can't believe she's gone."

"She's not gone yet," said Dylan.

"Almost," said the brother.

The other brother had more resources and felt obliged to help.

"Can I buy the casket?"

"She paid for her own cremation," said Dylan.

"How? She doesn't have any money," said the brother suspiciously.

"She saved up."

"Well bully for her," said brother two.

Dylan said goodbye and hung up. He turned off the TV and went out onto the lanai. The lights of Coronado twinkled. He imagined young couples strolling the edge of the night water, shoulders down, explaining themselves, burdens in front of them. He went inside and found a candle the color of an evergreen tree. It took four tries to light it. The last match singed his fingers.

The candle flickered. He stared into the darkness and wondered about Ma Sara's last twelve years, before the cancer. Her possessions held some clues. Eighty-six prescriptions lined the dining table, Vicodin, Cipro, and more, mostly pre-chemo drugs, thousands of pills. Soft, cheap lingerie filled her top dresser drawer, clasps and straps tangled. A hidden box of inflatable casts, finger splints, and ace bandages peeked out

from under the bed; he hoped she had given as good as she got.

He regretted his decision to stay in Ma Sara's apartment, sleep on her mattress, absorb her longing, and touch her secrets. He decided it didn't much matter; there was no point in wishing for emotional distance. The candle's wick sputtered and the smell of paraffin drifted into his nostrils. He shivered and decided that after she was gone, he would reform his memories.

He called his wife to say that it wouldn't be long now.

The next morning Dylan woke with a slight headache. He showered and donned shorts for the first time since arriving in San Diego. On his drive to the hospice, he began to feel very open and free. When he arrived, Ma Sara's room was dark and he thought she might be gone until her shrunken shape stirred. Separate from the IV tail, she barely existed. Dylan placed the green candle on her nightstand and lit it. He saw a note from Dan and headed upstairs to check in.

Dan was sleeping on an office cot and woke when Dylan knocked. He sat up and rubbed his eyes like a small boy.

"You wanted to talk?" asked Dylan.

"A man stopped by last night. A friend of your mother's. He mentioned Lyons."

"The bar," said Dylan.

"He wants to meet you. He'll be back."

"Okay."

Dan rubbed his bad leg and winced.

"What happened to your leg?" asked Dylan suddenly, surprised by his own question.

Dan sighed. "I mangled it mountain climbing. Fifteen years ago. I dangled from a rope, unconscious. I remember hearing zills, finger cymbals, and feeling icy cold. The doctors wanted to amputate."

Dan pulled back a blanket. His leg looked like a twisted tree trunk.

"I hate my mother," said Dylan. He began to shake uncontrollably. Dan stood up and wrapped a blanket around Dylan's shoulders and held him, held his head, held his body.

"None of this is easy or lovely," said Dan. "There are no angels singing."

"If she loved something, she killed it. If she loved someone, she left." said Dylan. "She didn't trust the feeling. She didn't trust anyone or anything."

"You should go see her now," said Dan.

Dylan had been sitting for an hour. Ma Sara had not moved the entire time. He felt a presence in the room and looked up, expecting to see a hospice volunteer, but it was an older, gray-haired African-American man.

"How she doin'?" asked the man.

"I don't know," said Dylan.

"This here is pretty nice," said the man. "Better than her place."

"I'm her son," said Dylan, extending his hand. "Dylan." They shook.

"I know. Seen your picture," said the man. "Delbert. I'm a friend of your mom's."

Dylan knew they were out there, somewhere. Ma Sara was never alone and always alone.

"I was her driver," said Delbert. "Took her on errands."

"How'd you meet?" asked Dylan.

"Oh, you know," said Delbert. He was being polite.

"Mind if I say something to her?" asked Delbert.

"No, please."

Delbert pulled a chair up to Ma Sara's bed and put his face near hers. He whispered and then began to cry, chin-trembling male tears, regret, perhaps, thought Dylan, but more likely the sorrow of good memories enlarged. After a few minutes, Delbert wiped away his tears and kissed his fingers and brushed them against Ma Sara's hair.

"You go now," he said. "I want you to go."

Dylan felt a long-suppressed rage take hold.

"You don't get to tell her that," he hissed.

Delbert blinked, confused.

"You don't get to come in out of nowhere and tell her to die," said Dylan.

"I . . . I didn't say that," said Delbert.

"What did you think you were saying?" asked Dylan.

"I was saying what she said when my mom died. You know. Don't hold on for us. That's all."

Dylan eased off. “Sorry. I took it different.”

Delbert stared back intently, his red eyes watering with emotion.

They sat that way for a long while, Delbert stroking Ma Sara’s hair, Dylan steeling himself, the two of them not knowing but knowing each other. After a while, Dylan said, “Dan said you wanted something.” Delbert was silent.

“Well?”

“How much you know about her growin’ up?”

“Enough.”

Dylan and Ma Sara seldom visited her parents in downstate Illinois. When they did, Dylan was petrified. Rusty downspouts crisscrossed the overgrown yard, the crumbling front porch housed rats, and empty Jim Beam gallons filled the basement. After Ma Sara found hundreds of dried dog turds behind the living room couch, they never visited again.

“I wished I had known some stuff before my mom died. By God I do,” said Delbert.

“Okay,” said Dylan, getting impatient.

“Your mom’s dad. He raped her. Grandpa too,” said Delbert.

Dylan did not say anything.

“Happen all the time. All the time. Everywhere. Sheesh.”

Rape. The word had come so easily to Delbert, as if he was saying candy or water. Dylan knew it was true. Ma Sara had never said it out loud, but it had hung in the air Dylan’s entire life, like the thrown punches. The violence poured through the generations. That a complete stranger could so easily share Ma Sara’s worst secret seemed strangely appropriate to him.

“Don’t worry,” said Delbert. “She can’t hear. She almost gone. I seen it before. It won’t be long.”

Dylan thought about reenactment. He thought about reading the same book to his daughters over and over again. He thought about the African tribes that send their dead to the afterlife in colorful painted wood caskets that resemble much-loved cars. He imagined laying Ma Sara in a casket adorned with painted flowers and nailing the lid shut. He imagined his mother as a little girl trapped in a farmhouse with circling dogs.

Delbert patted Ma Sara one last time and nodded to Dylan.

"Nice to meet you."

"Same. Stay if you like," said Dylan.

"No. I gotta go. She talked about you. A lot. She loved you," said Delbert on his way out.

Dylan left the room and walked out to the hospice garden. The girl and the window washer were gone and the cat was sunning itself. Dylan stroked its stomach and it purred. He knew that when he went back inside, Ma Sara would be gone. He saw her outside the horrors and criticisms and constraints and misfortunes that had shaped her but that were not her. He decided he would tell his daughters that Ma Sara was brave. He would tell them that on its own love is not enough. He would tell them that their bodies are not their souls.

Dylan was wrong. When he returned, the doctor was checking Ma Sara's vitals. Dylan asked what the doctor what he thought and he indicated an inch. The response felt odd to Dylan, the space between two fingers, a life reduced.

He sat in the chair Delbert had occupied moments earlier and grasped Ma Sara's non-IV hand. Ornate rust-colored Hindu henna scrolls adorned her palm, fingers, and wrist—curlicues, loops, circles, lace, and dots—beautifully rendered with the precision of a fine artist. Dylan closed his eyes and ran his fingers over the delicate patterns.

"Who did that?" asked Dylan.

"I don't know," said the doctor. "Someone."

It looked like Dan's handiwork or someone Dan knew.

Twenty-two minutes later Ma Sara died.

Dylan rested his head on his mother's bed and thanked her for her sacrifices. Unfamiliar feelings surged through his body. Both sides now.

His mother had been unlike anyone else's mother.

That afternoon, Dylan made the necessary phone calls, signed the appropriate papers, and drove to Mission Beach. Stunningly beautiful young women and men were everywhere, kissing, holding hands, roller blading, playing volley ball, sunglasses and smiles turned to the sky. He strolled along the boardwalk in a mental fog, perusing the vendor's tables. He bought his wife and daughters toe rings.

An aspiring entrepreneur, a young woman, suggested he buy something for himself.

"What?" he asked. "I have everything."

"How about this?" She held up a long leather strap divided into strands.

"What is it?"

"It's for your wrist. Here. I'll put it on."

The woman wound the strap around Dylan's wrist and snapped it into place. He examined it and sniffed the leather. Something about its pressure, its bondage, made him sad and he started to cry.

"Are you okay?" asked the woman.

"My mom just died," said Dylan.

"I'm so sorry," said the woman.

Dylan sat in the sand and watched the ocean. Its rhythm calmed him. He remembered the time he and Ma Sara had painted his bedroom. It was after his father had left and he was a teenager. He wanted midnight blue walls. Ma Sara cut the corners and he rolled, dark paint specks accumulating on his hands and face.

"Here, have some more," she had said, flicking her paintbrush at him, forcing him to cover up. It tickled and he laughed.

"Now you do it," she said and held her face to him, smiling, her eyes closed tight.

She was so beautiful, so radiant, the expectant face of an innocent, ready to withstand anything, and he realized that he was the only person she had ever truly trusted in the world.

Two days later, at the funeral home, Dylan signed Ma Sara's death certificate and chatted with the owner. She would be scattered in the Pacific Ocean off La Jolla. Did Dylan want to be there?

"I'll send you the latitude and longitude," said the owner. "Your mother was very thorough. Do you want to identify her?"

"I know who she is . . . was," said Dylan.

"We need to make sure it's her. I can do it from her photo."

Dylan nodded. The owner left and returned a few minutes later.

"It's her. You'll be happy to know they took the long bones."
"Happy? Long bones?" asked Dylan, confused.

"I'm sorry. Her femurs. She was an organ donor."

"Why are they called long bones?" asked Dylan.

"I don't know," said the funeral home owner. "They're substantial, I guess."

"What will they do with them?" asked Dylan.

"Beats me. Build a prosthetic maybe."

Long bones. Dylan repeated the word. Of all the things that carried on. Long bones. Substantial. Ma Sara would have liked that.

When he told Dan later, Dan smiled and joked, "Bones make good drumsticks."

"You're a little sick, aren't you," said Dylan.

"Yes I am," said Dan. "Yes I am."

A couple months later, the news of Ma Sara's scattering arrived in the mail in the form of a red dot on a map of the Pacific Ocean. The map had been inserted into an empty gray box that had held Ma Sara's ashes. The longitude and latitude were noted as promised.

Dylan set the map aside and replaced the box's cover. He began to tap its sides with his middle fingers, playing it like a drum. He tapped faster, finding a rhythm. He didn't hate the hollow sound.

Lisa Michelle

A Happy Birthday

Ruth was sure she'd been given a birthday party with friends, ice cream, and cake. But she couldn't remember when. Maybe when she turned sixteen. No. The visions were vague, but there had been no party, no friends. Just a chocolate cake with one candle left on the kitchen table for Ruth to find after school. The next year she married Ray Peterson, the quiet boy her father liked. He was polite and at the age of nineteen, owned a decent pick-up and the best bull in the county.

"Breakfast ain't gonna cook itself." Ray tore the blankets off Ruth, then flipped on the light on his way out. The dreary February morning spurred her arthritis. Made turning seventy-five just another day to get through. She stood on the cold wood floor, toes bent outward, knotty joints, crinkled skin, and warped nails. Nothing like the attractive petite feet she knew. Why had she wasted those good feet on Ray? Why had she wasted her good years waiting for things to get better? Things never get better, they just sort of subside. Ruth wrapped herself in her robe and a heavy dose of winter stoicism on the way to the bathroom.

The toilet seat up as usual, she stepped in a puddle of piss. *Rotten S.O.B.* She refused to clean it up today. A hand towel over the wet spot did the trick. But, she was *not* going to pick up the towel. Not today. Today she wore clean jeans. Buttoned on a gray wool sweater, usually saved for special occasions.

Ray, baked hard by the sun and bad luck, slurped runny eggs through his few remaining teeth. "You fill the woodbox?"

"Yes." Ruth poured herself another cup of coffee from the old percolator. Ray Peterson refused innovations. Since buying the color television in 1988, he hadn't purchased more than parts for the tractor or the truck. None of those cellular telephones. No satellite television, or world-wide-web hogwash. All of it was a ridiculous waste of time. Meals were

made in or on the stove the way they should be. “Microwaves were invented by the Japs to infect us with cancer for kicking their ass in the Second World War.”

Ruth disagreed with most everything Ray believed, but it was easier to just keep quiet and clean the house.

“Did you get my chew when you went to town yesterday?”

“Heck. I forgot,” Ruth confessed.

“God damn it!” Ray slammed his fist on the table. “You didn’t forget.”

“Don’t start.” Ruth filled Ray’s coffee mug. “I had to get to the bank before they closed. They said we were overdrawn again and—”

“Stupid bitch.” Ray mopped his plate with his toast and shoved it in his mouth.

Ruth tightened her grip on the percolator handle. She imagined pouring hot coffee on Ray’s lap, then cracking his skull with the pot. The possibility of heaven and hell stopped her. It always stopped her, particularly when suicide seemed practical. With no family or real friends, no money or job skills, leaving was unimaginable.

“You can just trot your fat ass back to town today.”

“It’s my birthday you know. I was thinkin’, you get a free meal at Denny’s on your birthday. We could—”

“Just get the god damn chew and bake a cake or somethin’. White, with white frosting.”

“I like chocolate.”

“Course you do. If I’da said chocolate, you’d want white.”

“It’s my birthday. I oughta have the kind a cake *I* like. I oughta have friends and a present from my husband.”

“You know where the gate is if you don’t like it.”

“If I had somewhere to go, I’d go.”

“Go live on the streets with your druggie daughter.”

“She’s your daughter too.”

“She’s a waste ’a oxygen. Nothin’ but a jailbird.”

“Jails gotta be better than livin’ with you.”

Ray stood up. Ruth looked down, cleared his plate and took it to the sink. “Whorin’ around with niggers, takin’ drugs. That ain’t my fault. Hell, she probably got herself killed a long time ago.”

Ruth turned and faced him. “You’re a pig. A heartless,

pathetic pig."

"And you're a worthless cunt." His cruelty lost its sting long ago and allowed for an idea to take shape. The refusal to waste another moment forced an epiphany so perfect it was as if God bestowed on her the flawless ploy.

"Not today." She marched to the bedroom.

The double-barreled shotgun was wedged between Ray's side of the bed and the nightstand. Ruth sat on the bed, cracked open the breech; a shell filled each chamber. The old gun stuck twice before Ruth forced it shut and walked out with it at her waist.

Ray was planted on the pot when Ruth walked into the bathroom, shotgun cradled in her arms. "What the hell you doin'?" His dirty britches gathered around his boots, an AARP magazine on his lap.

"Give me the keys to the truck." Ruth held out her hand.

"What are you doin' with my gun?"

"I'm leavin' you, Ray. Give me the keys."

"Ruth darlin', what's got you all twisted up?" Ray's smile was unconvincing. "Come on, we'll go to Denny's and—" Ray grabbed for the gun but missed. Ruth recoiled, didn't mean to jerk the trigger. Pieces of ceiling fell like hail as Ray dove into a fetal position. "Jesus Christ, woman!"

"Give me the dang keys, Raymond!"

Ray squirmed on the floor and pulled up his pants. He fought his pocket to find the keys, then held them out. She snatched them. The mix of adrenaline and satisfaction caused something as close to ecstasy as Ruth could remember. A laugh emerged from deep inside that would not be contained.

A black cloud of spent diesel purged from the tailpipes as the old Dodge fishtailed up the snowy drive and out the front gate. Ruth followed the snowplow off the two-lane and onto Main. Tommy's Bakery caught her eye. She had always wanted one of those fancy coffees, but Ray didn't approve of doing business with queers. Ruth parked the truck and walked in.

The air was a delicious mix of warm vanilla and coffee beans. A young man with a creamy complexion slid a tray of cinnamon rolls into the display case, then popped out and smiled. "Well, good morning. What can I get you?"

"Got any chocolate birthday cakes?"

"No, I'm sorry. You can order one, have it by tomorrow."

"That's okay." Ruth inspected the fruit-glazed tarts, the pies, the muffins, scones, and sophisticated-looking pastries of all sorts.

"Whose birthday?"

"Mine."

"Oh! Happy Birthday." The guy clasped his hands and held them at his chin. "Do you like tortes?"

"What?"

"I have a chocolate torte that someone ordered. I could," he looked around as if someone would hear his secret, "let you have it and make another one." He pressed his finger against his lips. "Shhh."

"It's not that important."

"Are you kidding me? It's your birthday. And my tortes are *amazing*." He opened a stainless steel refrigerator, pulled out a triple layer chocolate torte. Baby blue and lavender pansies planted along the top and bottom reminded Ruth of the small bouquet Ray gave her when they married at the courthouse.

"Oh my gosh." She had never seen a more magnificent cake. *Probably expensive*. "What sort of fancy coffee would go with it?" Ruth bit her smile.

A line formed as Ruth sat at a corner table, sipped her cappuccino and watched young, normal, well-dressed, happy people with their entire lives ahead of them. They knew what drinks to order while thumbing their phones. Knew how to live in a world where neighbors smiled and waved; didn't threaten to call the sheriff because your cattle busted through the fence. They lived with pets who were allowed in the house, who served no purpose other than companionship. Their world had family and friends and birthday parties.

Ruth finished her slice of torte, letting it linger in her mouth. The smooth chocolate coated her tongue and she washed it down with the last of her cappuccino. Like a cow working a salt block, Ruth licked her fork clean, then slid it into her coat pocket. A pink box held the remaining torte, and Ruth took a long last look before closing the lid.

The old Dodge rolled to a stop in front of Wells Fargo Bank. The truck coughed when Ruth killed the engine. She reached the shotgun off the floorboard and unloaded it, her heart

banging painfully in her chest as she stared out the fogged windshield. Shadows of cars passed now and then, but it was the thought of Ray that motivated her to take the gun and the pink box into the bank.

"Hi, Ruth!" Helen, who worked at the post office, was busy filling out a deposit slip.

"Hi, Helen. How are you?" Ruth smiled and set the pink box on the counter.

"Great. How are—" She noticed the gun.

"I'm fine, thanks." Ruth stepped up to the only teller. A redheaded girl, still battling acne, smiled disbelievingly.

"Hey, Mrs. Peterson."

"Hi, Amber. I'm sorry sweetie, but can I please have all your money? I'm robbing the bank."

Amber dropped her chin and raised her brow before she opened her drawer. "What am I supposed to put it in?"

Ruth hadn't considered details. Fear fogged her mind. Her heart began to beat impossibly loud in her ears, caused her hands and legs to tremble. Suddenly lightheaded and unstable, as if she might buckle at any moment. Everything told her to sit down, tell Amber she was "sorry" and "never mind it was only a joke." But it was now or back to Ray. "Find something!" It felt so good to yell. She grabbed a deep breath and watched Amber remove the plastic bag from a trash can. "Good thinkin'."

Amber filled the bag with cash from her drawer and handed it to Ruth as the new branch manager, a woman in her forties and a navy suit-dress, ducked behind her desk.

"Thank you. Now go press the alarm or whatever you're supposed to do." Ruth leaned the gun against the counter, hugged the pink box and carried it to a seat in the waiting area. Soft jazz played while Helen, the manager, and Amber, watched Ruth dig the fork out from her coat pocket and eat her birthday torte like no one was watching.

"Ruth? What in the world are you doing?" Helen asked.

"Leaving Ray."

It seemed like forever for the Sheriff's Department to arrive, but when they did, they came out in full-force. Six of them in flak jackets with assault rifles scanned the area for the bandit. The manager pointed to Ruth. With the fork in her

hand, Ruth raised her arms like she'd seen the bad guys do on reruns of *Magnum P.I.*

"Drop the weapon!"

Ruth dropped her fork.

"Stand up and place your hands on your head!" A voice from behind her roared.

Ruth stood, did as she was told, and her chair flew sideways. Strong hands expertly pinioned her arms behind her back. The cold cuffs were on in an instant and Ruth grinned all the way to the back of the police car. She grinned while being fingerprinted. Even grinned in her booking photo.

Judge Amy Jackson leaned forward on the bench at Ruth Peterson's arraignment. "Considering the severity of the charges this is a difficult case. The defendant lacks any prior criminal history."

"Cause she ain't no criminal, Judge. Let her come home. Please! I need her . . . I'm starvin' to death." Ray stood behind Ruth and patted her shoulder.

Judge Jackson slammed her gavel twice. "Mr. Peterson! You must refrain from speaking. I've warned you, these outbursts will not be tolerated. Next time, I will have you removed and fined. Do you understand?"

Ray twisted his ball cap in his hands. "I think freedom of speech is still my right as an American, ain't it?"

"Get him out of here," Judge Jackson ordered.

Ruth and her sweaty public defender, David Mendoza, watched as the bailiff and the security guard escorted Ray out the heavy doors.

"Your honor, my client pleads guilty to all charges and wishes to refuse bail." Mendoza's statement sounded more like a question.

"Considering the special circumstances of this case, I find the bail schedule to be excessive. The fact that the defendant failed to remove the money from the bank's premises also challenges the robbery charge. Until I can further review and determine the specifics pertaining to this case, I am ordering the defendant to house arrest."

"What? What did she say?" Panic filled Ruth.

"You get to go home, Mrs. Peterson." Mendoza, like Ray,

patted Ruth's shoulder.

"No!" Ruth shook her head. "I don't want to go home."

Ruth had been home two days before she shared secrets with the mounted deer head next to the wood stove whenever Ray was near. "Don't worry, I won't tell him," she'd say. "Wait 'til he goes to sleep then we'll get him," she'd whisper so Ray could hear. Then she'd cover her mouth and giggle. By the fourth day, Ray put the deer head in the shed. He hid his collection of hunting knives that once decorated the living room and the shotgun was no longer next to the bed.

At dinner, Ruth set a casserole dish on the table and folded her hands in prayer. Ray ignored her and lifted the lid. Olive-colored horse turds steamed his face.

"You goddamn lunatic! I'm callin' your probation fella."

Ruth rushed to the refrigerator, pulled Probation Officer Joshua Nelson's card off the door and handed it to Ray.

A foot of snow closed the roads until noon the next day. Probation Officer Joshua Nelson sat at the kitchen table and watched Ruth peel two bananas with her mouth. She held one in each hand.

"Last night, I woke up, she's standin' over me with a god damn butcher knife singing Happy Birthday." Ray crossed his arms and leaned against the back of his chair.

"Has she seen a doctor?" Joshua asked, as Ruth bit each banana.

"No." Ray eyed Ruth while she stuffed her cheeks.

Joshua wrote something in his file. "I think we should start with an examination and—"

Ruth spit the mouthful of banana at Ray.

"Ruth!" Ray grabbed the bananas. The sight of the mess creeping down his face as if he were melting justified Ruth's laughing frenzy.

"I have to piddle." Ruth hurried to the bathroom. Pulled her pants down without closing the door. "I see you," she sang.

"I'm going to order an immediate evaluation," said Joshua.

"Evaluate this." Ruth squatted and peed on the floor.

Ray leaned sideways in his chair, saw Ruth.

"I'm not cleanin' it uuu-up. I'm not cleanin' it uuu-up. . ."

"She's pissin' on the floor!" Ray stood, arms akimbo and eyed Joshua. "She's nuts."

"Maybe we should take her in," Joshua delivered in a somber voice.

Not answering even one of the evaluation questions caused the county to label Ruth incoherent. The second series of evaluations identified her behavior as dementia. Taking her home was not advised.

The Paradise Ranch Senior Care gave Ruth her own room and a colored television with channels galore. They cleaned her bathroom, organized yoga and bingo and polka nights. After a month, she had over a dozen friends. One in particular, Charlie, saved the chocolates his daughter brought and shared them with Ruth.

Charlie—she loved saying his name. Loved the way it sounded. Charlie. Loved the way his luminous gray-green eyes listened to her when she spoke. Loved his gravelly voice when he read then attempted to explain D.H. Lawrence poems to her. Loved the minty smell of his brown skin.

It was April first when Ray visited. "Heifers did good, not much trouble this year." He sat on the edge of a chair in the corner, watched Ruth work the fancy TV remote from her upright bed. She paused on the Superior Livestock Auction taking place in Nebraska.

"What is this?" Ray perked up and watched the cattle being sold. "That herd don't average no eight hundred pounds. Turn it up."

Ruth changed the channel to Oprah, tried to ignore the earthy odor of cow manure that always festered on Ray.

"Turn that back right now."

Ruth turned up the volume. "Hush. I'm watchin' Oprah."

Ray snatched the remote from Ruth. She laughed when he pressed the on/off button three times. "How the hell you work this thing?"

"You have to be nice to it." Ruth knew he couldn't see the buttons, too stubborn to wear glasses.

"Well, I come to visit you." Ray tossed her the remote. "Try

and remember that."

"Remember? I don't remember you." Ruth looked confused. "Who are you?"

Ray bent near Ruth's face. "You know god damn well who I am. You ain't foolin' me."

"I don't have to," Ruth whispered. And she never spoke to him again. Not one word when he visited twice in May.

In June, Ray found Ruth outside at a picnic table, sitting very close to Charlie. They worked a jigsaw puzzle under the shade of cedar trees. With a handful of wildflowers, Ray stomped up in a spotless white button-down and new jeans. "Guess we can figure why your daughter likes them colored boys, huh?" Ray spit a long stream of tobacco juice. Tried to rile Charlie with a long, threatening glare. When Charlie high-fived Ruth for placing the last puzzle piece, Ray threw the flowers at them and left.

February felt like an early spring. Charlie knocked on Ruth's door just before noon. She was sitting next to the window, reading *The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence.*

Charlie left the door open and went to her. "Happy Birthday, Ruth." He smiled like he meant it and handed her a box wrapped in gleaming gold paper.

"What did you do?" Ruth held the gift, admired it a long while. "It's so beautiful." She swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Come on. Open it up. We have to get to lunch." Charlie squeezed Ruth's hand.

Carefully, Ruth removed the tape and unwrapped the box. She wiggled off the lid. "What the heck is it?" Ruth asked.

"It's an iPad. They're wonderful. You can take pictures, check the weather, watch videos. You can even download all the books or poems you like. I'll show you how to work it later."

"Charlie, you believe in God?" Ruth stood and looked up at him.

"Sure. Don't you?"

"Without a doubt." Ruth filled her lungs, felt them expand, felt the privilege of being alive. Then, in the space of a

heartbeat she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Their kiss was simple—soft and slow, but most of all sincere.

"Come on now, we're gonna be late for lunch." Charlie held Ruth's arm and helped her down the hall.

"Shhh, here she comes. Quiet everyone." Hushed voices escaped the cafeteria.

Alison Turner

Actresses Auditioning

Nine days after her mom died, Alicia is running away. She has a duffel bag hidden beneath the stairs in the hallway of the apartment complex.

"Where did you say you're going tonight?" Justin, her dad, sits on the couch in his security uniform for the night shift at Fruitvale Mall. She's never lived with him before now, and he sleeps on the couch during the day. He tells Alicia to sleep in her mom's room because, he says, a fifteen-year-old girl needs privacy, but she uses the couch when he's at work. He doesn't know that the couch has always been hers, and that whenever her mom stayed out late Alicia would listen for the heels in the hall to turn off the TV. Her mom would keep the lights off and sit on the arm of the couch to play with Alicia's hair, both of them pretending she was asleep.

"To a friend's," Alicia says. "To study for bio."

"What's her name?"

"Katy." She pulls her Chihuahua, Beverly, up on her lap.

Actually, she's going to Stella's, but Katy's driving. Stella is the richest girl at school and is having another model party, a thing she does when her cousin, a photographer in L.A., comes to visit. The cousin takes pictures of girls who want to get into modeling or acting then gets paid by companies if they pick the girls for ads. Last year, Tanya Nelson's picture got picked and she ended up in a giant color photo for North Furniture. The whole school passed around the spread from *L.A. Weekly*: Tanya sitting around a dinner table with four strangers, aiming her fork at a plastic pork chop. She got a hundred bucks and might be famous soon, but no one knows yet because she transferred schools.

"Have you been to her house before?" Justin mutes the TV and stares at her. He's been staring at her all week, like he's trying to find something in her face.

"Yes."

She has never been to Katy or Stella's house. Last year, she asked her mom if she could go to a model party and her mom

said not until she was sixteen, because that's how old she was when she got her first ad. Alicia is fifteen but her mom is dead. She watches the screen, where a cop car's lights flicker. The clock on the DVD player says 7:20. Justin will go to the bathroom soon, and that is when she will leave to meet Katy at Low-Inn Park at 7:30. Alicia never tells other kids where she lives.

Beverly jumps to the floor and trots over to Justin's ankles, sniffs. Alicia will have to leave her here. Justin picks the dog up like she's a remote control.

"You gonna put some pants on before you go?"

"They're shorts."

Justin shakes his head and taps a pack of cigarettes on his knee.

"It looks like you've got nothing on."

"Everyone wears them like this."

"Your mom let you?"

"Yes."

Beverly jumps to the ground.

"Did you get something to eat?" He lights a cigarette. He never goes on the porch to smoke like he's supposed to, and he puts the silverware in the drawer instead of the jars Alicia and her mom decorated. Alicia doesn't know how to make him follow the rules.

"Yes," she lies. He doesn't know anything about girls. He doesn't know that girls don't like beef stew from a can and he doesn't know that girls need pads. Two days ago she got her period and asked him for money but he said he was broke so she said it was for food, and he said they had stuff in the cupboard. All that's in there now are cans he brought with him from the trailer where he was living with two guys he met in training for the National Guard before Alicia was even born. She's been stuffing socks with toilet paper for pads and taping it to her underwear. What will he say when she says she needs money for socks?

"Maybe this weekend we can make your mom's chili," Justin says. He says they have until the end of the month to stay in this apartment, and that then he'll find something with two bedrooms.

"Don't know how," Alicia says. She does know how. Her

mom even taught her to make kimchi in large batches, one of the only things her mom did that was Korean.

"Maybe we can try." He stands and scratches under his light brown hair, grown longer than Alicia has ever seen it which somehow makes his muscles look even bigger. When she was little she would wrap her hands around his arm and beg him to flex.

He goes to the bathroom and shuts the door. She hates the bathroom ever since he moved in. It is all the things they joke about on TV, like the toilet seat being up and whiskers from shaving in the sink, but also new bottles and deodorants that are grayer and larger and smell sharper than her mom's pink and green jars.

When the water runs she says, "Katy's here, see you later."

"What?"

"Bye."

Beverly barks when she rushes to the door, barks and barks until Alicia swoops her into a canvas bag they keep for her by the shoes. She runs down the stairs, gets the duffel, and jogs toward Low-Inn Park. Halfway there she has to walk with Beverly squirming in the bag. It is as cold as Bakersfield gets and the sidewalk feels different under her moccasins, which her mom called indoor shoes. They had matching pairs from when her mom worked at Ross; when she brought them home to Alicia she warned that in Korea it is a curse to wear your indoor shoes outside.

Alicia sits on the plastic steps of the park's play structure, which hasn't changed since she and her mom moved from L.A. to Bakersfield seven years ago. At first, Justin came over on Sunday nights even though he still lived in L.A. and drove trucks for a week at a time. When he visited he said it was hard to live so far from his girls and her mom would say, I haven't been your girl for years, and they'd whisper-yell in the kitchen while Alicia watched *Young Stars*, the show that turned kids like her into celebrities. If they still fought when the show ended she'd come to this park to play. She used to imagine the tube slide would portal her to another world if she said the right words at the top.

She lets Beverly out of the bag. The Chihuahua sniffs the structure until circling back to Alicia's feet, then sits. "Good

girl." Beverly might mess up finding a place to stay but she couldn't leave her alone. Justin doesn't know about walking and feeding, or about her stuffed dollar sign toy you have to hide on top of the fridge.

Alicia takes off the duffel, one of Justin's from the National Guard, like removing a seatbelt. All it carries is another pair of shorts, two shirts, some underwear, almost one hundred and fifty dollars—her savings plus what she could get off Justin without him noticing—one of her mom's dresses for the party, a medium-sized makeup purse, and her mom's high high heels. Maybe she should have brought the red dress. She picked the green one with the gold triangles but maybe the red one would make her stand out more. She's been trying on her mom's dresses at night, standing on a chair to see butt-down in the dresser mirror. Her boobs are too small to make the fabric tight like it should be, but they still make her look eighteen instead of fifteen. She thought her mom had at least twenty dresses, but after trying them all on there are only eight. She hung each of them on the closet door and stood back to decide which one would be best for tonight, like they were actresses auditioning.

Something crashes from the other side of the park. A lumpy shadow falls from the garbage bin to the ground. A raccoon waddles away and Beverly yips after it but doesn't chase. Whenever Alicia's in a place she's been lots of times, like this park, she remembers what she was like a long time ago. Last year, when she was fourteen, she used that retarded Hello Kitty backpack. She sees herself with the fat pink and white kitty head on her back: that looks stupid, she says. She sees herself when she was ten with her hair in a side ponytail that her mom made her wear, balancing on the beam in the gravel on the way home from school earlier than usual because of teachers' meetings that her mom forgot about: Don't go home yet, she says. When Alicia got home early that day, something was happening in the bedroom so she stood on the inside shoe mat with her backpack on. The door opened and a man came out. He looked different than any man Alicia had seen up close, with a thick black beard and tattoos on his chest. He touched his open pants on the way to the bathroom and it flopped out like a slug. When he saw her he yelled into her

mom's room, Lindy? and looked scared and sweaty so Alicia started to cry. Then there was a gasp, the kind her mom gave when someone kissed someone they weren't supposed to on *Beverly Hills, 90210*.

"Ali!" Her mom's black hair puffed out and eye shadow went outside of the lines. She held a red blanket over her body, the one they sat under to watch TV. The man went to the bathroom holding his pants up with one hand and rubbing his shaved head with the other, like erasing the last word on a blackboard. Her mom knelt down and the blanket fell open to one side of her butt, her stomach, her breast, the same wedge of body Alicia saw every morning five years later through hospital gowns that twisted overnight. Beverly was a puppy then, a gift from Justin, and chewed on the red blanket. "There's nothing to be scared of," her mom said. "But you have to promise not to tell Justin. Promise."

That happened other times, too, with other men, but by then Alicia knew to leave and come back later. She could tell by the shoes on the mat.

In the park, Beverly chews on Alicia's moccasin. "No." Alicia taps the dog's nose, which then rests on her paws. The dog's been sitting on Justin's lap all week even though he never fed her, just to get back at Alicia for forgetting about her when her mom was sick. That was one of the things the nurse called Cynthia would do when she came to the apartment, she'd say, Hungry little thing! and go to the top shelf in the pantry where they kept the dog food. Cynthia was fat and always told Alicia to eat, and at first Alicia hated her because she wouldn't let her put makeup on her mom, or Beverly into the bedroom, or the TV up as loud as she and her mom liked it. But then Cynthia got better because she'd look at her mom's portfolio with Alicia on the couch while her mom slept. There was the picture with her arms draped over a chair, the one with her leg up in the same high high heels Alicia has in her bag, and the close-ups of her face next to a lily, her mom's lucky flower and Alicia's, too. Alicia's favorite was a shot of her on the stairs with Scott Baio from when she was the foreign exchange student for two episodes of *Charles in Charge*. Her line was, We go shopping now?

After the machines and tubes were packed into a van to

move her mom to the hospital, Cynthia gave Alicia a bag of cashews and a *Glamour*. Alicia finished the magazine the night after the funeral, and someone else ate the nuts.

It is seven forty-five. Maybe Katy's not coming. Alicia bumps her heels on the step and leans against the plastic balls that spin to O or X. The park is silent except for Beverly's scratching on the ground and a buzzing from the lamp by the restrooms, which she knows are locked. If this were a movie her mom would say, How far does this chick really thing she's gonna get?

The tape around the sock in her underwear sticks to her thigh. She puts her hand up her shorts and tries to fix it and of course right then headlights sting her eyes, Murphy's Law, one of the sayings Alicia had to explain to her mom. She stands and feels something on her thigh, tries to check but the car is in front of her, parked as close as possible. "Treasure" by Bruno Mars plays as the passenger window rolls down and a hand with a lacey tattoo around the wrist dances out the window. Alicia watched Katy draw the tattoo in Bio with a Sharpie.

Alicia picks up Beverly and gets in the back.

"Evening," the driver says. She has long blond hair and looks older than a highschooler. She and Katy wear short dresses: Katy's is red and the blonde's is striped with tiny lines of black and white.

"This is Bree," Katy says.

"Hi," Alicia says.

Bree looks at Alicia's hoody then her moccasins then the duffel. "You changing for the party?"

Alicia looks down at the moccasins. Some beads are missing on the left one. "Yeah. Can we go somewhere to change?"

"Oh my god is this your dog?" Katy holds out her hand to Beverly and makes kissy noises.

"Can't you just change in the car?" Bree says, lighting a cigarette.

"I'm worried I'll ruin the dress," Alicia says. She needs somewhere with a bathroom to fix the sock. "It was my mom's. The dress."

"We can go back to Bree's," Katy says quickly. She pokes Bree on the arm and looks at Alicia the way everyone at school

looks at her, like she kind of died, too.

Bree's phone buzzes and she checks it. She rolls her eyes. "That thing's not gonna pee all over my apartment, is it?"

"No."

"Let's go, then." Bree finishes her cigarette and flicks it out the window. "You can't use my makeup though."

They drive to a neighborhood that looks like Low-Inn but the buildings aren't as high. Bree parks on the street. Following the girls in with the duffel feels more like running away than sitting in Low-Inn Park did. Alicia wonders if she should leave the bag in Bree's apartment so they'd have to come back for it and she could crash on the floor, or if she should take it to the party in case she finds a ride to L.A.

Bree's apartment is one room plus a bathroom. To the left there is a mini-fridge, a sink with one cupboard and counter, and a toaster. No freezer. Alicia thinks about her mom's sweetbread that has been in the freezer forever, and how if anyone tries to thaw it without putting a damp cloth over it the way you have to, it will taste stale.

Bree goes to the fridge and bends down to open it. Beverly sniffs her wrists. "Get out of here." She gives Beverly a swat.

Katy flips through Bree's clothes on a garment rack next to the bathroom. "Should I change my dress?" The hangers screech against metal.

"Just let me see before you put anything on, some of it's dry clean and I'm not doing that shit." Bree opens a can of beer or pop, Alicia can't tell.

"Can I use the bathroom?" Alicia says.

"There." Bree points. "Be quick, China girl. It's after eight, let's get there."

At eight o'clock, Justin has already left for work.

Katy and Bree are sitting close on the bed, the stripes on one dress reaching into the red of the other. Katy plays with Beverly on her lap. The way they look reminds Alicia of her mom and Justin, the times when he loved her. Sometimes he loved her like in the movies. Sometimes they didn't fight at all and all three of them watched TV, and Justin's hand would rub up and down her mom's neck, sliding under her hair so that her ponytail pumped like a heart.

Alicia squeezes into the bathroom, closing the door behind

her. She pulls down her shorts, bracing for deep red—there is one spot of blood on the sock. She turns on the water and opens the cupboard below the sink. There is a box of tampons, but Alicia has never used those. Her mom told her there was no rush. She rearranges the sock and pulls her underwear back up. She opens the duffel and stares into it. She has brought all the wrong things but doesn't know what she would trade.

The bathroom is hot, with no fan and blond hairs in the sink like rusted cracks. She takes off the hoody and the tank-top. The green dress is baggy around her chest, worse than she remembered. She puts on the heels and looks at herself, higher. She mouths, *We go shopping now*? to the mirror. Outside the bathroom they are talking about Twisters, the club with 16-and-up night on Sundays that she has heard about but never been to. She looks at the mirror longer. *I live with Justin. He's my dad.* These are words she's had to say to teachers and to counselors all week. She never knew what she looked like saying them.

Alicia closes the door and the car drives off while her hand still touches the metal. She stands on the sidewalk in her mom's heels and the green and gold dress flowering out from under the hoody. Beverly is already at the door of the apartment building. Alicia walks slowly, listening to every click, click, up the dirty tiles on the stairs. At the door, she has no key. Beverly scratches. Alicia tries the door, and it opens.

She leaves the duffel on the shoe mat and clicks, clicks over to the couch. There is a note on the coffee table, under her key with the metal lilies key chain. *Forget something?* it says. *I'll get groceries after work. Want to rent this place?* There is a picture of a mansion ripped out of a magazine.

Alicia changes out of the dress and puts it in the closet with the others. She moves the forks in the kitchen from the drawer to the jar and takes out the sweetbread from the freezer. Later she will bring the neighbors cigarettes to thank them for never telling about Beverly.

Brian Beard

Problems in Poultry Farming

I don't say goodbye to my wife and daughters anymore when I leave the compound to look for work. I don't greet the old basket weaver sitting in the haze of dawn beside the red dirt path. I don't wave to the workers waiting to be picked up by the side of the highway. Not that I've let myself go completely. I still wear my lime-green suit. I still carry my agricultural school thesis in my briefcase. Still rev the engine of my motorcycle more than necessary before pulling on the highway to Allada.

I used to be the man in Allada who'd write out your receipt if you bought cement at the depot. I supplemented my salary by making minor errors in my calculations, eventually pocketing enough to purchase my motorcycle. But I wanted more. So, the year I turned forty, I had an ID made to say I was thirty-six, quit the job at the depot, and began classes at the agricultural school alongside classmates half my age. The idea was to get ahead, to make up for lost time, to put myself in a favorable position, but after these months since graduation of coming up empty, I'd happily take my old job back if it hadn't been given to a tall woman from the north with a gap between her front teeth and a witchdoctor for a husband.

As I ride into Allada, the zemidjans are sitting beneath the miracle fruit tree waiting to take people from point A to point B. Even now, with hardly a CFA left to my name, when I pass the zemidjans in their yolk yellow shirts on their motorbikes, I am like a man passing night women on his way to see his bride—I don't even look at them.

I park my motorcycle in front of the high wall of the farmer's co-op, the last viable place in the entire subprefecture where I have not looked for work.

If they won't hire me at the co-op, here is my plan: walk out beside the highway after the sun goes down with a bottle of sodabi, drink as much as I can, lie down on the highway, and wait for Death to come in the form of a bush taxi.

The co-op secretary looks up from behind her barred window when I enter. When I start to introduce myself, she interrupts me and tells me to take a seat. There are no spaces along the wooden bench crammed with farmers in ill-fitting suits from the Dead Yovo Market, their fingers trembling on their thighs like dried fish in hot oil.

I gather through the half-whispered conversations of the farmers that they are here to ask for loans from the co-op boss, Djenotin. After a while, the door of the office opens and a large man stands in the doorway wearing a bubu in a dark blue and bright orange cellphone motif. Djenotin. I look as meaningfully disinterested as I can, but he points at one of the farmers, who rises, squares his shoulders, and follows him into the office. One or two farmers throughout the day come out of the office looking pleased, but the rest are wincing like they have been hit in the nose. Finally, in the late afternoon, when Djenotin still hasn't picked me, I decide I've waited long enough.

Before heading home, I stop at a bar across the highway from the cement depot and sit in a white plastic chair at a white plastic table. When the bargirl, who I don't recognize, asks me what I'd like, I tell her nothing, thanks, I'm waiting for someone. Across the highway, a driver and his apprentice lie on mats beneath the engine of their truck and work on the engine. On the side of the truck have been painted the words: "I trust no one—not even you." People pass in front of the bar from time to time: women carrying firewood; a man on a motorbike transporting a goat tied to the back; a small boy leaning on a stick, pretending to be an old man; a shirtless madman in stained blue shorts and a gray stubble beard who leans to one side and looks warily at me like *I* am the madman.

Djenotin enters the bar and takes a seat. He stretches his arm behind him as if he's reaching onto a shelf for a knickknack and motions the bargirl over. When she approaches, he hammers his fingers against his palm to draw her closer. She bends down so that her face is almost touching his. He orders a large beer and a braised chicken. She straightens and smooths her wrapper before walking through the curtain separating the bar from the courtyard behind it.

The bargirl brings Djenotin his beer. He takes an enormous gulp and slaps his hand on his thigh and sighs with satisfaction. Instead of introducing myself to Djenotin, impressing him, gaining his confidence—as it would seem Destiny has arranged for me, I lean my head back on the wall behind me and listen to the waves of bush taxis on the highway, a wandering cobbler tapping his box to advertise his services, flip-flops on the cement floor, a closing door. Djenotin is on his second beer and almost done with his chicken and I still haven't said anything when the speakers begin to blare a swirling, distorted Congolese dance hit full of chiming guitars, manic whistles, and a chorus of men shout-singing: "The dogs bark, the caravan passes."

Djenotin puts 1000 CFA on the table and leaves without waiting for the change, and then it is just me and a drunkard dancing by himself in the dark corner of the bar.

The darkness is punctured by the headlights of passing bush taxis and the fires of vendors grilling corn and curtains backlit by fluorescence like the pale flags of ghosts. As I head out of town, I can see, beneath the miracle fruit tree, the glow of a cigarette as it moves from one invisible zemidjan to the next.

As soon as I cut the engine of my motorcycle, the compound is silent. By the moonlight through the torn mosquito netting I see my daughters lying on their mats, my oldest humming a tune with missing notes in her sleep.

I crawl onto the mattress beside my wife. I imagine she awakes and asks me if I have found work, and I imagine I tell her that I have.

In the morning, some last scrap of hope rouses me and again I drive my motorcycle down the highway to the depot. Again I wait all day for Djenotin to pick me. Finally, when the room is almost dark, Djenotin announces he will see one more person. The others will have to return tomorrow. When he points at me, I stand, trying my best to appear nonchalant. The others suck their teeth and walk outside, mumbling to themselves.

One buzzing tube of fluorescent light flickers in Djenotin's office. A large couch is pushed against the wall beneath

the barred, curtained window. Djenotin and I sit in chairs facing each other on either side of his desk, empty but for two stamps: "ACCEPTED" and "REFUSED."

"How can I help?"

I open my briefcase, take out my thesis, and put it on the desk before him. Djenotin glances at the cover page.

"'Problems in Poultry Farming.' Why poultry?"

"I don't know."

"There must have been some reason you chose to study poultry."

"It was mainly an academic exercise."

"An academic exercise?" Djenotin grins as if at a private joke. "What does that mean anyway, 'Problems in Poultry Farming'? What would an example of a 'Problem in Poultry Farming' be?"

I nod, but I can't bring to mind any of the dozen problems in poultry farming in my thesis which I had copied shamelessly from a French agronomy textbook from pre-Independence.

"There are a number of diseases to which poultry are susceptible," I say.

"Let's cut to the chase," Djenotin says. "How much do you want, what do you want it for, and when can you pay it back by?"

"I'm not looking for a loan. I'm looking for a job, like the one I had before at the cement depot."

"So you were one of the crooks at the cement depot. I thought you looked familiar."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I am an honest man."

I mean to infuse my words with the knowing intimacy of a private joke and thereby lay the foundation for a lucrative and long-lasting friendship. But Djenotin's eyes narrow and he looks over in the direction of his secretary—although of course he can't see her because she is in another room—as if to say, "Why did you let this one in?"

I look up for a moment, as if someone might be up there able to help me out, but all I see are water stains on the ceiling.

"The bottom line is we don't need any cement people here. Or any chicken people." He lets out a very slight guffaw.

"I can handle papers. I can type reports. I can keep books."

Djenotin's face assumes the look I myself gave many times at the depot. It is the look one gives when one has come to the conclusion that helping to solve another person's problems is not in one's own interest. The curled-down sides of the lips feign regret that one will not be able to help for factors more or less beyond one's control.

I look at the binders on the shelves behind Djenotin and have the absurd thought that in one of those binders, if only I can find them, words are written, which, if I were to read them aloud to Djenotin, would cause him to change his mind. But finding those words, even if they existed, could take the rest of my life.

"Have you considered working as a zemidjan?"

There is a hint of gentleness in Djenotin's voice now, as if he is trying to convince a child who has picked up a freshly sharpened knife to put it down before someone gets hurt.

I try to smile, unsuccessfully.

"Do you own a motorbike?"

"I own a motorcycle," trying to sound modest.

"Do you?" he says, shrugging as if he has just solved my problem and that it wasn't such a hard problem to solve.

He stands and I stand with him.

When I exit through the empty waiting room, he does not accompany me out.

Children in khaki uniforms are chasing a baby dust devil in front of the bar as I arrive on my motorcycle. Before I cut the engine, a scrawny man appears from around the corner of the building, his lips pressing into each other as if trying to eat each other without the aid of his teeth. He jabs me hard in the gut. I watch him, bent over, waiting for my breath to return, as he heads north on my motorcycle on the highway toward Abomey. As soon as I am able to stand, a zemidjan passes and I call out for it. I climb behind him and we speed off.

We head north but we don't see the thief. Still we continue through the forest, arriving at dusk in some little town cut in half by the highway halfway to Abomey. The zemidjan stops in front of a table of pineapple vendors who are moving the pineapples they have not sold into cement sacks.

The zemidjan asks me to pay. I give him what I have left. Apparently it is not enough to return to Allada because, after

he buys a pastis bottle's worth of contraband Nigerian petrol, he leaves without me.

I walk down the highway until I can no longer see the tiny red dot of his taillight. Then I lie down in the middle of the highway and listen to the drumming of a ceremony far off in the bush. Above the trees, the moon appears, enormous and terrible.

The moon has made it to the other side of the sky and the newly-risen sun is glinting off the tin roofs of the cinderblock houses as I walk into Allada. Making my way along the dusty street, I hear, over the cinderblock wall of a compound, a woman calling for her children to wake up. A truck heading south toward Cotonou passes me without a proverb painted on it, at least not on the side I can see. Beneath the miracle fruit tree the zemidjans are arguing, but at my approach they become silent to witness what I cannot: myself, turning into one of them.

Liz Bender

The Hypnotist

The counselors had just left the cabin for their dinner shift, and the girls were finally alone. They quickly dressed in their evening whites. Underneath Emma's top bunk the girls formed a line, just as they'd planned earlier that day. The dinner bell would chime soon, and they would all have to trample down the caliche stone path to Grand Mess Hall for 7:30 dinner. The next thirty minutes were hers, though, Emma thought. That left just enough time to hypnotize all the girls one by one.

This year, they bunked in The Warbler's Nest on top of Junior Hill. Last year, all eight of them lived at The Barge Inn on the flats by the river where the youngest girls' cabins were. Over the week they had been back at Camp Kickinee, Emma overheard that a few of the girls had written letters back and forth over the summer. She wondered why no one had written her.

Everyone was thirteen now, except for Darby, who was twelve (but she'd already gotten her period). Darby knew the youngest had to be last in line, though. It was only fair. Jules, the Cabin Sweep, was first. She was a big time gymnast back at home and basically front-flipped into her white halter dress and scaled the rickety metal ladder to Emma's bed a full minute before the others. Mary Frances, who'd appointed herself Cabin Leader (again), was second in line. Becky, the (world's slowest) Mail Sorter, was third only because she'd elbowed Pam, the Historian, out of the way. Pam had knock-knees, an oily middle part in her hair and no sense of humor. (Mary Frances called her "Logjam Pam" behind her back.) Krista, the Chant Captain, scooted in behind Pam, and then, of course, poor Jessie was last (aside from Darby). Jessie had an incurable disease, the counselors told the girls last year, but no one ever talked about it to Jessie. No one talked to Jessie at all, really. Emma had tried once last year during S'more Prayer Time, but then she chickened out. Talking to Jessie was awkward. She had pretty brown curls and freckly

skin, but her glasses were extra thick and she wore metal braces under her socks. Once during lunchtime her muscles spazzed in front of the whole camp. Everyone knew she was weak, but she was kind and stayed quiet, so no one bothered her. She had the single corner bunk by the bathroom again this year. (Jules saw a bedwetting pad under her sheet, too.)

Emma's bedframe screeched as the girls below her grabbed onto the metal rails, staking their places. "*I* was here!" they hissed back and forth. The night air was sticky with high-pitched HeeHees and OhMyGoshes as the girls prepared to watch Emma put a spell on Jules first, who lay still as a dead body on the blanket.

The chorus of evening bugs settled into their places on the ancient Pecan Tree branches that hung over the cabin roof. Dusk was on its way. It would hum, as it always did, with abundant possibility. The Texas sky would turn to sapphire, and spots of stars would gather behind the last sprays of clouds. Soon the cabin's insides would be lighter than the earth outside. Emma's chest felt warm and chock-full of cinnamon like it did after a handful of Hot Tamales, and her fingers were strong and alive as she placed them on Jules' temples.

"It's magic. Watch!" Mary Frances whispered back at the girls.

There was silence over the crowd. Emma began to rub Jules' temples with firm, circular strokes.

"Close your eyes and count from 1 to 50," Emma instructed. She closed her eyes to look more mysterious, and then she came up with a few extra rules just to make the hypnosis sound authentic. "When you get to 50 start calling out random numbers between 1 and 50 in no particular order. Got it?"

"Got it," Jules said. Her voice strummed the numbers from 1 to 50 flawlessly, not forgetting a single one. Then she began the random count. "44, 30, 12, 10, 51—wait, sorry—3, 49, 21." Her cadence slowed—"1, 50 . . . 6 . . . 5"—and she fumbled the rest of the numbers.

Emma's fingertips pressed down into the small caves on the corners of her Jules' eyes. Yes, Jules was naturally athletic, but she was no match for the magic talent Emma had developed that day.

The discovery was unexpected. Emma was as shocked as the rest of the cabin that she could hypnotize someone. It all began when Krista climbed up into Emma's bunk earlier that afternoon. The girls had just returned from Chant Rant, the twenty minutes when every cabin practices the ten or so camp chants in preparation for Closing Ceremony, and they were settling into their bunk beds for Rest Time. Krista's head hurt from leading the group, and she begged Emma for a massage (promising Emma one in return), while Becky (the mail snail) divvyed out the daily letters and packages. Krista closed her eyes in Emma's lap as Emma gently pushed her fingers around Krista's forehead and hair. Maybe she would ask Krista to be her pen pal this summer, Emma thought.

Emma considered herself middle-of-the-road at all camp activities—Canoeing, Archery, Beading, Theater, Capture the Flag, Fishing, Swimming, Horseback Riding, Scrapbooking. During chants, she always mixed up the words. So when the counselors appointed her Cross Bearer at Sunday Services this year, she felt at ease. The Cross Bearer just had to deliver the three-foot pine cross up the short mountain trail to where the pews were on Holy Bluff. It was a job that required no preparation and medium physical effort, but it made you a legend amongst the little girls and counselors who didn't know you well. Emma remembered every Cross Bearer from last year, angelic pillars in long white robes, holding up handmade symbols of Christ's Sacrifice while the oldest girls from Senior Hill led prayers. She would be that glimmering figure in white this year, she thought. The younger girls on the flats would all remember her name.

During the massage, Emma quietly asked Krista to go over the Camp Kickinee chant one more time. Krista cleared her throat, clearly annoyed, and began:

"1, 2, 3—Camp KickiNEE!

4, 5, 6—Get a load of THIS! [Leg kick here.]

7, 8, 9—We tell you all the TIME . . .

10! We're CHRISTIAN! Begin AGAIN!"

Krista repeated it once, and then she unexpectedly trailed off into gibberish the third time through. Misplaced words like "Hacky Sack" and "Blow Pop" were floating out of Krista's mouth between the numbers. It wasn't like Krista to miss a

word. Emma worried if Krista had gotten a heat stroke or a scorpion bite. Miss VanDerBeer, one of the counselors, found a five-inch scorpion in her gym shoe a few days before. Now the girls in the surrounding bunks had noticed the odd behavior (except for Pam, of course), and they peeled open their letters and care packages noiselessly, all eyes on Emma's bunk. Darby pretended to flip through her *Tiger Beat* magazine. Mary Frances snuck an Airhead from beneath her mattress. Mary Frances's care packages always had candy in them; her mom knew to sew any Camp Contraband into a stuffed animal.

Emma whispered, "Krista, are you feeling okay?" as she continued to rotate the tips of her fingers into Krista's temples.

Krista mumbled, "Yes, I know my dog can talk."

Darby snort-laughed from the bunk below.

Emma snapped her fingers in front of Krista's face.

"My mom is a smoker," Krista droned on. Emma snapped again, louder this time, and stopped the massage altogether.

Krista's eyes opened, and she popped up. "What the hell was that?" she screeched, shaking her blonde hair out.

Miss Fritz, their other counselor, heard the word "hell" from across the room and paused her Sony Walkman dramatically. She sprung up without warning from her single bunk by the door—a real, live T-Rex from *Jurrasic Park*. (Whenever she stood, she had a gross habit of smoothing down her khaki shorts, which were way too long.) She threatened the cabin with a waggling finger that if she heard a "Devil's Word" again there would be no mail the next day. As second years on Junior Hill, she lectured, they knew the Kickinee Constitution all too well.

Krista climbed down to her own bunk, and then all the girls shared a glance (minus Logjam Pam who was still detangling her hair from Advanced Swimming). When the campers looked settled, Miss Fritz went back to her John Tesh CD and the scrawled notes in her devotional workbook. Then Mary Frances mouthed animatedly at Emma for all but the counselors to see: "YOU HYP-NO-TIZED HER, YOU WITCH. I'M NEXT."

After Rest Time, The Warbler's Nest held a secret emergency meeting in the bathroom. Mary Frances even called Jessie in.

"What the heck was that, Krista? Did you smoke marijuana cigarettes before Rest Time?" Mary Frances asked. Everyone laughed gawkily. Mary Frances smirked and adjusted the straps on her training bra.

"Emma is some kind of witch!" Krista laughed. "I only remember Fritzy yelling at us. Wait, did I say something weird up there, you guys?"

Darby, Jules and Becky giggled up against the shower, but Mary Frances shot them a silencing glance. Emma thought of the right thing to say in this moment, but she'd never been the topic of conversation before. It was as if she was looking in on herself from a distance, as Jessie was then through her extra large glasses from the far sink.

"Well, I say we all try it," Mary Frances announced. "First-come, first-served at Emma's bunk when Fritzy and Vandy leave for their shift at 7:00pm."

"I have to ring the dinner bell at 7:30pm on the dot, guys!" Darby peeped. She was the Reveille Rouser and the Dinner Belle—two small undesirable jobs combined into one this year. She got up first at 7:00am, played Reveille from a cassette player through the speakers in the Main Office, and then at 7:00pm she rang a huge rusty cowbell at the Grand Mess Hall and got to eat last.

"We *know*, Darby!" everyone (minus Jessie) said in unison.

Mary Frances turned to Emma: "So, can you hypnotize everyone before dinner or not?"

"Yeah, *can* you?" Becky echoed.

"Of course I can" Emma squinted her eyes at them, channeling an unruffled Buffy the Vampire Slayer. "I've done this a hundred times."

Jules continued her count there on the bed, slower now. "18, 7, 1, 31, 45, 50." She rattled off a few more numbers, and then she began to fade away into what seemed to be a sleepy trance.

"This is it, guys!" Pam whispered below, clasping her long skinny hands together. Mary Frances held a pointer finger up to Pam's lips.

"Shut. Your. Face. Pam. You're about to ruin everything," she snarled softly between smacks of Hubba Bubba.

"Jules?" Emma began. Jules mumbled something that no one understood. Emma tested the waters with an easy question. "How old are you?"

"Thirteen," Jules mumbled and then continued her count, "15, 4, 29, 35."

"Good. Now Jules," Emma continued, planning to set off the fireworks portion of the show, "have you ever broken the rules here at camp?" Emma prayed this question was leading enough for some crowd-pleasing responses.

The girls in white all stood still below and held their breaths in tightly like six jars of lightning bugs ready to burst all in a row. The crickets and the owls sung out from the other side of the window screens.

"It's just me here," Emma went on. Her voice had a smoother, semi-confident tone, like crushed velvet. "Everything stays a secret." Emma didn't know why she lied, but a different spirit had taken over the script, it seemed.

"Yes. I have," Jules said. Her eyes were still closed. The girls on the ground exhaled loudly in shock, sparks of breath dancing across the room. "Yesterday," Jules went on, "I lost the keys to the cabin after I did my sweep, and I told Vandy that Becky stole them."

Becky gasped loudly. Her eyes bulged. Mary Frances cupped a palm over Becky's open mouth and motioned for Emma to keep going with her other hand. Darby shook uncontrollably from the nerves. Krista leaked out a slow OhMyGosh under her breath. Pam crossed her lanky legs, one over the other, and mimed that she was about to pee her pants. Even Jessie was straining to get a better look.

Emma snapped her fingers in front of Jules, knowing this was the right time for her patient to come out of the coma. Jules cracked open her eyes and wiggled around a bit before sitting up to face the girls.

"What happened?" Jules asked naively. The other girls just looked at each other. The truth silently and clumsily bounced between them.

"MAGIC!" Pam called out. Everyone laughed a little anxiously (minus Becky, who had marched over to her diary to jot down a backbiting memo-to-self complete with date and time).

"My turn now!" Mary Frances yelled.

Just then, the cabin's screen door creaked open. There was Miss Fritz (in an all white, ill-fitting ladies' suit). "Darby? Have you forgotten something tonight?" she asked.

They had lost track of time. Thirty minutes had almost passed.

"Is it 7:30? Did I miss the bell? Are you going to give my job away?" Darby whimpered back.

"It's 7:29, and you all have exactly one minute to sprint down the hill and get your acts together. Not you, Jessie—no running. I will *not* have my cabin embarrass me this year." (The girls had heard that The Warbler's Nest was pretty much full of sluts last year. One girl even snuck out to the boys camp down the road.)

The girls headed out the door, down the chalky stones on the path and into their spots at the dining table while Darby raced to ring the bell. Miss VanDerBeer was already waiting for them. Jessie joined a few minutes later with Miss Fritz. They'd barely made it that night.

After dinner, the counselors made The Warbler's Nest stay back to do Meal Sweep, which was usually Jessie's job. Jessie was really only supposed to wipe down the tables, but she always did more than that, even in her leg braces. Jessie calmly told the cabin the protocol: pick up all the extra plates in the serving hall, wipe down the tables with bleach solution, sweep under the seats, and tie up bags of trash. Mary Frances was very uncomfortable with trash, so she made Becky tie up her bag. Pam's knees buckled as she tried to bend down under a short bench seat with her broom. Krista and Darby pretended to clean the same tables over and over again. Jules called for backup to sort a stack of dirty plates, cups and silverware into the Dirty Bins. Emma wondered how Jessie didn't complain about having this job every breakfast, lunch and dinner. Jessie even helped Emma with the dustpan, showing her the angle at which the dirt goes in best. They shared a friendly glance. Emma realized she'd never really talked to Jessie like this before, like one of her cabinmates. Jessie looked desperate to say something else.

"Emma, I know I'm second to last in line, but I want you to hypnotize me. Tonight."

"I'm not that good," Emma replied, now worried at the possibility of performing hypnosis on someone with an actual disease. The game was all in fun, but she'd never want to physically hurt anyone, especially someone so innocent.

"You don't want to because I'm sick, right?" Jessie asked.

Emma paused uncomfortably and looked down at her broomstick.

"Look, I'm okay. My body has seizures and moves slower than yours, but I'm still normal the other ways. Plus, my doctor at home told me there was something called 'hypnotherapy.' Maybe it could work on me."

Emma had no choice but to say yes. "Okay, but I can't promise anything. I'm not really a magician. Or a witch. It just—"

"I trust you. I know it will work. Wait an hour after lights out so everyone is asleep, then meet in the showers."

That night Emma felt queasy climbing up to bed knowing she'd be on her way down soon. A few minutes later, Miss VanDerBeer turned out the lights after Taps played on the camp's loudspeaker. Emma kept her legs out of the covers, knowing too many rustling noises would wake the others when she headed down to meet Jessie.

A pale light shone through the screened window next to her bed. There was an unnatural electric buzz from the floodlight outside and a harsh thrashing of bugs, big and small, against the bright bulb. Emma brushed her fingers through her hair to let out her dirty blonde braid. Her skin looked bronze there in the dark, the caramel color Mary Frances told everyone she was hoping to become before Closing Ceremony. She put her palms against her face. Her cheekbones were chiseled like those girls she'd seen in Cosmo ads, although she hadn't learned how to highlight her other features with makeup yet. If a boy had to give her a score, it would probably be a six out of ten—that's being generous, she thought. Her hands moved up to her temples. She tested how hard she should press down in order to not hurt a person like Jessie.

Emma heard metal bedsprings bend and Jessie's feet scuff into the shower. The hour was finally up. Emma climbed down the bunk's ladder and met Jessie in the dark. A half moon shone through a high window and onto the white tiles.

The transaction between the two girls was perceptive and silent. Jessie stretched onto her back there on the cold floor next to shower baskets full of smelly shampoo and wet sponges. Her legs sloped down and her heels nestled into the drain. Emma noticed how Jessie's legs looked without their braces, thin and white like bare bones. Emma's fingers assumed their positions and began circling Jessie's temples. Jessie's lips mouthed the numbers 1–50, and then she counted randomly.

A minute went by. Maybe two. The dark was haunting and cold there on the ground, and time was like porcelain, at once unmoving and breakable. Emma felt so far away from home. The drive in her parents' Ford Explorer was just about an hour, a city over, but the distance seemed rivers long. She ached to be back in her bunk, dumb and unaware, like the other girls.

Emma's fingers pressed on. Eventually, Jessie stopped counting. This was the trance setting in, Emma thought. Or maybe Jessie had fallen asleep. She thought of a question quickly and whispered into Jessie's ear.

"Okay, what's your job here at camp?" She started with something basic.

"I am the person people don't want to be," Jessie whispered back.

Emma's skin got goose bumps, and she wondered how to go on or if the trick had gone too far. 'Hypnotherapy' was a word she could barely pronounce, but it rattled around in her head there in the moonlight. Maybe this was just what Jessie needed.

"Do you think you can get better, Jessie?" Emma asked sincerely.

Jessie's eyes stayed closed.

"I need to be accepted, to be one of you," she whispered.

A moment passed there in the dark. Then Emma heard a gurgle and noticed a thin sparkling stream of urine flowing down to the shower drain from between Jessie's legs. Emma shuddered and snapped lightly, but Jessie stayed still. She snapped harder now and waited. No response. She hovered a palm over Jessie's mouth. She was still breathing.

Emma slipped her hands under Jessie's armpits and tried

to sit her upright. Jessie hunched over, unable to stay vertical.

Emma's heart throbbed against her ribs, and her body began to sweat. Logical thoughts twisted into crude knots. Emma began to cry—softly at first and then audibly—not knowing what else to do with herself. A sick and unresponsive girl lay at her feet. She imagined what her parents would think of her right then. They'd been so proud when she described the crisp robe she would wear and the heavy cross she would trudge up the hill during Closing Ceremony.

Seconds later, flashlights strobed into the bathroom. Miss Fritz and Miss VanDerBeer let out hideous screams.

"What in God's name is going on in here?" Miss Fritz yelled.

The six remaining girls emerged now with their own flashlights. Another set of screams followed.

Emma couldn't find the words to answer to them.

Miss VanDerBeer pointed down to Jessie and yelped. Pam pointed down to the pee on Jessie's nightgown.

"YOU HYPNOTIZED HER, YOU WITCH!" Mary Frances shouted.

The counselors were shaking Jessie at this point, clapping and yelling her name. Darby stood right behind them, relaying every detail to the group just feet away.

"Left arm is moving, you guys," Darby said. "One eye is cracking—no, both! She's sitting up!"

Emma's heart relaxed momentarily.

Jules shouted, "But where are her leg braces?"

Miss Fritz began to put the story together. "You mean to tell me that you dragged this innocent, dying girl out of her bunk and into this dirty shower so that you could carry out the Devil's black magic in the dead of night?"

Jessie stood up. "I'm fine," she said, gathering up her wet nightgown. "I asked her to do this to me."

"Jessie, please. You don't need to protect her. You are the one who needs protecting," Miss VanDerBeer sighed and touched Jessie's shoulder. "God is here now."

"She hypnotized Krista and Jules, too! I was going to be next!" Mary Frances continued.

"Krista? Jules? Is this true?" Miss Fritz asked.

"Emma tricked us!" Krista cried.

"Yeah!" Jules said.

"This was all an accident," Emma said. "I've never done this before. Honest!" They came at her all at once.

"She told me she'd done this a hundred times! Now she's lying, too." Mary Frances yelled.

"We'll settle this in the morning," Miss Fritz said. "You better believe you're not laying a satanic finger on that cross on Sunday, Emma."

The service on Holy Bluff was shorter than Emma remembered. The girls from The Warbler's Nest had dressed in their Sunday Robes and were seated in their assigned pew. Emma sat at the end of the row, closest to the patch of Mountain Laurel that lined the edge of the clearing. Jessie sat beside her.

"How do you feel today?" Emma asked.

"Better," Jessie smiled. Emma smiled back. Jessie still wasn't wearing her leg braces. She told the nurse and the counselors she wanted to walk without them, to build up her strength. It was working.

Emma glanced up at Mary Frances holding the pine cross. It made the most sense, Mary Frances told Fritzy, that she take over this important role and redeem the virtue of The Warbler's Nest. She looked the part—tan skin, golden blonde braid, slim frame. The day before, Pam eagerly changed the "Cabin Roles" section of her Historian notes: instead of Cross Bearer the letters "n/a" were next to Emma's name. Perhaps the Cross Bearer demanded a deeper love of self, one that Emma hadn't mastered.

Emma listened half-heartedly to the Senior Hill campers lead hymns and prayers. Maybe Jessie would be her pen pal, she thought.

"Will you write me this year?" she asked Jessie.

"Only if you send me a teddy bear full of candy."

"Deal." Emma smiled.

In the distance beyond Holy Bluff, buzzards circled noiselessly across the open sky. Beetles and muskrats cleared a path through the brush and dead leaves beside Emma's pew. She realized, glancing over at Jessie and then at Mary Frances, Becky, Pam, Jules, Krista and Darby, that she wasn't a person who really belonged to either of their worlds—the in

or the out. She was just a medium. Somewhere, too, she knew God was out there, but she wouldn't find Him there on the hill or down on the riverbank. Her search would be rockier and deeper. She simply wasn't coming back to camp again.

William C-F Long

Pet Hive

Sophie smiles, and tells him no, that she is not allergic to any part of an animal like a tail, or a leg; she is allergic to their fur, to their hair, to all of the little pieces that are shed from animals simply by their acts of living. She uses the word "dander," and Quintus scowls.

Quintus leans into the kitchen table, one cheek of his face squashed into the butt of his palm. He exaggerates a breath—a long draw in through the nose, a loud sigh blown out through his open mouth. He stares into the amber eyes of an African lion and imagines golden hills and emerald jungle, a sky the color of crystal. The lion is frozen, its close-up portrait printed on a full page in *Animals of the Earth! The Strange and the Wonderful*. Quintus has memorized the book's menagerie; its hardcover corners are worn down to bare card-stock. Quintus looks at Sophie, his mother, who stands with her back toward him, filling a kettle at the sink. The stove's burner clicks twice before igniting; a shimmer of condensation washes up the kettle's heating steel.

It is Saturday morning. Fresh snow carpets the world beyond the kitchen's window. Sunlight diffuses through a bright winter haze. Quintus sighs again, aiming the sound into his mother's back. His eyes are the color of riverbeds, his black hair is shaggy, cut below his ears. In a month, he turns eight; the roundness of infancy insulates his body still, but his jaw has begun to sharpen, and his shoulders foreshadow a lean broadness.

Sophie has asked what gifts are on his birthday list. He desires only a pet. Every day at school, his classmates praise the loyalty of their puppies or the guile of their kittens; the closest thing Quintus knows to a pet is the elderly rabbit that belongs to the school. It spends its time nibbling slowly down the lengths of carrots and staring at the gleaming windowpanes of the classroom, nose twitching. Whenever a pet comes to Show-and-Tell, Quintus sits rigidly at his desk, staring, fantasizing. Quintus's friend Ingrid knows the

caliber of his desire, and on those days she kicks at the legs of his desk and grins. Quintus invariably flushes.

Sophie takes her water off the boil and pours it over ground coffee. Aroma blossoms in the kitchen. A wood-stove snickers in the next room. Quintus pages past the lion, past the shaggy, flanged orangutan, the blue-ringed octopus and the cruel, prehistoric cassowary, the spitting cobra and the grand, weightless bulk of the whale shark, patterned like a nightscape.

"It's only that I've always wanted a pet. Really it's all I've ever asked for, and I still don't know why you have to be allergic to their fur and dander." The words spill out. "But what about birds?" Quintus asks. The inside panels of his book are landscapes of deep jungle where birds flash like sparks, caught by a camera's lens against dark, dense overgrowth. "Birds don't have fur. I don't have to have a furry pet."

Sophie is an accountant. She works from home with her fingers at the pulses of other people's finances. She had kept a tidy office in the upstairs of their house long before circumstances made her a single parent, forcing her to work from home. Her features are sharp, akin to the aesthetics carved into old Roman marble. She gave her dark hair to her son, but her own eyes are bright blue, warmly glacial. She looks through the kitchen doorway into the living room, out through the large windows and onto the snow-covered meadow, the darkened woods, and the mountains half-masked by cloud. She presses and pours her coffee and imagines that view obstructed by a brassy cage and the silhouette of some shrill, wide-eyed macaw.

"I am so sorry about it, Quintus, but I know that you know how a feather is, when you look at one very closely."

Quintus thinks. "It is kind of like hair."

"Precisely. If we had birds' feathers inside the house, I regret to say that my head would stuff up entirely, as though I had spent a week eating nothing but cotton balls."

Quintus chortles and asks, "but what about reptiles? They don't have any hair at all. And in the summer we could dig a big pit in the backyard and leave the hose on, and keep an anaconda there to eat all the mice that chew up the things in the garage." He pauses. "I could teach it not to bite at people,

so we can like snakes again."

"Oh, my dear, dear, sweet boy." In summer, when the mountain nights are warm, Sophie sometimes throws dinner parties for clients and friends in the back yard. The sounds of chitchat, silverware, and ice cubes tinkling against glass mask the silk-hiss of heavy scales as they glide across the grass toward the heat and tremor of her child's heart. She shivers. Alas; she is allergic to forked tongues.

"But—"

Sophie tells Quintus with great seriousness that she is allergic to anything with webbed digits, mandibles, antennae, or feelers. Neither can she tolerate egg-sacks, nor tentaculate appendages, venom glands, membraneous wings, or any creature at all in possession of a cloaca.

"Cloaca?" Quintus runs through the list of restrictive organs in his head. He thinks of dander, and smells a contradiction in what his mother has told him about allergies, but fears for an instant and wonders if there is a cloaca hidden somewhere on him. He knows that humans are animals in many senses of the word, and asks, "were you allergic to Dad?"

Sophie hides a smile behind the rim of her coffee cup. Her eyes narrow. She turns her head to look out the kitchen window into winter, and for a long moment, she is silent. Quintus had known his father for only a few years: the man had jumped from a rock ledge down into the cold, deep water of a remote and private swimming hole, and had stepped flat-footed on the buzzing tail of a rattlesnake as he had come out from the water's chill, sputtering, hooting, and groping for the warmth of his towel.

Sophie sets her mug on the table, and taps triplets against it with short, unpainted fingernails. She cups the back of her neck with an open palm.

"Darling Quintus. When I was your age, I wished to live in a magic zoo, and I dreamt that in the mornings at breakfast, I could sit and share my oatmeal and warm berries and drizzled honey and sweet-smelling tea with all of my favorite animals, all at one grand kitchen table, where they were all my friends."

"Fun," says Quintus.

"But." Sophie holds up a stiffened index finger. "I never

managed it, of course, because of my allergies and because your grandfather loved his own two dogs so deeply that he would tolerate no other creatures in the house. 'No more room in the heart for another beast,' he'd say. Quintus, have you ever wondered what it might be like if the animals in your book had all the same lives that we do? What if they could go along to school, and learn all of the same things that seven-but-almost-eight-year-old boys and girls get to learn?"

Quintus had thought of it before, but only as a wandering sort of day-dream, a fantasy like an image in a cloud that bleeds away into something wildly different, elsewhere. Cloacae and allergies momentarily forgotten, Quintus dives into the speculation: many animals would not fit into the desks at school. Many animals, he suspects, would not get along well with one another at recess. He flips a page of his book again, and imagines the painted lines of the school's playground obscured by slicks of arterial red, and the shade beneath the jungle gym home to a sprawl of crocodiles and bears, wolves and tigers, predators thickened and wounded by their sudden engorgement at the expense of slower, weaker playmates.

Quintus cocks his head. He imagines the animals with their heads bowed, pencils clutched tooth and nail, wild eyes roving over worksheets and exercises; gentle purrs, hisses, and grunts of creatures in studious contemplation.

"Which do you think would be the best at math?" he asks.

"The raccoon," Sophie says. She takes a long sip of coffee.

Later in the evening, they drive down the valley's winding road at dusk to go to town for groceries. Quintus watches for pairs of luminous eyes that might blink from the crooks of trees or snowy drainage culverts. He wonders if the passage of their car has distracted any raccoon from the study of a trash can's geometry, or the calculus of rich, yolky eggs distributed throughout all the forest's birds' nests.

Winter dulls into early spring. Melting snow seeps back into the earth through a mesh of matted, yellow grass and Quintus learns to circumvent his mother's laws of pets and allergies. He helps no kitten tangle itself in yarn, he watches no pet snake swallow down the last length of a feeder-

mouse's tail. Instead, he adopts pets into his life directly from the world around him, working without any true sense of ownership and guided by a child's whim: strangely-shaped trees in the woods down in the valley's gut, fledgling robins and the sounds of owls, the creek that eats a small gorge through the snow. He adopts reefs of sunset clouds, and the lavender dusks punctuated by arcing bats. As the last of the winter's snow is lost, he adopts a patch of ice that clings to its tangible form in the house's northern shadow. Quintus greets the ice-pet each afternoon when he comes home from school; it melts and refreezes, melts and refreezes, until it shrinks enough to be held for the first time.

The pet leaves a puddle in Quintus's cupped pink palms, and the boy giggles gleefully. At the dinner table he tells Sophie that one of his newest pets is not very well trained. His mother arches a black stroke of an eyebrow.

The next day, the little wedge of ice is gone entirely from the wash of gravel that was its dwelling. On the school playground during recess, the other children play hand-ball or seek the upper limit of the groaning swing-set. Quintus sits with Ingrid by the drinking fountain, and tells her that one of his pets has died.

"Was it a real one, this time?"

"Yes Ingrid, of course so. And all of them are actually real, obviously."

Ingrid is eight years old. She is a thick young girl with blushed calla-lily skin and hair like sunlight caught in straightened strands of spiders' webs. Her classmates tease her not only for her weight and paleness, but because of her imaginary friends: oftentimes before class she sits by the school's rosebushes and chats with the elves and faeries hiding there.

Ingrid picks up a stone and sends it skittering across the playground's blacktop. "Well, sorry," she says. "How am I supposed to know what's a pet and what's just a rock or something, usually."

Quintus is her true friend. They are united not only by similar strangenesses but because they each live with parents who are otherwise alone: Ingrid's mother had vanished in the night from behind the wheel of her sedan after it left the

paved road to crumple into a ditch. Shards of the shattered windshield had spread out onto the shoulders of the road, but if Ingrid's mother left the wreck to look for help, she had wandered in the wrong direction and had never returned.

Quintus knows about the nightmares Ingrid suffered after her mother's death: she would sleep and find herself wandering an arctic wasteland, trapped among endless sheets of ice that groaned and cracked and split and gave way to dark, choppy water. In that water, strange, monstrous heads rose up to stalk her as she fled across the ice; bristled heads with crimson flesh and thick fangs. They sunk away when she shrieked at them, and resurfaced elsewhere, staring. Quintus had listened to Ingrid's telling of the dreams, and had brought *Animals of the Earth! The Strange and the Wonderful* to her to show her that she had only ever been dreaming of walruses.

"I wish I could fly," Ingrid says as a butterfly flutters by the drinking fountain. "If I could have a real pet, I would want a griffin, I think. Bright white feathers and golden fur! And razor-sharp claws. We could fly way up into the mountains whenever I felt like it."

"Griffins aren't real pets, Ingrid."

"But you know what I mean!"

Quintus looks out into the hills and mountains that bracket the valley, the school. Spots of old snow cling up high among rock faces and stone chimneys. He knows that both winter and his little ice-pet will return; he has learned from his parents already that death is not some dreadful, lurking thing, but something natural, like the rings hidden within the heartwood of trees.

True spring crowns itself with laurel-wreaths of wildflowers and fresh grass. Breezes swell up the mountain valley in the mornings and roll down in the evenings, ripe with the warmth of blossoming life. Rain storms soften the earth, and as Ingrid and Quintus await the end of the school year, they spend weekend afternoons together working at jigsaw puzzles, or following the pet creek down through the woods to where the water contributes to the valley's river.

They sit beneath a pair of blossoming chokecherry trees, arranging a collection of river-smoothed stones. There is a

droning in the air, something soporific and rootless, like a long wave breaking across the sky.

"What if these were ancient coins," says Quintus, looking down at the small treasury. "Or jewels and diamonds."

"We'd be so rich. I'd buy Dad a new truck and—do you hear that buzzing?" They are far from the road, down in the valley's low cleft; no tractors at work there, no motorbikes. The nearby river holds its own gurgling conversation, but this new sound is separate. Quintus looks up through the canopy of trees: the sky is a rich blue, spotted by tight white puffs of cloud. There is a haze moving through the trees' leaves, and the droning becomes a roar. Quintus and Ingrid watch as huge bees fill the air, single insects at first, followed by the body of the swarm. The bees envelop the chokecherry trees, weighing down the branches like a snowfall, guzzling at the blossoms. Ingrid clutches at her elbows, drawing herself inward. She speaks softly but her voice is lost; they can hear nothing but the cacophony of the swarm's buzz. Quintus feels the vibration of the insects' layered sound deep within him, working into the hollow spaces of his bones. Ingrid runs, flailing her arms to swat at nothing; the bees stay among the branches drinking nectar, dowsing themselves in pollen. Gradually they fly away as they had arrived, sifting downstream into the forest. The buzzing thins; the last bees drift away, silence as the punctuation at the end of the swarm's passage.

For a moment, the world seems devoid of sound. Quintus begins to hear wind in the leaves, the river, the timid chirruping of other insects, and the far-off calls of birds. He follows Ingrid back to his house.

Ingrid's father picks her up in his old truck. Quintus hears them crunch down the gravel driveway, but he is watching the valley from his bedroom window. Sophie is in her office, wreathed in the steam rising from a cup of tea. She works through stacks of documents; receipts are arranged on a side desk in a partial mosaic.

"Can I go up into the attic and look through some of Dad's old books?" Quintus asks. "Didn't he have a lot of old nature books?"

"He did. And yes, of course, sweet child."

"Mom, are you allergic to bees, too?"

"Absolutely," she says without looking up. She scratches brisk pen-strokes at a pad of paper. "Be careful on the attic steps."

Quintus takes for granted the fact that their home is clean and organized: he has seen his mother sigh into sheafs of paper and rub her temples with her whole hands. Soon after, she sweeps the house, or rakes the yard, or sets into something with a rag and cleanser.

"If we put our hands to work, our minds will have a chance to relax," Sophie tells Quintus whenever he helps her.

The attic exists as though in a different world, separated more by its disorder and stillness than by a slender stairway and a hinged panel. The steps creak beneath him; the attic yawns dust and stale air as Quintus pushes the panel open and climbs up. He flips a light-switch: bare, dusty bulbs cast a yellow shine onto rows of cardboard boxes, a set of old chairs, an antique bicycle. Graying sheets hang over other shapes, obscuring them. The shadows are thick; the sunlight streaming in through a small window illuminates many thousands of glowing, golden dust motes.

Quintus remembers his father strongest through the smell of the garage; he was a tall, strong man with a vague face, a near-stranger now, in the photographs around the house. Many of the boxes in the attic wear his name in thick marker lines. Quintus thinks about rattlesnakes more often than he thinks about his father, and with a closer and more tangible fondness.

Quintus kneels and rummages through his father's boxes: old, folded clothing, letters bundled together with twine, books of photographs taken before Quintus was born. He leaves them alone. He sneezes, wiping his nose on his forearm.

Prying apart another box, he finds his father's books. He cracks their spines; paper rasps and flutters as he pages through them. Perhaps bees are too commonplace to qualify for the index of *Animals of the Earth! The Strange and the Wonderful!* but in the second box of books, bound in hardcover with indented silver lettering, Quintus discovers *The Gardener's Encyclopedia of Insects,* and within that, chapter after chapter on the subject of bees.

"I think you're really onto something, Quintus, but I suppose that if we have pancakes and a fruit salad for dinner tonight, then tomorrow morning we'll just simply have to eat the pot roast and the spinach salad for breakfast," Sophie and Quintus are almost home from town. Quintus is thinking about his birthday, and the issue of real pets has risen up like vapor.

Quintus plays with the automatic car window. "I hate dinner."

"Really, Quintus. You like pot roast. I've seen you eat it. You are going to grow up one day and be appalled that you gave me so much grief over what is really quite a delicious meal."

"I don't care."

"Indeed, my poor, poor child, but how could you?" Sophie turns from the road into their driveway. "The horrors that I level against you must be legendary. You'll help me bring the groceries into the kitchen and then please find something fun to do outside."

In the late afternoon, Quintus plays in the sandbox in the backyard. A toy desert, networks of tunnels and walls, a legion of monochromatic soldiers assaulting a castle where a tyrannosaurus is installed as king. He stews over the fantasy of a living dog and does not hear the droning of a solitary bee, but instead feels the prickling of its legs as it lands on him. He freezes, fearing a sting, but the bee only paces a circle across his upper arm in slow, deliberate steps.

The bee is thick and round, bristled with black and golden hairs beneath folded, translucent scissor-blade wings. Its stinger is long and straight as a finishing nail and it is larger than any bee Quintus has ever seen; a peach made physically articulate and gifted with flight. The bee seems drowsy. It crawls onto his tee-shirt sleeve and hooks its legs into the shirt's fabric and attempts to fly away, pulling at Quintus but unable to move the boy on its own. Then it abandons him, and wobbles in its flight to land and bob at the end of a nearby branch of lilac bush.

Quintus rushes from the sandbox, into the house. He sneaks into the kitchen, to the drawers where the mason jars are kept. He takes a jar and a lid and creeps back outside, closing the door quietly behind him.

The bee is buried in the depths of a blossom. Its bristles are dusted with pollen; the blossom's slender branch struggles under the bee's weight. Quintus slowly raises the mouth of the jar over the bee, over the flower, up the neck of the branch, then he claps the jar lid closed; the bee falls from its flower onto its back and scrambles at the air. Quintus pulls the branch out, scraping it though a narrow opening between the jar and the lid, raining leaves and petals down onto the bee.

"I caught you," Quintus says softly. The insect waggles its antennae and taps against the jar's glass when it tries to fly away.

Quintus takes the bee to school for Show-and-Tell. The children fidget at their desks. The number of days left before the end of the school year can now easily be counted, and summer break—no longer an abstraction—calls out sing-song promises from the near future.

The bee clambers uselessly at the walls of the jar, or buzzes to the lid to hang from the air-holes that Quintus punched through the tin with a nail. When it is his turn to present to the class, he stands by the teacher's desk with the jar held high, like a trophy.

"Just like a librarian or a trash-truck driver," he begins, "Bees are important members of the community. They have six legs, a head, a thorax, and an abdomen, which is also where their stingers are. They actually have four wings. Bees live in hives, and that's where a single queen lives, too. She is the one in charge of the bees."

Quintus hands the jar and a magnifying glass to Ingrid, who sits at the front of the class. She stares down into the bee's kaleidoscopic compound eyes.

"Bees help pollinate flowers, which is very important for plants. Bees are good for all the fruit trees in the valley, because without pollination, the fruit couldn't grow. Bees aren't wasps, or hornets; bees will only sting if they think you're going to squash them, or maybe try to squash their queen."

"Bugs," someone hisses.

"Some people are allergic to bees," Quintus continues,

"and if they get stung, they could die." The children pass the jar and the magnifying glass down the rows of desks. They stare at the pulsing abdomen, the pointed stinger, the stiff, iridescent wings. "But it's important to remember not to be scared of bees, because mostly, bees are always our friends."

The children clap; they pass the bee back to Quintus.

"Very good, Quintus. Very inspiring. Honey bees are a very important species." the teacher pauses. "They are, however, on a tragic global decline and threatened with extinction. Children, pay attention: you must never kill honey bees. Albert Einstein," the teacher points to a poster of the physicist by the classroom doorway. Einstein arches his eyebrows, protrudes his tongue. "Albert Einstein predicted that when the bees are gone from the Earth, humankind will die off entirely within a decade. How unexpected! Can you imagine the shock of learning that the last hive is dead, and then, in your same lifetime, watching as whole cities fall away into abandonment—"

The teacher halts; the children stare. The bee tinks against the jar as it tries to fly toward the elderly, nose-twitching rabbit, toward the classroom's open window. Quintus has heard the word "extinction" before, in reference to the dinosaurs. The fact that the word is still useful surprises him; that the strange and wonderful animals of his favorite book could die away completely and be reduced to collections of bones strung together with wire, like the dinosaurs he knows in the natural history museum.

"Yes. Well, very good, Quintus. Well done. Now, who is next?"

"Don't worry," Quintus whispers to his bee as a classmate walks to the front of the class and holds out a glassy rock that she found in the river.

"Something igneous," the teacher murmurs, and the class goes on.

On a warm Saturday afternoon, Ingrid comes to the house to play. She has a hunger for board-games but Quintus convinces her to go down to the river to explore. Sophie prepares their explorers' rations: two peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, two bottles of water, two plastic baggies full

of crisp, red grapes. She places these items in two separate paper-bags, and labels one with an "I" and the other with a "Q" in the same bold lines that label her husband's boxes in the attic. Then she puts water on the stove to make two cups of coffee: Ingrid's father has agreed for the first time to stay a while and chat. The children grab their lunches and stuff them into Quintus's backpack, where the glass jar holds the captive bee.

"Be good," Ingrid's father calls as they leave. "Or, have fun, you know." He is a carpenter. He sits at Sophie's kitchen table and touches its tablecloth; the fine-thread linen catches on the calluses of his hands. He looks to the ceiling, to the floor, or to the joinery of wooden things. "Come on back whenever, sweetie."

At the edge of the river's woods, Quintus unscrews the lid and holds the jar away from him like a Roman candle. The insect buzzes its wings softly, but lies still.

"Are you sick?" Quintus asks the insect softly.

"What?"

"Nothing." Quintus shakes the bee loose from the jar and it flies off, down toward the river. "Let's go!" Quintus shouts, trying to determine the final direction of the bee's flight.

They set off down their familiar path into the riverside shade of cottonwood, willow, and aspen. Birds call out into a layered song above the chanting river, but Quintus listens specifically for the buzzing of the bee and its hive. He hears it mistakenly several times and the two explorers zig-zag, crossing and recrossing the river in the shallow riffles or traversing across fallen trees.

They stop to rest. Ingrid eats her sandwich. "Don't you want to go play a game?" she asks. "How about the farm game, with the little wooden pigs? Or even the goblin one, in the dungeon, if you want."

"Wait. Hear it?" Quintus asks. Ingrid pauses to listen, and nods. She wraps her sandwich in its plastic and they move into a thicket where the trees temper and cushion the river's noise.

"Quintus," Ingrid whispers. "I don't want to get stung."

They scramble over an old logjam and twist past snags and densities of brush. The sound of buzzing grows stronger, stronger, and then the children freeze. There, in the blown-

out heart of a tree half struck-down by lightning, is the hive: huge columns of wax and resin partially obscured behind the movement of a veil of bees. Their droning is multi-pitched, powerful and layered. The children feel it through the soles of their shoes. Quintus walks closer. The buzzing is like a second pulse projected onto him from the exposed and beating heart of fins and combs and tines all perforated by perfect hexagons. Ingrid stays behind, hissing warnings that Quintus cannot hear.

"Wow," he says, unable even to hear himself. The bees are gargantuan, larger than he remembers from the afternoon beneath the chokecherry trees, and larger by far that the one he captured in his jar. He creeps closer, and the pattern of the bees' movement changes: the swarming becomes regimented, an airborne, transitive dance. More bees shake loose from the hive and pour down from the ruined tree like rope, like sheets; waves of insect flowing through the air to meet Quintus where he stands. He cannot move. He is paralyzed by awe.

The bees land on him, they knead the tiny hooks of their legs into his clothing and skin, not to injure but only to grasp, to hold. Quintus's feet leave the ground. Ingrid shrieks, she hurls a stone into the mass of bees and then flees, screaming, scrambling, running for the house and her father and Sophie as a sleeve of insects breaks loose from the cloud and snakes after her.

Quintus cannot feel his own body. The difference between himself and the hive is lost into the vibration and noise and the mass of swarming bees. They climb up over the trees, over the coursing river and the canopy of groaning, squeaking branches, up above the mountain valley.

There is his house, his gravel driveway, Ingrid's father's truck; Quintus will not throw sticks to a dog, will not rub the belly of an outstretched cat. Pet ice will not drip from between his palms. Now he wears an embrace of bees: they scratch behind his ears and nuzzle into him. He feels the hive's purr. The bodies at his lips dab him with honey and sweet pollens, and Quintus is lost. When he remembers himself, in the warmth of the hive, in the cold, high air, he will be too far lost above the earth to ever truly return.

Wendy Dolber

Charlotte's Plan

Alone in the quiet house, Mary waits behind the locked front door. This is for Mary's own good, she has been told. Call if you need anything, her daughter-in-law, Charlotte, has told her many times. But Mary doesn't want anything that Charlotte has to offer. No trip to the emergency room, no visit from the plumber or the electrician. No, Mary just needs her life back and she is waiting for the mailman to rescue her. If she can only get the mailman's attention, she will ask him to take the key that is always left under the front doormat and open the front door for her. A simple request. Anyone would be happy to oblige an old woman shut up all alone in a house. She suspects it's not even safe—being locked in a house that you need a key to get out of.

"It's for your own safety," Charlotte had said.

"But what if a fire breaks out?" Mary had asked.

"Oh, Mom, Charlotte replied, exasperated, "Why do you always imagine the worst?" Why indeed.

She takes off her glasses and leans close to the window, eyes anxiously sifting the afternoon blur of brightly dressed children for the blunt blue of the postman. She spots him now turning the corner, bag over one shoulder, but as luck would have it, he does not look up as he approaches the house. Mary waves frantically from the window but he does not notice her. His attention is focused on the mail in his hand. Too late she realizes she must open the window to get his attention but it won't budge. She desperately grasps the brass fittings, putting her back into it. The resistance fills her with unaccustomed anger and disappointment. Then she hears the scraping sound of the mailbox closing. Can it really be that she is going to miss her opportunity? She knocks on the window until her knuckles sting but he is already at the next house. How can it be that he does not hear? Then she sees it—wires sprouting from his ears—one of those contraptions everyone seems to have these days. She watches him go on down the block and she is alone again.

Well, that's it, then, she thinks. Perhaps she does need to be protected like some sort of endangered species. There was that time around the corner when she thought she was in a strange neighborhood without a clue how to get home. Her legs had deserted her too that time so she just sat on the curb and waited. That nice police lady found a letter from Social Security in her handbag with her new address—John and Charlotte's, her son and daughter-in-law. Why hadn't she thought of that? After that, she had promised not to go out anymore on her own.

But then she had just walked out one day to go to the butcher. Charlotte had said later that she was obstinate but the truth was she had simply forgotten she had ever made that promise. Funny. There she was walking down the street mouth watering set for that good German bologna—she could almost smell it. She got down to the corner and went to turn on to Arthur Avenue. There was no Arthur Avenue. No butcher either. Just some street called Fifth Street.

"It's the void, Sam," she'd said.

Sam knew all about the void. The first time it happened she'd been terrified; thought she was going out of her mind. It was like being under water, trying to fight your way back up before you ran out of air. Sam always said there was no need to fight. "If you just let yourself go, you will always rise up into the light and air." Even now with Sam gone, she can still feel the pressure of his hands pulling her up, as real as the sound of his words in her ear. She hopes she will never forget that feeling.

Mary remembers evenings with Charlotte and John before she came to live here. After dinner they would all go into the living room for coffee. There would be Charlotte's laptop and cell phone. If the laptop was open, that meant it would be a short evening because Charlotte had work to do. It was always open. Sam would joke that the day that contraption closed, he'd expect a grandchild nine months later. Sam had a way about him, all right. Now the living room is Mary's bedroom. Every night after her evening bath upstairs, Mary sees Charlotte on the bed in front of her laptop, surrounded by papers. John is in his studio in a corner of the kitchen working on a painting. They never seem to spend evenings

together.

Mary often thinks about loss these days. She has lost a lot since Sam's death, but she has not lost Sam. That is her secret. They had been so close for so long. Like when they were first lovers, she cannot forget the feel of his skin, his early morning whiskers, even the weight of him. She wonders if in their intimacy they had exchanged molecules in some important way. Smells of Sam seem to generate from within her so that now and then she'll be caught short by the pungency of cherry tobacco or Old Spice. And his thoughts. She might forget where she lives sometimes, but she can always remember what Sam might say about something and the sound of his voice saying it.

Other losses are harder to bear. They had planned so carefully for their future, but who could have predicted that they would use their entire savings prolonging Sam's life? And they had succeeded, hadn't they? Two precious years. The relatives said the quality of his life was inferior, not worth living. Let him die peacefully, no more pain, no traumatic operations. Perhaps that would have been possible if he had gone away from her. But he was always there. Even after the stroke when he could no longer smile or speak, he was still there. She could see it in his eyes. She could feel his presence just as she always had, just as she still does. So she had bought him every chance, until their funds had dissipated along with his strength. In doing so she had never dreamed that her life would come to this—where her entire vision of herself has been overruled. She wonders if this is the way it's supposed to be. Does your life just unravel one day like an old sweater?

In the evening when everyone thinks she is asleep, Mary combs the want ads of the New York Times. She ignores "classy, savvy, interface with Fortune 500 clients. MS Word, Excel, PowerPoint a must." She knows her limitations. There are dozens of others that seem to be looking for someone just like her—"dependable person to meet greet clients, answer phones, friendly, down to earth, well-groomed, mature, outgoing, people person, sense of humor a +." She has an idea that she will get a job in New York City. The train station to New York is only half a block away. When she was a young woman she worked in the City as a secretary for five years. She

knows that there are endless opportunities within walking distance of Grand Central Station. The next step is to find out what times the trains leave. She remembers seeing John put a schedule into one of those little side pockets in his briefcase. It is there in the foyer as usual. She picks it up and starts to put her hand into one of the pockets, then stops. She has always respected her son's privacy. She can call up the train station tomorrow. The satchel is almost empty and as she lets it drop to the floor, she hears a metallic clank. Reaching in, her fingers meet a gaggle of metal objects. John's keys. Closing her eyes, she slips the keys into her pocket.

Her bed faces the kitchen door and as she drifts off to sleep that night she can see the thin line of light under the closed door. She can hear soft voices from within. She is a child in her parents' bed, their soft voices a lullaby. Safe and warm, she turns on her side and curls up in a ball. The keys fall out of her pocket. Silly girl. She has gone to bed in her bathrobe again.

"Senility," they are saying or is it "New York City"? Her stomach contracts at the thought of either.

"It's just a place," Sam soothes. Or is that Charlotte talking?

Charlotte is saying "there's a place—a place at the nursing home."

"There are just some people you never turn your back on," Sam says, or is that John? Her hand finds the keys and clutches them to her breast.

Mornings are the trickiest. In the sleepy transition to wakefulness, the old Mary returns—Sam's wife, ageless and hopeful. In the roll-away bed, her hand absently explores the cool uninhabited space next to her. Sam is not there. She has become his widow. Her hand recedes to her side. Now she feels the familiar pressure of the metal ribs of the bed beneath the thin mattress, a gentle reminder that home is no longer the antique four-poster with the hand-made chintz canopy. No longer the parquet floors they had sanded and varnished to a satin sheen. No longer the den and the sewing room, the cluttered cellar, the sunny kitchen. Now home is simply a place to be, a waiting room.

There is nothing she'd like better than to get up and make breakfast for her son—French toast and bacon, fresh

orange juice, flowers on the table, the paper to read. Just the thought of it fills her with energy until she hears the sound of Charlotte's footsteps overhead. Too late. Charlotte will be down in a few minutes to take possession of the kitchen. Whatever Mary tries to do, Charlotte will stop, telling her to rest, a euphemism for "This is my kitchen." Then she remembers the keys that she had taken the night before. After today, everything will be different. You can surely get some sort of a job, doesn't have to be much. Just enough for a room somewhere with a little kitchen. John can come visit once a week if that's all he can do. Charlotte will be welcome too if she behaves herself. You'll make all his favorites—pot roast, leg of lamb, real mashed potatoes, not some flakes out of a box. John can bring his shirts to you instead of that laundry that sends them back with broken buttons. You'll wash them by hand if you have to. Maybe you'll even read to each other again the way you used to. We were so busy with The Hardy Boys and Walter Farley's horse stories, we never even touched Dickens. Never touched him.

In the kitchen, the sink is piled high with last night's dinner dishes. She barely has time to fill the dishpan with water when she hears Charlotte's footsteps racing down the stairs. She is late as usual and probably annoyed that John is procrastinating in the shower, singing his morning medley of 60's tunes.

"Eggs or cereal?" she calls up the stairs.

Three muffled syllables.

"Cereal," she says as she races to the refrigerator. "He wants cereal. Please God, let there be milk and a banana wouldn't hurt either."

Mary continues to wash, caught up in a reverie of dunking and rinsing that is like prayer. The familiar motions are soothing and revitalizing. Abruptly, Charlotte twists the faucets closed. "Mom, that's why we have a dishwasher," she says in carefully measured tones. She takes the dinner plates from the drain board and loads them into the machine, her movements bright with precision and authority. Mary stands back feeling like a six-year-old, arms growing numb with uselessness. Charlotte looks at her then, "Aren't I awful, I didn't even say good morning." She pecks Mary's cheek,

asking, “Could you get the coffee, please?” in a voice so apologetic she might as well be asking her to move the house down the block.

Mary must go to the pantry to find the coffee. By the time she returns, the dishes are gone, spirited away for a more economical and sanitary treatment. The machine hums and lurches triumphantly into the first wash cycle. By the time John comes in, hair still wet, shirttails hanging, breakfast is ready—three bowls on the table accompanied by a family size assortment of cereals and two black-skinned bananas.

“Where’s my eggs, Charls?” he says. “I said eggs, scrambled eggs. Mom and I want eggs, don’t we, Mom?”

He squeezes Mary’s hand. Mary smiles tentatively, watching Charlotte, and touches his face. His skin is smooth and delicate, like his dad’s.

“Fine,” says Charlotte, getting up from the table. “So let her make them for you. I’m late as it is.” She leaves the kitchen, muttering, “Who am I to come between a boy and his mother?”

“Never mind, Mom,” says John, kissing her forehead. “She didn’t mean anything. She just gets in a bad mood whenever she’s late. And she’s always late,” he adds, in his best Groucho Marx imitation, tapping imaginary cigar ashes into her cereal bowl. And he kisses her again, trying to dispel the unfamiliar aura of dissention that his wife’s actions have brought into their relationship. Then he is gone, too, and Mary sits pondering the breakfast cereal serenaded by an electric dishwasher and coffee pot duet.

It’s a June day, her birth month and the month of her wedding. A good time for beginnings, she thinks. The openness of the sidewalk is dizzying after the confines of the four walls. She imagines herself walking a tightrope or a balance beam and wonders if she should have brought her cane for balance. But she had never wanted to walk with a cane. It had been a present from the kids and after a while, she had grown fond of the secure feel of it in her hand and had even taken to leaning on it a bit. She hadn’t wanted it to become another point of no return—another concession. A little dizziness she can handle. She has heard about people a lot younger than she, people with head injuries, for instance, who have to go through life being dizzy every day. If they can

do it, she certainly can.

She is more concerned about the disorientation that had replaced her knowledge of where she lived with a cold dark void. But she reminds herself that the void can be waited out like the blackness on the television screen that with a sudden flicker, transforms itself into a world of information and activity.

"One step at a time," Sam's voice reminds her.

When the train comes, she is happy to see the cushioned seats and doors that slide open invitingly. The trains she had known years ago were rickety affairs with cracked cane seats that tore women's hose and windows that were stuck closed or open. It pleases her to see that the world is becoming a more comfortable place. Now that she is on her way, things that she has become accustomed to living with suddenly seem unendurable. Like the no unsupervised cooking edict. One day she had forgotten to turn off the gas. No one was more shocked or concerned than she was. But she had learned from the experience and realized that she must take extra special care in the future. Charlotte never gave her the chance. Every day before she went to work, she removed the knobs from the stove.

She should never have fallen asleep. Awakened by a soft tap, she tries to read her destination in the face of the conductor. She does not know where she was going before the soft rocking of the train lulled her to sleep.

"Grand Central, Ma'am," he says, as the train pulls into the station.

She walks off the train letting herself be pulled up the platform steps in the wake of other passengers. People who know where they are going. Panic, she knows, will snap the remaining threads of awareness completely. So she breathes deeply and moves forward with small steps until she finds a bench in the terminal. She has learned a trick. There will be clues in her purse. She opens it and sifts the contents. An old plastic compact—she should really get a new one. A faded library card from the old neighborhood. A change purse. A house key. She turns it over in her hand remembering how close she had come to losing it this morning. After breakfast, she had sat in the kitchen listening for the sound of the front

door closing. She hoped that John would not check for his keys. He won't miss them for one day. He always comes home with Charlotte anyway, who has her own set. But it was taking too long. They were not leaving. She heard footsteps approaching the kitchen. "I'm sure they're in here," John had said. Mary sat at the kitchen table with her hand in the pocket of her duster nervously clutching the keys. To make matters worse, they brought the satchel into the kitchen and started to examine it right in front of her. Mary bit her lip and prayed that no one will ask her directly about the keys. She cannot lie in response to a direct question.

Her body started to rise up out of the chair as if threatening to carry her against her will and place her in front of her son where she will have to confess. But she counseled herself to sit down and remain calm. She has to have her freedom. Without freedom, life can be lived, but without usefulness, it wasn't the life she wanted. Finally, much to her relief, John decided he must have left the keys in his office. He kissed her goodbye as she sat like a statue at the kitchen table. As Charlotte bent down to kiss her also, Mary looked up at John, letting him see the truth in her eyes. He smiled.

In an envelope in her purse, she finds the ads for the jobs she had decided to apply for. They are all on 42nd Street within a block or two of Grand Central. All she has to do is figure out how to get up to the street. "Just follow the crowd," Sam says, "there's only one way to go and that's up."

The Gibbons group turns out to be a potbellied man in a wrinkled plaid jacket stationed behind a tiny desk. Underneath a pile of yellowed newspapers comes the muffled sound of a telephone ringing, which he ignores. He is reading a dog-eared tabloid and using the overflowing wastepaper basket as an ashtray. She has to clear her throat several times before he acknowledges her presence. When he does, it is to size her up with a quick glance and mutter, "Office hours don't start til noon. Come back."

She continues to stand in front of the desk watching the man smoke and read. Turning a page, he says, "Look, if it's about the leak, we already know about it. A man's on the way, so don't go calling Central Complaints on us."

"I'm not here about a leak."

"Well, the buzzer, then. That'll be fixed on Tuesday."

"It's not about the buzzer."

"If you're collecting for something, forget it. I already gave at home." This breaks him up. He roars with laughter followed by a fit of coughing. "Get it? Get it? Gave at home? That's a good one." He finally calms down enough to focus on her. "Okay, you've ruined my concentration. What's the story?"

"I'm here about the job."

His smile instantly disappears. "Too old. Go home. Someone must be looking for you."

"Please. No one is looking for me. I may be old, but I can certainly answer phones. I need a job."

"Not here you don't. Get on with you. I don't need these headaches."

"Wouldn't you at least try me out?"

"No way. No Ma'am. Didn't you ever hear of retirement? Go retire. Don't bother me."

"I just . . . ."

"No way," he states, widening his eyes emphatically. After this exertion, he settles back into his paper.

"No way," he tells the paper.

At the patent attorney's offices, she waits in a room full of young women. They all seem to be around twenty years old. They are called into the inner office one by one and they leave one by one until eventually only Mary remains. After an hour, she is politely told that no interviews are being given that day.

"But the paper says Monday through Friday, 9 to 5," she says. "This is Monday and it's only noon."

"That is so," says the grey-haired receptionist, a seasoned screener, "but the person giving the interviews has called in sick."

"But those young women—weren't they here about the job? They were all seen by someone."

"That is no concern of yours."

"Well, I'm not trying to pry. It just seems obvious that they were being interviewed. It only seems fair that I be given a chance. I've been waiting a long time.

The other woman looks at her for a long time. Finally, she sighs and shuts her eyes momentarily as if to try to change the picture before her. "Can't you see? They're not going to

hire a woman your age. I'm not supposed to say that, but it's the truth. This is a pretty menial position. They want to hire some high school girl and pay her minimum wage."

"Oh, is that it?' says Mary."But I'd be happy to work for minimum wage. I just need a job, don't you see?"

"Really. I feel for you," the receptionist tells her. "But they only hire high school girls. She'll stay for a few years until she gets married or goes to college or whatever. And then they hire another one. It's company policy."

"It's company policy to hire high school girls?"

"No, of course not. That sounds ridiculous." says the other woman, starting to redden. "I'm just trying to tell you in a nice way that you wouldn't be happy here. If you don't care about money, why don't you try volunteer work or maybe some special programs for the elderly? I'm sure your town must have something like that."

Yes, something like that.

Back on the street, the heat is waiting to wrap itself around her like a second skin. As Sam used to say, "42nd Street and Fifth Avenue is the hottest spot on the face of the earth." Here there are no sunless canyons as in the narrower streets. The sun's rays reflect off glass and steel and rise in waves from the broad white sidewalks. She imagines herself lost in a desert trudging across a wavering ribbon of sand alert only for the sight of shade and water. She walks no more than a block when she feels the intensity of the heat slowing her down. Her breathing grows shallow, her steps smaller and less sure, until the penetrating heat simply stops her in her tracks. She is a hairsbreadth away from being asleep on her feet. If she does not look up, she will be all right, but her attention is caught by the images of clouds reflected in the dark glass facade of a towering highrise that appears to be leaning backwards into the sky. And when she raises her head to watch the pretty white clouds floating in the blue reflection, the upward sweep of the building carries her into unconsciousness.

In the ambulance, she thinks of Sam. He would have looked at her in that offhand way of his and say, "You did what you did. Those are the facts. If you could have done differently, you would have. Why be sorry? You did what you wanted, didn't you? You just didn't think it would turn out this way.

There's no going back. So just rest awhile." She rests.

At the hospital she causes a slight commotion by forgetting her address. But they look in her purse and find it along with Charlotte's number. She should have taken the number out, but now they are already calling Charlotte.

"You got away lucky this time," Charlotte is saying. "It was just the heat and exhaustion.You might have had a stroke, though. What possessed you? We had a bargain. You agreed not to leave the house. Why, if you wanted to go to New York, we would have taken you. What in the world were you doing, Mom? Mary?"

Mary does not respond. She has found an unreachable place, a retreat. She likes the feeling of this new freedom. She hears Charlotte quite clearly going on about their bargain, about compromise, commitment and promises. She is only applying these words to Mary, of course, and Mary knows that these words have nothing to do with her. There is no bargain. There is only Charlotte's plan. Now Charlotte is trying to say that Mary had broken some agreement, gone back on her promises. She is making this all lead up to something, twisting it all around into a crisis. How could they coexist under the same roof when Mary will not keep her promises has become the question of the moment that must be answered.

"And I'm not even going to tell John about today, Mom. If we tell him, he'll be out of his mind with worry. But I need you to tell me what to do." Charlotte is saying.

But Mary cannot tell Charlotte what to do because Mary has decided she will no longer speak Charlotte's language. Charlotte is painting a picture with words and the picture is supposed to be their life. It doesn't matter if no one sees the picture but Charlotte. Mary knows that physically she has evolved into a new version of herself. She is not even the same person who started out on the train this morning. Decisions, desires, actions and events have transported her to a new place—a place where she can come to terms with the fact that there are some things she can no longer do. But she does not accept that in one short year the rich life she enjoyed with Sam has been distilled down to a few permitted activities like some kind of perverse chemistry. Perhaps she is not as good

at doing things as she used to be. Isn't it perfect that she no longer requires the precision of her youth?

"So what do you think, Mom?" Charlotte is asking. Something about a nursing home. A more suitable arrangement. Dying with dignity. This girl makes such gigantic concepts out of simple things like death. To Charlotte, death is a problem to be solved, like algebra. Mary knows that death is not the alien thing that people make it out to be. It's a part of her, waiting to be realized, like a thought, an instinct. Just as growth once was, death is an inclination that her body knows how and when to follow. Just not now.

Sam used to say that you could define people not by how they furnished their homes, but by how they furnished the inside of their heads. Mary imagines the inside of Charlotte's head. There must be a collection of towering structures with big signs reading Commitment, Dignity, Promises, Death. Perhaps there is a little Charlotte scrambling over them trying to grab hold. And like Alice in Wonderland, searching for something to eat to bring her back to normal size so she could cope with them, finding herself standing on tiptoe peeking over the edge of Eternity, only to find herself face to face with a large blue caterpillar.

Mary giggles at the thought and decides that even though she lives in Charlotte's house, she does not have to live inside of Charlotte's head. The inside of Mary's head is her own domain and she will furnish it with her own familiar surroundings, her love for her family and her pleasure in the simple tasks of living.

"Mother, aren't you going to answer? What's so funny?"

Mary looks at her watch. Almost 4 o'clock. She'd like to be at home starting supper. She isn't sure how she is going to accomplish this, but she is going to try. Going to try with everything she has. And if she can't get it done today, well, she will just try again tomorrow. She'll make pot roast with carrots and red potatoes and a nice thick gravy—just the way John loves it. After supper, they'll wash the dishes together, the way they used to. She will be his mother again, not some irrelevant shadow.

She relaxes into the hospital bed and closes her eyes. She is aware of the hum of Charlotte's voice beside her. The sound of

that voice reminds Mary that everything she wants for herself might be impossible. The thought makes her tired. She sleeps awhile until she arrives again at the moment of awakening when her spirit emerges resolute and unencumbered, ageless and hopeful. She grabs on to that trusted friend and resolves to never let go again.

Emily Holland

Something Cool

(homage to June Christy)

Angela heard the swoosh and thwack of a sliding glass door opening and closing, slicing off a blast of television ambiance from inside the condo next door. A man stepped out onto the building's back deck, right beside hers. She was seated there on a grimy plastic adirondack chair, with a towel hung over the back to dry. Ahead of them, beyond a row of villas, the ocean roared. It was night, half past one o'clock.

She resented him; now she was not alone. Rather: she was alone as ever, but now she had another presence to contend with; she had to be self conscious in her loneliness. She didn't even have the deck light on, and she was sitting there by herself, drinking. Her sister and brother-in-law were in bed, as were their children. She had stayed awake reading and reading, losing her place over and over, until she at last drug out the bottle of mango white rum she had brought along with her, and tempered it with some of the children's orange juice. A previous condo guest had left a bottle of grenadine to molder in the fridge. Angela had had no compunction about twisting open the crusty top and letting a few drops bloom throughout her rum drink. She supposed the cool thing in its frosted starfish glass was some kind of sunrise.

Now the man was sitting down as well, and she heard the rasp of a match, detected the glow in her peripheral vision of a cigarette. He hadn't turned on the light on his deck, either, but the morphing bluish haze from the nattering television inside spilled in front of where he sat. Angela wasn't sure if she should look over, if he would regard it as some sort of invitation or perhaps feel just as uneasy as she did. The ice cubes tinkled in her glass; she took another sip. She got up and put the man behind her, walking to the deck rail to look at the beach entry, the villas and packed golf carts, the moon. She could only barely see the ocean from where she stood, but it was just as present as anything else, hushing and reprimanding and throwing its white surf against the shore.

"What are you drinking?" the man said, and his voice startled her. She turned around slowly and looked across at the other deck, to make sure he wasn't talking to anyone else. She walked closer, around a sandy glass-topped table, and stopped when she could smell the acrid smoke.

"It's a kind of sunrise," she said, lifting the glass as if he could tell what was in it. "OJ, mango rum, grenadine. Tropical."

"Ah," he said. She took in his appearance: late 50's maybe, hadn't shaved in several days, oversized Boston Red Sox shirt, hand curled around a tumbler that held dark liquid and one rock.

"Bourbon," he said, tilting his head toward the glass. "Good for what ails you."

He didn't say anything else, electing to take a drag of his cigarette. Angela crossed back to the chair and sat down. So that was it. He was just curious. Being neighborly. She tried to remember if she had seen him around before, but she had honestly paid very little attention to who was living next door, being so wrapped up in getting Kelly and Ethan from place to place, out of bed and fed and to the beach and back from the beach and cleaned up and in bed then up for dinner and so forth and so on . . .

How Mike and Allison managed daily without her was a mystery.

She had never felt farther away from her younger sister, and yet Allison had never been sweeter or more grateful, drowning in her children's incessant needs while trying to enjoy, trying to record and manufacture what was supposed to be a memorable family vacation. Of course Angela had known all along that was half the reason her sister and brother-in-law had invited her; they had made it quite clear—insisting that they pay for the condo, mentioning tactfully but emphatically that they wanted a night or two off, et cetera.

"How long you been out here?" He sallied forth again.

"Oh, I—" Angela said, jolted off her train of thought. "Not long, I don't think. Haven't been keeping track."

"And you're staying just this week?"

"Mmhm." The condos were Saturday to Saturday rentals; it was Wednesday.

She paused a moment, then gave in. She supposed she ought to ask him about himself.

"You?"

"Yeah, the wife and I are staying here with some friends, then next week we're going down to Myrtle. We've got some other friends who live there year-round."

"That's a long beach vacation."

"We're retired. Life's a vacation, now." Whether he was being facetious she couldn't tell.

"I guess so."

An ocean breeze brought the cigarette smoke across to Angela.

"Those kids yours?" He walked over and leaned on the side of his deck toward hers.

"No," she laughed. "Do you think I'd be out here like this if they were?" She took a large swig of her drink.

"Hell, I sure was. All the time, even when my kids were little. Should've been tired, but I've never been able to sleep so well."

"Hmm."

"Wife about killed me. I'd come back to bed at three smelling like I'd just left a bar." Angela raised her eyebrows.

"Went to the doctor's, eventually. Now I take pills. When it's important that I sleep, that is." He paused to look out over the vista of beachfront. "I'm off the clock, now. It's nice to have a few nights with my old self."

Angela looked idly at his cigarette and thought about all the people she'd seen smoking on the beach. Some older, like the man, bronzed and beer-gutted. Some younger, without children to look after. She wondered how they stood it, that strong flavor in the heat.

"Who do they belong to, then?" He was back at it. "That boy and girl I've seen running around."

"My sister," Angela said brightly and nodded. "She's younger than me by nine years, but she's the one all grown up."

"Who says?"

Angela looked away and smiled. "Maybe not."

"How old are you?" said the man.

"Thirty-six."

"Still a baby." He grinned.

"Does that make my sister an infant?"

"As far as I'm concerned."

The sunrise was dipping lower and lower in the glass; Angela was warmer and warmer; there was no chill at all in the breezy night air.

"You know, I saw my first gray hair today."

The man burst out laughing. He stretched out his glass, and she walked over to the deck rail to give it a clink.

"To many more."

"And I lied today—" she continued. "Just to see what it was like."

"What, you've never lied before?"

"Many times." She leaned against the deck rail, closer to him. "But I lied, earlier, about having those kids, just to see what it was like to say it."

He gave her a blank look.

"I told someone they were mine."

"Ah." He drank some bourbon.

"My sister and brother-in-law were taking a walk, and I was watching the babies. Some other kids came up and helped them build their sand castle, and the mother started talking to me. It was surreal."

He looked at her cannily.

"It felt good?"

"No, just surreal. I was partially afraid of being found out, partially guilty, and I couldn't quite *enjoy* saying those things because I knew they weren't true. I had just thought, maybe, for once, that I would find out what it felt like to tell someone I was married with kids. The only thing I got out of it, I think, was how the other woman seemed willing to relate to me, immediately, in a way she probably wouldn't have if I had told the truth."

The man grunted.

"There's an age," he said, "after which it's pretty much all couples, and my buddies are a temporary escape hatch from my marriage, and her friends are a support group for all the shit she puts up with from me, and the kids, et cetera. I know people get married later now, I don't know if you've gotten to that age yet. I guess maybe you have. But the settled-down life is not all that. Don't think you're missing out, or you're

less than. It is what it is—Christ, I feel like I'm talking to my daughter—" he grinned again. "You'll find your way."

"How old are you?" Angela asked.

"Fifty-nine," the man said. "About old enough to be your Pa."

He walked back to the table on his deck to retrieve his matches and light another cigarette. Angela was about finished her drink, and she wondered now if she'd ever be able to go back inside and fall asleep. She thought about taking a walk on the beach; she thought about the soft sand at the beach entrance cool rather than burning between her toes, she wondered if she'd see anyone else on her walk (probably drunk kids or late night fishermen). She thought about asking the man to take a walk with her—no, she remembered to herself, he was married, and that would be forward and absurd. Although she would ask him with no ulterior motives, just glad for his easy companionship. She remembered that she didn't even know his name.

She asked for it as he stood in the center of his deck smoking again, the last of the bourbon on his table, watered down from the ice.

"Gary," he said. He walked over to the rail of his deck again, and Angela told him her name as they shook.

"You know, I'm thinking of taking a walk on the beach," she said. "I don't think I'll be able to get to sleep."

"Atta girl," Gary said. "Glad I'm not the only insomniac around here."

"I was wondering," she continued, tentatively, "if you might like to come."

She could tell even in the dark that he was studying her closely, trying to get a handle on her motives. They were innocent, Angela was telling herself, but of course Gary had no way of knowing. She was trying to get a sense of him; she wondered if he had ever had an affair.

He blew out a curling eddy of smoke.

"It's all right," he said. "I think I'm going to try to turn in before long. You go on ahead."

And then she was left standing there, glass still in hand, deciding whether—without him—she really wanted to go for a walk at all. She turned briefly and surveyed the deck: broken

shells littering the glass-top table, a mishmash line of flip-flops by the sliding door, towels hung over chairs blowing in the breeze. She smiled again at Gary, who seemed already to have forgotten she was there. She put down the glass empty of sunrise and began to walk down the wood-plank stairs.

Contributor Notes

While serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Benin, West Africa, Brian Beard collected and translated fifty Beninese folktales with his Fon language teacher, Angelo Houndedji. His writing appears in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *The New Guard*, *Poetry East*, *Quiddity*, *Red Rock Review*, *Translation Review*, and elsewhere. He lives with his wife and sons in Houston, where he teaches courses on happiness and "the good life" to high school seniors and leads service trips to Bolivia.

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Mary Lucille Hays lives on a farm with her husband and writes about the Prairie. Named for both of her grandmothers, she teaches writing at the University of Illinois. Her MFA is from Murray State University. "Tribute in Black, White, and Grey" is from her yet-to-be published novel, *Ruth Harris: Under the Prairie Moon*. Other stories have appeared in *Every Day Fiction*, *Short Fiction Break*, *Quiddity*, *Short Fiction Break*, and *Broad!, and Coal City Review*.

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Faith Shearin's books of poetry include: *The Owl Question* (May Swenson Award), *Telling the Bees* (SFA University Press), and *Orpheus, Turning* (Broadkill River Press). She has received awards from the NEA and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Her poetry has been read aloud on *The Writer's Almanac* and included in *American Life in Poetry.* Shearin's short stories have appeared in *The Missouri Review*, *Frigg,* and *The Atticus Review.* She lives with her husband, her daughter, and two dogs, in a cabin on top of a mountain in West Virginia.

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