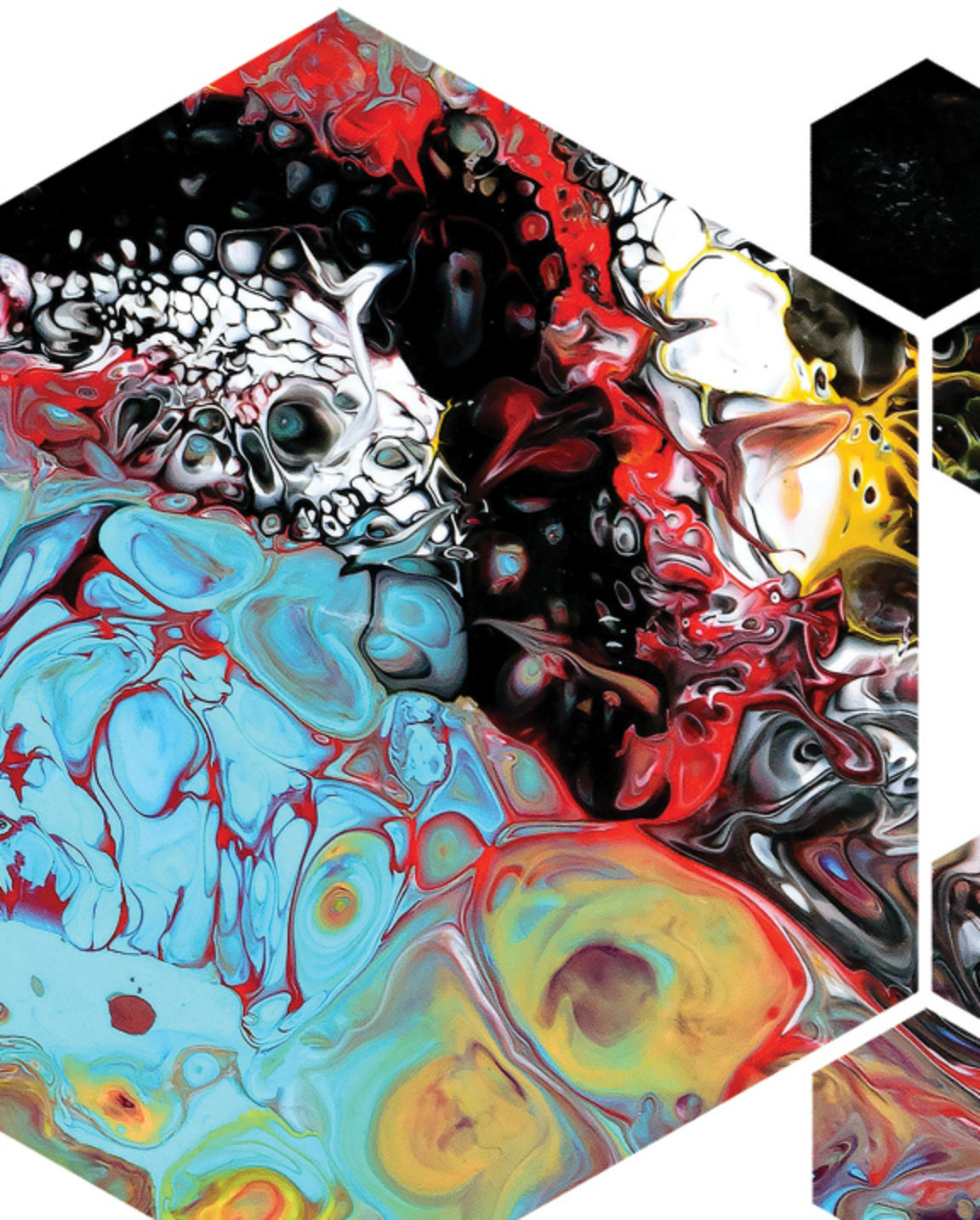


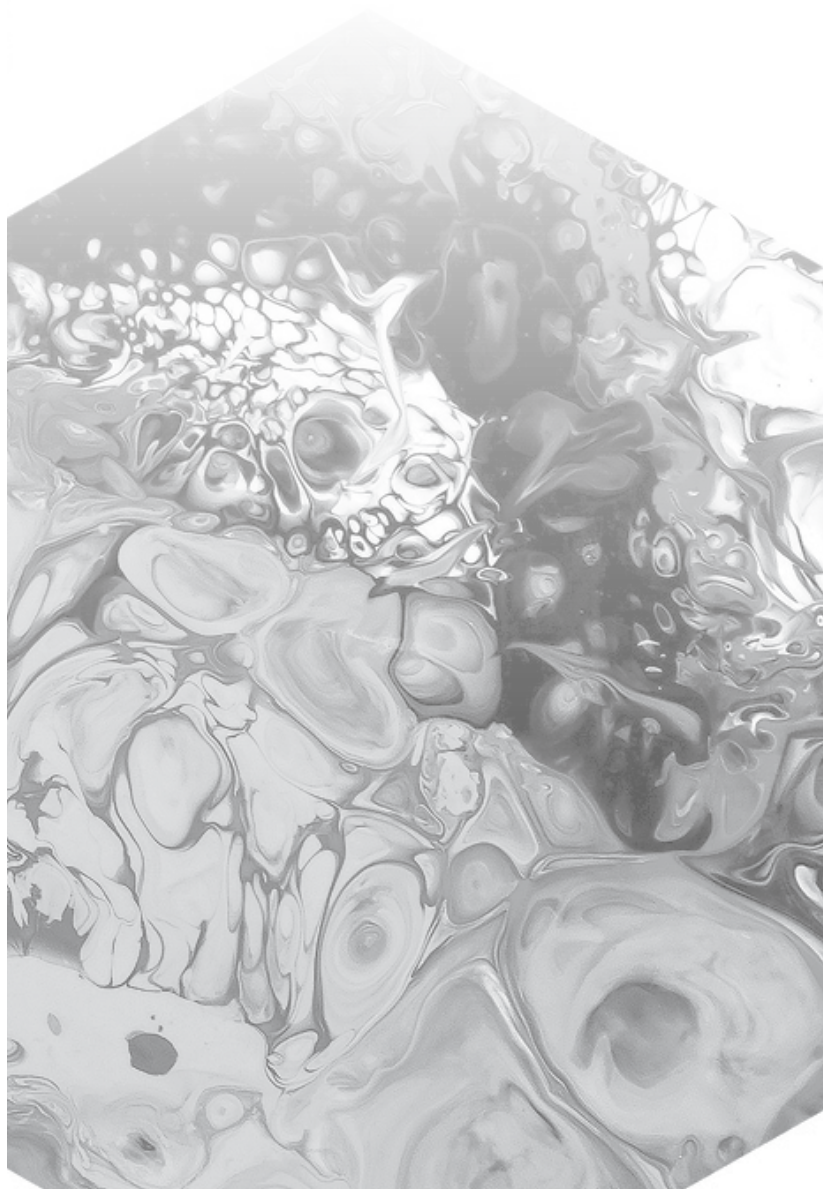
SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2018



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Emily Rinkema

Child A

My mother slept with Ted Bundy. It was 1972 and she was a student at the University of Washington. She met him where she worked, in the library. He had tripped in the stacks (in the Feminist Literature section she would say, as if that were significant) and she had picked up his books for him.

They went out to dinner, had a great time. He was charming, complimented her on the way she wore her hair. When she reached for the bread, he touched her hand. He slid his foot against hers under the table.

He walked her home, kissed her, gently. Brushed a strand of hair out of her face with his finger and kissed her again. She invited him in and when he left the next morning he promised he would call.

Whenever she told this story, as she did often throughout my childhood, she would shake her head, laugh a bit too loudly, and say, “Blown off by Ted Bundy! I’m the luckiest woman alive.”

How exactly do we become our parents? We get our eyes, our bone structure, our curly hair, and our crooked toes from them, but that’s not it. We get our mannerisms too. The way she turned her head chin first, the way he stood with one shoulder slightly lower, that nervous way she tapped her right foot in public. We catch ourselves in the mirror raising our eyebrows as he did, pulling on our earlobes like her.

Our father left when I was three. They had just bought a small house in Southern Indiana to be near my Aunt Debbie, but after only a few months he moved out, went to the other side of town, closer to the distillery where he worked. A year later he was killed in a late night run-in with a train. I only have a few pictures of him, but it’s clear I have his eyebrows. Stephanie is fair-haired like Mom, but I have hair everywhere and it’s dark and coarse. Before my first co-ed pool party, Mom made me put on her bikini, even though I

was planning to wear my Ramones T-shirt the whole time, and while I stood with my arms and legs spread apart in the bathroom trying not to cry, she used her electric razor to shave off all hair that could be seen.

“Can’t have my girl looking like a Yeti,” she said.

Stephie watched from the doorway.

Aunt Debbie said my father was a dreamer. She said he fell in love with Mom fast and hard.

She told me Dad played the saxophone in a blues band in Seattle, that they had a record deal in the works when he met Mom. They met at a club and by the end of the night he was in love. Two weeks later they were married. That’s how it was with her, Aunt Debbie said.

Mom never talked to us about him. I never even knew he was a musician.

“I don’t think he meant to do it,” she said as I stared at a picture of him with his band, his head tilted to the side as if he had heard something in the distance. Didn’t mean to kill himself, or didn’t mean to fall in love with Mom? I thought of asking. But I already knew that there was no difference.

We knew Mom was different for as long as we knew anything. It wasn’t her moods or her disappearances or her drinking or that she broke things and laughed too loudly, or that she only ate bananas if they had been blended and refused to allow us to wear the color green, that sometimes she locked us out of the house—those things were just the Mom we knew, the Mom normal. Yes, she was different than our friends’ moms, but she wasn’t different than our mom.

On Wednesday nights we had picnics in her bedroom. She would pack a basket and lay out a blanket on the floor and we would eat tuna sandwiches with our pinkies in the air, laughing at Mom’s British accent.

Once she sewed tags in all of our shirts, so no one but us could see them. They said *I am here*. In every shirt. I still have one in the back of my sock drawer.

When one of us was sad, Mom would climb into bed with us and sing the fish song.

Down in the meadow in a little bitty pool
Swam two little fishies and a mama fishie too.
“Swim” said the mama fishie, “Swim if you can,”
And they swam and they swam right over the dam!

She always started soft, and then each repetition was a little bit louder, and a little bit louder, until we were all bouncing on the bed, collapsing in a pile when the fish swam right over the edge.

All of that was normal, the loud and the soft and the crying and the laughing, and the knowing when it was time to call Aunt Debbie.

But it was the way other people, mostly our friends’ parents, looked at us when we weren’t with Mom that wasn’t normal. It was the questions, whispered to us in the grocery store or outside of the school or at friends’ houses:

“How you doing, honey?”

“Sweet things. You’ll let me know if you need anything, right?”

“Be strong, baby.”

A few years ago, Stephanie called me crying late at night. She’d been drinking.

“It’s a real song,” she sobbed. “It’s a real song, and there were three little fishies, and she didn’t make it up.” I didn’t know why this was making her so upset.

“It’s *all over* the dam,” she almost yelled through the phone, “not *right over* the dam!”

Most of my friends know who they will become by looking at their parents. They see how their eyes will age, how they will lose an inch to bad posture, how they will settle into their bodies, become sturdier first, then frailer. They have models, maybe not perfect, but rough prototypes to help them plan or prepare or push against. I am now older than my parents ever were. I am the model, the one they could have become had life been very different.

On the night of my 44th birthday I got more drunk than I’d ever been before. I had made it. I had outlived them all. I had been counting down the years until I could believe I would no longer become them.

Once, when I was ten, Mom, Stephe, and I piled into the Renault, an old blue station wagon Mom had bought from Aunt Debbie's ex-husband and went on a three state hunt for Smartfood popcorn. That's the way she told it later, as if three states was a crazy feat even though we lived in the corner of Indiana, five minutes from Ohio and ten from Kentucky. We bought every bag we could find in every Kroger's or 7-Eleven until the whole cargo area was full of black and yellow bags, and Stephe was close to buried in the back seat, and it was after midnight when we crossed back into Indiana, over the bridge, singing, laughing, windows down so we could yell into the night. She told us it was good luck to yell into the night, to let it all out for the stars to hear.

"We're the luckiest girls in the world!" She screamed to the stars.

That same night Mom tried to kill herself for the first time. I heard a glass break and found her in the bathroom. I called 911 and the doctors told me I had saved her life. They told me if I had waited just five more minutes she would have died. Just five more minutes, they said, as if I were a hero.

I wrote a report on Ted Bundy my senior year in high school. He was born in a home for unwed mothers in Vermont, raised by family members in Philadelphia, and then moved with his mother to Washington. He dated, went to college, graduated with a degree in psychology. He drove a white VW Beetle. He was accepted at law school, just like I would be years later.

The older I get, the more I look like my mother. Except for the hair. I saw myself in a restaurant window a few weeks ago on my way to the firm, and for just a moment I thought she was there, inside, watching me walk by. We have the same confident posture, the same turn of the head, the same eyes, set deep and just a little too close together. I remember getting ready for a middle school dance in Shelley's basement when Mom showed up. I heard her upstairs in the kitchen asking if she could see me. She ran down the stairs, Stephe in tow, dressed in jeans and a tank top, no bra, her hair beneath a blue bandana and her John Lennon glasses perched on her

small nose (Stephie has her nose).

“Josie!” she said, pulling me away from my friends, who stood with make-up brushes in hand, half dressed. “Be a doll and watch your sister, will you?” She put her hands on my shoulders and looked at me without seeing. Then she kissed me on the forehead (high like hers) and ran back up the stairs. Stephie was crying.

She was gone for ten days that time. Stephie and I took care of ourselves for the first few until we ran out of food.

Those eyes, so deep, just like the ones staring back out of the restaurant.

When I was seventeen and Stephie was fifteen, she screamed out the window of her room at Aunt Debbie’s as I walked away, “At least I know who my father is!”

Stephie is 42. She lives in Cincinnati just across from an indoor farmer’s market where she and her boyfriend go every weekend to buy fancy cheese. When she called me last month to tell me she was pregnant she had been drinking.

“I can’t have it,” she said.

“Does Mike know?” I asked.

“No. I’ll take care of it before he finds out.”

“Are you sure?”

“Jesus Christ, Josie. Yeah, I’m sure. I’m not doing this.”

“But maybe it would be okay,” I said, taking a beer out of the refrigerator. “There’s a chance, you know. There’s a good chance you’ll be okay.” I opened the beer and sat back on the couch.

“Yeah, and there’s a chance it skips a generation, in which case this baby is fucked. Both our parents, Josie. Both. Not very good odds. I’m saving everyone time and heartbreak.” I pictured her baby, pictured holding it in my arms, watching it breathe, cupping its tiny skull.

We stayed on the phone for hours like we used to in our twenties. After a few beers her voice sounds so much like Mom’s.

The train didn’t even stop. It wasn’t until kids found his body that they knew there had been an accident. For a

while, I wondered how it was possible to hear a train coming and not be able to get out of the way.

One summer when Stephanie and I were both back in town for a wedding, we decided to go down to the tracks where Dad was killed. It was late, and we brought a half empty bottle of whiskey. We sat on the hill behind Benny's Gas & Grill, our shoes kicked off, Stephanie leaning against me. The grass was damp from late night dew, the air starting to cool. I could smell gasoline, the memory of fried food, and behind that the yeasty odor of the Seagram's distillery. We hadn't been back to town since Mom died, no reason to return. We talked about places we missed, people we hadn't seen since moving to Aunt Debbie's.

We heard the train before we felt it, and we felt it before we saw it.

"Let's see how close we can get," said Stephanie, scrambling to her feet.

We ran down the hill until we were ten feet from the track. I grabbed Stephanie to keep her from going any closer and we stood, arms locked together. The light cut through the night and the sound grew. We weren't at a crossing, not close enough to town and too late at night for warning horns or flashing lights. Just the sound of metal rushing towards us in the dark. Stephanie took my hand, entwining our fingers like we did when we were kids, and we took a step closer.

"One more!" she yelled over the sound. It was physically difficult to step toward the tracks, as if magnetic fields had formed around our bodies, but we did it, together, dresses blowing, hair swirling. We tipped our heads back and howled into the sky as the train passed.

And then it was gone, and it was dark, and we stood clutching each other, aware of exactly how close we had been.

In my college biology class we learned about Punnett Squares, a model of inheritance. The professor talked about dominant and recessive genes and made us list some of the most commonly passed down traits: eye color, hair color, cleft chin, widow's peak, freckles, free and attached earlobes. We looked at photos of mothers and fathers and children. We read about genetic mutations. We made charts to determine

the likelihood that Child A would have blue eyes, red hair, a cleft chin.

I can't decide which is worse, to know or not to know. To hear the train coming or to stumble drunk into its path. Is it worse to kill yourself or to kill someone else? Is there a difference?

On January 24, 1989, when I was sixteen years old, Ted Bundy was executed, found guilty of killing somewhere between 30 and 100 women.

I am guilty of killing only one. I was sixteen, just home from school. The door was open, which was not so unusual. Stephe was at band practice and wouldn't be home for at least an hour, and I just assumed Mom had forgotten to close it. Inside, the house smelled of bananas and dish soap. I stood in the entry and breathed, shut the door behind me. Everything was so still.

She was on the kitchen floor. The ceiling fan was on and the afternoon sun coming through the windows cast shadows on the tiles as the fan circled. I watched the shadows cross over her legs, circle around, cross over again, like birds circling a field, slow and steady, determined. I remember thinking it was odd that a circular fan could cast shadows that were oblong. I remember thinking I should be able to figure out why based on angles and diameter. I remember thinking I could use the angle of Mom's leg to calculate circumference.

I remember thinking I should call 911, that it wasn't too late to save her again.

But instead, I cleaned. For the next hour, I put away dishes, emptied the bananas out of the blender, washed it. I threw away the bottles, first the glass one, then the small orange plastic one. I started a load of laundry, picked up the living room, swept the hall. I returned to the kitchen and cleaned up the vomit, took the trash out the back door and into the garage.

I can remember all of that, every detail. I can see it all every time I close my eyes. I remember the door the dishes the bananas the laundry the blender the trash the fan the smell the door the bottles the garage the blender the dishes

the garage.

“She’s dead,” I said when Stephie got home. I was sitting on the porch, my knees tucked under my chin.

Stephie dropped her flute case.

“Real?” she asked. I nodded. Her knees gave way and I caught her. Held her. Told her it was going to be okay.

There’s a picture of Ted Bundy I keep in my desk drawer, beneath envelopes and old letters. It’s a clipping I found going through Mom’s things after she died. It’s 1978 and he’s standing outside a news conference in Tallahassee. He’s in his prison jumpsuit, leaning casually, his right arm against the wall and his left disappearing behind his back. He’s looking slightly away from the camera, his eyes focused and his lips set in what’s not quite a smile. His chin is smooth. His hair dark, no freckles, attached earlobes, like mine.

Stephie looks so much like Mom that it hurts sometimes to see her. I watch the way she pretends to be brave, the way she smiles all the time, even when she’s sad, the way she laughs too loudly and tells stories as if they were Homeric epics. I know she drinks too much, like me, loves too hard, sings when she shouldn’t, still rolls down her windows and yells at the night.

“Am I like her?” she asked me a few weeks ago. “We were sitting on her couch and she was curled into me like a child. She had just told me she was going to have the baby, that they had decided to roll the dice.

“Kind of,” I said. “But just the good parts.”

“Would you want it to be different?” She asked. “I mean, if you were Queen of the World, would you change any of it?”

“That’s a stupid fucking question,” I said, and we laughed.

Iwould change one thing, I think. I would go back to that day in the kitchen, and I would tell my sixteen-year-old self to give it one more try, that this time could be different, that this time we could find a way to make everything better. I would tell her to her dial 9-1-1 one more time, to shake her mother’s body and pound on her chest and ignore the tears and snot and vomit and breathe into her mouth until the

paramedics arrive to pull her off, screaming. I would tell that scared, angry child that maybe this time it would be different, that people change, that there is no such thing as fate.

But if I couldn't have all that, if I couldn't change what happened, then I think I would go back to that kitchen anyway, and I would watch my sixteen-year-old self brush the hair out of her mother's eyes, so much like her own, and I would tell her I forgive her.

Alice Martin

A Hole to Nowhere

The day the ground opened up marked six months that Monica had been living at home. This, to her, felt more monumental than the hole.

She noticed it first as she let her arthritic dog Clifford out to do his business. That's what her father always called it, "conducting his business," as if the dog were smarter than her just by shitting. What business did she have to conduct? She'd just woken up at 11am on a Monday and was standing on the weed-infested patio in an oversized T-shirt and socks up to her knees. In one hand, a cup of coffee. In the other, a cigarette. She never used to smoke.

Clifford found the hole by peeing into it. He circled it buzzard-style afterward, just like he did before he found a place to sit. He was a basset hound mix, and his ears hung almost as low as his eyes. He looked at her until she groaned and came over to inspect.

"It must be a sinkhole," her mother declared when she got home at 4pm and Monica showed her. Mrs. Gentry was a public elementary school teacher who had recently discovered social media. Specifically, she enjoyed posting saint-like messages on her wall, too-long narratives which bemoaned the public school system while simultaneously declaring teaching to be the most noble profession. The posts were annoying, of course, but also made Monica sad in a way she didn't like to think about.

"Do sinkholes start that suddenly?" Monica asked.

"Well, what else would it be?"

The two of them stared down the hole and a shiver crawled up Monica's back. It was the same sensation she got when she realized someone was looking at her from a distance. The ground around the hole wasn't cracked or grassless. Instead, the earth just tilted downward to darkness.

"I think it's growing," Monica said after a minute.

"Well," Mrs. Gentry said, pulling her daughter away from the edge by her wrist. "Let's ask your father when he gets

home.”

Mr. Gentry, when he came home from work where he served as a construction site manager, insisted on setting up orange traffic cones around the perimeter. So no one accidentally fell in.

“I have extras in my trunk,” he said, as if they were normal things for a person to have.

That night, Monica stared out her bedroom window at the neon orange traffic cones, three of them glowing around the perimeter of the hole. When she heard a noise just outside her bedroom, she closed her eyes. She pretended she didn’t know that her mother cracked the door open to look in at her every night. She pretended she didn’t hear her mother sigh.

The next morning, the cones were gone and the hole was bigger. Mr. and Mrs. Gentry still had to go to work, and so Monica was left with the gaping monster. It was now roughly four feet wide and who knew how deep. Mr. Gentry promised he would “make some calls.”

Monica briefly considered doing so herself. Last time she was living here, five years ago when she was in high school, he might have asked her to do it. “I’m a busy guy,” he would’ve said. “And you’re my kid. What did we have you for?” He’d say it with a wide, squinty-eyed grin. It was Mr. Gentry’s chief belief that the ability to make friends was a man’s greatest asset.

But now neither he nor Monica’s mother ever asked her to do much. Since her homecoming, they’d treated her with the kind of fragility as someone who knew there had been a tragedy. In this case, the tragedy was her.

It had always been known that she was welcome to come home if she needed it. But when she arrived, carting the two suitcases that she’d dragged around New York City for two months while she looked for a job and slept on springy couches, her parents’ smiles had held small torn edges. They still barely asked her to rinse her dishes. So, fixing the hole was certainly not on her agenda.

Monica stood over the hole. Her dark brown hair dangled in greasy ropes, reaching into the crater like Rapunzel’s braid. She poured her coffee inside and waited for a distance splash.

The silence lasted a full minute, and Monica left without ever hearing it break.

She let Clifford out, but made sure to put him on a leash after a brief mental image of him tripping over his ears and falling headfirst into the hole. Then, she came back inside, climbed the familiar carpeted stairs two at a time, and slipped into what used to be her bathroom. Since she'd moved out for college, it had been converted into the guest bath. The drawer filled with her old nail polishes, all gooey with congealed color and cracked with sparkles, had been emptied. Her old towels, marked with streaks of black mascara and beige foundation, had been chucked. Her collection of accumulated Bath and Body Works sprays and lotions, hotel room soaps and conditioners, all swept clean. Replacing them were tasteful bottles of body wash, plush navy towels, and a candle scented inexplicably like clean linen.

Monica lit the candle, shoved one of the oversized towels against the crack under the door, and lifted the lid of the toilet. A water bottle bobbed inside. She unscrewed the lid and dumped her stash into her lap, packed the bowl in the hammock her too-long T-shirt made between her thighs.

Spring was coming and the birds were loud outside the open bathroom window as she smoked. She wondered if it was the same family of birds that woke her up on weekends when she was young. Did they return home, too? Or did they get as far away as possible? Maybe they tried, but always ended up coming back anyway.

Her phone trembled on the tile floor, a low groan. She answered it with her big toe and listened to Josh tell her he was in the neighborhood.

“Yeah, I’m here. You can come see the hole.”

“The what?” he asked. His voice still sounded the same as it had when they were in high school, a bit too high pitched but perfectly intonated, as if he’d copied it entirely from teenage soap operas on television.

“There’s a hole in my backyard.”

“Like a sink hole?” he asked.

“Not like a sink hole,” she said, and blew out a cloud of smoke. She wished she could blow smoke rings but until recently her marijuana usage had been too infrequent and

casual to allow for such tricks. Maybe she'd learn. Maybe she'd use the next six months to pick up talents like rolling your own joint and driving while high. Life skills.

She'd finished the bowl by the time Josh got there. He knocked on the side door next the garage instead of the front door because he'd grown used to her home during their high school years. High school boyfriends, Monica had learned, continued to feel entitled to familiarities even after they were exes. Girls always worried about lines being crossed but boys reveled in their seeming nonexistence.

Monica held the screen door open for him with her foot while she held Clifford back from climbing up his leg. Clifford, the traitor, still preferred men, and Josh in particular.

"Coffee?" she asked. She'd pulled a pair of running shorts on for the occasion, but still wore the thread-bare WashU T-shirt she'd slept in. She didn't like wearing it in public anymore because people always asked if she went there. Then she'd have to explain, why yes I did, but I live at home now.

"I'm quitting," he said.

"Why waste the energy quitting coffee?" she said as she led him to the patio. "Shouldn't you save that kind of determination for quitting something important like drinking hard liquor?"

"Headaches," he said. They stood together on the patio and he whistled. "What the hell is it?" he asked.

"A hole to nowhere," she said.

"A what?" he asked.

"You know," she said. "Like that time we went to Topsail Beach with my parents. Sophomore year? We were digging a hole in the sand and you wanted to stop but I wanted to finish it and you asked when I'd know it was finished and I said I'd just know."

"Oh yeah," he said and smiled. "I called it your hole to nowhere."

"Right," Monica said. But she wasn't smiling.

They walked up to the hole and looked inside. While he was staring, Monica snuck a glance at Josh. He was taller than her now, which hadn't been the case when they dated in high school. She'd always been tall, and had gotten a fair amount of ribbing from her friends (and her father) about Josh being shorter than she was. But he'd always been good looking in

a boyish kind of way, big cheeked with blonde hair and large eyes. His hair was darkening now and the frames he'd started wearing in his twenties only made his eyes look bigger. His shoulders were broader, but something about the roundness of his face, the fullness of his chin still made him look young.

She, on the other hand, felt like she'd gotten smaller. Certainly slimmer, but not in the good way. Friends always said you lose weight in your boobs first. Her whole body felt a bit concave these days, her posture slouched forward so her shoulders closed inward around her heart. It wasn't because she'd moved home. This'd started in New York, when she couldn't get a job. Stress always made her stop eating.

"What are you doing today?" Josh asked after he grew bored of the hole.

She shrugged and he offered her a ride.

"Where?" she asked.

He grinned. "Does it matter?"

Turns out he was headed to the old high school to drop off baseball equipment. He worked for the local community center now, running summer programs and sports leagues for kids. They collaborated with the school a lot. Her house was on the way, kind of. But she knew that wasn't why he stopped by. He'd dropped in at least twice a week for the last two months. Once, Mrs. Gentry came home before Josh had left and found them sharing a cigarette Monica'd convinced him to smoke on the patio.

"What's he after?" she'd asked Monica.

"Probably sex," she said and Mrs. Gentry gave her a hard eye that said she knew Monica was joking but still didn't want to pursue the banter. Monica had shrugged. "Company, I guess."

It wasn't that Mrs. Gentry didn't like Josh. In fact, Monica's parents had always felt that it was a mistake that they hadn't stayed together. Of course, Monica liked to remind them when they started feeling too bad for Josh, it was he who'd said if she went to an out of state school they'd have to break up. What did they want her to do? Stunt her ambition?

She was doing a pretty good job of that by herself, a hard, dark thing inside Monica reminded her.

Whenever she was in Josh's car, Monica felt a deep well in

her stomach, as if her nostalgia could eat her from the inside. She still knew by feel exactly how far back his seats went, because of their many failed attempts to have sex there. And the smell, a not all together unpleasant scent of old French fries and grassy cleats, gave her the desire to both cry and touch herself. It wasn't that she missed him, but the force of habit made her think about things she felt belonged to another person.

They sped past the sites of their many dates. The grocery store where they found the ladder to the roof and got drunk off boxes of wine. The gas station where they first kissed and Josh had left her in the convenience store so he could go break up with his current girlfriend and stop feeling guilty. The track field behind the high school where they'd trekked on a snow day from her house, mittened hand in mittened hand, to go sledding on the lids of the school's garbage cans. There was an uncanniness to these places, a familiarity that was no longer real. Monica remembered why she hardly ever left the house since moving home.

Josh left Monica parked in the car while he ran the equipment into the clubhouse by the baseball fields. Afterward, he asked if she wanted to stop for lunch but she said she'd rather go home. On the way back, she rolled down his window and stuck her head out into the breeze to try to remind herself who she was. Monica Gentry, who went to Washington University, who majored in Philosophy, who moved to New York to become and a writer, or an artist, or important in some way. Who hadn't failed, exactly, but who'd run out of money and needed to go home. Other friends of hers, friends from families with the cash to fund them, friends who never talked about their hometowns or their parents when it wasn't to complain, friends who Monica had never resented until after they'd left college, were still there. They texted her now and then, but the messages had grown less frequent as the months went on, and the momentum that Monica had always associated with *Who She Was*, she had to admit, was slowing.

Not just slowing. Screeching to a halt, she believed was the phrase.

"You didn't used to be so sad," Josh said as they got close to her neighborhood.

He sounded not angry so much as disappointed, which enraged her. What right did he have to be disappointed in her? What did she owe him? A happy face? He was the one who asked to come over every week. She couldn't even tell if she enjoyed his visits, or if just his presence made her feel worse. Worse, because she missed him. But also worse because she didn't, not the way she thought she should. Sometimes, she felt the desire to lean over and kiss him, but only so she could feel someone's lips on hers and remember what it smelled like to be so close to someone who really knew her.

"You want me to fake it?" she asked. It was a line from an argument they'd had a month after they'd started having sex in high school. She'd admitted he couldn't make her come and he'd asked her to leave. She doubted he remembered, or maybe that was the exact kind of thing boyfriends didn't forget.

"I'm just making an observation," he said. His eyes flashed to hers and then back at the road. "Why did you come back here anyway?"

"Like I had a choice," she said.

He pulled up in front of her house but didn't cut the engine. He was waiting for her to get out. When she hesitated he said, "But you did, though, Monica."

She left, and he didn't ask to come over a second time that week.

In the week that followed, the hole kept growing. She watched it from her bedroom window on the second floor. First, it ate the stump of the tree that had died the year she'd gone to college. Then, it ate the rosebush she'd planted with her mother when she was seven. Yellow, because that had been her favorite color and her mother remembered, even though no one else did. It ate the old swing set that had rusted over with age and grown mold in the butt curve of the seats. "We probably should have thrown it out years ago," Mr. Gentry said. But even he was having a hard time keeping the concern from his voice. Next up, it would eat the patio where she used to put on plays in her pajamas for her patiently smiling parents.

A police officer and three firefighters had come to look

at it first. They'd wrapped CAUTION: DO NOT CROSS tape around it, only for the trees holding the tape to bend and tumble into the hole, too. They'd brought in city planners, architects, landscapers, scientists. Soon, people from town started dropping by in their Honda Civics and Jeep Caravans to look. Mr. Michaels, Monica's old English teacher came by.

"I didn't know you were back in town!" he'd said, like it was a good thing. She didn't want to tell him that he'd been wrong about her when he'd written a sticky note on her paper that she was talented, bound for big things. She doubted he even remembered that.

Still more people came. Photographers, politicians, families, journalists. The businessmen came, too. At first they'd asked Mr. Gentry how much he might sell the land for, so they could charge admission to people who came and stared. But soon they stopped asking. At the rate the hole was growing, Mr. Gentry wouldn't own it for long. It was beyond him. It was beyond any of them.

The day the patio began to tilt and slide was the day that Monica's father finally announced they had to move. This was how big decisions were made, when her father could no longer make light of a subject. Mrs. Gentry had been saying for days that they needed to leave, but it was only when Mr. Gentry acknowledged it that anything become real. Monica wasn't sure why this was, or why she'd never noticed it before now.

"We don't have time to move everything," he noted at breakfast. He said it with a clip to his tone, the way an executive may deliver news about losing assets. He said it while reading the newspaper, his eyes glancing through his rimless reading glasses. He said it over eggs and orange juice. He said it, and Monica thought her heart might explode.

"This is crazy," Monica said. Her voice maintained the flatness with which she'd addressed everyone in her life for the past six months. If something was fazing her, she would make them believe it wasn't.

"Yes, but sometimes that's life," Mr. Gentry said. "Sometimes we have to be willing to lose what we have because we don't have a choice."

Monica narrowed her eyes at him, taking this as some kind of metaphor or personal offense. Mrs. Gentry caught

Monica's eye and tried to smile at her but Monica just stared back down at the poach of her poached egg. It was harder to keep the sting of tears out of her nose when her mom looked at her that way.

Monica spent the rest of the day, while she was meant to be packing her essentials, watching the hole from her window. The hole was so wide now, if you stood in the center of her room and look straight out, you might think she lived in the middle of it. A scientist who'd come over last week from UPenn suggested that it was developing its own gravitational pull. He'd said this with excitement, and had taken a video on his phone, as if it were some kind of miracle.

Now, even when she knew she had something important to do, Monica couldn't look away. That was the thing about the hole that no one, not any of the scientists or psychiatrists or philosophers or spiritualists, could understand. It had a hypnotical quality, her hole. A vastness, a darkness, a depth that made your soul feel like it was already falling, tumbling and tipping like the trees, willing itself to drop into nothing.

Sometimes, Monica liked to imagine that she'd started the hole with the sheer force of her desire, that it yawned and ate for her, and that each centimeter it grew was a beat of her heart. Other times, the thought terrified her, and she'd never felt so lonely. She thought now about calling Josh, but he hadn't come by, not even to look at the hole, since they'd last spoken. And she didn't want to be the one who broke the silence. She didn't need anything from him, or anyone really, and she never had. She told herself this until the words stopped sounding angry and instead just sounded bland.

That night, the last night they would spend in their house, Monica lay in the blue-lit darkness of her room, staring at the rim of the hole from her mattress. She heard padded footsteps outside her door and closed her eyes as her mother pushed into the room. The floor sighed where her mother stood beside the bed and watched her. Monica prickled with irritation just like she always did on nights when her mom came to check on her. But then her annoyance melted away as the sheets moved back and Mrs. Gentry slipped into bed beside her, like she used to do before Monica's first day of school every year. Monica had never been able to sleep before

the first day of school. Her father said she was too excited, but that wasn't the truth. She was scared, petrified of what she both wanted and didn't want, the emptiness of growing up, the casual cruelty of almost everyone, the boundless expectations that she both thought she depended on and always seemed to ruin her. On those nights Mrs. Gentry would come in and lay beside her daughter, run her fingers through her hair from root to tip, hum songs that Monica had known from birth and didn't need the words to recognize. They were the songs of her heart.

Mrs. Gentry lay beside her now and whispered, "I know you're awake, honey."

When Monica opened her eyes, she was surprised to find that her eyes were wet. She'd been so busy feeling nothing that the pull in her chest now almost choked her.

"What if we just don't leave," she asked her mother, softly because if she spoke any louder she knew she would cry. "What if we just stay here forever and let it swallow us. Would that be so bad?"

"Maybe not," Mrs. Gentry said. "Maybe there's something beautiful down there."

Monica turned over and faced her mom. She'd never done this before, she'd always let Mrs. Gentry comfort her back, pour her love into her hair. Now, they looked at each other in the dark room and Monica saw both that her mother was old and had been crying.

"I don't need it to be beautiful," she said. "I don't need it to be anything."

Mrs. Gentry tucked all Monica's hair behind her ears in a way that always made Monica think she looked like a five-year-old. But for once she didn't mind.

"Honey," Mrs. Gentry whispered so low Monica could barely hear her. "We have to leave, and you do, too."

"What about the house? What about our memories? What about me?" she asked.

"We still have those things," Mrs. Gentry said. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"You're lying," Monica said. "There's everything to be afraid of."

Mrs. Gentry thought of that for a while and then said, "Yes.

Yes, you're right."

Monica turned back around and Mrs. Gentry sang with her throat until they both fell asleep.

In the morning, Monica woke up to a slanting room. Hers, the southern-most facing room of the house, had begun to tip with the foundation. Mrs. Gentry was gone, and late morning sun filled the room like a slap. Monica saw it didn't matter that she hadn't packed. Sometime in the night, her mother had done it for her. Missing were her perfumes and hairbrushes and clothes. Her boundless bookshelves had lost their teeth. The bin by the window that had always held her pile of stuffed animals was nearly empty. Her mother had known just which ones to take.

After Monica showered and went downstairs, she was surprised to find Josh at the table, drinking coffee with her parents.

"I came to help," he said. "I thought you could use a second car."

Monica picked at the hem of her T-shirt. "Want to come look at the hole?" she said.

"Not really," he answered, but he smiled. "That shit is freaky."

"The military came by this morning," Mr. Gentry said. "They are evacuating the whole neighborhood now."

"It's just a hole," Monica said, adopting the same flat tone she always used in the daytime. "It's just our hole. Everyone doesn't need to leave."

"Well, babe, it doesn't look like it's slowing down anytime soon," Mr. Gentry said. He snapped off his reading glasses and tucked them into his shirt pocket. "Seems that the neighbors have been scared of it for quite some time now."

"It has to stop growing sometime," Monica said, more to Mrs. Gentry than her father. She smiled at her daughter but kept her lips closed tight. They didn't speak about their secrets in front of other people.

"We hope," Mr. Gentry said. "But the military seems concerned. They say the government wants to run a bunch of tests, see how they can stop it."

"They can't. It has to stop on its own." Monica didn't know

how she knew this. She just did.

“That’s a lovely thought,” Mr. Gentry said with the same unthinking condescension he often directed at his wife, but Monica had never recognized until this moment was occasionally also directed at her. “But what if it never stops? What if this is the end of the world?”

“Then it’s the end of the world,” Josh broke in with a shrug. He looked at Mr. Gentry and then at Monica. “If it is, then what’s the use of staring at it all the time?”

Mrs. Gentry patted Josh’s hand and collected their nearly empty mugs.

When it came time to load the cars, Monica said she’d go in Josh’s. Clifford went in her parents’ van. He could leave without hesitation, but Monica decided to go back in one last time. She walked through the house, and thought of how it smelled, of lavender laundry detergent and old rugs, wood and lemon hand soap. Every place smelled different, and some smells would never exist again. She ran her hands along the walls and shuffled her feet to feel every floorboard. She tried to memorize every inch of the two-story house, with its big windows and wood-paneled walls. The stairs groaned in all the places she’d committed to memory. The house was old fashioned and always felt too warm in the summer and too cold in the winter. So why did it feel perfect right now?

When she left the house, her father was impatient to leave, but Josh was just sitting on the lawn, tying knots in blades of grass. He stood when she came out and opened the car door for her, like they were going to prom instead of fleeing the scene of a disaster.

Once they drove off, following her parents, Monica noticed all the neighbors packing their cars too, leaving their lives behind. She hadn’t thought about them at all. She’d been busy thinking about herself.

“I’m not going to sleep with you, you know,” Monica said once they’d left the neighborhood. “In case that’s why you’re doing this.”

Josh grinned and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “Well, that would be nice. But it’s not why I’m doing this.”

“Didn’t you ever move on?” she said with an aggressiveness they both knew was fake. “Why are you still the same?”

“I have moved on,” he said. “And so have you. Doesn’t mean we can’t still do this, too.”

After a minute, he turned on the radio and the tinny sound of it from his broken-up speakers made her smile. Even after they’d left the neighborhood, she still saw people clattering into their cars, stuffing their trunks full of bags, as if the hole was on their doorstep and not hers. She’d never seen so many people outside their houses at one time, scared of the same thing. There was something comforting about it.

The song ended and another one began. Josh rolled down the windows like he knew she liked but he didn’t try to take her hand. Monica leaned back into the breeze and didn’t even mind that she had no idea where they were going.

Fan Li

Dromedaries in America

Jin waddled up to the ducks as they waddled to the water. The sun had set. The sky was lavender. Bird droppings were all over the grass though the webbed feet never seemed to step on any. Jin sat down on a park bench and checked the bottoms of his own feet. His wife would not be pleased.

When the ducks had all waded into the pond he looked at the opposite bank. A tall bird with chopstick legs executed a landing like a paratrooper. A crane maybe, or an egret. Jin had trouble making it out. He rubbed his eyes and squinted, but the smooth cameline mountains in the distance faded like islands in the fog. Even though there was still light, he somehow couldn't distinguish the outlines of anything. Not the straight curbs of McCormick Road or the manicured edges of the golf course. He shut his eyes and pinched the spot in between but nothing improved. For a moment, Jin could hardly see a thing. Then that moment prolonged and he found himself in utter darkness.

Jin sat there and listened to his surroundings. First, he heard the breeze, then a few wing flaps, then a runner's steady steps. He turned his head as if to rise, but the steps were already passing him. What could he have said? Briefly, he regretted not joining his wife in her English class at the community college before they left China, but he was not her after all. He could not attempt a new language at the age of seventy-six. One time he saw her practicing pronunciations with her classmates in their living room. They played a CD over and over again while twisting their wrinkled old lips this way and that, puckering, pouting, tongues darting around dentures like newly hatched chicks yelping for the hen. He didn't have any desire for that.

The air was getting chilly. Jin put a hand over his watch as if he might feel time through the glass. It was probably close to seven-thirty. How long would it be before his daughter came looking for him? Another hour? Maybe two? Jin rubbed his palms together for warmth and then tucked each hand into its

opposite sleeve. This would surely cause a fuss in his family. His daughter would call his son, who would make the seven-hour drive from LA, and together they would consult doctors, books, friends, cousins—everything from the Internet to the *I Ching*. Somehow he had raised worrisome children. All his life he had tried not to inconvenience them, not to give them troubles that were otherwise his own, but now he had done it. He tried to picture the last thing he saw: mountains like camels in the desert. There was a story about that he couldn't quite remember, something he had heard when he was a child. Then it dawned on him that his last vision of the world was a land he knew nothing about.

Jin slid all the way to the end of the bench and got up slowly with a hand on the armrest. He shuffled forward. The second his hand left the bench he became disoriented. Easy now. Jin stood still for a minute and then stretched out his hands. A second step. A third. He felt like an astronaut floating in space. But on he went, small steps to stay in the same direction. He felt the soft ground beneath the grass rise in an incline, the earth becoming firmer, and finally something flat and concrete under his heel. The path.

Just then a shiver shot up his spine. Jin dropped his hands to his legs to steady himself. The shiver stopped, but after a second it returned again. He felt as though his liver was trembling and the tremor came at an even, persistent pace. Here it comes. There it goes. It comes again. It goes again. After a whole minute of waiting for the final strike that he figured would end him on the spot, Jin put a hand to his body. Oh look, there was the cell phone he had forgotten about, purring like a kitten in his pocket.

Jin's fingers fumbled until the phone was upright. His thumb felt the smooth screen at the top and jabbed at all the buttons below.

"Dad?"

"Hm."

"Dinner's ready."

"Oh."

His daughter paused and waited.

"Dad?"

"I'm here."

“How long will you be? Dad?”

“I’m here,” he cleared his throat.

“Everything all right?”

“Yes, yes,” he nodded. “I just can’t see.”

“What do you mean? Where are you?”

Already, her voice has risen a pitch higher and Jin thought he could hear his wife in the background, shuffling closer, pushing her ear next to his daughter’s.

“I’m by the pond,” he said, not wanting to say more. Then he chafed his face with the rough heel of his palm and began to tell them about the bird across the water as if that made sense of the ensuing darkness.

But then something above snapped on. Dim yellow light pooled at his feet like he was about to deliver a soliloquy. Jin leaned back, turned his face up at the streetlamp, and blinked hard. When he looked down, he could vaguely make out the way he came and the dark glassy surface of the water. He rubbed his eyes. The image remained blurry, but it remained.

“I’m fine,” Jin feigned annoyance. “I just can’t see the damn buttons on this thing.”

His daughter was skeptical.

“You will have to hang up first,” he told her impatiently.

In his mind, Jin could see the way his wife shook her head with her lips pressed into a thin sharp line and the concerned look on his daughter’s face. He kept the phone at his ear until the call was disconnected, then moved onto the path and followed it by the puddles of light back home.

Jin and Xia had been staying with their daughter for a month. The first time they visited, the three of them had to share a studio in South Phoenix. This time around Liyan had bought a three-bedroom house in Scottsdale next to a golf course. Every day Jin and Xia ate together, walked together, napped together, and read side-by-side. Neither had mentioned the divorce. Jin didn’t know if his wife had forgotten it, changed her mind, or was just not talking about it on account of their daughter, who had her own divorce a few years ago. For all he knew, his wife might have already asked her brother-in-law to draw up the paperwork.

What Jin did know was that his wife thinks he’s a lump

of wood. It wasn't a guess either. She told him that before they came to Arizona. She said, "I've been married to a lump of wood all my life." Then her face crumbled and she locked herself in their bedroom. From the kitchen Jin could hear her sobbing and cursing to her sister on the phone. Spools of anger and regret. He paced the tiny flat they shared for the better half of the century and wondered what he had done wrong.

He said a year was too long. That was what did it. He worried about leaving their home and being away. So far away.

"What could happen?"

"Lots."

"Don't you want to see your children?"

"It's not that," he said.

"Then what is it?"

He couldn't explain. He worried about the radiator leaking, the wires short-circuiting, the pipes bursting in the winter—anything he could've said would've sounded silly. One night on the news he saw an obstinate homeowner in Sichuan refusing to sell his property while every inch of land around his house was dug up by some government developer. The aerial shot showed a lonesome home atop the only remaining stack of dirt. A long bamboo ladder extended from the front door to the bottom. That man could not give a reason, either.

"Say something," she prodded.

"Anything."

There were knots inside him and she insisted on tugging at the first loose end she saw. When that failed she indicted him: "you've never been anywhere because you're always too scared. What are you afraid of?"

He knew he had to say something but didn't know what.

She shook her head, exasperated.

"Tell me. What are you afraid of?"

Jin looked up at his wife who stared back at him.

Finally she shook her head again. "I wish I divorced you years ago."

It was the first time Xia had ever used the word, but she said it like an afterthought. Like it was some conclusion they'd both come to after much debate. Did he somehow miss crucial parts of this conversation?

Sure, over the years they had fought about travelling. After their children left the country with their own families, she complained that her life was too bland. That, having finally waited out the wars and the famines and the revolutions, they were not taking advantage of their good health to see the world. She told him the passing of their days together felt as if she was counting all the sand in the world. But that was dealt with, he thought. They aged out of it the way teenagers age out of puberty.

Ten years ago she started travelling alone. First, they were just weekend trips to see some farms. Then they were week-long treks to nearby provinces. Afterwards, when she got over her fear of flight, she went away for months at a time. The first day she ever left home, he sat alone in front of the TV to watch the evening news. When the weather report came on, Jin found a half-empty notebook and recorded the weather for wherever his wife was. The next evening he did the same. Every night at exactly 7p.m. he parked himself on the sofa and noted the highs and lows, the precipitation, and wind speed in each column he had carefully drawn with a ruler. Somewhere in their closet there were photo albums of her spelunking in caves, floating down rivers, tasting exotic meats, and a stack of yellowing notebooks.

“Where are you going?” He asked when she came out of their bedroom, luggage in tow.

“Outer space.”

He watched her drag her suitcase with one hand and heard its wheels clunk down three flights of stairs. She didn’t even bother shutting the door.

Jin waited for an hour and then called her sister’s house.

“What does he want?” He heard his wife in the background.

“To talk to you,” Jin shouted into the phone.

“Hold on,” said her sister.

The phone fell silent.

After a while, her sister got back on.

“Look,” she said. “Give her some time.”

“We don’t have much left.”

“Give her a few days.”

Jin scraped the inside of his thumb on his knee.

Her sister sighed, “do you have something to eat?”

“Some.”

A silence followed by muffled speech.

“She wants you to know there are dumplings in the freezer and noodles in the top left cupboard.”

There is no street lamp near the front of Liyan’s house. When Jin approached, he saw only a dark recess where the yard was. All four hundred and fifty square feet of it. He peered into the thick murkiness but could not see a thing. Not the flower bed his wife tended every morning, not the trellis he erected, and not the six-foot tall saguaro covered in sharp spines. He shut his eyes and made a wide reaching motion with one hand in front of him. Then forward he went, arms like windshield wipers and forefoot sweeping for mines. Time dragged on through sludge. With out-stretched fingers, he inched forward with a preemptive wince on his face. Pain was a foregone conclusion; the question was whether anyone would find out.

Jin didn’t know it but his fingertips were half a foot away from the front door when he heard a noise to his left. It sounded metallic though he couldn’t be sure. Out of pure desperation, he decided it might’ve been the door and that someone inside was fiddling with the lock. He aimed his belabored steps to the side and turned sharply like a kid after a piñata. Step after step he reached out to grasp the door and felt only air. Step after step he paused and listened and heard nothing more. He was absolutely convinced of his intuition until he had taken so many steps in one direction that he knew he had to have missed the door. Jin stood still. The sky was dark and so was the ground. He blinked and could hardly tell that he had blinked at all.

“What the hell is your father doing?” Xia came to a stop when she saw him from the kitchen window.

Liyan got up and came behind her mother. There her father stood, face-to-face with the saguaro, peering into it with all his might.

“What is he doing?” Her mother looked back.

Liyan met her eyes then rushed to the door.

“Dad,” she called out from behind.

Jin turned his head without a word and instantly lost his

balance.

“I’m here,” she caught his arm and put a hand on his shoulder.

His fingers searched for hers.

“I’m here,” she said. “I’m here.”

He held on to her arm.

The blindness was only temporary. Jin opened his eyes the next morning and almost found religion. He sprang out of bed and pitter-pattered barefoot to the bathroom. Everything seemed surreal in this newfound light. Jin ran his hand under some water and splashed his face. Then he leaned into the mirror, blew a hot breath, and drew a squiggle.

For the rest of the day, Jin barely stood still. He washed vegetables, rinsed rice, soaked beans, baked bread, cleaned windows, swept the floor, and even scrubbed the stovetop. Xia was quieter than usual. She spoke to him almost entirely in questions. Patient and attentive. Tenderer, he thought. There was a time in their youth, after the kids were born, when he had quietly wished that she would act this way, sprinkle some of the tenderness she poured over the children on him. But if there was ever an antithesis to honeymoon, it was parenthood. Now, after all these years, her kindness only made him feel fussy and self-conscious. The first chance he got, Jin climbed up a ten-foot ladder with a broom under his arm.

The roof was flat and gleaming. Quick-dry foam was sprayed last winter after an unexpected hail. The sun was very bright and the reflection off the material made Jin squint. Behind the house there were two full-crowned bitter orange trees. When a breeze came through, the fruit-laden boughs bent wearily and scattered dark leaves with tapered ends all across the roof. Jin went to each corner and crevice and swept out the leaves and dirt. He took his time clearing the gutters, dislodging the mud, and pushed the debris into manageable piles. When he finally straightened his back, he breathed deep and peered at the mountains in the north. The sight of them gave him relief. As Jin turned to face the yard, he saw the saguaro with its two arms raised at its sides in a gesture of surrender. Without thinking, he raised the

broomstick with both hands, tucked the bristles under his armpit, and pointed the handle at the saguaro.

Jin has never held a gun in his life, but when the Japanese came through his village he had seen soldiers sweeping the streets holding their bayoneted rifles just like that. Every time they came, Jin's father led him and his brother into the mountains. They took yams with them and left the more valuable grains behind because yams can be eaten without building a fire. Also because you had to leave satisfactory food for the raiding party or they'd burn down the house. Jin never knew what his home would look like when they returned. They could only pray that the Japanese took the food and abided by the unspoken agreement. One time the news came late and they didn't have time to run away, Jin's father threw him into the wok and put the lid over his body. Back in those days each family had seven or eight children, like his once did. The woks were as big as cauldrons. Jin remembered hearing the Japanese soldiers, whom the Chinese called ghosts, talk as they poked their way through the house. Their words sounded fast and harsh, like machine gun rounds hitting a sand bag. Staccato consonances with not enough vowels. Jin was cramped up in the dark, not knowing where his father and brother went to hide. The only thing he could do was wait in that tiny space, where he tried to keep his trembling body from moving the lid or scratching the metal.

The ghosts were anything but quiet. They kicked over tables and stools. Jin heard the crackling sound made by the baskets he wove when army boots stomped through them and felt his body fill up with hate. But hate is fire and fear is ice. He was frozen solid at every step that neared the kitchen. He couldn't peek over the edge of the wok, but he could picture these ghosts. Their round helmet with the neck flap. Dirt colored uniform and brown leather belt. The little mustache in the center of their upper lips. Jin burrowed his chin into his chest and wished he could melt through the earth like piss through snow.

There were three voices in total. One was low like a growl, another was mostly silent, and the third was high pitched and boyish. The rustling moved from the far side of the house to the kitchen, where more clattering rang in Jin's ear. He tried

to guess what the soldiers broke by the sound but then tried to just shut his mind off. As they dragged out the burlap sacks of grains from a few feet away, Jin could hear his pulse echo inside the wok. He was breathing so hard he thought one of these breaths would blow the lid right off. But before he knew it the raid was over. The low voice gave a command and the steps fell away. Seconds later, the door opened, banged shut, and the house was quiet again.

Jin waited some more. He shifted his body and loosened his fingers that ached from clenching in the dark. Count to one hundred, he convinced himself. Heart rattling like a trapped animal, he began to reel out the numbers in his head, trying to be deliberate as not to rush.

At thirty he felt his toes tingle with pins and needles.

At fifty he let out a sigh.

At eighty he sensed a smile creeping on and quickly stiffened his face. The cocky ones were the first to die.

Yet it was impossible to stay steady. He breezed through the rest of the numbers. The ghosts were gone and the house remained standing. Jin lifted his chin and put a sweaty palm on the lid above him.

Suddenly a dog barked. He withdrew his hand and his elbow hit the side of the wok. Please. He bit his lip till he tasted metal. Please. Please. Please. The door banged open, footsteps returned, fast and some scraping along the floor. They closed in towards the kitchen. Please. Jin squeezed his eyes shut. He heard the boyish voice ask an unanswered question, then the door banged again, and this time a girl yelled. Jin recognized her voice.

The girl screamed and sobbed. Screamed and sobbed. Jin buried his face between his knees and covered his ears, his head, his neck, but it could not keep out the sounds. It bore right through the wooden lid like a thousand long nails being hammered inwards from every which way. Jin felt the wok fill up with her scream, the sharp points boring into his skull. He couldn't breathe, couldn't stop trembling and, when it had gone on for longer than he could bear, he jammed his fingers so deep into his ears that he wished he was deaf or even dead.

But the girl's cry never stopped. Even when the men's grunting did. Even when they slapped her so hard that the

sound had a wetness to it. Even when the men dragged her back out of the house, the door banging one last time, Jin could still hear her screaming all the way up the dirt road.

That night when his father and brother came back, they found him asleep in the wok. His father righted a stool and set him on it, then began to heat up water in the wok to boil yams.

“They didn’t burn down the house,” his brother said and collected the broken baskets.

“They killed Old Zhang’s youngest,” said his father.

Jin stared at the bed next to the stove and never breathed a word.

Behind the saguaro, in the line of sight along the broom handle, stood the neighbor’s house. Liyan said the house was on the market for nine months before she saw a young Mexican man park a Mercedes-Benz in the driveway. But that was all they knew. The curtains on the windows were always shut, though the lights go on at night. Liyan thought the property manager turn them on to discourage burglars.

The house was lower but wider than Liyan’s. It had the same style of a flat roof except with a large skylight. From where Jin stood, he could look through it and see the color of the wooden floor in the neighbor’s living room. He stared at it. Not a soul in there. Before he turned away, however, he noticed the edge of a shadow move under the skylight. With the broom still clamped under his arm, Jin cupped a hand over his brow and trained his eyes on the spot. The shadow passed again. Someone was certainly in that house. Jin stood as still as the saguaro until a part of a person came into view.

It was a couple. At first Jin couldn’t figure out what they were doing. For all the slow bobbing and tight embrace, Jin had almost turned away in embarrassment. But when more came into view, he saw they were no younger than himself. The man was short, had silver hair, and stooped on arthritic knees. He held a raisin of a woman in a large shawl with one hand on her upper back, and she wrapped a thin, twig-like arm around his waist. Their other hands were laced and tucked away between the clam shells of their hunched shoulders. Together, the old couple shuffled left and right,

slowly, carefully. As they moved their foreheads touched.

There were times they were out of sight, other times they rocked against one another beneath the skylight. Their bodies were stiff, they were not effortless, but they unfolded and refolded themselves gently like they were cradling a sleeping infant. One time the old man lifted their clutched hands towards the ceiling and the old woman, as though by instinct, spun like she was stamping out a small fire. Afterwards they both threw their heads back and laughed. Jin could not say why, but it was a sight that all but hollowed him. He stood there, mesmerized, though when he tried to imagine what their music sounded like he had no idea.

He put down the broom and peered once more at the mountains in the distance, the slow curvatures across the sky. Then his eyes rested on the saguaro. The bristled green figure frozen in a moment of capture. Is that how his wife sees him? A man in perpetual surrender. Is that who he has been? A fearful man?

The sun was the only thing in the sky when Jin climbed down the ladder and waddled down the sidewalk. He marched past the neighbor's thick creamy curtains without knowing where he was going. His feet carried him like an old horse that knew its way.

At first, he walked a mile. Then two more. Then he began to weary. He felt the pressure on his knees, his ankles, his back. He grew acutely aware of how flat-footed he was. It had been years since he last walked this far, but his bowed legs went on, one before the other, block after block. For the first time in a long time a stubbornness was building inside him. He was either doing or was going to do something and nobody was going to stop him. Jin puffed out a breath and took in his surroundings. It was a land strange and new.

When the main street ended, he took a smaller road. When the road ended, he took a footpath. The traffic thinned. There was no one ahead of him. The farther north he went the more he felt the incline of the earth rising to meet his sole, the world tilting against him. But he kept his pace. As his shadow caught up and began to wobble in front of him, he watched it grow long and thin, its head warped over time as though by

malnutrition. It looked like himself when he was a child, the child who walked from his village in Shanxi to Xi'an, fleeing his burnt home with nothing but a sheepskin on his bare back. The blisters on his feet, Jin recalled. He didn't feel them yet.

It had been a long time but the flesh remembers what the mind may forget. How to endure. How to keep moving. Even as a nine-year-old boy he knew the secret to surviving anything in life: patience. Patience turns time into an ally. It stokes but also tempers hope. It insulates, upholds, and metes out suffering in bearable bites. He wore that same expressionless face now that he wore sixty some years ago. Kept the same metronomic pace.

Step.

Step.

Step.

Step.

Steady drips of water that will pierce the stone.

Three hundred and seventy miles he travelled. One time when his knees buckled, an old man from his village dragged him up by his collar and said, spitting in his face, "our ancestors walked here from the Arabian desert. They walked the Silk Road from end to end." Then, clamping Jin's chin in his coarse grip, the old man twisted his face towards the mountains behind them and laughed insanely. "Those are their camels still making their way home."

Jin could still recall the giant rocky humps under the gray sky, one following the other, mossy in the morning mist. When he had finally reached the door of his prearranged bride's home, he looked up at his father-in-law and apologized.

"Sorry I came early."

The Arizona sun hung at the edge of the world. Jin could not tell how far he had walked or for how long. As the sun ducked behind the horizon, for a shrinking moment, he saw the vast mottled desert around him. Rocky slopes staked with grand saguaros. Ground dotted with chollas and broken sandstone. The half-moon, pale only seconds ago, began to brighten in the sky.

Jin stopped. He breathed in and let it out slow. As he closed his eyes he became nine years old again, inside the mountains, inside the wok, inside that lice-infested sheepskin outside her

door. A feeble fist poised to knock.

Xia climbed the trembling ladder. She managed one rung at a time, pausing in the middle.

The saguaro watched as she called Jin's name over the edge of the roof and then, turning to the street, found his waddling figure in the distance. It watched as she went after him, one trailing the other like a pair of sandhill cranes heading north in the spring.

Xia hurried along the sidewalk with her eyes on her husband. She has never seen him do anything like this. She was afraid for him but was also afraid of what she might find when she caught up. Vacant eyes? A vacant mind? She has heard stories about women her age waking up one morning and finding their husbands unable to speak or unable to remember. Then you have to start a new life. You have to learn to care for a stranger in your own home.

She tried to read the cues in his movement, guessing at the diagnosis. Though much has changed in old age, she could still recognize the child in him—the child she met at her doorstep, standing next to her father. There's always some sustaining feature in a man that, if you look back in photographs taken decades earlier, you can find in the child. For Jin it was the way he swung his arms. Always a tad too vigorously. She remembered telling her mother in confidence that he looked like a cow with two tails, constantly swatting the flies on his behind. And there were indeed flies the way he showed up at their door. Matted hair, smeared face. She still remembered the wild way he tore at the steamed buns with his teeth.

She couldn't believe she had to marry him, but her father's word was the law, and his promise to a dead man meant that it was a promise without reprieve. She watched him from afar. He did everything he was told and did it with womanly care. He learned carpentry, then taught himself how to read. When her mother asked him about his family, he named the crops they used to grow. When her father asked about the Japanese, he said he'd always run off to the mountains before they arrived.

They've had a steady, stable life. He was never lazy, never shirked his duties. By all measures he was a good man, but

there was a silence in him that muted the colors of life. And she saw it in her children. They lived without gusto. When the sun began to set, Xia hurried even more. She was tired, and as she raced against his waddling figure, anger fluttered inside her like a gas stove being ignited. She did not want to marry him. Though that seemed a millennium ago, that was the truth and still is. Her sister chose her husband. Her cousins chose theirs. But she was the oldest and the communists hadn't shattered the traditions yet.

The faster she walked the brighter her anger burned. What did it matter he was a dutiful husband? What did it matter he worked hard and never cheated? Or that their marriage was peaceful even through wartimes?

He never gave her joy. Is that so much to ask for?

She looked at the desert around her. In the failing light, the calm beauty of desolation enveloped her but it did not quiet the roiling inside. She looked at him, his arms swinging too far back with each step, and all of a sudden she wanted to chase up and scream and hit him in the face. The thought of caring for him for the rest of his days irked her. She did not owe him that, even if he was a good man, even if he had done right by her. She didn't owe anybody that. Yet she knew she could not leave him if he were lost and broken. What timing, the bastard.

The desert wind began to pick up. Her hair whipped about her face like flames. When she saw him stop she began to run and as she did she thought of things that hadn't come into her mind for years. The intense jealousy she felt towards her daughter when she boarded the train to go to college. All the times she wrote Liyan, telling her not to be homesick, telling her to see the world while she can. And when Liyan said she wanted to leave the country for a post-doctoral position and Jin told her to reconsider, of course he was only worried for his daughter's safety, but by God she could've murdered him right then.

When she finally reached him she was breathless. Sweat streamed down her face and stung her eyes. She almost fell at the moment she gasped his name. Jin turned around. His wife was no more than ten feet behind him, hands on her knees, gasping for air.

“Have you lost your mind,” he cried as he rushed over.

She hung onto his shoulder, still hating him, and lowered herself to the ground, the heaving of her chest like the uncontrollable sobs of a child. He sat down next to her. As she finally raised her eyes, she saw the man-like saguaros standing all around them, tall and stoic beneath the night that billowed in the wind like a colossal tent, the starlight shimmering like rips and tears in the canvass. The giants of antiquity. What did they dream of? Whom did they love?

She looked past his face and sighed at how far they had come, the city lights stretching all the way out.

He pointed over her shoulder.

“Someone once told me that before mountains were mountains they were camels returning to their home.”

She turned her head. The fool had never seen a camel in his life. But when her eyes traced along his arm, she saw the silhouette of the rounded peaks far in the distance like a caravan of dromedaries travelling westwards to the sea.

Given a hundred thousand years more, they may reach it yet.

Judith Colp Rubin

The Crossing

The delay was almost an hour. The absence of air conditioning, or any kind of ventilation, combined with the menopausal heat to stain Mira's T-shirt. She drank mineral water from a large bottle and felt the downward flow pressing against her bladder. But she didn't think you were supposed to use the toilet if the train was lodged in the station. Outside, train after train pulled away for destinations unknown. Norm would have gotten off long ago after complaining about Italy's failed economy, the validity of ethnic stereotypes, and the folly of romanticized travel. She would have followed him.

Now she stayed put. The face to face blue vinyl seats, sticky from the heat, seated four passengers. They unfolded into a bed and above each one was another bed. When she had booked a so-called *courette*, Mira had imagined the compartment attaining a slumber party atmosphere. That she was the sole occupant—the train was nonstop—made her feel foolish and lonely. Maybe she should have asked Ben to accompany her. But she hadn't wanted to bring him as her escort for the wedding. Besides, she liked the idea of traveling amongst strangers, of being alone but not actually alone.

Mira tried to get interested in reading from her frayed copy of *The Odyssey*. But a headache made it impossible to concentrate. She took out some postcards purchased at the station. One showed a photo of the enlarged front of a gleaming Trenitalia train rambling down a track as if it were about to crash into the viewer. She scrawled a message on the back: "Sitting on the night train bound for Sicily." She then wrote her home address. Sending a postcard to herself was an old habit. As a teenager when she received a postcard of a sun setting over pristine water, she was reminded of the best parts of that trip to the Bahamas, not the fight with her sister or the jellyfish sting.

Another half hour passed. Finally, without warning, the train jerked forward. The electricity snapped on and cool air flowed into the compartment. The train departed the

station slowly, like a runner getting his footing, and then increased speed until it settled into a steady rocking motion. Through the encroaching darkness, Mira made out sooty and crumbling buildings, patches of weeds littered with empty pasta boxes, bottles, plastic bags. Gone was the elegance of the Spanish Steps, the designer stores lining the Via Condotti and the tiered grandeur of the Coliseum. Now, there was just the uniform ugliness of poverty.

Sliding open the door, she treaded along the rumbling corridor to the toilet. Behind the other compartment doors were ebony-skinned, lanky Africans in colorful prints, women in *hijab* and shapeless long dress coats, or hard-faced children toting enormous bags that engulfed them.

How far this all seemed from the Italy she'd fallen in love with almost 40 years ago. Back then the country was filled with young men in tight pants with hair black as shoe polish, all looking like Al Pacino. Women tottered on spiky high heels with gold crucifixes bouncing around their exposed cleavage. That was summer following her freshman year in college when heartache—an unexpected break-up with Howard, the pre-Med she was dating—prompted Mira to buy an unlimited Eurail pass which took her all over the continent. She met her counterparts from around the world: Australians on leisurely seven-month tours of the continent; Germans outfitted with sturdy sandals and so-called rucksacks who were efficient and thrifty; Iranians who had fled the revolution and were living as refugees in Paris or Turkey wondering if they would ever be able to return home.

Mira traveled solo with no set itinerary. She loved the freedom of jumping spontaneously from country to country. And she let herself go sexually on that trip, sleeping with several men, including those she never would have considered back home such as the high school dropout turned U.S. soldier stationed in Heidelberg. This was the age before AIDS. The most to be feared was getting pregnant or a bad reputation. But she was on the pill and no one had a reputation while traveling.

Only once had it been scary. She had been on a night train somewhere in Spain when a middle-aged Frenchman seated next to her started rubbing her thigh. She bolted up and

ran into the café car where she spent the rest of a sleepless night. But a few days later she had flirted with a good-looking Israeli on a train in France and had had sex with him in the bathroom. It was fun to feel desired, come together and then separate. Never before, or since, had comings and goings been so easy.

The toilet was filthy. Others had clearly not waited until the train moved. Mira willed herself not to look into the hole as she enjoyed the relief of uncorked pressure. When she returned to the compartment, she found she was no longer alone. There was a young man sitting opposite her seat, having apparently spent the delay elsewhere. He was slight, wearing frayed jeans and a simple blue T-shirt. Around his plastic sandaled feet was an oversized and overstuffed nylon bag with holes crudely patched over with tape. He looked to be in his mid to late-20s, younger than her only child. His face had that unblemished look of youth coated with a soft olive sheen—darker than most Italians—with the faint outline of a mustache. Thick dark hair fell into his eyes; if she was his mother she would have told him to get a haircut. There was a weathered look about his appearance as if he had experienced life beyond his years.

Mira smiled at him in greeting. He nodded wordlessly. But did she detect curiosity? She wasn't sure as he turned toward the window, although there was nothing to see because of the darkness. They might have been anywhere, even on the Metro.

With her headache now gone, Mira opened *The Odyssey*. At the private school where she taught English she had successfully fought to get the classic once again included in the ninth-grade syllabus. She believed that teenagers should be pushed to come out of their comfort zone with books.

The young man looked with interest at the book's cover showing a drawing of ancient Greek warriors armed with shields, arrows, and swords; fallen soldiers splayed around their feet. When Mira's eyes caught him, he turned toward the window again. She put down her book. She had always been good at making small talk with strangers, although Norm had discouraged it.

"Do you speak English?" Mira asked.

He smiled widely as if she'd opened the right door.

"Yes, yes, I speak English."

"Are you Italian?"

"I am Albanian. And you, where are you from? England?"

"No, the United States."

"The United States of America?" His voice rose even more in obvious appreciation.

"That's right."

"Oh, this is a wonderful country, best country."

"Thank you," said Mira, unsure how else to respond.

"Which part? Which part of America, please?"

"Washington, D.C."

"The capital. Most important place in most important country."

She felt personally complimented. "My name is Mira. What's yours?"

He straightened up as if making a formal presentation. "My name is Ardit."

"Does that name have a meaning in your language?"

"Yes, golden day."

"How lovely."

The compartment door opened, and the conductor staggered into the compartment. He towered over them, reeking of cigarettes and impatience.

"*Biglietti*," the conductor said.

Mira realized that she'd forgotten to remove her ticket from the money pouch hidden under her shirt. She could imagine Norm sneering at her rookie mistake in security. As she tried to discretely fish out the pouch the conductor's eyes passed over her body. After he made holes in her ticket, the conductor turned to Ardit who got to his feet and reached into his jeans pocket, revealing a swatch of downy bare skin but no ticket. Ardit spent several seconds searching his pockets but still came up empty-handed. Mira saw the conductor glaring at him with visible impatience. Finally, to her relief, Ardit produced a crumpled ticket. Wordlessly, but still clearly sneering, the conductor scrutinized it and then punched the holes. Then the conductor turned toward Mira.

"Madame, you want me help you sleep?"

"Excuse me?" Was he propositioning her? Here? Now?

“Private sleeper. I get you one. 70 Euros. You want?”

“Oh no, that won’t be necessary,” she said, feeling foolish at her misunderstanding. “I’m quite comfortable here.”

“Private cabin better, no?”

She shook her head again, annoyed at his persistence. The conductor shrugged, perhaps assuming she couldn’t afford it even though her money pouch bulged with Euros. But she was not taking this trip just to be sequestered in a private cabin.

The conductor slid open the compartment door and it clanged shut behind him. Mira reattached her money belt under her shirt.

“Goodness, he wasn’t very friendly,” Mira said.

“Italians, they don’t like Albanians. He feel, how do you say, he feel he must protect you.”

How absurd that anyone would think she looked like a woman who needed protecting.

“Where did you learn to speak English?” she asked.

“I study in university.”

“What did you study?”

“Engineering.”

“Do you work as an engineer?”

“No, not possible in Italy. Please, may I ask? You come to Italy for holiday?”

“In a way. I’m going to a wedding.”

“Wedding? You have Italian friends?”

“No, my son is getting married.”

“He marry Italian?”

How did one explain to this young Albanian the concept of a destination wedding? Aaron had insisted it was both his and Serena’s idea. But Mira suspected her future daughter-in-law had talked her son into it. She had wanted to like Serena, whom Aaron had met less than six months ago at some party. But Serena wanted an oversized engagement ring and a down payment on a McMansion in Potomac which Mira knew was beyond their means. Neither Serena nor her parents talked about anything except material things. Dislike of Serena was one of the few subjects she and Norm had ever agreed upon so fully. Both knew, in that heartbreaking way parents know, that their only child’s pending marriage was doomed.

“His future wife is American, but she thought it would be

fun to marry in Sicily.”

“Please, may I ask? Why you take train to Sicily? Better for you, I think, to take airplane.”

Others had said the same. Ben had emailed her several articles describing the horrible conditions of the Rome to Palermo train. Serena had expressed concern, albeit not to her directly, that Mira wouldn't be able to sleep on the train and look “haggard” in the wedding photos. Norm had put it the most bluntly: “What middle-aged and middle-class American woman in her right mind takes a 13-hour night train?”

Several years ago, during a trip she hoped would revive their sinking marriage, she suggested taking the night train from Paris to Nice. Norm, the economist, lectured her about the illogicalness of train travel during the age of airline deregularization. When she said that trains were romantic and exciting, Norm rolled his eyes. “There's nothing romantic or exciting about wasted time,” he said.

Only Aaron had understood why she wanted to take this train trip.

“Sounds like fun,” he said.

She thought there was a wistfulness in his voice.

“Come with me,” she said.

He laughed. “Serena would kill me.”

When Aaron was a preteen she had taken him on a road trip during spring break while Norm was abroad. They visited Civil War battlefields and small towns where people spoke with thick accents. Once they ate at a diner with knotty pine wall paneling and a most curious installation hanging upside from the ceiling: a circular table set for a meal alongside two hard-backed chairs. She and Aaron had both found delightful this mirror image of where they were eating.

When she called Norm that evening to tell him about the diner, he seemed uninterested. Then she said they would drive all the way to Charleston, South Carolina. He argued that it was “a bit much” and tried to talk her out of it. After she got off the phone, Mira decided to drive there anyway. But when they reached the North Carolina border she suddenly panicked and turned around.

She first heard about the Rome-Palermo train journey from

Gabriele, one of the owners of the Pines of Rome, a longtime favorite restaurant. Gabriele had once described how, many years ago as a young Sicilian, he had waited 18 hours to purchase a one-way train ticket to Rome where there were lucrative factory jobs available. Having scored that magic ticket, he put on his heaviest coat, sure it would be freezing in Rome, even though it was July.

“I never forget that crossing,” Gabriele said.

The route was the last place in the world where passenger trains were still put aboard ships to pass through the Straits of Messina. Mira, intrigued by the concept, did some online research. She was delighted to learn of a coincidental literary allusion which further seemed to justify taking the trip. The strait’s turbulent waters were symbolized by Scylla and Charybdis, mythical sea monsters from *The Odyssey*. Navigating past the monsters threatening from both sides was one of the many challenges facing Odysseus in his return home. Mira planned to take a video of the crossing on her new iPhone to show her class when they discussed the book.

“And you? Are you going home?” Mira asked Ardit.

“I go to Sicily.”

He didn’t volunteer whether that was home. Mira suspected the answer was complicated. Mira knew little about Albania, except that it wasn’t a country where you wanted to be from. Vaguely, she remembered once reading an article about the sinking of a boat of Albanian refugees trying to make it to Italy. Or was she confusing that with a story about a boat with refugees from Central America headed to the U.S.?

As the train sped through the darkness Ardit asked Mira question after question about the United States: Did she eat meat at every meal? How many cars did she have? Had she ever met the president? How much money did people in America make? What did Americans think about immigrants?

She couldn’t recall ever having met any foreigner so curious about her own country. These days, foreigners felt they knew everything about America, much of it negative. Trashing America had become disturbingly trendy. A British guest she was chatting with at breakfast in her Rome hotel allowed herself a snide remark about the “incompetent” U.S. president. She had seen red graffiti splayed in the station:

“Fuck USA.”

“One day you must visit America, Ardit,” she said.

“Difficult, I think.”

“Maybe I can help.”

How foolish she was. What could she do to help Ardit? She didn't have connections in getting visas and even if he could somehow get a visa he would likely never afford to travel to the U.S. She imagined he dreamed of many things that would never happen. Meanwhile, her friends had bucket lists of adventures that they could feel confident of achieving such as parachuting, going on an African safari or hiking in the Himalayas.

She had questions of her own for Ardit: How and when had he come to Italy? How did he support himself? Where was his family? Why was he even on this train? But Ardit answered all the questions vaguely and then immediately asked her another question. He wouldn't share any details about his life.

When Mira reached for a package of Biscotti from her carry-on bag, eager to offer him something to eat, her Michelin map of Italy fell out. Her misdirection was a family joke. Once, after they first moved to Washington, D.C., she directed Norm the wrong way on the George Washington Parkway. They missed an exit and ended up at the CIA and then in Anacostia. “Mira almost got us killed, twice,” Norm said when he told people the story.

“Ah you have map. Please may I see?”

“Let's look at it together.”

He moved over to sit next to her. He smelled earthy and sweaty, like a freshly mowed field. How often did he have access to hot water? Did he ever floss his teeth? Outside, the landscape of the world's most famous boot whirled past invisible in the blackness, like a film reel flapping on an old projector. Ardit asked her the time and when she consulted her phone and told him, he knew exactly where they were. Surely, he had taken this trip many times before.

“We leave Amalfi Coast. Now we go Salerno, then we arrive Cosenza.”

Mira loved the sounds of those names. Perhaps those were places to visit one day. Maybe she would even get a Eurail

pass and repeat the trip across the continent from so long ago.

Ardit scraped a chipped and dirty fingernail against the speck of blue on the boot's shaft: The Straits of Messina.

"So small. I think we can swim," he said.

Mira tapped *The Odyssey* and explained how perilous it was for Odysseus crossing the Straits. He was advised by travelers to avoid Charybdis, a lethal whirlpool that could suck in all his men at once. Instead he passed by another monster, Scylla, who scooped up six of his men.

"Imagine them in the monster's mouths, their head and feet kicking in the air," said Mira dramatically. "They call out 'Odysseus, Odysseus,' one last time. But it's too late. Odysseus calls it the most horrid sight that he saw up until then in all his travels. But, unfortunately, there would be many others."

She paused. Being pedantic was an occupational hazard. But Ardit seemed interested in the story. He said the book reminded him of an Albanian saga which he described as a "long, long poem" about warriors and *zanas*, spirits who live near springs, and vampire-like creatures known as *lugats* and *drangues*. There probably wasn't a country in the world without its own version of *The Odyssey*, a point she should make in class.

"I would like to read your book," said Ardit.

Mira's copy of *The Odyssey* was marked up with her notes. But maybe getting a new copy would spark some fresh ideas. It would surely mean so much to this man to give him such a present. She extended the book to him.

"Please take this. It's not an easy read, but it's worthwhile. I think you will enjoy it."

He held up his hands as if surrendering. "Please, I cannot accept such a generous gift."

"You can, and you will."

He placed the flat of his hand on his chest. "Thank you."

He stuffed the book into his lumpy plastic bag and then inspected the map again.

"They must, I think, build a bridge over this water," Ardit said. "Job for good engineer."

"It will take more than a good engineer, I'm afraid."

Mira knew from her research that Silvio Berlusconi, the

controversial former Italian prime minister, had wanted to build what would be the world's longest suspension bridge. But the plan had been spiked and was unlikely to be revived. Building a bridge was too expensive, harmful to the environment and vulnerable in an earthquake. But an underlying reason, and perhaps the major one, was that mainland Italians didn't want to be so easily accessible from Sicily, synonymous with poverty and the Mafia.

"It's incredible to think they're going to put this entire train on a ship without us even having to move," she said. "Have you ever seen it?"

"We will go together to see, yes?"

"That sounds good."

Mira produced some Trader Joe's granola bars which Ardit examined like objects from another galaxy and then appreciatively ate one. She helped him read the information on the packet. He'd never get through *The Odyssey*, but he could still enjoy owning the book. She then suggested it was probably a good idea to get some sleep since they'd be waking up in a few hours to see the crossing.

"Somehow these seats turn into a bed," she said. "Let's call the conductor to help us."

"No. I do."

He stood up and moved toward Mira. With a quick movement, he flipped over first her seat and then his, so they were transformed into side by side beds.

"Please," he patted the bed. "For you."

Then he stretched out on his bed and she slid onto the bed facing him covering herself with a blanket she had brought for the occasion. He motioned toward the compartment door.

"I lock?"

Why should the door be locked? There seemed no reason.

"Let's leave it open."

He shrugged and reached to turn out the light. How strange to sleep in this compartment alongside this young man, as if they were intimate. The churning of the train's wheels felt warm and sedating, like being rocked by one's mother.

"Mira, may I ask question?"

"Yes, Ardit."

"Why you have no husband?"

“I had one. We divorced.”

“He must be sad without you.”

That was a joke. “Not exactly. We didn’t get along.”

“He is stupid man. I do not like him. Now you have boyfriend?”

The frankness of the question surprised her. But she thought about how to answer. Ben considered himself her boyfriend. But sometimes she wanted someone, as she told a friend, that would make her heart pound more with desire. A friend had joked that at their age, a pounding heart was a sign of an imminent heart attack.

Still, Mira kept up her online dating profile. She sometimes received flirtatious messages from men, although many of them were 10 and even 20 years younger than her. The first time she received such a message she thought that perhaps all that exercise and careful eating had paid off. Then she learned that such solicitations were common among women her age who were perceived as easy lays and potential sugar mommies. In contrast, most men her age wanted someone younger.

“I have a boyfriend. But what about you, Ardit? Where’s your family? In Albania? In Italy?”

“There is no family.”

“Your parents?”

“Dead.”

“I am so, so sorry. Has it been a long time?”

He yawned. “I sleep now.”

Mira lay awake listening to this young man’s gentle snoring as colorful images flashed through her head: The simple grandeur of the White House which all visitors said looked smaller than on TV; Lincoln’s graceful but almost sad visage overlooking the Tidal Basin where Martin Luther King told of his dream; the sparkling of the Potomac in spring. She imagined Ardit taking in everything, determined not to miss anything the city had to offer. Why couldn’t she do this? She would somehow help Ardit get a visa and then buy him an airplane ticket. He could sleep in her guestroom. She’d make him breakfast, hand him fresh towels for his shower and take him out for Thai food and a jazz brunch in Adam’s Morgan. It wouldn’t be unprecedented. Soon after the divorce, she

agreed to let one of Aaron's college friends stay for a week while he was doing a training program in Washington. The visit had been fine except for an embarrassing moment when the friend barged into the bathroom while she was taking a bath. She had learned to be more careful and lock the door.

The next thing Mira knew she was being jarred awake by Ardit sitting on her bed. He placed a finger on her lips and then into her mouth where he probed her teeth. Then he kissed her, his tongue lashing around her mouth with a sloppy ferocity. She struggled to get up, but he held her down. He unbuttoned her shirt, removed her bra and sucked on her breasts before pulling down her pants and unhooking her money belt. Everything fell in a heap on the floor.

Mira was aware of how she could try pulling him off. She was aware of how she could cry out. But mostly she was aware that his sweaty scent was nicer than Ben's old age odor and that he wanted her. Ardit unzipped his pants and, along with his jockey shorts, pulled them to his knees. Discreetly almost, he covered them both with her blanket and then roughly entered her. His erection, full and insistent, was so different from Ben's flaccid one. She felt herself churning through a whirlpool mimicking the train's motion. It was a roller coaster ride, equal measures terrifying and thrilling, as it sped towards its destination. She reached the end first and then he joined her with a loud grunt.

Ardit rose and reached for his jockey shorts. She saw now that the waist band was shredding and were several holes in the posterior. After he put on his pants, Ardit dealt with Mira's money belt. He removed the entire stash of Euros, U.S. dollars and several credit cards. He also took her new phone which was pushed into the side of the bed where she was still lying. But he didn't touch her passport. If he had, he would have found her debit card. She watched him stuff her items into his bag. She did and said nothing.

Finally, he opened the compartment and slipped into the darkness. Mira rose herself and dressed quickly with trembling hands. She accidentally tripped on something: the discarded copy of *The Odyssey*. The ridiculousness of her gift felt almost as painful as what had just happened.

She was desperate to go to the toilet and wash herself, but

she didn't want to go outside. She couldn't face the possibility that she might see Ardit or someone who could have seen them.

Mira lay on her side in the bed in the fetal position. The train's movement reminded her of her orgasm which led to thoughts about AIDS and other STDs. When she returned home she would have to visit her longtime gynecologist and request blood tests. It was too embarrassing and frightening to contemplate.

Mira wasn't sure how long she lay there when the train's rocking abruptly ceased. The train groaned and creaked as if it had become a monster or was in the mouth of one. There was a curious sensation of the car being lifted. This was surely the sign: They had reached San Giovanni, where the train was shunted in half as it was put onto the ferry. Mira rose. She hadn't come so far to miss seeing the crossing.

There was a festive atmosphere in the corridor as bleary-eyed, but animated passengers moved forward, guided by the same conductor who had taken her ticket.

"You are okay, madam?" he asked her.

He seemed to be looking at her strangely. Did he know what had happened? She thought of him sneering at Ardit and how easily she could send him to jail or get him deported.

"Everything is fine," she said hastily.

A stepladder materialized, and Mira joined the others climbing it. They were now on the deck of a boat. The air was crisp with a tang of salt, and the sky was a pinkish mauve reminiscent of that lovely refrain from *The Odyssey*: "rosy-fingered dawn." The water looked inky black and turbulent, enough to believe in the presence of monsters.

A man with a thermos hawked espresso for a single Euro, but she couldn't even afford that. The other passengers took photos and videos, like the ones she imagined displaying on the overhead screen in her classroom as she read from the text:

"Thus, we sailed up the straits, wailing in terror, for on the one side we had Scylla, and on the other the awesome Charybdis sucked down the salt water in her dreadful way."

Would this be the last time she would have a thundering orgasm like that? Probably, if she stayed with Ben. And yet

perhaps there was a chance for something different.

The ship tossed about, yet easily sliced through the strait's choppy currents. There were many photos and videos online of the crossing which she could show to her students. No one would know she had not taken them. She could afford to lose the cash and could cancel the credit card. Even the iPhone could be easily replaced, possibly at the train station in Palermo when she used her debit card to withdraw money. Such was the advantage of globalization.

Hopefully, with the stolen money Ardit would get himself some decent clothes or pay rent or buy food. She would take a taxi to the hotel and insist on spending time alone with Aaron. She would make sure that he wanted to go through with this wedding. If he was she would apply extra make-up to conceal the rings under her eyes and smile for the photos.

Then she would return home—by airplane now—and immerse herself in lesson plans. She would get several blood tests and tell Ben she needed a break. She would then plan another trip abroad because everyone needs a future trip in their lives.

In a few weeks, she'd get the postcard which she would stick in the drawer of her nightstand and never look at again.

Rebecca Dean

Forgotten Dreams

On his first night in the apartment, Petra served Hassan tea a man at the Middle Eastern grocery store on Sonnenallee had picked out for her. She wore a baggy cable knit sweater with a small hole on the left shoulder, both cuffs slightly frayed. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, exposing the gray mixed in with the ash blonde.

“I hope you’ll be comfortable here,” she said in English. She tore the paper from the tea bag into little pieces, the shreds with Arabic writing on them falling like snow onto her lap. Hassan looked thinner than in the pictures on Facebook. He had a boyish face and a small, heart-shaped scar above his left eyebrow.

“I’m sorry, you must be tired,” Petra said when the pot was nearly empty. What was she thinking, talking the poor boy’s ear off?

“No, no. But my German class starts early tomorrow.”

Petra blushed. “Of course.”

She showed Hassan to Teresa’s room, handed him two towels and a wash cloth and left him alone. By nine he was already in bed, asleep under Teresa’s pink and blue striped comforter.

Teresa didn’t approve of Hassan. She called Petra from Munich as soon as she heard about her plans.

“Mom, you can’t have a Syrian man living alone with you in the apartment. You know what their culture is like.”

Petra sighed. She’d sent her daughter to a Steiner school with an urban apple orchard and classes on interpretive dance, her holidays spent on Bavarian farms, petting goats and milking cows. But Teresa preferred gray flannel and pearls earrings to batik and Acai beads. She wanted to be a lawyer like Petra but planned to specialize in corporate law. The kind of law that makes you money.

“He’s not a man. He’s a year younger than you are.”

Petra had been lonely since Teresa left to study in Munich. If nothing else, Hassan would be someone to come home to.

The language school's registration office where Hassan had been assigned his German integration course was in a once-stately building on Motzstraße. The massive wooden doors at the entrance were now covered in tags.

"This is it," Petra said. She had a morning court appointment, her clients a group of Bulgarians who'd broken into a clothing donation bin in Moabit. Her high-heeled footsteps echoed on the chipped marble stairs covered in worn red hemp carpeting while Hassan trailed behind her.

At least forty people were waiting in the registration office, all ages and shades of skin, their heads covered in everything from baseball caps to kufi to hijab in a rainbow of colors. The school registrar, an older German woman, sat behind two towering house plants. "*Es ist mir egal, ob Sie kaum Deutsch können, Sie müssen den Test trotzdem machen,*" the woman yelled at a tall African in a white collared shirt. She pushed a stack of papers at him while the man shook his head, his hands in the air.

Petra looked at her watch. "I'm sorry, I have to go. Are you ok?"

"I'm fine."

The registrar was now scowling at an Asian woman holding a small child in her arms. Poor Hassan. Who knew how long he'd have to wait until the woman yelled at him in a language he couldn't understand. "You're sure you'll be ok?"

"I'm sure." Hassan looked so determined, she believed him.

On the weekends, Petra took Hassan around Berlin. In Grunewald, they saw a wild boar in the forest by the sand pit, the boar so close they could smell its musky stench. They circled the World Time Clock on Alexanderplatz, where Hassan took a picture of Petra standing under the current time in London, Lisbon, Casa Blanca. She squinted in the photo, her shoulders slouching, and her head slightly bowed, as though she were in a room with ceilings not tall enough to support her height. She wondered what they looked like together, a middle-aged German woman with boyish hips and a twenty-year-old Syrian with a similar build, his serious eyes the color of sandalwood.

It had just stopped raining when they hopped on the double

decker Bus 100 at *Zoolgischer Garten*. They climbed the steep, spiraling stairs to the upper level where they snagged two seats by the window at the front. The floor and the seats vibrated underneath them while Charlottenburg rushed by outside, the white, ornate buildings like rows of wedding cakes. “We’ll get off at *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*,” Petra said.

Most locals stayed downstairs in the double decker buses, but kids and tourists loved to sit at the top. Petra used to sit up here with Teresa when she was small, her daughter pretending the rail in the front was a steering wheel and she was the bus driver. An Italian woman was sitting in the seat Teresa had always wanted, holding a fussy baby in her lap.

“Berliners call *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* the *schwangere Auster*, the pregnant oyster. The building has a very unusual shape, you’ll see.”

Hassan didn’t say anything. He was watching the Italian woman and her baby. The baby had a rash on its cheeks. It kicked and whined while the mother rocked it, singing a lullaby in Italian.

When the baby cried louder, the woman sitting behind them started to complain. “*Wie kann man mit so einem Kind in einen Bus steigen? Unmöglich, diese Touristen.*”

Stupid woman. Petra was glad Hassan couldn’t understand her. The baby was screaming louder, its entire face now red. The mother continued to sing and rock, but the baby wouldn’t be comforted. When the bus barreled past Brandenburg Gate, the child was finally quiet. A few seconds later it threw up all over the window, the milky puke pooling over the driver’s top mirror.

The driver slammed on his brakes; the passengers lurched forward.

“*Wir fahren nicht weiter bis jemand meinen Spiegel reinigt,*” bellowed the bus driver from his seat below. “*Wir fahren nicht weiter!*”

“*Tja, was hab’ ich gesagt?*” said the woman behind them.

The Italian woman looked at Petra and Hassan, her baby limp and whimpering in her arms. “What’s happened? Why has the bus stopped?”

“The driver said you have to clean up your child’s mess

or he won't drive," Petra told her. "It's blocking the upstairs mirror."

The woman lay her baby down on the seat and started rummaging through her diaper bag; she was trying hard not to cry. Hassan stood up.

"Please, sit down. I will clean it." He took off his sweatshirt and wiped up the vomit, while the woman sat in her seat, cradling her baby's head. When he was finished, he helped her put her baby in the carrier strapped to her chest. "Thank you so much," she said. The bus drove on.

Hassan sat down again next to Petra, his sweatshirt balled up on his lap, smelling like sour milk.

They had coffee and cake on the veranda of the café in *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*. Hassan washed out his sweatshirt in the bathroom and hung it to dry on the back of one of the chairs at their table facing the Spree River.

"Would you prefer to go inside?" Petra asked. "You must be cold."

"It's fine. I like looking at the water."

They sat a few minutes in silence, the pigeons gathering at their feet, bobbing their heads and begging for crumbs.

"That was a kind thing you did for the woman on the bus."

Hassan poured sugar into his coffee and stirred. "She needed help."

Petra had done a weekend training course with the organization who arranged the home stay on how to deal with trauma: Let them talk if they need to but call us if you're getting overwhelmed. But Hassan didn't want to talk about what he'd been through. He told her a little about his family. His father, a doctor, had been killed in an airstrike in Damascus and his mother and younger sister were at a camp in Lebanon. He never talked about his journey, and Petra never asked him any questions.

But Hassan did talk a lot about music. In Syria, before the war started, he had been preparing for the entrance exams to the Higher Institute of Music. When his German was good enough, he wanted to study guitar and composition at the conservatory in Berlin, or some other city in Germany. Petra told the organization and they gave him a guitar someone

had donated. The guitar had a deep scratch down its side and wasn't the best quality to begin with, but he was happy to have it.

But Hassan's true love was the Oud. "In the Oud is a universe of sound," he told her. Petra googled Oud and found pictures of an instrument that looked exactly like the lute flung over the shoulder of a minstrel in a Renaissance tapestry.

They shared a pot of Syrian tea in the kitchen while Hassan played her songs by his idol, the Oud player Adnaan Baraky. The Oud's sound reminded Petra of a more sonorous harpsichord.

"This one is my favorite." Hassan put on Baraky's song *Forgotten Dreams*. *Forgotten Dreams* started slow, almost maudlin, like a poet with a broken heart, a Werther relishing in his suffering. The song changed a minute later, the new sound strange and magical. Petra imagined the poet's surprise when a genie suddenly rose out of his bottle of wine. The song switched from Goethe to Karl May, the Oud sounding like a banjo in a western get-away scene, a love story told on horseback, drunk cowboys starting a fight before bursting into a fit of laughter, a line of can-can girls closing out the dream someone somewhere had forgotten.

She poured Hassan another cup of tea, the rising steam billowing into scrolls. "My father gave me an Oud made of rosewood, with beautiful inlays of mother of pearl. I left it at my grandmother's house. Who knows where it is now."

The weeks flew by. When Petra came home from work, Hassan was sitting at the table with his German grammar books, ploughing through accusative, digging into dative, delving into declination. He tried to talk to her in German while she cooked dinner, but usually got frustrated and switched back to English. He stayed up late most nights, practicing the guitar on the sofa in Teresa's bedroom.

One day, when he came home from school, Petra surprised him with an Oud, a yellow ribbon tied around its neck. Hassan shook his head. "No, this is too much." She told him someone had donated it to the organization like the guitar, and they had thought of him. He sat down and started to play, turning away from her so she wouldn't see him cry.

But Petra lied. She bought the Oud herself and paid almost six hundred euros for it. She bought it because she couldn't get him out of her head.

Before her accidental fall into celibacy, Petra had slept with a total of nine men. The list started with Tilo, her boyfriend in *Gymnasium*, a red-haired, semi-professional tennis player everyone called Baby Boris. On a class trip to Hamburg they'd slipped away and had sex against the exposed bricks under a bridge on the Elbe, inspired by the peepshows they'd walked past on the Reeperbahn. The others were spaced out unequally between university and her late thirties, the most important being Alejandro, not because of the length or depth of the relationship, but because he got her pregnant.

Petra met Alejandro in the Pyrenees on the Way of Saint James, both determined to walk all the way to Santiago de Compostela. Alejandro had a deep voice and broad hands. He liked to quote Coehlo and recite poems, many of them his own. In the evenings they checked into one of the *albergues* where they stayed up late, drinking cheap Rioja in the common room. They slept together for the first time in their fourth *albergue*, trying to be quiet so they wouldn't wake up the person sleeping on the bottom bunk. One night they splurged and got a private room with a sloped ceiling and exposed beams, the headboard of the queen-sized bed made of twisted ornate wrought iron, the bathroom decorated with scallop shells pressed into the tiles.

Neither of them made it to Santiago.

Alejandro moved to Berlin shortly after Teresa was born. Since he didn't speak German, he stayed at home with the baby while Petra went back to work. But, poetry and ponytail aside, Alejandro was an incurable macho. Petra would come home from work, completely exhausted, only to find him vegged out on the couch, his t-shirt flecked with pizza stains, watching television he could barely understand. He'd feed Teresa, but forget to change her diaper, leave stacks of dishes in the sink and piles of laundry on the bed. No matter how much they fought, he couldn't understand why Petra didn't want to come home and cook him dinner. He moved back to

Madrid when Teresa was six months old.

Three of the nine came after Alejandro, but each time things fizzled out fast. Teresa always came first.

Petra talked about sex with her friends and some of them also weren't having any, although most of them were married. Maybe sex stops being important once you reach middle-age, but people are just too embarrassed to talk about it. At this point in her life, sex and, so help me god, love, sounded like nothing more than a hassle and a chore. If it weren't for Hassan, she wouldn't be thinking about it at all.

It all started the night Hassan played *Forgotten Dreams*. They did the dishes together before bed, she rinsed, he dried. His arm brushed against hers a few times and, when it did, a jolt went through her body, one she hadn't felt for so long she was surprised she even recognized it. In bed, she closed her eyes and pictured his face. What she wouldn't give for him to crawl into bed with her, his skin warm like the sand under her feet on a beach in early summer.

The next morning at breakfast, while Hassan slathered butter across a bread roll, she felt like sinking into the ground. What was wrong with her? The boy was a year younger than her daughter, a quarter of a century younger than she was; he was vulnerable and in her care. She wasn't attracted to him. How could she be? But when his knee briefly met hers under the table, it was there again: the jolt.

When she met the Bulgarians standing under the limestone arches in the lobby of the *Kriminalgericht* in Moabit for their second court appearance, wearing clothes they probably stole from the donation bin, Petra thought about Hassan. She thought about him when she met with a friend, one of the undersexed married ones, for lunch at Café am Neuen See. They sat near the pond, a mistake because of the mosquitos.

"How are things going with your refugee?" Her friend asked.

"Great," Not great. I want more than anything to lie with him and not leave the bed for days. "How are things with you?"

That night, when Hassan played the guitar in Teresa's bedroom, Petra touched herself for the first time in years. Something was obviously wrong with her. She had to find a

way to fix it.

To make things right again, Petra went to a shop for oriental musical instruments on Adalbertstrasse. She chose out an instrument with striped ribs, its pick guard shaped like a cloud, listening patiently while the shopkeeper gave her a ten-minute lecture on the differences between an Arabic Oud and a Turkish one. She walked home smiling, the Oud hanging over her shoulder, tucked safely away in its case. See, I'm a good person. Not some middle-aged pervert lusting over a poor refugee boy from Syria.

But the Oud didn't help. When Hassan played it at night, those beautiful, mournful sounds coming from behind the door to Teresa's bedroom, Petra felt like screaming: Please, for god's sake. Stop.

She called the organization and told them Hassan couldn't stay with her any longer.

"I'm sorry, but he has to go."

"Can't you make it work?" the girl on the phone said. Petra could hear the judgement in her voice. She pictured the girl: a nose ring and long hair tucked into a hoodie, a volunteer at an organization for refugees who had a subscription to the *taz*, the kind of girl she used to wish Teresa would be someday.

"I'm sorry, I just can't. Please don't tell him I put in the request."

The girl scoffed. "As if we would."

The organization sent Hassan an e-mail to let him know he'd been reassigned to a dormitory with twelve other boys in Weissensee. "I don't understand. Why can't I stay here?"

"I'm sorry, I don't have a say in these things."

"But I want to stay with you."

"I wish there was something I could do."

They shook hands outside of the dormitory, the social worker standing beside them.

"Be sure to keep in touch," she said.

He promised her he would.

Petra turned 46 a few weeks after Hassan moved out. On the morning of her birthday, she stood naked in front of the mirror. Not bad for 46. Not bad at all. She rubbed lotion into her skin, her body soon smelling of lavender.

Men started noticing her. Their eyes lingered longer than

usual on the U-Bahn; colleagues started flirting over lunch. Men hadn't looked at her like that in years. Or maybe they had, and she'd just stopped paying attention.

Either way, something had to give.

Petra didn't see Hassan again for another eight months. But she kept tabs on him over Facebook. She read his updates when they showed up on her feed, written in Arabic, English and, increasingly, in German. Occasionally she'd like something or write a comment and he'd like what she said or write a comment back. But, besides Facebook, they had no other contact.

One morning, in the U-Bahn on her way to work, who should get on the train but Hassan. His hair was longer than when she'd seen him last, his wool coat open, showing a blue collared shirt and dark jeans. The Oud she'd bought him was strapped to his back in its black canvas case. When she called out his name, he smiled and made his way through the crowd.

By this time Petra was seeing Andreas, a soft-spoken man with a well-trimmed salt and pepper beard who worked at a school for naturopaths located in the same building as her office. It wasn't love, but he was nice. The sex was nice. They went on a cycling tour around the Baltic Sea in October, Andreas collecting the bright orange berries from the sea buckthorn bushes which he cooked into a syrup, giving her some later in a decorative terra cotta pot. Teresa met him when she came home for Christmas and the two hit it off. "I'm happy for you mom," she told her later over the phone. "I really am."

Hassan held onto the pole in front of Petra's seat while they talked in German. She couldn't believe how well he spoke. He told her his mother and sister might be coming to Berlin in the spring; he was sorry he hadn't kept better in touch, but he thought of her often. He was playing the Oud at Südblock in a month and hoped she would come. Hassan wasn't dressed warm enough for the winter. Petra had the urge to hop off the train and buy him a hat and a scarf.

When the woman sitting next to her got off the train at Prinzenstrasse, Hassan sat down in her place, propping the Oud up on his lap.

“I hope you will come to the concert and hear me play the Oud. Petra, *mein Schatz*.”

Mein Schatz? Petra smiled. “Send me an invite over Facebook.”

When they arrived at Gleisdreieck station, Hassan got up to switch trains. He shook Petra’s hand goodbye, the Oud cradled at his side.

But when the train doors opened, he didn’t walk through them. Instead he turned around, sat back down, and took her hand again.

Marianne Stokes

Ponies

I'm going to catch hell for this later. My grandson Shane trails me down the sidewalk, and at a dark-tinted door I stop and say, "We're here." A small green sign glows: Off-Track Betting.

"No way!" he says. "I thought we were going to the senior center."

"Honey, this is the senior center."

He holds the door for me, and the warmth pours around us. Inside, a dozen lined faces with hooded eyes turn and most of them smile, especially when they see Shane. Twenty-one years old, but he's a baby in here. Lenny puts down his pencil and touches the brim of his fedora. Across the room, Beverly is flirting with James and Cesar and just glances at us. Dolores grins—she's got only granddaughters—and says, "Peg! Is this the boy you keep bragging about?" I introduce them; Shane says hello and fidgets with his collar.

We hang our coats in the corner. "This reminds me of the post office," Shane says. Freddie still hasn't fixed the flickering bulb in the middle of the room, so everyone is washed in the same jittery gray light. Counters are strewn with racing forms, newspapers and pencil stubs. Bulletin boards have the day's races and flyers for home health aides and pinochle clubs. Near the back are a couple of electronic betting machines no one uses. Plastic chairs are bolted to the floor in rows facing the small televisions hanging from the ceiling, each screen showing a different racetrack, each track running ten or fifteen races in a day. Marisol takes up three seats, two for her and one for the handbag she's excavating. Raymond squints to see the harness race at Monticello and presses a small radio to his ear. I can hear muffled voices and the squeak-squeak of sneakers on hardwood; Raymond loves basketball almost as much as horseracing. In the back, behind bulletproof glass, stands the new kid who handles the cash. I don't know his name. He blinks at nothing, half-awake, a government worker who can't wait to go smoke alone in his

room.

Freddie comes from the back, carrying a broken television destined for the curb; Shane hurries to hold the door for him and I hear polite murmuring.

If he weren't here with me tonight, Shane would be home watching the Democratic debate, hypnotized in the glow of the red, white and blue banners and the shining faces with bright teeth. The other day he voted in his first presidential primary. He seemed to stand straighter afterward. Yes, Shane, it's about time a black man or a woman is a major party candidate and perhaps the next president. And it's good a young man like you cares more about politics and his grandma than about drinking all night and chasing girls. I'm glad you finally got a haircut and shaved that patchy beard. I know you wanted to watch the debate with me tonight, and talk about it. But you haven't been disappointed by hundreds of debates exactly like this one. Real politics is what happens between people on our own sidewalks, our living rooms, our churches, our community centers. Even here, Shane, right here at the OTB.

I have so much to tell you.

Shane is peering around the room like he'll be tested on it. I see everything he's taking in, and I also see what he can't, because it's decades ago and miles away: the shine of the ponies' coats, the velvet swivel of their ears, the waves in their manes, the nodding grace of their gaits. I feel Daddy's arm around me tight and the crumple of papers inside his coat. I smell cut grass and hot salty popcorn. Across the noisy crowd I hear the horses' whickers and the drumming hooves in the dirt, dirt that flies in the summer wind and gets in my eyes. I see the horses galloping in a great curve away and back again, all the time my heart pounding at their beauty and furious speed. Did we win, Dad? It doesn't matter, honey. Did you see how they ran?

I pick up a betting slip, a pencil stub and a racing form, its tissue-thin pages wrinkled with coffee stains. Shane stares at the betting slip. To him, it's an enigma of wordless red letters and empty ovals. I put on my reading glasses and flip through the racing form. Nothing too soon; I want some time. Here we go: "Aqueduct's coming up. The track will be soggy from the

snow.” I slide the booklet in front of Shane, pointing to the race. “Pick a pony. Pick a name you like.”

He rubs the back of his neck. “But I don’t know anything about horses.”

“Doesn’t matter. You pick a bad horse, you’ll probably lose your money, but if he happens to surprise everyone and win, then you take home a pile of cash much bigger than what you bet.”

“Sure,” he says. “You play the odds.”

I know they didn’t teach him pari-mutuel betting at Queens College. I explain, “Right. And those odds that determine the payout of each race, they change all the time, every moment, with every bet we make, from weeks ago when they set the schedule and print this racing form, to right up to the second the horses start running. You, me, everyone in here, everyone in every casino or OTB from New York to Vegas and everyone there at the Aqueduct”—I point to the televisions—“who just loves the track even in winter, every single one of us is changing the odds. Altering the outcome. We all affect what happens after those horses run like hell to cross that finish line.”

“I get it—my bet affects the payout. But that’s all, right? It doesn’t change what happens in the race. ”

“No, but I like it because it’s a system that includes all, listens to all, rewards them in proportion to the risks they take.”

“So we’re all butterfly wings blowing our money on horses,” he mutters. I snort. He smiles that half-smile I can’t resist and looks back at the racing form. “These names are crazy.” He brushes a fingertip across the page. “Runnafowl, Push Up Jimmy, Sixtyseven Buick. OK, here—I wanna bet on this one. Cherry Danish.”

“Good choice.” I help him fill out the ovals on the betting slip. He puts five dollars on the line for Cherry Danish to win, and the kid behind the glass hands him a receipt. No names—not his, not the horse’s, only a string of numbers and letters that represents a nervous, powerful animal now warming up on a chilly night at the Aqueduct as well as the fleeting hopes of a good young man. Shane tucks the receipt in his wallet. I squint at the television and say, “Twelve minutes to post. Let’s

get something to drink.”

At the counter I slip two quarters into the honor box and fill a styrofoam cup with Café Bustelo, then plunk in a honey-lemon cough drop from my purse. I call it a grandma’s toddy. It feels fine going down, eases my stomach and my sinuses and doesn’t smell quite as bad as the stale mop-water reek in here. Shane buys a Coke from the machine, sinks onto a chair and glances wistfully at each television screen as if by some miracle one has switched to Democrats. It won’t happen. All around us, delicate ponies clamber through the cold evening, the jockeys’ colors looking faded.

I realize I need to use the bathroom. Shoot. I say, “Hold my coffee, please—I’ll be right back.” He sniffs the cup and makes a face. I chuckle and walk away.

They still haven’t replaced the bathroom mirror. After I wash my hands and pat my hair, I gently touch my face. I wonder how it looks. Pale, probably. Tired. Has he noticed? The light in the OTB is indiscriminately unkind; it makes us all grayish and old.

I leave the bathroom and see Shane has slid over a few seats and he and Raymond are leaning together and frowning. I hear Raymond: “. . . season was over already. Ain’t surprised they traded Kidd.”

Shane nods. “Was gonna happen sometime.” I don’t think he even likes basketball. I’m back, so Shane says to Raymond, “Thank you—pleasure talking to you.”

Raymond says, “Anytime, son.” Shane gives him a politician’s too-wide smile. He’s practicing. I don’t like it.

We go back to our seats. Then Shane twitches and reaches for his jeans pocket, the gesture that tells me his phone—his leash—has vibrated with a call or a message. Christ, seems like a minute can’t go by anymore without someone, something, interrupting us. He looks at me. “Um . . .”

I’m jealous, but a grandma can be indulgent, too. I tell him, “Go ahead.”

In half a second he’s flipped open the phone and grins, his face lit with more energy than I’ve seen yet tonight. “One of my friends texted about the debate—he says ‘Come on, let the man get a word in.’ Must be getting hot in Cleveland.” Shane types a reply with a quick thumb. A few words without

context: political discourse for a new millennium. But I'm kidding myself if I think my generation knew how to dig much deeper. He looks down when the phone buzzes again, then looks away, unfocused, and says, "They've got strong voices, both of them." Then he flicks his eyes right into mine. "Y'know, you never even told me who you voted for in the primary."

I smirk. "It definitely didn't matter in New York."

"Yeah, but you always say to vote for the best candidate regardless. That's what makes it count, what gets you heard."

"Well, that's what I did." Then I wink and take a sip of cough-drop coffee.

He says, "Me, I voted to make history."

"Good." I almost say, every vote makes history as soon as you yank that red lever. Makes history and is history. After the inauguration we'll find out the whole rotten machine there in Washington and Albany and City Hall never stopped humming, and nothing's changed. Every penny we bet on horses has more of an effect, in the end, than any vote. Butterfly wings, like you said, Shane.

On the television, ponies are warming up at the Aqueduct. They are living sculptures, hard lines of muscle and soft brown eyes. I'll miss this place. Shane follows my gaze and says, "Look, it's number four—Cherry Danish. That's my horse." A feisty reddish brute.

"We're not so different from those ponies, if you think about it." He turns to me, and I go on. "Beautiful animals. God's creation, each one. But—they're trapped. Running in the same circles over and over, doped up, blinders on, whipped, exhausted, caught in the excitement of the race." On the television, two horses prance side by side, tossing their manes. Shane, beside me, is still. I say, "They are beautiful, but the system is ugly, and they can't escape. And me, I can't stop watching. I never could. Addicted to the spectacle, I guess."

He touches my knee. "The system, eh, Grandma?" I shrug. He says, "At least the one we're trapped in is a democracy."

"Oh? Equal rights, equal responsibilities, equal representation, equal protection under the law?" He's young but he's not naïve. I'm surprised we haven't had this

conversation around the Sunday dinner table, but then I think of my daughter's face, her grinding jaw, and I'm not surprised anymore.

Now he shrugs and says, "Well, it's not perfect, but at least it's something." I look away and stay quiet, feeling an old anger burning. He continues, "And I don't think we're so blind and helpless. People debate. They take action. They protest. They—they don't give up."

Why did I mention anything? He has years to turn sour. Above us, the ponies trot.

Finally he says, "We weren't supposed to come here tonight." "That's right."

"Told Mom we were going to the senior center."

"Mm-hmm." And I will hear about it from Kathleen, too—she's got as much mercy as a brick falling from a tall building.

"She hates the OTB, y'know. But I don't see what's so bad about it." He's looking around at the people in here, hair gray or gone or store-bought, and at all the 13-inch screens showing essentially the same story, over and over. I wonder what Kathleen's told him. My social security drizzling away, not much, really just a little, one race at a time. It won't matter. I wonder what else she knows. Probably more than I think. Children, they snoop, they wheedle their way to the truth. Shane asks, "Do you ever go to the races?"

"No. Not in years." Decades.

"Well, maybe we could, when it gets warmer. I'll take you."

Sweet boy. He certainly doesn't know. "That's OK, hon." I pat his knee, then lace my fingers around my coffee cup. He slumps a little. Then I say, "I promised my mother I'd never go there again—after what happened to my father."

"Huh?"

I look him in the eye. "My dad ran numbers for the track."

"Wait, wasn't he a mailman?"

"He was. Guess it was a side job."

"He told you?"

"No. My mother told me. And she had to keep explaining it over and over, because I just kept asking, because I couldn't believe Dad was gone."

I notice Shane is holding my hand now. And Marisol nearby is probably listening, but it's nothing that matters anymore.

Everyone's gone. Shane's forehead is all crinkled as he asks, "What do you mean? I know he died when you were nine. What happened to him?"

"I'll never know. One night he just didn't come home." I take a weak breath. "In the morning I heard Mom crying in the kitchen. She sent us kids upstairs but I heard the front door and quiet voices talking. Later, when she told us he was gone—she never said 'dead'—her eyes were dry. She turned hard as ice in that one morning."

Shane sighs. "No one ever told me this."

"Mom made us promise never to go to the track again. Hell, after that, she didn't even let me ride the carousel." On the television, a gentle horse is walking, the jockey slouched and bored. I say, "But I kept my promise. I never went back. After Mom died in '75, we put both their names on the stone. And then I started coming here."

"Why? After all those years?"

"Because going to the races with my dad was my best memory from when I was a kid. I couldn't be angry anymore. And I earned this." This room: grainy televisions, buzzy lights, gray linoleum, cheap coffee, sour smell of unwashed corners. These faces: Raymond, Dolores, Lenny, Freddie, Marisol, James, Cesar, Beverly, all of them. I'll hold on as long as I can.

"Grandma." I look back at him, at his serious eyes. He says, "I'm really sorry about your dad."

"Thank you, honey."

"And Mom's wrong about this place."

"Mm-hmm. It's just another place people gather, people with something in common. Even if that something is gambling and smoking, well—they belong here. I belong here. And we talk, we laugh." I grunt. "And we vote." He nods, staring ahead. He'll think of me here, now, tonight. As real as I ever am in my dining room chair. Then I say, "But the OTB is dying."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a losing business. Not even a business, really—it's a government agency and it's always on the chopping block. Probably won't last another year. Albany doesn't make enough money on it." I sniff. "Enough money off people like me, who

just want a place to be warm in winter and cool in summer, somewhere with each other.” I see Marisol watching me and nodding.

Shane tilts his head the tiniest bit. “Will you be sad, you and your friends, if you can’t come here?”

“Just find someplace else, I guess, but I’ll miss the ponies.” I picture a deli or a dollar store right here, with this same cracked linoleum. Maybe the sound of pounding hooves will linger, somehow. Like the scent of my coffee. One minute to post. “Shane.”

“Yes?”

This is really why we’re here. And I can’t get the words out. I love this boy. Hell, knowing, not knowing, pretty soon it won’t matter. He’ll be in other places with other people, remembering me, and making real change happen the only way it ever does: quietly, powerfully, one conversation at a time.

I say, “It’s post time. Our race is about to start. And after it’s over, we’ll go home and watch the rest of the debate, OK?”

He shouts, “All right, Grandma!” and we high-five. Maybe I’ll tell him tonight. But not just yet. Not until our ponies have their chance to run like they were born to run.

We look at the television and I put my arm around his shoulders. Then I hear the bell. Cherry Danish bursts out strong from the gate. We stand up and I hear myself yelling, “Go! C’mon, damn you!” Shane laughs. The horses round the back and their images are small and blurry in the cool humid night. As they come around to the home stretch, I see Cherry Danish has fallen behind. A gray pony streaks from the outside and wins by a good three lengths.

I look at Shane. He’s grinning and says, “I lost. But it’s exciting to watch them run, isn’t it?”

K. Ralph Bray

Flight

Aunt Tish's flight from San Francisco is twenty minutes late, a modest delay for air travel where schedules are precisely determined and carelessly ignored. Tish phoned me last night with details about her flight, but she's become less reliable as an agent for information or recall. She forgets where she parked her car in the Costco lot, confuses her banking numbers with birth dates, misplaces keys, leaves her house windows open and the backdoors unlocked, and her stories have acquired greater embellishments, adding people and places that don't exist. She's also begun erasing my mother from memory and last month she changed her will, making me the sole beneficiary. My cousins—her son and daughter—no longer speak to me, except through lawyers, forcing me to decode Tish's rambling voicemail without familial interpreters, so I arrived at the airport an hour early to find parking and order a martini at the bar.

I love the idea of flight, the audacity of an enormous metal chunk lifting itself away from the Earth's surface; the pluck of a goose running across water and then flinging itself into the sky. As a kid I'd roll down the back window of our big maroon Monte Carlo when my mother drove me to the lake for swimming lessons and I'd plunge my arm into rushing warm air, flying my hand into the sky. I collected newspaper articles about plane crashes and organized crash statistics into tables and concluded that I'd never fly on DC-10s (doors fall off), 747s (doors fall off, also the greatest aviation disaster in history when two of them collided in Tenerife), bush planes (other than a twin-engine Otter, which is a legend in the North), pontoon planes (they flip in the water and drown occupants, except for the Otter), helicopters (no glide ability when rotors stop) or any regional airline (young and inexperienced crew who fail in crises). Tish is flying on a Boeing 737, the kind of plane whose metal skin peeled like a banana as it flew over Hawaii, dumping a flight attendant into the blue Pacific. The plane's skin is old and stretched tight and the cool dry

pressurized air in the cabin pushes on the thin walls, blood inside a weakened vessel, a potential aneurysm. Aunt Tish doesn't care about these details though, she's not interested in a plane's death history or the unbearable logic of flight. Once, flying to Toronto, she yelled "beam me down Scotty" after the captain, whose implausible name was Captain Kirk, announced that the landing gear was stuck and he had to dump fuel over Lake Ontario.

I sit down on a silver, metal bench to wait for Tish. A crowd of Indians has formed under the arrival screen, checking flight times, chattering and smiling. The women wear bright, silk saris and the men are in blousy pants. A young boy, maybe ten years old, tosses a ball in the air and catches it in his baseball mitt. His next toss is so high it bounces off the screen and rolls along the carpeted floor towards me. He runs for the ball and scoops it into his mitt before it hits my shoe.

"Are you waiting for a friend or a relative?" he asks.

"I'm waiting for my aunt."

"Oh. My aunt was killed on a plane. She was in a plane that broke into pieces because a bomb exploded on it. She is somewhere in the sea. In Ireland."

The boy tosses the ball again, just above his head.

"Do you watch baseball? My friends and I play baseball but my dad doesn't want us to. He says we should play cricket or we will become too Canadian."

The Indians move closer to the glass wall that separates us from the arrivals. Three women hold a long banner that says "Welcome Home Mohandass and Nirmala."

"We prayed to Vishnu to save this plane. My mother prayed at the temple all week, but I played baseball. Have you prayed for your aunt's plane?"

"No. I don't pray, but I hope."

"I hope Nirmala's plane is safe. She is flying over Ireland where a bomb can happen. Are you Christian?"

"I was."

"You should pray to Vishnu, even if you are a Christian."

A woman in a gold sari walks over, her short steps raking the floor.

"Sriva, please come back here. You must not bother this man."

Sriva tucks the ball into his glove.

"This is my mother," Sriva says. "She will pray for your aunt!"

"Oh, I am sorry if he is bothering you. He is such a talker now."

I tell her that Sriva is not bothering me and I hope they don't have to wait too long for their family to arrive.

"Mother. Can I wait here? You can see me and it's so boring."

"Yes, but don't lose the ball."

I imagine this.

I am twelve years old. My mother is quoting James Howell, explaining why she is going to fly in Mr. Haraldson's Cessna on Saturday morning. "You've got to git up airy, ef you want to take in God," she shouts, pouring too much milk over my Cheerios. My father calls her an idiot and loudly reminds her that she is agnostic, even though she was baptized in the United Church and my father was raised Catholic. Mother has started reading popularized mathematics and science books from her Book of the Month Club subscription, with titles like *Mathematics for the Millions* and *A 1001 Scientific Discoveries*. She lectures us at the dinner table. "If you can prove something mathematically, then it's true." She explains carbon dating and how the Earth was created 2 billion years ago, not in 4004 B.C. as Bishop Usher calculated from Biblical evidence. "Science," she says, looking directly at my father while he eats toast, "is more complicated than God."

I worry about her plan. For two weeks I imagine Haraldson's plane crashing, convinced that Haraldson will black out at the controls, his ability to see the horizon blurred by twenty six ounces of Canadian Club. My father calls him "the town drunk." Who will look after me if she dies?

I lend her my motorcycle helmet, a gift from my father on my twelfth birthday, who opposed the small dirt bike I bought with paper-route profits but acquiesced when my mother said she'd buy one for herself if he kept protesting.

"I'll get a motorcycle and Ethan can ride on the back of it with me."

The helmet looks like a white bowling ball with a red sun visor. She rests it on her lap while we drive to the airport.

The airport is typical for a logging town. A corrugated steel hangar shelters three small planes and the terminal is a white, aluminum-sided, mobile home balanced on concrete cinder blocks. Two single-engine planes are tethered to steel pegs by thick ropes, the pegs hammered ten feet into the sand dunes that rim the runway. Haraldson's Cessna is revving and rocking and the engine sounds like an overworked lawnmower. He wears mirrored aviator's glasses and leaves them on when we meet him.

"How long will you be up there?" my father asks.

"About a half hour. We fly around Morfee Lake and straight into the mountains."

Mom walks to the plane, allowing Haraldson to hold her elbow. I yell at her to put the helmet on. She slips the white ball onto her head and gives me a thumbs up. My dad and I stand on the dunes so we can see the runway. The Cessna's engine whines louder as the plane taxis onto the tarmac. I'm surprised how slow it moves taking off, bouncing up and down like a Marionette. I could run alongside it and grab a wheel and pull them down to the ground. Haraldson yanks the plane into a steep climb and banks to the left, flying towards the mountains.

"The Rockies don't look any better up there than they do from down here. At least down here I can appreciate their size," my father says.

We walk back to our car. Dad leans on the car's hood and kicks dirt with his new cowboy boots, puts a Freddy Fender tape into the eight-track player and we listen to Freddy sing about wasted days and nights. We watch the plane rise above the tree-line and dissolve into the snow and sunshine that sketch the mountains' peaks. I pick wild blueberries growing around the runway, smashing them into my mouth. After an hour I tell my father "I'm not sure they are still up there."

He is still propped against the car, rubbing dirt onto his boots.

"Dad, maybe Mr. Haraldson crashed the plane."

"No," he replied. "He's sober."

I listen for a lawnmower and finally see a sharp glint in the sky, moving slow and steady, like the satellites passing over our town at night. Haraldson's plane flies around the airport

in a wide circle, drops to twenty feet above the runway, drifts left over the blueberry bushes, and bounces along the tarmac. In the infinite time between flight and landing there are a million chances the Cessna will cartwheel down the asphalt, breaking my mother's body into a thousand pieces, her head preserved inside the white helmet. She steps out of the plane before the propellor stops whirling and raises her arms. A victory gesture, or an open and empty hug? Dad sits in the car looking at her in the rear-view mirror. Freddy is still crooning when Haraldson catches up to my mother and kisses her on her cheek.

I unlock her door and slide into the back seat directly behind mother, who opens her window and lets the warm air rush through her hair and I stick my arm out and let it fly.

Sriva sits beside me.

"These benches are torture. They make them hard and cold so you won't sit."

He puts his glove between his legs and sets the ball on the ground and massages the dirty floor, rolling the ball back and forth with his feet.

Tish's flight is now forty minutes late. The electronic information board blacks out for a minute, the green letters dissolve, and then new numbers assemble, into new predictions, fresh expectations.

"Oh no! Their Irish plane is going to be even later. Airports are the worst."

Sriva looks for his mother who is out of earshot. He pushes and pulls the ball hard and fast, erasing more grime.

Does the Hindu religion prohibit gambling? Do they see the similarity between the arrivals board in the airport and a tote board at the horse races? The odds for a horse change as bets are placed. Could the arrival times bear the expectations that friends and family bring to the airport, exposing their collective wish for the plane to make it across the finish line?

"Look! Those men are pilots!"

Sriva points to two men wearing caps and uniforms and carrying small duffels. One man is short and thin and wears his jacket like he's a little private-school boy stuffed into his clothes from an earlier grade. I trust he is the copilot. I want

testosterone in the cockpit during a crisis, a man to keep the nose up in a final act of self preservation and heroics, not a schoolboy.

“Those guys are cowboys. My mother said that, when she was on a plane that was bucking like a horse. They know how to ride a wild horse.”

My father was not a cowboy, even though he wore sharp-toed boots, checkerboard shirts, GWG jeans and a big-buckled belt. Mom called it his “Howdy Doody” outfit. He never wore anything else after we moved from Toronto to the logging town. I thought he looked like the Marlboro Man.

My parents did nothing together, so if she took me swimming at Morfee Lake, he’d offer a different activity on a different day, to balance the parenting ledger.

“Let’s take the propellor plane out today. Your mom had you at the lake yesterday.”

Dad bought the plane in Vancouver on one of his business trips. Its gossamer-thin wings spanned four feet, and the fuselage—a hollow, balsa wood replica of a single-engine bush plane—had call numbers, and landing wheels that actually rolled. A rubber band provided kinetic tension to spin the propellor and pull the plane.

We drove out of town to the straight stretch of highway to launch it. The air was slightly acrid from a recent fire, but the newly cleared forest meant we could see cars coming for miles. I didn’t want to fly the plane, I just wanted to rest it on the yellow median and pretend, without consequences.

“There isn’t a car coming down this road for hours, son. Fly the plane. I’m going to sit in the car and write a few notes for work.”

“Dad? How many times do I wind up the propellor?”

“Until it’s too tight to keep winding.”

I twisted the rubber band until it might break and held the plane with two hands, one restraining the rubber band and the other on the tail.

“Let it go Ethan. It’s made to fly.”

The plane sped down the highway, jumped up, and flew higher than I’d imagined. Dad stopped writing to see its improbable trajectory. At the top of its arc, it rolled upside

down and swirled in tiny circles to the ground, crashing in a blueberry patch. The tail had snapped and the wings had twisted, rendering the plane flightless.

“It’s the wind, dad. It’s too windy up there.”

He didn’t hear me. A momentary gust, a mini tornado, lifted his yellow sheets from the open car and, as he ran around trying to pick them up, one landed on my foot. I grabbed it, careful not to scrunch the paper. His handwriting—a cursive script comprising feminine and masculine strokes—was legible enough for me to read a few words—“love”, “passion”, “lost hope”—and my mother’s name. He snatched it from my hand.

“Are you writing to mom?”

“It’s private. Pick up your plane and we’ll fix it. Let’s go home and fix it.”

We got into the car and drove home without speaking. I put the broken plane in my closet and left it there until we sold the house and moved to Vancouver.

Sriva’s white ball is turning grey. He hums songs and squirms, shifting from one seat to another.

“Do you like living here? I like the park. I can’t swim though. My aunt couldn’t swim and I think you should not fly over water if you can’t swim. We can’t go on school trips without passing a swimming test.”

“Where would you go that you need to swim?”

“India. My parents want me to visit there and meet all my relatives.”

“Ah. That sounds fun. But I meant school trips.”

“We went camping in Squamish. They have really big cliffs there, with names like Little Smoke Bluffs. My friends tried smoking but not me.”

Sriva looks at me, expecting an answer.

“That’s good. I don’t smoke either. My mother did. Two packs every day. And a bottle of Pepsi too.”

“That’s a lot of smoking. Is she still alive?”

I look at the board and the green letters dissolve and reappear again. Maybe the weather is getting worse or there is an errant cargo handler on the runway; could a bomb threat have held all the planes in the sky, forcing them to fly

around the city until they can safely spiral down from the mountains and over the sea and onto the river delta on which the airport sits?

“What if flying from Ireland is like the Bermuda Triangle? Planes that just go ‘poof’ and they’re gone.” Sriva puts his ball in his mitt and slides down his seat. “Is she still alive?”

“I think one day they’ll find all those missing ships and planes,” I reassure him. “We’ll know what happened to those people.”

He waves his finger back and forth, a scolding gesture.

“I do that at school. Not answering questions. My mother does that to me too, when I ask her what is for dinner because I smell something I hate.”

On schooldays I came home for lunch to eat crustless sandwiches and read comics. Television was not allowed and besides, we only got two channels. My mother would sit in the living room listening to classical music, drinking sherry and reading *How to Listen to the Great Composers*. After eating my sandwiches I’d sneak gum-drop cookies from the jar that was never empty.

One morning my mother was up for breakfast before I left for school. She never got up early, unless it was Christmas morning and she was tending to the turkey, or we were leaving for our annual trip to Vancouver, to escape the “cultural and intellectual wasteland” we lived in. Every night she sat in the living room, smoking and drinking Pepsi and reading books, consuming facts and living an imagined, different life. Our tiny spot on Earth was halfway back to light when she finally went to bed. She’d sleep in until me and my dad left the house, but on that morning she made me French toast, sprinkled with cinnamon, floating in syrup.

“Mom. Did you go to bed early last night?”

“No, but I wanted to do something nice for you. Before your father comes down from his room.”

“I have a really cool school project. I have to make a lunar landscape model. We’re reading *2001 A Space Odyssey*.”

“That’s wonderful. I’ll give you the ingredients and instructions on how to make the base from flour.”

“You’ll help, right? Maybe dad can help me build the obelisk.”

Later that day I rushed home for lunch, hoping that my mother's light mood meant a hot lunch. Instead I found sandwiches on a plate with a note beside them.

"And this gray spirit yearning in desire, to follow knowledge like a sinking star . . ." Tennyson. Dear son. Call your father at work and remain calm. You will understand when you are older.

I was immediately worried that she'd discovered I was stealing the cookies and her disappointment made her leave. I needed to find her before I called dad at work. I looked through her bookshelves for Tennyson, thinking that if I could find the book, read the passage, I'd decipher her riddle. There was an empty space on her shelf where she might have placed it beside the other T authors and her liquor cupboard had an empty bottle of sherry. She'd cut my sandwiches into triangles and the cookie jar was full. I sat down, feeling like a boy at his own birthday party, waiting for friends to come, who never do.

A week later the Hercules search plane finds Mr. Haraldson and my mom in the woods, less than three hundred feet from the runway. The giant plane passed over the crash site a dozen times, but the Cessna flew straight into the trees without scarring the canopy. The Cessna pulverized the ground. No explosion or fire. My mother's bones are shattered and her body has collapsed into itself like a deflated balloon. Ice had coated the wings, robbing the plane of the push it needed, as if the hand of God, holding the plane aloft, had suddenly pulled away.

Within a month my dad sells the house and we move to Vancouver. In another month he leaves me with Aunt Tish and goes back to Toronto, with a woman who works for him.

"You're not the Marlboro man!" I yelled at him. "You should never have worn cowboy boots!"

"I wore them because your mother bought them for me."

He's a liar. I vow never to attend a rodeo or watch a cowboy movie my entire life.

The Indian flight lands. Sriva's mother comes to the bench and tells him to join them and help with the banner.

“One minute. I will be right there.”

She nods and leaves him with a stern warning not to be a second later.

“Here. I am going to throw the ball to you and I want you to make one good pitch to me,” he says.

“That’s not a good idea. What if you don’t catch it? Something could break or someone gets hit.”

“First of all I’m a good catcher, and you look like you can throw a ball straight. Just once, please?”

He lobs the ball into a long parabolic arch, the apex near the ceiling, and it plunges down the other side of the parabola into my open hand. Sriva backs away towards the exit doors and when no one is walking past he crouches and gives me a thumbs up. I glance to the board and see that Tish’s plane has landed. I wind up my arm and hurl the ball towards the boy, who waits with his glove open, trusting me not to throw a wild pitch, expecting me to keep the ball in the air.

Zoë Däe

Bugs Under a Spaghetti Strainer

My name is Olivia “Liv” Mansour. I am twenty-six years old. The first thing I remembered on my own a couple hours after I woke up from surgery. The second was explained to me by my psychologist a few minutes later when I confidently informed him that it’s 2012.

My neurologist told me I was knocked out by a half-full paint can. My psychologist asked me how that fact made me feel. They are not a good duo. They disagree about everything, and my psychologist doesn’t seem to know what he’s doing. The only non-hospital person I’ve been able to see since I arrived two weeks ago is my best friend, Baxter. According to my psychologist, everyone else who was close to me when I got hurt has either aged in a way that would alarm me, or I simply don’t know them anymore. Baxter was flattered by his perceived agelessness, and I bet my mom loved having some dork who just got out of grad school tell her that she’s aged too wickedly in the last five years to see her amnesiac daughter. Mercifully, she only screamed at me over the phone about it for twenty minutes. I don’t even ask where the psychologist got the data needed to decide who has aged too much for my fragile, traumatized brain.

Subdural hematoma. Traumatic brain injury. Craniotomy. Aphasia. Retrograde amnesia. I’m an expert on what happened to me, what it did. My psychologist informed me that, while traumatic brain injuries are unpredictable, I’m doing very well considering the extent of damage my little noggin sustained. Apparently memory loss is a blessing in disguise—wait, that’s not how that goes. What I mean is, apparently memory loss is *small change* compared to loss of motor control. I’m still getting the hang of idioms.

But I still don’t know what happens when I leave here. Where is home? I’m guessing (hoping) I no longer live in the studio above the concessions wholesale place. I’m kind of worried that I don’t live in the same city anymore, but I’m not sure. I’m in a hospital I’ve never been to, but I was

transferred here while I was conked out to be treated by specialists (apparently Dr. Dork, Ph.D., was top of the class he graduated from last year). Transferred from where? I don't know, and I'm not asking. I just want to be cleared so I can go home, wherever that is.

I've exceeded all medical benchmarks these last few days and all I have to do before I can go, according to Dr. Dork, is look in a mirror. He hasn't let me until now, an idea both my neurologist and I don't agree with. But the kid is so well-meaning, and I really don't want to have some kind of outburst and be stuck here for another week.

So I'm standing in front of this covered mirror in a handicapped bathroom, because that's the only one with enough space for my two doctors and me. Dr. Dork, a gangly white boy in a lab coat that I'm sure he's tripped over at least twice this week, is waiting for my go-ahead to remove the sheet. My neurologist, a scruffy forty-year-old in a golf cap who looks like he was drunk until noon today, sits firmly on the toilet seat and slowly shakes his head.

I give Dr. Dork a nod and he dramatically removes the sheet (and smacks himself in the face with it). I look pretty much the same and I cannot describe my relief. My hair is shorter than I remember, which hopefully means I actually have time to keep up with it, and it doesn't look like I cut it myself, which hopefully means I can afford to get it cut by a professional. The bit of hair that was shaved before surgery (which has grown back quite a bit already) is not visible in the mirror. I'm wearing the clothes they told me I was originally admitted in: an aged blue novelty T-shirt that says *I Love Motorboatin' in Kennebec Valley*, a green flannel, and a pair of jeans. I definitely don't remember any of these items and they reek of coconuts and dog. What I can say about the aged me is that I have never looked gayer.

I glance at Dr. Dork, who's only shifted his weight approximately twenty-seven times in the last thirty seconds.

"Wh-who's that?" I say, shakily pointing at the mirror.

Dr. Dork turns white. "What?"

"I don't recognize that person!"

Dr. Dork shrinks against the wall and the neurologist nearly

falls off the toilet laughing. I haven't seen him laugh or even crack a smile before now. He stands and slaps me on the back. I notice *Dr. Brown* is stitched into his lab coat. How lucky, because I forgot his name as soon as he introduced himself (not because I have brain damage but because I'm awful). Dr. Dork can stay Dr. Dork.

"You can go," Dr. Brown says. "I'll call your family."

It's three p.m. by the time they arrive. Baxter and a woman I don't recognize.

"Welcome back to twenty-seventeen, bitch!" Baxter cries, slapping me on the back.

I don't respond. I just stare at the stranger clinging to the door frame.

"I'm your wife, Mia," the woman finally says.

My heart quickens. A bead of sweat breaks over my upper lip and my stomach contracts like a hand into a fist. I feel the way I did about six hours after I convinced Baxter that we should get dinner from a food truck that conveniently disappeared that very night. Everyone in the room takes a step back. I guess they can see how I feel and don't want to get puke on their shoes.

"Oh, my," says Dr. Dork, stepping between Mia and me. "Did you forget you were gay?"

I can't decide if I want to ask him if he's never seen me or if he's never seen a lesbian in general, so I settle for the pained cringe that Baxter, Mia, and even Dr. Brown are already wearing.

"No, she just forgot she had a wife," Mia says, elbowing Dr. Dork out of her way. She's miffed, as I can imagine anyone would be, but I can't tell if it's because of the born-yesterday psychologist or me.

I don't see why I loved her before, or how anyone could. She's 5'9" at the least and could probably grab her ankles without having to lean down. Her inhumanly long limbs can only be topped by her translucent, freckled skin and bright red hair. This is a woman who burns in the shade and thinks black pepper is spicy.

"We've been speaking steadily with Mia since your injury," says Dr. Brown. "We are confident she can take over your

care from here.”

“If that’s what you want,” Mia cuts in.

“Of course,” I say, knowing damn well I’d follow any kind stranger out of this place to escape hospital food and scratchy blankets.

To my relief, I’m still living in the same city, a tiny coastal village wedged between the Carolinas. It’s always bloated with tourists and everything smells like funnel cake, but it is mine and I know where everything is. I know which seafood buffets are worth it and which ones will leave you locked in a bathroom for thirty-six hours. I know which business owners will let you walk in in your bathing suit just to let your kid take a piss and which ones will chase you out with a broom and slap a Polaroid of your blurred face to the back wall to make sure everyone knows you’re never welcome in again.

After an hour-long ride, we are home. Apparently home is a quaint yellow bungalow on stilts that’s only separated from the ocean by the Strip. I’ve never lived this close to the water, and I feel a twang of jealousy as if this isn’t my own life I’m envying.

Upon entering the house I am greeted by a dog. He’s a fluffy monstrosity, black with once-white boots stained red-brown, dirty drool dripping out of his permanent grin.

“Van got caught digging in the yard right before we left the house,” Mia explains. “I didn’t have time to clean him up.”

“Van?” I try to act like I’m asking about his unique name to be polite and not because I’m dying of excitement to see that I’ve finally fulfilled the lesbian duty of having a dog.

“Short for Vincent van Gogh Fetch,” Baxter says, grinning at the absurdity. “Your wife is a painter.”

“**S**o what do you want to eat for your big dinner tomorrow night?” Baxter asks.

It’s been two hours since we got back. I’ve been rolling around on the floor with Van because I only have one life and there’s no need to impress Mia because I already tricked her into marrying me somewhere along the line.

“Big dinner?” Opening my mouth to speak gives Van the opportunity to French kiss me, and I have to pretend it’s the

most disgusting thing I've ever experienced.

While I'm making a scene of spitting into the trashcan, Baxter explains that he and Mia have invited all of my closest friends and family to the house tomorrow to celebrate my surviving a traumatic brain injury, and Mia seems shocked that he hasn't already told me.

"You've seen her several times, Baxter. Why didn't you tell her?"

Baxter gives me his signature *Uh-oh, we've upset Mom* look that he uses around any upset adult, including (you guessed it) his own mom. "We had more important things to talk about. Right, Liv?"

But Mia isn't laughing. She's near tears with both of her lips sucked into her mouth. "You explicitly *told* me she said she was fine with it."

"Oh my god, Mia." Baxter's voice is still taunting but I can tell he's starting to feel bad. "I told you she was fine with it because I knew she would be."

Mia turns her seconds-from-falling-apart gaze onto me and I can feel myself shrinking. This woman has got lasers hidden behind her eyes, I know it. To tell you the truth, the idea of facing everyone I know, even the people I remember, frightens me to the point of nausea, but I don't want to be annihilated by the lasers, so I quickly nod my head.

"Okay," Baxter says, clapping his hands and rubbing them together, his usual *Aaaaand we're back* move. "So, what do you want? Pasta? Soup? Wings? Roast? Fish? *Zzz? Zzz? Zzz? Zzz?*" He's talking to me through a foot of water and I can't understand him. His words are just *zaps* from a Hasbro *Operation* board.

"You have to slow down," Mia scolds as the room goes sideways. "She has aphasia."

"Oh my god. She sees colorful letters and shit?" He's serious.

"No, Baxter."

He looks at me. "Oh shit, can you taste sounds?"

I try to stand. "I gotta . . . I gotta . . ." *I gotta vomit.* "Bathroom?"

The high of leaving the hospital has subsided and now I feel like I'm suspended in jello. I'm standing in Mia's

bath—*my* bathroom. White linoleum squares with little blue linoleum square accents. Yellow tile in the shower. A mirror that you press and pop open and there's a medicine cabinet behind it. This is a design one would call vintage to prevent other people from calling it ugly.

I open the window and am enveloped by the nostalgic scents of spring. New growth and freshly disturbed dirt. The bathroom smells dangerously clean, but not like bleach or any inorganic cleaning supplies. It smells like lemons and lemon—*shit*. I mean lemons and *linen*. The scent of a children's hand soap (watermelon?) bounces off the porcelain sink alongside the harsh fluorescent light, reflecting and refracting and slapping me in the face.

I've been in here for at least twenty minutes and, after checking on me once, Baxter and Mia have already forgotten about me. I can hear them scream-laughing down the hall. I want to believe that Mia must be great because Baxter gets along with her, but the idea that Baxter is cautious and selective in choosing who to sit back and be profane with doesn't hold water. Did I use that idiom right? Nevermind, it doesn't matter.

The wind blows hard, pushing cherry blossoms through the window like a mother hurrying her tiny children into the house and away from the oppressive coastal sun. Another gust forces in the smell of the ocean.

I am here. I am here. I am here. No matter where my mind floats, I am here. It is spring. I live by the sea. I have a dog.

I hear Baxter and Mia are back to bickering.

"This backsplash is fucking ugly," he complains. "A lighter color would be better. This burnt orange you got going on interrupts your back-home atmosphere."

"I'm sorry," Mia begins, sounding utterly considerate until she continues. "Do you eat my pussy or pay my bills?"

Baxter erupts into laughter again. Christ, she *is* my wife.

I wake up with a start, not remembering where I am or who owns the ass that's backed into my crotch. But then the fynapses start siring—*ugh*. The *synapses* start *firing* and I'm back. I am in Mia's bed—*my* bed—*our* bedroom, where I went to lie down after becoming overwhelmed. On the other side

of Mia is the dog, expertly positioned as the littlest spoon. I use all my sleepy strength to lift my arm and check the watch I fell asleep in. Ten a.m.

Mia doesn't stir when I inch out of bed, and when I turn back to look at her my heart feels like it could melt through its cavity and slide right out of my ass. Kind of like the heavy anxiety I've been carrying since I came home but different. I am awash with affection without the memories to back it up. Her hair is pulled back by a baby pink scrunchie (must be a family heirloom because I know they don't make them like that anymore) and she has a thumb-sized smear of white paint on her jaw. Her mouth is wide open and she's snoring like a fat old man, but she appears soft, unthreatening.

She's less scary in her sleep, I think, and I'm suddenly mad at myself for fearing her in the first place. The only aggression I've seen has been a defense mechanism on my behalf.

My wife, the painter. It does seem nice. The . . . what do I do again? The [insert my job here] and her wife, the painter, and their fluffy dog, Van, the littlest spoon, all cuddled up in their dark house by the sea, shielded from the heat. For the first time, I long to remember my life.

But I can't shake the feeling that something happened to us, Mia and me. Something that has dribbled even further to the edge of my recollection than my love for her. My memory is an old, worn couch. What I do remember sits atop the cushions and most of the memories from the last five years are spare change that rest beneath a groggy, six-inch layer of fluff and brain static, waiting to be pulled back up. But there are darker memories, too: a thin liquid that has soaked beneath the cushions, through the wood framing, and rests in a puddle on the cold floor below the couch. Everything I know about reading tone and body language would tell me that yesterday with Baxter was just Mia protecting me, but there was something behind her laser eyes that I can't grasp. Every time the injured wreckage of a memory bubbles up to the surface, it slips back down into the black water of my subconscious before I can grab it.

I feel a weight pressing on the back of my throat, as solid as if someone shoved their fist in my mouth. A tiny sob escapes, waking Van but not Mia. He looks sternly at me, a real *If you*

cry right now, you're a little bitch stare, so I look away.

My bedroom, though still unfamiliar, is overwhelmingly inviting and I can feel myself getting sleepy again. The window unit hums softly and jostles the many plants sprouting out of old glass soda bottles. It is just chilly enough to want a light blanket and the warmth of another person, and the string lights on the ceiling emit tiny orbs of light just bright enough to make the dark room navigational. But I am too nervous to go back to sleep.

I should probably bathe, but I'm afraid that if I try unsupervised I'll get dizzy and crack my head open all over again. Plus, I'm not quite ready to endure the trauma of getting the right water temperature in an unfamiliar shower, so I just get dressed (in clothes that I am only eighty-five percent sure are mine).

The living room is covered in streamers and balloons. **T** *WELCOME HOME LIV* is spelled out in paper letters over the TV. Baxter looks up from cutting out paper snowflakes at the coffee table to reveal his dime-sized pupils, then returns to his work with the mania all gay men are overcome with when prepping for a party.

"Mia and I decided on tortilla soup after you went to bed," he says, still *snip snip snipping* away.

I can smell it now, the heaviness of corn tortilla, the bite of lime, and my stomach reminds me that I haven't eaten since yesterday afternoon. Reading my mind, Baxter snaps himself out of his decorating trance and suggests we have a bowl.

"Were Mia and I having problems before I got hurt?" I ask after my third bowl of soup.

Baxter fiddles with his spoon, looking reserved for the first time in his life. I slap him on the shoulder.

"I'm not telling Mia's business like that. Stop trying to be slick."

"Mia's business?" I am appalled. *Whose* best friend is Baxter, again? "It's my business too."

"Fine, if you really want to know. You've been a real dick for months now. Before you got knocked out, I mean."

I'm not surprised by this. "I guess I'm really not marrying material, then."

Baxter laughs loudly but without joy. He asks me if I remember who I was five years ago. If I remember going home with a different woman from a different bar every night. I try to answer these questions but he informs me that they are rhetorical.

“You’d rather go back to that than living in this place with Mia?”

I don’t answer.

“Okay, well you didn’t have a *dog* five years ago. Isn’t that something?”

It’s six o’clock and people are beginning to arrive.

“Maybe we should have eased her in,” Mia says, staring out the window at all the cars and chewing her cuticle. “This is a lot, isn’t it? All these people at once?”

“Well, that nerd psychologist should have put ‘ease her in’ in her after-care packet,” Baxter says. “I’m sure at least one of those doctors could tell we’re both complete idiots.” He opens the door to the first guests.

I am roadkill with my guts strung out all over like silky ribbons, my body flattened so I can be easily passed over. I’m just another part of life for these people. “Oh, we’ve got to go to Liv’s party. She got smacked with a paint can and now we have to go to her house and remind her that we love her. Anyways, what’s for dinner tomorrow?” Even the people who are happiest to see me alive and well, I’m sure, are not feeling as much as me. I am feeling all there is to feel. I’ve never been more overstimulated in my life (that I can remember). I’ve never been hugged so many times by so many different people (*that I can remember*). I’m a deflated birthday balloon, hanging by the throat from someone’s mailbox.

My mother is on the couch laughing, wine cooler in hand, surrounded by a few of my friends from technical school, surely telling her favorite story about when I was five and got pinworms. From the roar of laughter I assume she’s reached the part where I wouldn’t stop crying because I thought I was turning into a dog and would have to go live at the pound because my mom’s allergic. Her favorite part, when the doctor told her I got it from eating contaminated dirt, is

still to come. She never worries people will see her as a bad mother when she tells stories like this about my childhood. Maybe she shouldn't. I guess a rich kid or two has eaten dirt.

Baxter is having his third bowl of soup and his fourth glass of wine, chatting with a woman who apparently fostered Van until Mia and I could take him. The woman is flushed and won't stop giggling. I wonder if she knows that, despite his indiscriminate charisma, Baxter is queerer than a square donut.

Mia is standing in the kitchen with an older man she introduced to me as our wedding photographer, staring past him as he talks on and on and on. She needs rescuing, but I don't want to intrude. While I grapple with my *To save Mia or not to save Mia* struggle, she walks away from the wedding photographer in the middle of his lecture to approach me. He seems offended, but only for a second. A young blonde, Mia's college roommate I think she told me, walks past him and his eyes are suddenly locked on her ass.

"Wanna get out of here?" Mia is standing very close to me. Her neck is shiny with a thin layer of sweat and her cheeks are red beneath her freckles. Every light in the house is drawn to her. She's had a few but she's my wife so it's not weird, right? Surely I can take her for a walk without being accused of kidnapping.

We head down the street away from the ocean, toward the trailer parks and the gas stations and the cafes that start serving beer at noon and pay tween waitresses under the table. It's not long before we reach *Place*, a pastel trailer park that used to be [*Something*] *Place* but who knows what because the letters of the first word have been torn off.

"Here it is," Mia says, pulling me toward a tiny pink trailer. "My workshop. There's yours." She points to a whale-belly blue trailer adjacent to her own.

"What do I do again?" I ask, relieved to finally have a segue into this conversation.

"You're a door maker," she says, then laughs a long, drunken laugh, full of snorts and squeals. "You carve artisan doors for old rich people."

The artisan door maker and her wife, the painter. "Not as cool as being a painter, huh?"

Mia stops laughing. She explains that she's been working on a secret mural for months and, because she's been disappearing to her workshop constantly and sometimes overnight, I've been accusing her of cheating on me since she started the project. The accusations have caused a lot of fighting and alienation, a void between us like there never has been and suddenly I can feel it. I still don't remember it, but I feel empty and heavy at the same time. I feel a hundred miles away from her even though she's standing right here, drunkenly leaning into me.

She says I followed her to her workshop a couple weeks ago, thinking I was going to catch her in the act, but instead I found her working on her mural, and that's how I got hurt. We swore not to go into each other's workshops without permission because it can be dangerous, and, as she thought she was alone, she had paint cans carelessly hung about on her scaffolding.

"Like I would say I'm going to my workshop up the street and go somewhere else to cheat, or worse, cheat on you *in* my workshop that's a hundred feet from yours. I'm not an idiot." But she isn't talking to me. She's talking to pre-knockout Liv, and I let her. I owe it to her. "And the worst part is," she says, crying now. "Even after you *saw* I wasn't cheating, you still couldn't trust me. I told you to go to the hospital right away for a scan but you wouldn't. You said you were fine and that's why your brain got pressure-washed with blood."

"It does feel cleaner," I say like some kind of idiot, and Mia cries harder.

I begin to remember some of this. I remember it like I would remember a movie I saw once, but it's enough to be overwhelmed with guilt. I want to apologize right away but my curiosity gets the best of me.

"Why was the mural a secret?"

Mia's workshop is littered with at least fifty paintings. They come in many different sizes and a few different frames, but I soon notice that they are all the exact same painting, each an identical picture of a beach sunset, seagulls in the sky.

"I sell them to tourists for twenty bucks apiece," she says.

“If you couldn’t guess, this isn’t what my parents are thinking when they brag to their friends that their daughter’s art pays her bills.” She goes on to say that she’s been unhappy with her life, but feels foolish about it. She kept the mural a secret because she didn’t feel right for thinking she deserves better than flea-marketing paintings.

I want to console her, tell her that there’s nothing wrong with what she does, or wanting more, but before I can, I notice the mural, a titan rich with color. It, too, is a beach sunset, but not like the ones Mia paints to make her living. The mural is astounding, incredible, some other big words I’ve probably learned in the last five years but haven’t remembered yet. This poor woman, this truly talented woman, probably has to grit her teeth every weekend as she hands a sixty-year-old man a carbon copy corny painting and he says, “Your boyfriend must love having an artist around.” This woman has to listen to her parents prattle on about her false successes, longing to correct them but feeling ungrateful for the luck she’s had in her trade. This woman has spent months just trying to squeeze more juice out of her life and I saw that as a crime, had the gall to not trust her because of it.

“We have a kid, too,” Mia says, a statement that jerks me back against the wall.

“Oh, god, the children’s hand soap.”

She laughs. “Wait, what? I’m just fucking with you to lighten the mood. We don’t have a kid. We just like the way kid soap smells.”

I laugh so hard I cry and hug Mia for the first time since I got out of the hospital. It feels more natural than I thought it would. I smell coconut shampoo and sweat on her, the nicest scent I’ve ever witnessed, and the high tide of emotion washes a memory up to the forefront of my brain.

I am in my dark bedroom and I am hurting. Did I fall asleep in my clothes? I turn the lamp on but it’s still hard for me to see. A train plows through my head, from one ear to the other, circling around in front of my eyes so I am completely blind for a second, then back into my ear. I grab for Mia but she is not here. She went to sleep on the couch tonight. I try to stand but I fall. Sour, burning vomit. I cry out and she is here. She is screaming into the phone. “511 Oceanside! Are

you fucking deaf?!” Her voice changes as she addresses me. “I told you, I told you.” But it is not the usual I told you so. She isn’t angry with me but with the big, heavy hand that is trying to drag me away. It’s getting harder for me to see, to understand words. “Zzz zzz awake!” She is begging me to stay awake through Operation buzzes. The heavy hand grabs my skull and squeezes and I shriek like a little kid. One last conscious thought pulls itself above the water: I am never going to see her again and it’s all my fault. I am drowning. Dog fur brushing against me. Someone else’s tears and snot on my face. Coconut shampoo. Black.

I’m for-real crying now, not laugh-crying.

“Let’s visit the water,” she whispers.

The briny air bites the inside of my nose, a sensation too familiar to sneeze out. We decided to take a longer walk to reach a nicer part of the beach, further from the hotels. I look up at the sky and lose my breath. The stars stare back at me, winking like there’s a secret between us. I look over at Mia. She is looking up too, and I am suddenly frightened that I briefly forgot how to love her. Without all the light pollution, we can see that we (Mia, me, and the ten other drunk people on this part of the beach) are just bugs trapped under a spaghetti strainer.

Maybe I wasn’t meant to be here five years ago, and maybe I’m not meant to be here in another five years, but I belong here right now. We all belong here: Baxter, my wife (the painter), Van, me, and all the young hicks who are just here to get their rocks off for spring break.

Charles J. Alden

Double Feature

The second week on the job with the *Des Moines Register* my editor held back a grin as he gave me the day's assignments. After detailing a visit to the police chief and the kindergarten Teacher of the Year, he said, "Go out to the fairgrounds and get an interview with Albert Crosius. He's one of our undecided voters and I gather he's of two minds about a number of issues." He handed me a tent address and turned away before I could catch the look on his face. I had been warned to be wary of the prank goose chases freshman reporters got sent on, like apprentice mechanics being sent to fetch left-handed screwdrivers. But the State Fair was a plum assignment—three months before the election, and the biggest show in the state was a magnet not only for fans of canned goods and giant pumpkins but also for national politicians and the national press that followed them. This assignment might present three opportunities all at once.

Late in the afternoon my press pass and twelve dollars got me through the main gate, and my heart began to sink as the fair map led me not to the speakers' center but towards the Midway section, where the shouts of barkers for side shows and ball-toss games competed with the overhead din of the whirligig rides. My destination led down a sawdust-covered path behind a row of tents, until I arrived at a hand-lettered card that read Crosius Brothers taped to a tent flap.

I had been had, but good. I imagined that by now everyone in the office was howling about the naïve girl just out of journalism school trudging around the carnival freaks to take the pulse of the electorate. Well, no matter. I was here now and pushed my way through the canvas flap to see what sort of backstage trick was behind this show.

What I did not expect was to walk into the middle of a heated argument between two identical voices.

"I keep telling you that your guzzling Cokes makes me burp."

"Better than your Mexican beers that get us both drunk."

“Getting a buzz on is the only way to get to sleep with your snoring.”

“You should talk. You’re the one with your mouth in my ear all the time.”

The room was still dark compared with the bright sunshine outside and my eyes hadn’t adjusted yet. Across the tent I saw the backs of two heads seated side by side in what looked like a wheelchair. I cleared my throat. “Excuse me,” I said. “I’m looking for Mr. Albert Crosius. Is he around?”

The wheelchair pivoted, and as my vision cleared I saw two pair of eyes looking at me appraisingly, two mouths fixed with half-grins, but only one single and remarkably wide torso seated in the chair.

“That would be us,” said the head to my left. “I’m Al, and this is Bert. Our dad had planned to name his son Albert, but he had to adjust a little when we were born.”

“Dad had a sense of humor all right, but he needed one,” said the other head.

By now my eyes had adjusted to the dull green shade inside the tent, and I could see the poster “The Crosius Brothers—The World’s Only Two-Headed Man!” I looked more closely and saw the two faces were not identical at all. Al, on my left, had a long and angular face, with thinning brown hair and an inquisitive, skeptical expression. Bert on my right had a rounder face with thicker hair and prominent black eyebrows. Al’s neck appeared longer and indeed his mouth was at the same level as Bert’s ear.

“Now don’t tell us, let us guess,” said Al. “You’re the reporter from the *Register*, right?”

“Yes,” I was stammering. “How did you . . . did they tell you they were sending me out here?”

They both laughed, and Bert said, “No, of course not. They send a new reporter out to see us every year we pass through. And who else would be wearing a pants suit to the fair?”

“But you’re sure better looking than those boys they sent out before, honey,” said Al, cocking one eyebrow. “What did they tell you to look for—the champion cabbage grower, or a social worker from Head Start?”

“Or maybe they just told you to get a good headline. Get it?” said Bert. I was beginning to notice how they tended to

complete each other's sentences.

"No," I said, looking at my shoes, "they told me it was some political angle, but it looks like they were just pulling some joke on me. I'm sorry to bother you."

They chuckled in unison, then together said, "Don't leave, honey."

Bert continued, "We're always good for a story, and we'll tell you more than we gave those dopes they sent out in previous years."

"As long as you don't use the headline "Two Heads Are Better than One," said Al. "We've seen that too many times."

We had half an hour until their next performance, and I learned more than enough about dicephaly and conjoined twins. Al and Bert were lucky to be alive, mainly because their massive torso contained two hearts and each head had a complete spine, but farther down they shared a digestive system. Each had control of one arm on their side. "Took us a long time to learn to walk," said Al. "We each control one leg, and getting that motion coordinated was a job.

"Especially with someone as clumsy as him," said Bert. For emphasis the left hand reached over and gave a tug on the ear of the right head, and in response the right leg gave the left one a little kick.

"We used to have a little vestigial arm up here," said Al, "but it didn't do anything and was removed when we were three."

"Wish it were still there. Might slap some sense in you," said Bert.

"Some things we share," added Al. "One stomach, which this dope keeps filling with junk, and I need to drop in the antacids."

"One liver, one digestive tract, one butt."

"Which only I can reach. And one dick."

"And a very nice one for sure. Would you like to see it?" At that they both looked up and nodded encouragingly.

I couldn't tell if I was blushing or it was just the August heat percolating through the tent. "Are you guys trying to hit on me now?"

"Just him," said Bert. "I'm the gentleman of the pair, and I'll defend you."

Al winked and said, "Right, he can be our chaperone."

A raspy voice from the front of the tent called out "Two minutes to show time, boys."

Both faces fell for a second. "Wait around for an hour, honey," said Al. "Afterward the show maybe we can get together, have a bite. . ."

"Or a drink," said Bert.

"Or a drink," continued Al. "Just hang out a little. A normal date."

"If you like we can go to the ball park. Maybe take in a doubleheader." Bert earned another kick from Al. "Ow! Sorry honey, that's a line from our show. I couldn't resist."

Beyond some biographical and anatomical detail, I still didn't have enough material for a story here, but more than that, I was intrigued by these fellows. Except for their unusual conjunction, each of them individually would have been rather presentable, self-assured and witty. And for sure I was in no rush to get back to the office. "Okay," I said, "I'll be back. Don't either of you stand me up."

The two faces turned and grinned at each other. The raspy voice from the front called again. Bert said, "On two," and simultaneously they pushed themselves up from the chair, and alternately took steps towards the stage in the front of the tent. Al glanced back over his shoulder at me, and they nearly stumbled as they passed through the canvas flap.

I had an hour to kill and I wandered around the Midway section taking in the sights. What would a normal date be like with this pair? Indeed, what about their lives could be normal? As I wandered past the weight and age guessers and the piglet races, it occurred to me that for them 'normal' was the life they had always known, that any interaction without the presence of the other would be not only impossible, but literally unimaginable.

As I was lost in thoughts of the dicephalic lifestyle, my feet led me back up the noisy Midway until I was jarred by a familiar raspy shout, "Alive! Alive! Prepare to be astonished! Step right in and see the eighth wonder of the world! Not for the squeamish! Right here, the Crosius monster, the world's only two-headed man!"

Beside the barker were huge posters of Al and Bert's faces,

not grinning slyly or looking thoughtful, but with bared teeth and the eyes colored a menacing red. Plastered around the poster were the words “Grotesque!” “Terrifying!” and “Unbelievable!” I started blinking tears.

Behind me a fat man wearing a straw boater and trailed by an equally pudgy wife and three overfed children paused before the Crosius tent. “For sure this one’s fake,” said the man. “Probably some ventriloquist with a dummy head taped on his shoulder. That’s what they always do.”

I wanted to shout and argue, then caught myself. No, let them go. The boys didn’t deserve to be demeaned by having these people gawk at them. Suddenly I was angry and defensive, and realized I was feeling something more than pity or an offended sense of justice.

I still had a half hour to kill and found a booth next to a cotton candy stand to file my earlier interviews of the day. The police chief had boasted of his need to make quick decisions, how he could never second-guess himself. The kindergarten teacher spoke of needing to have eyes in the back of her head to keep track of 20 squirming five-year-olds all at once. My mind kept going back to the Crosius brothers—they could look in two directions at once, and they always had a second opinion available in any situation. Who could feel sorry for them?

It was close to sunset when the final show wrapped up, and I was bracing my stomach for a dinner of carnival corn dogs, but Al and Bert had other plans. They emerged from the back of their Midway tent in their syncopated lurch, trailed by a rat-faced little man of indeterminate late middle age. Besides being the barker, Eddie was their personal attendant, business manager, and, it turned out, chauffeur. He went ahead, and a moment later pulled up in a late-model Lincoln at the head of the Midway strip. I was given the front passenger seat while Al and Bert situated themselves in the middle of the back seat. “We would have invited you to sit with us,” said Al, “but we would have spent too much time fighting about which one of us got to sit next to you.” I could see that with them positioned in the middle, there wasn’t room for another person on either side.

The Lincoln swept into the carport of the Des Lux, the

fanciest hotel in Des Moines, where a uniformed attendant was waiting with a wide wheelchair. Al and Bert worked themselves crab style out of the car and gestured me to follow, with Eddie holding the car door for me. Snugly settled in their custom chair, the brothers chatted familiarly with the bellman, who was laboring to steer the chair through the plush carpeting en route to the Flamingo Room. In my four years at Drake no date had hinted at going to the Des Lux, nor could they have afforded to. I knew reservations needed to be booked two weeks in advance, but when we whisked up to the maître d', Al said, "Good evening Maurice. The usual table, and tonight we have a guest."

All the while I kept looking around at the crystal and velvet and gold leaf covering every surface, and over my shoulder at the patrons coming and going. Bert noticed my nervousness and chuckled, "Now don't be self-conscious, honey. With us here, for sure nobody's going to be staring at you."

In the back corner of the restaurant a table was set with a small sofa as one chair, which the brothers slid into, and a chair was brought in for me. "I wish you'd call me by my name," I said, pointing at the press pass still pinned on my jacket. "It's Elizabeth, you know."

Al and Bert glanced at each other. "Okay," said Al, "I'll call you Liz."

"And I'll call you Beth," said Bert. "That way we can tell you apart." He paused to give me time to catch the joke. "C'mon, it's only fair. It's not our fault there's only one of you, so humor us a little."

"Sure, this is probably the only time you've ever been on a double date by yourself. If we're lucky you might be schizophrenic."

I couldn't help but laugh. I was with doubtless the most freakish pair of people on the planet, who by any measure would be considered abnormal, hideous, or repellant, and here they were, trying to put me at ease and teasing me. I was full of questions, not just for the paper, but for myself as well.

Just then the menus arrived, with a half glass of wine each for the boys, and they entered serious negotiations. "We have this one stomach between us," explained Bert, "but we each have our own set of taste buds. Mine refined, his primitive,

so we need to bargain.”

“Four items total, we each get to choose two,” said Al. “Today is my turn for entrée and dessert.”

“Well cut up,” explained Bert. “We each get a fork, but we wouldn’t trust each other with a knife.”

“We’re pretty good with chopsticks though.”

I marveled. How they managed daily living was a whole new version of normal. “Doesn’t it bother you though, being stared at all the time?” I asked.

Bert chuckled, “Of course not. That is our profession. If people didn’t look, and look again, we might have to do real work for a living.”

“And we do quite well, thank you,” said Al, gesturing at the room. “This is where we stay every year we pass through, and even better in the big cities. Some carnival people may still sleep in the straw in their tents, but this is how we roll.”

“Not a lot of competition, you know. A pair like us comes along every two generations or so.”

“We’re working on a nice deal with Doublemint gum. Our previous manager didn’t want to go there, and that’s why he’s previous.”

“We have business degrees, took them online.”

“And he kept peeking at my answers on the test.”

“It’s tough to beat us in negotiations. While one of us is watching the words, the other is following the body language.”

“And if you think about it, together we have an IQ of over 200.”

“I don’t think it works that way,” I said, but couldn’t keep from laughing. I had to admit that their perfectly timed alternate delivery would be hard to interrupt. There was no pause to catch a breath before the other followed in.

“Still,” I said, “aren’t there times when always being the object of curiosity, and, and, fright or pity, bother you?”

“Or repulsion?” said Bert, looking thoughtful. “We know how to deflect that.”

“But even your advertising. I saw the poster outside your show. How can you let them portray you that way? You aren’t grotesque, you aren’t monsters.”

“Oh, aren’t we?” said Al, in a Boris Karloff voice, then both of them laughed. “No, no, the ads came from our marketing

consultant. We did focus groups, test market comparisons. Our gate increases by 20% if the audience is primed to be scared rather than if we were billed as a comedy routine.”

“But when we get them inside, we engage them, make them giggle, which surprises them either more.”

“If they thought they were coming for a comedy show, then the, ah, novelty of our appearance might be startling. But if they are coming braced to be horrified, then having us tease them for being half-wits sets them at ease.”

As dinner progressed I found myself entranced. Never had a date been so attentive, or for that matter even half as attentive, as this pair. As I alternated between being Liz and Beth, my speech patterns began to alternate in tandem with the dual conversations. As Liz I mirrored Al’s mildly ironic and flippant tone, while as Beth I adopted Bert’s blend of seriousness and whimsy. By now my questions were not for the newspaper, and I felt accepted enough to not worry about giving offense.

“Don’t you ever wish that you were, well, like other people? Separate individuals, not tied together?”

“Not at all!” said Bert, and Al nodded. “We wish that the rest of the world was like us. Think how much better things would be then. Less impulsive and hasty decisions, always someone there to watch out for you and keep you from doing something too stupid.”

“We’ve never been lonely, and how many other people can say that?”

“You don’t need to be taught about caring and sharing. Our lives depend on taking care of each other. When one of us dies, the other one will too, within the hour.”

I was reminded of the story of the Chinese host who settled a family dispute by placing two-foot-long chopsticks by his guests’ plates. Nobody could feed himself, but when they discovered they could feed each other, they learned the value of cooperation.

“And when one of us decides to get drunk, the other one does too,” said Al, as the third pair of half glasses of wine appeared. I had been keeping pace with them, and had a drowsy feeling that I had forgotten something in the course of the evening.

Al and Bert glanced at each other, and whispered something I couldn't hear. They leaned forward, and Al took my left hand and Bert laid his palm over my right.

"Liz, we think Mom would like you," said Al.

"We haven't met many girls like you, Beth," said Bert. "Most just want to go straight upstairs, to have something to tell their friends about. But you are someone we can talk to."

"Even if there's only one of you. But it's a very nice one."

Suddenly I realized what I had forgotten. My car, still parked at the fairgrounds. I couldn't just jump up and leave, nor did I want to. By most measures, these were two of the nicest guys I had ever met. But still, this was a first date, and I had to be at work in the morning.

"C'mon up and let us show you the bright lights of the big city," said Al, whose speech was starting to slur a little.

"Just the three of us," said Bert, giving my hand an added squeeze.

I had little choice. Eddie and the Lincoln didn't get the same accommodations as the stars of the show and were settled in at a Motel 6 two miles away. We rose from the table and tottered to the service elevator at the back of the restaurant, with me still holding Bert's surprisingly strong arm. All the while Liz and Beth were being showered with outrageous flattery

The skyline of Des Moines might be drab by daylight, but from the Presidential Suite on the fourth floor the lights from the buildings reflecting off the river at night yielded a stunning panoramic view. The room itself was elegantly, if sparsely, furnished. In particular I noticed there was only one oversized bed, and no sofa that I hoped might be my refuge for the night. And I had little time for inspection of the décor as I found myself, not just embraced, but enveloped, by a hug that halfway surrounded me. I gasped when simultaneously Liz's earlobe on the left and Beth's earlobe on the right were being nibbled, and for a moment I was disturbed at how expertly—too expertly—Al's longer hand was unfastening my buttons. That was quickly forgotten when I jolted to the thrill of having both nipples kissed at the same time, and at one point I thought I heard a voice beneath say, "Mommy."

Later, much later, as I lay awake with my chin resting

on the mutual shoulder between their two sleeping heads, feeling the unsynchronized thumps of two different heartbeats against my chest, I wondered how I could make this relationship work. Most of my friends would recoil in disgust and disappear. Mom would be horrified at first but would eventually come around, and Dad, who always advised me to marry rich, would have no problem. But what would I really be to these two? Could I ever be a full partner, or would I always be a third wheel appended to their bicycle?

In the morning, true to their word, the brothers had room service send up a lavish breakfast, and they telephoned Eddie to pick me up before the fair opened. Their shows didn't start until afternoon. "Can we see you again this evening, Liz?" said Al.

"We really like you a lot Beth," said Bert. "You're most unusual."

"That's quite something, coming from you," I said. "You're really sweet, both of you, but I don't know if this would work out. I couldn't marry you, that would be bigamy."

"We could do it in Utah," said Bert. "We have a show in Salt Lake every fall. That way you could get two rings."

"Or you could just marry me," said Al. "Let Bert be the best man."

"Which I am, by the way."

"That wouldn't work either," I said. "Then you'd accuse me of having an affair with your brother, and not even behind your back."

"Heck, just come along with us anyhow. Any chance you have a sister?"

"Fortunately not, but that would make things even worse." Eddie's knock and raspy cough sounded from the other side of the door. I stood up, reached out, and took each of their hands. "Fellows, you are wonderful, you really are. But you couldn't commit to me the way I could to you—you'll always have someone else to care for, to confide in, before me."

Al looked down, and Bert nodded almost imperceptibly, which showed me I was right. He said, "Well, that's the kindest put-down we've ever had. Usually it's just because my brother is a jerk."

The ride back to the fairgrounds was mercifully quiet.

Eddie asked no questions and his face betrayed no sign of a smile or smirk. I sat in the back, settling into the depression the brother's body had molded into the seat cushion, and wondered if I had missed my best chance for a remarkable life. When I arrived at the office in mid-morning I avoided my editor's eye and filed a one-paragraph clip for the political section, noting that the visiting Crosius brothers, age 29, of Missoula Montana were independents who strongly favored family unity.

In the four years since then I haven't been back to the fair. My mother, always pushing to get into the grandmother business, invariably quizzes me why I'm not dating, and all I allow is that I'm getting over a previous disappointment. When pressed for details, all I offer is, "It's complicated."

The single girls who come and go at the paper seek me out to unload their romantic woes, knowing they will only have a smug and condescending audience with their married colleagues. With them I allow that I once had two suitors, but had to dump them both because they sort of knew each other, which made things awkward. Last week Darlene, the new headline proofreader, was fuming about her boyfriend of six months. "I could just spit in his eye," she said. "He's so two-faced."

I patted her hand. "I know just what you mean, dear."

Ateret Haselkorn

Mittelschmerz

When the face smiles I leave the stick on the toilet tank to let Kevin know the time is nigh. It is a mixed signal, really, like beckoning a man to his own destruction. The ironic happy face marks the opening crack of the fertile window and the simultaneous rush of a cold hormonal wind that intensifies as the endocrine system overcomes its restraints. I am used to this concept, though, I pee on sticks all the time and long ago learned to follow their semaphore and guideposts without question.

The purple sticks track ovulation, signifying the pending drop-kick of my egg through my fallopian tubes. They offer a smiling guide to timing copulation and maximizing our chances at reproduction. The pink sticks detect pregnancy and indicate it with two parallel lines I've read of but never seen. The sticks build up in the bathroom garbage. My average is five per week—I like to count them when I empty the trash, I've begun to see them as a new metric for femininity. I'm also a pro at aiming my urine at anything attached to a digital reader and mentally timing three seconds accurately.

I know all about metrics since I head up big data for a major retailer. I think the retailer hired me because I had the phrase “data scientist” in my LinkedIn profile. At the time I was tinkering with my statistics dissertation, which had to do with predicting the impact of texting videos on nutrition to the smart phones of diabetics. Kevin, my husband, was a “socially conscious entrepreneur,” which meant thinking of apps, realizing they had no plausible tie to a business model, and then reading Internet comic strips for the rest of the day. He'd started out in advertising, which he'd found dishonest, then switched to marketing, which he'd found overthought, and then joined a clean tech start up right before the bust. I guess you could say that, when a major retail chain made me an offer, I looked at my graphs, then over at Kevin, who was playing Scrabble on his phone, and decided to take the job. Now my name is followed by the letters ABD, All But

Dissertation, which is fine. I already have the tools I need to crack life's code and I can leave to the academics the mystery of A Smart Phone-Based Intervention in an Insulin-Resistant Population.

Still, the sticks only have a detectable correlation with how often Kevin and I have sex and how often I want to smash things. I once thought the happy face was cute, like a young cheerleader coaching Kevin's sperm to reach new goals, but after six months without success I noticed that my PMS symptoms were triggered by the faces on those Have A Nice Day bumper stickers, like Pavlov's dog turning on his owner, ripping his throat out, and then ringing that stupid bell in his ear as he bled to death wishing he'd studied accounting the way his father had wanted.

I track everything on an app. It uses flowers and hearts to describe fertility and the act of love, respectively and respectfully. Sometimes, when Kevin and I are doing it, I think about how excited I am to log this data point afterwards. Self-tracking is a big tenet of the Quantified Self movement, and feeling rewarded is a big boost to self-tracking. I don't rely on the app alone, I also keep an Excel spreadsheet that pulls information on my body temperature, mucosal lining thickness, and sleep patterns into a Pivot table. I'm thinking of adding a chocolate consumption variable, but I don't really want to if I can avoid it.

My friend Shelly from work had twins via in vitro. I am going to see her fertility specialist in two weeks, even though Shelly said her kids ruined her life. She claims to love them like crazy in spite of the devastation.

"Are you doing candlestick pose?" she asks me over lunch one day.

"What's that?"

"Studies have shown that women who raise their legs above their heads after copulation have higher pregnancy rates." Shelly loves to say, "studies have shown." It is her mantra. Mine has become, "Let's make this one a quickie." I'm thinking about the meaning of this when she asks, "How does Kevin feel about all this?"

"Huh?"

Shelly puts down the fork holding her quinoa and salmon

salad. “Kevin. The man attached to the penis you are having sex with. How does he feel about the appointment with Dr. Foo?”

“Fine, I think.” The truth is that I forgot to ask, just sent Kevin the meeting request on Google calendar and made sure he accepted it later.

That night after sex I fling my legs above my head and place my hands onto my lower back in an attempt to maintain the candlestick position. Kevin asks me if it’s really called “embattled mongoose pose” and, when I laugh, my legs fall down and odd noises emanate from my lady parts. I’m so embarrassed that I bury my head under a pillow and ignore Kevin’s attempts to reassure me, which he doesn’t do that well since he’s laughing so hard he is crying and can’t breathe. In the end he lies on top of me and pretends to sleep on my pillow-head with his hands tucked under the base of my neck. I eventually remove the pillow and let him kiss me and stroke my hair. I wonder if this could be the causative factor behind success and how I will code it into my spreadsheet.

It isn’t, though, and I get my period nearly two weeks later, before I can even use the pink stick to look for parallel lines and bringing down my stick count for the week. Kevin and I go see Dr. Foo and, in the waiting room, we sit on a couch framed by natural sunlight because I think it will coax the maternal side out of me. Kevin plays on his phone while I admire the photos of flowers that were deemed safe enough to be hung on the walls of a fertility clinic. The place is a train station, women arriving, women leaving, women drinking tea at the counter, women, women, women. One sits across the room from us with her headphones plugged in and her eyes closed, and I realize I know exactly what she is doing—a guided meditation. I smirk as she stops to answer a text message and then resumes her pose. Then, I wonder if maybe she knows something I don’t and I should incorporate mindfulness into my algorithm.

“**S**o, how was the appointment?” Shelly asks me at work the next day. She is wearing a sweater with rainbow-striped sleeves and a neon yellow cat on the chest.

“Fine, he ordered some labs and I have to get an H-S-”

“An HSG test, I thought so,” Shelly says. “To see if your tubes are blocked with gunk. If they are, studies have shown that a small percentage of women will have their tubes unblocked by the exam itself.”

“Like Roto Rooter?” I ask.

“Yes, exactly.”

“Kevin just has to give semen for analysis, and I have to fill out like a 10-page questionnaire on my . . . myself.”

“Why are you being so cagey?” she wants to know. Shelly wants to know everything. It makes her good at her job, actually. Earlier that month, she deciphered that consumer spending in our stores was more strongly correlated with ambient light than ambient noise, as we’d previously thought. She was the only person who thought to look at sunlight as part of the analysis. When she did, it was clearly a variable that confounded the relationship between the alternate soundtrack we’d selected for afternoon shoppers and buying behavior.

“I’m not being cagey, I just don’t like saying the V word at work,” I explain.

“Ah, no cha cha talk in the cafeteria, I get it.”

I laugh and spit my brown rice across the table where we’re sitting. “Cha cha?” I manage to say. “The most musical name I’ve heard was ba-jingo.”

“Cha cha cha, cha cha cha,” Shelly says, making her arms and her upper body twist to the rhythm. It makes the cat on her sweater undulate.

“Too much, Shelly, too much.” Sometimes that woman just makes my day.

During the HSG test I feel pinned to the exam table through my cha cha, kind of like a butterfly on a bulletin board at the visitor’s station of a national park. Before undergoing this exam, I was asked to take a pregnancy test in the clinic bathroom and, as I lie on the table, I tell myself to remember to count that stick towards my average for this week even though it isn’t in my garbage at home. I ignore the discomfort of the procedure by thinking of how I will code this visit in my spreadsheet to see if my variables reflect any changes afterwards. I’ll have to make a timeline and show before and after.

Dye flows through my lower half and I see, on the TV screen, that it snakes its way through my fallopian tubes, the path clear as no excess tissue is acting as a bouncer at the entrance. I'm clean as they come. Kevin is waiting to take me home afterwards. When I re-enter the waiting room, he stands up and I see that his hair is sticking up from dozing off on the couch. Sunlight always puts him to sleep unlike, I guess, the people who shop at my employer's stores.

Even though we're in our thirties, Kevin has this eternally boyish quality that makes my heart warm and, when he opens his arms to hug me, I kiss his cheek and whisper that I love him and that my junk hurts but the test was clear. We get coffee and go to a park where I try to focus on what he is saying but my eyes keep wandering over to young, urban mothers pushing their kids in swings. The moms have greasy hair and are wearing intentionally lumpy sweaters and thick, geeky eye glasses. I wonder, when we have kids, if we have kids, whether I'll join this special club of stylish-yet-excusable-frumpiness because children take all of your time.

Shelly hosts Kevin and me at a barbeque a few weeks later. At this point, we have been trying to get pregnant for one year and we are the only couple sans-children at the party. Kevin and the men stand in a circle comparing their new cell phones and I look at the children running around wearing colorful leggings, their heads marred with hair chalk, their nails unevenly painted with polish that they chew off while spacing out. I want to scream at them to stand still and shut up. I wonder if that makes me an unfit would-be-mother, then I realize this is entirely predictable since I had the Happy Face of Mental Anguish this morning. Janine, another coworker and the mother of two little boys, comes over, which is also predictable since she either can't read expressions or doesn't understand that anger means, "Stay away."

"You look like you are in pain, Laura," she says, confirming the latter. She is wearing an earth mother, ankle-length, bohemian dress with Birkenstocks. Her children are blond and curly with names I can't remember except that they make me think of hippie communes and gluten-free granola mixed into plain yogurt.

“My stomach hurts a bit,” I answer, which is true, I’ve been having cramping here and there ever since that HSG test.

“Is it your special time?” I don’t understand what that means until she says, “I can get you some Ibuprofen.”

“No, actually, it’s too early for that.” Special is not how I’d describe my period. Persecution is likely closer.

“Oh, mittelschmerz!” she exclaims. “I was like clockwork with that stuff.”

“Mittel-what?”

“Mid-cycle pain. From ovulation. Tell Kevin he’s going to get lucky tonight!” Janine winks at me and I wonder why everyone assumes we’re trying to have kids, even though we are.

“That sounds like a German torture device,” I tell her, trying to joke around as I ponder why I’ve never heard this word before.

“Anyway,” she continues. “I brought you something.” Janine sets her son’s organic apple sauce squeezey thing down and pulls a brochure out of her bag. It has a drawing of copulating male and female bodies on the front and, just as I’m about to smack her under the assumption she’s going to hand me the Vegan Guide to Reproductive Kama Sutra, I notice the title says Bay Area Ballroom Dancers. “I heard you and Shelly talking about Latin dancing in the cafeteria, so when I saw this I thought of you.” It takes me a moment to grasp this and then I manage to say, “Thanks Janine, I need to freshen up” before I run into the house in a giggling fit. I have to tell Shelly, she’ll just flip.

The parents at the party seem exhausted and the children are misbehaved. The collective sound of their tantrums is like hearing a hundred entrepreneurs whine about not getting onto a Top 30 Under 30 List. I wonder why Kevin and I are putting ourselves through this. Maybe we should just forget it all and travel or spend our money on fancy restaurants or those ballroom dance lessons in Janine’s brochure. Then I see one little boy with dark blond hair and chubby cheeks run across the living room, pause, stand on his tippy toes to turn off Shelly’s halogen lamp, and run outside. He has the same rascally quality as Kevin and, with that one antic, he makes my chest open in a feeling of longing and sadness.

“Wilder! There you are,” I hear Janine say. So that was his name, Wilder, not Rory or Shepard or Kai. I think Kevin and I would prefer traditional, slightly old-fashioned names for our kids like Henry or Rose, but I put this thought aside because I don’t want to cry at Shelly’s party. I’ll just let it feed my bitterness instead.

I slip outside again as I’m curious to see how Janine handles a scoundrel. Wilder has found his apple sauce container and, just when I’m about to be impressed at his self-reliance, I see him smile with half of his mouth. This is an expression I recognize as the one Kevin has when he is sneaking drug store candy into a movie theater while humming the Pink Panther theme song. Then, darling Wilder points his snack at Janine and squeezes a large stream of organic goodness onto her dress. When she shrieks, I have to run inside giggling for the second time.

“Having fun?” Shelly asks.

“Great party!” I tell her.

After Kevin and I try that night, I kick him out of the room, debunking the myth that women prefer to cuddle and making it clear that his entire body becomes unnecessary once it has released the pieces that I need. Then, I place pillows under my lower half and heave my legs up into the air with no need to feign modesty or elegance. As I lie there, I wonder what else have I been in the middle of without realizing. Mittelschmerz, mittel-grocery-store-checkout-line, mittel-sentence, mittel-life crisis. Maybe I should have finished my PhD after all because I’ve missed so many causative factors in this analysis.

During our second appointment with Dr. Foo, he claims that all our tests are normal. I have plenty of eggs in storage. I think of myself as the Costco of ova, my eggs all lined up in glass enclosures wearing US Marine Corps fatigues because they are ready to deploy. Then I realize how small my eggs likely are and begin to think of them as ping pong balls bouncing into the bushes, hopefully to be found by Kevin’s troops during a search and rescue mission.

“So, if everything is normal, why is this taking so long?” I ask.

Dr. Foo leans back in his chair and presses his fingertips together. His fingers are extremely lean and his nails are completely clean. In front of him lie laminated pictures of the human reproductive system. They are completely unsexy. Kevin holds my hand. “Well, Laura. Sometimes infertility is unexplained,” Dr. Foo says.

“What?”

“There is no reason for not getting pregnant. It just doesn’t happen.” I sit, stunned. He continues, “I think you should continue to try for a few more months, and we can try intrauterine insemination if you don’t become pregnant on your own. Also, remember to just have fun.” He smiles, showing teeth as perfect and clean as his hands.

Fun? Didn’t he know that was really just for the husbands? I was hard at work tracking if my cycle length had anything to do with the weather, or pollen levels, or if our receptionist at work wore yellow. I was perfecting my candlestick pose. I had eliminated alcohol from my diet. Did any of that seem fun?

When we get home, Kevin makes dinner while I watch Shark Tank. We eat without talking because Kevin knows when to leave me alone to digest thoughts and / or food. He is very empathetic that way. It is a trait I hope our children inherit.

“What would you invent?” he asks, when the show is over. He presses his nose against the top of my head and smells my shampoo.

“I don’t know.”

“You’re going to be a great mom someday.”

I nod but don’t speak. Lately, reassurance has begun to feel as packaged as a TED talk. Now comes the part where he connects our personal hardships to a revelation on humanity. But Kevin lets his sentence lie in the room as the last words spoken for a while.

“Want to see what I invented?” he asks, making me realize I not only forgot to return the question, I have no idea what he has been doing lately. When I nod, Kevin hands me his phone and I take it with both hands to show respect for his creation. I press “Enter” on an icon of an ancient, wooden sign and am presented with the image of an old woman holding a crystal ball. She looks perfectly old-fashioned in the way

that I'd picture a fortune teller at a carnival or state fair. A cartoon-like speaking bubble appears by her mouth and the text, "What is your question?" appears in it as a raspy sound voices this question aloud. Kevin nudges me to talk.

"What is our future?" I ask.

The woman's mouth opens and closes as she whispers her reply while "Go outside" appears in the text bubble. Kevin gently but eagerly shoves me off the couch. I walk out into our tiny backyard. The phone vibrates in my hand and a constellation map appears that pivots a bit until it matches the night sky above me. "See!" Kevin says, practically dancing in his flip flops. "It knew you were outside, and figured out exactly where!" The fortune teller re-appears and says, "Adventure is a great way to harness the feminine energy of Neptune. Be sure to try new and exciting things to connect your inner, spiritual and outer, physical heroines." Then, she dissolves into nothing, leaving behind a flashing ad for a conference on embedded systems.

"Hey, ads were the only way to monetize it," Kevin says, shrugging. A surge of conflicting emotions renders me nearly dumb, so I switch to canned tech talk. "How many active users do you have?"

"Two hundred K," Kevin answers, beaming, "and half signed up during our soft launch! Users log in like three times a day, and most just want to know if they should marry their significant others."

"Really? How do you answer?"

"We dip into their social media streams. If the sentiment analysis is generally positive, and photos containing the end user and one other human body receive a high number of likes, we show two smiling emoji's standing under a huppah."

"A what?"

"You know, the Jewish wedding canopy?"

"And if it's negative you link to Tinder?"

"Good idea!" Kevin says, totally serious. "And look," he continues. "It's just been gamified!" Kevin opens the beta version of the app on his phone. "See, you can upload photos of your palm and see if your prediction matches the fortune teller's, in which case you get points. If you want, you can send your friends a 'high-five' and read each other's palms."

I'm grateful for the dark because it gives me the chance to compose my thoughts and my expression. Initially, I want to scream at him and his stupid fortune teller, but then I see how happy Kevin is with his creation and I give him a hug and congratulate him.

The next day I manage to forget about it until I notice three people sitting around me on BART, our rapid transit system, taking photos of their palms and giggling. Shelly can tell I'm livid about something and demands to know what. When I tell her, I detect a flinch but I'm not sure if it's because the analyst in her is sad or she has the app on her phone. I don't ask.

"Two hundred thousand users are a strong indication that the market needs a GPS-enabled fortune teller app. Apparently we're all seeking some kind of answers in the form of a predictive model."

"That isn't a predictive model! That is random gunk!" I try to keep my voice down.

"Look, nothing is predictive until it is. At the very least, the app is providing people with some sense of safety we all crave." She yawns and rubs her eyes.

"Tired?"

"We're sleep training. We're using the No Tears method," Shelly says, as if I'm supposed to know what that means.

"No tears for who?" I ask in all seriousness.

"Funny ha ha, Laura. It means I run in there whenever they cry even though we've spent two hours rocking them to sleep."

"That sounds tough."

"Yeah, it doesn't seem totally right to me, but some studies have shown . . . you know, whatever." Shelly presses her palms into her eyes and I put my hand on her back and give her a small rub. "I think I'm going to nap in the conference room," she says, and slugs off.

That evening I stand on the BART platform waiting for my train and refusing to look at my phone even though it keeps buzzing to remind me to do the mindfulness meditation I've been delaying. All I want is to go home and lie on the couch with my iPad propped up on my stomach. I hear an annoying, repetitive noise and spot a familiar, blond and curly-haired

little boy dribbling a kiddie basketball a few yards away. Janine's husband is sitting on a bench behind him, immersed in his phone. I'd say hello if I could remember his name.

Wilder walks towards the platform edge, dribbling the ball and looking over his shoulder at his oblivious father. When Wilder uses both hands to throw the ball down hard, it makes such a large sound and echo that a few commuters standing nearby seem to hear it despite their ear buds. Still, his dad still doesn't detect his son's departure. Wilder moves further away and raises his hands dramatically above his head, the ball poised to create maximum impact. This time, it ricochets off the floor and over the platform, landing on the train tracks below. He stares at his basketball, his lower lip sticking out and his fists by his sides. I hear the grumble of the oncoming train and get this "oh no" feeling in my chest. My legs begin moving before my mind knows what I'm doing.

"Wilder!" I yell as I shove past people. "Stop!" I don't think he can hear me since the train is really close by now, its grumble turning into a full growl. As it slides into the station, Wilder takes a step forward. I jump. Before he can lift his other leg, I grab him and propel us backward towards safety. I land on my back with him in my arms, his tiny shoulder blades pressed against my chest. We are both shaking. When the little basketball is run over, it pops and pieces of it fly into the air. A few people film it on their phones as if someone else might want to watch it on YouTube.

I sit up and hold Wilder as he begins to cry. "You're safe, kiddo. It's ok. And we'll get you another ball. Hush," I say as I rock him. He seems to calm down, if wiping his nose on my sweater is any indication. Then he rests his head on my shoulder for a brief moment of humanity, just long enough for his tiny curls to brush the bottom of my chin. I feel this . . . flash. It's a sensation that I would never know how to code into a spreadsheet, a moment of presence followed by the deepest understanding I've had in a long while. *I want this. I will do this, somehow. And I really miss Kevin.*

"Sorry! Oh my gosh, oh no," his dad rushes up to us. "Sorry! I lost him for barely a minute!"

I help Wilder up and then slowly stand, wiping my hands on my knees. I decide that, when I get home, I will throw all

my ovulation sticks into the trash uncounted.

“I was just . . . I wanted to log his afternoon nap onto my phone, I thought it would take a sec, but the app froze, and, um,” he shakes his head. “Don’t run away from me ever again, little guy, got it?” Wilder stares at him blankly. “Again, I’m so sorry,” his dad says to me. “I need to stick a tracking device to his body.”

“Just trust your instinct,” I say. “It’s like a predictive model.”

“Thank you,” he says. “Really.”

I nod and board the train home to Kevin, smiling and eager to explain it all.

M. M. Ehasz

A Shanghai Concession

A winding road in Shanghai, Fuxing Lu, cuts through the city's charming French Concession. Ninety-foot deciduous Plane trees line the curbs, sprouting green clusters of maple-like leaves that weave a verdant canopy over the residents in the summers. During this single season, a lush shield protects the Shanghainese from flashing neon lights and mushrooming skyscrapers.

One summer in the early aughts, Starbucks planted its roots in an old structure on Fuxing Lu, where it served up microwavable sweets and coffee in cups the size of wine bottles. I was renting a room nearby and this garish reminder of the States couldn't have been more welcome—I relished the insolent emblem of home. In mangled Mandarin, I'd order the largest coffee possible, sit by the window and watch the locals move up and down the block.

I shared my apartment on Fuxing Lu with Olivier, a 33-year old French-Swiss lawyer. A friend had put us in touch when I was looking for a new room. She mentioned Olivier was “a little odd” and wanted to “interview me.” I met him in front of the Starbucks. Tall and broad with a poof of blond hair, he was easy enough to spot. His eyes were sky-blue, half-closed and inattentive. I'd assumed Olivier would show me the apartment straight away, but instead he sauntered up and down Fuxing Lu in an apparent daze. Every so often he'd lob a question in my general direction. Olivier spoke a muddled variant of English—it was a version of the language where he always knew exactly what he was expressing and found it inconceivable that native speakers would ask him to repeat himself.

“So, tell me Hana, why do you want to live in China? What is so wrong with these United States?” Olivier asked.

“China is fascinating!” I said. “I've studied Mandarin but I think it would be so useful to know more of the language and culture.”

Olivier responded to my explanation with a long, spaced-

out stare. Nothing in his expression changed and he remained silent. I looked at him askance, wondering if this man might be hard of hearing. A full minute passed and then he looked me straight in the eye.

“This? This is what you want to learn?” He gestured to the street. Two middle aged Chinese men sat on stubby stools, hunched over a game of checkers. Neither wore a shirt and both sucked deeply on cigarettes. There was something about Olivier’s attitude that bothered me. I remember thinking I’d better not sound too enthusiastic about living in China.

“So, what is your job in the U.S.?” Olivier wanted to know.

“I left my job to come to China,” I explained. “I was working on Wall Street—it was really stressful. So, last December I took my bonus and moved to Shanghai.”

“Wall Street, really?” Olivier said skeptically. “And could you wear this outfit to your Wall Street job?”

I looked down. I was wearing baggy jeans that flared at the bottom and a peasant blouse. Suddenly, I felt sloppy. “No. I had other clothes.” I said. I wrinkled my nose. What a fancy pants.

“And what is it that you do here in China, to learn about the culture?” Olivier said. Yup, I detected an undercurrent of snide in his manner.

“I’m a student at Jiao Tong university,” I said. “I also translate articles from Mandarin to English on a freelance basis. Translating happens to pay well.”

Olivier nodded. “Yes, I have heard that. So, you speak Chinese?”

“I get around,” I admitted. “I’m much better with reading and writing.”

“One last question,” Olivier said. Something knowing and arch crept into his expression. “What are you running from?”

I remained silent but my nerves started firing.

“In my experience,” Olivier said, with a broad, teasing smile, “all Westerners in China are running from something.”

Anxiety swept over me as I dug deep for a smart aleck answer. Alas, I couldn’t come up with anything. So, I turned the inquiry around—an avoidance tactic with which I’ve had a surprising rate of success.

“What are *you* running from, Olivier,” I asked.

“Ughhh.” Olivier sighed and ran an agitated hand through the unruly explosion of hair. “In my case, it is a who that I run from,” he replied. “I moved to China to get away from a girlfriend. From a very crazy woman.”

“Men always call a girl “crazy” when they’ve dumped a lovely woman for no good reason,” I shot back.

He laughed. “Maybe.”

I had successfully steered him off topic. “So, what—did she want to get married? Settle down? Have kids?”

He laughed again. “Why don’t I show you the apartment now? Follow me.”

Olivier led me down an alley. Despite a lovely Deco exterior, the building was in shambles. I hopped over trash heaps toward the narrow, dungeon-like staircase that led to the second-floor landing. Olivier pointed out the fuse box in the outdoor corridor. It was rusty and the door dangled by a single hinge. “This regulates electricity for the entire building,” he said. We walked past a row of apartment doors all of which had heaps of stinky shoes piled at the entrance. From inside one apartment I could hear the shrill pitch of domestic discontent—a woman shrieking at her husband in Shanghainese dialect. Despite the surrounding squalor, the interior of Olivier’s apartment bordered on lovely. Olivier showed me his master bedroom, the small room that would be mine, and the large tree outside the living room window. The trunk of the tree was as round as a barrel and pale branches sprouted from every direction.

“This tree gives me peace,” Olivier said. A wistful shadow passed over his face. “It is very special. Some days I come home from work and stare at this tree for an hour. Then I can function again.”

It was a very pretty tree. Most Shanghai apartment windows faced other Shanghai apartment windows.

“My parents can’t believe I’m living here,” Olivier told me. “They visited last year and my mother felt faint in the staircase. She said, ‘Olivier, we put you through the nicest schools in Switzerland, we paid for your law school. And now you live in this slum? What did we do wrong?’ I was laughing when she says these things but she was so serious. She kept putting the back of her hand on her cheeks and mumbling

about ‘wasted skiing lessons.’”

I loved living with Olivier. He told me he had a younger sister my age who he’d always ignored. To atone for this transgression against flesh and blood, Olivier vowed to dote upon me as an elder brother should. On Saturday afternoons, Olivier and I would sit on the fake wooden floor drinking Rosé and watching pirated DVDs of various American television series. The television was old and small. It rested on a rickety IKEA stand by the living room window, framed by Olivier’s favorite tree. Olivier loved American television, but he especially loved the show *24* and we both adored the main character, Jack Bauer. We agreed Jack Bauer was Kiefer Sutherland’s finest role. On one occasion, our bottle ran dry at the same time as Jack’s emotional breakdown in the *Season 3* cliffhanger. We looked at one another in despair.

“What should we do now?” Olivier asked. He was distraught.

“I don’t know,” I said. I guess we should get our acts together.” Although I wasn’t quite sure what that phrase meant it was something I’d often heard my mother say.

“How about this,” Olivier suggested. “I will open another bottle of this wine and you discover *Season 4* of this wonderful American television show.”

I smiled and agreed to the plan. Olivier was infinitely wiser than my mother. “Here, here, take this.” Olivier tried to give me renminbi to buy the next season but I waved him off. The entire season would cost the equivalent of five dollars.

I knew Olivier had sent me to fetch the next season so he could avoid the chaos outside. The air was sweltering, bicycles whizzed by and the street teemed with people yelling in Mandarin. An overwhelming smell of rotten eggs assaulted my senses. At the corner, I spotted the DVD salesman, his wares spread on a ramshackle, plastic table. At the very tip top of his lungs he shouted in English, “Watch! Bag! DVD! Watch! Bag! DVD!” Then he saw me approaching and his excitement soared. “Lady! Lady! Watch! Bag! DVD!” I crossed the street amidst honking horns and swerving taxis to exchange some basic greetings with the vendor. He steered me toward the pile of conspicuously fake Louis Vuitton handbags. But, my eyes rested on the treasure I sought. Tucked underneath

The Best of Jean-Claude Van Damme, I spotted a flimsy cardboard box stamped with the image of Keifer Sutherland's hardened mug. Across Keifer's bulky chest I read the printed words, *Sweaty Four. Season 4*. I paid for the set and returned upstairs where Olivier was waiting for me with a freshly poured glass of Rosé.

It is a universal truth, not often enough acknowledged, that all excellent roommates rarely occupy the shared living space. Olivier was seldom around. His law firm kept him busy, he travelled frequently and he had a fiancée, Nicola. One evening, Nicola dropped by unexpectedly. I remember being impressed by this stylish, dark-haired Croatian beauty in her shimmering mini-dress. I, on the other hand, was splayed on the couch in my favorite sundress—the one Olivier referred to as “the nightgown”—and he was sitting on the floor. We were deep into *Season 4*. A passenger train had just collided with an explosive-laden truck. Nicola greeted me politely, but I caught a whiff of something unfriendly. Or maybe she was in a bad mood. She informed Olivier she had a work function and his presence was requested.

“No, Olivier, I won't get fired if I don't go, but it would make a bad impression. Would you please get up off the floor and come with me? My co-workers are starting to doubt that I even have a fiancée.”

Olivier didn't turn away from the television. “You want that I should go dressed like this?” he said, face glued to the tiny screen. He was wearing pristinely pressed slacks and a button-down shirt. “Nicola, I need more notice for a party. I'm in the middle of a program here.”

“Olivier, we can just watch this tomorrow,” I said, trying to diffuse the swelling tension.

“No, I will have to work late tomorrow. I wish to watch tonight.”

“Ok, that's just great, Olivier,” Nicola said. “You do understand that we are engaged to be married, right? Part of what that means is that we do things for each other. Another part of engagement means we live together. Grow up and extract yourself from this weird roommate situation. Living with someone ten years younger than you doesn't make you

ten years younger.”

“Um, seven years younger,” I said. I had always enjoyed correcting people. Also, I felt Nicola’s comment was the sort of remark that should have been made behind my back.

“I didn’t mean any offense to you,” Nicola said. “It’s not personal, it’s just embarrassing that Olivier refuses to live with his fiancée.”

Truth be told, I thought she might be right. It *was* weird that Olivier was living with me. At this moment, it occurred to me Olivier might be afraid of marriage. Or at least, that he might not want to marry Nicola.

Olivier rubbed his eyes. “How about this, Nicola. I will finish *24* tonight and tomorrow I will take off early and we will have a romantic dinner. Would it be okay? We will discuss our wedding. I’m sorry, I am just not in the mood for a party.”

Nicola crossed her arms over her chest and looked away.

“Fine, Olivier,” she said. “We’ll have dinner tomorrow. I’ll go to the party alone.” Nicola turned and walked to the door. Her high heels clacked obtrusively on the fake wooden floor.

“It was nice meeting you,” I called out from the couch.

Olivier smiled at me with a roll of his eyes.

“I’ve never witnessed an eye roll where the iris completely disappears into the socket,” I said to him.

As I drifted in and out of sleep that night, I thought about Olivier and Nicola’s upcoming dinner. I wondered where he would take her, how he would make her feel better and what they would talk about. Would they laugh together? I realized I didn’t want him to go to the dinner with her. I wanted him to take me instead. I could understand why he thought it would be smart to marry Nicola. She was a successful professional, very beautiful and presentable. Without ever having met Olivier’s mother, I could guess that she adored Nicola.

Time has a way of drawing itself out slowly when you’re a westerner burrowed Shanghai, like a piece of pink taffy stretching out to a filmy transparency. A week feels like a month and a month feels like a year. In fact, no one considers a Shanghai expatriate fully seasoned until she’s lasted an entire year in the city of twenty million. I don’t know exactly what passed between Olivier and Nicola at their “romantic

dinner” but it must have been significant. Not long after, sometime in the fall, Olivier moved out of our apartment. I know it was fall because I was picking bits of leaves and twigs off my jacket when he delivered the news.

“So, Hana,” he said, “I am going to move in with Nicola. It is the right thing to do.”

I looked away from him and said nothing. As he yakked away about wedding plans, I focused on plucking the autumn debris from my coat and scarf.

“Well do you?” he asked.

“Do I what?” I said.

“Do you want to take over my lease? As I’ve been explaining it should be a simple transition.”

“Yes. I’ll take it over,” I said. “I love this apartment.”

“And you are sure you can pay for it?”

I attempted to mimic his zombie eye roll.

I hated to see Olivier go, but I loved moving into the master bedroom. From the window upstairs, I could look down onto Olivier’s tree. To justify renting multiple bedrooms, I spread my scant belongings throughout the totally unnecessary second room. I simply could not bring myself to search for another roommate.

My first Shanghai fall merged into my first Shanghai winter, which was one of the coldest in recorded history. Natives and expatriates alike saw snow hit the city for the first time in decades. During this winter, I realized my adored apartment was cheaply constructed. There was nothing I could do to keep warm. A single six-foot heating unit stood in the corner of the living room. It was new and plastic and shiny but no match for the building’s 70s-era wiring.

On a frigid January evening, I trudged home through a light flurry from the teahouse. My cheeks burned with winter wind as I turned the long silver key in the lock. Bursting inside, I foolishly expected to encounter a blast of heat. But the insulation in Communist-era buildings was laughable. A half-eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich I’d made that morning rested by the sink. I poked it with my gloved finger—frozen solid. I hurried to the ogre-sized heater and set the temperature to seventy-eight degrees, a number I associated with good weather. The machine started to grumble and

sputter out heat. I gathered myself on the couch with a blanket to watch the numbers tick upwards. Before hitting the magic number, all the lights in the apartment went out. The overworked heater heaved an exasperated sigh and then shut itself off with a vexed clunk.

For a few minutes, I sat in the dark. I watched my own breath and wallowed in self-pity. Propelled by the possibility of freezing to death, I shed the blanket, grabbed a lighter to serve as a flashlight and stumbled down the dark hall to the decrepit fuse box. My cracked, frozen fingers struggled against the wind to flick on the lighter. When the flame eventually caught, I flipped every switch stuck in the “off” position. Sparks flew from the fuse box as I snapped switches by the fistful. I thought I heard someone shout upstairs. When I saw a warm glow from the crack underneath my front door I hurried back into an apartment brimming with lights and blaring television chatter. The heating unit read sixty-three and started to climb.

I rubbed my hands together. They were chapped and scaly. The familiarity of my own hands in this miserable setting made me long for home. A hollow feeling rose from my stomach to my throat—I desperately wanted my family. At that moment, my flip phone buzzed. The small device hopped excitedly on the desk. I looked over with hope at the inch-long digital screen. It lit up and black letters flashed “Olivier.”

“Hello?”

After long pause he responded, “Ciao, Hana. It’s Olivier. How are you?”

“I’m good,” And now that Olivier had called, I felt good.

“Great.”

I heard mumbling in the background.

“Nicola and I want to invite you over to our new place for dinner next week. We will make pasta. You will come?”

“Yes, of course!”

“Excellent, do you have a paper? I will tell you the address. Wait. Never mind. I will email you the address. Print it and give it your cab driver, ok? You can take a cab. I am still in French Concession. Ciao, Hana.”

“Qù nǎlǎ?”
I handed the cabbie Olivier’s address.

We jolted down Huai Hai Lu, stopping for some of the red lights and ploughing through others with abandon, a rush of cold air pumping through the cracked backseat window as we steered through traffic and pedestrians at breakneck speed. The cab took a sharp right onto an alley and pulled up under an imposing stone gate. Olivier’s home was straight out of 1920s Shanghai. The stone gate opened onto a narrow courtyard, where a skinny two-story brick townhouse loomed. I paid my fare and exited.

Standing outside the door I felt utterly serene. There were enough fragrant trees to mask the street smells and muffle the honks and cries from the main road. I knocked loudly on Olivier’s grand entrance. Inside, some metal object clattered to the floor bringing with it an avalanche of French swears. The door swung open. A white apron splattered in red sauce greeted me warmly. Olivier’s hands were covered in oil and the thin blond waves spewed from his head in all directions.

“Hana! So, happy you are here,” he said, giving me kisses on both cheeks. “I am just having a terrible accident in the kitchen.”

“You look like you’ve been electrocuted,” I observed.

“Olivier, get in here,” I heard Nicola yell from the kitchen. He shrugged at me with the look of a man who has become domesticated.

“Here, sit here,” he said gesturing to a large, modern looking chair. “Be comfortable. We are almost ready with the dinner.”

From the living room, I glimpsed a kitchen that could barely squeeze two people who were getting along with one another. Nicola and Olivier bickered in audible whispers about the current condition of the pasta and how one defined “al dente.” A few minutes later the couple emerged smiling. Nicola carried a steaming platter of Rigatoni. Olivier followed behind her with the meat sauce, bowls and forks for everyone. We sat on the floor around the coffee table. Nicola tugged her skirt as low as it would go and bent her knees demurely, arriving on the floor without revealing a thing.

“I’m sorry we don’t have any normal chairs yet, Hana,” Nicola said. “We ordered them from Europe about a month

ago but obviously, they haven't arrived. And, I'm also sorry about the way I acted the last time we met."

"Please don't worry about it," I said to her. "I understand why you were upset. And it's big of you to apologize—most people don't."

"How about some wines for everyone?" Olivier asked.

Nicola said, "Olivier, no. Not on a weeknight."

"Nicola threatens to make me healthy," Olivier shrugged.

Nicola smiled as she pulled her thick black hair away from her face and braided it with long, practiced fingers. From silver tongs she served us each a hill of pasta and drizzled sauce over the noodles in an elegant spiral.

"Your house is such a classic," I said to her.

She beamed under the warmth of my flattery. "Yes, I love it."

"Is it a Shikumen?" I asked.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I've been writing a series of articles called *Interiors of Old Shanghai*. I've toured a couple of Shikumen with my editor, Zoe. Apparently, the 'shikuman' translates to 'stone gate.'"

"Oh—that is totally fascinating," said Nicola.

Olivier sucked a noodle into his mouth loudly. "Yes, fascinating," he said.

"Olivier!" Nicola was all indignation. "I'm really interested in interior design," she said.

I paused and looked around the barren interior.

"I know it looks empty now, but we are hoping to get our dream furniture as wedding gifts."

"When are you guys getting married?" I asked.

"We just set the date for February 18!" Nicola said.

"Oh soon!" I uttered automatically. Then I felt stupid.

"Yes, so very soon," Olivier said.

"What about you, Hana? What else is new?" Olivier asked. "Are you still enjoying my apartment?"

"Yes, I still enjoy *your* apartment, Olivier." I told him I'd been freelancing at another magazine in Pudong.

"Oh, what a pain," Nicola sympathized. Pudong was a district of Shanghai located across the Huangpu river, home to all the newest, tallest skyscrapers. The region offered a mixture of cheap office space and expensive gated communities. Some

expats referred to it as Pu-Jersey. “I can’t stand Pudong. I know it’s part of Shanghai but it seems so culturally bleak compared to Puxi. Don’t you think?”

I happened to agree but Olivier snorted.

“Culture in Puxi,” he said blankly. He looked up at the ceiling in feigned contemplation and chewed deliberately on a piece of Rigatoni. By the time he finally swallowed, the pasta must have been liquid. “Hana, is an expert in Chinese cultures,” Olivier said with raised eyebrows. “I need some informations on the culture here—I seem to miss it all.”

“I thought I had just given you some ‘informations’, Olivier,” I joked.

If you looked carefully in Shanghai you could find stunning cultural gems tucked away in corners, like Shikumen houses in long quiet lanes. Yet, the way of life was so different, the longer I spent abroad the more empathy I developed for the jaded expat, my former roommate.

“I’m going to get myself more pastas”, Olivier said. “Anyone else?”

Nicola and I were both finished and I mumbled something about needing to head home.

“Wait, before you go, I’ve got to show you something.” Nicola said. She stood up, grabbed my hand and led me down a corridor to a heavy wooden door. “This is the most special part of the house—maybe you should tell your editor about it.” Nicola opened the door to reveal an enormous bathroom with a vaulted spa. Black, gleaming marble covered the entire floor and walls. Green tiles lined the shower area.

“What are those?” I asked, pointing at the tiles.

“I think jade. The owner had it refinished a couple of years ago.”

“Really beautiful,” I said.

“Please tell Zoe about it!” she said as she led me back to the front of the house.

“Ok, I will.”

“Yes, please tell your boss about our breathtaking toilet,” Olivier called out from the kitchen, where he was drying the dishes with a floral hand towel.

I arrived at home with a stomachache. Was it the pasta? As I tried to locate the source of the discomfort in my gut, I

visualized Olivier and Nicola's impending wedding. And then I knew. The very idea of those two spending forever together made my stomach turn. They were completely wrong for each other. Nicola was nice, sure. And she was a good hostess. But she was also a social climber and materialistic. Olivier, on the other hand, had a sense of humor and laissez-faire attitude toward existence that distinguished him from most of the humans I knew. His ability to abstract himself from the silliness of life was a characteristic we shared. I thought he'd be much happier spending forever with me.

I had to act. I would tell Olivier what a mistake he was making. Possibly, I could make him see that he could be happy with me.

From bed, I texted Olivier. "Hi! Dinner tonight was fun. Let's meet again soon."

"Yes, it was great to see you. We should not let so much time pass," he texted. I took this rapid response as a good sign.

"Would you want to meet me at Cotton's for dinner next Monday?" I texted.

A good ten minutes went by before I received another text. "Sure."

Cotton's was a restaurant in the French Concession that catered to the expat crowd. Surrounded by eight-foot brick walls and Plane trees overhead, the space protected the urban-weary expat with a chilled-out villa atmosphere. It was the go-to place for anyone unused to Chinese food and not planning to become acclimated. Not everywhere in Shanghai could a person indulge in a burger and a beer.

I'd been sending Oliver all the wrong messages. Walking around the house in my pajamas with knotty hair, wasting weekends drooling by the television and engaging in lively debates had sunk me into the sibling zone. Tonight, Olivier would make no mistake about the type of relationship I envisioned for us. I dressed for the occasion, arrived at Cotton's early and ordered two vodka martinis, up.

Olivier showed up at the restaurant in work clothes. I watched him scan all of Cotton's looking for me and then do a double take when he realized I was the woman in the black dress with a plunging V-neck and a flawless up-do. He

hurried over to my table. I noted he forgot to kiss me on both cheeks.

“Hana, you are so dressed up,” he said. “I did not recognize you.” He slid into the chair across from me and nearly knocked over his glass of water in the process. “Really, I cannot get over this change in your appearance. Are you going to a party tonight?”

I felt Olivier’s gaze rest on my collarbone and in a fit of excitement I started to fiddle with the silver chain around my neck. “Olivier, I’m not going to a party. I got dressed up to see you.” I paused. The next part I had rehearsed. “I’m not sure how to say this so I’ll be blunt. I think you and Nicola are totally wrong for each other.”

Olivier burst out laughing. Laughter was not on the list of reactions I had anticipated.

“What’s so funny,” I said.

“Nothing. I appreciate your interest in my personal well-being, Hana,” he said. “Yet another woman wants to tell me how poorly I plan my life.” Olivier shook his head and looked to the depths of his martini. Two green olives impaled by a plastic sword toothpick drifted inside the glass. “And who out there is ‘right’ for me, Hana? Where shall I find my heart’s mate?”

“You mean soulmate,” I said.

“Yes, of course. Where do I find my soul’s mate?”

I gave him a long meaningful look. And then he understood. A sheen of sadness obscured his face.

“Oh, Hana. You do not wish to be with me. I am old. You are only twenty-five with many years ahead of you for having fun. Me, I am thirty-three. Old and finished.” He smiled. “I’m not joking. All my friends are married except for me. Most of them have children. Are you ready to have a baby, Hana?”

“Are you, Olivier?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Nicola is thirty-two. She is ready. I cannot hang on to my youth forever.”

“Olivier, that’s crazy,” I said. “You don’t have to get married and have a baby because everyone you know has done it. Actually, it’s not crazy. It’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Olivier grimaced and tipped back the rest of his drink.

“You really don’t understand, Hana,” he said to me. “Maybe

you will someday.” He placed a 100 Renminbi note down on the table.

“Have another drink or two on me,” he said as he stood up. “And then please go find a party to dance at in that stunning dress. Forget about ancient Olivier. He returns home so Nicola can yell at him.”

After that night at Cotton’s, I saw Olivier once more in Shanghai. I was strolling through the French Concession on the way to meet a friend when he and Nicola passed me. The two rode on matching red bicycles, adorned with bells and baskets. The farm-style two-wheelers were so outrageously out of place in Shanghai I had to laugh. But the couple peddled along the road, beaming, the sunshine glinting off their bikes. They looked like newlyweds in love and I hurried to turn a corner without being noticed.

“Hana!! Hellowoo.”

I’d been spotted.

Hi Olivier, Hi Nicola.” I waved from across the street.

We are going to try the new Patisserie on Zhengshan Lu. You will join us?” Olivier yelled over the traffic.

“I wish I could but I have to meet someone,” I said. “Have a great time and let me know how it is!”

“Ok, no problems. Well, we will make dinner plans very soon, okay?”

“Of course,” I said, smiling.

“Ciao, Hana!”

“Ciao, Olivier! Ciao, Nicola!” I waved again and watched their shiny bikes disappear into the mass of people.

Kitty Bleak

Sooner or Later

The dirt everywhere in Oklahoma is red, something to do with an excess of iron. It hits you suddenly, like the sight of blood, oozing from the jagged edges of a sinkhole or bubbling up from potholes in the road. The houses are red too, low and brick. They hunker down in a vain attempt to blend in: maybe the next tornado won't hit them. But there is no such luck. All of the roofs, even on the oldest houses, are new.

The roads are not new, but patchwork, more pockmarked than a pubescent teenager. Some holes are clumsily filled in by asphalt of another shade of gray, while others are left gaping until the next round of insanity.

The signboard outside a church we pass says, "Satan intends evil. God intends good." Nature doesn't care either way. It hasn't gotten the memo about morality, ripping up people's houses whether they've been saintly or sinners, not caring about the mega industry that's put so much effort into paving over its skin as it shrugs off the asphalt. It is indifferent also to my wishes, plowing through my every effort to beat it back as it plants a fleshy little seed in my belly.

It's almost fourteen weeks now, the size of a lime, the internet says. I picture its too big head, its translucent skin. I catch myself resting my hand on the top of my stomach, though there's not much to see. I wish I felt angelic instead of stupid. But nature has chosen its vessel. Life begets life; willingness is irrelevant.

My grandparents don't meet us at the door. We come in, single file through the side entrance in the carport—me, Mom, Dad, and my brother—as they rock methodically in their matching recliners. They have a perfectly nice front door around the side, but this is the South. Only the preacher and maybe the president (if he's Republican) stand on formality. So instead we wander past the tools and the beat up cars, everything pink with dust, past the hot water heater,

rumbling away. I've come to associate that humming, bone rattling feeling with these visits.

"Long trip?"

My mother takes point, though these are not her parents. "It wasn't too bad."

"Well, there's pound cake and key lime pie there in the kitchen."

"Oh, that's ok, we ate on the road."

"It's no trouble, get yourself a snack."

"Really, we're alright for now."

"Well, here then, let me just get you a piece."

Grandma is up now, creaking across the kitchen linoleum, her elbows bent upward behind her back. The muscle and fat hang together off the bone, like the slipping, tender meat of a cooked chicken.

Despite her protests, a slab of pound cake is thrust into my mother's hand.

"This looks great, Jean, really. But we aren't hungry just yet."

"Don't worry, I'll get you some milk. Did you want ice cream?"

I escape while I can and drag my suitcase to the back bedroom. When I return, Grandma has made me up a plate.

"So, how's wedding planning going, Lacy?"

"Good, it's not too bad."

"Glad to hear it. Where is the man of the hour then?"

"Oh, he's got a big deadline next week, so he had to stay and work."

"Well that's good he's a hard worker. We just wish we got to see him more."

I say something non-committal before changing the subject.

"So, Grandpa, have you gotten any new stamps since I was here last?"

"Not since then, no. It's been a slow couple of months."

I drink bottled water I brought myself. I am the definition of conspicuous, with my crackling plastic. But the water here is tainted, arsenic and other poisons from the red sediment leaching in. My grandparents still drink from the tap. Bottled water is expensive.

Mom breaks the silence. “Jean, did you get new couches?”

“Oh no, it’s just some of those couch covers. They were having a fabric sale at Hobby Lobby. You know, how they do?”

I roam the kitchen while the adults talk, literally bumping into my brother, who is doing the same. I feel young when I come here, as if I am a snake trying to crawl back into its skin. I peel it on, holding the brittle edges together in to mimic the original shape, then walk around carefully, holding my breath.

“Did you see the dessert in the freezer?” my brother asks. He is two years younger, still a junior in college. I envy him his free time, the late nights spent philosophizing, the blissful expectation that after college anyone will care what you have to say.

“No, does it look good?”

“Yeah, but it’s weird.”

I open the door, and mist coats my cheeks. Inside is a rectangular cake pan, the contents hidden by a covering of tin foil. I yell back at my Grandmother, interrupting.

“What kind of cake is this?”

“Oh, it’s just one of those salads.”

“Salads?”

“Uh huh, it’s got orange jello and banana slices. It’s got some cherries in it, oh, and some walnuts.”

I lift the corner of the foil to reveal a flat, dense surface, white and iridescent like an arctic plain. There are maraschinos and other candied fruits thinly concealed, lurking beneath the surface. This is what my family calls a salad.

“Looks great.”

Before dinner, we say grace. This is my grandfather’s big moment, more words in a row than he will say the rest of the trip. He always starts the same: “Dear God. Thank you for this food, and the gorgeous woman who prepared it. Even if she does use too much salt.” Always, Grandma sighs and rolls her eyes, with not even a pretense of levity.

After this, Grandpa goes around the table, naming each person and saying something he is thankful for about them. With the men, it is usually how hardworking they are. With the women, how good looking. When he reaches the

grandchildren, my brother is first.

“Thank you, Lord, for Connor, who is turning into a fine young man. Thank you for giving him courage and a hard working spirit. We know you have big things planned for him.

“Thank you for Lacy, who has grown up to be a beauty, just like her mother. We also thank you for her fiance, even though he can’t be here with us. We know you’re watching over him, wherever he is. We ask only that you lighten his load at work next time around, so he can make it for the holidays, and we can get to know him better.”

Once grace is dispensed with and guilt firmly cemented, we eat.

“Did you get enough rolls, hon?”

“I’m fine, Grandma, thanks. I really don’t need any more.”

“Well of course you don’t *need* more! Here’s another one for you.”

The salad makes an appearance as well. There are special plates for it, little flower-rimmed tea saucers that Grandma has been keeping in the china hutch. It sits atop them in perfectly straight squares, melting secretly along the bottom, so that if you try to cut off a bite, the whole thing slides away from you like it’s on an ice rink.

Spurred by the sugar rush, my father finally speaks. “The new shed looks nice, Dad, did you hire it out to have it done?”

“Well, nothing fancy, just paid of a couple of them Mexican boys cash to put it up. They sure do know how to work. I thought later I should’a just paid ‘em in hot sauce and chimichangas, they’d probably like that better!”

I tense, and I hear Connor’s intake of breath. We exchange glances, a secret liberal handshake. But I can’t even help myself, can’t summon the courage to tell them how I’m in the family way, barely a ring on my finger to cover my shame. I’ve got no business intervening.

Dad seems not to notice our reaction. “What you need to do is get some of them Indians from these reservations. They’d probably do it for a bottle of whiskey.”

My grandpa wheezes like an old accordion. “Yup, that’s true, I should’a thought of that.”

For dessert, we are treated to another piece of snow white coconut cake.

I bitch to Michael after dinner. “You should’ve seen it. It was like a competition to see who could be the most racist. Actually, I’m glad you weren’t here. I’d be mortified.”

He laughs, though there is a several second delay. “Yeah, I’m sorry. I know how that goes.”

Silence on the phone always sounds funny, pregnant with almost-static, always as if someone is listening in.

“What are you up to?”

“Oh, just thinking about dinner.”

He is doing something else. I can tell from the pauses and half answers.

“How was work today?”

“You know . . . it was fine.”

I think I hear typing, the faint clacking of shallow keys against his laptop keyboard. He is always attempting to multitask; he can’t bear the thought of just sitting and talking on the phone. Meanwhile I sit crossways on the bed with my feet against the wall, staring at the ceiling like a lovestruck teenager.

“Anything interesting?”

“Not reallyoh! Actually, this thing happened with Kellerman. He was—god, I was so pissed!”

The typing stops. He is on a roll now. Like high tide at a beach with no wind, he has worked himself into an isolated frenzy.

“Uh huh, that sounds really annoying.”

“Who does he even think he is?”

“Yeah, totally.”

“Damn, I hate that guy.”

“Me too, babe.”

Something has happened to us lately that I can’t seem to undo. There is a lack of pressure in our relationship, a leak somewhere from which I can feel the blood seeping out of us, oozing in a way that is nothing like the red dirt. That blood is pulsing, raging. It is single-minded in its fight against suburbians and manifest destiny. This is more of a slow drip, like an IV, carrying us away in little plastic tubes. We are fading silently, going gently as if we are already corpses.

I am relieved when we finally hang up the phone.

The next day, I ride with my mom and grandmother to the local flea market. The ground is flat here and the grass sparse. The trees we see are mostly strategic, meant to flank neighborhood signs in order to make them appear majestic, *gated*, but instead they stick out like Charlie Brown Christmas trees.

We pass several prefab houses being built, the skin of the construction workers almost as red as the dirt. There is a poster board sign in front of them that reads, “Coming Soon: *OK Living!* Family Housing. No Credit, No Problem! Apply Today!”

“We’re trying to stop that company,” my grandmother explains, nodding. Her padded chin wobbles, lending her a dignified air. “We don’t want a bunch of low income people coming up in here. We need that tax money to pay for upkeep of roads and such. We have our standards.”

Just then our car lurches in and out of a fissure in the asphalt, narrowly escaping two pot holes. I grapple against the car door for leverage.

“So how often do you fix them?” I ask.

She laughs.

We reach the store on the town square, and a bell dings as we enter. The building is rough, made of concrete and cement blocks, with the ceiling struts exposed. It has the feel of an unfinished basement, cool even in the heat of Oklahoma summer, complete with a faint mildew smell.

Grandma has a booth off to one side, from which she sells hand-embroidered handkerchiefs with Bible verses on them and sweatshirts onto which she has laboriously puff-painted pictures of cats. I finger one of the handkerchiefs, running my thumb over the bright flowers. It reads, in careful, thin stitches, “Love is patient, love is kind. 1 Corinthians 13:4.” The first “L” is big and looping, running through the rest of the script, so that the “n” and the “d” in “kind” are hard to make out.

“You want that one for Michael, sweetie? I’ll bet he could use a handkerchief.”

“Nah, that’s ok, Grandma. I don’t want it to get snot on it and everything.”

She nods and turns back to what she was doing.

Michael and I met at a college party, an auspicious beginning, fueled by Miller High Life and the dank, enveloping humidity of a Arkansas night in August. He arrived late, something I later learned was a habit that would have seemed calculated if it didn't always take him by such surprise. The group I was with erupted with cheers upon seeing him, standing and dissolving into back-slapping hugs.

"Where you been, man? It's been dull as hell without you!"

"Ah, man, you know, just working. Been up at Enterprise, renting cars. You'd be surprised how much they pay up there."

"Ah yeah? Well damn, man, I'm glad you're doing well!"

It is a woods party, someone's idea they think will stop the cops from finding us. The seniors arrive late with Michael, but they don't stay. Dropping off the boxes of beer, they fidget and look over their shoulders while they collect the cash, charging us extra for the drive out to "the middle of nowhere." I pull out my wallet, but Michael waves me away.

"I got you," he says.

And just like that, I am caught. There is a purity to his actions, a selflessness in taking on my debt. And already he is turning back to the departing seniors, expecting nothing, thinking nothing of it.

"So, do you come out here a lot?"

"Not really. You know, I kind of make the rounds. Try to see as many people as possible."

"Oh wow, Mr. Popular over here!"

He laughs. "What can I say? Gotta give the people what they want."

"Lucky them."

Someone calls his name from across the clearing.

"Sorry, one second."

"You weren't lying about being popular."

"Nah, I just haven't seen him in a while. We've got to catch up real quick. Be right back."

I wait almost thirty minutes, but by then he is gone, moved on to another party. I don't make it into his rotation again for several months, but when he reappears, or rather I appear, it's like he's won the lottery.

"Hey hey, *there* she is!"

I am flattered he remembered me. Not only that, I am his

favorite person. His is smiling, baseball cap cocked to one side. He meets me at the door of Jake's house and hugs me before I can even make it in. I feel his body laid out against mine, arms enveloping my shoulders, my head cradled against his chest as if we have known each other a long time. He smells like Axe. The shape of his bones feels right against mine.

He lets go. "You want a drink?"

"Sure."

"Alright, let's get you one. Come on, I want you to meet my friends."

I don't realize until later that he is already drunk. I don't realize until after we are engaged that he didn't remember my name. There was a girl when we met before, someone he was "talking to" that I didn't know about. Now he is off the hook, and I am there. Like so many things that hadn't mattered before, it is one of those details that is suddenly of great importance.

I wander the booths at the flea market while Grandma and my mother talk. I should go help, ease the conversational load between in-laws, but instead I rub the dust off of glass lamps filled with red oil and shoestring wicks. I touch the heads of creepy ancient dolls. I pass woven baskets and blown glass figurines, moonshine jugs and the kind of heavy, dark wood furniture that really dates a house.

A common trend is shabby-chic, artfully distressed signs with wanderlust quotes and hideous candle holders made cool in matte white. This is the kind of thing Michael loves. He wants a loft with painted-over brick and frayed-edge countertops. He wants a view of a city skyline and the kind of square footage people only have in movies. I used to love his ideas. My pragmatic self could take a leg off and get swept along for the ride. But now we need to be saving money, being smart. My patience is wearing. The baby is going to be expensive.

We always used condoms. I didn't like hormones, and IUDs were expensive. Occasionally there would be a slip up, but it wasn't a big deal. I took the Morning After

Pill, and it was all cleared up, like allergies or a UTI. Until it wasn't.

It was so cliché, the way it happened. It was like a scene out of any daytime sitcom.

We are sitting on Michael's plaid thrift store couch, watching The Walking Dead. A bloated zombie is ripped in half. Blood and bits of pulpy matter spray across the screen. Michael shifts, rearranging my feet, which are in his lap.

MICHAEL: Hey, have you gotten your period in a while?

ME: Yeah, I just had it on . . . I'm not sure, actually.

MICHAEL: Maybe you should check.

ME: Check what?

MICHAEL: You know, like, your calendar or something.

ME: *(laughs)* What are you talking about? I don't keep a calendar.

MICHAEL: You don't? Seriously? I just assumed you did. You should really know when it is.

ME: What are you, my dad? It's none of your business, it's *my* lady bleeding.

MICHAEL: Well actually it is my business if you wind up carrying *my* goddamned kid.

Awkward pause. Close up of my shocked face. Zoom in on Michael as he looks at the floor.

MICHAEL: *(quiet, remorseful)* Don't you think maybe you should just take one of those tests?

Cut to ad. Next week (spoiler) the test is positive.

“There you are!” Mom had found me, sniffed me out among a bunch of handmade pins, the kind you put on backpacks or berets. “Thanks a lot for the help, Grandma and I have been having a really great talk about *M*A*S*H*.”

She blows her bleached white-blond bangs out of her eyes, then cocks her head when I don't immediately respond. Warning signs go off in my brain. Intruder alert. Sadness detected.

“Ah right, sorry about that.” I try for joviality but can't tell if the smile makes it to my eyes. “I was just really busy over here, trying to choose between the diaper pin and this Elmo.”

My mom reaches out a finger, scratching at the threads of the diaper. It's depicted as the old fashioned cloth kind,

with a silver clothespin in one corner. “How cute! You know, I sometimes miss having you little ones running around everywhere, making messes.”

My throat closes up, and there is a sudden flash of heat across my eyes. I could tell her all of it now, just fall to pieces in this little store, but I am terrified. If I stay silent, everything is fine. It all goes back to normal. If I tell her, anything could happen. Yet it feels so good, leaning over the edge, that first feeling of weightlessness before freefall.

I open my mouth, but I see Grandma there, lurking with her papery skin and her finger so gnarled she can't take off her wedding ring. She turns her head, one cloudy blue eye peering at me as if she already knows, and I bail, making a break for the bathroom.

We thought, under the circumstances, it would be best to have a quiet engagement. Michael took me out to dinner, Italian, and had the waiter put the ring in a glass of sparkling grape juice. I knocked over the glass trying to get it out, sticky soda liquid spreading across the tablecloth.

“Wow, way to ruin the moment.”

He pokes me to signal it's a joke, but I'm not in the mood. He's ordered a bottle of real champagne for himself and nervously fills up his glass. There is an awkward pause.

“The ring is a little small, I know, but I figured you'd want to get engaged fast. You know, so you still look good in the pictures and everything. Before you turn into a balloon.”

He tries another smile that I don't return.

“Yeah, thanks a lot. That's really what I want to be reminded of right now. How fat and terrible I'm going to look. Sorry this is all so gross and inconvenient for you!”

“Whoa, hey, I didn't say that!”

“Michael, what are we even doing? This is never going to work, you shouldn't get married because of a kid. We're such idiots, what were we thinking? We—”

“Shh, Lacy, stop!” He reaches across the table, his sleeve squelching in the juice, “Hey, I know this isn't what we would have planned, but we're gonna be ok. Things are good at Enterprise, I can pick up a few extra shifts, and then we'll have a little squirt running around. Whatever the kid is,

we're gonna spoil it rotten. What matters is we love each other, right? C'mon, stop crying. It's all gonna work out. We're gonna be the cutest, Instafamous parents, and our kid is going to wind up all screwed up from it, like Macaulay Culkin. And then we'll just stick him in movies and live off of the royalties. It's gonna be fine, ok?"

I laugh and burst into tears, and he pats me and makes shushing noises from across the table. I feel better for a while after that.

Dinner this time is fried okra and heaping mashed potatoes, flaky biscuits and chicken-fried-steak. Michael is trying to get ahold of me, sending messages that I put off replying. There is a mounting feeling of terror since the flea market, a weight on my chest and a pressure in my ears that grows and grows. I feel as if my skin is stretched too tight, like the button on my pants will explode and my ribs will burst from my chest at any moment. I tell myself it will be easy, like stepping through a door. Anything is better than this.

Mom and Grandma are talking again, more talk about prices and coupons, trading exclamations over deals on craft items. There is a lull in conversation, and before I can stop myself, I blurt, "I'm pregnant."

There is a pause. There is no gasp, no tinkling of breaking glass. There is only a pursed-lip, sucked in kind of silence. My mother frowns, and the men pause a moment before resuming eating with more intensity than before. Only Conner reacts. His head snaps up, and his eyes dart around the table. Then he ducks again, and there is a head-bowed moment of waiting.

Grandma finishes chewing and sets down her napkin. She clears her throat. "Well, I don't know why you had to bring it up. Right now, when we're having a nice dinner."

"I just . . . thought you should know." Blood pounds dully in my ears. My voice sounds far away.

"Know? It's not as if a body could miss it! Being old don't make us blind. At least you're marrying him, Lord knows why you feel the need to swan on about it. But then, I guess kids do things differently these days."

She stabs at her icy slab of dessert, the ambrosia salad

skating away and tipping over the edge of the saucer. It lurches and then lies half erect, one corner on the tablecloth, the bulk of it jutting up against the rim of the plate like a sugary, pink iceberg. As I watch, half a maraschino cherry falls out, flashing red as it gains momentum. It rolls off the table and falls wetly onto the floor.

Grandma hisses, sucking in her teeth. “Gosh darn it. Now I’ll have to bleach the tablecloth again.”

Barbara Fischer

From the Gentlemen at the Bar

Melinda and I are drinking Margaritas at Applebee's during our traditional post-Christmas debriefing. "Want to hear something crazy?" Melinda says. "The whole time Susan was in the hospital, I couldn't find my glasses."

Susan, Melinda's daughter, spent the week after Thanksgiving at Magee Hospital after she totaled her car on a cement balustrade on her way home from a sorority party. She fractured both ankles and needed surgery to reset bones and insert titanium rods. She's still convalescing in her childhood bedroom at Melinda's and won't be returning to her dorm at Duquesne this semester. Melinda, naturally, is still beside herself. I can relate. I have a daughter, too. Becca, five years older than Susan.

"I was dead asleep when I got the call," Melinda says. "Before I went to sleep, I was reading *Love in the Time of Cholera*—which you lent me, remember?"

I nod. I've been nagging her to read it for ages. We're big fans of magic realism.

"I distinctly remember turning down the page—sorry, I know you hate it when I do that—then taking off my glasses and putting them on the nightstand where I always put them. And then the whole surreal nightmare thing—the call at 2 a.m., racing to the hospital. But I didn't tell you the part about my glasses. My glasses were not on the nightstand, so off I careened in my readers from Kresge's."

"I vaguely remember wondering why you were wearing the harlequins," I say. Melinda had called me from the hospital and I'd met her there.

"When I finally got home, I started looking for them for real, inside *Love in the Time of Cholera*, under my pillow, in the pockets of my robe, and then in crazy places—the refrigerator, the dishwasher. They were nowhere. And then I found them—the very day Susan came home from the hospital. Guess where they were."

I don't even try.

“On the nightstand next to my bed,” Melinda says. “Where I always put them.”

“Stupid stress,” I say.

“You don’t understand. My glasses were *not there* when I got the call.”

“Then where were they?”

“They’d disappeared. Sometimes things just disappear—for a time. Case in point, your car at the mall.”

“Okay,” I say. Melinda knows this story.

The Saturday after Thanksgiving I’d gone directly from Magee Hospital to the Century Mall in Monroeville, the biggest mall east of something or other. I spent the day shopping for Christmas presents with an almost feral concentration to distract myself from the very real possibility that Becca wouldn’t even show up to open them.

And then, a more immediate worry. I could not find my car. I wandered up and down the rows for half an hour while an Arctic gale pulled at my plastic bags. Finally, I had to admit it. My car was gone. I went back into the mall to report it. The security guard, a twelve-year-old playing dress-up in a policeman uniform, said, “I wish I had a dollar for every shopper who thought their car was stolen.”

I went back into the cold to look one more time. And there it was, my ’07 Camry. I’d taken it as a sign. My car had been miraculously returned to me. So might Becca. Maybe my daughter *would* show up on Christmas to open and appreciate her gifts. And that’s what happened, more or less.

“So where do things go when they disappear?” I ask.

“They never existed in the first place,” says Melinda. “The whole universe is just a fabulous construct of our own making. And sometimes, when we’re especially overwhelmed, we lose little pieces of it. Like my glasses and your car. We forget how to imagine them.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “This Margarita seems pretty real to me right now.”

“Thanks to your own personal universe.”

“Maybe the universe hid your bifocals so you couldn’t see how banged up Susan was. A very special holiday gift from the cosmos to you.”

“Oh, Alice,” says Melinda, “even without my bifocals, I

could see how banged up she was. Face it, Pollyanna. The universe doesn't give a rat's ass about us."

I'm not so sure I believe this. I haven't told Melinda the whole story of my Christmas yet. She knows the highlight from our brief phone conversation on Christmas Eve: Becca did come home. But there's another part I haven't told her yet, and this piece snaps neatly into place right next to hers. Not that two little puzzle pieces form anything like a picture, but how true, how satisfying, when one piece out of a thousand, a million, snaps neatly into place next to another.

Our waitress, a young, cheerful blonde with an energetic stride, brings us another round of Margaritas. "From the gentlemen at the bar," she says.

"See?" I say. "The universe does so care about us."

Then I tell Melinda my Christmas story.

Becca came home at ten p.m. on Christmas Eve. I hadn't seen her since her birthday in March. I didn't know where, how, she was living. How could a mother not know where, how, her child was living? The mothers in my Al-Anon group ask themselves these same questions. What did I do, what did I fail to do, *why* can't I make my own child better? You can't, says Al-Anon. You are powerless. Not the answer I was looking for when I started coming to meetings, but like any answer, strangely comforting. *I am powerless! So much better than admitting I've failed.* I'm sure a more spiritual person would have a deeper understanding of powerlessness, but for me, it's been a way to feel less guilty about giving up.

Becca looked good. A little too thin, slightly hyper, but mostly, good. Nothing like the other times. We spent an hour of perfectly lovely quality time while she opened her gifts, each and every one, she insisted, the exact thing she always wanted. She gave me a charming homemade coupon for pinking shears. The last time we spoke, weeks before, I'd complained that my blunt scissors gnawed the seams of the quilt I was working on, and she remembered. Gift enough.

By eleven o'clock, I could see that Becca was getting antsy. She said needed to go to Wal-Mart right that minute to get me a real present. Of course I suspected. No, knew. I said the usual things. That having her with me was gift enough. That the best gift she could give me was *not* going out.

But out she went. I could have tried harder to make her stay. But it was Christmas Eve. She'd come home. Would she, ever again, if this holiday degenerated into yet another dysfunctional scene, the two of us screaming at each other in the driveway? And maybe she really did want to get me a gift. Maybe this was her way of making amends. Maybe she really was working the steps.

"So which was it?" says Melinda. "Denial or Christmas miracle?"

"You tell me," I say, and tell her the rest.

An hour and a half later, as I was dozing and jerking awake in front of the TV, I got the call from Annette, Becca's best friend from high school, the one Becca always swore the Vodka, the pot, the paraphernalia belonged to.

"She was seizing!" Annette shrieks into the phone. "Grand mal! I couldn't bend her arms and legs for a full seven minutes! I turned her on her side and made sure her tongue was free, but it went *on* and *on*. For a full seven minutes!" She'd timed it. The length of a seizure, it turns out, is crucial. Annette took the pre-nursing curriculum in high school. Now she works at Ed's Tattoos While You Wait. "Talk to her," Annette pleads. "She won't go to the hospital. Tell her she needs to go to the hospital."

I hear the chaotic blur of a phone being passed. A long moment, then, "Mommy?"

"Sweetheart," I say. "What did you take? It's important. Tell me."

Ecstasy, she says.

"Where are you?"

"Whether or not. Something."

"Becca. Put Annette on."

I tell Annette to call 911 and have the ambulance take Becca to the University Hospital (which sees patients without insurance)—I'll meet them there. I hear low urgent mumbles in the background.

"I don't know the address here," Annette says. "Just . . . come get her. The Weathervane Apartments in the city. I'll meet you out front."

I realize no one is going to call an ambulance for Becca. But, a small miracle, I know where the Weathervane Apartments

are—in a rundown section of Pittsburgh, twenty-five miles away. I've been there before, on another Christmas Eve, years ago.

I drive the twisty two-lane road over Algonquin Mountain way too fast. In the city I switch lanes, tailgate, swerve through gas station parking lots to get ahead of slow moving cars. I almost want the police to stop me. They can give me an escort, call an ambulance—and possibly arrest Becca when, if, we find her—because of course there are drugs in that apartment. Is that what I want? Becca in jail instead of a hospital? I drive like a maniac and leave it up to the universe.

Of course Annette is not out front. I hit her number on my cell. “I’m here,” I say. “Where are you?”

“Becca’s doing better now,” says Annette. “She says she doesn’t need to go to the hospital.”

“Tell me where you are.” Every word is its own sentence.

Annette gives me confusing directions. Bottom level, halfway down the block on the K-Mart side, around the back, up a few steps, down a few, off to your left, a broken lantern. I race up and down half-flights through a labyrinth of breezeways straight out of an M.C. Escher print. All the lanterns are broken.

The last time I was there, Becca was eight. I was still married to her father. I’d spent weeks shopping and sewing for the family we adopted from the Angel Tree at Community Action. Becca picked the tag. Two little girls ages seven and nine. My big and little sisters, Becca said. Crazy, I’d had the same thought. Becca is my only child. I miscarried the child that might have been her big sister, though of course Becca doesn’t know that, nor that I miscarried again a year after Becca was born, after which her father and I stopped trying, on many levels.

I was supposed to meet the social worker in charge of the Angel tag family at her office to hand over the presents, but at the last minute she had a more pressing emergency. “The rule rather than the exception on holidays,” she said with an airy laugh. Highly irregular, but could I deliver the gifts? Otherwise the kids would have nothing for Christmas. She gave me the family’s name, directions to the Weathervane Apartments in Pittsburgh, and complicated instructions

about how to find this family's unit within the vast complex. It was tricky, she said, intentionally so, 3B next to 6F or else not marked at all—you'd think some drug lord devised the system to confuse the police. Again, that airy laugh.

I dragged my bags of gifts down one cement corridor after another. The place seemed oddly deserted—there was no one to ask. I knocked on a few doors, but surprise, no one answered. Give up, I told myself. You'll never find the family you're looking for. Go home, to yours. What were they doing that very moment without me? Shaking presents to guess what was inside? Putting tinsel on the toy train tracks to make sparks? Watching *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* for the hundredth time?

An elderly woman dragging an oxygen tank opened her door as I was lumbering by. "The Kerrs?" she said. "They're right next door! I'll knock on their wall." A few seconds later the door next to hers cracked open and there stood a thin, shirtless man fitting dentures into his mouth.

"I'm delivering these for the social worker," I said cheerily. The man opened the door just far enough to haul the bags inside, but before he pushed it shut, I caught a glimpse of two little girls, tangle haired, wide-eyed, barefoot on the concrete floor. How beautiful they were, these ghost children of mine, these sisters Becca might have had. I heard their squeals as they plundered the bags. Later, the social worker told me that when she did her wellness visit, they were still abuzz at the wonder of it. They'd seen Santa, they told her, and he was a *lady*.

Maybe Annette's directions clicked in my head, maybe other universal forces were at work, but I find her, Becca, my beautiful girl, slumped on a futon, shaky, befuddled, vomit caked in her long blond hair. A man sits next to her, his arm draped proprietarily around her shoulder. There are others in the room besides Becca, Annette, and this man, but I can't focus on them. They might as well not exist.

"Mike," says the man with his arm around Becca. "Sorry we had to meet under these circumstances." He has a shiny shaved head and a jaunty goatee. Small-boned, confident, polite to mothers—I know his type. Something expensive glitters in his ear.

“Let’s go,” I say to Becca. “I’m taking you to the emergency room,”

“They’ll put me in jail,” she mumbles.

I dial the University Hospital emergency room. No, I will NOT hold. “My daughter just had a seizure,” I say. “Grand mal. Seven minutes long. She’s afraid you’ll call the police if you find drugs in her system. Will you?” I hit speaker.

Bring her in immediately, says an officious male voice. A seizure of that duration has most likely caused brain damage. The police will not be called. It’s not a crime to have illegal drugs in your body. On your person, yes, but not in your body. Anything in your body is governed by doctor/patient privilege. She needs to be seen. Immediately.

“Where’s my shoes?” says Becca. I fit her trembling feet into her high-heeled clogs and push my shoulder under her arm. We stand. She leans against me like a crutch. I bend to pick up her purse; she bends with me. Together we hobble out the door. Mike doesn’t get up.

By the time we get to the hospital it’s after two a.m.—Christmas Day, technically. The intake nurse behind the bulletproof glass insists that Becca sign in herself since she’s too old to be my dependent. On the Reason for Being Seen line, Becca writes *seizure*. She spells it correctly. I can’t say why this breaks my heart. “Grand mal. Seven minutes long,” I add. We’re told to take a seat.

The waiting room overflows with the casualties of Christmas present. Every seat is occupied. The walls are lined with the stricken and their significant others sitting or sprawling on the floor.

We’re called back almost immediately. Everyone turns their resentful eyes to us. Who are we to be so privileged? *Are* we privileged? Of course. But is that why we’ve been called back so quickly, or the length of Becca’s seizure? Privilege, I pray. Let it be privilege.

Tests. More tests. Blood drawn, sensors stuck on her skinny torso, an IV piercing the shy blue vein in her left hand, the beep beep beep of machines telling her body’s story in a language I don’t understand. Her face is so white. I see freckles I didn’t know she still had. They faded as she got older, but now, here they are again. Someone gives her a shot of something. What?

They can't tell me without her consent, HIPAA regulations, doctor/patient privilege . . .

"Oh fuck, just tell her," Becca says in a low, slushy voice. *Oh fuck just tell her* counts as consent, apparently, even when the patient is high on yet another substance—this time a major dose of Ativan.

It turns out Becca had a "bad reaction" to cocaine—meaning she almost OD'd. No obvious damage to her brain or heart—a small miracle given the duration of her seizure. And no trace of Ecstasy. Cocaine, opioids, alcohol, marijuana, yes. But no Ecstasy. This according to the attending physician, a handsome young resident who in a perfect world would be Becca's over-protective boyfriend, but who in this one looks much too young to be a real doctor.

"She lied to me," I say to Melinda. "Seconds after her brain jack hammered for a full seven minutes against her skull, she still had enough brain function to *lie* to me. The good news? Her brain still works like always. The bad news? See above." Melinda doesn't say anything. That's how good a friend she is.

The young resident tells me to take Becca home, follow up with her primary care physician, get her into rehab, pronto. I want to say, can you write me a prescription for a magic wand?

Much later, a nurse comes into our curtained cubicle with discharge papers, a vial of Ativan, a prescription for more, and colorful printouts about free and private rehabs. I unstick the plastic EKG tabs that litter Becca's torso, help her out of her hospital gown and into her tee shirt, and once again, fit her feet into her high-heeled clogs. I drive home with Becca slumped against her seat belt, heavily asleep.

The sun is just rising when I get to the top of Algonquin Mountain. Far below, our town sprawls like a miniature village around a train set. I pull onto the shoulder and turn off the ignition. All is quiet.

"Every Who down in Who-ville . . ." says Becca. I assume she's talking in her drug-induced sleep, but no, her eyes are open. She's awake. Of course she's being ironic, but when I reach to start the car, she rests her hand on mine as if to say, no, not yet. We settle back. The sun rounds the horizon and melts the shadows below. Together, we watch Christmas Day arrive.

“We couldn’t have sat there more than ten minutes,” I say to Melinda, “but during that little bit of time, things came back to me. The way she could recite *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* when she was eight. How she’d sometimes say exactly what I was thinking the exact moment I was thinking it. All the good . . .” I take a long shuddery breath and start again. “Oh, Melinda. I think I forgot how to imagine her.”

Melinda takes a long swallow of her drink, mostly melted ice now. The Margaritas courtesy of the gentlemen at the bar sit untouched in a puddle of condensation. One each is our limit when we’re driving.

“Christmas miracle, definitely,” Melinda says. “Still, doesn’t it suck how something really . . . *sucky* has to happen before the universe tosses us a miracle? Becca nearly kills herself but at least she’s back in rehab. Susan nearly kills herself but at least she’ll walk again—with a limp. You’d think the universe could do better, miracle-wise. Why all the *at leasts*?”

“Because that’s what we pray for,” I say quietly.

“You pray? Really? Sorry. I’m still majorly pissed at the universe for letting shit happen in the first place. I know that makes me sound whiny and entitled. I know I should be grateful, joyful even, especially since your prayers . . .”

“Becca’s not in rehab. I don’t know where she is.”

When I pulled myself out of a dense, dark sleep to check on her a few hours later, Becca was gone. Also gone: her grimy gym bag, her vial of Ativan, her prescription for more. Not gone: the printouts about free and private rehabs, all her Christmas presents.

“Oh, Alice,” Melinda says. “The universe owes you one big fucking miracle.”

The universe, of course, doesn’t owe us a thing. Still, it has its moments. The way it turns us toward the light with each new day; Becca and I on Algonquin Mountain, watching it happen, together; Melinda’s hands in mine, the salt from our Margaritas chafing our wrists.

Wendy Cohan

The Sweetness of Cowboys

*A*pril According to my cowboy jitterbug partner, who hails from Lincoln, Montana, Ted Kaczynski, aka, the Unabomber, was not the strangest resident in town, but actually somewhere mid-spectrum.

“Why? What was he like?” I asked Cal, wondering by what criteria he’d determined this.

“Well, Ted could make pretty good eye contact. He came to the library regularly, and he was an excellent math tutor to our junior high kids. Genius-level smart. We couldn’t believe it when the FBI busted him. Thought it was a conspiracy, because Ted seemed like a decent enough guy. Bit of an introvert, though.”

This was the kind of conversation I’d never imagined having before moving to Montana, before I pulled up my city roots and changed my life completely.

I met Cal one early spring night at the Union Club, which isn’t a dive bar, although it’s dim interior and aged booths might initially give that impression. As I waited for my drink, I glanced at the happy couples sitting all around me, as far as I could see. As the band launched into Guy Clark’s, “Ain’t Gonna Sing No Lonesome Tune,” one of my favorites, I wandered alone onto the dance floor, swaying to the music and looking around hopefully. Sitting at a table near the back were two gentlemen my age. As the song ended, I wandered toward their table, drink in hand. I’d never done this before—asked a stranger to dance. But my feet shuffled in their direction, my mouth opened, and the words tumbled out.

In a heartbeat, this handsome silver fox with a handlebar mustache jumped right up. “Right on, Darlin’” he growled. “I’ll take you for a spin.”

“Cal” and I set ourselves up on the dance floor as the band started into an original Russ Nasset tune. Somewhat awkwardly, we arranged our hands, positioned our torsos, and began the in-and-out seesaw of the jitterbug, our hips

bumping lightly. I glanced down at my feet: *right, left, back-step, right, left, back-step*. Cal was a strong leader. He explained that he danced in only one style, “Missouri River Cowboy Jitterbug.”

“I keep my feet mostly planted, and use my ‘throwing arm’ to twirl you out and bring you back in. I won’t step on your feet,” he promised me, “as long as you keep ’em out of my way.”

We jitterbugged slow, we jitterbugged fast, and we started getting good at the basics. We were well-matched in height, with the top of my head reaching about to his bushy eyebrows.

Cal said, “You’re a pretty good dancer,” which I found hard to believe since I was thirty years out of practice, and I could still hear that critical voice in my head telling me that I had no sense of rhythm or coordination. I told it, firmly, to shut up.

At the end of one particularly energetic number, Cal pulled me in and planted a loud, smacking kiss in the middle of my forehead. Then he threw back his head and laughed. At one point, he turned me around and pulled me back against his chest, our arms still entwined. We rocked back and forth that way for a few bars, before he un-pretzeled our arms and sent me spinning out again.

Cal’s arms were lean and lithe and covered with fine blonde hairs. His shoulders were broad, and his hips and waist were narrow. Older than me by a few years, he had a strong frame, but it looked like no one had been feeding him lately. If I took him on, I thought, I’d want to bring him home and fatten him up, just a little. But, when you have been hurt as badly as I have been, this possibility seems beyond one’s capability in every respect.

I leaned back into a dip, gazing up at a pair of sparkling blue eyes in the nicely-weathered face of a man I’d only just met. During the band’s break, Cal related his history. He’d been many things, but, mainly, the foreman of a large cattle ranch on Montana’s Eastern Front. As I watched, he hand-rolled his cigarettes and sipped ever so slowly on his whisky and water, his manners courtly, in the way of a cowboy of the last century—like the good guys you see in old Westerns.

Cal’s silvery hair was long enough to touch his collar, and he had the drooping mustache of Sam Elliott. His voice was

deep with a hint of gravel, but it rose in pitch with excitement. As he walked me to my car at the end of the evening, he put his hand on my elbow and leaned in close. “Shoot, Darlin,’ I like you.”

I looked sideways at him and asked, not coyly but in a direct way, “What do you like about me?” Because it had been so long since any man had said these words to me.

“Well,” he said, “You’ve got good muscle tone. That long muscle that runs up along your spine? I held onto that all night.”

There was only one sensible choice to be made the first time I met him, and I made it.

June

Friday evening after work, I took my dog Wylie for a run through the fields of yellow grass and sweet clover at Kelly Island. Just before the sun headed over the horizon, I sat on a downed cottonwood log, bleached silvery smooth by years of Montana weather.

Wylie propped himself against my knees, gazing out at the riparian forest, ears up and alert for sounds of wildlife beyond human hearing. I rubbed little circles on the top of his head and reached around to bury my fingers in the thick hair on his chest. Wylie leaned in closer, ninety-five pounds of canine comfort. The silence was interrupted only by the calls of woodpeckers.

I let thoughts come to me, and I let them leave. Like the birds flitting above my head. Like butterflies. There was no hurry. This was the state of mind I desired: no hurry—no hurry at all.

As June blossomed into July, my new friend Cal and I continued dancing together every week or two. His solid presence was warm and comforting, and he became a kind of crusty, no-bullshit mentor who always spoke the truth.

“I don’t think men are attracted to me.”

“*Look in the mirror, Sweetheart.*”

“I have a lot going on right now.”

“*Call me when the lightning storm is over.*”

One thing I never allowed myself to do was to lay my

head against his chest when we danced to the slower tunes. *What if I wanted to leave it there?* Cal smelled deliciously like a combination of quality pipe tobacco, leather, and wood shavings, so sometimes this was harder than you might think. Cal, with his cowboy clothing and slightly old-fashioned sensibilities, was just completely foreign terrain from every man I'd ever dated, and I didn't have a compass. After thirty years of struggle and a failed marriage, I no longer trusted my navigation skills anyway. It seemed to me that I was better off alone, even though Cal was also an environmentalist and a registered Democrat, who didn't even hunt anymore—in Montana.

One night, following a horrendous, botched, root canal, I called Cal in a Percocet-induced fog: "I have to take my toilet out because the guys are coming in the morning to install my new floors. What do I do?" I asked, secretly hoping he'd charge right over and take care of the problem so I could sink back into dreamland.

Instead, he patiently talked me through shutting off the water valve, holding the handle down until the tank was emptied, disconnecting the toilet from the tank, and the bowl from the wall. Requiring far more time than it would have taken to drive over here and do it himself, Cal patiently broke the steps down for me, as if he'd removed and installed a hundred toilets with his eyes shut. He didn't just jump in and do the messy work for me, which I respected. I needed to stand on my own two feet.

I proudly carried the whole thing in pieces out to my front porch, scraped the remnants of gooey beeswax from the floor and then from my hands, and hauled myself upstairs for a long, hot shower. As I drifted off to sleep with an ice-pack against my jaw, my phone chirped out a text from Cal: "*Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale.*" I smiled as I drifted off to sleep, grateful to have my own leathery, silver-haired, tobacco-chewing Yoda, who told me, often, "Sweetheart, you have everything you need."

I was grateful for Cal, but I was also searching for the other members of my new tribe. Soon, I joined a hiking group and a backpacking meetup. Breathing hard, I summited a few peaks and survived a blustery, weekend backpacking trip,

which prompted me to fill in the blanks in my arsenal of outdoor gear.

Last summer, when I left the bright-blue home I had lived in for twenty years, the comfortable nest where we raised our two sons to adulthood, I brought with me only half of the cook-kit, all four of our inflatable pads, and the water purifier. Clearly, I was not thinking clearly.

I woke up early, threw on my khaki shorts and a T-shirt and headed down the highway with a ripe nectarine in my mouth, determined to get to the members-only REI garage sale early enough to beat the crowd.

Following the stream of fit, tan people in the door, I headed over to the storage bins filled with perfectly good, recently-returned merchandise. I scored a Sierra Designs sleeping bag, 100% goose-down, and a half-price two-person tent in matching mossy-green hues.

“Honey, I’m home . . . ,” I called out to the dog, who had been patiently waiting for my return. I found it consistently rewarding to have someone in my life who was always this happy to see me. I hauled out my backpacking gear, which had been spilling out of the coat closet, ever since the door fell off in its struggle with the vacuum cleaner. My new tent went up easily. I inflated my old Thermarest and tossed it inside, followed by my new sleeping bag, and a paperback I’d just started reading. K 103.3 FM—“The Trail” kept me entertained while I assembled a snug, little camp in my living room.

Dropping my shorts to the floor, I tore off my sweaty T-shirt and pulled over my head a gorgeous, cotton knit dress in little rivulets of blue and green, like a mountain stream. My one splurge. Then, I crawled into the tent and snuggled into my sleeping bag, sinking into three-quarter inches of warm, Gore-Tex-covered air. Patting the tent floor, I called the mutt to join me, since he was standing there wagging his tail in hope. And I needed his comfort, too, because I suddenly realized, until a week ago, I’d only ever gone camping and backpacking with my husband, and then our children—as a family. Now, things would be different. Once Wylie was settled, I turned onto my side to nap and dream. No one appeared to tell me this was odd behavior for a fifty-six-year-old woman on a

perfectly warm July day.

Stuck is an unproductive place to be—so, it was time for me to devise a stone with which to kill a bevy of birds: ease my loneliness, indulge my need to care for others, tap into a new flow of information from the Universe—and make some money. After a couple of trips to the home goods stores, I opened the two remaining bedrooms in my small house to Air BnB guests. “Aspen Grove Cottage” quickly became the new, economical place to stay in Missoula.

In a few short months, I welcomed dozens of Forest Service employees, peach-faced college students, world travelers, digital nomads, Buddhists, and even one lonely, newly-divorced and attractive male just my age. My new home, painted in vibrant colors and filled with Mexican pottery, was now rich with interesting conversations and classic breakfast smells: dark roast coffee, alder-smoked bacon, freshly cut oranges. Strawberries. The simple action of inviting strangers into my life brought me exactly what I was craving: *Movement. People. Connection.*

Wylie looked at me as if to say, “Duh, Mom. Why didn’t you think of this sooner?” Air BnB brought benefits for him, too: *Strangers to sniff and endless belly-rubs!* And at least a dozen five-star reviews for “world’s sweetest dog.” One visitor called him “a gigantic ball of happy,” and I completely agree.

Things were definitely better, yet I still felt like I was sitting on the banks of the river of life. I could see the rolling water but still hadn’t gotten my feet wet. One late-July morning, I went hiking in Pattee Canyon with one of my favorite guests. Susan was a happily unattached female in her forties, here for a week to check out Missoula as a potential relocation spot. Our conversation led me to believe that Susan understood what it means to be stuck.

“I think you need to surrender,” said Susan, a practicing Buddhist. “Just start saying “yes” to every opportunity that comes your way—and see what happens.”

According to Susan, a very unhappy and stuck person named Michael Singer began his own “Surrender Experiment.” And, of course, it totally transformed his life and led to a best-selling book. As he said “yes” to the many, strange opportunities that

fell across his path, curious and delightful things began to happen. Well, wouldn't some delightful be delightful, right about now? I thought.

Only a few days later, on a random Thursday night, I stopped into the Union Club. Mike, the friendly doorman, asked me if I'd come for the open mic comedy, which took place the first Thursday of every month. "Gonna do a set, are ya? It looks like a pretty good crowd tonight," he said, encouragingly.

"Uh, I hadn't thought about it. I don't have anything prepared. I've never done anything like this . . ."

Mike shrugged a lanky shoulder. "Give it a try. It's a pretty easy audience . . . might as well go for it."

Because I wanted to be brave instead of stuck, I walked over and introduced myself to the hosts. Then, I nervously found a seat and awaited my turn. Fifteen minutes later, in a shaking voice, I began, "*I drove all the way to Great Falls to meet someone from Match.com, in February. I wouldn't recommend it . . .*"

I talked about my life as a mother, and as a newly-divorced, newly-transplanted woman of a certain age. It was all true—every word:

"I've learned that if a guy can't pick you up for a date because he has half an elk carcass in the back-seat, he's probably not good at prioritizing or time management. And, possibly, hygiene."

I ranted about guys with too many guns, guys who think they can stop time with their minds, and guys who wear ankle bracelets, and not the decorative kind. And for some reason, people began to laugh.

Half-a-dozen women high-fived me as I left the stage and the bartender handed me a free drink called a "Dark and Stormy," which, at that point, I really needed. My body was vibrating with new energy, and that was it. I was hooked.

One Friday night in late summer, I walked into Draughtworks to meet up with my friend and dancing partner, Cal. There he was, the handsome devil, wearing a close-fitting denim work shirt that looked as if he were born in it, and bearing the clean scent of fresh sawdust. He'd even stopped smoking.

We sat at a table near the door, ready for a quick escape if it got too crowded, but we had the entire back corner of the bar

to ourselves. Soon we were up dancing to the sweet, rich voice of Carolyn Keys, in a place where no one usually dances, and just like always, it felt so natural. I leaned in close, speaking right into his ear.

“You know, it’s kind of strange, but it feels like we’ve been dancing together forever, not just a few months.”

Cal smiled with his spark-filled blue eyes and seized the opportunity to spin me out again. After a pleasant two hours, the band began wrapping up. We sat, sipping on warm root beer, no ice, no straw—a reasonable facsimile for a hefty pint of Draughtworks’ Last Rites Mexican Chocolate Porter. (Cal and I both hate the taste of beer.) It was finally quiet enough to talk, and just when we were getting into it, a buzzed young lady came up to us on her way to the bar.

“You two were bringing the thunder,” she roared. “Now, are you gonna take her home and make sweet, sweet love to her?”

Cal and I hadn’t crossed that bridge, and who knew if we ever would? Covering my blush of embarrassment, I turned to Cal, “did you pay her to say that? He jokingly pulled a wad of bills out of his wallet, but by then the drunk girl had left us and was on her way to top up her tank.

It turned out to be a busy summer, dancing with Cal, dipping my toes into standup comedy, hosting Air BnB guests, and fitting in as many mountain hikes as I could. I climbed Sleeping Woman and St. Mary’s peaks, hiked to Crescent and Heart Lakes in the Missions, my favorite mountains, kayaked the Bitterroot and Blackfoot rivers, hiked every inch of Pattee Canyon, and most of the Bitterroot Trails, too. The Universe, and Cal, both seemed to be telling me, “you’ll be just fine.” I believed it was the natural state of human beings to be modestly happy. And I was working very hard at being happy.

S*eptember*

Russ Nasset and his band were back in great form, and since we were early, Cal and I had the dance floor to ourselves. I loved wearing my new cowgirl boots, slick but not too slick, and incredibly comfortable. (The lady at the boot store said she can always tell she’s made a sale when the customer pulls on a pair of boots and says, “ahh . . .”)

Almost effortlessly, Cal made all the other men in the bar look like sticks in the mud, I thought, as I caught the envious eyes of women tracking us around the dance floor. I felt lucky, and happy, to be here with him. When the last slow song of the night began to play, I moved into his arms. I laid my head lightly on his shoulder, just for a moment. I wanted to know what it felt like. I knew perfectly well I was crossing a boundary, breaking a rule. After all, Cal took his dancing partnerships seriously, and he'd been a gentleman, for months, now. But he didn't say anything, just gently pulled me closer. I breathed in his unmistakable scent—and I liked imagining that he breathed in mine.

Cal walked me to my car. We kissed once and hugged tightly. The wind was whipping down Hellgate Canyon, literally freezing my cheeks. I snuck my arms around his back, beneath his jacket where it was toasty warm. Because we were so close in height, his lips just naturally found my neck for a few, delicious moments. We pulled apart a bit reluctantly. Incredibly, we still hadn't talked about where we were going with this, other than one awkward moment after dancing at Draughtworks, when Cal whispered dangerously in my ear, "Take me home, or turn me loose." Then, he had turned on his heel and headed for his car, without a backward glance. Message received.

I knew that Cal had limits. I had limits, too—physical and emotional. I knew how much love I had to give someone, but I was afraid to risk my heart again. Cal and I already worked as friends and dancing partners. We respected each other. For now, maybe that was enough, I thought, as I drove over the bridge heading home.

My phone beeped as I pulled up in front of my house. "*Thanks for the dancing, Sweetheart.*"

While on an autumn backpacking trip with a new Meetup group, I thought about Cal entirely too often, all alone in my tent, shivering in the long, cold night. And I had a serious bone to pick with those Sierra Designs people. What were they thinking rating this bag to twenty-three degrees? I only survived because I stopped for Pho on the way home—chicken noodle soup is curative in every culture.

As I had lain awake that frigid night in the Rattlesnake Wilderness, I heard a strong, clear voice in my head: “just because something *can* happen, doesn’t mean it *should*.”

Cal continually impressed me in all sorts of ways: by thanking the band for playing each night we’ve danced, stopping to greet one of his employees in a crowded bar, welcoming a friend of mine who stopped by our table to say hello. And he was the best dance partner a girl could ask for. Maybe even in the whole history of cowboy swing.

Cal was the unexpected sweetness in between, a delicious gift, a solid anchor in a constant sea of change.

But. Healing takes as much time as it takes. I’d never been good at allowing life to unfold for me, and this was precisely what I needed to do. As Willie Nelson says, “The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.” *Patience, Grasshopper*. My heart needed time to heal—so I gave myself this gift.

D e c e m b e r

I didn’t come to Montana alone, the first time, but with my husband and children. Nearly twenty years ago, we purchased five acres near Glacier National Park, complete with an old, tin-roofed cabin. I don’t mean second home made of rustic materials but possessing all modern conveniences. The bathroom was a single-seater with a half-moon carved in the side and no sink. In the initial marital separation, I ended up with the cabin, my trusty Subaru wagon, and Wylie—far from the short end of the stick, in my eyes. But now, I was here for one last visit to say goodbye to the cabin, which would be sold, and to the last remnants of our life together.

Stiff after the long drive up from Missoula, I picked my way across the early snow-pack, pock-marked by fallen pine cones, larch needles, and a few random branches that had fallen in November’s storms. Winter birds flitted about in the cedars, emitting little peeps and chirps, but the predominant sound I heard was the gentle breeze sawing through cedar branches. I unlocked the door and stepped inside.

The cabin was frigid—so much colder than outside that it was always kind of hard to believe. I made a quick cup of tea, sweetened it with honey, then headed outside to sit on

the sagging front stoop. Sipping my tea, I turned my face up to the low light of the winter sun, while Wylie ran around, getting all the bush news.

For such a small space, this cabin held a painfully-large chunk of my past. But, despite a vague feeling of melancholy, I didn't regret a minute of the time I spent here with my husband—only that our life together ended without anyone really fighting for it. As my new mentor in truth-seeking, Pema Chödrön, says: "*Things come together, and they fall apart,*" sometimes without making much of a sound. Thirty years *should* have made a hell of a sound. Instead, our marriage received a quiet burial, with a closed casket and no discernable ceremony.

Following a year of legal and geographical separation, we chose to make it official, appropriately enough, on November 2nd, which marks Missoula's annual calendar as the "Day of the Dead." After filing for divorce, I walked two blocks in the bright fall sunshine, from my attorney's office to *Sweet Peaks*. I bought my wounded soul a double scoop of pink-lemonade-huckleberry sorbet, which was exactly as good as it sounds. Then, on my way home, I picked up flowers, salted-almond dark chocolate, and a good bottle of Malbec at Orange Street Market.

I cried into Wylie's ruff until he slunk away from me, then cozied into my couch and watched the entire season of "Fixer-Upper" on Netflix without moving. I wished, sincerely, that Chip and JoAnna Gaines were my close personal friends. I'd have offered to babysit their well-behaved kids and tend their little flock of pygmy goats. I'd always been good at making myself useful—just not indispensable: The fact that my husband did not want or need me was now inescapable. I would soon have it in writing, signed by a judge, and locked in my safe-deposit box. I had to accept it—but no part of me was happy about this outcome. How could I be? Once, the four of us were a family, and now, we would never be again. This was the loss that I grieved.

My husband and I traveled together for a long time, and now, it was perfectly OK to fly solo for a while. Here, where the mountains are so much larger than life, it seemed possible to believe I already had everything I needed to be happy.

But, in fact, happy was a feeling I'd not been closely acquainted with recently. In early October, before the first snowfall, I stopped dancing. While Cal tried to be supportive in his gruff, Montana-cowboy, Yoda sort of way, I was short-tempered and humorless, as I joylessly dragged myself through the unpleasant tasks involved with filing for divorce and everything that comes after. It was such a strange pairing—sensible financial disentanglement and catastrophic heartbreak.

I stayed in “hunker down” mode, without ever reaching out for the support that I knew was there from my friends, from my adult sons, who understood better than anyone, and from my whole family. I didn't really know why I chose to isolate myself—I simply went to ground as if it were the only way to get the job done. But, it might have had something to do with shame, which was the final blow—because, until the papers were signed, there was always a distant glimmer of hope. When it was all over, I felt shame, bone-deep, for failing in my marriage—an emotion that is the opposite of helpful.

For two solid months, I wanted nothing to do with Cal, or with any other man, or, to be honest, with anyone or anything. I curtly replied to random texts from Cal, like: “*Thinking of you makes me smile out loud,*” and “*Just breathe, Sweetheart.*” My cynical smashed-up heart wondered if Cal really cared about me, or if he was simply another manipulative man out to break me, for good, this time. Trust no longer came easily to me—and that included an inability to trust my own judgement.

The dark, drudgery of divorce finally ended, with an anonymous judge's stamp of approval, on December 7th, a date that's still a little too easy to remember. I stayed in bed and cried for about twenty-four hours straight. After all, thirty years was worth a little respect and the grief that comes with it. But, when I came up for air—the first person I thought of was Cal. I know it seems sudden, but it wasn't. It was simple. I missed him. I mean, I really missed him, everything about him.

On Christmas Eve, I baked a pile of Finnish ribbon cookies, pecan snowballs, and jam-filled thumbprints. After a quick, surprise phone call, I showed up at Cal's house, where he

was on hospice duty, sticking close to his ailing black-and-white tuxedo kitty. We talked for hours, as he tenderly cared for her, as feathery flakes drifted down outside the kitchen window. We ate some more snowball cookies, drank cups and cups of tea. I held his cat's weightless body on my lap. *Pleased to meet you and goodbye*, we said to each other.

After a long while, Cal gently pulled my wool-covered feet up into his lap, rubbed warmth into them with his big hands, which felt sensational and more. Something real and undeniable began to grow and take form between us. It shimmered there like an unopened Christmas gift. As we watched the day turn to dusk, I reached for Cal's hand. I felt his warmth and openness, his gentleness and his strength. I felt possibility, and forgiveness, even. This was a man I already knew well, so when the moment felt right, I reached for all of him.

Cal had the combination of strength and tenderness I'd been craving all my life, and which, for so long, had always eluded me. And he was heart-meltingly romantic, too. Most cowboys are, he assured me, and he should know.

When Cal placed the palms of his hands on my cheeks and leaned in close, I knew it was going to be a really good kiss. He took possession of my lips, very slowly. His kiss was gentle at first. And then, like all the best kisses, it grew into a conversation. I had a great deal to say, after holding so much back, out of fear, and because I wasn't ready.

It was a kiss that carried both of us forward—even though I was still a bit of a mess, and even though, this late-life love came after quite a long, uncertain wait for Cal. But, none of this really mattered. These last bits of rough weather blew over soon enough, leaving behind something calm and strong and sure.

Contributor Notes

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