

SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2019



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Gregory Jeffers

Preservation

Toward the end, Sherry became a stay at home mom. To support our meager lifestyle, she prepared frogs for dissection in high school and college biology classes. The most vivid images I have from those days are of her in the kitchen. She had the mystifying ability to chain smoke without using her hands to toggle the butt or tamp off the ashes, as she murdered the frogs in the wash tub atop the stove, bathed them in formaldehyde, then set them gingerly to rest in plastic bags she sealed with her clothes iron. On alternate days, she'd box the packages and address the parcels, readying them for their journeys in mail trucks to biology classes all over the state of Florida.

As a result of Sherry's home business, the kitchen table of our trailer in Fen View Mobile Home Park was never available for its intended purpose. We ate on TV trays in the living room, stabbing green beans from cans or scraping factory prepared meals from tin trays she shook out of boxes and warmed in our three-legged oven. These meals involved cakey mashed potatoes in one compartment, peas with too much Oleo in another, and grey meat with brown gravy in the middle. The taste of aluminum lathered in butter gone bad was consistently accompanied by the smell of frog-tainted formaldehyde skulking in from the kitchen.

Before Sherry raised her own frogs, my little sister Tiffany and I were paid two-cents apiece for each frog we snared over four ounces. I was almost seven when this little business started, just after we'd moved to the park.

"Four ounces? How much is four ounces?" I was slipping on my rubber boots for our first frog foraging, trying to balance on one foot on the sloping entry hall floor. Our trailer was so out of level, we couldn't play a decent game of Pick Up Sticks. And forget about marbles.

"Needs to be as big as your hand, Stone," Sherry said, helping Tiffany on with the boots that had been mine the year

before. I didn't find out until much later she'd named me after the man who fathered me, her husband of less than a year, a man by the name of Stone Ross.

He'd walked the tops of boxcars on the O and M from front to rear as they clattered down the tracks toward Orlando, a brakeman, until the day he knelt to tie a shoe and missed the feelers that would have tipped him off that the train was about to pass under a bridge. He stood up just in time to catch the main steel girder in the back of the head. He lay brain dead for about two months, sucking up all of the consolation payment from the O and M, leaving Sherry pretty much penniless by the time they lowered him into the ground.

She took to working in the diner. Al, the owner, took pity on her and let me stay in a crib in the kitchen's back corner. Sherry says I was the quietest baby she'd ever known. Says I must have known we were living on the edge and one squawk from me would end us up on the street.

Tiff came along about a year later, daughter of Al and Sherry.

One afternoon about six months after that, Al's hair caught fire from a leaping grease flame at the grill. I've heard since that hair burns fast as part of a Darwinian notion that if it burned slow, it might catch your scalp on fire, a much more painful situation, one would imagine. But in Al's case it didn't much matter, as the grease fire proceeded to catch his shirt and apron on fire and in the following spasmodic dance he banged his temple into a rusty corner of the exhaust hood and, well, that was it for old Al.

Sherry claimed ownership of the diner, and no one questioned her. It burned down under suspect circumstances a year later and she used the insurance money to buy us a mobile home in the swampiest, dankest corner of the county.

One day after our third year in the Park, a man showed up who looked vaguely familiar. A bullet-headed man. Tiff and I had just finished harvesting a couple dozen frogs from Sherry's fenced-in pond and were ambling onto the stoop where Sherry stood, her hips cocked, scratching a cheek. The stranger had a hand on the porch rail, the other in a back pocket.

"Sherry, we got these twenty frogs you wanted." I held the

galvanized pail up for her to see. My skin pimples for some reason I couldn't put my finger on. Tiff looked at the guy like he'd stumbled out of an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

"Go put 'em in the sink and come back out here."

We did, but I couldn't take my eyes off him, dressed in clean clothes, face shaved, but somehow still having the air of a hobo. He had a smell I couldn't cipher out but now know all too well as the sickly-sweet combination of Four Roses whiskey and cherry chewing tobacco. Mixed in with another smell I did know at the time. Brylcreem.

Tiff and I returned to the stoop like we'd been told. A hot breeze swept up onto the deck, lifting Sherry's hair and scratching my nostrils with driveway grit.

"Stone, this here is your Daddy's brother, Mr. Hank Ross."

The man extended his hand and I took it the way I'd been taught. I winced at the overly zealous grip, and he must have noticed, as a smile came over his face, the sort of smile a boy might pose when he purposely stomps on the tail of a smaller boy's dog.

"Nice to meet you, son." He had a gravelly voice, like his throat was lined with newly sliced tin can lids, shredding each word as it came out.

"Nice to meet you too, sir."

I sensed Sherry blocking the door.

"Sir?" He choked out a chortle. "Call me Uncle Hank."

"Yes, sir. I mean Uncle Hank, sir." I could no longer make eye contact with him. I was sick on my stomach what with all of us crowded onto the stoop like that. What with the new smells and all.

Perhaps Sherry sensed it because she spoke up, a little too loudly. "This here is my daughter Tiffany. Shake the man's hand, Tiffany."

"Why do I have to shake his hand? Ain't no kin of mine."

I'd never heard her talk like that, but it would increasingly be the tone she'd take on over the next few years, the few remaining ones before I lost touch with her. After we were sent to separate foster homes.

Sherry tapped her lightly on the back of the head and after a brief sneer, Tiffany shook the man's hand.

"Now go on in and turn on the oven. TV dinners tonight."

At that news, our demeanor picked up and she ushered us in but remained in the doorway. “I’d have you in to eat, Hank, but I only got the three TV dinners. And only three TV trays. You can see the problem, right?”

“Hell, I don’t need dinner, Sherry. I’ll just grab the bottle out of my truck and come on in. I’d like to get to know you a bit better. And that sassy little gal of yours, too,” he said, tasting his own words with a cheery smack.

My arms and chest broke out then, as if ants were crawling toward my heart.

She raised a flat hand about an inch away from his chest. “I’m sorry as sin, Hank, really am, but won’t work out tonight. The kids got homework, and I got to batch up some frogs for morning mail.”

Then came a long moment as if time were being drawn out like a fat rubber band that might snap into your nose at any second. I was mostly confident at moments like this that Sherry would win out, but on that late afternoon, I sensed a danger I never had before.

Hank considered the sky, parsing hard on the matter, as the crickets played their saws.

Then the band did snap. He growled some curse word I never heard before, smacked the side of a fist on the railing and pitched down the steps. There was a short laugh, both hollow and triumphant, a bark really, as he slammed his truck door shut, the shivering of the rusty metal reverberating through the dusk. The engine choked itself alive and the truck skidded across the gravel and disappeared down the long uncaring highway.

The last rags of cloud faded in the twilight.

I slept uneasy that night—the quiet terror of being awake when everyone else is asleep—and awoke to a commotion at the front door and some shushing.

Then Sherry. “Oh, damn you. For one minute only. Use the toilet and be on your way. And keep your voice down.” There was some shuffling. “That’s not the bathroom. That’s the kids’ bedroom. Get on.”

Then the voices and noises got all jumbled up and I knew things were going wrong. I sprang off my bedroll and lurched into the hall just as Hank was pulling Sherry through the

front door by her hair. She flailed at him with closed fists.

I stumbled through the living room. “Sherry,” I screamed.

“Lock that door and get the hell back in your bedroom,” she yelled.

There was a fear in her voice I’d never heard before, but I did recognize the commanding part, not to be mussed with. I closed the front door, locked it, and went to our room, locking me and Tiff in with a chair under the knob. To this day I hold myself responsible for all the ill that followed. For not running out that door and killing that son of a bitch. I’ll take that to the grave.

I stumbled through the living room the next morning, the formaldehyde odor stronger than ever, almost as if the thread-bare carpet was saturated in it. Sherry was at the stove whipping up some oatmeal, something that normally only happened on Sunday. She whistled, in a breathy way, a tune I recognized as “The Ants Go Marching,” but which I have since learned has more ominous origins. The usual cigarette burning in the countertop ashtray was missing. I didn’t know it at the time, but I would never again see Sherry smoke.

We slogged off to school that morning as if nothing unusual had happened the night before, even though all of us knew it was not so, and we all knew we all knew.

When we returned that afternoon, Sherry was in the dried muck we called a front yard, talking to Mr. Wilson, who owned the Esso service station in town. They carried on for a few minutes then she waved her arm a bit, like shooping gnats. Mr. Wilson hauled the old Indian motorcycle up a plank and onto the back of his pickup.

“You’re not selling the Indian, are you, Sherry?”

She turned her stare to me, running her open hand through her red curls. “Don’t suppose you’re ever going to start calling me Mom.”

Wasn’t until a couple months later I realized how often she changed the subject with no rhyme or reason.

“You said I could have it when I got older.”

“Not selling it. Getting it in running order. Going to get out of this stink hole.”

A suspicion—the image of her abandoning Tiff and me

to parentless lives choring in frog embalamation—shuffled around in a dark corner of my mind.

A week or two later she tried her luck with the newly rebuilt Indian on the cratered dirt roads of Fen View. When I got home from school the first day, her legs and arms looked like someone had beat her with chains and she had a lump on her forehead the size of a puffball. But she got better with a couple days practice. By Friday she had the old saddle bags packed and they and Tiff straddled the Indian, which gleamed, strutted up on its stand. Sherry, fussing with the headlight, wore bib overalls and a beat-up leather jacket I guessed to be my dad's. She had a blue and white kerchief wound around her head, holding her red mop back off her face, and had dredged up some mud-streaked lace-up boots from somewhere.

She didn't even give me time to scratch my head. She strapped on her helmet, adjusted her Guatemalan cross-shoulder bag, and kicked the stand out from under the bike. "Get on up behind your sister."

I did.

Sherry stood high on the starter pedal and let her full body weight—which wasn't much—onto it. She half turned around and shouted over the blurberings of the engine. "Tiff you take hold of my ribs. Stone, grab my overalls with both hands and keep your elbows tight into your sister."

We weren't down the road but five minutes, going full pelt, when the blaring of a siren drowned out the bike's engine.

It was Sheriff Doug Seegar, our county's lone police presence. Stories had it Sherriff Doug was sweet on Sherry when they were kids. But she only had eyes for Stone Ross. Plus, if Sheriff Doug looked anything as a kid like he did as an adult, he sure as hell was not the juciest topic in the girls' locker room.

When he pulled his black Ford Fairlane alongside us, Sherry held up her fist with one finger extended, no easy trick on a motorcycle with a stick shift. He forced us off the road by angling in front of us.

The Ford door creaked open and Sheriff Doug, using both hands under each thigh, picked up one leg at a time and hoisted his feet onto the pavement. Then with an effort so

immense I have never since witnessed the likes of it, he placed his thick ham hands atop his basketball size knees to lever the top of his body off the torn front seat. He ambled over to us and tipped his flat-brimmed hat up on his forehead. “Sherry, what the hell you think you’re doing?”

“Taking my kids for a ride. What’s it to you?”

“For openers, you can’t have three on a motorcycle.”

“Where’s it say that?”

“It’s the law.”

“Horse feathers.”

“And that ain’t no motorcycle helmet you’re wearing.”

Sheriff Doug was right on that count. Sherry had on her roller derby helmet from an earlier life. She and Bobbie Mateer had both been greats, skating for the Chicago Windy City Rollers. Bobbie was the pivot and Sherry one of the jammers. They were written up all over the country, and in Florida Sherry was a local hero. But two years into it, she decided she missed Florida and Stone Ross too much and gave up the skates and the fist fights.

Sheriff Doug took a half step back and spread his feet another foot or so. “You meet us back at your trailer. These kids are going to have to ride with me.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Don’t make this difficult, Sherry. I know you’ve had a hard time of late, but I can’t let you put these kids at risk.” Huffing twice in preparation, he lifted Tiffany off the seat and set her on the ground. “Come on, son, get off the bike.”

Before I could move, Sherry sprang off the motorcycle and had a finger in Doug’s chest.

“You touch one of my kids again and I’ll rip you out a new nostril.”

Things went bad pretty fast. Sherry ended up in handcuffs, and Sheriff Doug ferried the three of us to the county jail in the back seat of his cruiser.

Next morning Sheriff Doug let us out of the cell. He had a couple guys with him, one I recognized from the grocery store and some other big guy. Back-up, I guessed.

“Sherry, I’m going to let you out of here, and I want you to move nice and slow. No funny business. We’re gonna let you go with a warning this time.”

She didn't say a word.

He creaked open the cell door. Sherry eyed me and jerked her head sideways toward the hall. I sensed she was boiling over. I'd never seen her that pent up before and never would again for those last two years of her shortened life. I crept out feeling somehow it was me had got us into this mess.

Sherry had to sign papers at the desk, and they gave her back her shoulder bag.

"I already strapped the saddle bags back onto the Indian," Sheriff Doug said.

She remained silent, thinning her lips, and slung the bag strap over her head and onto her shoulder. Sheriff opened the door for us. The Indian stood up on its stand, glinting and proud in the yellow morning sun. On the far side of it sat a lump I couldn't quite make out. Sherry strode over to the bike then around it, and we followed, hunkered down like.

It was a sidecar, though I did not know at the time that's what it was called.

Sherry cracked what passed for a grin for her in those days and looked into Sheriff Doug's face, squinting against the slanting sunlight. Her eyes might have gone misty.

"Who's payin' for that?" she said after clearing her throat.

"No sense going all sentimental, Sherry. Not costing you a cent."

She shuffled around in the dirt, kicked up a few pebbles then looked back at him. "Yeah, well you thank whoever it was."

Sheriff Doug helped Tiff and me into the side car and Sherry got up on the starter. I had no idea at the time this would be the beginning of a two-year Great American Road Trip. And I don't think Sherry did either. I figured we were running from that son of a bitch, Hank Ross. Sherry likely figured her escape would be neither great nor quite so long.

Her escape.

A search I would do of the local newspapers about twenty years later indicated Hank Ross's body was lying under our mobile home at that very moment, not to be discovered until three months later, thanks to all the formaldehyde she'd pumped into him.

Before she let her weight down to kick start the bike she looked to us in the sidecar. "All good, Stone?"

"All good." I might have had sand in my eyes. "All good, Mom."

Bill Pippin

A Brother Offended

When Dad called that Saturday morning in July, I was at the computer in my upstairs office translating a redundantly overwritten R&D report on the HPLC separation of amino acids into a readable technical bulletin.

Dad used our land line instead of our cell phone, which usually meant he wanted to talk to Jeanne and me together. When I told him Jeanne was grocery shopping and had taken Damien along to get new sneakers, the line appeared to go dead. At last I heard a squeaky sound on the other end like a rubber bath toy makes.

“Is anything wrong, Dad?” I asked.

“I’m afraid so,” he said.

I took a deep breath. “Mom?”

“No . . . no. . . .” And then he began to sob.

I’d never heard my dad cry. He’s a big, rugged man, a hard-nosed history professor I’d thought incapable of crying, and the sounds he made were heartbreaking. That’s when I thought of my brother, then on his third tour in Afghanistan.

“Has something happened to Tyler?”

“Y-yes,” Dad said with a kind of whispery breathlessness.

“Is he dead? Has Tyler been killed, Dad?”

“No, Derek. Tyler’s still alive.”

“But he’s been wounded?”

I heard him clear his throat. “He stepped on . . . Tyler stepped on one of those IEDs.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Specific?”

“His injuries?”

“Oh Not his face. Not his head, some, but his eyes are okay. Thank God, no brain damage. His hearing, they say, should return. . . .”

“Good. That’s good.” Again I sensed his reluctance to continue. “Well then . . . how bad is it?”

“I’m afraid . . . his legs . . .”

I shifted the phone to my other ear. “Legs . . . plural?”

“Both legs . . . above the knees.”

“*Jesus!*”

Another moment of silence. “His arms . . .”

“*Both arms?*”

“Both arms.”

I sat back in my chair. “Tyler lost both arms and both legs, Dad?”

“Right arm . . . near the shoulder. Left arm . . . just above the elbow.”

“Both arms *and* both legs?”

“Gone, Derek. Gone. Both arms and both legs. Blown away . . . blown away . . .”

Silence again. Dad’s voice had taken on a dreamlike quality. I swivelled around to look at the books on my shelves, then up at the revolving ceiling fan. And when I tried to picture Tyler armless and legless I found myself struggling with, of all things, the outrageous compulsion to giggle.

What had triggered such an impulse? What the hell was wrong with me?

“Anything else, Dad?” I asked, straining to keep my voice normal. “Injuries I mean?”

“Here . . . I’ll let you talk to your mother.”

My mom is the realist in our family, the strong one who faces up to facts. Her voice was resolute, honed with a fine edge of resignation that seemed to say what happened has happened, a tragic reality, now we need to get on with the business of dealing with it. I pictured her standing up rather than sitting down, mouth set, every muscle and tendon taut, right eyelid pulsating the way it did when she was under stress.

I fumbled a pen out of the mayonnaise jar on my desk and scribbled details on a pad. Tyler was on patrol. Helmand Province. Another Marine was killed in the explosion. A medic had tended to Tyler right away, saving his life. He’d been airlifted to the military hospital at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. Now he was being flown to the National Naval Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland.

“The Marine Corps will fly us there too—your dad and me. We hope you and Jeanne can meet us.”

“For sure, Mom. Are you okay?”

“As okay as I can be, hon . . . under the circumstances. We’ll keep you informed as information comes our way. The hospital will let us know. Unless you have questions . . . I need to be with your dad right now. He’s not okay.”

“No. No questions, Mom.”

“We love you, Derek. We love Jeanne and Damien.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I tossed down the remains of my lukewarm coffee and went downstairs and set the cup in the kitchen sink. I stepped out the sliding glass door and eased into a plastic lawn chair on the deck. I gazed out past the forsythia bushes, at the picnic table, at the swing-and-slide set I’d recently assembled for Damien. The noon sun glared hot and high in a deep blue cloudless sky. A chattering squirrel hurled insults from the oak tree at the far corner of our fenced-in backyard. I grew aware of my right foot tapping.

And then, spontaneously, I erupted into a fit of giggling. Like a seizure. Rather than try to stifle it, I gave it its head, hoping to purge my system of this sickness. Shock? Had to be shock. Somewhere I’d read that severe shock can cause freaky behavior.

No one else could ever know about this. No one.

I loved Tyler. Why wouldn’t I love my own brother? I’m not sure I liked him, though. We ‘d never been close, not like some brothers. We had nothing in common. I was into sports and Tyler was crazy about engines. I enjoyed fishing and Tyler hunted. I loved books and Tyler thought only candy asses sat around reading. We had nothing in common except blood.

As the older brother I had to look after Tyler when we were kids, often when I’d rather be with my friends. Everybody thought Tyler was the cutest thing and I got tired of hearing it. I’d taunt him, tickling him under the chin, cooing, “Kootchy-kootchy koo.” When he grew old enough to recognize my derision, he got back at me by singing, “You ain’t nothing but a hound dog,” while playing an imaginary guitar and doing an Elvis wiggle. Other kids picked up on “Hound Dog” and it became a nickname I hated. One day I asked Mom if it was true, did I honestly look like some floppy-eared hound dog?

“Of course not,” she said. “Tyler’s only teasing you, Derek. It’s not your ears, it’s your eyes. You have sad eyes, that’s all.”

I couldn't trust Tyler. One day when I was eleven or twelve we were in the Music Shop downtown and I saw the latest Dylan CD on display. Being low on funds, I slipped it under my shirt. I'd never stolen anything before, but I just had to have that CD. I wasn't aware that Tyler had even seen me, but when we got home he told Mom. She marched me back to the Music Shop and made me return the CD and apologize to the manager, Mrs. Phelps. Then Dad grounded me for a week.

"Why'd you rat on me?" I asked Tyler as soon as I got him alone.

"Because stealing is wrong," he said, giving me this infuriating angelic look.

"You're a snake in the grass—that's what's wrong, man."

"Woof-woof!" Tyler barked.

The muted drone of the garage door brought me to my feet. By the time I reached the van, Damien was out of his car seat. He ran to me and pointed at his new red and blue sneakers. I lifted him up and gave him a kiss. His lips were smeared with chocolate, his chubby hands sticky.

"Wow!" I said. "Those are so awesome. Why don't you trot outside to play while I help Mommy with the groceries."

I shepherded him to the back door of the garage and watched through the window until he settled into his swing. Jeanne was pulling cloth bags out of the van, setting them on the concrete floor. Grabbing a couple, I went on ahead. I put the ice-cream in the freezer, the milk in the fridge.

"Anything else need refrigerating?" I asked.

"That's it." Jeanne sat the last bag down on the kitchen floor and stood studying me.

"Dad called," I said.

"Oh? How is he?"

"Not good."

She waited, visibly holding her breath.

"It's not him. Not Dad. It's Tyler."

I told her Tyler had been badly wounded, monitoring myself for the slightest inclination to giggle. When Jeanne wanted to know how bad, I didn't mince words. She started rocking on her heels, then she lurched to the nearest chair and collapsed, leaning forward with both eyes shut, hands cupping her ears.

"Okay," she said at last. "That's the fucked-up deal then."

“He’s a combat Marine,” I said lamely.

“Oh fuck—fuck fuck *fuck!*”

“Dad took it hard.”

She jumped up and grabbed my face with both hands, digging her nails into my cheeks. “How are *you* doing?”

I was reluctant to admit how well I was doing. Confessing to Jeanne about my weird compulsion was out of the question. “Dad’s the one I’m worried about. They want us to meet them in Bethesda. Can you take off work on short notice?”

“Of course I can.”

“We can drive it in two days. We can leave Damien with the Cornelisons.”

“No.” She jerked her hands back. “Damien should come too.”

“You really think so?”

Her brow crimped. “Why would I not think so?”

“Well . . . we don’t know Tyler’s emotional state. Dad’s a wreck. I’d rather Damien not see Tyler—even Mom and Dad—until we know how everyone’s faring.”

“Honey, we need to think about Tyler,” Jeanne said. “Seeing Damien might be some comfort, they’re so close.”

“But—”

“He doesn’t need to see his uncle until we know Tyler’s state of mind. But he should be there.”

I dreaded the thought of describing Tyler’s horrific injuries to our son. How do you make a five-year-old understand something as senseless as war?

I went out to the swings to tell Damien we’d be traveling to see Grandpa and Grandma. I made it sound like a holiday. Jeanne and I called our bosses to arrange time off. We packed and went to bed early.

But thinking about Tyler kept me awake. Tyler and Mary Ann Ridenour.

By the time he was thirteen, Tyler was attracting girls. Lots of girls. I was jealous, even though I only wanted one girl for myself—Mary Ann. Our families were close friends and I’d been in love with Mary Ann since sixth grade. Tyler was the only other person who knew. He’d sneaked a peep at the notebook I scribbled my private thoughts in.

I saw Mary Ann frequently at family affairs, though I’d

never asked her out on a date. She seemed more interested in sports than boys. I was three years older and she was in middle school when I was at Lake Valley High. I was leery of being accused of robbing the cradle.

By the time I became a freshman at our local college, Mary Ann was a junior at Lake Valley. She was on the track team, the softball team, and she excelled at basketball. She wasn't our top scorer—that was Laura Robb—but she was our best defensive player. She played point and could throw a basketball the length of the court. Her long legs were muscular without being mannish. She could be clumsy, laughing at herself when she dribbled the ball off her foot. She had a cackling laugh and a funny way of wrinkling her nose when she thought someone was full of shit. I loved it. I loved everything about Mary Ann Ridenour.

Nearing season's end, the girls' basketball team was tied for first place with Springerville, our closest rival, half an hour away. Our whole town must've driven to Springerville the night of the final game. Even Tyler went, riding the Harley he'd just bought after getting his driver's license, paying cash he earned working part-time as a mechanic's helper at Gordino's Garage.

The gym was packed to the rafters. Mary Ann fouled out of the nip-and-tuck game with three minutes to go. She sat on the bench in tears as Springerville chiseled away at our seven-point lead. We lost by a point when Laura Robb's desperation shot at the buzzer bounced off the rim.

We were a small school in a small town and the loss was crushing. We looked like a funeral procession leaving the gym. All I could think about was comforting Mary Ann. I stood around beside my car long enough for the coach to deliver his spiel, and for Mary Ann to shower, before I headed back to the gym door. My intent was to drive Mary Ann home, stop for something to eat, look for an opportunity to tell her how I felt about her.

But she didn't come out of the gym with the rest of the team. Disappointed, I started back to my car. When I heard the gym door open behind me, I turned to see Tyler and Mary Ann. Mary Ann's blond hair was still wet, her eyes red and puffy. Tyler grinned at me as he took her hand. They hurried to his

Harley, parked nearby. The sight of Mary Ann sitting snug behind Tyler, skirt hiked up, knees spread, arms clasping my brother's chest as they roared off, twisted my gut into a knot.

Fifteen minutes later, Mary Ann was dead.

It happened on a sharp curve on the narrow road leading out of Springerville. Deep woods on the right blocked visibility; on the left lay a pasture. Some cattle had escaped through the fence—hunters left the farmer's gate open—and one cow chose to stand in the middle of the road. Tyler hit the hefty animal dead center.

There was no evidence Tyler was speeding, though I'm sure he was. Tyler loved speed. No alcohol was found in his blood. No one accused Tyler of breaking any law. Perhaps the only person in the county who thought Tyler killed Mary Ann Ridenour was me. Tyler suffered a skull fracture, two broken legs, internal injuries. What good would've come from punishing him more than that? Drawing and quartering Tyler wouldn't bring back Mary Ann.

But how could I forgive him? I loved Mary Ann. Loved her since we were kids. Loved her with a longing that at times made me want to rip out my heart. If I could've driven her home that night, held her in my arms, comforted her, I would've found some way to tell her how I felt.

Tyler robbed me of that chance.

Jeanne and I rose before dawn on Sunday morning. Traffic was light as we drove out of Orlando toward the coast. I set the cruise control just over the speed limit. For hours we rode in silence, while Damien played in the backseat with his LeapFrog Leapster. We stopped only for pee breaks and at a McDonald's for lunch.

Around five we pulled into a motel in North Carolina. I called my parents and my mom answered. In that same controlled voice she told me their flight from Oklahoma City was scheduled for tomorrow morning. They expected to see Tyler right away.

I put Damien on the line and both grandparents managed to say a few words. Jeanne took the phone and muttered something inaudible. No one mentioned Tyler.

We'd spotted a steakhouse just down the access road from the motel. We needed to stretch our legs after the long drive

and we each held one of Damien's hands as he skipped along between us, humming tunelessly.

While we were looking over the menu, two young soldiers wearing camouflage fatigues, sporting GI haircuts, came in, likely from the nearby Army base. Their manner was jaunty, their faces ruddy with health. They ordered beer with their meal and the middle-aged waitress, a plump woman with a caring face, asked for their IDs. They produced them with exaggerated groans.

We finished eating before they did. When the waitress brought our check, I asked Mona—the name on her name tag—to give me the soldiers' checks. She went over to them and whatever she said prompted them to look our way. One snapped a smart salute. Jeanne made an effort to smile, then crushed a napkin to her mouth. When we got up to leave she hurried on ahead.

"What's wrong with Mommy?" Damien asked.

"Just tired, Sweetie."

"Me too," he said. "Traveling sure wears me out."

Back at the motel, Jeanne and I sat propped on bed pillows watching CNN. Thankfully, there was nothing about Afghanistan or Iraq. Once the lights were out, I lay listening to the air conditioner, an occasional truck growling past on the interstate, a drunk couple arguing briefly just outside our window.

At last it grew quiet. The outside lights encroached around the edges of the window drapes, casting the room in gloom. I couldn't sleep. I rolled onto my other side to gaze over at the next bed, at Damien's Roman nose and cherubic mouth, at his palm cradling his cheek.

When I hired Jeanne Hunt as a proofreader in the technical publications department I manage for a company that makes chromatography products, she was right out of college. She was just getting over this guy she'd been seeing since her junior year, a guy she'd planned on marrying until she found out he hated kids. When Jeanne and I started dating it crossed my mind that catching her on the rebound, and being her boss, was a likely recipe for disaster, but I didn't let that stop me.

A quick-witted blonde with a guileless smile and cheekbones

that suggested royalty, Jeanne was the same age as Mary Ann Ridenour would've been. I told myself it was mere coincidence that they looked something alike, that in some ways Jeanne reminded me of Mary Ann.

One night after we'd made love I asked Jeanne to marry me. She lay on her back, staring at the ceiling, not saying a word, until I began to feel sick to my stomach.

"Bad idea," I said at last. "Forget I mentioned it."

"I really like working for you," she said.

"Uh huh. But you wouldn't like being married to me."

"I didn't say that. It's just . . . the company has this policy against married couples working in the same department. You know that. I'd have to quit my job."

"One of us would," I said.

"You wouldn't give up your job just so I could keep mine."

"I'd do whatever it took."

She rolled onto her side. Tears glistened in her eyes as she ran her hand through my hair and tapped the tip of my nose with one finger. "God, that is so sweet."

After we were married, Jeanne quickly found a better-paying job as a technical writer for a software company. For several years nothing came of our efforts to have children. When we decided to get tested, Jeanne tested okay; I was told I had a fifty-fifty chance of making a baby, maybe less. After a tense, discouraging year failing at everything we tried, we discussed adoption. Then one day—eureka—and in due time our precious son was born.

Our life was bliss. Until I began dredging up reasons to suspect things weren't going as well as I imagined. And one day, sitting in the barber shop watching Damien get his blond hair cut, it struck me that I was seeing Tyler at that age.

My own hair is dark brown. I look nothing like my brother. Rationally I knew that didn't matter, but from then on every time I saw Tyler and Damien together—tossing a ball, flying a kite, playing horsey—I felt sure any observant stranger would assume Tyler was Damien's father, pegging me for some distant relative or family friend.

Jeanne has one of those expressive faces that mirrors her deeper feelings. I began to observe that face more closely: the way it sometimes looked at Damien, the way it sometimes

looked at me, the way it sometimes looked at Tyler. Some days I told myself I was making something out of nothing. Some days I believed this. Some days I believed the opposite. On my worst days I believed my brother had fucked my wife and Damien had been his doing.

I remember little from my Bible school lessons growing up in Oklahoma, but somewhere in scripture is a warning about the dire consequences of a brother offended. I identified with this. My brother had offended me by killing Mary Ann Ridenour. Had he compounded that offense with Jeanne? What would be the consequence?

Tyler had dropped out of college to join the Marines. He prospered in the military, developing proficiency with a variety of lethal weapons, adding muscle to his tall, skinny frame, learning to suck in his gut, square his shoulders, carry himself with pride. How stalwart he looked at our family gatherings, showing off those classy dress blues.

When stationed in the states he was usually close enough to Orlando to visit us. He chose not to announce his visits ahead of time, he just showed up. I think he liked seeing the surprise on our faces—in Jeanne's case a beaming surprise. I knew it wasn't me he came to see.

Sometimes he dropped in while I was traveling on business. Oftentimes he stayed overnight. Once I asked Jeanne if the way Tyler made himself at home made her uncomfortable, hoping she'd say yes, then I could decide what to do about it. But she laughed and said she wouldn't think of sending my brother to a motel.

That didn't make me any less uneasy. Uneasy isn't even the right word—I *agonized* over Tyler's visits during my absence. Did he use the guest room, or did he snuggle with Jeanne in our king-sized bed? Once, after returning from a week-long seminar, I caught myself actually sniffing the sheets. And if I was feeling especially masochistic I could conjure up a porno parade of *Kamasutra*-like images.

In Jeanne's defense she did nothing to suggest her love for me had diminished in the least. If she loved Tyler, she must still love me as well. Had she turned to Tyler to satisfy her longing for a child? Did I really want to know? Because what was I willing to do about it? Have some sort of showdown?

Leave her? Without Jeanne and Damien, my life would hardly be worth living. Did I want to risk losing them over what might be pure paranoia?

Just before Tyler left for another tour in Afghanistan we had a backyard barbecue in his honor. Tyler had ridden his current Harley from Camp Lejeune down to Orlando the day before, a Friday. He and Jeanne played tennis on Saturday morning. I'd wrecked my knee playing high school football and couldn't offer much competition on the court. I was surprised that Tyler could, given his disinterest in sports, but Jeanne said they matched up well. They returned around noon, showered, and joined me on the deck.

Stretched out in a recliner with a beer, Tyler was barefoot, face stubbled, sinewy body tan as a lifeguard's. He wore sunglasses, a gray T-shirt bearing the Eagle, Globe and Anchor emblem, ragged denim shorts. Jeanne sat across from him on a redwood bench.

While I grilled burgers I listened to Tyler tell my wife war stories. He'd developed a paradoxical affection for Afghanistan. He spoke warmly of the Nomads and their tents; the dark-eyed children; the lean taciturn leathery men; the secretive shifty-eyed women peering out of burkas. His description of an assault breacher nicknamed The Joker, a huge, multi-ton vehicle fitted with a plow on skis, captivated Jeanne. The Joker looked, Tyler said, like a monstrous tank with a cannon. It was used to dig safety lanes through minefields laid by the Taliban; exploding IEDs apparently didn't faze it. If numerous mines littered an area, The Joker could fire rockets packed with C-4 explosives to detonate them at a safe distance.

"That big bastard will save some lives," Tyler vowed.

Jeanne's back was to the picnic table, elbows on knees, hands clasping a bottle of beer. She'd tied her hair in a ponytail. She looked delicious, her long legs slender and brown in white shorts. She'd left the top two buttons of her white blouse undone. I was sure Tyler had a full view of her braless breasts.

Next morning when we left the motel, Jeanne came around to the driver's side.

"How about if I take a turn," she said. "Need to keep my

mind occupied.”

Just before we reached the Maryland line my cell phone chimed. Mom told me they were at Bethesda Naval Hospital; they’d seen Tyler and he was holding his own. I relayed the information to Jeanne.

I slipped off my sneakers and reclined in the leather seat. An itch at the base of my left big toe compelled me to reach over and scratch it through my sock with my right big toenail. It occurred to me that Tyler could no longer indulge in this innocuous pleasure.

I’ve heard the prostheses they make these days are quite advanced, their development driven by the growing need, but still. Tyler would surely miss being able to open a stubborn jar of pickles. Tying his shoestrings, walking barefoot in the surf, running his hands over a woman’s body, even picking his nose.

We passed a rest area sign and Jeanne flipped the turn signal.

I sat in the van and watched my wife walk to the restrooms. Damien was busy with his LeapFrog Leapster. When something swelled inside my chest until I felt ready to explode, I got out and walked across a grassy area to a picnic table. A large woman in halter and shorts, trailing a black cocker spaniel on a leash, eyed me as I circled the table like a robot. When I stopped to stare back at her she hurried off like she’d been assaulted.

At last Jeanne emerged from the restroom and came over to join me. “They say those air dryers are loaded with germs,” she said. “But what can you do?”

“Talk to me.” My sharp tone brought her to a halt. She stood there rubbing her hands on her slacks, looking confused. “Tell me the truth about Tyler.”

She glanced after the woman with the dog, making sure she was beyond earshot. Looking back at me, she said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you do.”

She crossed her arms and turned her head, staring into the distance. She held this pose for what seemed like a full minute. When she looked at me again her face had turned to stone.

“Whatever you’re thinking,” she said, “you should stop.”

“I have to know.”

“Know *what*?”

The anger in her voice caught me by surprise. I shrugged my shoulders.

“All right, I do know what you’re talking about. I’ve seen it in your face enough times. And there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“You can tell me.”

“Tell you *what*, Derek?”

“What I just said.”

“What you—look—why should I have to defend myself?”

“I just want the truth.”

“The truth?” She shook her head slowly. “Think about that. What you want—what you *think* you want—is for me to confirm what you suspect.”

“I’ll believe whatever you tell me.”

“No you won’t. The only thing you’ll believe is a confession, because you’ve already made up your mind. But here’s the thing . . . even if I was guilty I’d never admit it. And do you know why?”

I shook my head.

“Because I love you too goddamned much. And I love Damien. I love what we’ve made of our lives. I don’t want things to get any more complicated than they are. If you can’t handle that, if that keeps you from loving me or loving Damien, if that keeps you from wanting to go on living the life we’re living”

“You’d rather I just keep wondering?”

“I don’t see any other way, sweetheart. I just explained why.”

I had to think about that, and for a long time I did. Jeanne stood there with her jaw clenched, watching the woman with the cocker spaniel returning.

And then I started to giggle. It came on like a storm, like an Oklahoma twister swooping out of nowhere. I tried to stifle it, but it was like trying to stifle a sneezing fit.

Jeanne uncrossed her arms and backed away in alarm.

It lasted maybe half a minute. Then it morphed into something similar to what I’d heard come out of my dad. A

storm of a different kind. No way could I staunch the flood of tears, those heaving keening yowls that sounded like a wounded animal. It was less than manly. I don't know what I was ashamed of most, the giggling or the sobbing.

Jeanne made matters worse when she came over and put her arms around me.

We walked back to the van in silence. Damien was still engrossed in his game. I took the wheel and we drove on.

Traffic grew heavier, bunching up as we neared Bethesda. Now and then I glanced over to find Jeanne staring straight ahead, lips drawn taut against her teeth. I kept thinking about everything she'd said. Even if I got the truth I'd asked for, would I actually know it? And what would I do with the truth? How would the truth serve me? If it came to it, who would benefit from my throwing down the gauntlet? Who would win? Who would lose? What would be the prize?

The truth isn't always a good thing.

Call it weakness if you like, even cowardice, I'd stopped caring. One thing I'd learned from my mom was to just press on once you know a thing is beyond rectifying. And having made that decision, I found myself letting go and rejoicing in my own good fortune. Shamelessly rejoicing. If I was a coward, I was a live coward. I not only had Jeanne and Damien, I had my arms and legs. I could walk and run and dance. I could pick my nose. I had so much more than I deserved.

Compared to Tyler, I had everything.

And that was where I left it as we reached the hospital and stepped out of the air-conditioned van into the mugginess of a Maryland summer afternoon, the gritty reek of frying asphalt washing over us like a wildfire. Jeanne held one of Damien's hands and I held the other. Our son hummed tunelessly as we went inside to welcome his father home from Afghanistan.

Edward M. DeFranco

Wasted

February 1971

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Nixon reigns in the White House and my ass sits in Vietnam. Forget the images you have from *The Green Berets* or TV news. Picture a cluster of tents, temporary sheds, and the perimeter of a base fortified with sandbags and barbed wire. Add an overpowering stench from open sewers, intensified by humidity. I pray for my eyes to blur and for my nose to be stuffed up.

I'm stationed at Guy Thung Lung, an Army base in the Central Highlands near mountains, resembling those close to my home in northern California. I pull twelve-hour shifts in a hanger rebuilt as a supply shed, shelved with parts for jeeps and armor cars, and I sleep with thirty-four other men in a wood-frame Quonset hut barracks. Everyone can see our outdoor showers, even the Vietnamese women—few though they are—who do chores for some of the higher ranking NCO's on base. We even have to shit in public since the latrine has no doors.

One night, six weeks after I arrive, our first sergeant Smitty catches up with me on my way to the barracks. Over thirty and already balding, Smitty seems like a stand-up guy.

"Is everything okay with you, Private Denicola?" he asks. "You sure do keep to yourself."

"Yeah," I answer. "I'm really out-of-it after working twelve or thirteen hours."

"You only hand out jeep parts." Smitty shakes his head. "How would you deal with being on the front lines? They go out on patrols at night even if they hump through the jungle all day."

For a moment I shudder. Ever since the base was attacked, I wake up every morning, wondering if it'll be my last. I probably wouldn't survive in the jungle.

"Sometimes beer helps," he says. "Need any? We're getting a resupply from Nha Trang."

"Guess I'll take a couple." While no place in Vietnam is out

of danger, Nha Trang is one of the safest. Wish I was stationed there.

When I get to the barracks a letter from Mom still lays on my cot.

She writes—Your twelve-year old cousin Christopher is visiting. He looks like you at that age. Green eyes, dark hair and lanky. It helps to have someone that reminds me of you around.

Dad doesn't say much about you. But almost every day I catch him with a pained look of uncertainty on his face.

I'm not looking forward to his Navy reunion. You know your father around beer. Though it's the only place I find out what happened in the Pacific.

I miss you. Godspeed to you getting home. Any chance of it being early?

Love, Mom

No, Mom, I have 313 days left in country.

Suddenly mortar crashes in the distance. Bolduc, blond haired and footballish, is cavalier about it while I have to breathe through my mouth spasmodically and hold my chest.

“Dickless bastard,” he calls me in his New York accent. He has the same look on his face that my high school wrestling coach had when he told me, “You don’t have a fighter’s instinct. Never gonna win without it.”

My heart doesn’t quit pounding until the M-16’s stop shouting at one another.

An hour later, on my way to the chow hall, I see a pock mark on the hillside where there had been vegetation earlier.

The following week, a new troop member, Peterson, is issued the bunk next to mine. Right off the bat, he asks me to call him Pete. Shortening my last name, he calls me Denny. We hit it off. Maybe it’s because he tells me right out that he’s scared shitless.

He’s from Oklahoma and has dark skin and blue eyes. Though we’re both nineteen, he’s soon ahead of me in adjusting. In his first week, he wanders past the edge of the base and finds a whorehouse.

A few days later while lying on our bunks, Pete tells me about the place.

“Well, it ain’t more than a hole in the wall,” he says. “but I swear you won’t find poontang any closer. Won’t take us more than a couple of minutes to get there. Come with me.”

“I don’t know, man.”

“You tellin’ me you don’t miss women?” he says.

“Shit, I want a shot of leg, as much as you do.”

“Glory be,” he says. “Let’s go tomorrow. Haven’t had it regular in over a month.”

I wonder what it’s like to have it regular. I’ve only been with Cindy Jane. Unless you count last New Year’s Eve when I French kissed twelve girls before midnight.

“Are you going with me, or not?” he asks.

“Okay, okay,” I say, “but we leave the second our shifts end and get back before dark.”

The whorehouse has a small bar and a few women sitting on stools. They serve Vietnamese beer which we call tiger piss. Within minutes, a short teenage girl, maybe seventeen, grabs my shoulder and says, “Hey G.I. you wan me?”

I scan the other women’s faces. They’re both much older and from their red mouths look like they’ve eaten too much betel nut.

“Okay,” I answer the girl and pay the Mama San three dollars.

“You numba one G.I.” the girl says and leads me to a cot barely off the bar. The size of the rat hole we’re in and the low ceiling restrict me from bobbing my ass. Her hands let loose, going wild and massaging me every which way. Not like Cindy Jane’s light strokes that were in the same direction. Still, after I rub the girl’s jugs for awhile, I can’t hold off.

As I leave the cubby hole, Pete is haggling with the Mama San.

“You say two dollars for sucky, three for fucky,” Pete tells her. “I get sucky and I gave you two dollars upfront.”

She holds out one finger meaning she wants another dollar. I don’t like the expression on her face. Nor on the face of the Vietnamese man on the other side of the room. And by the way he’s reaching under the table, it looks like he may have a gun.

“Here.” I toss her a dollar in military script money and

motion to Pete for us to haul ass.

On the way back, Pete says, “You shouldn’t have paid.” He slips a buck into my shirt pocket. “She must’ve figured my sucky turned into a fucky. I was trying to explain to her I wanted to get another shot.”

“Not worth fighting over a buck. Plus it’s almost dark and that place is grungy.”

“How was the girl you were with?” he asks.

“Pretty good.” I grin. “Wished she’d been older and slower, though. How was yours?”

He smiles widely. “She knew what to do when she was down there.”

A Vietnamese man is following us who I’m sure is Viet Cong. I make a face to Pete and nod.

Pete shakes his head and laughs.

I say, “It’s not funny,” and sneak a backward glance. The man is taking a dump on the dirt road.

We don’t say anything else the rest of the way back.

Hours later, while getting my uniform ready for work, my nuts itch like crazy. I don’t plan on seeing a medic, but within two days, I scratch my balls until I bleed. The doctor tells me I’ve got the crabs and prescribes a shower and powder routine, clean bedding and a reissue of boxers. The regimen soothes the problem.

Pre-dawn the morning after the itching stops, Smitty finds me before work.

“Commander McAllister needs to see you ASAP,” he says. “Your ass is grass.”

“Why?”

“The medical staff reported you were off-limits with a prostitute.” He pauses. “Mac’s strict about this stuff. That’s why he has tight controls over who can have Vietnamese women on base.”

I take all this in and stride to the Commander’s office. The white plaster building is more permanent than most of the others on base. Posters of the military chain of command hang on the walls by his office.

The door is open and he yells, “Get in here.”

I salute and announce myself.

“Private Denicola, why is it you went to an off-limits

establishment?” His red hair practically stands up on end.

“I didn’t know it was off-limits, sir.”

“Weren’t you briefed when you first got here?”

“Yes, sir. I didn’t know that was the place they were talking about.”

“Were there any other military personnel with you?”

“No, sir,” I say.

“Maybe five days of shit detail will make you think twice next time.” He stands up, all five feet eight inches of him, and dismisses me.

Shit Detail consists of scrubbing the latrine, installing fresh toilet paper, and grappling with the shit pots in all eight crappers. Each of them holds several gallons plus the contents and has to be dragged thirty or so feet so the mixture can be burned. When I look at the mixture I wonder if any of the guys have had a solid movement since they’ve gotten here. Added to the mess are swarms of insects. As I roll the contents to the burning area, the shit spills all over my uniform. Sweat bathes me, soaks my shirt and stings my eyes. I don’t dare wipe my face with my mucked up hands. A Vietnamese woman stares at me as if I’m nuts.

The burning is no fun either: I pour gasoline on the contents and when the fire finally catches, I watch it go up in flames. The next part—stirring it with a thick wooden stick—creates another putrid smell.

When I finish all eight crappers, it’s dinner time. Laundry doesn’t have any clean uniforms. I do the next best thing, by taking a shower and trying to get the shit off my clothes. They still smell raunchy. So I put them back on and scrub them as best I can. As always the water in the shower turns cold. My uniform is saturated and doesn’t smell any better.

In the chow hall, I start eating. Bolduc walks up to me. “I’m short,” he says. “Don’t wanna smell shit while I’m eating.”

“You ain’t that short,” Gonzo tells Bolduc. “You still got over a hundred days.”

“Give ‘em a break,” Molina says. “Can’t do shit detail without smellin’ like it.”

I give up on eating before things escalate. Chow hall food isn’t worth hassling over.

Minutes later, back in the barracks, I slump on the edge of

my bunk.

Pete swaggers in holding a nicely browned loaf of bread. “Looky,” he says. “My momma sent me some of her sweetbread.” He rips off a hunk and holds it out to me.

I bite into it. It tastes like cake without icing. “Man, this is good stuff.”

Pete deals the cards for a hand of poker. Neither of us knows how to play well, but it helps keep our minds occupied the nights we’re not on duty.

When I look at my cards, I reach for a beer, and realize I’ve run out. “Can you spot me a beer until the next run?”

Pete hands me one of his. He takes another bite of the sweetbread and asks, “Is your momma a good cook?”

“She never learned how to bake sweets ’cause her father was diabetic, though she could open a restaurant with her Italian food.”

He brushes the crumbs off his shirt. “What’s your dad like?”

My mind shifts from her perfectly spiced eggplant parmesan to the Chow Hall’s runny powdered eggs “—Guess he was a hero.”

“You guess?”

I look away from Pete. “In World War II he was on a submarine in the Pacific. He detected a Japanese suicide boat and ordered the spotlight focused on it. They wiped out the boat before it got them. He saved the entire crew’s lives.”

“Wow. Swift.”

I nod.

After the next days’ shit detail, laundry gives me a clean uniform and I stop by the showers. Pete gets there at the same time. He keeps his shorts on while he briefly showers, then dries himself off, and wraps a towel around his waist.

“Shit,” he says when his towel drops.

I glance over and see he doesn’t have pubic hair.

“Hacked it off,” he says. “So I don’t get the crabs at the sex shack.” Quickly, he puts on his shorts.

“Different strokes for different folks,” I say, though I think that’s pretty fuckin’ weird.

When I finish showering, I stay outside to catch my breath. It’s nice to be by myself for a while. I don’t care about eating

in the mess hall and the cooks will give me C-rations. The fruit's not so bad and maybe I can swap the dessert and the cigarettes with one of the smokers for beer.

A loud whistling sound startles me. I breathe in heavily and yell. A rocket drops and explodes the shed next to one of our generators. *God, Molina works there.* All that's left is the shell of the building, still on fire. Several minutes after the attack started, I hear the delayed radio announcement warning of "incoming" and I hurry to the barracks. For the longest while, my breathing doesn't steady and panic shoots through me.

Later while drinking a beer, Smitty tells us Molina's body was burned beyond recognition.

Even though the temperature's over a hundred I'm shivering.

Cindy Jane sends me a letter. She wants to know if they call me by my last name like in war movies. She writes about her college classes at Cal, and how she wants to remain friends even though we broke up before I left for Vietnam. Her letter ends with the question everyone asks: When will you be coming home?

"In 301 days," I say aloud.

I always get a pull in my stomach when I hear from her. She knew my lottery draft number was thirty-eight but got angry when I enlisted in the Army. I told her the extra year I have to serve is stateside and it's worth having a warehouse specialty code instead of being infantry on the front lines. She said, "Maybe you won't get drafted."

"They expect to call everyone under 200," I told her. "At thirty-eight, they got my ass for sure."

"What if you go to Canada?"

I told her, "My father would disown me." Plus I didn't have the balls to do it back then. Now every time the base gets knocked, I think going to Canada would've been better than getting zapped.

Late that night, when it looks like everyone's asleep, I jack off. It doesn't take long to get good and hard. I think about Cindy Jane, her wonderfully firm breasts and how, the night before she left for college, she let me go all the way. In the

barracks I do it with less noise and more thought than ever before.

I plant myself on the floor in the few feet of space between Pete's bunk and mine. My card playing buddy is at the sex joint. The mail has come and I have a note from my father.

I'm writing because your mother doesn't know what to say to someone in a war. Believe me, she thinks about you every moment of the day. She's getting a package ready to send.

I'm damn proud of you. I knew when the time came, you'd stand.

We're leaving for my reunion tomorrow. Someday you'll be going to yours.

I'm sure, like me, you're doing the right thing. When you get home, we can talk about our experiences man-to-man.

*Love,
Dad*

I crumple up the letter and jam it in my foot locker. The letter feels like pressure. To clear my mind, I go outside. For the first time since I've been here the night temperature is cool. Smitty told me this morning that monsoon season is coming. Watching the stars gives me a calm feeling even though the stars are in different constellations from the ones I see back home. At the moment I don't want to think about home.

Pete isn't back by the time I go to bed. He's been gone long enough to have sloppy seconds and thirds. I toss and turn on the narrow cot as much as I can and try to sleep on my side.

In the distance, I hear the banging of explosions. The sounds become louder and the weak light in the barracks goes out. Then the door abruptly swings open. The image of the person standing in the doorway is taller than Pete. I bolt upright in my bunk and try to speak. But I can only manage a stammer.

"It's Smitty," he says. "One of our generators failed. Mac sent for Nha Trang's help. Should be back up by morning." He flashes his light on Pete's bunk. "Where's Peterson?"

I tell him.

"He picked a hell of a time to get his rocks off."

While Smitty walks to the next bay, I remain perched on

top of my bunk above the mosquito netting. The guy at the other end of the barracks snores. Someone in between tosses and turns.

It must be a good hour later when the barracks door opens. But again it's not Pete. Smitty comes closer and speaks no louder than a whisper, "Need to see you outside, Denny."

As I stuff my feet into my boots, he grabs my shoulder. My heart sinks. He's never touched me before. We go outside.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Pete got shot in a scuffle. He didn't make it."

The night air is heavy. My eyes are wet. An image of the Vietnamese man in the whorehouse reaching under the table and shooting Pete point blank runs through my mind.

"Do you need a minute?" Smitty asks. "Or can you see Colonel Mac now?"

I take a breath. "See him now. I sure as hell can't sleep."

The lights are on in the hall by the colonel's office. Either he has his own generator or ours is back up.

"I have a fast question for him then he'll see you," Smitty says.

From the outer office I hear Smitty ask, "What do you want the official report to say on Peterson?"

"He got killed near the base entrance. Be vague. He was a good troop. None of the bull about him being off-limits."

When Smitty leaves, I walk in and salute the colonel.

He waives me off and points to the chair.

I ease into the chair.

"I need a favor from you. Denny," The colonel says. "I know you were Private Peterson's buddy."

I nod.

"I'd like you to write a letter to his family." He fidgets with some papers.

"Sir, Pete and I only did a few things together. What can I say that might help them feel better?"

"I'll send the official letter," the colonel says, "But since you knew him you've got a shot at being personal."

"Guess I could try." My shoulders sag.

"That's the spirit."

When he tells me he doesn't want a salute, I leave.

Now with the generator back, there's a small amount of

light from the lamp. I can't sleep, so I begin working on it.

Todd Peterson was my friend and a good guy. We used to play cards sometimes. He even let me win when he knew I needed it. He talked about his folks a lot. You sound like real nice people. And Mrs. Peterson, I tasted your great baking. Even here, Pete knew how to enjoy life.

Joe "Denny" Denicola

He has beer left in his foot locker. I reach in and remove three cans and somehow it makes me think about Dad.

Dear Cindy Jane:

Sorry I haven't written. A friend of mine died last week and it's made me stagnant. The heat doesn't help. Neither does the fact I always feel dirty from the dust blowing.

I had guard duty last night. Never a good day when you've only had two hours of sleep. But I did hear the new song by The Who on the Armed Forces Network and started thinking about you and the night we saw them live. It was the best night of my life.

Sure do miss you. Maybe we can get together again. If you're not with some college guy.

To answer your questions, I still have 290 days left here. And they call me Denny or Denicola. But please still call me Joe.

Before I decide how to end the letter, I cross out the sentence about getting together and rewrite the whole damn thing.

Commander McAllister yells, "Fall in." We scramble into formation. The colonel clears his throat. "President Nixon has reported that because of the increased strength of the South Vietnamese Army, the war is fading out. He thanks all of the troops for your hard work and commitment."

With most everyone cheering, I don't hear the rest of what he's saying. I wonder if I'll get home by Christmas.

On the walk back, I listen to Bolduc and Gonzo talking.

"What Mac said doesn't make sense," Bolduc tells him. "We've had more attacks in the last couple of weeks than we had in the first months I was here."

I hate to agree with Bolduc, but he's right.

Gonzo holds the door for me, and as I round the corner to

my bunk, I spot a letter sitting on my cot.

Dear "Denny":

Your note was very nice. And since you were Todd's friend I hope you can help me find out information on how he died. No one we've contacted has any specifics. His girlfriend would like to someday tell his unborn child all about him. And his mother and I have questions. Did he die in a battle? Did he save anyone's life? Please help.

Mr. Charles Peterson

I flop down on the cot and mutter, "Whoa!"

When Smitty comes by, I tell him about the letter. "I'm short," he says. "Your young ass can come up with something decent."

Smitty only has twenty-seven days left, but I think that's long enough to answer a letter.

Bolduc overhears us and after Smitty leaves, says, "Tell him his kid got blown away in a fuck house."

I stare at Bolduc. What's with him? Then I remember, once overhearing him and Pete arguing about something outside the barracks, shouting for a long time—what, I couldn't hear. I didn't think their argument had come to blows. But was that enough to cause Bolduc's reaction? "I can't do that," I tell him.

Bolduc tears the letter out of my hand. "Then I'll do it."

Something goes off inside my head. I hear a guy in the next bay listening to that awful song by the Partridge Family. I imagine Mrs. Peterson sniffing back tears while she's kneading dough for her sweetbread. And I glare at Bolduc's self-satisfied look. Heading swiftly towards him, I rush Bolduc and slam my fist in his face.

He staggers backward. "You prick," he yells and comes toward me. His hand scrapes my shoulder as I turn away.

"Quit this shit," Gonzo yells. "We're not here to fight one another."

Bolduc eyes me.

I throw him back the nastiest look I can muster.

Gonzo grabs and holds Bolduc's arms.

A newbie private holds mine.

"What the hell's this about, Boldy?" Gonzo asks.

Not wanting Bolduc to answer, I tell Gonzo.

“Give the letter back to him,” he says.

Everyone listens to Gonzo. He’s six-foot-four and does hundreds of push-ups a day without anyone ordering him to.

“Only if he says he’s sorry,” Bolduc says.

“I’m sorry,” I lie.

“Here’s your fuckin’ letter.” He hands it to Gonzo who hands it to me.

My knuckles hurt from my punch. My shoulder aches from his.

With my pen and pad in hand, I go outside to try and get my breathing rhythm back in sync. It’s still too light to see the stars. The wind is blowing. My mind is racing. *Pete died near the base entrance. He had detected a man that was a Viet Cong. They skirmished. The man killed Pete, then fled. Had the man come on base, we might have all died. So I’d call Pete a hero.*

In the distance, I hear someone shooting an M-60. Then an “incoming” warning on the base radio. We’re rocketed by mortar again. The sky becomes bright with red flames. Flashes of light stream off the barbed wire surrounding the edge of the base. The force of the attack knocks me to the ground.

The sirens screech in harmony, and I crawl the few feet to the barracks. Once inside, I grab a beer from my foot locker. From my position, I can see the calendar on the floor. The number of days I have left 262 is marked inside a circle.

The mortar attack gets louder. I sip the beer, and tell the can, “Do your job. Get me lit.”

Half a beer later, I pick up the envelope and address it to Pete’s folks. I wonder if my father would ever consider lying as doing the right thing.

I won’t find out. Even if I survive, I’ll never talk to him or anyone else about this place.

M. J. Schmid

Start Over

Hazel arrived home from the veterinary clinic to the apartment she shared with her husband. After ten hours at work—constantly moving, seeing appointments, attending to patients, never sitting—her feet felt like they were on fire and her left leg ached worse than usual. From the doorway she could see the entire apartment, living room, kitchen, the door to their bedroom. It was a small place made smaller by too much stuff. The clutter engulfed every flat surface.

Matt was home, already on the couch, streaming old episodes of *Supernatural*. He paused the episode when she walked in the door. They exchanged hellos. How's work. Did you have a nice day? Superficial and meaningless.

Hazel took off her puffy jacket and joined him on the couch. Matt used to try and pull out more information from her, about work, about how she was feeling, but she never really want to talk about *anything*.

She pulled out her phone and opened her latest downloaded game. Last night she had spent all of her insomnia-induced free time building her avatar and leaving the starting point in the village.

“What's the game of the week?” Matt asked.

“Adventure Freely: Mountain of Destiny. It's stupid really—defeat the evil wizard and save your village from destruction—but I like the animations. It's a multiple-choice adventure game. Kind of like those old books we used to read as kids.” Hazel didn't tell him she had named the avatar Alice. It would not go over well.

“Sounds fun,” he said. He didn't understand how she could spend hours at a time on the couch playing on her phone. He started his show again, and she became engrossed in her game.

The Alice avatar walked across the screen up a steep path. The scenery scrolled so that as Alice walked, she remained in the middle of the screen and the background moved behind her, pine trees along the path, snow-capped mountains in the

back. The path became steeper; the forest disappeared giving way to boulder fields.

A text box popped up:

You travel along a mountainous trail, rocky and barren. You come upon a bridge leading to the other side of a crevasse. As you start to cross, a troll jumps out in front of you blocking your way.

You:

- a) Ignore the troll and continue to walk past**
- b) Hit the troll with an item from your inventory**
- c) Offer the troll all of your gold**
- d) Turn back**
- e) Start over**

Previously, Hazel had selected the first two options and the troll had thrown Alice off the bridge both times. She tapped on option C.

A text box appeared:

The troll takes your gold.

“You may pass.”

The troll disappears over the side of the bridge. Alice walks across and continues up the mountain.

Matt paused his show and said, “I reheated leftovers. Want some?”

She shook her head. Thinking about eating. Thinking about the messy kitchen. No longer immersed in the game, the thoughts triggered her anxiety. It was physically painful, a tightness in her chest that felt like a fist wrapped around her heart squeezing, making it hard to breathe.

She fixated on the thoughts. The mess. He wouldn’t take care of it. She always had to take care of it. Messy to him was a whole order of magnitude above her threshold. The ache in her chest and the negativity towards Matt started a sequence of images and thoughts. She couldn’t stop or mitigate them in any way. The image: dishes on the counter. The thought: *Matt never does the dishes.* The image: the exam room, owners crying. The thought: *I don’t know what’s wrong with the dog. What did I miss?* The image: the purpled haired teenager on the bus pushing past her today. The thought: *What a bitch!*

Each image and thought gave strength to the grip on her heart. *Oh god, here it comes.* She was powerless to prevent

the next images. They always came in flashes: twisted metal, broken glass, blood, ambulances, firetrucks. And then the smell would creep in: the burning rubber and oil, gasoline, the metallic tang of blood.

“Hazel!” Matt said, shaking her.

Her attention refocused on him. The images and smells faded, but the fist still gripped her heart.

“How bad?”

“I’m fine.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Hazel ignored him and returned to her phone. She knew she was not being fair to him, that she was treating him like shit. But she found games were the only thing that blocked out the panic for any length of time. Everything else, including Matt, was just a pathway leading to another anxiety attack.

“I think you went back to work too soon,” he said. “You were getting better, but now you’re almost as bad as you were just after . . . maybe you should take more time off.”

“You know we can’t afford for me not to work, not with the medical bills.” She didn’t look up from her phone as she spoke. Then she added, as if it wasn’t obvious to him, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

The game was open. Alice walked along the mountain path shivering.

A text box appeared:

Freezing wind whips around you. The snow reduces visibility. The light begins to fade, and you lose all feeling in your fingers and toes. A twinkling light breaks through the darkness.

You:

a) Persist in your trek, convinced the light must mean a dwelling and a fire are near

b) Give up and lie down

c) Turn back

d) Start over

Hazel selected option A.

You persist in your trek. The snow gets worse. In the diminishing light, you lose the path and walk off the cliff’s edge plunging to almost certain death.

A second text box appeared:

The feeling of falling overwhelms you, and you lose consciousness.

Then the screen went black, and the app closed itself. Hazel couldn't get it to reopen. A groan escaped her lips. "Ugh, I keep dying in this stupid game."

He looked at her, his eyes wide, his mouth drawn tight. "Maybe you should play a different game—"

"Maybe you should leave me alone," she said and got up from the couch. It was childish. She knew that. She walked out of the room without looking at him, but she paused at the bedroom door, "I'm sorry."

Matt dismissed the apology like he always did, "Don't worry about it."

As she dressed for bed, she tried to avoid looking at the scars on her arms and left leg, souvenirs from the multiple surgeries required to put her back together. Ignoring them was futile. Working to not think about them was still thinking about them. The fist around her heart squeezed again. The images started to flash. The oncoming car. The impact. Alice.

The phone chimed and vibrated twice. A text box appeared on her lock screen with "AF" and a small graphic of the app, a yeti with a snow topped peak in the background. Underneath the icon it read, "You have been saved by the mighty eagle, King Golden Feathers. Open the game to Adventure Freely!"

When the notification appeared, the images stopped and the pressure in her chest loosened a fraction, enough to give relief. She climbed into bed and played the game until her eyes could no longer focus. Then she closed the app and turned off the light. Tonight, sleep came easier than usual, but deeper sleep always locked her tighter into the dream. It was the same dream every night, her worst night on endless repeat.

The high beams are on, illuminating both lanes of the empty highway. The colonnade of pines are barely visible at the edge of the lights. Hazel and Alice are singing along to Tom Petty's "Free Fallin" playing on the radio.

Hazel sees it on the edge of her vision. The car is moving so fast, she doesn't process what is happening until the car has jumped the median and is a second from hitting them. There is no time to cry out, to tell Alice to swerve. The

second is gone and the entire world is screeching, grinding metal, shattering glass, tumbling. She is upside down, held tightly in place by her seat belt. Blood flows down her face, its metallic scent filling her nose, mixing with the smell of burning rubber and oil. Alice hangs half out of her seatbelt. She is motionless. Her body is broken, neck bent and legs twisted in an impossible configuration.

She screams, "Alice!"

The screeching, grinding of metal has stopped and an eerie silence fills the air. Her voice echoes in her head.

"Alice!" She wails until her throat is raw and her voice is raspy.

Somehow the radio is still playing, and Tom Petty is singing about falling into nothing.

She woke up the same way she did every night screaming, convinced she was covered in blood and trapped in the car again. She flailed. The sheets bound her legs. Her panic intensified. Suddenly, Matt was there, holding her, creating a soothing pressure that felt like a protective bubble, distancing her from the dream.

She knew more than just her nightmares were putting a strain on him. They were both suffering from her bad moods and irritableness. Despair settled on her, a heavy suffocating weight that smothered the panic and left in its place emptiness. Even as he held her, she felt alone and disconnected.

Pushing away from him she said, "I'm getting up. Go back to sleep."

He sighed and let his arms fall away. He returned to the living room without speaking. As she was getting back into bed, her phone chimed and vibrated twice. The AF icon appeared on her lock screen, but something was different. Underneath the icon it read, "You have survived another nightmare! Open the game to Adventure Freely!"

"Weird." She dismissed the notification. It was almost three in the morning. The panic from the nightmare faded but sleep was a feral and elusive creature, hard to catch and impossible to hold on to. It was not going to return to her again tonight.

She got out of bed and dressed in her running clothes. Matt was already asleep on the couch, the TV on with the

sound muted. She decided against waking him. Hadn't she disturbed his sleep enough tonight?

The neighborhood was still with an eerie quiet that only happened in San Francisco at three in the morning. Ignoring the pain in her leg, she headed north up the hill through the Presidio, ear buds in, bass heavy techno turned up.

An impulsive thought occurred to her, and without it fully conscious in her mind, she continued running until she was on the Golden Gate Bridge, the orange-red railing to her right and the freezing water of the San Francisco Bay a thousand feet beneath her. She stopped to stare down into the dark. Images of that night flashed. The twisted metal. The blood. Alice's body.

Since that night Hazel had been falling. She was desperate to stop, for the nightmares to be over, but the fall seemed endless. She looked left and right. The bridge police, who arrested would-be jumpers, were not around. It would be quick. The pain would be over. Matt could go back to a normal life. Neither of them would have to deal with her deteriorating mental state.

Her phone chimed and vibrated twice. She looked at the screen. The AF game icon appeared followed by a text box:

You stand on the precipice.

You:

a) Jump

b) Turn back

c) Start Over

Confused, Hazel ignored the phone. She checked her surroundings. The road was still empty. The wind whipped around her, its icy bite ripping through her clothes. If she jumped, would she feel the freezing water engulf her, wrapping her in its numbing embrace? Or would she lose consciousness before impact? Without further hesitation, she climbed up on the railing and jumped off.

She was falling.

Falling.

Everything went black.

Then she was standing on the bridge again, looking over the edge of the railing, contemplating the jump. How cold will the water be when she hit it? Would she feel it? Would

the impact of her body on the water be enough to knock her out? She felt queasy imagining the plummet over the edge.

Suddenly, it came back. The falling was no longer a fantasy but a memory. The rushing of the wind around her, the waiting for the falling to stop, the shattering of her bones on impact with the water, the regret. It all crashed into her, and she doubled over in pain.

Her phone chimed and vibrated twice. She looked at the screen.

The AF game icon appeared followed by the message:

You stand on the precipice.

You:

a) Jump

b) Turn back

c) Start Over

Hazel's finger hovered over option C for a moment before tapping option B. The text bubble disappeared. There was a rushing sound, and the edge of her vision blurred. The wind was gone. She heard Matt's voice.

"Hazel. Hello?"

She looked up from her phone. She was standing in the entrance of their apartment dressed as if she had just come home from work, in scrubs and a puffy jacket. Matt was sitting on the couch watching an old episode of *Supernatural*. The dishes were piled on the counter. She looked back down at her phone. The AF app was open, and the screen was black. Her thinking was sluggish. Where had she been a moment before? Images flashed. Not painful images punctuated with the tightening grip on her heart. Just images. A run. The bridge. Falling.

She hesitated in the doorway. She could join Matt, but she wanted time to figure out what just happened, to try to find a reasonable explanation for why a moment ago she thought she had been on the bridge and now was standing in her doorway.

"Hazel," Matt said, sharper this time. "Are you going to come in and shut the door?"

Her phone chimed and vibrated twice. She opened the app. There were no graphics, just a text box in white on a black background. It read:

You are exhausted. Confusion and dread steal over

you.

You:

a) Join Matt on the couch

b) Go to the bar

c) Turn back

d) Start Over

What the hell was going on with the game? Not really expecting anything to happen, she selected option B.

The app closed out. There was a rushing sound, and the edge of her vision blurred. Stale beer permeated the air, and a live band played “Smells like Teen Spirit.” She looked up from her phone. She was in the Tavern, three blocks from her apartment, and she could see her friend Andy standing at the bar.

“Hey, Hazel!” Andy said and gave her a hug.

Hazel tried to ask Andy what he was doing at the bar on a Tuesday, but when she opened her mouth different words came out, “The band sounds terrible. Should we tell Steven?”

“God no. It’s the only thing that gets him out of the house. I don’t want to do anything to ruin that,” he said laughing.

Hazel took a closer look at the stage. Andy’s husband was behind the drums doing his best Dave Grohl impression.

“How’s the leg? You ready to go back to work tomorrow?” Andy asked.

Comprehension came slowly. This was last month, the Sunday before she started work again. Hazel had met Andy at the Tavern to celebrate her return to semi-normalcy and watch Steven perform. The fist around her heart had been a fraction below intolerable that night. She could feel the phantom of it now.

The bartender set a whisky and diet soda in front of Hazel and, as she had that night, she finished it, barely taking a breath before putting it down. Andy watched without judgement and downed his own drink, before ordering another round.

They stayed at the bar, listening partially to the band but mostly talking about frivolous things—the latest celebrity gossip, what happened on their favorite tv shows that week, how terrible Stephen’s band was. A few drinks in, Hazel was feeling calm, the grip of anxiety looser than it had been for a while. For a few minutes she felt normal, like herself before

the accident. Then Andy mentioned what almost no one mentioned in Hazel's presence.

"I know this has been tough on you. God, I can't even imagine what it was like to live through that. But you know you're not alone, right? We all miss Alice. She was one of my closest friends. I miss her every day, especially her laugh. She had a great laugh."

Hazel tried to stop herself, to keep from repeating what she had said that night. Right now, she wanted to thank Andy and share stories about their friend. Instead, the words spilled from her mouth, an unaltered rendition of the original script.

"You're right. You can't imagine. Coming here was a mistake. I have to go." She finished her drink, then grabbed her jacket and left. Andy called after her, but the words were lost in the music.

As Hazel stepped out into the brisk night air, she stumbled. She was drunk. The kind of drunk that caused a brain-searing headache and stomach-emptying nausea the next morning. Her phone chimed and buzzed twice. When she opened it, a text box read:

You regret drinking too much and overreacting.

You:

a) Go back inside and apologize

b) Go for a walk

c) Turn back

d) Start over

Too drunk to be rational, and for no particular reason, she selected option C.

The ground lurched, and everything in her peripheral vision blurred. When she looked up from her phone, she was standing in her entryway, clear headed and somehow sober. Matt was in the bedroom calling to her.

"Honey, do you think I should wear the blue tie? Will it clash with your dress?"

Hazel looked down. The skirt of her teal dress floated just above her ankles showing off the gold straps of her favorite heels. Her finger and toenails were painted red, a deep almost blood colored shade of red. She turned to the mirror hung next to the door and stared at her reflection. Her dark, wild curly hair was pulled back, only slightly tamed by bobby

pins. Matt bought her flowers, and she had fastened one of the them just behind her left ear. She remembered what night this was.

“You look amazing, sweetie,” Matt said as he appeared next to her and kissed her cheek. “Ready to go?”

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” she said with the exact same inflections and notes of worry she had that night. She tried to tell the truth, *Absolutely not, I can’t. Too much. It’ll be too much. Too much noise. Too many people.* But what came out followed the original lines of the script.

“I don’t think I can go out.” She could not handle crowds since the accident. She had a hard time being in a car. She had not been back to work either. She was most calm when she was on the couch binge watching shows or playing games on her phone.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be fine. We need to celebrate. You’re out of those casts, and your leg is getting stronger,” he said, the enthusiasm sounding forced. He paused, then added, “And you need to get out of the house more.”

Despite the mounting anxiety, the fist in her chest tight as ever, she yielded. To please him. To try and meet his needs for once. Remembering the subsequent events, her mind began to build and repeat the images, not of the car accident, but of this night. *I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.* Flashes of dancing clumsily. Of someone running into her because she missed a step. Of her screaming “Back off!” Of her collapsing to the floor unable to breathe.

Her phone was still in her hand. It chimed and vibrated twice. Relief flooded through her as she viewed the screen.

Wishing to avoid this night, you:

- a) Get in the car anyway**
- b) Go sit on the couch**
- c) Turn back**
- d) Start over**

She contemplated selecting “d) Start over” but she didn’t know what “start over” meant. *Start over where? To what?* She selected option C.

The overhead lights in the room were off, and the one behind the bed emitted a soft warm glow. The monitor hooked up to Hazel was silent, the sound of her pulse playing at the nurses’

station rather than in the room. The steady peaks and valleys of the electrocardiogram's readings were mesmerizing. She was unsure how long she had been fixated on the screen, monitoring her own vital signs—pulse, respiration, ECG, oxygenation levels—experimenting with taking deep breaths and watching her oxygenation level increase, her heart rate decrease slightly; holding her breath and watching how oxygen levels decreased and her heart rate increased. It was all so much more manageable than thinking about what else was going on in her body. The accident left her with seventeen fractures, five in the left wrist, one each in the right radius and ulna, one in the right humerus, four in her ribs on the left side, three in her pelvis and one in her left femur. Everything except her ribs and forearm required surgical repair.

She recovered quickly from the surgeries, and the pain of breathing with broken ribs was subsiding. The bruising in her lungs and internal organs was almost gone, but she was back in the hospital. During the course of healing she developed a severe infection in her thigh.

Hazel remembered this night vividly. Matt sat in the chair next to her bed, pretending to read and struggling not to fill the silence with meaningless conversation. Earlier, frustrated and short-tempered, she yelled at him, “Stop talking. I can't take it. Either shut up or get out.” She felt possessed by the irrational anger. It lashed out at Matt in ways that horrified her, yet she felt powerless and incapable of preventing it.

The pain in her leg was worse than anything else in her body. She could feel it throbbing with her pulse. However great the pain, it was more manageable than the fear. Tomorrow she was going into surgery to remove the hardware in her leg, which had allowed her femur to heal properly, but now was the nidus of infection. There was a high chance they would have to graft bone. There was also a small chance the leg was unsalvageable and they would have to amputate. So, she focused on her monitor and tried to block out everything else, including Matt.

Her phone buzzed on the bedside table. Originally it had been a text from her mom, but this time it was the game.

You are filled with pain, in your soul and in your body. You:

- a) Try to sleep**
- b) Talk to Matt**
- c) Turn back**
- d) Start over**

Maybe if she selected “d) Start Over” it would take her back before the accident. Or maybe selecting “turn back” would give her options to make a different decision. She could imagine what they would be: offer to drive the car, tell Alice to take the next exit and get a hotel for the night, turn back.

Her finger hovered over D, but at the last moment she chose the familiar over the unknown and selected C.

Tom Petty played on the radio and she and Alice sang along.

Hazel tried to stop, to tell Alice to pull over, to tell her there was a car speeding toward them, that the guy was texting, that he wasn't paying attention. But what came out were the next words of the song.

In desperation, she tried to reach out and grab the wheel, but her hands stayed locked around her phone. This time she saw the car off in the distance. It wasn't swerving. It was in its lane. For a moment Hazel held the hope her past was changing, that the driver wasn't distracted by his phone, that the cars would pass each other by, and no one but Hazel would hold a memory of the worst that could happen.

Then the other car drifted into the opposite shoulder. A few seconds later he would over correct, jump the median and ram into Alice and Hazel. It would crush the driver-side door and flip the car. A defective airbag would fail to deploy. Alice would hit her head on the steering wheel and her knees would jam up into her chest. Hazel would watch helplessly as Alice bled out internally and died within minutes. She would scream Alice's name continually until her throat was raw.

In the few precious seconds before the approaching car crossed the median, Hazel continued to sing but Alice broke script. She took her hands off the wheel and turned to Hazel.

“Hazel, I love you. Stop falling and be free.”

The world faded until all she saw was Alice's beautiful face. When the cars collided, the two friends flew free from the wreckage. Hazel could not hear the screeching and grinding of metal, or smell the burning rubber. She watched as her friend drifted up and faded until she could no longer distinguish

Alice from the stars.

Hazel landed softly on the ground a hundred yards from the crash. She watched from a place of safety as the emergency vehicles arrived, and the firefighters worked to put out the fire and to free the occupants of the vehicles. She watched in wonder as they quickly and methodically took off the passenger side door, removed her from the car and placed her on a backboard. When the phone chimed and vibrated, she was startled to still have it in her hands. All that was on the screen was:

Start Over

Margaret Hrencher

The Professor and Doña Eleanor

“**H**e makes you stay late. You can’t clean until he’s finished with his practice. I can move you to another building on campus. Nicer professors.”

Eleanor clasped her dry fingers and rubbed her palms. She crossed her arms, one hand tight against her side, the other gripping her forearm and considered the request of her young supervisor.

“Me gusta la música,” She said and refused to leave the music department with its erudite, if arrogant, conductor.

The sound of the strings wafted through the long hallway.

She gathered supplies and began cleaning and listening to music. The music, the wide arcs of the broom swishing, the faint creaking of the wooden handle, created a reverie.

Eleanor drew a quick breath, a slight smile on her lips, she prickled with anticipation. She knew it was a good night. The orchestra would perform *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* for the university audience in a few weeks, a little serenade for spring. A sharp tap on the metal podium rang through the practice room and down the corridor.

She lived in two worlds. In one, she cleaned the university music building. In the other, she remembered her father, a time before they moved to the north. Her father’s tap on the podium was magic to her. She sat next to her mother, close to the orchestra. The ambient lighting glowed from the stage, the music began, and the dream was made. She heard the patterns develop, the ascending themes of the first movement, then the lyrical andante. She imagined the dance of the menuetto and the brilliance of the rondo allegro. Each caught her soul as the concerto moved deeper and deeper into her mind until she touched the great composers of the past.

Suddenly, a side door swung open hitting the hallway wall. The sound muffled as two boys eager to leave their last class of the day rushed out. A stream of students followed, hustling through the door, jostling each other with their back packs slung across their shoulders. She moved to the side, making

room for their hurried exit. The heavy double doors leading to the street banged opened then clanged shut after the last student.

Her mood interrupted, she arranged items in her cart, waiting for the humanities professor who taught the class to emerge. Soon, she was there. Her brief case in hand, she turned, fumbled with her keys, then locked the classroom door. “Good evening,” she nodded to Eleanor, not waiting for a return greeting, and hurried down the hall and out the door.

The gardenias that covered either side of the porch were in full bloom. Their fragrance drifted into the hallway before the doors banged shut. She stopped and stared at the doors, the spring night just out of her reach. The baton hit the metal stand, the orchestra played, and she turned to continue her work.

Midway through the first movement the music stopped. “Measure 14, again, march this,” the conductor lectured. “Think about what you are playing. Rocket theme. Again.”

Chairs moved. A hard tap to the stand. The music began.

Within seconds, “No,” he interrupted. “Think. Rocket theme. It must be fast, energetic.” He paused. “Again. Listen. The tempo does not yield.”

The metronome clicked. The slice of the bows on the strings began the movement.

He would do better to let them play through, she thought, remembering her father’s work with the musicians in his orchestra. “Let them play,” he would say to his assistant after several attempts at a correction. “They have to learn to feel it. Let them play.”

The students played the first movement and began the melody of the second.

“No.” The music stopped. “This must be slower, gentle, lyrical. Do you know what those words mean?” he yelled. “No sentimental blustering.” A pause. He adjusted the metronome. “Get out ‘Fur Elise.’ Maybe something easier will help. We can only hope, right?”

She heard students rustling through their music folders held on strict black stands. Finding the score, they straightened their chairs, scraping the hard wood floor. She again swept the hallway, arcing back and forth with her broom. The first

notes of 'Für Elise' floated down the hall and she stopped. She closed her eyes and listened.

She remembered her father's last performance. Not a member of the elite orchestra, her talent on the piano good but not quite good enough, she sat in the velvet seats, frayed from the years of use then neglect, and allowed the music to enter her mind, then her soul. The flamboyant Mozart and the transitional Beethoven were his favorites to teach and perform. But in those last years, the pressure to leave, the military on campus, the assassination of the chancellor, weakened him. His physique thinned, his energy drained, he made a decision. "It's not safe anymore," he told his family. "There is no money. Soon there may not be a university."

She often wondered if they would have disappeared, become part of los desaparecidos if they had stayed. We had no path, no choice but to leave, she thought. As it was, the move was too much for her already weakened father. A dark time, he died only months after moving north. Not alone, his family with him, but disenfranchised, away from his colleagues and his passion, he wasted away.

The last notes faded. Again, she heard the chairs move, the sheets of music rustle, the metronome reset. The clear click, click, clicking of the beat, the exact tempo. Then the muted voice of the orchestra conductor. He stilled the deliberate pendulum. His baton tapped the podium. She held her breath.

The beginning was crisp, the tempo bright. They felt the serenade, she was sure. "Let them play." She mouthed the words.

She worked through the remaining few classrooms, dusting the shelves, emptying the waste baskets, sweeping the floor, and listening to the music. The cleaning dreamlike. She moved through her tasks mechanically, rhythmically. This one last time, the conductor allowed them to play through. Through all four movements to the coda. The ending always brought a gasp to her lips. Brilliant, she thought.

The session over, she heard the students moving their chairs, setting them in order for their morning peers. Sheaves of paper were tamped in place and put in folders, then on shelves above the openings designed for cased instruments. Parking her cart by the side of the wall, she peeked her head

inside the full room. The conductor shook a sheet of music in front of a nervous student and pointed with a rigid index finger. "Here," he said. "This is where the crescendo begins. Not two measures before."

The student nodded.

"Practice. Think. Hear it in your head. Then do it all again." A rasp of a smile raised his upper lip as he thrust the music back toward the young student.

Catching his eye, she said, "Clean?"

"No, no, not yet." His lips pinched together. "In a while. Pocos minutos," came the condescending answer.

She continued down the hall to the next classroom. Humming as she cleaned, she again heard the movements of Mozart's little serenade playing in her mind, moving from the first lyrical movement to the coda. Over and over she heard the movements and saw her father, tall and straight, the black tails of his tuxedo moving up and down, side to side, his arms punctuating a flourish, his hands encouraging more feeling to flow through his musicians, as he guided the orchestra through the piece.

Soon, she was finished with the last room. She headed back down the hall, through the double doors and stopped at the open door of the practice room. He was still there, his back to her, sitting at his desk. He stroked the metronome with his fingers as if it were the skin of a lover and unhinged the pendulum from the hook. The sound of the quick click-click sounded in the room. Moments later, the professor fastened the swinging lever and opened the music score.

"Clean?" she asked quietly. She did not want to upset him. There are parrots in the field, she thought, her father's frequent expression during those last months, urging them to be watchful.

A long sigh escaped his lowered head. His slumped shoulders were suddenly erect. He stood up quickly and picked up the papers on his desk. "Of course," he said without looking at her. "I was just leaving." He stuffed the papers into his brief case and grabbed his navy sweater. "Still chilly out, I guess," he said, not expecting a reply. He walked past her not noticing her shy smile. "Evening," his perfunctory salutation, as he left the room.

She waited until she heard the outside door open and swing closed, the sound echoing down the hall. Inhaling deeply, she wanted the odors of the leather cases, the resin of the bows, the heaviness of the sheaves of music to envelope her. She began to clean, first dusting the shelves, then sweeping through the arched circle of chairs, taking care not to move them from their places. Last, she came to his desk, slowly dusting the open spaces, careful not to disturb the piles of papers strewn around the periphery.

She brushed the unyielding metronome, pendulum clasped in its center place, the whole apparatus void of dust or fingerprints. Moving it carefully, she glanced underneath and found no dust footprint. As she slid it back in place, the clasp of the movement came undone, and the allegro beat clicked in the quiet room. She clasped her hands on the front and back of the metronome to stop it. She moved the instrument toward the back of the desk, warding off any further movement with open palms, the duster clasped under one thumb, as she backed away.

Brooms and rags stored away, she pushed her cart into the hall. She reached to close the door, paused and gazed at the chairs and music stands set precisely in the intricate arrangement. Once again, she felt the ambient lighting lower and the closeness of the audience. Once again, she heard her father's orchestra begin the music of the little serenade.

Drawn to the podium, she stepped up and faced the empty chairs. She picked up the slight baton and tapped the podium, the metallic sound loud in the quiet room. Her left arm raised, her right hand extended, she held the baton between fingers and thumb as she had seen her father begin so many times before. A quick downward stroke and the first movement began. She played through the ascending rocket theme and moved flawlessly into the second graceful variation. The intimate and tender strokes of the strings in the second movement entered her brain.

Entranced by the music in her mind, she did not hear the outside door open and close and the quick tap of the professor's shoes as he came down the hallway toward his room. She moved into the third movement, the menuetto, and heard nothing except the music, the baton in her hand

moving in small circles encouraging the dance.

He stopped before the door. Astounded. His mouth gaped open. He saw her turn the pages of the music on his stand. Then he watched, intrigued. Yes, he thought. *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. His hand began to tap the rhythm on his leg, immediate and precise, as he watched her lean forward into the rondo. Her face in a dreamlike smile, her eyes closed, her body staccatoed along with the movement, encouraging the individual voice of each instrument, her head bobbing, her hands sweeping through the coda.

His hand came up to his waist and struck down as if he were conducting the coda instead of her. His arm was tense, exact, striking down at the precise moment before the imagined sound. Her arms flowed making the last sweeping movement that enveloped the violins, cellos, violas, basses, ending with an exaggerated open palm, fingers stretching toward the empty chairs.

He heard her huff out a last breath as she lowered her hands, eyes still closed. Placing the baton on the podium, the clink of wood on metal brought her from her reverie. Opening her eyes she arranged the music as the professor had left it and turned to leave.

The professor backed out into the hall before she turned. Putting his hand on the wall, he walked toward the outside door, his quick stride gone. Quietly opening the door, he stepped through the short entrance out to the porch. He slipped, striking his thigh against the cement balustrade. His hand landed on the rough slope of the wide ledge. He slumped against it, shoulders drawn forward, head down. A bird flew from beneath the gardenia bush startling him. A strong gust of wind tossed the blooms dropping white petals on the ledge and the stairs.

The wind settled and he leaned against the building and felt the bricks mark his back. He again saw the graceful movements of the cleaning woman, arms moving, hearing the imaginary orchestra. Yes, he thought, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. She heard it, conducted it, note for note.

Suddenly, the door opened, and the cleaning woman stepped out on the porch, her purse clutched under her arm, her shift done. "Profesor," she said, surprised by his presence.

“You are here still. Buenas noches,” she said as she stepped down the stairs.

“Buenas noches, doña . . . ,” he paused, wishing he hadn’t spoken. He didn’t know her name.

“Doña Eleanor, Profesor,” she replied. “Buenas noches.”

Swinging her purse over her shoulder, she began her walk home.

The professor stared after her. Her quick step, the rhythmic sound of the heels of her shoes sounded on the sidewalk.

He sat on the cement ledge, the fragrance of the gardenias thick in the air. In the stillness of the night, he leaned his head against the brick, propping one leg on the ledge for balance, the other dangling over the edge. He heard the music. He felt it pulse in his mind. His fingers kept the tempo opening and closing, feeling the crescendo and the coda.

A brisk zephyr stirred the tops of the trees. The rustling of the leaves came in bursts, one followed by the other. The dream broken, “Doña Eleanor,” he murmured.

He swung his leg over to the steps, putting his hand on the façade of the building to steady himself and peered into the evening, down the sidewalk, stippled with gray sparkles.

Miranda Williams

The Gardener's Son

It was two days after his father got arrested when Elijah's mother finally lost it. He had awoken to her screaming, but it was not directed at him as one would expect at nine on a Sunday morning when he had yet to get dressed for church. Now, he stood behind the sliding-glass door, staring out its smudged pane as he watched his mother strip the cherry trees of their branches, ripping them limb by limb until they were nothing but leaves scattered on the ground and pillars of empty wood. Cherries fell onto the pathway that trailed through the backyard and his mother trampled them; their flesh burst on the cement, staining it a dark crimson.

Elijah's little sister, Esther, lurked next to him with eyes widened to the size of fifty cent pieces and, under them, tired grey circles bloomed on her pale skin. Their mother's hair flailed around in the windless summer air. She continued mutilating the tree, and the small muscles in her thin arms bulged. She was mesmerizing and horrific like an angry goddess.

An uncomfortable feeling, one that made vomit brew in Elijah's stomach and his hands turn cold, settled into his skin. There was a massacre unfolding in front of him. Elijah looked at Esther to see a few tears roll down her cheek.

An ache emerged in his throat and he brought his right hand to cover her eyes, and she should have pushed him away like younger siblings do, but Esther only turned to rest her head on Elijah's shoulder. She sobbed, just identifiable by the slightest of hiccups and droplets that birthed scattered spots of wetness on Elijah's shirt.

At thirteen, his sister was only two years younger than him. Their father had assaulted a girl Esther's age—Julie Byers. They didn't know if it had happened more than once or exactly how much damage was inflicted. Elijah could only imagine him lifting up her light pink training bra, and pulling down her flower printed panties. She had probably left with violet bruises on her hips, and an ache between her legs, and

he, crescent moon cuts along his wrists, and red, swollen lips.

“I was supposed to go to her birthday party next week,” Esther said, burying her head deeper into his skin.

He was glad that Esther didn’t say Julie’s name. A shaky, anxiety ridden breathe escaped from his lungs. He could feel Esther’s tears mixing with the sweat on his neck. Esther turned her head to look out the glass door once again.

“I wish she would just stop it,” she continued, in a voice muffled by cloth and crying.

“I know,” Elijah replied, “Mom’s just angry.”

He wanted to mention that he was too, but it didn’t feel like the right time nor did it feel truthful. Elijah really only felt sort of sad and sort of nothing. He placed his hands on Esther’s back as he embraced her, glancing up to see that his mother had ended her rampage and was now staring at them. She was a wild animal who’d just been caught ransacking the garden: wide eyes bloodshot and glossy, her hair a tangled whirlwind, and bare feet now coated in a layer of red juice and dead grass.

Esther stepped back, and Elijah met her eyes. She had all their mother’s features—earth colored hair that fell in waves, thin nose, honey eyes, milky skin—and mirrored her even more so with the tears still dripping like a leaky faucet. Elijah resembled their Dad. He hadn’t been able to look at his own orange autumnal hair in the mirror for the past two days.

Their mother was walking towards them with her head jerking from the direction of the sidewalk to either fences on the left and right side of the yard. Esther’s right hand crossed over her thin waist to hold her left arm.

“Dad’s going to hell,” she said.

Elijah stiffened. The comment pierced him in a way that was sharp and distinct. It was what they’d all been thinking but he hadn’t expected to be confronted with the thought so soon and especially not by Esther. He rolled his shoulders back and took a breath that felt unstable in a way, like he was putting more supports on a house that would surely fall.

“Okay,” he said just as their mother made it to them.

His mother opened the sliding glass door and both Elijah and Esther stumbled backward so she could step into the house. They were all silent for a moment, and Elijah inspected

the muted yellow curtains, noting every stray thread. The room was bloated, stuffed with warm sticky air, and a buzzing fly made circles around the kitchen table. The stare of their mother wore Elijah down like prison shackles. With reluctance, he met her gaze.

“What on earth are you two doing? Go get ready for Sunday school,” she said, ignoring their raised eyebrows and parted lips. She hurried past them and started towards her bedroom. The old linoleum floors groaned under her feet, and Elijah started to speak.

“But—”

“And y’all stop looking at me that way. You didn’t care nothing of your father’s garden no time before. Go get ready.”

On a fall evening, when Elijah was ten, after the trees had turned red and the plants had begun to wither, his mother came down with a flu. And because it was Saturday and, at the time, his best friend was his sister, their father let both Elijah and Esther help work in the garden. They were tending to the pears, their skin light green and freckled, and curved like a woman’s body.

There was a chill in the air, and smell of dust and honeysuckles that occupied most of the town seemed subdued. The grass was yellowed and decayed and Elijah’s speckled snakeskin cowboy boots crushed the dryer pieces into dust as Esther chased after him.

She was on top of their Dad’s shoulders and laughing so he could see her gums where several of her front teeth were missing. His father was shouting and laughing too—it was full and loud, reminiscent of barking.

“We’re gonna getcha. We’re gonna getcha.”

“You’re not never gonna! You’re crazy, Daddy.”

His father and Esther caught him eventually, and they all fell into a pile of leaves and grass and limbs. They all laid on the ground. Snorts riddled their laughter and their chests heaved.

“We should probably get to doing some work now, shouldn’t we?” Elijah said.

“Well now, look at you, Mr. Farmer. You’re ready to tend to the garden all by yourself, aren’t you?”

His father looked at him with an easy smile, a smile that made people feel comfortable, with no teeth and his short red beard covering the sharp angles of his jaw. Elijah blushed. He felt inflated like a balloon. His father was an honest man—he didn't give compliments unless he meant it.

They dragged out the gardening tools from the shed: chemicals and shovels and hoses, all in a red wheelbarrow. His father handed Elijah a sprayer with a long tube of a dispenser and asked him to fill it with pesticide. He completed the task, watching as his father broke off the tab of a beer and brought the can to his lips. Esther was sitting next to Elijah, making crowns out of dying dandelions. Elijah grinned as she placed one on his head.

“How come I never get to do the spraying?” Esther asked.

“Because I'm goin' be the gardener. I'll have to harvest it all when I'm grown up.”

“And I can't help you then either?”

He didn't want to say no to her but Elijah could sense his father's stare. There was a way that things ought to be, his Daddy would say, and Esther didn't understand that yet.

“Of course you can,” he said, “all the fruits need someone to cook them into pies.”

That seemed good enough to appease both of them. Esther smiled at him and jumped on Elijah's back as he crouched near the dispenser. He sprayed the plants, Ester trailing after him while collecting more dandelions. The pesticide weighed down the weakened leaves of the plants and sent them spiraling down to the soil. Elijah looked up, watching as his father took another swig of his beer. The man gave him a nod and another smile before glancing at his sister and turning to go inside.

They had gone to the same church since Elijah was born, and before that, his father went to it, and before that, his grandfather, and throughout all those years the building was still just as ugly. Midland Baptist Church was composed of two portables in a bare field that was more sand than grass. One building was for the adult service and the other for children to be taught by some high schooler who probably needed volunteer hours, and in between the two portables,

was an area where everyone parked. A dusty white sign with three crosses drawn on it stood in the middle.

The drive to church had been silent. His mother didn't even turn on the radio, which on any other Sunday before this one would be blasting God's Music, an album that mostly contained twangy country chart toppers that spoke of tractors and women in red dresses. Esther had looked out the window the entire time despite there not being anything to look at besides a few abandoned rodeo ropes and stray dogs.

As they got out of the car, Elijah pulled on the bottom of his dark green polo that was much too short. He had been borrowing his father's Sunday clothes for the past few months but couldn't bear to today. When he had let the shirt touch his skin, he felt poisoned like his father had a disease, and it was lethal and contagious. He vomited in the toilet after.

"You'd best be on your good behavior, you two. They're going to say a few words about your Daddy," his mother said. Elijah and Esther shared a glance, a brief moment of mutual understanding and sadness. In an erratic second of bravery, Elijah spoke.

"Why? It's not like he died."

If his dad were here, he would have been slapped right about now. His mother jerked her head in his direction.

"You'd better hold your tongue right there, Elijah Martin," she said, planting her old black heels into the sand more aggressively with every step.

"These are good people. They're helping us get back on our feet, recover from our loss," his mother finished.

Elijah turned away from her to look out at the field. It wasn't until he could smell her sugary scented perfume that had become part of her clothes that Elijah noticed Ruby Alcott falling into step with him. She was wearing a knee-length brown skirt with white polka dots. It looked faded and weary like it was gasping for breath and hung low on her hips, exposing a thin strip of tanned skin. It was just scandalous enough for his cheeks to become rosy. Ruby Alcott was somewhat of a legend in the town. She led her first school protest at age eight, she supposedly only came to service because her mother made her, and she had pierced her nose with a sewing needle in junior high. Everyone knew

her stories, due to their gossip-worthy nature or her Mama's loud mouth, Elijah didn't know. They were in the same grade, and had had two actual conversations with each other: once when they were lab partners, dissecting a frog on a metal, chemical coated table, and one time when Ruby offered him a cigarette outside the Whataburger on Stallion Street. A deep purple color stained her lips.

He knew she had approached to him for the same reason that everyone else had in the past two days—to discuss his father. He looked at his mother and Esther who were both still silent, trailing behind the other church-goers like corralling horses, and slowed his pace.

“Hey, Ruby,” he said, putting his hands in his pockets, so she couldn't tell if they started shaking.

“That shirt looks dumb on you.”

Elijah's breath got caught in his throat, and he coughed. She glanced at the church portable and then back at him. The wind had arrived, and her blonde curls flew in the sky like stray pieces on a hay bale. His response was stammered.

“Yeah.”

“Then why'd you wear it?” Ruby continued, crossing her arms over her chest and covering the cartoon rose sewn on her white shirt. He could tell she tried to hide her Texan accent but it resonated through some of her words.

The warmth in Elijah's hands traveled to his face, making his cheeks even more fevered than before. His hands were splotchy and cold, and as the wind picked up, he could see Ruby's arms pimpling. It felt like she knew a secret about him, like her pale cerulean eyes had broken through his calm facade and could see what he was really afraid of. If he wore the shirt, if he let his skin touch where his father's had once been, he was one step closer to his transformation. To his unbecoming.

An electronic church bell rang from the speaker mounted above the first portable's door. Elijah hadn't realized that he'd stopped breathing, and he inhaled, coughing on the dust from the sand and hay. Ruby was still looking at him, but her intensity dimmed as she smiled, making the thin line of black makeup rimmed around her eyes crinkle.

“Hey, it's fine. A lot of guys our age like to dress stupid, so

you're just blending in."

"Yeah," he replied, and winced as he realized how stupid he sounded.

She giggled as one would giggle at an infant who just did something baby-ish and charming. The door of portable one slammed shut. Despite his embarrassment, a small, apprehensive smile found its way to his mouth.

"We'd better get going. Service is starting without us," Elijah said, tilting his head towards the church.

"Ah, yes. The good Lord waits for no one" she replied. She said it in a tone that made him feel slightly rebellious, powerful, even. Ruby Alcott was from another world—one without Sunday schools, and cherry trees, and fathers who did things that made sisters cry. She turned around, skipping towards portable one. The frilly edges skirt bounced, dancing around her thighs in some holy ritual. He followed.

They walking into the church, and the already quiet crowd turned silent. Everyone sat in brown metal fold out chairs, and a whiteboard with the words "sin" and "forgiveness" scrawled on either side stood at the front of the room. The pastor, an older man with a protruding belly and white wispy beard, halted his speech to look at them standing in the doorway. Elijah felt the muscles in his arms tense. Panic, enhanced by mild agitation, bloomed in his chest when he saw his mother's face. Her lips had disappeared until her mouth was just a thin line pulled taut and her eyebrows, thick furry caterpillars, were raised.

Ruby ignored the stares of the forty-two people who had managed to stuff themselves into portable one and sat next to her mom who sat the in second row, three rows in front and to the left of his mother and Esther. The church smelled of sweat and old vanilla candles, and Elijah surveyed the dull white flooring as he walked to his seat. He could feel his mother's stare burning him. The pastor was the first person to break the silence. After both Ruby and Elijah sat down, he coughed, eyeing the crowd behind his thick wire-framed glasses.

"Okay, let's get back to it then," he said, and Elijah looked up to face the pastor as he stood at the front, shuffling papers on a podium.

"So as all you folks know, a member of our congregation has

recently been detained by the police.” He said “police” like it was two words—*poh lease*—and Elijah repeated it in his head over and over. It was too hot in the church, with too many bodies, and he felt claustrophobic, like he was the smallest fish in a sardine can, and they were about to get eaten.

“Peter Martin was a cherished member of the church, and we know how much of a good man he was.” The pastor paused, and Elijah looked to Ruby who was sitting slouched in the chair with her head resting on the back; her face was towards the ceiling. “And I think it’s important to remember that sometimes, the devil can possess us to do bad things. But that does not mean that the Lord cannot forgive us.”

Elijah’s temples hurt because he was grinding his teeth so hard. A drop of sweat escape from his hairline. It all felt fretfully contrived. These people were delusional. This was Peter Martin’s doing, and Elijah wasn’t sure if he deserved forgiveness—from God or anyone else. It was bullshit. This whole ordeal was. Elijah shifted his gaze to Esther. Her hair was in two braids with light pink ribbons, like a baby girl’s blanket, hanging from the ends. He wondered if Julie Byers wore ribbons in her hair. Or did it flail freely in the wind like Ruby’s?

The pastor was still talking, but Elijah couldn’t distinguish the words from one and other. He stared at his hands. They were freckled on top and calloused on the bottom like his father’s. An itch crawled up the inside of his throat, and he was somehow warm and cold at the same time. He scratched at his hands like maybe somehow he could carve the freckles off. He scratched harder. Red, angry lines appeared on his skin but the freckles were still there. He stopped just as three spots of blood welled on his hand. Esther coughed.

He flinched and turned to her. She was staring at his hands as she had looked at their mother that morning: horrified and sad. A plate of crackers with a pool of crimson liquid in the center rested in her hands. Communion. She tilted it in his direction, and as he took it from her, it made his arms feel wrong, or unsure, or nervous like he had been in the same place for eternity, and to needed to stretch had finally consumed him. The liquid in the shallow white shifted as his hands quivered, making the juice spill out onto the crackers.

The body and blood of the Father.

Elijah dropped the plate, and it fell to the ground with a resounding crack like a whip, silencing the crowd until the only noise was soft gospel music leaking from the CD player at the front of the room. The plate and bowl was diminished to tiny shards, and just before the liquid reached his shoes, Elijah stood up.

He could feel everyone's presence—his mother's, Esther's, the pastor's, Ruby's—and how their attention belonged to him. It was a power he didn't want. More blood trailed down his hand. Elijah wondered if blood had fallen into his palms and dripped off his fingers when Julie Byer's nails had pierced his father's wrists.

"I'm sorry," he said, before turning towards the exit. Elijah stumbled out of the church and wiped his bloody hand on his pant leg. The wind was sudden and jarring.

"Wait, Elijah."

He expected to see Esther or his mother, but it was Ruby. Hair whipped across her face and her eyes watered. He didn't reply.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Elijah's head pounded, but he didn't want to touch it because that meant touching his hair, a reminder of how similar he was to his father. He was sick of this town—they were all the same. No one leaves or arrives. It was all boys who became their dads and girls who became their moms.

"Yeah, I'm fine. The room was just hot," he replied.

"I know you're done sick of it, so I'm not going to talk about your dad," Ruby said.

He observed the ground and the layer of white dust that covered her black tennis shoes, not knowing how to talk to her.

"Okay," he said. "Why are you here then?"

Elijah looked up into her eyes the color of jeans faded from summer heat and the morning glories painted on his mother's china. She wore a petite smile that made dimples wane on her cheeks.

"It looks like we got some of the same problems," she said, "and I could'a used someone when my dad left, so I figured I'd be that someone for you."

Elijah was suddenly furious, his eyes starting to burn, and the heat from the church possessed him once more like a burning fire.

“I don’t need anyone. I just need him to be gone.”

He meant to sound angry but his words came out a stream of stammers and heavy breaths. “He’s all there is now. He’s in the mirror when I comb my hair, he’s in my sister’s tears, and in that church, and in the goddamn seeds in the garden. At least your father left, mine became another person, and even though he’s gone he’s still fucking there, screwing everything up.”

He tasted something sour like spoiled milk or old fruit on his tongue, and tears ran onto his chapped lips. It was so quiet Elijah thought he could hear the sand sifting through the grass and lifting into the air like uncaged birds. He let his stare detach itself from the dust and plants and shift to Ruby. Elijah expected her to look upset or startled but she was the same.

“Come on,” she said. “You could use a drink, right now.”

He squinted his eyes, and his nose wrinkled. Ruby pushed past him and started toward the road, lifting her knees to her waist as she walked to step over the grass that got higher farther away from the church. Elijah followed her.

They walked along the empty asphalt in silence, Ruby standing on her toes to balance on the white line of paint, and Elijah picked at his nails, watching her. The scratches on his hand had stopped bleeding, red now crusted over his wounds. He was surprised that he hadn’t seen his mother’s car yet. It was not like him to disappear like this.

They arrived at a shack about a half a mile from where they went to school. It was made of wood, washed white by rain, surrounded by grass and weeds. As they got closer, Elijah could smell the faint scent of mildew and cologne that could only be worn by high school boys. Ruby stuck out her hand towards him.

“Come on, this’ll take your edge right off. You can just forget about him,” she said. When he didn’t respond, she continued.

“Lots of us hang here after the football games. It’s where we keep the liquor.”

“Oh,” he said before coughing.

Ruby pulled him into the shack and he ducked to not hit his head on the door frame where the wood was splintered and hacked off. There was a stained pink blanket that covered the entire floor of the small space. Two discolored bean bags and a blue icebox with no lid sat in the far corner.

She threw herself into one of the seats, pulling Elijah with her, so he landed in the other. The wind whistled through a hole in one of the wall panels, and he noticed a pile of miscellaneous items near the door: crumpled cigarette packs and dirty T-shirts, horseshoes and rope. Ruby sat up as straight as she could and pulled the icebox between her knees to search it.

“What’d you want?” She asked, “It looks like we have Fireball, Bud Light, and some Deep Eddy.”

He ran his hand through his hair and leaned towards her, looking at the bottles. There was a bull bucking in Elijah’s stomach and the nausea from before was returning. He didn’t know what he was doing.

“I’ll just take whatever you’re getting,” he said, arching his neck to look at her.

“Okay,” she said pulling out two beers and trying to hide her smirk with her hair.

Ruby handed him the bottle. It was room temperature with gold liquid. His hands willed him to release the bottle but they remained; it all felt wrong but titillating. He should stop but he couldn’t like there was another, greater force controlling him. She reached over and opened the bottle for him, some of it splashing on his fingers. It was the color of his sister’s eyes. He moved his grip to the neck of the bottle.

“Well?” she said.

“Nothing. I’m going.”

He felt somehow like he was entering a second stage of his life. This was the moment where he’d become the person to drink beers with girls in shacks, and leave church, and forget fathers. Elijah brought the beer to his lips, sucking the liquid from it like a man dying of thirst, and then flames engulfed him. He sputtered. He was sure that feeling had left his arms. His lips were tingling and tainted.

Ruby giggled, “I knew you’d hadn’t drank before.”

She took the cap off her own beer and sipped it with no

struggle. Elijah wiped his mouth on his arm.

“It’ll get better if you go slow,” she said.

“You sure? I can’t imagine how that’d ever get better.”

“Just try it.”

“Fine,” he said, tilting the bottle to sip it once more. It was still bitter and his face still twisted like a child eating a lemon, but it was tolerable.

“There you are,” Ruby said. “Maybe once you can ride with the training wheels, we can get you the big boy stuff.” She took out the whiskey and drank two large mouthfuls.

The sky was turning bruised and purple, and Elijah had no idea how long they’d been there. Everything was soaked in warmth and his stomach felt bloated as if a rounded beer belly had already appeared. Ruby was splayed across the two bean bags. Her head laid on Elijah’s waist. Sweat had gathered in his underarms and now he had two wet stains.

“I just don’t want to end up like him, you know?” he said, gazing at the ceiling, counting the splinters in the wood.

“I know.”

“Because all this town’s been here for generations. We don’t leave or change. We just copy. We go get the same job as our parents and wear the same clothes on Sunday morning.”

“I know.”

“What if I become like him,” he said under his breath. “I already am like him. Look at me, Ruby. Drinkin’ and messing up shit already. My mom’s going to have a cow.”

He sat up a little so he could look at Ruby. He could smell the beer that they had probably spilt on their clothes at some point during the day and was now aged.

“What if I’m just destined to be a horrible person? Drink, hurt some little girl, hurt my family.” He laughed, but it was loaded with spite, “I guess it don’t matter anyhow, the Lord forgives all.” Elijah shouted the last part.

Ruby tried to lift herself up to get back on her bag but nearly fell so she compromised to just lean on Elijah’s shoulder. Her makeup was smudged around her eyes.

“Shhh,” she said. “Just because your daddy’s shitty doesn’t mean you are. My mom is an elementary school teacher, goes to church two times a week, and has a book club on Saturday.

Now tell me, do you think I'm going to be like that?"

He pushed his heels against the floor to keep them from sliding off the bean bags. He felt defiant. She had a point but he was not about to admit it.

"I'd be a part of your book club," he said.

Ruby snorted as she laughed. This time it wasn't out of pity, Elijah thought. The outer corner of her eyes had a tiny ripple of wrinkles, and the curls in her hair had unraveled, leaving her blonde locks straight but calm and beautiful. Lifting his hand and placing it on her jaw, he turned her face in his direction. Her laughs had quieted to soft giggles, and he kissed her, nearly missing her lips and keeping his eyes open. He wasn't really sure what to do with his hands but she placed one of hers on his neck. It lasted about five seconds, but it felt longer, and when she pulled away, he could taste her lipstick, like wax and flat grape soda, where it colored his lips.

"What was that for?" she asked. Her lipstick was smudged now too.

Elijah shrugged. He wasn't really sure why he kissed her. It was something foreign and there. She was still facing him, biting her lip and looking into his eyes as if she were searching for something.

"It's okay," she said.

Ruby swung a thin leg with a knobby knee over his waist so she was sitting on him. Her skirt swallowed his thighs. She was holding his neck again, and her mouth covered his, this time for much longer. He felt like he was being drowned in tongue and melted purple crayons, but he kissed her back. She moved to run her fingers in his hair, and as she touched it, he realized how dry his mouth was. Ruby pulled away, sitting up in his lap, and reached for the ends of her shirt.

As she pulled it over her head it, he realized how much smaller she seemed without it, only blemished skin and protruding bones in a polyester bra the color of strawberries just pulled off the vine. Elijah breathed in short pants. Ruby kept her eyes on his as she reached for the end of his polo and lifted it above his arms. It was too small for his shoulders and got stuck around his elbows. He shivered as the wind came in through the doorway and assaulted his bare skin.

She threw his shirt on top of hers and leaned to touch her lips to his neck. Her hands gripping either side of his waist, and he could feel the greasy remains of lotion on her fingertips that she must've put on earlier. Her nails were ridged and uneven like they had been chewed off. The floorboards creaked under them as he retracted further into the bean bag. Ruby left wet kisses on his jawline and licked the sweat from his neck. Her hair engulfed his face and he reached to pull a strand out of his mouth.

"Are you okay?" Elijah heard her say against his skin now moist with saliva and sweat and beer.

He felt like his entire body wasn't there, and the parts that were, buzzed like bees swarming inside him. He stammered something incoherent and looked at his hands, his father's hands: torn and rough and resting on a girl's body. He tried to move them but couldn't. Elijah's vision blurred at the corners.

As Ruby reached both hands behind her back, he counted the freckles on her stomach to distract himself. A toad croaked from outside. Its leathery green body was probably as slimy as his neck felt.

Her bra slid off her shoulders and she put it with the rest of her clothes. Her breasts were small, nipples the color of flowering judas. Elijah tried to look away but she held his face in her hands barely touching his hair that wasn't his. He didn't see how small and girlish her nose was until now. It looked like it hadn't yet grown into the rest of her face.

Ruby leaned in to kiss him again, and he thought if his heartbeat quickened anymore he might die. His legs were numb from her sitting on them and the air seemed to be fleeing from the room. It all felt so wrong, so shameful. The frog croak again.

He pushed Ruby onto her bean bag and stood up, hitting his head on the shack's ceiling before crouching. Dark purple lipstick was everywhere: his arms, her chin, his neck, her cheek. She was splayed partially on the cushion with her limbs on the blanket covering the floor, and Elijah wondered if this was how his father left Julie. Naked, alone, drunk, in a shack that reeked of beer and molding wood. Ruby's mouth was opened so there was a thin darkness between her lips, her eyes open so they looked perfectly round.

“I can’t do this,” Elijah said.

She had a cut on the outer side of her arm. She must’ve caught herself on a splinter to avoid the fall. Scarlet burst on her skin.

“I’m sorry,” he said before turning toward the exit.

“Wait,” Ruby said.

She stood up, still naked. Elijah looked up to stare at the ceiling. Everything was tense, and he felt sticky and disgusting, like he needed to take shower after shower. But, even then, he wasn’t sure if he’d feel normal. Cloth tickled his stomach, and Elijah looked down to see Ruby handing him his shirt.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I understand.”

She offered a weak smile, and pressure built in his eyes. Elijah’s jaw was cemented, and he couldn’t move it to speak. He smelled her perfume on his shirt as he took it from her. He nodded, moving his head so little that it could hardly be considered a nod.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, turning back towards the door and walking outside.

He didn’t stop to look at his surroundings. He ran, letting the wind steal the freckles from his hands and the red in his hair. He ran, stepping in the muddy puddles to wash the alcohol from his body. He ran, only stopping at the graves of cherry trees and the blue mailbox with “The Martin Family” painted on the side.

He walked up their driveway and towards the garden. And for the first time in the past two days, Elijah sobbed. He cried for Julie Byers, and for Esther, and for himself. He cried until tears ran down his chest and he had burns under his eyes from rubbing them so much.

He fell to his knees. The grass was wet from the sprinklers and he could feel the water soak into his jeans. The only light came from the porch and the stars and the moon. He felt exhausted and detached like maybe the next gust of wind would just turn him into a sea of leaves and carry him away. Elijah lay on the ground amongst the fruit and green, but then he felt it. The moths that had been rioting inside him all day threatened to break free. He barely had enough time to sit up before he vomited onto branches and cherries.

He coughed, covered in snot, and tears, and his insides. Elijah heard someone snap a twig or a branch behind him. It was Esther.

“Hey,” she said, coming closer to him. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She stood wearing a black nightgown, curling her toes on the grass. He wanted to stand up but he wasn’t sure if he could without puking so he started crying again. He heard Esther sigh as she kneeled down, hugging him with one arm from the side.

“It’s okay. You’re just angry.”

Mark Sutz

Squeaky Balloons

By the time the clown arrived, one of the children had vomited up ribbons of neon-colored frosting from too much cake, two were in a sugar coma on the oversized beanbag, four others were glued to the viral video of the Vermont newborn triplets farting in unison, and my daughter, Beatrice—the birthday girl—had her right arm jammed into a length of irrigation pipe in the backyard where she’d been trying to retrieve her birthday gift from a year ago, a Maine coon kitten with one eye the color of lime green sherbet, the other a sky blue marble.

If her mother were still here, she’d have known exactly what to do.

But she was not.

Beatrice had five birthdays with her mother, likely only one she might even remember as she got older and the memories of her own early years faded, like they do for all of us.

Her mother was smart, however.

The gift of the cat, she knew, would not only be something Beatrice would remember because the cat would, hopefully, live till she was a teenager, but that cat would also help cement in her brain that she did, in fact, once have a mother—and that mother loved her very much.

I was bound to make this sixth birthday another one she would remember. I’d stick to the plan my wife had written down for the party.

So, I ordered up a clown.

“We’ve only got a girl who failed out of clown school,” the man said when I placed the order. “The rest of our veteran clowns are booked that day. But she’ll be good. Takin’ one of them remedial balloon courses. Had a little trouble on the poodles. But real good at simple wiener dogs,” he chuckled.

“Get it?” he asked.

“Sure,” I mumbled, wishing Julia was still alive to talk about birthday party balloons.

“A wiener dog’s just a blowed-up balloon,” he said through

wheezy laughs.

“I guess that will do,” I remember saying, not thinking—like my wife would have—to call another event clown vendor.

For a month before the party—and knowing it would only be good to invite Beatrice’s kindergarten classmates whom she got along with, I thought—inexplicably—that telling Beatrice her mother had planned every inch of this party before she died might lock into her mind even more how much her mother adored her.

But, ultimately, I knew that with each plan I made over the previous month, each gift I bought, each decoration I envisioned putting up—all of it, every last bit—was me performing a farewell sacrament.

This ritual had exactly one purpose: to try and prop up a body that would collapse in the drugstore aisle where they sold Julia’s favorite coconut body spritz.

A dozen times or more, after I sprayed the whole sample bottle onto my forearm at three in the morning and tried to will my dead wife back to life, the teenage clerk brought me tissues on this once-a-week ritual of grief that I held back from Beatrice because I had to cradle her in my arms every night as she fell asleep and asked me why mommy left her with someone who “can’t make my egg-in-a-hole right.”

After I put Beatrice to bed each night, I went through more of Julia’s clothes, filled a garbage bag and set it by the front door so I could drop it off at the thrift store with Beatrice after I picked her up from school. This, too, became a ritual and slowly Julia’s side of the closet emptied out until there were just a handful of her favorites left.

The thing I saved for last was a moth-holed, mustard yellow, ill-fitting sweater she loved any excuse to wear—even if there were just a chance of a slight breeze kicking up—and which I’d made fun of because it looked so ragged.

She always told me it was the most comfortable piece of clothing she’d ever had.

As I touched it each day on the hanger in the closet that was slowly emptying out, her voice faded another notch. She was becoming more of a ghost.

After I checked on Beatrice each night and saw her sleeping soundly, I took the sweater to the recliner, sat down and

draped it over my face, lost entirely, forcing myself to keep the contours of her body and the lilt in her voice at the front of my mind so she wouldn't fade.

Sometimes Beatrice would wake up in the morning and find me there with the sweater wrapped around my head. She would sometimes pull it off, put it over her head and nudge me till I got up. Or say, "I dreamed about Mommy. She said she loves us."

I hugged her, said "Yes," and instead of depositing the sweater into the thrift store bag like I promised myself I would every night, I went straight back to the closet and gingerly placed it on the designated padded hanger.

For a few months, when Beatrice was sad or when I became blue, we put a few pillows on the floor of the closet and laid down, looking up at the sweater hanging above us and shared whatever we'd done that day with the ghost of my dead wife.

I did a quick count of the birthday guests to make sure none had gone missing, went outside into the warm rain and knelt in the wet grass. I slithered my arm into the other end of the irrigation pipe where Beatrice's arm was inserted and thought I could help unstick her with a little nudge. The moment I got my own arm up to my shoulder, I felt the cat's tail and saw Beatrice at the other end easily slipping her arm out. Seconds later, she was standing above me, the cat in one hand and the other filled with cake. The cat's face was covered in frosting.

"Honey, I thought your arm was stuck."

"No, daddy, not stuck. Just feeding Crayon."

She wandered off back to the party.

I tried to pull my arm out and quickly realized that, somehow, I was the one who got stuck. I told myself this was a sign to give up on this long-abandoned project to funnel grey water out of our house and into the garden. All that grew there anymore were weeds and it felt like that was appropriate.

I closed my eyes to will up the energy to continue monitoring a houseful of children with no interest in being monitored. A few moments later I was startled by the bleat of a bulb horn being squeezed above my head. I opened my eyes and saw what seemed to me the saddest clown ever. Its face was made

up in colors that were dripping down the white cheeks and the big red smile was starting to turn downward.

“Hey,” it said. “HEY. I’m Lucy. Your birthday clown. It’s raining. You’ve got a zoo of children inside.”

The clown was holding a kid’s jacket above her head, trying, unsuccessfully, to protect the makeup job from being ruined.

“I’m stuck,” I said to Lucy, but she’d turned already, her gigantic floppy feet slapping across the puddles toward the house.

I then freed my arm, the quickening rain likely having had a bit of a lubricating effect.

Wet and flecked with mud, I followed the clown inside the house, grabbed a towel from the hall closet and came out to the living room where Lucy had one of the girls in her lap.

She was pulling balloons out from hidden pockets in her polka-dotted clown suit and making birds and giraffes and poodles. I guess Lucy had passed the remedial course. But even the yellow octopus she created didn’t stop the girl in her lap from crying.

“Lots of kids are scared of clowns,” Lucy said.

I knelt down.

“Angie, do you want to go home?” I asked.

She nodded and said, “My tummy hurts.”

I started in on the calls to the parents, telling them that I thought the party had to end early because Beatrice was getting a bit tired.

“And they probably overindulged in cake,” I added at the end of each call.

“Sorry if your little one comes home with a sugar high.”

Once the last kid left—a girl whom I walked out to the car with a bagful of the last of the cake (she was the only one who didn’t seem to get any ill effects and I was happy to see it go)—I breathed easier and wondered exactly how I’d continue to navigate any more of Beatrice’s birthday parties.

I made a silent promise to myself that the rest of them would have strict limitations on invitees.

And less cake.

When I walked back into the house, Lucy had Beatrice in her lap and was reaching into hidden pockets in the clown

suit, blowing up more and more balloons and attaching them to one another so that at the end she had made a caterpillar that was as tall as Beatrice and as colorful as a peacock.

It looked like it could crawl out of the house and turn instantly into a butterfly, then sail off into the sky and transform into a squeaky rainbow.

In the kind of slow motion reserved for unavoidable incidents, I could see the overindulgence in cake was finally going to hit Beatrice. I reached out to pull her from in front of Lucy, where Beatrice was standing and stroking this new balloon pet, but all my action did was accelerate the vomit like a loose garden hose that someone turned on to full blast.

In seconds, Lucy's clown suit was streaked with extra colors.

Instead of freaking out, as I'd have expected anyone in her position to do, Lucy pulled one of her bright blue clown handkerchiefs from a pocket and wiped Beatrice's face.

"Are you sick, sweetie?" and pulled her onto her lap.

Then, to me, "You must have a little soda here from the party? Pour me a cup."

I handed Lucy a cup of Sprite and she held it to Beatrice's mouth.

"Sip on this. It'll make your tummy feel better."

"You must have kids of your own," I said.

"Nope. Not yet. I just remember this from my childhood. And I'm studying to be a pediatrician. This," she said and honked her clown horn lightly, "is to pay the bills. But the carbonation does wonders to settle the stomach. I guess I could've saved a billion dollars in tuition," she said and stroked Beatrice's forehead.

"What are we going to do about your clown suit?" I asked.

"When I go further away, I usually bring a change of clothes," she said. "It gets a bit clammy in the costume. But I live just a few miles from here, so I'll just wear it home. I'll be okay."

"Absolutely not," I said. "I'm sure we've got something for you to change into. There's got to be some clothes from my late wife that will fit. You're about her height. Beatrice and I have been going through it all over the last year and we're down to the last of it. If you're not too weirded out, you're

welcome to change.”

I picked Beatrice up off Lucy’s lap and set her on the couch.

I went to the front door and grabbed what was the last bag of Julia’s clothes and started pulling out a few pairs of jeans, some T-shirts.

“Sure, that would be fine,” Lucy said. “I have to get home and wash the clown suit, too. I’ll get fined 20 percent of my next paycheck if I don’t.”

Beatrice asked for more soda, drank it down and it seemed like she’d completely forgotten about being sick just minutes before. The balloon caterpillar that Lucy had made kept Beatrice entranced.

“Daddy, can we listen to Steve Kittens?” she asked.

Beatrice meant Cat Stevens. Julia’s favorite movie was ‘Harold and Maude,’ the soundtrack for which was end-to-end Cat Stevens. We probably watched it 50 times with Beatrice, the music being the primary influence on her as the film’s intricately-staged fake suicides, intergenerational romance, and middle finger thrown up so perfectly at conformity would have been well beyond Beatrice’s understanding. But the music. The music infected her.

I opened up the record player and took the “Harold And Maude” album out of its well-worn sleeve and started it up. I’d spent hundreds of dollars on the rare limited release and it had become our family’s anthemic music cure-all.

Beatrice started dancing with her caterpillar as the record’s B-side’s 1st track, “Where Do the Children Play” rolled out of the speakers—“. . . *I know we’ve come a long way. We’re changing day to day. But tell me, where do the children play?*”

Lucy said, “I haven’t met many people who know ‘Harold and Maude.’ It was my mom and dad’s anniversary film. They met at a revival showing at an art theater in New York.”

Lucy and I sat and watched Beatrice dance with her balloon partner through the next song, “If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out” and it struck me she was pretty much living as perfect a life as her mother could wish.

For someone who had tried to will a sign from my wife and who believed there was no such thing as contact from the dead, I chose to give this coincidence some meaning.

“You can change in the bathroom, Lucy.” I said. “And since it’s already wet and getting a bit chilly, I’ve got something else for you.”

I went into the bedroom, pulled the sweater off the hanger and held it to my chest.

“Goodbye, Julia. I found someone who’s going to appreciate this. I’ll tell her all about you.” Then, thinking about Maude’s line in the movie that was Julia’s favorite. “This clown today, sweetie—you’d get along with her—she’s your species.”

Nathan Buckingham

Pull

The grocery store's curling neon letters glared devil-red in the frigid night. Nicholas ignored the sign as he hurried through the parking lot. He had to be here, that much was true, but he didn't need to linger. Lingered, like thinking, would only make it worse. He passed through the sliding glass doors, barely registering the temperature change, and glanced at the rows of carts crammed together like dead sardines. They weren't the gleaming, perfect silver from memory, but tarnished. Old. Seventeen years ago, he remembered trying to scratch the perfect right out of them. Failing that, he'd wedged lumps of gum on the underside of the handles instead, right where people wouldn't notice until it was too late. The gum was probably still there, on some of them.

No lingering, he reminded himself, and continued without taking one. A single bottle of wine didn't need a whole cart. He navigated around an ad-plastered island made of diet soda cartons and scanned the aisle signs. The font had changed: they were machine-printed in a scrawl supposed to look handwritten but ended up just being illegible. Despite that, he spotted the familiar "Wine & Spirits" sign poking out at the far end of the store above aisle twelve, the same place it had always been.

He cut through a register lane towards it while some Demi Lovato song warbled from the store speakers overhead. The store seemed empty—not many people here at ten-fifteen on a Thursday night. Hell, he wouldn't be either, if not for Emily. It's not like she needed the wine. No one needed wine.

Nicholas did a quick breathing treatment his therapist taught him. In, in, out. Inhale positivity, exhale frustration. He could do this. How often did one's fiancée get their doctorate in psychology? Not very goddamn often. It was just a grocery store.

He turned the corner into the Wine & Spirits aisle. A shoulder-high rack of shelves ran down one side for wine

and hard liquor. Down the other, an open-cooler loaded with beers, colorful and blocky. Charcoal and brick wall prints had been pasted over the tarnished chrome, and fake fireplace displays dotted the aisle every few feet, as if any of it made the five-dollar booze more sophisticated.

Near the middle of the aisle, an employee manhandled thirty packs into their respective sections. Nicholas hastened past him. Don't look at the beer. No lingering. No thinking.

The wine selection was more extensive than he'd thought it would be. Thirty different bottles covered the shelves, three deep and three wide—Alero's Cellars, Sunbeam Mergot, Bay Boxer Cabernet. Which one would Emily like?

As he weighed his options, a little girl, maybe eight or nine years old, came careening around the corner at the far end of the aisle, followed by an exhausted-looking construction worker type Nicholas assumed was her father. The man aimed straight for the thirty-packs while the girl sang along to the Demi Lovato song, trying to match the tune but failing in that cute way only kids can manage.

Nicholas found himself analyzing the man. He couldn't help himself. It was ingrained in him, like muscle memory, the same way a professional architect enters a building and measures the solidity of its design. He examined the man's face—the way it was set, the widening of his eyes as he approached the beer—and what he carried in his basket: a half-gallon of milk and a bundle of twenty-five cent ramen noodles that did a lot to make you feel full without actually providing any nutrition, a feeling Nicholas knew well. He eyed the girl. Was she happy? It was hard to tell with children. Their smiles became frowns faster than the Grizzlies lost their first game.

Nicholas forced himself to pay attention to the wine. It was just a father and his daughter, nothing more. He decided to just buy the most expensive bottle the store had. High price meant high quality, right? He plucked it from the shelf and set off down the aisle, keeping his attention on his shoes—anywhere but at the construction worker. His soles squeaked against the checkered tile, forming a rapid one-note song that sounded far better than whatever country song the store speakers were playing now that the Lovato song had ended.

He didn't notice the employee shift in front of him. A case of beer slammed into his gut, ripping away his breath and knocking the bottle from his hands. The case dropped. Glass shattered. Beer and wine splattered across white tile. The brand logo glistened amid snowy mountains; he recognized it. How could he not? It was seared into him like a cattle brand, as much a part of him as his own name. And the smell. Oh God, the smell. It was the bitter, piss-water scent of cheap beer, and it blurred the sixteen-year divide between him and the trailer and the bathrobe and the scratch of her voice and his work boots and the mountains and the mountains and the mountains and the mountains—

The cigarette smoke spiraled up from the couch, wisping against a discolored, splotchy patch on the trailer ceiling. Nicholas's mom sucked in again and the cherry flared like a devil's eye in the shadows. They didn't have a living room lamp, so the only light came from a small TV; it cast a blue glow over David's dirty work boots crossed on top of the coffee table, next to an ashtray and a row of empty beer cans.

Ashley's head pressed into Nicholas's shoulder. They sat on one couch while Mom and their stepfather sat on another. A football game droned on TV, but Ashley's eyes were glazed over and Nicholas didn't understand anything that was going on. There were so many rules—way too many for a ten-year-old. He wanted to ask questions but words were dangerous; the air felt charged, volatile, as if some kind of explosive gas had been pumped in and words had the potential to ignite it.

Mom leaned forward and dotted her cigarette out with two fingers, her nails painted a bright, neon pink. Nicholas eyed those nails, then decided to ask a question. Usually he could ask one without the room exploding. Ashley must've felt the words working their way to his mouth because she spoke.

"Don't," she said, just loud enough for him to hear.

He scowled and shifted away from her. Ashley never wanted him to ask questions. His little sister was always the neutralizer, trying to please everyone—even Mom, if it kept the room from exploding.

"Why did that guy in stripes throw a red flag on the field?" he asked.

“If you wanna know so goddamn bad go look it up, Nic,” Mom said.

That wasn’t too bad. Better than ‘shut the fuck up.’

David cracked open another beer. The football game continued on TV. The second quarter stretched into the third, and then the fourth. Time stretched with the game, becoming slower and slower, until the little players didn’t seem to be moving at full speed. Nicholas badly wanted to go to sleep, but Mom hated movement more than she hated questions. “Where you think you’re going?” she would say when he tried to leave. Or “What, is this not good enough for you to watch?” Then she would get up and sway towards him, lipstick-smearing mouth stretched to a clown-like snarl on her wrinkled face, those pink nails curled into a clenched fist high above his head.

The only time it was safe to move was when she fell asleep, or on the occasional night when David would whisper something in her ear and they’d retreat into the bedroom together. Those were good nights because he and Ashley got to watch *X-Men* and *Rugrats* reruns.

Mom stood from the couch. Nicholas tensed, but she stumbled away from him towards the hall, wrapping her frayed bathrobe around the rashes dotting her legs like moon craters. Although she liked drinking, his mom preferred other things—things that went in a pipe and made the bathroom smell funny. He hoped that she wasn’t going to the bathroom now, because afterwards, it was always worse.

Nicholas glanced at Ashley. Her eyes were closed. The couch muffled her snores, and her head was pressed against the couch arm in such a way that her blonde hair fanned out like a wildflower around her. This was their chance. He could wake her and they could sneak to their room.

“You wanna watch some cartoons?” David asked.

Nicholas turned to see his stepfather lifting a beer can to his bearded mouth. Snow-covered mountains glittered on the aluminum above a curly, cursive brand name. Nicholas hated that beer. He hated how it looked in the fridge beside the expired milk, like a big, exclusive castle the other food wasn’t allowed to enter. He even hated the mountains. They were beautiful. Too beautiful.

David set down the beer can, empty, beside seven others, before picking up the remote and changing the channel to *The Ninja Turtles*. Any other time, Nicholas would have been happy to watch it, but they only had a few minutes until Mom came back—minutes that were dwindling with every passing second. He didn't know what to say to David, though. If he said 'yes' then he was stuck here, the opportunity to leave slammed shut by their stepfather's kindness. If he said 'no' then David might get mad. He never got as mad as Mom, but he did get loud. Loud meant yelling, and yelling would make Mom come back. And that would be bad. Very bad.

Reluctantly, he leaned back on the couch. Donatello and Raphael were beating up bad guys on a subway train. He tried to enjoy it, but his eyes kept darting towards the hallway, alert for any sign of Mom's return—the rustle of a bathrobe, the swish of slippers on carpet, a muted cough.

"Nic, you're a big boy now," David said. "Why don't you try one of these?"

His stepfather held a can of beer out to him. It glistened between his meaty fingers, unopened, the edges dusted in ice from the cooler beside the couch. The forbidden castle. Nicholas stared at it, uncertain. Should he take it? Or not? This felt like a test, but one he hadn't been able to study for. At least on a multiple-choice test he could guess. Here, though, there were no bubbles to choose from. There may not even be a right answer.

"Go on," David said.

Nicholas took it. Its chill seared his palms, and it was heavier than he'd thought it would be. When he set it on his thigh, the mountains looked vast gripped by his small fingers—much bigger than his stepfather's. His seemed to engulf the snowy peaks.

He popped the tab and took a hesitant sip. It tasted terrible. Bitter and burning, like rotten soda. Face puckering, he managed to swallow it without throwing up. Barely. How did David and Mom drink so many?

"Keep drinking. You opened it, now finish it."

Gagging, Nicholas set it down on the coffee table. There was no way he could get through that whole can. He didn't even want to try.

“Nic,” David said. “You aren’t going to waste that.”

Nicholas’s eyes flickered to the hallway. If Mom came back and saw this, he would be in a lot of trouble. Big trouble. The kind that made Ashley crawl into his bed and wrap her arms around him later, when his head felt like splitting in half and moving became a unique kind of hell.

Keeping his eyes on the hallway, he reached for the can—and knocked it over. Amber liquid gushed over the wood, dripped down to the carpet, staining the tan a dark brown, almost black.

“Goddammit, Nic!” David said, jumping up from the couch. His stepfather hurried around the coffee table and disappeared into the hallway, then came back with a towel. He tossed it into Nicholas’s lap. “Clean it up.”

Nicholas dropped to the carpet, tears blurring his vision. He hadn’t meant to knock it over. He really hadn’t. It was an accident. With a shaking hand, he picked up the overturned can and wiped the coffee table dry. Any second now, Mom was going to turn the corner, screaming at him. *What the hell, Nic? You ruined the carpet! And why the fuck were you drinking?* Sniffling, he pressed the towel against the fizzing liquid, trying to soak up the spill.

David collapsed on the couch with a grunt. “That’s good enough. You can clean it better tomorrow.” He waved a hand at the hallway. “Go on to bed, since you can’t seem to handle your shit.”

Nicholas stopped wiping the floor. That was it? He could just go to sleep? It was almost better that he’d spilled the beer; now he didn’t have to wait for Mom to come back. He and Ashley could go to their room. Avoid her, until tomorrow, when she hopefully wouldn’t be too angry. After wiping his tears away, he stood and shook Ashley’s shoulder. David’s yell hadn’t woken her somehow. “Hey, wake up. It’s time for bed.”

Ashley sat up, her eyes dazed.

“Not Ashley,” David said.

Nicholas looked at their stepfather, searching for a reason why Ashley had to stay behind. They always went to bed at the same time.

“Your mom’s asleep, so I need someone to keep me company.” David patted the seat next to him. Mom’s seat.

“Come here, Ashley.”

Something twisted in Nicholas’s stomach, down at the very bottom, but he didn’t know why. It might’ve been because David never made them sit with him. He glanced at Ashley. Fight scenes from *The Ninja Turtles* flashed in her eyes, reflecting the indecision, the weariness. She didn’t want to do it.

“Ashley,” David said.

This time, authority spilled from the syllables, tugging at him, at Ashley. It was almost like a physical force. Like gravity. In science class today, his teacher had taught them about black holes, how they were so powerful they sucked things in and never let them go. Now, the way David sat shrouded in darkness, the way his words pulled. . .it made him think their stepfather was a black hole.

Ashley squeezed his hand, and smiled. It was a bright smile, bright as sunshine. But it was a gentle smile, too, like an autumn breeze, and it showcased both rows of her perfect teeth because the Tooth Fairy hadn’t come yet to take them. It was a smile that said, “Everything’s going to be okay.”

Nicholas almost believed it.

Ashley released his hand. She turned away and David’s gravity sucked her in until she hopped up next to him on the couch. Beside their stepfather, she looked dimmer, less radiant—but maybe that was just the light. As she sat there, a meaty hand—the same hand that offered him the beer, the same hand that slid beneath Mom’s robe when David thought they weren’t looking—extended forward, as slow as a creaking door, and rested on Ashley’s tiny knee. Engulfed it. Nicholas stood there for a second, straddling the line between the living room and the hallway, then David told him to go to his room.

So he did, and their stepfather lifting a beer can to his mouth was the last thing he saw before he turned the corner. The glint of snow-capped mountains bathed blue by the TV.

Tears ran down Nicholas’s face and fractured his vision into pieces, a kaleidoscope of skewed color: the beer, bleeding out onto the tile; his ears, buzzing with Rugrats laughter and hissing plastic tabs; the cooler, stretching down the aisle into

forever, sneering packages of alcohol tinted blue-white under blinding spotlights, cigarette smoke curling up from their freezing corners.

The employee's face contorted but Nicholas didn't care. His mouth formed words but Nicholas wasn't listening. He stepped forward, bottles crunching under his feet, and seized a thirty-pack from the rack. Ice coated the packaging. Cooler. Mountains dusted in snow. Couch. As he hoisted it above his head the bottles clinked together like a cry for help. Someone put a hand on his shoulder but he pushed it away. Why should they be spared?

"Fuck you," he said.

He threw the beer against the tile. It exploded in a thunder-clap of shattering glass. Nicholas grabbed another and it broke the same way. He reached for a third thirty-pack, then a fourth, then a fifth. When he ran out of thirty-packs, he switched to eighteen-packs, and when he ran out of those, he ripped six-packs from their flimsy shells and broke those too. He smashed pale ales and lagers, desert hills and palm-tree beach fronts, curly cursive names and simple blocky ones. He broke them until the aisle became a battlefield clogged with dead cardboard angels and golden blood gushed from their torn paper wings. He broke them until the acrid stench of fermented yeast made him gag and he couldn't see any faces in the mountains anymore. He broke them until there was nothing left to break.

And then he stopped.

He bent over, gasping. Something dripped from his face—beer or sweat or tears, he didn't know which. It might've been all of them, or none. He looked up and saw the construction worker, his daughter, and the employee all standing a few feet away, just outside the outer edge of the destruction, their faces pale. The little girl was crying.

"The police are on the way," the employee said.

Nicholas nodded. With a shaking hand, he fumbled in his back pocket and pulled out his wallet, then tossed it to the employee. "I'm going to go smoke a cigarette."

He picked his way through the mess, shoes squelching. As he passed the construction worker, the man shrank against the alcohol racks, pulling his daughter behind him. Nicholas

faltered, his face burning. He wanted to apologize. He wanted to tell the man to be a good father. He wanted to tell the girl to never let anyone take away her smile. But instead he walked away, and all the words died, unspoken, in his mouth.

Noreen Graf

Out of Water

As far as she could tell, he lunged to his death. Claire couldn't determine if it was a suicide, or if his confinement to the small, glass house drove him to it—a desperate attempt to escape an unfathomable life.

She had rescued him. And for a time, at least as far as she knew, he was content to move in small circles. Maybe, Claire thought, she should have provided plastic plants or a fluorescent house with open windows and doors. But the perfectly round, cut crystal bowl, placed precisely in the center of the glass-topped table, was breathtaking with just one orange, fantail fish. Each evening, a stream of light penetrated the bowl to partner the fish in a slow dance of homage to the setting sun. Amber light leapt through the glistening globe to paint the curved walls with fleeting explosions of hot, white fireworks. And, just before the sun dipped below the sill, trapezoidal spectrums of color flickered on and off to the pirouettes and plies of the almost translucent creature.

Claire had believed the fish was satisfied, but looking into the abandoned bowl, she doubted her estimation of its psychological wellbeing. Small puddles on the table led her to the still, orange body on the floor. The fish, she deduced, had exerted great effort to leap out of the bowl and splat onto the table. Then, with one more heroic burst, he plunged to the floor—where he was suffocated by the air.

Claire bent down to pick up the fish which had begun to adhere to the wood planks. In her lifting, the scales from his left side were peeled from his body, leaving behind a glistening silver shimmer. Remembering her mother's cure for the ailing fish of her childhood, Claire placed her lifeless companion back into the bowl and darted to the kitchen. She returned with a dish of warm, heavily-salted water and lay in the limp, little body. Life twitched back into the tiny creature. And, after an hour, the fish sputtered in the water, making desperate attempts to right itself. Unfortunately, having lost a front fin to the floor, the fish could maintain only a 45-degree

angle and compensated through increased speed and furious flapping of the remaining fin.

Claire knew this resurrection was yet another of her failures. She had fashioned a fish environment suited only to please her aesthetic eye. She had filled the bowl too high, had mutilated the poor creature, and revived it only to suffer until its demise. Before closing her eyes that night, Claire prayed, (to no God in particular), for his death, and, in the morning, found the poor thing afloat. Dead of exhaustion.

Claire remembered the interment of only one of her childhood fishes, although she suspected there were many. For a coffin, little Claire had selected a cardboard ring-box, lined with cotton fluff. After she dug a four-inch hole into the earth, she prayed five Hail Mary's and two Our Father's. In eulogy, Claire proclaimed, "Angel was a good fish." She peeked once more at its papery body, pressed the box into the hole, replaced the dirt, and marked the spot with a palm-sized, oval, backyard rock. After a month, she dug under the rock with a kitchen spoon. Claire had imagined a flawless fish skeleton, but when she opened the box, nothing had survived but the shredded, soggy remains of the cardboard coffin. Not a trace of fish.

For the present fish, free-floating in its salty bath, Claire considered a solemn, fish-flushing funeral. *Too coldhearted.* That's what Kyle would have said. *You're so indifferent. Were you always like this? Am I just noticing it now?* To prove him wrong, Claire selected a more traditional burial. However, she would need time for planning. She plucked the fish out of the water by its tail, wrapped it gently in cellophane, and placed it in the freezer . . . right next to the cat.

Before any of her companions, and way before Kyle, Claire had inherited the condo at Marina City from her mother, who inherited it, and megabucks, from her second ex-husband, Rick. He had left her mother only seven years later for a younger woman (who quickly divorced second-ex for a younger man, triggering Rick's first and final heart attack). Three years later, someone passed out cancer-pink rubber bracelets at her mother's funeral. Claire threw the bracelet into Lake Michigan only hours after the service. It bobbed back to her on a wave, as if playing a game. She left it sitting

in the sand. The next day Claire quit school as an undecided major but kept her part-time bank teller job. She liked being locked in a cage with large deposits, challenging herself to count rapidly while turning the bills in the same direction and detecting counterfeits by the feel of the paper. When Claire moved into the condo, she donated all her mother's furniture. She packed away every photo, managing to hardly look at them by neatly wrapping from the face-down position. Claire decided to deal with these later, when she was ready. She tucked them into the closet. Where they remained.

The cat, now in her freezer, was acquired after Kyle, boyfriend number 6, exited. Right after he called her a *greedy, selfish, little bitch*, which she later shortened to GSLB. His rant had come after her elective abortion—elected by her without informing him. Kyle's dramatic response reminded her of the trajectory of all her previous relationships. The enticing intimacy, insatiable passion, and inevitable waning of desire—on her part. There would be futile efforts to paddle backwards which only served to exhaust and overwhelm Claire. Intimacy complaints would follow; accusations that she was *just lying there, uninterested* (which she was). Theatrical arguments would ensue followed by excessive drinking, the first blow-up and make-up, several more blow-up/make-up cycles and the final scene. The storming out. With Kyle, it was different. Sometime after the *lying there uninterested* phase, but before the dramatic exit performance, Claire turned the litmus stick pink.

Her decision was made within nanoseconds of seeing the pink line. She gave no consideration to an alternative. This was a mistake—unplanned, unexpected, and correctable. She didn't wish to strain her already-doomed relationship with the news of an unwanted pregnancy. Claire hadn't meant to tell him at all, but her two days of recovery from the D&C demanded an explanation as Kyle stood over her bed, arms crossed, looking concerned. Claire thought he would be grateful she had acted decisively and spared him the trouble. She thought incorrectly.

“Did you ever think that I might want it?” Kyle's face was splotchy, the way it got when he was fuming.

“Want what? The pregnancy?”

“The baby, our baby!”

“It wasn’t a baby, just multiplying cells.”

Kyle starred without responding, his jaw muscles pulsing. Maybe there was hurt in his eyes, Claire couldn’t tell. “*Our* multiplying cells” he shouted, “that would have made *our* baby. Part you and part me.” He turned away from Claire, shaking his head and walked towards the door.

“I just thought you wouldn’t want to be bothered by the drama of all of this.”

That’s when he said it, spinning to face her and pointing his finger. “Because you are a greedy, selfish, little bitch!”

His tirade was unanticipated, but alas, his storming away was as expected—though a bit premature. The thunder of the slamming door brought familiar comfort rather than the intended angst. Proof, that this relationship would not have weathered a storm. Comfort, that she had chosen correctly. *Unless she was wrong*. Claire wondered then, briefly, about the gender, the eye color, the tiny hands, and about the reality of mortal sin and hell.

A week later, when Claire felt alone, because she was alone, she bought a cat from a brother and sister soliciting door-to-door. “Lady, you want to buy a cat?” Now she had something that would not leave her, or threaten to leave her. Something warm and soft, like a child—*erase that, it was simply a cat*. Claire hated intrusive thoughts. She named the cat SC, for Second Chance.

SC was a lot like her, aloof and quiet. They studied each other. SC only liked touch if she initiated it, and that was a lot like Claire. SC liked to knead Claire’s stomach before coming to rest on it. Claire wished that SC would do this to her back but could never train the cat to be interested in becoming her masseuse. Claire liked to sleep late and SC liked to be fed early. This was a battle of wills that Claire would win. SC would become contented to stare for hours at Claire’s sleeping face. Claire didn’t notice the cancer because SC’s prodigious plume of fur concealed the growing lumps until it was too late. The vet whispered to Claire that it was *time*, but Claire couldn’t do it, and took SC home. The next morning SC bled out. A pool of blood the consistency of thin pudding turned much of SC’s white fur deep plum. Claire held the cat until

her final breath escaped and SC lay limp in her arms.

Kyle had been right, she thought, she was a “greedy, selfish, little, bitch.” She should have put the cat out of misery the day before, but no surprise, Claire’s needs superseded those of her cat. Her selfish desire to feel SC knead her stomach again and purr in her lap again, led SC to an atrocious death. *GSLB, GSLB, wretched, wretched GSLB.*

Claire debated what to do with the body of SC, but after two hours of crying she decided that she needed more time to decide. She hopped a redline bus to Bloomingdale’s and selected a baby blanket she thought SC would appreciate, if she were not dead. At home, Claire sang a lullaby as she wrapped the cat’s body, thick with sticky, matting blood, into the pink and blue, satin-trimmed softness. Claire practiced crisscrossing the blanket corners across SC to overlap them as evenly as possible. She wrapped and tucked and smoothed until she was satisfied with the final swaddle-around and tight tuck. The flawless folds were pleasing to Claire, but then she chastised herself for being distracted from her grieving. With nothing left to do, she placed the bundle into her empty (except for two ice trays) freezer so that she could figure it all out later, when she was ready.

Claire read ferociously after that. Her goal was self-perfection, or at least self-improvement. She read the how-to books feverishly: *How to make a Million Dollars*, *How to Clean your House in Minutes*, *How to Become your own Best Friend*, *How to Make Friends*, and *How to Change your Life*. And, she made meticulous notes and lists about what she needed to do in response to each book. It was not until she read *How to Quit Smoking* that she made a step. Not towards stopping smoking. Claire had never smoked. She had picked up the book out of curiosity and decided to read it in case anyone ever asked her for advice about quitting. She determined, after reading, that she had been in a *pre-contemplative* state of change for most of her adult life and needed to progress to the *action* state. Taking out her numerous lists from the books she had read, she placed them face down on her bed. She shuffled the papers a bit, closed her eyes and picked one. She turned it over and read from the top. Book Title: *How to Love Again*. Things to do: join a social group, join a church,

join a sports league, get a pet, volunteer in your community. With significant trepidation, Claire decided on the *get a pet* option, because meeting people made her nervous. But it would have to be a small pet, smaller than a cat. *Poor Claire.*

Her visit to the pet store led her, eventually, to look at the fish. And finally to the tank that read: *Goldfish—6 for \$1.00 or 25 cents each.* She concluded it would be a loving act to rehome the fantail. The Waterford crystal rose bowl, \$275 plus tax, was purchased from Bloomingdale's on her way home. It was paid for while holding the fish, not yet named, in a plastic bag with a twist tie.

Now there were two dead creatures in her freezer.

Claire fretted she might be incapable of loving. Perhaps a pro-active, loving response would be to bury her companions at last and allow them to return to the earth and become one with the cosmos (she was again reading self-help, this time: *Leaving the Material World behind: Transcendence into the Spiritual Realm*). But Claire wasn't ready to feel the weight of SC in her arms. She would start her self-actualization smaller, with the fish. It was essential to be selfless and Claire therefore selected the wooden box with inlaid silver, given to her by Kyle. It was barely bigger than her fish with a hinged lid that certainly would not keep out worms or bugs. For protection, she added tape around her frozen fish wrapped in cellophane. Then she placed the fish body into the box and circled tape around the box, until the tape was gone. Finally, Claire put the box into a Ziploc and squeezed out the air before pressing it closed. For good measure, she placed it into another Ziploc. Of course, this would delay his return to the earth, but it would keep out the worms. Fish ate worms, not the other way around.

The fish was buried on a November night, as far down as her metal serving spoon would dig into the sand at Lake Shore Drive beach. Claire knelt and said five Hail Mary's and two Our Father's and asked the God she no longer conversed with, to take the soul of the fish. She pushed the little box into the hole and apologized for her poor caregiving, for her selfishness at no painted fish house or plastic weeds. As she scooped sand on top of the tiny coffin, she vowed to become a better person. Claire thought for a moment about what a shame

it was to bury such a lovely box and then reminded herself that the box was only a material possession and therefore unimportant in the greater scheme of things, especially the spiritual realm. It was hard to be a better person with earthly attachments to little wood boxes.

As she stood, Claire remembered she had forgotten to bring a flower (which immensely disappointed her). She poked her spoon into the spot that concealed her companion and sought out a worthy rock to mark the sacrosanct place. She chose, however, an ordinary grey rock void of any noteworthy qualities, except perhaps that it was, she thought, as ordinary as one could possibly find. It could be extraordinary in its ability to most perfectly represent the ordinary within the rock world. Claire thought this could be a profound epiphany of sorts, and might be a sign from her Higher Power that this was, in fact, the rock destined to mark the fish grave. There was a message in all of this, *how ordinary can be extraordinary simply by being ordinary*, and she vowed to find deeper meaning at her next (which would also be her second) yoga meditation session. Finally, she returned to the fish spot and pushed the spoon down into the sand until it was stopped by Kyle's gift. *She was not attached to spoons.* Claire smoothed over the sand and placed the tombstone on top. With empathic conviction.

A frigid surge of the Lake Michigan breeze brought Claire to a standing position and she forgot to speak her final words of remembrance and gratitude. She regretted this on her walk to the bus stop, wondering if she should return now, or tomorrow, or if it would count to think the eulogy thoughts as she walked. She turned back multiple times, each time getting only a few feet before a bite of wind spun her towards home again.

The next day, Claire determined she could likewise bury the cat and scouted for a final resting place by walking the beach after work. She reasoned that she would, however, need a shovel this time. Each night Claire walked past where she had buried her fish, and each night she felt the same strong urge to dig it up and look to see what had become of her neglected companion's body. She resisted this urge over and over, even as it grew stronger each evening, even as it

mingled with thoughts of what had become of her mother's body. At last she settled on Montrose Beach as a burial site for SC. There, a circle of rocks cradled the sand, keeping it from washing out with the waves. At high tide the lake water would transform those rocks from chalky grey to glistening ebony. Waves would smash into the rocks, burst upward and rain down, before pooling into the nest of rocks and seeping slowly beneath the sand.

On a Saturday evening, Claire removed SC's body from her freezer. Although she tried to look at SC one more time, the blood had soaked through the baby blanket and fixed it tightly to the frozen cat. She placed the cat's body into a plastic grocery sack, picked up her folding garden shovel (\$19.98) and the daisies (two for \$15.00) she remembered to purchase this time, and awkwardly navigated towards Montrose Beach. As she passed the fish grave, it called to her loudly for an unearthing and, had it not been for the task at hand, she could not have resisted. She *promised* that once this burial was completed, she would resurrect the stamp-box coffin, and pour the caged remains into the water where they belonged (although she wondered if there would be any remains).

Claire found the beach comforting; the cacophony of traffic noise was hushed by the rumbling waves rushing to shore. She placed the flowers and shovel and plastic bag under a circle of streetlight illumination. Claire removed the frozen bundle, wrapped in its pink and blue (stained with plum) blanket and placed it on the plastic bag. *How long do turkeys take to defrost?* Claire hated intrusive thoughts. As she dug, Claire began to sing the lullaby of her childhood.

She was besieged by thoughts of her mother and then of the aborted fetus, not a child, but the hope of a child, potential comfort and love, opportunity and immortality. Claire could keep nothing alive. She picked up the shovel and dug until the dry sand was wet sand, and the hole was as deep as her knees. Claire did not see the hand-holding lovers staring at her as they walked by. She did not hear the cars speeding along Lake Shore Drive, not the whipping wind or the blaring sirens. Nothing. She was utterly adrift in her sonorous solitude.

In the dark of night, brightly lit by halogen street lamps, she

scouted out of the sandy pit, picked up the swaddled cat and placed her in the hole. Kneeling there, Claire began to pray. She prayed with her hands in perfect prayer position, her fingertips matched up precisely, attempting to replicate the picture on her first communion prayer book. Kneeling at the precipice of wisdom attainment, Claire wondered how far she should hold her hands from her chin. Within nanoseconds, the essence of her being would be revealed. She fought off the thoughts of her mother, the cat, the fish, and the abortion. With one more un-intruded instant, enlightenment would penetrate her consciousness and reveal her path at last.

“Chicago Police, raise your hands over your head.”

Claire was yanked from her transcendence. The pillars of knowledge crumbled away.

“Chicago Police, raise your hands over your head.” It was louder this time.

She could see the dark outline of a police officer backlit by the streetlamp behind him; she could see that he was in *ready position* with one hand on his holstered gun. She scrutinized him to make sense of his presence.

“Ma’am, I want you to raise your hands above your head, where I can see them.” His voice was softer this time. Claire felt her body comply. He walked around her. “Now place your right hand behind your back.” Again Claire obeyed, thinking about which was her right hand. *I pledge allegiance*. It dawned on her that burying pets on the beach was likely illegal. And then she felt the officer’s warm hands grasp her wrist and slip a plastic handcuff around it. “Place your other hand behind your back.” She felt the plastic tighten. *Click, click, click*. The officer helped her to her feet. Then his hands moved over and around her body from shoulders to ankles. At her thighs, she thought about Kyle. She had the right to remain silent.

“Ma’am, is this your child?” The police officer was looking into the hole she’d dug.

Claire started to cry. “No, this is SC. I’m sorry. I can take her home.”

“Did you kill Essie? Did you kill your child?”

Claire didn’t understand how the officer knew about the abortion or why he was questioning her about it now. “You don’t understand, I didn’t kill a child, it wasn’t a child yet. I

am sorry that I did it now! I should have told you, Kyle. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry!" Claire realized she was screaming at the officer.

"Who's Kyle?"

Claire regained her composure, "The father, well he wasn't a father because it was never a child. I didn't know he wanted it."

Claire heard the officer call for backup. "A possible 187." He instructed her to sit on the sand near the gravesite. She watched him move towards the cat, pick it up and try to pull away the blanket. "She's dead. I froze her, so you won't be able to get the blanket off." The officer held his ear to the blanket and finally placed it back in the sand, positioned exactly as he had found it.

Claire's started to cry, not just to cry, but to wail. She cried because her mother died, and SC, and the fish she hadn't named, and she cried about the end of her pregnancy and the end of Kyle. Claire mourned deeply and loudly and profoundly. Her body trembled, and she gave into it until she heard her noises stop, until all she could hear was her breathing, until she could feel only the icy air being taken into her mouth and swallowed into her lungs. Turning into ice.

More police arrived. They pivoted heavy rust-ridden steel garbage drums around the hole and strung yellow do-not-cross tape. Claire knew officers were speaking to her, but she couldn't understand their words because of the hum in her head. Their voices grew louder and softer like someone was playing with the volume on a radio. When the coroner arrived, he announced the child, Essie, would need to be thawed overnight before conducting an autopsy. Claire protested, "SC's not a baby!" but then resumed sobbing until she vomited. No one was listening. She was helped to her feet by two officers who began walking her down the beach towards the waiting police car—towards the fish grave. She heard the fish calling more loudly than ever for its release from captivity. As they neared, she struggled to break free and dig up the fish. Claire had *promised* to release him on her way back. It was important. It was essential. She threw herself to the ground, falling onto her knees and screaming, "Just let me do this one thing!"

When she wouldn't walk with them, they carried her. At last, she let her body go slack. Claire had managed, in her flailing, only to kick the perfectly ordinary rock to a new spot that marked nothing but an ordinary place on the beach.

In the days to follow (after the misunderstanding was corrected), Claire hung her mother's pictures. She cremated her cat, purchased a metal detector (\$56.24) and located the buried spoon. Returning the liquidated body of her fish to the water, Claire prayed five Hail Mary's and two Our Father's and proclaimed, "Fred was a good fish."

Erin M. Chavis

The Gift of Glory

Amazingly, the apartment feels fuller with less in it. Maybe that's because now it's a HOME. It's the FUTURE. The only furniture I have is what I brought into the union: a dinette set with only three chairs that don't match the table or each other. Well, that and the futon mattress that Kit has so graciously given me to use as a bed. The bare walls envelop me in an embrace warmer than when they were cocooned in David's photographs. I reach in amusement to touch the light rectangle where my botched attempt at knitting used to hang, wondering if he took it because in his haste, he lost track of what belonged to who, or because it had started out as a gift for him. Does it have sentimental value to him? If that's the case, it's because of who created it, and then he would've stayed, right?

It doesn't matter. Everything I need, everything that *does* matter, is in this apartment.

Glory opens her eyes, Jay's eyes, and peers myopically at me. I hold my breath, waiting to see if she'll cry. But she just blinks lazily at me a few times as if to say, *You know what I want. Do I need to spell it out?*

Breastfeeding is still a bit awkward, but after a few failed attempts, she latches on. I rest my back against a bare wall, legs splayed on the futon mattress, while my daughter has breakfast. *My daughter.* The phrase feels foreign and perfect at the same time.

Motherhood had never been part of the plan, so when I met David, who didn't want kids, either, it seemed perfect. It wasn't until just recently that I realized how vastly different our reasons were. There was a time that I would've thought that our motives didn't matter, as long as the end game was the same.

How wrong I was.

A foster kid since the age of three, I never knew what a real family was. David, on the other hand, had grown up in

a two-parent household with a brother, a sister, and a dog. It was an affluent family, due to the marriage of his heiress mother to his plastic surgeon father. They seemed to have everything I'd ever dreamed of, and I'd told him as much on our third or fourth date.

"It's all a lie," he'd said, helping himself to some of my pad Thai.

"What do you mean?"

"Our 'perfect' life. Everyone in my family is selfish."

At the time, I didn't stop to think that that included him.

It's becoming harder and harder to keep my eyes open. I haven't had much sleep this past week, or the past few months, for that matter. Still, knowing that someone is completely dependent on me is my new form of adrenaline, and I stay awake because she needs me to.

The state of the apartment when I arrived home suggested that his decision to leave was an impulse. This shouldn't surprise me, since I was also one of David's impulsive decisions.

"Let's get married," he said to me one day as we rode the subway home from grocery shopping.

"Seriously?" We'd only been dating for three months, living together for six weeks.

"Seriously."

And so, the next week, we were husband and wife. We were kindred spirits, he said. We both loved indie films and cats and eating breakfast for dinner. My dark hair and eyes were the perfect complement to his blonde and blue. I'd always been poor, and he evaded his family's wealth.

It was meant to be.

Maybe he'd truly believed it at the time that the words had cascaded from his lips. Or maybe it had been nothing more than the level of enthusiasm he'd initially shown for his myriad abandoned hobbies: the guitar, pottery, painting, photography. When he was there, it was almost impossible to walk from one end of our home to the other without tripping over some forgotten, half-completed project of his. My right forearm will forever bear a scar from that attempt at glass-

blowing that had wound up broken and shoved out of sight, just waiting for some unsuspecting someone to root around blindly under the bed in search of a misplaced shoe. And one wall of the kitchen displays the appalling aftermath of his fascination with sponge painting.

Glory has drifted off mid-breakfast. I still sit her up, cradling her impossibly small upper half in one hand while I rub her back with the other. She emits a satisfying little burp, still asleep, eyes shut as tight as her tiny fists.

For David, the novelty of poverty got old pretty quickly. We had been married for eight months, and his ever-dwindling savings made it apparent that if he wanted to just be broke and not flat broke, then changes would have to be made.

I had just gotten home from a double shift at the gas station when he walked into the bedroom, flopped across the bed, and announced: “We’re out of cereal.”

“No we’re not,” I replied, pulling my smelly uniform polo shirt over my head. “I bought some yesterday.”

“We’re out of my cereal.”

“I bought your cereal.”

“No, you bought the generic stuff,” he countered, face down on the mattress. His words, though muffled, were no less maddening. “I can’t eat that crap—it has a weird aftertaste.”

“The name brand is three dollars more for a smaller box,” I explained, “and that was three dollars that had to go to the electric bill so our power wouldn’t get shut off.” My sweaty bra followed the shirt in the dirty clothes hamper, which was overflowing. “Think about that the next time you want to keep the lights on all day.” I turned sideways to sidle past his feet, which were blocking my way to the door. “I’m taking a shower.”

I wasn’t sure, exactly, what he mumbled as I exited the room, but it sounded suspiciously like “This sucks.”

Both Glory and I are asleep when Kit stops by. She apologizes profusely for showing up unannounced. I’m nearly dead on my feet, but I’m so happy to not be alone with the baby

that I insist it's not a problem. Some parenting books say that you should rest when the baby does; others insist that that's the time to tend to your own needs. I'm not certain which policy I'll officially adopt, but I'm leaning toward the former.

Kit is the closest I've ever had to a sister. She and I had been placed in the same foster home on three different occasions. The total of six years we'd lived together means that I have lived with her longer than with anyone else.

"How are you?" she asks, taking Glory in an expert hold. Kit has two of her own.

"Terrified." I can be completely honest with her.

She offers me a smile that is three parts encouragement, one part pity. "It'll get better."

“We have something really important to talk to you about.”

Eric, another product of the foster system, had invited me to dinner at a restaurant I'd never be able to afford on my own. He was the exception to the rule, a crack baby and ward of the state that had grown up to be extremely successful. Jay, his partner in business and in life, had come along as well. His presence was a surprise, but not necessarily an unpleasant one.

“What is it?” I asked, pretending that it wasn't my first time trying lamb. Just for one night, I wanted to be free to pretend: I was someone important, with tons of money, who ate at restaurants like that every day. I was someone who had a personal shopper and never had to wash dishes and used champagne to water my plants.

The guys exchanged glances. “We've decided to have a baby.”

“That's great!” The lamb was delicious—juicy and succulent and more flavorful than I'd imagined. But Jay's next words made that piece of meat sour in my stomach.

“We'd like for you to be our surrogate.”

The rest of the conversation is kind of a blur. I remember alternating between being touched that they'd chosen me for such an awesome responsibility, and offended because the expensive dinner seemed like a bribe. Eric and Jay had everything worked out logistically, down to visitation, should

I want it, and how my existence would be explained to the child when he or she was old enough. “I know this is a lot to ask,” Eric said when they dropped me off at my apartment that evening. “Just promise me you’ll at least think about it.”

“Please,” Jay added before I headed inside.

I waited until the next day to present the proposition to David. I was uncertain of how he would react, or even how I was hoping he would react. His face remained expressionless until I got to the part about what was in it for me: besides supporting me financially during the pregnancy and covering all of the medical bills, Eric and Jay were offering me one hundred thousand dollars.

“That’s crazy, though, right?” I concluded. “I mean, I don’t want to feel like I’m selling a baby.”

“Jess.” There was an almost maniacal gleam in David’s eyes. “What we’d be doing for them is providing an invaluable service. How can you put a price on that?” But then he did exactly that: “If you ask me, one hundred thousand is too low; they should’ve offered us at least two fifty.”

Us?

“Who else have they asked?” he wanted to know.

“No one else,” I answered, feeling numb. “There’s no one that they trust with this.”

“All the more reason to ask for more money. You’re a hot commodity.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “I’m not asking for more, David. I’d do this for Eric for free.”

My husband looked horrified and disgusted. “Don’t be stupid. You need to learn how to negotiate.”

“So you’d be okay if I did it?” I asked, not sure how I felt about his willingness to comply. Eric had been right—it was a lot to ask of me. There could be complications, for me or the baby or both of us. My body would never be the same after I carried a child. I would never be the same.

“Of course,” David replied, smoothly switching gears. “You always say that Eric’s like a brother to you.”

He was like a brother. Before David came along, Eric was the only steady man in my life. And giving him the gift of a child, a child that would be wanted and loved and would have a permanent home, just felt right. It meant so much more to

us—Eric and me—than it would to the average person.

And as loathe as I was to admit it, the money would help out more than Jay and Eric could imagine. I could quit the job at the gas station, go to school, make something of myself.

And so I said yes.

Kit grabs me by the shoulders and steers me toward the bedroom. “Sleep,” she commands. “I’ve got the baby.”

When I wake up, the sun has set and the smell of spaghetti sauce wafts in from the kitchen. “Have you been eating?” Kit asks when I emerge, rubbing my grainy eyes. She’s holding my daughter with one arm while stirring the contents of a pot with her free hand.

“Not exactly,” I admit sheepishly.

“You have to eat to produce enough milk for Glory,” she says, knowing that’s the one argument that can’t be trumped. I sit down and she serves me spaghetti and meatballs, salad, and garlic bread.

“Mike says he saw David yesterday,” she says casually after placing Glory in her carrier and joining me at my mismatched dining set.

“He did? Where?” Our husbands aren’t exactly good friends. In fact, David doesn’t really care for *any* of my friends or their mates, claiming they’re all trash. *Then so am I.*

She shrugs. “On the street.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “What aren’t you telling me?”

She stuffs a piece of garlic bread in her mouth, a blatant stall tactic. “He was driving a Beamer. With temporary plates.”

I know what this means: not only has he gone back to the family and the lifestyle he supposedly despises, but he’s been welcomed with open arms. I can’t possibly compete with that, and strangely, I feel not despair but relief.

Wow. My marriage is over.

I*couldn’t understand the girl on the phone. At first, I thought there was an issue with interference or background noise, but then I realized she was crying. Weeping, actually. And until she spoke, I, for some odd reason, assumed the call was for David.*

“J-J-Jessica?”

“Yes, who’s calling?”

“M-My name is Leslie. Leslie Rinella.”

I straightened up, my hand reflexively resting on my swollen belly. The baby, a girl that the guys were planning to name Glory, immediately responded with an eerily accurate kick against my hand. Rinella was Jay’s last name; this was his sister who had called me.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“There’s been an accident,” she managed to tell me between sobs. “A terrible car accident. It-It was fatal.”

“Oh my god.” My knees buckled and I fell to a seated position on the edge of the ottoman. At seven months pregnant, I’d normally have to strategize and go through a lot of maneuvering to sit that way, but in my state of profound sorrow, my awkward body performed almost gracefully. “He’s gone then? Jay’s gone?”

“Y-Yes!” This admission renewed Leslie’s tears.

“Has anyone told Eric?” I asked when she stopped to catch her breath.

“Oh Jessica, you don’t understand . . . they were both in the car. Eric’s gone, too.”

Kit hugs me carefully, mindful of my engorged breasts. “Do you want me to go with you tomorrow?”

I shake my head, afraid that I’ll start crying if I attempt to speak. I’m overwhelmed by her kindness and concern.

“You’ll call me afterward, right?”

I nod against her shoulder.

“Don’t forget to eat,” she reminds me as she slips out the door.

If this was a soap opera, the news I’d received from Jay’s sister would have sent me into instant labor. Instead, I hung up the phone and cleaned the entire apartment. Only after I made sure that every baseboard and lightbulb was dusted did I allow myself to go stand by the window that looked down onto the street so that I could cry. The tears wouldn’t come, though, and I numbly watched the foot traffic until David got home from his latest endeavor. I couldn’t even remember what he was up to—maybe harp lessons.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked when he saw my face. Knowing he’d be annoyed if I beat around the bush, I delivered the bad news as succinctly as I could. He stared at me for a long time, mute.

“Say something,” I finally implored after two full minutes of silence.

“You’re not still planning on having the baby, are you?”

Then it was my turn to stare. I couldn’t find the right words to . . . there just were no words.

“I mean, you can get rid of it, right?”

“David, I’m thirty weeks along. I kind of don’t have a choice.”

He suddenly threw his keys at the wall. They struck one of his hideous paintings, leaving a fan-shaped spray of tick marks on the canvas. “Shit!” he screamed. “Shit shit SHIT!”

“David, calm down.”

“Calm down? CALM DOWN?!” He ran his hands through his hair. “We’re fucked here—absolutely fucked—and you want me to calm down?! We’re out a hundred grand!” He began to pace wildly, describing frantic circles in our living room. “I knew we should’ve had papers drawn up. I knew we should’ve demanded the money up front. God DAMMIT!” He was panting now, chest heaving. “This was too good to be true; why do I always get the short end of the stick?”

My blood was boiling, and the baby squirmed. “Think about how Jay’s family feels right now,” I said, “and all the people that care about Eric.” Not to mention how I felt.

My husband shot me a look of pure contempt. “They didn’t just get screwed over. They didn’t just lose a ton of money.”

I clamped my mouth shut. There would be no reasoning with him.

“So how does this work?” he asked, collapsing onto the same ottoman that I’d fallen onto earlier that day. “You can just hand the baby over and let Social Services find a family for it, right? You don’t have to be involved with picking someone, do you?”

I hadn’t thought about that, but maybe that’s because it was a no-brainer for me. As inexperienced as I was, as unwilling as I’d been to have a child of my own, I couldn’t give up the baby I was carrying. I’d known the moment that

I'd heard of her fathers' demise that she was staying with me. "This is my baby," I said quietly. "I'm keeping her."

"No," he said immediately. "We're not having kids. You're giving it up."

"Her, not 'it.' And I can't do that to my child, David. I grew up in the system—"

"—and you turned out okay," he interrupted.

But had I turned out okay? I was married to a narcissist who had just asked me to abort a fetus at thirty weeks. To me, that was pretty not okay. Though his next words were of no surprise, "Jess, if you keep that baby, I'm out of here," I imagine I shocked him with my reply:

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Glory gurgles while I dress her for our meeting with Eric's attorney. Her lavender footie pajamas match the maternity dress I selected after discovering that my new body can't fit into my old clothes. She gets fidgety while my shaky hands fumble with the snaps. I realize I've misbuttoned them and have to start again, finishing right as she pushes a disgruntled wail out of her nine-day-old lungs.

I scoop her up and bounce her a bit until she quiets, then gather our things so we can head downstairs to the taxi that's waiting for us.

I don't know what the future holds.

I don't know why the lawyer needs to talk to me about Eric's estate.

I'm nervous about taking the baby outside for the first time.

But I know that no matter what happens, we'll make it, Glory and I.

We're survivors.

David Grubb

Ninety on Jackknife

A loud knock rattled the door on Clayton's new travel trailer. He took the last swig of his pre-ride beer and then yanked open the door. A kid with scruffy blonde hair stood a few feet away from the two metal steps that lead up to the trailer's entryway. After a few moments he realized it was the kid who ran errands for the office manager.

Clayton said, "Well, what do you want?"

The kid held his hand up to shield his eyes from the midsummer Arizonan sun. "There's a woman on the phone asking for you."

Clayton leaned away from the door and tossed the empty beer bottle into the small trashcan next to the sink. He grabbed his boots and sat down on the upper step. His spurs were already cinched in place and jangled as he pulled on each boot. The kid shifted but made no attempt to leave.

"Okay, run along. I'll be right behind you."

The kid spun around and took off jogging. His gait wasn't much faster than walking, but he covered a hundred yards down the main dirt road toward the arena before Clayton got more than fifty feet from his trailer.

Minutes later, Clayton's shoulder bumped the door frame as he stepped into the cramped rodeo office on the second floor. The office door was always propped open, and through the opening he kept his focus on a fellow bull rider straddling the back of a monstrous grey Brahman bull inside the chute.

Clayton tried to snatch the black handset off the counter but dropped it. The receiver banged against the counter's beige paneling. After struggling with the long cord, he placed the handset against his face.

Clayton said, "Hello."

"Hello. Clayton?"

"Yes. Are you a fan?" His turn to ride was approaching fast and he moved over to the large window that overlooked the arena. He tapped the tip of his boot against the grungy banged-up trim that ran along the bottom of the wall.

“No. I’m Eloise from Ryebeck, Kansas.” She fought her raspy voice as if she had a terrible cold.

“Oh. What’s this about?”

The Brahman began bucking and twisting before the gate could swing all the way open. The rider flew off its back and Clayton winced when the man’s lanky body slammed against the churned-up ground: flat on his side. Carlsbad, not the rider’s name, but where he called home.

“There’s no easy way to say this.” She muffled a cough. “You’re the father of my son.”

The rodeo and announcers became dull, like it was all on TV. “You’re mistaken. The last time I was in Kansas must’ve been . . .”

“He’s three. I’d given up on finding you, but then you showed up on the news riding bulls. You didn’t,” she paused, “don’t seem like the type to drop everything for some fling in Kansas.”

Another rider clambered up onto the platform above the chutes. He lowered his body into position on top of a tan bull named Kistler’s Whistler. Clayton frowned at the man, wearing a flashy black and red vest, who took first place from him less than a month ago.

He closed his eyes. “Three?”

“His name is Jesse.”

“I worked on the wheat harvest crews back then. We went through Kansas.” For a second, endless fields of golden wheat stretched out in all directions. “It could’ve been any one of the men on those crews.”

“Do you still have that huge belt buckle? The one with your name, two roses, and a colt revolver on the front of it.”

He opened his eyes right as Kistler’s Whistler sent the rider sailing off its back a fraction of a second after the eight-second horn. “I lost that one a couple years ago in Cheyenne—two colt forty-fives and a single rose.”

A southern drawl crackled out of the loudspeaker. “Yowza, what a fine ride by Howie Lawrence, no doubt it’s going to post high. Anything over eighty-six will put him in the top three, don’t you think Terry?”

“Yes sir, it sure will.”

Eloise cleared her throat. “The buckle is about all I

remember besides your face and that cheap motel out on Route Fifty, the one the harvest crews still overrun every fall. I've never been much of a drinker."

"Nah, you're that girl?"

"You've got a wonderful son down here in Ryebeck."

He lifted the black Stetson off his head and reseated it, an attempt to make a straighter, tighter fit. "What do you want from me?"

The announcers' chatter came again. "Sam, there's only one cowboy out there who can run away with this and head off to the semifinals."

"You got that right Terry and he's up right after this next fine rider from Havilland, Texas."

She said, "I'm sick." A child began wailing in the background. "The doctors say it's curable, but I'm telling you about your son in case they're wrong."

His face contorted. "Sick?"

"Cancer, but . . ."

"Look, I gotta go. My bull is going to be led to the gates soon." He tried to step out of the doorway, but the long phone cord reached its limit and stopped him from going any farther than the threshold.

"I—we don't expect anything. I wanted to make sure you knew about Jesse in case . . ."

"These are the quarterfinals. I'll be disqualified if I miss my ride."

Two of the three rodeo clowns rushed in and drew the attention of an agitated bull away from a fellow rider and the crowd's roar made it impossible to hear anything she said except the word *please*.

He moved to the counter and stuck his finger in his ear. "What?"

"My phone number and address—write them down on something you won't throw away."

"Fine, fine just hurry up."

Eight months later, Clayton parked his truck at the address on the five-dollar bill he'd scribbled it on. After getting out, he yawned and stretched standing next to his truck. Driving non-stop from Albuquerque with his trailer in tow

was the only way he could stop by before beginning another ranch hand job.

Eloise greeted him at the door and seemed unsure of what to make of his unexpected visit. Her face was gaunt, eyes haggard. Jesus, he'd have guessed she was at least forty-five instead of thirty something.

A sister with the distant stare of a drug-addled brain and a feeble grandmother stood in the small kitchen gaping at him. Jesse, four years old now, rushed over to him and held out his hand to show off a deep cut with fresh stitches. The boy was his undeniable miniature and arguing otherwise would've been foolish.

After a bit, Eloise led him out the back door, which flopped and screeched because the bottom hinge was torn away from the rotted frame. The lower edge had worn a deep groove in the wooden planks of the stoop and Clayton paused to assess the damage. He could fix the damn thing in ten minutes, but Eloise motioned for him to follow.

They passed through a backyard cluttered with two rusting lawn mowers, faded pinwheels with broken blades, and dead weeds choking out patches of grass. She led him a hundred yards into an open field of ankle-high, green wheat before turning to face him.

"They talk about remission, but I feel worse than ever." Her voice became croakier with each word.

He smiled. "You're recovering."

"I'm begging you to take Jesse when I die." She stared into his eyes—a piercing intrusion he was unaccustomed to getting from man or woman. "Momma's too old and sis does meth or God knows what."

"I'm on the road half the year chasing the circuit. That ain't no place for a child. Besides the ranches where I work offseason have strict rules against kids in the bunkhouses—wives too."

He waved his hat in a circular motion. His nicest Stetson, a black felt Boss of the Plains with distressed leather band, was still in his hand after taking it off to enter the house. The hat was in pristine condition, he only wore it for funerals, weddings, and the awarding of stunning belt buckles with prize money. The oddity of being outside without something

covering his head struck him as she spoke.

She fidgeted with the strings of her bedraggled apron. “Ryebeck will be no better for him when I’m gone, likely worse.”

“I don’t know the first thing about young children.”

She slanted a smile. “You figure it out as you go along.”

“There must be a better . . .” He searched her face.

“If I could’ve found a more suitable place, I’d have left you alone.”

He turned away and stared at Ryebeck, which was four or five miles off to the west. On one side of town, the graffiti-covered grain elevator stood like a beacon. Farther to the South, the greyish-blue water tower with R in fading white paint seemed taller, but it was too close to call a winner. The same small pit stop from his harvesting days should’ve shriveled up and died out. What in the hell was keeping the damn place alive?

“Banking on my survival is a fool’s dream.”

He snapped his head back. “I can ill afford to . . .”

“I’m sending him to you when the time comes.” She dropped the apron strings and pointed at him. “If you turn away your own son, then that’s how it’ll have to play out.”

“We’ve got to figure something else out.”

“I’ve figured it every which way I can, and it keeps coming back to you. I hate it, but that’s how this damn stew pot is boiling over.”

“It ain’t going to work out.”

“By god you’re about the sorriest excuse for a father I ever met.”

“I never claimed I’d make a good father.”

“No, and I’m guessing you never will.”

Clayton turned and walked away, tromping over the rows as he angled toward his truck.

Two years later, Eloise’s sister and grandmother piled back into the green Chevy Nova they’d borrowed from a friend. Calving season forced them to bring the boy to him and he was shocked they obliged.

Even though the sister made it seem like breaking parole was more of a nuisance than a risk the women were heading

home before an hour had passed. Without so much as hugging Jesse goodbye they drove off. The boy played with dirt clods that curdled the ground inside the small corral next to the bunkhouse, and he did little more than glance up.

The rattletrap with rusted wheel wells, missing tailpipe, and bald tires shook and sputtered as it crawled down the long lane of the big, sprawling Texas ranch Clayton had hired on with during the bull riding offseason. As the car picked up speed, black exhaust fogged into the dusty cloud being churned up. Clayton bet they wouldn't make it over the county line before the damn thing broke down.

After they drove out of sight, he tore open an envelope the grandmother had handed him as soon as she stepped out of the car. "Christ, now what?"

He unfolded the pages and muttered, "Shit, do I have to wash him, or can he do it himself?"

Clayton,

He's my little boy and he needs someone to look after him. I reckon hard love is better than none. I'm hoping you can do right by him, but I have my misgivings about this arrangement. Even so, you're his best chance.

He eats like a lumberjack and about as often as a slop hog.

With your lifestyle school will be difficult, but he needs to learn.

He's all boy. He likes cars, action figures, sticks, and anything that'll get him grubby or in trouble.

He questions everything, which will be trying for you, but it's a phase as most things are with children.

Well, this list could go on for pages upon pages and you've skimmed it at most. I assume there're many women in your life. A consistent female influence will help ensure he grows up to be less gruff than his father. My mind runs wild about what he'll be like after spending time with you, yet all I can do is cling to hope. That's harsh, but I don't care because he's such a loving boy.

Please tell him about me when the time is right. You know little more than my name, but just tell him that I wish I could've had a whole lifetime with him. I've loved him since the day I found out about our miracle and I'll never stop loving him (don't you ever tell him he was a mistake). I'll

be watching over him from Heaven and praying for both of you.

My body will be placed next to my father's plot in Ryebeck's smaller cemetery.

The map on the back of this letter will get you there. I hope you bring him by on occasion so I'm more than a name.

Sincerely,

Eloise Anita Grangler

Two nights ago, as late as possible, Clayton parked his trailer among the new fancier rigs lined up in the large grassy expanse behind the stadium arena. While he jacked up the tongue, he noted how much things had changed over the last ten years.

Even in the oncoming darkness the names in cursive reflective stencil on fifth wheels bigger than greyhound buses shined like sunfish on bright mornings. The numerous colorful lights running along the sides annoyed him more than the flickering glows of TVs that lit up the tinted windows inside every one of them. Everything had advanced: savvier Sunday crowds, higher stakes, larger, more aggressive bulls—everything except him.

Jesse and he travelled all day from Denver to get to Ogden for the finals. He had only qualified to ride when another rider had broken most of the bones in his hand during a bar brawl while celebrating his placement. Clayton's luck was even as rigid and impeding as himself.

The following day, after two solid postings, Clayton wanted to sit and rest in his recliner, but the boy stood by the sink shuffling the dishes around instead of washing them. The trailer was littered with takeout boxes, whiskey bottles, dirty clothes, and greenish yellow blades of grass tracked in from outside. Jesse made no attempt to explain why he hadn't done any of his chores.

Clayton popped the top off of a beer and tossed the cap at the waste basket. The lid bounced off a crumpled paper bag on top of the overloaded receptacle.

Clayton said, "After doing the dishes, you need to at least pick up the place and get rid of the trash."

"This is bullshit. I'm not your maid."

“You got to earn your keep.”

He slammed a handful of utensils into the sink and turned to face Clayton, fists clenched. “Not for you, not anymore.”

“What’re you going to do boy? Get a job? Head out on your own? I ain’t about to stop you.”

“I can do everything you can, even more.”

Clayton said, “Can you?”

“Screw you. Maybe I’ll join Zeke and those guys. They like me.”

“Pfft, rodeo clowning, that’s your grand plan?”

“Better than being a washed-up bull buster or bronc jockey.”

“Do whatever you think is best, but I’m warning you . . . bull riding is dangerous, I’ll give you that. Clowning? Now, that’ll get you killed.”

“Great, then I can be as semi famous as my old pops.”

“Get out, get out of here now.”

Jesse stormed out of the old travel trailer. The door banged shut with a thwack, the same thunderclap from when Clayton slammed his own father’s door. Not much older at the time, he joined the wheat harvest crews the following morning. What in the hell was the rash punk going to do? Would he join up with Zeke and Darryl as their newest clown? They needed another and had for some time ever since Billy Zane shattered his hip. The odds of them letting a sixteen-year-old join their ranks seemed low.

Sunday night he got ready for the last ride of his career, whether he won or not. Eloise’s letter drew his attention away from packing his green, canvas gear bag. Wedged into the upper corner of his full-sized mirror on the sliding closet door, the whitish paper had turned yellow. Tattered edges and dark stains made her handwritten words seem older than a decade. A partial view of the map made him guzzle over half his beer. Why had he never taken Jesse to see her? Pride, disdain, or the excuse he’d used every time the subject came up: they were too busy?

His image, distorted by a large crack angling across the mirror, also slowed his routine except his drinking which sped up and led to another popped top. Deep wrinkles from years in the sun made him appear older than his age. Too much

booze, too little sleep, and vying for a top spot in a sport for young men had broken down his body. Soon, irritation and a ticking clock pushed him out of the tiny bedroom-bathroom combination. The beer had him more buzzed than normal, downing two before a ride was unusual.

When Clayton finished getting his stuff together, he sat down on the couch, it was too soon to head to the chutes. The trailer was messier than ever before because Jesse kept his word and stayed away. Clayton smiled at the boy's resolve. Then the past forced its way into his mind. Filthy, hot days of harvesting led him to the back-breaking work on different ranches across the American landscape, more often in the South than the North or Midwest.

On a languid Saturday afternoon with the chores complete he and the other hands began drinking whiskey on a five thousand-acre spread in Oklahoma. Soon, the owner came by the horseshoe pits and joined them for a drink and a few tosses of the shoes. The short, stocky old timer challenged them to ride Dempsey, a retired pro-circuit bull: his most prized animal. Many Saturdays he offered the same contest, and nobody ever took it on. This time, he upped the ante with a hundred-dollar bill for anyone that could go six seconds or longer.

Two other hands failed to go more than a few seconds before Dempsey launched them into the large patches of Mexican sandburs swathed across the neglected practice corral.

Clayton held on longer than six seconds and won the hundred-dollar bill. The twinkle in the owner's eye spoke more of Clayton's natural talent than his terse congratulatory words ever could. Things took off and bull riding, almost overnight, became his main way of life: fast living followed. A blur of women's faces, booze, and squandered prize money made his teeth clench tighter together.

In the dark and all alone, his past seemed like someone else's memories, someone else's heartache. The multitude of people he'd met and the places he'd been were immersed in vapid daydreams. He swatted the foil pan of a TV dinner off the arm of the couch and screamed. The goddamned choices stood out more than anything else. Choices, good, bad, or indifferent were open sores always festering and eating away

at his future.

He stepped out of the trailer with his bag in hand. The night was dark and airless, familiar. The bag's bulkiness made it uncomfortable against his hip. Amber rosin powder, bull rope, and leather gloves were stuffed in with his button-down, long sleeved western shirt for the after party, along with dozens of other odds and ends like ace bandages, a mouthguard he never used, and three or four packages of gauze. In the trailer he'd already put on his spurs and competition vest breaking further away from his ritual.

He hobbled past rows of those plush RVs and pricey trailers, the limp from his training days worsening every year from hard living and rough riding. The roar of a Sunday crowd rose with each painful step toward the arena.

His right shoulder still throbbed from the first two rides and soft, powdery dirt worked through small holes in the bottoms of his lucky boots. Halfway to the chutes he paused. He took a deep breath and tried to work the kinks and soreness out of his shoulder and leg. Then he shuffled into the frenzied excitement near the back of the chutes.

The loudspeakers hailed out John Jared's score of eighty-six point two, five. One of the announcers continued, "That young man from Texarkana can ride with the best of 'em. That puts him in third place. Kenny Jenkins has the lead with his second-round score of eighty-eight point seven. The other riders are gonna' have one a heck of a time catching him with this line-up of rambunctious bulls. We haven't seen a number near ninety in quite some time, eh Jim?"

"Oh, it's been a while Cal."

Clayton's mind cleared, and he tried to focus on the next twenty minutes. When was the last time one of his rides scored above eighty-eight? Holding on the full eight seconds for much of the year had proved difficult and more like luck when it happened, until yesterday. His first two rounds had given him a slim chance for one last taste of glory. His final ride would have to score above ninety to take the title.

His draw for the third round could've been worse, but few riders considered Jackknife a great bull for scoring. One of the gate handlers called over to him, "man your bull is a goosey orange-brown wrecking ball of fluttering butterflies."

Clayton snorted. “That’s one way to put it.”

He tossed his bag onto the ground at the back of the gates. As soon as he glanced up, the chute man gave him the two-minute signal. His bull rope, snake-like, slid out of the bag as he freed it and the can of rosin from the tangled mass. He thrust the rope up into a sea of hands. He wasted no time trying to figure out who had grabbed the most important piece of his gear. One of the chute workers would ensure to strap it around the bull’s girth and pass him the correct end.

He bent down to deal with the rest of his stuff—glove, chaps, and latigos. Buckling the chaps only took a moment or two, the same with tying the latigos around the tops of his boots. The glove snugged his hand and grew warmer the more he rosined it.

Then he clambered up the fence and onto the platform above the chute. His pain vanished. Exhilaration was a powerful analgesic like chugging a pint of two hundred proof grain alcohol. He salted more rosin on his glove for the bull rope and then dropped the small plastic canister down by his bag.

The world drowned out as he assumed the position on top of Jackknife. He locked eyes with the same chute man who’d given him the two-minute warning. The husky man’s calm, regimented demeanor was meant to ease a rider’s anxiousness. It was a strategy that worked on the rarest occasions, at least for Clayton.

Voices of familiar commenters echoed out of the loudspeakers. The pent-up power of Jackknife flowed out from the beast’s flanks and into his legs, like the bridled energy before a high magnitude earthquake. He crushed everything into a ball of hardened steel that sat in the pit of his stomach and waited.

The chute man nodded again; Clayton had the green light to give his signal whenever he was ready for the gate handlers to release Jackknife. He tightened his grip on the bull rope and took a deep breath. His left hand rose into the air from tempered instinct. The gate swung open and the buzzer sounded.

Jackknife surged out of the chute whirling into the arena in a dizzying series of spins and bucks. The crowd roared: a din

no louder than a murmur in his ears. Jackknife became the furious bucking bull selective breeding had intended.

At first the bull's erratic rhythm jarred and jostled him. He almost flew out of the saddle but managed to hold on as the bull thrashed beneath him. Then, like a storm front dying away, its spins, twists, bucks, and hops became smooth.

It was like he knew which way the bull would turn, when it would buck, and even predict how many hops it would make before it hopped. His ride was flawless, the best one of his entire career. When the horn sounded, he fought the urge to let out a yeehaw.

He tried to dismount from Jackknife's back, but his glove bound up in the bull rope. The tangle of leather and hemp held him to the side of the wild bucking brute. His tiptoes tapped the churned dirt every second or third time Jackknife bucked. Having his hand caught in the rope had happened to him numerous times before and the disastrous outcomes flitted through his mounting fear. He tried to control the panic as he'd learned to do, but his helplessness made it difficult.

Jackknife continued his spinning rampage and Clayton dangled off the bull's side. His shoulder popped when it tore from the socket. He could no longer keep any distance between him and Jackknife's barrel. After a few jolting hops, the bull reared its head back and Clayton's faced slammed into the poll. The impact stunned him, but he remained semiconscious. Blood seeped from his nostrils and trickled down his upper lip. For over a minute, he flopped and flailed until the bull rope released. He crumpled to the ground.

Things were happening around him, but they were slow and fuzzy. The hooves of a one-ton bull churned up the dirt inches from his head as Jackknife continued to buck, spin, and search for him. Dazed and unable to move, all he could do was lay there hoping the bull's hooves kept missing him, missing his head. Then the shadowed figure of a rodeo clown appeared. Jackknife's bulky form moved farther away, and Clayton's body relaxed.

"Zeke, is that you?" Clayton's voice was weak and hoarse.

"No Dad, it's me." Jesse's face, painted sad clown, loomed above him. "Are you okay?"

"Where's the bull?"

Jesse glanced over his shoulder and then back down at Clayton. “Relax, we’ve got him.”

“Where’s the fucking . . .”

The long horn of Jackknife caught Jesse’s baggy pants and swept him off his feet. A quick powerful twist of the bull’s head flung him up in the air. He landed with a thud a few feet away from Clayton in the musky dirt. The loud snap of a bone breaking preceded Jesse’s screams.

The crowded arena went silent. Raucous fans sat in their seats rigid and muted, a common courtesy of respect for the injured men. Jesse writhed and Clayton tried to get up to help him. He was still too dazed to do more than loll his head. The bright arena lights created halos and distortion. For a moment the young boy he’d met in Ryebeck lay beside him.

“What’d you break, a leg?” Clayton inched his arm closer to the boy.

Jesse gasped and groaned like the wind had been knocked out of him.

Clayton said, “Be tough, help is coming.”

“Unhhh.”

“Jesse, I—.”

A rush of people cut off more words. Two cowboys lifted Clayton to his feet and the crowd erupted. A score of ninety point five zero echoed through the din. His fist rose into the air and he soaked in the adulation from the deafening rumble. A half dozen cowboy hats, two or three baseball caps, and a pink bandana landed at his feet. His gaze followed Jesse being hauled off in a stretcher. For a moment he stood fast, unable to move or react.

When he tried to run to his son, he stumbled and collapsed to his knees. The cowboys who’d helped him were quick to get him back on his feet, but he shook out of their grasp. He stumbled forward, this time keeping upright as he plodded toward the station wagon style ambulance parked in its designated spot at the far end of the arena.

“Wait, that’s my son.”

The announcers’ voices called out through the starry night and muted his words. “What a spectacular finish. His final ride in a long rocky career and he takes tonight’s title. Ya gotta’ feel pretty bad that he and one of our heroic clowns

got beat to hell. They're telling us it's a nasty injury, but the clown should pull through. Jim, do you even know that guy?"

"No Cal," the other announcer said, "can't say I do. If he keeps protecting our hard riding 'boys like that, then he'll either have one heck of a career or a darn short one."

"You ain't kidding. Okay folks let's hear another round of applause for our big winner Clayton Donbrooke."

Before Clayton could call out again, Jesse was loaded into the ambulance, the driver already behind the wheel. He kept moving forward, forcing himself to remain on his feet. With each step he grew steadier, stronger, yet he hadn't even reached the center of the arena when the ambulance flipped on its lights and sirens, then sped off.

G. Bernhard Smith

Baggage

W eird to think that of the dozens of women walking the concourse near Andy Dirkson one might be his mother. The airport is the perfect place to wonder about people—who they are, what makes them tick. Andy scans the female faces. “Not her, not her, not her . . .” the words reverberate through him like some sick mantra. There’s an annoying buzz in the air, muted voices amidst the distant drone of traffic. He wishes he could swipe away the cluttered sounds and confusing visuals. They only stoke his frustration. He stops at a bank of overhead monitors and tries to suss out the carousel upon which his birth mother’s luggage might be orbiting. The early evening’s the worst time to meet someone who’s arriving at an airport. What’s worse, there are a hundred flights a day that fly New York to Minneapolis. Why’d she have to pick one that arrives at rush hour?

If he waits somewhere in the middle of the claim area he won’t have to travel far to meet her. She wouldn’t give him her flight number. Said she wanted to text him after she collected her bags and got all her things together. What kind of a woman does that? What kind of a woman is she? He shrugs off the question. How in the hell is he supposed to know the answer to that? He’s always tried not to think of the woman.

No telling what makes some adoptees curious about their true parents, or what makes others want to bury their heads in the sand. Andy’s always been a head in the sand type. Water under the bridge, right? He never dreamed someone would want to open old wounds, reach out to a child they’d thrown away like incriminating evidence. At age 21, when the representative at Life House Adoption Agency mailed him a questionnaire, asking among other things, if he would be open to meeting his birth parents if they wanted to contact him, he’d answered yes, since it was unlikely it would ever happen. He pictures the woman on the other end of the surprise phone call, brows downcast, a regretful grimace pasted on her aging lips as they form the words, “I’m sorry,” in silence. He

clears his expectations, even though something undeniable is floating in the heavy, over air-conditioned, nearly toxic Cinnabon atmosphere—the sweet scent of curiosity.

His adoptive parents weren't bad. They told him he was adopted early on, probably so that he wouldn't resent them. Charlie and Christine gave him everything he needed, all the comforts of home and three squares a day. But by the time he was a teenager they sort of gave up trying to communicate with him, at least in any meaningful way. Maybe it was just Andy being 15. All teens feel their parents are a big zero when it comes to emotional support. Still, it's not unheard of, parents being able to relate to their kids. He smirks. People are so fucking strange.

Andy shoots down an escalator, and walks through a turnstile that looks like it's just there for show. The claim area is a zoo. The first two offload carousels are teaming with harried travelers. He sifts his way around the people as if they are rocks protruding from a fast-moving stream. A young woman with sharp features steps into his way. She extends a hand toward him, her palm stopping just short of his chest. He jerks to a halt. She smiles.

"Excuse me, but do you know where I can get a cab?" she asks.

He stares at her business attire, smart blue suit, fake pocket square and matching neck scarf. Is this some sort of come on or could this well put together go-getter be that clueless? Andy laughs. "What? No Uber?"

Her smile fades. "I've got to expense it off, and it's easier . . ." She shakes her head. "Jesus. Whatever." She wheels her bag off to the side as if to go around him.

"Wait." He dashes back in front of her. "I was just joking."

She stops and stares up at him under a furrowed brow. "Yeah. That was really funny."

Maybe he's just blown recognizing an overture. He takes a deep breath. For sure—he's definitely blown his chance to meet an attractive woman. Andy smiles a sheepish smile. "You've got to go up to ticketing and cross the drive up lanes. Cab stand's on the other side of the street under the closest parking ramp."

"Thanks," she says, her dry tone accompanying an

exaggerated eye roll. Miss I've-got-all-my-shit-together removes her sunglasses from the top pocket of her suit coat and props them onto her nose. "You know, you'd be kind 'a cute if you had a personality," she tells him, wheels around him and continues down the concourse.

He can't think of anything to say. Why is it when someone shoots off a zinger like that you can't think of anything to fire back until ten minutes later? God, as if he doesn't have enough to think about, his subconscious loads on a few dozen what-ifs, just to clutter up his brain. He sighs, and then decides to walk on, dodging people, doing his best to put what was filling that woman's suit out of his mind. When he gets to a part of the claim area that's less hectic he finds a column to lean against and settles in for the wait.

He scans around, sizing up the maelstrom of travelers surrounding him, rates them on a scale of one to ten, ten being the most harried. A guy in a business suit running down an already moving walkway—ten, a bald guy walking by with a laptop under his arm and talking on his phone—seven, an old woman waddling with a walker toward the restroom—three, two teenage girls toting Coach knapsacks and drinking pink smoothies—one. Funny the differences by sex. Most of the men fall onto the high end of the spectrum, sevens to tens for sure, but the interesting ones are the women. They seem less frazzled, frustrated scowls on their faces, like the pressure of making a flight or passing through security has collected somewhere deep inside them and the only clue as to their real stress level is a crinkled forehead or the turned down corner of a lip (not to mention the occasional scathing put down.) Women are a curiosity, their motivations, how they think. His relationship track record is a testament to his complete befuddlement at female emotions. It's almost as if women's feelings are a giant planet that Andy has never visited.

Andy stands there in the baggage claim, the needling images microscopic organisms floating through his body's ecosystem, germs waiting for an opportunity to overwhelm their host. This part of the claim area is a musty mix of exhaust fumes and that smell a vacuum makes when it's overheating. Cars crowd around the broad glass-framed entrances as the drivers gawk and lean around, looking for

whomever it is they're picking up. At least most of them know who it is they're meeting. The rest carry little signs. That's an idea. Maybe he could have written one that said, "Adult abandoned 33 years ago seeks birth mother." But that would look more like a plea for help.

An alarm sounds and swirling yellow lights fill the space with even more tension, if that's possible. A new arrival. Suitcases begin falling from a chute marked '7'. They slide down a silvery bridge and crash into a rubber ledge, then they spin round and round waiting for someone to claim them. What's the emergency here? We need to sound an alarm every time a luggage cart gets emptied out? Doesn't this happen every minute of every day? Andy rolls his eyes, slumps his shoulders and lets the exasperation roll off them.

Dozens, maybe hundreds of bags fall one by one until the conveyor is trundling all the green or red or black items around in a lazy circle. And someone owns each and every piece of luggage on the carousel, a bag they've been looking for ever since they fell out of the sky. Almost like adoption. Andy imagines a whole shit load of suitcases that no one wants twirling around in circles. No one gives a damn about them. And then maybe someone decides they want to come pick one up. And maybe they want one really bad. So, the airline lets them grab a bag without knowing a damn thing about what's inside it. Boy, that really is just like adoption. He laughs to himself so no one around him thinks he's nuts.

Andy points his toe toward the carousel, stares down at the tip of his sneaker as bag after bag drifts by. He hasn't asked for any of this. One day this phone call comes out of nowhere and a month later here he is feeling queasy, loitering around in a claim area like a kid at twilight, waiting to be called home. Is he supposed to feel good about all this? Is he supposed to feel grateful to be alive, or wish he was dead, or worse yet, wish he had never been born?

Wishing he'd never been born—that's the way he's been feeling ever since he broke up with Sheila, or more accurately, since Sheila broke it off with him. Thirty-three years old and every single relationship he's had that's lasted more than six months has followed the same pattern. Three months of getting to know someone, and then after three more months

of waiting and wondering when the intimacy is going to lead to something next-level the woman gets impatient with him and finds an excuse to call it quits.

His phone buzzes. He reaches into his pocket and lights the screen. The text reads, “The end of carousel 17.” That’s all. No hello, no frills or heart emojis, and no picture. Perhaps that’s a plus. He can form an impression when he sees her in person. Number 17 is a couple hundred yards distant. Andy tucks his phone away and starts walking down the concourse.

About 10 or so yards from carousel 17 Andy spots a woman he thinks must be her. Somewhere in her fifties, worried look on her face, a black roller-at-the-bottom suitcase at her side, red obviously dyed hair, red lipstick and dark hazel-green eyes, eyes he sees in the mirror every morning when he brushes his teeth. She locks those eyes onto his and he imagines she is thinking the same thing he’s thinking—yes, we’re related. He continues walking until he’s a few feet away. He stops.

“You’re Trudy? Trudy Farris?” he asks as he looks down. He can’t bear staring into the woman’s eyes any longer.

“That’s right. And you’re Andy?” she says, her voice shaky.

“Um. Yeah.” He reaches out. “Andy Dirkson. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

She takes his hand, but doesn’t move it up and down. She just holds his big palm in hers. “You’re so tall,” she tells him.

“I’m six feet nothin’. I think maybe you’re just short.” Andy smiles. She smiles back at him, finally releasing his hand.

“Do you mind?” she asks, as he meets her gaze again. There are big watery drops in her eyes. They’re about to stream down her cheeks.

“What?”

“Can I hug you?” She reaches up to his shoulders.

Andy hesitates for a moment, but it’s almost reflex. “Sure,” he says, bending toward her enfolding arms. He can’t tell right away if he should wrap his hands around her back or not. What comes out is some weak grasping gesture that he doesn’t feel comfortable making in the middle of the baggage claim. She squeezes him. He looks around. No one cares that this woman has latched onto him. After an awkward half-minute they part again. She’s full on crying now. She reaches

into the handbag stowed atop her suitcase and pulls out a tissue.

“Are you all right?” he asks. A guy thing. He’s sure she’s just lost in the moment, but it’s something to say that shows he means well.

She dabs at her tears. “I’m fine. I just can’t believe it’s really you. After all this time.”

“Yeah.” He stares at the floor. “Me either, I guess.” The last part trails away in a sort of tired way and immediately he regrets his tone. “I mean, I’m glad you decided to contact me and all . . .”

The woman smiles. “But there’s a part of you that feels lost and out of place.”

“Sure. I think that’s what I’m getting at.” Andy sniffs in a big chunk of the stale air and lets it out, and then he hopes the gesture sounded like relief. Relief at her understanding.

She turns to her suitcase. “C’mon. Let’s get out of here. I’ve never liked airports, especially the baggage claim. Someone’s always losing something.”

“**S**o, where are we going for dinner?” she asks. Andy’s SUV roars south, away from the airport.

“There’s this place in Lakeville that’s nice, all different kinds of food, kind of a continental menu.”

Traffic’s subsided. Check-in at the hotel was painless. Trudy’s first suggestion after Andy had settled her into her room was someplace quiet where they could share a meal. Learning how to speak to one another without a ten-ton weight hanging over their heads is probably a good first step. Still, Andy finds himself struggling to keep the conversation pilot light lit.

“What kind of food did you grow up liking?” he asks.

“Oh. Well, my parents didn’t have much money. We used to think of a hamburger and fries as a special treat. Never went out to restaurants much.”

“Not even fast food?”

Trudy snorts. “Not until I was a teenager really. When I was 15, I got a job at a bakery working early mornings before school. That came with all the pastries you’d ever want.”

“Bet that was sweet.”

“Well, no. You’d be surprised how sick of baked goods you get when you know how they’re made.” She laughs. “To this day I still can’t bring myself to eat a glazed donut.” She fidgets in the passenger seat. “My whole life I’ve struggled to keep the weight off.”

Andy laughs too, more with her than about her comment. “You’re pretty thin. Don’t look like you’ve ever struggled with your . . .” He swallows, searching for a word that won’t detonate. “. . . size.”

Trudy laughs again. “You should have seen me when I was pregnant. I was a house.”

“Yeah, well, not much chance of that, was there?”

Trudy quiets. She reaches over and touches Andy’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to . . . can we talk about something else?”

But now Andy’s curiosity wins. “Why? Don’t you think you should maybe tell me a little bit about who I am? Where I came from? Isn’t that why you’re here in the first place?”

“Sure. In part.” Trudy takes back her hand.

Out of the corner of his eye Andy catches a short-lived grimace on her face.

She continues. “I’d be glad to tell you all about what happened, if that’s what you want to know?”

“Sure.” But he’s wondering now if he’s ready for a bunch of sordid details.

“I was 17, and Catholic,” she says, and her head bows as she stares into her lap. “Kind of a typical story really. The boy that got me pregnant wanted me to have an abortion, but I couldn’t do that. I mean, my parents wouldn’t have stood for it.”

Andy feels the heat gathering around his neck. He doesn’t want to be mad, but it’s his life they’re talking about. “So, you would’ve aborted me if your parents hadn’t made you go through with the pregnancy?”

“No.” Trudy stares out of the side window, wrings her hands and sighs. “I don’t know. No.”

Stillness takes over. Andy can’t think of anything to say that’ll clear the air. The questions flooding in on him are so plentiful he has trouble spitting any single one of them out.

Trudy breaks the silence. “We were stupid kids, Andy.

Don't you remember when you were 17? How curious you were about sex, and confused, and desperate to be free of your childhood, and how you thought you knew everything, when in reality you didn't know anything at all?"

She turns back to face him. He glances over as he's driving. "I guess." His chest feels like a slowly deflating balloon. The tension in his head eases. "I do. I remember being irresponsible, and stupid. But, I was never in the situation you were in, so I guess I'm not in any position to judge." He wonders whether all that came out correctly. "And of course I'm glad you made the decision you made." He laughs, but even he can hear that it sounds forced.

"I never meant to hurt you. I just knew I wasn't ready to raise a child. I wanted you. You should know, I wanted you. But, Andy, sometimes, when you're that young, you get cornered into feeling that you have no choices. I felt as though I was doing what was best, or at least, my mother convinced me that I was doing what was right. God. I'm still confused about that. It haunts me every day. What would my life have been like if I would have raised you? What would things be like if we had stayed together, if I'd have had kids?"

"You mean you never had another child?"

"No. Only you. I'm divorced. Married a man who didn't want children. Not much of a relationship really. It ended after 12 years. We didn't get along. I so wanted to be married I guess I convinced myself that I could overlook a lot of obvious warning signs. I wouldn't admit to myself things weren't right between us. It's a big problem I have, not facing the truth. Hell, I feel like I've been in denial my whole life. That's one of the biggest reasons I'm here, Andy. I'm done pretending my life is anything it's not." She takes in a deep breath and sighs again. "I'm not making any sense."

"No. Really. I understand, I mean, where you're coming from." All this honesty's made him nervous. His chest and underarms feel warm and damp. He gets this way when girlfriends force him to talk about his feelings, like even broaching the subject is going to get him physically ill. "I've never been able to make any of the relationships I've been in work. I'm always feeling like I need to do something, or be something that someone else wants me to be. But it's like

I never get to be who I really am.” Andy shrugs. “You know what I mean?”

“I do.”

A wave of relief washes over him. Drops of sweat dot his forehead, almost as if he’s had a fever for years that only now is breaking. “You think we can start over with this whole thing? Maybe get to know each other for real?”

Trudy breaks down crying. Her whole body jerks against her seat belt as she reaches to get a tissue from her handbag. Between sobs she manages, “Yes. Yes, I want that so desperately. You don’t know.”

Andy reaches over and places his right hand on his mother’s shoulder, squeezes just a little. “I’ve been trying my whole life to figure a lot of this stuff out—why I do the things I do, why I can’t seem to get close to anyone. You think maybe we’re the same?”

“Yes. I think maybe we are.” Trudy sniffs in and dabs at her eyes, trying not to muss her makeup.

For the first time today, Andy feels like smiling. He holds on a little tighter, rubs his mother’s shoulder. “So, we’ve got time to figure more of this shit out. That’s a good thing, right?”

The restaurant they’re headed for appears in the distance, on a service road just off the freeway. Andy exits. By the time they reach the parking lot Trudy is crying even harder. Her hair is a jumble of wavy curls and loose strands. She pats at them trying to get them to behave. “You gonna be able to get yourself together?” he asks.

“No,” she says.

“No?”

“I mean, you might not want to have dinner with me after I tell you what I came here to tell you.”

“Why?” Andy steers into a parking space and shuts off the engine. The whole tone of this encounter seems to have shifted in place, like some mini-earthquake that precedes the eruption of a volcano. He turns to his mother. “What is it you came here to tell me?”

“What you said, about being who we really are to each other. Well, I . . .”

Andy’s heart is pounding. “What? What’s wrong?”

“We’re not going to have any time to figure more of this out.”

Andy looks around, wondering whether to be embarrassed or put out. The parking lot is dark, and even though it's full of cars, no one's really around. Alone, with his new mother, or maybe this is his old mother, he sits, wondering how to get off this spinning carousel of emotions. The frustration that seemed to have melted away just a few minutes ago is back with a vengeance. "I don't know what you mean."

"I'm dying." Trudy glances up, a desperate look in her eyes. "The truth is, I'm not some good woman who came to find you out of a sense of responsibility, or even curiosity. I have breast cancer, late stage. I already beat it once, but this time it's back, and it's spread all over. And I don't have the strength to fight it again. I've got no one else to turn to. I have a few friends that I work with, but no family and no relatives, at least none that want anything to do with me. I've got nothing but a son I don't know, who I did nothing for. So, now I'm here trying to figure out if there's anyone in this world who gives a damn whether or not I leave it. Anyone who cares whether or not I was even here." She hangs her head, sobbing into her tissue, her shoulders bouncing up and down with each breath.

Andy unbuckles his seatbelt and turns to Trudy, embraces her, pulls her close so that her head can rest upon his shoulder. "Well then, maybe I shouldn't have said we have *time* to figure more of this out. Maybe I should've said we have a lifetime."

Contributor Notes

When **Nathan Buckingham** isn't dying from the Arizona heat or a severe lack of inspiration, he can usually be found scouring thrift stores for cheap fantasy novels, playing *The Last of Us*, or accidentally winning writing competitions. He won first place for fiction in his community college's short story contest, and his poetry has been published in *Passages*. You can find him on Instagram @theshapeofletters.



Erin M. Chavis lives in Chicago. She has received two honorable mentions in the Writer's Digest Popular Fiction Awards — for Romance in 2015 and Horror in 2018.



Edward DeFranco lives with his wife in Troutdale Oregon. He has a BA and an MA. His fiction has appeared in *Italian Americana*, *Oracle*, *VIA*, and in an anthology.



Noreen Graf teaches Rehabilitation Counseling at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, where she researches the impacts of trauma and disability. Her fiction has appeared in *Dirty Chai* and *Wingless Dreamers*. She has recently completed her third novel.



David Grubb is a retired Coast Guard Chief Warrant Officer who recently earned his MFA. He's been a creative writer his entire life, yet never focused on it because of career and family. He's changing that part of his life one day at a time and loving every minute of it. He also immensely enjoys being a stay-at-home dad, more or less.



Margaret Hrencher has received recognition in regional writing conferences, earning the top honor for her speculative fiction novel, *Whereabouts Known*, in 2015. She lives in Stillwater, Oklahoma, with her husband, Joe.



Gregory Jeffers stories have appeared in *Chantwood*, *Suisun Valley Review*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *Corvus Review*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Silver Blade Magazine*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly* and the anthologies *Hard Boiled*, *Outposts of Beyond* and *If This Goes On*. “The Loon” won an honorable mention in *Glimmer Train’s* 2015 Very Short Fiction Competition. Mr. Jeffers lives and writes in the Adirondack Mountains and on the island of Vieques.



Bill Pippin was nominated for a 2019 Pushcart Prize. His short story “Century” won first prize in the Summer 2014 edition of *Sixfold*. His stories have appeared in several anthologies, also *The MacGuffin*, *Black Fox*, *Sixfold*, *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, and elsewhere. His nonfiction has been published in *Newsweek*, *Field & Stream*, *Writer’s Digest*, *Philadelphia Magazine*, and many other publications. He lives in New Mexico with his wife Zona.



M.J. Schmid lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her dog Jack. She has forthcoming publications in *Dreamers Magazine* and *Coffin Bell Journal*.



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