SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2021

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Michael Kozart

Polaris

I rise at four a.m. and pull on fishing trousers. So does Pai. I tell him to return to bed, I'll be home in the afternoon, soon enough. He still messes with his trousers, muck boots, Sou'wester hat—everything he needs at sea. I fix him a bowl of cereal with a Seroquel tablet. By the time I'm ready to leave, he's sleepy again, crawling into bed, listening to the marine weather on a portable radio that calls out swells and gusts in a computerized, monotone voice. I imagine when he finally sleeps, he'll dream about the *MarElie*. He'll be in the wheelhouse, Donny and I in the pit, reeling in, laughing our heads off. Truth is, I have no idea if he dreams or even remembers that one of his two sons is dead.

I kiss him goodbye. We'll eat a nice dinner.

He grabs my hand and starts a prayer, the one his own father used to say in Portuguese: *The sea is our mother—*

—No, Pai. We wait for dinner.

July is hard. Your body doesn't expect chill, but fog gusts are whipping the trees, stinging my face like ocean spray. I wish the sea was someone else's problem.

I drive to the marina.

Elie, my sister, says we should scrap the boat. Junkyards by the bay are full of trollers, all on their sides. No one's making money. Wild king once swam in schools a million strong, but now they've been fished off, poisoned, breeding grounds destroyed. Everyone's eating musty fish farmed in Chile or Nevada—franken-salmon. She says to put Pai in a nursing home. I should head back to school, learn something new. She'll cover the tuition. But you don't just wake up and be someone else. I fish salmon. She thinks I'm a nuclear physicist.

Jonathan, her fiancée, will be coming on board today. He offered to help after they heard I let my deckie go. It's probably a one off. Jonathan manages high-tech websites, earns major money. He'll be more trouble than he's worth, but my sister says he used to line fish with his dad, whatever

that means. I'll take him out for a day. Besides, even with a seasoned deckie you can't break even when there's no fish to be had.

The marina parking lot is nearly empty. There are a few rusty trucks, and then there's Jonathan's Mini Cooper, shiny red and white, British flag on top. I hear the pounding bass of his stereo as I drive up. He sends me songs from time to time, bands I've never heard of. Electronic dance music. He rolls down the window as I come over, hands me a doobie.

I take a drag. You up for this? I ask, sucking in, sounding a bit like Mickey Mouse.

He tells me to hop in. There's a basket of muffins on the front seat, Elie's gift. He pours coffee from a thermos—stainless-steel, top of the line. No need to suffer, he says, right?

I scarf down three muffins. The coffee burns my throat. Through the windshield, I see boats bucking in the sheltered cove of the marina. I heard the report on Pai's radio. Fourteen-foot swells, plus wind waves nine to ten feet. We shouldn't put out. I pour myself another cup.

Jonathan's in a pink shirt, black jeans, brown shoes with pointed tips—disco wear, not fishing gear.

Leave the threads behind, I say. There's gear on board.

Seriously?

I give him a look.

Yes captain, he salutes, stripping down to long johns.

We run to the slip.

Usually, there are crews everywhere, loading ice, fueling, setting hooks and lures, but the only boat shoving out—besides us—is an eighty-foot, steel-hulled giant. Smaller boats are staying in on account of the sea. I turn to Jonathan before we hop on the *MarElie*, which is forty feet, solid wood. I tell him this day's going to be rough.

It's nothing, he says. I make bigger waves with a kickboard.

The weed's still strong: I can't stop laughing. From a hamper in the wheelhouse, I draw out a wool sweater, work pants, yellow fishing bib, boots, gloves. No one's worn this stuff in years. I think it all belonged to Donny.

Jonathan suits up.

I show him the pit. Nothing's complicated. The gurdy winches have three gears—back, forward, pause. I show how

to hook leaders to the main, how to hand-line the leader, how to spike or gaff the fish above the gill. Then I bring out the steel bat. Swatting the air, I say, You strike between the eyes. If the eyes cloud, the fish is dead. End of story.

Jonathan doesn't flinch.

I start to describe gut and gill, but that's when he turns gray. I'll hold the lesson until we're out at sea with a real fish. I think he's going to puke. I've seen the look.

I'm not a pussy, you know, he says, jabbing me in the ribs.

Hell you're not.

For a moment, we play punch, duck and dodge. I think, no more weed. It's hard enough rolling on the sea, sober. We fuel up, load ice, head into the channel.

It's mostly smooth motoring to the breakwater. Jonathan sits on a hatch, playing with chipped ice. I stand in the wheelhouse. How 'bout the Beastie Boys, he asks. Cool, eh?

Pretty cool. I can only name one song, though. *Brass Monkey*. I put on the weather channel, wondering if Pai's listening too. The robot voice issues a small-craft warning.

Jonathan says, Your sister and I have been thinking—

I knew there was a catch. He wasn't here to just fish. Elie must have coached him, word for word. The life speech. But they care. That's the point. I'm not resentful.

—that we want to make a sizable investment in your future.

I'm only half listening now. My eye's drawn to froth spouting beyond the breakwater. It's been years since water scared me.

Seriously, he says. Elie says you were accepted at Berkeley. We'll help you pay for it.

Sure, I think, two years ago I was accepted. Now I'm here, rolling.

She says you were planning to study nuclear physics.

I correct him: astrophysics. I'm not interested in blowing things up. I used to stargaze. I read about celestial navigation, named my dog Sagan, bought my first telescope with my confirmation money. It seems pointless now. I tell him to work the starboard gurdy. That was Donny's station. I was port. Pai had the wheelhouse—all of us buzzed on coffee and whiskey with molasses thrown in.

We churn through the harbor.

Know how I got my start? Jonathan asks. Porn. Lesbian,

shemale, straight, fetish. I wrote for dozens of magazines. It paid my way through college. Why was I so good? Guess. C'mon.

I won't.

He enters the wheelhouse. Research, he says, mussing my hair, like in *The Three Stooges*.

I hand him the wheel. See those two buoys? I point to the opening through the breakwater. Steer right between them.

I head aft to check the lines, remembering days when we scored three thousand pounds. Now we're lucky to hook a hundred. We pass the buoys. The bay is agitated. I take the wheel and navigate out to sea. The closer we get, the more the water heaves.

Elie's kinda concerned, Jonathan says. She's talking about how you're in that old house with your pop. We can help. Move to the city. Live nearby.

Elie was seventeen when she ran off, two years after Donny's death. The more Pai refused to talk about what happened, the more she blamed him. I didn't hear from her for nearly four years. She called me the night of my high-school graduation but wouldn't talk to Pai, and as far as I know they haven't talked since she left—though she stays in touch with me now. Pai says she'll return home any moment. He said the same about Donny. After the funeral, the flowers, the inquest, it was always *Let's see what Donny thinks*, like my brother was about to come through the door, suspender straps down, ready to rip the cereal box from my hands.

I light a cigarette and offer the pack to Jonathan.

Unfiltered Camels, he says. Going to an early grave, Gale? I've got one word for you: vape.

The radio's still turned to the NOAA weather station, the flat voice saying what we already know: the sea's angry. I switch to a music station. It's Tom Jones, then the Bee Gees.

Jonathan leans over the gunwale, olive green.

You okay? I ask, handing him a bottle of Dramamine. Music that bad?

We pass Bodega Head, with the lighthouse and foghorn. Jonathan's words rattle in my head: *early grave*.

He looks up, puke dripping down his shirt. Don't laugh, he says. Don't fucking laugh.

I laugh anyway.

The swells are deep as we reach the ocean. I tack as best I can, but the *MarElie*'s struggling. I lock the wheel and rush aft to lower the outriggers, unspool main lines, drop cannonball weights. We lay in six lines and a hundred and twenty hooks. I return to the wheelhouse and slow the boat to a trolling speed.

Jonathan's looking better. Dramamine works fast. He takes pictures on his iPhone. Elie's not going to believe this shit, he says.

Oh, she will.

The sun's rising higher, the air warming. Maybe we'll hit a school. Six to seven dollars a pound, ten pounds per fish, say two hundred fish, that's fourteen thousand bucks. I've always been good with numbers: algebra, calculus—you name it. I tell Jonathan to head to the pit. We're about to reel in.

He's blowing perfect smoke rings from a cigarette, no sign of seasickness. He says that Elie contacted a realtor. From the sale of the old house, we could afford to send Pai to a nursing home. I'd have enough left for a down payment on a condo. He and Elie will help with the mortgage. He tells me about vacant units in their building.

I visited their place once—downtown San Francisco, thirty-third floor, fifth tallest building in the city. Views of the bay, Oakland, Mount Diablo. There was an oriental carpet and a lap dog that nibbled my socks. Bose stereo system. Leather furniture. I didn't want to guess what it all cost, but Elie caught my look. Anything's possible, she said, wide eyed: You're twenty-one. There was a photo of Donny and me on the wall, when I was six.

Gulls now hover above the boat. I'm not superstitious, but they're a sign we're about to strike a school. I tell Jonathan to watch. I start reeling in.

Sure enough, there's a thirty-inch salmon on the first hook. With one arm, I gaff and swing it onto the cutting table, and with the other I unlatch the leader and pause the gurdy. I strike with a single blow, slice off the head while the heart still pumps, cut lengthwise and scrape out the guts, then lay the pink flesh on ice. We handle one fish at a time, I say. The flesh doesn't have blood vessels because the blood drains,

and they're no bruises because the fish dies before flapping. It's what you'd call restaurant grade.

Jonathan's taking pictures the whole time, saying, You fucking rock, man. He starts his own gurdy, unlatching empty leaders, hanging lures and spinners on the stern bar. Oh daddy, he yells, we got one.

I see his first fish spiraling to the hull. Before he can gaff it, a wave hits broadside and the *MarElie* pitches hard. Jonathan's legs sweep out. He manages to hold onto the cutting bench, shrugging off the near fall with a laugh.

I rush to his side and pause the gurdy before it grinds up the leader and the fish. Never lose sight of your line, bro, I snap, a bit too sharp.

Jonathan spikes the fish in the belly, then strikes it five times, no aim at all. The fish is a bloody mess and we have to waste it.

Don't worry, I say. It took me years to get things right. I notice swells peak and fold, crosschecked by steep wind waves.

Jonathan's hanging over the side, enjoying the ride like a roller coaster.

My chest is tight as it all flashes back—nine years ago. I shake my head, but the movie won't stop. I was twelve at the time.

I'd just left the pit to grab my lunchbox. The boat heaved on a rogue wave, the starboard rail dipping water. I looked back and Donny was gone. I kept screaming, *Donny's gone*, like a siren. Pai rushed back. He shot side to side, looking for any sign in the water. He cut the engine and ran aft, our lines still out and running. There was no body, no yellow bib, nothing—just boiling surf. He radioed the Coast Guard and soon helicopters flew above. My brother was never found. They suspended our fishing license during the inquest, but we were cleared. No citation. The authorities wanted to know if I was a deckie—I should have been in school—but I said no: we were fishing recreationally, on the family boat. After that, Pai hired two deckies and kept me in school till I was old enough to work legally.

I never asked why we didn't swing around. I knew what Pai would have said: *Donny's boots filled up and he sank*

like lead. No reason to turn hard, which would have meant wasting the lines. We reeled in, went home.

No doctor ever said Pai's dementia happened because of Donny, but I knew his death ate at his brain, like a seaworm. Maybe if we'd just circled back, even if the odds were against Donny making it, Pai could have saved himself, cleared his mind of commotion, guilt, whatever you want to call it. You never know what's possible unless you try. But Pai lived by the odds. He knew the rules of the sea better than anyone, the sharpest captain in the fleet. Everyone turned to him for help. If there was a school to be found, he found it, just like his father who used to pole-fish albacore in the Azores, and like his father's father who netted sardines in Portugal. What they all knew was a blessing and a curse. The sea gives and takes. You carry on.

After Donny died, it all went to hell. The doctors called it vascular dementia, early onset. By the time I graduated high school, Pai was climbing onto other boats, thinking the crews were all his sons.

From the wheelhouse, I now see the bow plunging beneath swells. We're taking on water, more than we should. The bilge will fail. I switch the radio back to NOAA. There's an order for small craft to head home. No exceptions. Jonathan, I yell, throwing him a life jacket and safety rope: button up, strap in. We're headed back.

He doesn't know what to do with the rope and his life jacket's unbuttoned. I'm an idiot for not training him, a captain's responsibility, but with Pai we never wore life vests either.

Jonathan continues to reel in.

Seriously man, I yell, strap yourself down.

He shouts, We got another, oh baby. He leans over to gaff the fish, and that's when it hits.

A monster swell slams portside. The boat nearly keels. Jonathan goes over without a sound. I see everything, each detail, as if in slow motion.

Ten feet out, Jonathan bobbles in the foam, life jacket floating beyond reach. Can you swim? I shout. The wind blows my words back.

The water's cold. Muscles freeze. Hypothermia sets in.

I fling out a life saver, but it falls short.

Jonathan looks at me, shame on his face, as if he should have known better.

I run to the wheelhouse and find wire cutters. Back in the pit, I cut all six gurdy lines. Lures, spinners, weights, main lines—everything sinks. I throttle open, turning the boat as sharp as she'll go. The *MarElie* lunges, punished by waves. I swing away from Jonathan, because if I swing in, the waves could fling the boat over him. I navigate as close as I can, lock the wheel, then perch on the bow. I see a flash of yellow fishing bib. The current's drawing him away. I think about his boots filling up, then I tell myself to shut up. There are no odds—just what I need to do.

I loop rope around my waist, tie it to the deck, shed shoes and sweater, and dive. The cold shocks my chest. I don't panic. I swim.

Jonathan's slapping water with both arms.

Grab me, I yell.

He reaches out and clutches my shirt, then clings to my back.

I pull on the rope, drawing us back to the *MarElie*. Somehow, we make it to the hull. Hang on, I say.

With the deck five feet above and no ladders or handles, climbing onboard seems impossible. We're battered against the boat. With each swell, the *MarElie* rolls, the deck dipping down, a bit closer to reach. With one extra-low dip, I loop my arms over the gunwale. As the boat rights, then shifts opposite, we're hoisted up. My arms feel like they're about to be pulled from their sockets, but I don't let go.

We land in the pit, Jonathan still clinging to my back. I turn to him. I ask if he's okay.

He fumbles with his sweater, babbling.

I drag him to the wheelhouse, strip off wet clothes, pull out a thermal blanket, and plug in an electric heater. He's too cold to shiver.

Sailing with the wind, we make record time back to port. The movie's playing again. There's Pai navigating, looking straight ahead, his face chiseled granite—mine, a wet sponge. It's just the two of us—Pai and me. *Donny's gone.*

No, this is different.

I look down at Jonathan, bundled up. We lost the rigging, and we have one fish to show for our day, but no one died. The odds don't matter. All I know is that it had to be. I feel high and it's not the weed. I'm soaked and freezing, but I savor the salt on my lips. My hands embrace the wheel.

At the wharf, Jonathan leans on me. We disembark. He crawls into my truck. I run the heater full blast. He's in no condition to drive back to the city. At least he's shivering, his body fighting hypothermia. I retrieve the salmon from the hold, and we drive home.

Jonathan mumbles, Sorry man, sorry.

Shush, I say, don't talk. Want me to sing *Brass Monkey*?

His smile is shaky, a little crooked, but it's a smile.

We arrive. Pai's out front, smoking, watering a dead bush in a bathrobe, bare feet. All I can think about is getting Jonathan inside, into a warm bath. I help him from the truck, still wrapped in the blanket.

Pai calls out, Donny!

Jonathan turns around. Yes, sir.

Did you boys get milk?

Inside, I draw the bath. Jonathan sits on the toilet, hunched over, still shivering. Warm mist fills the bathroom. I ask him why he said yes to Pai just now.

I thought he called out Jonny. That's what my dad used to call me. Jonny.

Clean the wax out, I say, gently boxing his ear. He sinks into the bath. I change into fresh clothes and head to the kitchen. Pai's there, picking lint off his robe. I offer him tea and crackers.

He says, Donny's teacher called: he flunked everything. *Everything*. Unless he gets his grades up, he's grounded.

Sure, Pai.

It's pointless to correct him. I leave to bring tea to Jonathan. He's still in the bath, leaning back against the tiles, eyes closed.

You okay? I ask, helping him from the water. Wrapped in towels, I show him Donny's room. On the nightstand, there's an old Sports Illustrated, bathing-suit edition, circa 2005. On the wall, a team photo of the San Francisco Giants, the year they won the West—2003.

Can you call Elie? Jonathan asks. I lost my phone. Tell her everything's okay. He paws into bed and drinks tea with little sips. I think he's still in shock.

I return to the kitchen. Pai asks about dinner. I offer him more crackers, then cut fat filets from the salmon, preparing them for the oven with potatoes. Once everything's in, I walk outside and phone my sister.

Elie answers immediately, worried she hadn't heard from us.

I explain that Jonathan lost his phone and that he became Donny, sort of.

Come again?

Jonny-Donny. Pai thinks Jonathan's Donny. And now he's in Donny's bed, sleeping like a baby. They don't look alike, but—

—Cut the crap.

I tell Elie what happened at sea. She's silent. Everything's fine, I say. Nothing bad happened.

No, she says. It's not fine. The line clicks dead.

I return inside to the aroma of baking food. I fetch Pai's portable radio and plug it into a kitchen socket. We listen to classical music while the food cooks. I make Pai more tea and slip in a Seroquel in case he agitates. I want to tell him about the day. I could lie or say nothing, but I've told Elie. He needs to hear too. Maybe they'll have something to talk about.

Pai looks up. How many? he asks. No matter how confused, he always remembers to ask the question.

One.

You can't catch *one*, boy.

We caught one, Pai.

I explain the incident about cutting the lines to avoid tangling up the screw when we swung around. We lost the rigging, but better that than the entire boat. Better that than losing Donny. The name rolls off my lips without me realizing it.

Pai grabs my arm. I want to see Donny, now.

No, it's not Donny. I meant Jonathan.

I shouldn't have sent you boys out. You're too young.

We're fine, Pai. I meant Jonathan, that's all.

He starts to cry. Maybe it's best for him to stay confused.

Jonathan enters the kitchen in Donny's 49er sweatshirt and baggy muscle pants. He sees Pai in tears. What's going on? he asks.

Donny, come, sit, Pai says. He pats the chair to his right. And you, Gale, sit, he pats to the left.

Jonathan holds up his hands and I shrug my shoulders.

We take our seats, starboard and port.

Pai puts his arms around both of us. Where's Elie? he asks. We need her too.

My heart's beating fast. I want to whisper to Jonathan, *Go with the flow—be Donny.*

We all sit, listening to music.

I hear a car pull up, then footsteps outside. There's a knock. I go to the door. Elie glares at me. Where the hell's Jonathan? She asks.

In the kitchen. It's helping.

What's helping?

I look her in the eyes. Pai believing Donny's here, I say. You know how Pai gets. I think to myself, maybe she doesn't. The pacing and raging when the sun sets, the sleeplessness at night, mumbling in Portuguese, mixing nightcaps with milk and ketchup. She hasn't seen him for seven years.

Donny's dead, Elie says, or maybe you can't talk. No one talks, right? She pushes past me and goes to the kitchen. I follow.

Pai's eyes light up.

Hello, she says to Pai, casually, as though they just talked yesterday. And then to Jonathan, We're leaving, unless you want to die a real death.

Pai waves to a vacant spot at the table.

Elie shakes her head. No way. We're not staying.

I pull out the fish and potatoes.

Pai orders us to all hold hands.

Elie turns to Jonathan and says, You almost drowned. Her voice quivers. She's also looking at the food.

Jonathan winks at me. I didn't come close. Just a dip. Ask Gale. He had things under control.

Your sister's got boy problems, Pai chuckles, glancing at Jonathan, then at me.

Elie throws up her hands. Am I going crazy? Is this the

Twilight Zone?

Jonathan says, I'm not leaving till I taste today's catch. Salmon, sushi grade. He rubs his hands. Besides, he side-eyes me, Gale's got an announcement.

What? I ask.

Pai starts the blessing before the meal: *The sea is our mother—*. He looks around the table, finger raised like a baton.

I quickly say, *Her depths guard the souls of those who shan't return. Amen.* We start eating. What announcement? I repeat, mouth full.

That you're headed to college, Jonathan smiles. He turns to Elie. Did you know Gale's studying astrophysics, not nuclear physics? We got it wrong.

Pai raises his eyebrows. Gale, where's that thing you used to look at the stars?

I'm surprised Pai remembers my little telescope. I haven't used it since before Donny died. Sometimes the dementia parts, like a fading storm, and there's clear blue sky—what the doctors call a lucid interval.

Telescope's in the closet, Pai, I say.

Get it the hell out. Why the closet?

Elie nibbles the salmon. Not bad, she murmurs, carving off a bigger bite. Glancing at Pai, she says, Gale will need to live closer to Berkeley. We thought, near us, in the city.

Pai nods, chewing.

I look down at my plate and say, I don't know if I can still get in. They accepted me a couple years ago. I'll have to reapply.

You'll get in, Elie wipes her mouth. Lord knows where you got your brain. And don't worry about tuition. We have that covered.

I have it covered, Pai interjects.

We all stop eating. The room's quiet, except for the radio.

Pai points at Jonathan, then at me. I raised fishermen. And what? They come back with one fish. One keeps falling in, the other looks at stars. We'll sell the *MarElie*. That's that.

Elie leans over the table, eyebrows raised. Pai, you serious?

Pai raises a glass. Where's the wine? Gale, you forgot the goddamn wine.

I pour glasses. We continue eating. Pai's like a different

person, his face bright, his eyes sharp. I know this can't be an effect of the Seroquel or the wine. And it's more than a lucid interval. Something has taken his brain elsewhere, away from the seaworm. It's as if he's in a parallel universe. Anything's possible. Donny's back. We're all together, eating.

After dinner, Jonathan and Elie clean up. Pai continues drinking. I should take the wine but he's at peace. Most days, by this time, he'd be yelling at faces outside the window. I rummage for my telescope, which I purchased in '08 through mail order from the Smithsonian Institution.

It's still in the original box.

I set it up in the front yard. Polaris is easy to locate in the twilight sky, the North Star, used by sailors for centuries to navigate the open sea.

Pai stumbles out of the house, pees on the dead bush, then heads my way. I tell him to look.

He peers into the telescope, saying, You got it right, son. He starts to shiver. I lead him back inside.

Darkness settles. Crickets chatter. Fog descends.

Stay here tonight, I say to Elie and Jonathan. Let's give Pai one night, all of us together, even if it's a dream.

She hugs me. Just so you know, she whispers, Jonathan is not Donny.

But for one night. All of us under one roof.

Pai climbs into bed. I kiss him. He grabs my arm. Tell Donny we'll buy new lines in the morning, head to Drake's Bay, anchor overnight.

Sleep tight, I say. I plug in his radio and turn it back to the NOAA channel. The robot voice now says the sea's calm.

We all settle in our rooms.

I picture peaceful water, small waves lapping our hull, the *MarElie* sailing proud. I fall sound asleep.

In the morning, I rise to make breakfast. It's ten. We've slept in. I look outside. The truck's not there. I nudge Elie and Jonathan awake. Pai's nowhere to be found.

Elie calls the police to report a missing person.

I have a hunch.

We drive to the marina in Elie's car, and sure enough, my truck's parked and the *MarElie*'s gone. At least Jonathan's

Mini Cooper is where we left it.

The water's still, the breeze easterly. There was enough fuel in the boat to travel a hundred miles.

We call the Coast Guard.

After about an hour word arrives that the *MarElie*'s been located a few miles off coast, adrift and quiet. No one aboard.

We sit quietly in Elie's car.

Something tells me that Pai slipped over the side, perhaps to run a final errand: retrieve our sunken lines. Or maybe it was his way to make the night last, diving into the darkness. Or to swim with the last great school of wild king. Either way, he didn't fall in by accident. I'm sure of it.

I try not to think about the sea filling his lungs. I try not to think about anything. I want to float adrift, too.

We walk to the slip as if there might be some remnant of Pai, something to remember him by—a dropped Kleenex, coin, cigarette butt. But there's nothing—just a clean dock, empty berth, smooth water.

Elie invites me to stay with them. You should not be alone, she says. Not after this. Her arm sweeps out to sea.

I'm expected home. Pai needs breakfast and maybe another Seroquel to catch up on all the missed sleep. I check myself.

My father's gone.

Yes, I say, embracing them. Pai would have wanted it this way—all of us, together.

Emily Hancock

Catching Tadpoles

I never did read that book of Rilke that you gave me, except for the first two poems. I didn't much like the first one, but the second one, I did. The one about moving in widening circles around God and the primordial tower. "I may not complete this last one / but I give myself to it." I like that very much. I should have kept reading. That book was a gift you gave me for Mother's Day last spring, and I should have honored it better than I did. I might even have enjoyed it. We all have our failures. That is good to remember. Still.

If it is any consolation, I keep the book on my desk, so I see it every day. And I think to myself, This weekend, this weekend I'll begin. But I never do. Maybe someday. Anyways, it reminds me of you each time I see it because of course it does. Who else in this house would read German poetry from a book called *Love Poems to God* but you? Who else ever lived in this house with me but you.

I do get lonely. I try not to worry so much about it. I certainly don't want to burden you with it. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything, but it's true, and I know I should be more honest with you.

If you still lived here you would tell me to read that book, and maybe I would, then. And when I finished you would ask me which poem was my favorite, and I would sit with the question for a moment, partly thinking of my own answer, but really just waiting for yours. And you would tell me, and you would have it memorized so when you spoke it, it wasn't Rilke's but yours, changed somewhere in your body, and you would tell me what it means, then what it means to you, and that would be more sacred to me than any poem in that book, or any other book I could ever read. If you still lived here, I could never be lonely.

I work mostly from home now. It's easier to call most of my patients and the meetings were all conference calls anyway. It's not that I have become agoraphobic in my loneliness, it's just easier, really. And I still leave the house to see some folks,

so don't worry over me too much.

There's this man up in Dover I see on Thursday afternoons—you'd like him. His name is Cillian McGrath, and you won't believe it, but he's Irish. He used to be a priest, until he met his wife.

We never went to church, did we. I've never thought to ask you if you regret that. I think I do. Not out of any particular love for the religious tradition, but because I have come to understand that a life is richer when lived with some kind of belief in mind. So much of life is lost when we think it has no meaning.

Mr. McGrath is in his nineties now. He has lung cancer, and so is shackled to an oxygen tank. It has become too difficult now for him to leave the house, but he seems nonetheless happy to still be alive. I admire people like that. In this line of work you meet so many people who, when faced with the question of mortality, simply and catastrophically crumble. They close themselves off from life, all while it waits like a dog, old and loyal, to be loved for one final second. And seeing that the door will not open, it grows tired of waiting and is gone. And then what. So much of life is lost when we think it has no meaning.

But Mr. McGrath is not like most hospice patients I have met, though I wouldn't blame him if he were. To be put on hospice is to be given an expiration date, give or take a month or two. It is depressing. And yet I do not think Mr. McGrath is depressed.

Just today I paid him a visit and when I walked upstairs I saw him through the open doorway, sitting upright in his bed, hands folded in his lap. The white linen curtains had been pulled away, the window opened. The forest, much older than him, rustled in the breeze of late spring, blossomed with birdsong. And that room smelled not like a hospital or a man on his deathbed but like pollen and pine and the blessed muddy soil at least freed from the snowdrifts and warming in the sunlight. He must have been paying a very careful kind of attention because he did not hear my footsteps on the old wooden floorboards, or my knocking on the doorframe, or even his own name, the first time I called it. I thought I might be interrupting a rare peace I wish I knew better, and so was

silent and nearly left. Then he said, Robin, how good to see you. Like always.

There is an old green armchair his family keeps at the foot of his bed, partly so when I speak to him we might look each other in the eye, and partly so his son or daughter might keep vigil over him while he sleeps. It is always looming, the inevitable, unknowable end. I sat, he watched. We tried to forget.

"How are you today, Mr. McGrath?" I asked him.

He smiled at the window, closed his eyes against the warmth of the sunlight on his face. A breeze built, then broke. Faintly I heard the wind chimes on the front porch, humming their joy. The geese flew overhead, calling out in agreement. And that forest, so green and alive, whispering.

"It is a beautiful day, Robin. A beautiful day."

A pause. He watched me, watching him. He hadn't really answered and he knew it, and he knew I would wait until he did.

"I am alive, and happy for it," he said. "I am lucky to see the days that I do, and today is a beautiful day."

I have had this job for nearly twenty years and yet I wonder sometimes if I was ever any good at it. So often I have no idea what questions to ask that man. It's like trying to teach a fish how to swim. I don't think there is a single thing I could say that could make the end of his long and graceful life any easier. He already knows.

He smiled. "There is no need. Sit with me and listen. I would enjoy your company."

So we sat, and we listened.

"Do you hear it?" he asked.

I heard the trees, the leaf bodies moving against each other. I heard that ancient forest whispering, and listened.

Hush. Be still. I am working.

You remember your grandmother. Of course you do. She was your beloved just as much as she was mine.

You remember driving here, to Vermont, for the summer. When you were little, and wild, and your grandmother not yet the still and painful body she died in.

You remember the hikes we took, the three of us, through

the mountain forest. The plastic bag of wooden eyes, noses, mouths. The trees, watching.

You would laugh like it was the most wonderful thing in the world. A wooden face on a tree. It always seemed to me that the woods are more alive than we give them credit for, and now here was the mouth, the nose, the eyes, proving it. Here is a soul like mine. I laughed. You must have felt it too.

Those trees still have their faces. You'd be happy, seeing it. They are slightly warped by time but who among us cannot say the same of themselves? What do those trees say to each other about us? About our fast and brief lives? You would have a good answer.

The first time I met Mr. McGrath, I pointed to a painting that hung above his bed and told him you would love it. And you would. I find it odd, but you would like it. It's this old and yellowed screenprinting of a farmhouse, three women working in the yard. One in the garden, one with the chickens, one running between the others, or to someplace else entirely. You would say it reminds you of us—you, me, and your grandmother. And I can see it, though we never did have any chickens.

I thought nothing of it when I said it, but I should have, because it sounded so much like asking. And then he was still a stranger who owed me nothing, certainly not a gift for my daughter. But he nodded earnestly, said, Really? Do you think so? and began to offer it up like food into the hands of the hungry. So I said No, no, and Oh, I couldn't possibly, and after a while he conceded, then laughed.

"You'll have to commend your daughter on her taste in artwork. My wife loved that painting, God bless her, absolutely loved it, but I can't get either of my children to take it home. And even if I could it'd just waste away in some basement or other. I can't bear the thought. It needs a home, someone to love it."

"Don't we all," I said.

"Don't we all. Indeed."

It was snowing that day, heavy, wet snow that lands and does not let go. The snowflakes weren't even snowflakes, not really, but huddled masses, a hundred little bodies holding

onto each other, braced against the fall. He watched. Then he asked for your name, and I told him. Mary. He liked that. Then he asked me about you. What's Mary like? And I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

To be fair, I've always found it difficult to talk about you. For a while it was because I hated those mothers who bragged and bragged and bragged about their children, and because I realized that that was all I could ever do. And then once I was alone I couldn't talk about you without remembering my own loneliness. The words I'd used to make you up now outlined the body of my loss, incapacitating me in a way for which I could never possibly be prepared. I was embarrassed and ashamed, and Mr. McGrath just looked at me with those kind, kind eyes, the ones that already knew, that had already forgiven. He smiled, and understood, and told me about his day.

You wouldn't remember, but when you were two, you had an infection in your kidney so bad you were in the hospital for a week and a half. I thought you were going to die. It's a terrible thing to say, and an even worse thing to believe. Mothers aren't supposed to give up on their babies; they are meant to hope against hope, believe against belief, and I could not. I saw those doctors, their worried faces, and you, your small body filled with tubes and wires. And I was helpless. That is the only time I ever asked God for anything. I went to that hospital chapel, that room made for begging. I knelt before the altar. I bowed my head. And I begged.

At night I would crawl into your hospital bed and hold you in your sleep, touching your hair, your face, your hands. Remembering all of you. And when your grandmother found me in the morning, she would be my mother, too. She would guide me out of bed, make me eat, bathe, sleep. Hold me while I wept. Walk with me to the chapel. Kneel. Bow. Beg.

I never told you how grateful I am to have had you with me when she died. Of course I didn't. People, myself included, spend so much time thinking of grief as a small and ugly stranger. Something to talk over and around, but never to know, and certainly never to love. I have always had my failures with that kind of strength, though, so I'm sure you

knew more than I ever told you.

You were sixteen then. So you remember those days spent sorting, pruning, disposing. You remember the boxes upon boxes of photographs. The picture of your grandmother on her fortieth birthday, her right arm raised, hand in her hair. You were holding it like it was made of glass, staring like eventually it might move. You handed it to me, carefully.

"Whenever I knew her she was my grandmother," you said. "But I look at that and I see your mother. She was your mom. I'm sorry I never thought of it before."

It made me cry, but I was glad you said it. I think I got so used to being your mother that I forgot how to have one of my own. I forgot the tenderness of being somebody's baby. It might have taken me a decade to realize it on my own and by then the grief would have gone and I would just be the mangled remains of a body healed wrong, beyond comfort, or solace. You put your arms around me and did not let go.

I wish we could have kept more of her things. Her clothes, her magazines, her lavender perfume, which somehow smelled less like lavender and more like cigarettes. We used to complain about it, that awful smoke smell. How it would wake us up in the middle of those summer nights when she hobbled to the bathroom, removed her cannula, and lit a cigarette, blowing smoke into the vent shaft. You can smell it even now, if you are paying attention.

But so much is gone. Do you remember that truck, those men from 1-800-GOT-JUNK? I cannot forget. We said afterwards how efficient they were. Now I think to myself, Yes, how efficient. Next time I want to dispose of a life and all its evidence, I know exactly who I'll call.

So what remains? This old saltbox house. This secretary desk. Me. Somewhere I have stashed away all the letters and recipes she ever wrote. Everything in her handwriting. I'll have to find them all.

I keep one recipe, her favorite, hanging on the fridge. You remember the pesto risotto she used to make. It was the meal we had for all your birthdays, all of mine. The night before you went to college. You remember. Of course. That last supper. I was cooking then, so you will also remember she was the better chef by far. I try to do my best though. I hope

you know that much.

But do you remember the summer you turned nine, the dinner we had on your birthday? It was the last year your grandmother kept the garden in the front yard. After that her knees and her hips kept her out of the plant beds. But *oh*, while it lasted it was so beautiful.

She really was talented. And at all these things I forgot to learn from her. Cooking, for one. And gardening. Growing. I should have been paying attention, because it was a kind of magic that is lost to me now.

She grew basil, garlic, spinach, lettuce, kale, carrots, tomatoes, strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, and more, I'm sure of it. So the pesto then was always fresh, always grown from home and by hand. And it really was some kind of magic. I hope you remember, because I'll never have words big enough to hold it.

When I say that I try to do my best, I mean it. I've been keeping the gardens again, trying to remember what they looked like before. I thought it would make you happy. When you were little, that summer especially, you would sit between the hedgerows, communing with the blackberry bush. You grandmother never believed in pesticides so you could eat the berries right off the branches, and you did. You would spend whole evenings like that, seated with the berries and the other growing things, the sunset smiling on you as it dipped below the treetops.

I am no great gardener. My strawberries are too small and bitter, most of them gone to the rabbits anyways. I grow more kale and tomatoes than I mean to or can eat, so I have come to giving them away.

Mr. McGrath always seems pleased by a basket of fresh tomatoes. His daughter, he says, is a wonderful chef, and he promises his thanks. I should really just give the basket to her, then, if she's the one who'll use them, but the gift is to him. It isn't much. I'm no great gardener, I told you. The tomatoes are too watery and the kale tastes too much like kale, it is still a gift and matters that it's him to whom I give it. It means I still think he is alive enough to knowingly receive. Maybe that is the gift.

Just last week I brought him a basket and set it on his bed.

He reached inside and withdrew a tomato the size of a fist, firetruck red. He held it up to the light, felt the weight of its body in his hand.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you."

I wonder if it isn't too late to plant the blackberries. You're meant to do it in early spring, which, in Vermont, might qualify as May. It's a nice thought. A pretty picture. Blackberries heavy on their branches, an offering from shrub hands. Glistening like gemstones in the sun. I like to imagine your reaction. The way you would gasp and laugh and run down the hill to sit between the hedgerows again. Still small, still wild. And I would watch with the soft contentment of that hard work and the quiet gift I never knew to ask for but craved like water in the desert. It would make you so happy. But it would not bring you back.

A few weeks after I began meeting with Mr. McGrath, he asked about you again. He'd already told me by then about his family. His daughter, Fiona, a high school English teacher in Connecticut. And his son, Patrick, who owns a bookstore in New York. You'd like them. They're in their thirties, so older than you would be now, but people always said you seemed older than you were. They'd like you too. Fiona and Patrick. Everybody always did.

"Tell me about Mary." He was soft when he said it. Undemanding. I could have said no. He didn't ask like he deserved it, like I owed it to him. He asked like somebody who knew I needed to say it, though I didn't know myself. "What's she like?"

I thought about it. About you. About those mothers who brag about their children for hours, the ones I said I hated. The body of my loneliness, familiar and exhausting. I could have said no. I could have stopped myself before I started but I was so tired of it. That loneliness.

The year my mother died, you made me a bible. From books and from poems and from the well of your own insight, you paraphrased and quoted and juxtaposed, and wrote on a piece of purple construction paper that became the cover, The Bible, by Mary. My favorite line was your favorite first, the one you explained to me. The one by Hermann Weyl, some

German mathematician, though you never did like math. He said, "Only to the gaze of my consciousness, crawling along the lifeline of my body, does a small section of this world come to life as a fleeting image in space which continuously changes in time." You told me something about how physicists don't really believe in linear time, though it's the only time we know. And you said something wonderful about memory, how we get to come back.

So I told him. Everything, all of it. I told him how smart and how talented and perfect you are. The stories you write. How you always read with a pen, and love to be outside. How blackberries are your favorite. How proud I am of you. How much I love you, too much for words.

He could see you. He could feel you. He knew. How precious, how sacred you are to me. And he asked, "Where is she now?." But he already knew. I looked down at my hands, flexed my fingers back. You always said we had the same hands—hitchhiker thumbs and the same shape of nail.

I told him. The truth, what he already knew. I felt the words in my mouth, the taste of bitter metal, like pennies. I heard them, too, but they were distorted, wrong. No, no, that doesn't sound right. That can't be true. That's not where you are. You're on your way home, coming back. On Route 100 by now, I bet. And I'm going to plant the blackberries so when you get here, when you come back to me, I will have something good to give you, the gift that says what I don't know how to. The language I can't speak.

"How did it happen?"

You remember. You were there. Almost a year ago to the day. Text me when you leave the airport, I'll see you when you get here. Call me if there's any trouble. That's what I said. And you said, It's only an hour from Bradley, what could go wrong. And I said, Drive safe anyway. I love you. You said, I love you too. See you soon.

The phone call from the hospital. Route 100, the car and the tree. Don't know why, they said. Don't know why.

The book they found in the backseat, somehow still intact. *Love Poems to God*. Rilke. Your handwriting inside the cover, your blue pen. Happy Mother's Day, love Mary, and a little blue heart, smudged on the opposite page.

How did it happen? Yes. How did it happen?

I wanted to hit that policeman who asked me if it might have been suicide. No. Of course not. I love you too, you'd said. See you soon. The book in the backseat. No. Not a suicide. Not you. Not you.

What to call it then but an accident. What to tell this old man but the truth.

"An accident. Nothing more."

When you were little, I would say, as all good parents do, that accidents happen. I said it because it would stop you crying, but also because I really do believe it. Accidents do happen. I'm not one of those people who thinks every single thing in this life happens for a reason. I know better than to try convincing myself that this kind of loss is good. But I said before that so much of life is wasted when we think it has so meaning. So how do I reconcile that kind of contradiction? How did it happen?

I think that the idea of everything happening for a reason would necessarily imply that for every single event in every single life, there is a purpose, or a function. So every good thing, and every bad thing, can never be concerned with only its own being. Then joy is not joy, but the opposite of sorrow. Then life is never what it is, and only what it is not. Tell me, where is the love?

You remember. You were there. So was my mother. So was I. That clearing. That pond in the woods, below a break in the canopy. The creek flowing in at one end, out at the other, so the water was always clean. The lilies, rising from the water until their bodies bowed under the weight of their flowers, leaning towards one another as if passing on a secret. The dragonflies above the cattails, armor glistening, blue and purple and magnificent.

You stood on the shore in that green swimsuit you loved so much, net in hand. Your grandmother was already in the water, knee deep, one hand holding her own net, the other urging you forward. So you watched as the water creeped higher and higher up your legs, lifting your arms like a baby bird, balancing. Then she pointed at the shadows in the water, and gave them names. Around your ankles, see, the minnows,

the sunfish. And in that underwater grass like mermaid hair, that's where their babies grow. Those bubbles over there, just below the surface, those are frog eggs, like jelly with a little life inside. And there's the momma over there on that lily pad, she's watching us. Tell her 'don't worry, momma'. We're just saying good morning. Now take that net I gave you, she said, hold it tight, yes, just like that. Slow and careful, sneak it under, towards the bottom. Don't give anybody a scare. Good. Start on one side, over here, go all the way across. Yes, very good. Now lift it up, careful, careful. What do you see?

Against the pink string of the net, the dark bodies of tadpoles, tails pushing, and nothing to swim through.

"Tadpoles!" you said.

"Yes! Tadpoles!" my mother replied. Both of you laughed with the miracle of it all.

"Now what?" you asked. And she put her hands over yours and lowered the net into the water. The tadpoles swam out.

"Just saying good morning."

You looked at me. I was standing on a flat, mossy rock, in the shade but close enough to the clearing that the sunlight was moving on my skin, as the breeze moved the branches. And every so often the sun would touch the corner of my eye, and then be gone, a flash of light as if refracted through diamond. So you looked at me and smiled and laughed and when I saw you, you were sparkling in that summer light, sending tadpoles off to live the rest of their short and stunning lives.

I don't know what the meaning is, but I know that it is there. I have seen the world from the mountaintops and the valley troughs, and I can tell you that I went to neither place thinking of the other. Life is exactly what it is. The unknowable dream. Every day is sacred because it is. I cannot give you a thesis, or a number, or the face of God, but I can tell you that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, and the blackberries come in summertime, and all those tadpoles you let go turned into frogs and had tadpoles of their own. You are the most precious thing to me in this world. That's all I need to know.

Mr. McGrath is getting worse. Fiona called on Sunday to let me know. He'd slept through the last two days and would not eat or drink. The doctor had been by that morning

and said in so many words that this was the end of the line.

So yesterday I went to Dover. Patrick let me in and led me upstairs. He sat down on the foot of the bed, rested his hand on his father's bony leg. Fiona had crawled alongside the old man, her head laid gingerly on his shoulder, arms and legs bent into her body so she was small, and someone's daughter.

Mr. McGrath himself was awake and upright but seemed to be somewhere else entirely. Through the open window I could tell the air was dense and humid with the coming storm. The wind, harsh and unsteady, like the trembling inhale of a sobbing child.

Do you remember that book I used to read to you at night? You were so young then. *Love You Forever*, it was called. "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always. As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be." The song, the promise from a mother to her son. And then when she is old and dying, when he holds that beloved body and repeats the old refrain.

I told you once that losing a mother is the hardest thing a person can do, and that I hoped you never had to do it. I don't know if I still believe that. Maybe it's not the hardest thing. All of life is hard. Losing my mother. Losing you. Finding a dear friend and watching him die. I question my place in this life, often. But I don't know where else I'd go. That hard, flat rock made soft by moss. From the lifeless, life. There is no nothingness. I try to be grateful. If nothing else, at least I know you never had to lose your mother.

Mr. McGrath was watching the window, like always, until he wasn't. His children felt the change, and stood, and kissed his head, and left.

"Robin. How good to see you."

"Mr. McGrath. How are you?"

Like always.

He looked at the window, smelled the rain on the wind, that promised storm.

"I am dying, Robin."

"Yes," I said, because I would not lie to him, "you are."

"It's still a beautiful day, you know." The dark grey clouds, the thunder in the distance. "So many people would say, No, it's going to storm. But this has always been my favorite kind of weather." He paused. "Would you mind if we stepped

outside?"

So with Patrick's help, I settled Mr. McGrath into his wheelchair, rolled him to the staircase, which he descended on one of those moving chairs, back into the wheelchair, and then out to the back porch so the cast iron bistro table was at his left. I sat beside him. Fiona brought us lemonade and a bowl of fresh fruit.

From that porch you could see the creek, where it widened and might even be called a river. Great slabs of stone and their little pebble children, scattered nearby. The white of water where it rushed and tumbled through the air. And beyond, the forest. The conifers, tall and full, needles which, from a distance, looked almost soft. The elms, arms old and everywhere.

Creek, laughing. Forest, whispering. Thunder, marching. Closer.

"You know, back in Ireland, I lived on a farm. My family, all ten of us. I was the youngest. I was eleven when my mother died. She'd been sick for a while, long as I can remember. So we knew, and had known for a long time, that she would be dying. We waited for it. For her to die."

The rain began. Soft and intermittent, like you might have imagined it.

"So one day she was sitting on the porch—we had one just like this, only in the front of the house—and one of my sisters and I were playing in the yard. It was sunny that day, all day, which is rare. And then all of a sudden these clouds, these big, heavy storm clouds come rolling in. Like *that*." He snapped his fingers. "So my mother told us, Go check on the cows. And we did. We ran off to the pastures, and everything was fine. A little rain, and then the sun was out again. So we came running back to the house. Cows are fine, Ma, cows are fine. I thought she might have been sleeping, her head on her shoulder like she'd just forgotten to bring a pillow. But she was dead. I'd been waiting all my life so I could be there when it happened and she'd gone and died in the five minutes I wasn't looking." He shook his head, laughed.

"We see a lot of that, funny enough," I said. "Mothers don't like to die in front of their children. I'm sorry. I don't mean to make it less meaningful—"

"No, no. You're right. It makes sense. I don't want to die in front of my children. I'm no mother but I love them enough to wish I could spare them at least that sorrow."

Lightning flashed in the high, far distance. Three seconds, then thunder.

"Did you ever read any Mary Oliver?"

"Yes," I said. "My daughter gave me a collection, once."

"You know she had cancer, a few years ago. Lung cancer. A smoker, like me!" He laughed. "And she wrote this poem, in four parts, called 'The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac', and that last part, dear God in heaven, it's so beautiful."

The rain was steady then, a silvery veil, and everywhere. And the wind had picked up, too, so the rain blew in fitful gusts onto the porch, finding skin, a cool, brief kiss. Mr. McGrath closed his eyes. Raindrops collected on his face, so much like freckles in the sunlight. He didn't flinch, or wipe them away, but felt them, breathing in that rain-smell.

"I don't want to die," he said, almost a whisper. "I have so loved this life. I have so loved my children. This place. I am not ready to let it go. I don't think I ever will be. And my wife, I have so loved her, too, but I'll see her again, I know it. That was always the comfort. That she would be there, waiting. But this—" he raised a hand into the air, catching rain in his palm, "this life makes no promises. None at all. That wildness. That is what I can't let go."

I had nothing to say. He looked at me. He knew. And he'd already forgiven.

When I came home I went to the bookshelf. *Blue Horses*, you gave me that book. So I found that poem, and looked to the fourth section:

> Late yesterday afternoon, in the heat,
> all the fragile blue flowers in bloom
> in the shrubs in the yard next door had
> tumbled from the shrubs and lay
> wrinkled and fading in the grass. But
> this morning the shrubs were full of
> the blue flowers again. There wasn't
> a single one on the grass. How, I
> wondered, did they roll back up to

the branches, that fiercely wanting,
as we all do, just a little more of
life?

It's dark now, and the storm outside is raging. The wind pushes against this house and makes it groan, and shiver. I am thinking of Mr. McGrath. I worry that I have failed him. I am supposed to provide comfort to those who are too sick and too weak to carry on with the business of living. To make death a more habitable place. And I couldn't do it. Mr. McGrath, who so loved God he became a priest. Who so loved his wife, he married her anyway. Who so loved his children, he could not let them watch him die. Who so loved this world, he could not bear to leave it, no matter what paradise is promised on the other side.

When I think of you, you're on Route 100, coming home. Even now. It's a little trick I play, a delusion that lets me sleep at night. You're still somewhere, to me. You're on your way. I'll see you soon. And I think I will, someday, but that day won't come for a long time. So here I am. What to do.

It's hard for me to reconcile what Mr. McGrath said to me with the knowledge that I have lost you. Because it's true; life is so stunning, and wild, and we want more of it, always. A life is the fullest thing a body can know, and still, it is never enough. And you are not here. The fantastic dream of it all is, for you, finished. There's a part of me that wishes I could tell you that you aren't missing much, but you are. I hope that you saw, and knew while you could, how magnificent it is to be alive. The best I can do is know it was a tragedy to lose you, feel that grief, measure its depth as if it were a well. And looking upwards, I see all of creation, no less sacred for the cavern in its side. The best I can do is see this life through to the end, and know I was lucky to live at all.

Mr. McGrath died in his sleep. I went to the house this morning. Irish tradition says to bury the body three days after death, so I arranged the burial for Thursday afternoon. I don't normally go to patients' funerals, but I was invited, so I'll be there. They gave me that painting, the one I said you'd like. He wanted you to have it, Fiona said. It's hard to say no

to these things. Custom be damned.

I haven't been to a funeral since yours. I had hoped it would be the last one. Do you know where I buried you? I bet you could guess.

That pond is technically on the property, so no one could say no when I asked that you be buried there. It's where we spread your grandmother's ashes too, you remember. It seemed right. They mowed a bit of grass, dug a hole, and laid you down. Moved the dirt back over your body like a blanket, like you were only sleeping.

For a while your grave looked so much like a scar, the jagged interruption of the standard living thing. The pond, same as it ever was, the lilies and cattails and the sparkling water. Then you in your grave-bed, so palpably gone.

I'm sorry to tell you all of this. And I said I didn't want to burden you. The truth is I do not know why I am telling you any of this. Maybe I just needed to tell it to myself. Write the words down, and know that they're true. So then why not just journal, or, heaven forbid, get a therapist. Why do I always come back to you, even now, when you could not possibly come back to me? An accident, I guess. Nothing more.

I told you I was lonely and that is true enough. There are no living human bodies left in this house but my own, and so I feel that quiet, that physical aloneness. But I have been walking, hiking the same trails we would back then, back when there were three of us.

I walk down the hill, through the gardens—I planted those blackberries, finally—down to the treeline, into the woods. I follow the trees with their wooden faces to the creek. I step on the biggest rocks and cross. Then I come to the clearing, to the pond, and to you. For a moment, it's like nothing has changed. The water still sparkles, the cattails still sway. The dragonflies still march through the reeds in their armor, wings flashing. I sit on the same flat stone, still covered in moss. From here I can look across the pond and see your headstone, small and dark against the grass. The scar is healed over, almost perfectly, green, and cherry blossomed.

So there you are, I tell myself. Not on Route 100, or disappeared entirely, but just across this pond. I can hear the frogs and the toads, singing from their homes in the mud.

If I squint, yes, I can see the frog eggs, a blur beneath the surface. And look, there go the tadpoles, new to this life and thrilled by the miracle. And after it all, there you are. Just across the pond.

You told me once that nobody likes poetry until they have to, until they need it, and I think that's true. Otherwise it's like reading someone else's diary, or eavesdropping on a prayer. It doesn't make sense until it's yours. "I may not complete this last one / but I give myself to it."

I have so loved this life. It will be longer than I can stand and end before I'm ready. I give myself to it.

The blossoms crawl upward. Blackberries come in the summer. The tadpoles turn into frogs.

Everytime.

I'll see you soon.

Anastasia Carrow

Homecoming

January 1998

Dad begins his transformation of the house weeks before Charlie's return. Little by little, the photos reappear. Pictures of Charlie are displayed on the coffee table in the den, next to our bowl of foam fruit. Our coat rack is moved out of the way, so the shiny new frame on the console is immediately visible from the front door. Even in the hall bathroom, above the toilet, now hangs a family portrait I've never seen before. I'm a baby in the photo, cradled in my mom's arms, my chubby cheeks swaddled in a pink blanket. Charlie's around eleven, all elbows and knees with a bottom tooth missing.

I don't recognize my mom's face. Dad cleared out her photos years ago, before he stored away Charlie's. The only real point of reference I have is a grainy photo magnet on the fridge, in which my mom and dad are posing in Steelers jerseys at the '76 Superbowl. When I was younger, I'd squint at that magnet, trying to find my smile hidden within my mother's. On lucky days, when Dad's not so tight-lipped, he'll tell me that I look like her. His eyes will turn glassy, and he'll ruffle my straw-straight hair. "The same freckles," he'll remark, before turning and hurrying from the room.

I barely recognize Charlie in the photo. The last time I saw him, two years ago, his sandy hair had been buzzed, uneven in patches across his scalp. He had a full set of teeth, but his upper lip was bruised, blooming purple. He never told us who hit him.

Dad said he'd be back from the bus station with Charlie by six o'clock. I wait around until then, working on an English paper in my bedroom, but the quiet unsettles me. Charlie's old room is one door down from mine; I pass it as I move my things to the den. Dad's washed the faded plaid sheets and made the bed: tucked in corners, fluffed up pillows, a folded Dale Earnhardt blanket at the foot. The carpet's been freshly vacuumed, too, judging by the intersecting lines that

pattern the floor. On top of the dresser are rows of Matchbox cars, and on the nightstand sits an old Walkman and a pair of headphones.

I linger outside the door, which usually remains closed. I don't know why Dad decided to bring Charlie's stuff out of the attic yesterday. I don't know why he chose to rearrange everything exactly how it used to be—I don't even know how he remembers what it looked like back then. I was only five, but I'm near positive Charlie's room wasn't this neat ten years ago.

In the den, I turn the television on to a cheery sitcom, letting it play in the background as I sit down at the computer. Jenna's online, so we send a few messages back and forth. I don't tell her about Charlie coming home today. I don't think she knows that I have a brother. I don't think any of my friends do.

The episode ends. Jenna logs off to eat dinner with her family. A few minutes later, I hear keys jiggling in the lock outside.

Bitter wind drifts in as the door opens, and I pull my sweater tight. Dad walks in first, stamping the snow off his boots. He spots me in the den, tugs off his gloves, and gestures me over as Charlie steps inside.

My brother's tall, but right now he seems shorter than I remember. It could be that I've grown since we've last seen each other. His hair is still cropped close to his head, and he's dressed in nothing but a long sleeve, loose jeans, and a pair of sneakers, despite the seven inches of snow outside. He's not carrying anything with him, either. For some reason, I thought he'd be dragging a suitcase behind him, but it's not like he was away at camp.

Dad nods his head, prompting me to speak.

"Hey," I say.

Charlie's shivering, arms crossed in front of his chest. His eyes are caught on the picture Dad put out by the door. This one is a standalone of Charlie from years ago, posing with a basketball in the street. When he was younger, he used to play with the kids in our neighborhood. At least, that's what Dad told me.

Charlie ignores my greeting but uncrosses his arms. His

hands are shaking at his sides—I can count every bone in his white-knuckled fingers. Dad scurries off to turn up the heat, saying he'll be right back.

"Hey," I repeat, and my brother looks up. There are no bruises on his face now, but a scar glistens, jagged pink through his eyebrow. I wonder who carved it, and why. "Do you want to see your room?"

He nods, following me into the den and down the hall, but not before pausing and staring at the white chat box still blinking open on the computer screen. He blinks back at it, tilting his head.

I lead him into his childhood bedroom, flicking on the light switch as I enter. The glare of the bulb bounces off the darkened window, and Charlie stops short, staring back at his reflection. After a moment, his face twists downward, and he takes a couple steps further into the room to carefully draw the striped curtains closed.

Slowly, he looks around, eyes roving as if he's never been here before. He starts touching things—dragging his hand across the smooth wood of the dresser, thumbing the edges of the bed's comforter, toying with the curled edges of the outdated wall posters.

Dad joins us, standing in the doorway and watching as Charlie bends over and opens the bottom drawer of his nightstand. Something in there causes him to freeze. I can make out the muscles in his back stiffening through the sheer fabric of his shirt. After a moment, he sinks into the bed, and it becomes clear that Dad and I are intruding on something.

A low sob croaks out of Charlie. With elbows balanced on thighs, cradling his shaved head in skeletal hands, his shoulders begin to heave. Up and down, a soft, aching rhythm.

I crane my neck, trying to look inside the open drawer. I catch a glimpse of a yellowing envelope, Charlie's name written in looping, unfamiliar cursive across the back. Mom's handwriting, I'm guessing, or an old girlfriend's. A couple of bright birthday cards are tossed in with the envelope, along with a scatter of old Polaroids. A drawer full of memories, full of ghosts.

"Emily," Dad says, placing a hand on my arm. "I think—I think we should give him some privacy."

I allow myself to be pulled out of the room. Dad shuts the door, and we both walk away.

One of my earliest memories is of the arrest. It was the summer before I started kindergarten. I'd already picked out my first lunchbox, a metal one with the Care Bears on it.

Dad was at work, and Lisa, our sixteen-year-old neighbor, was babysitting. Her hair was usually teased to perfection, gathered into a low ponytail or rising in a high swell off her forehead. Even now, I can't stand the smell of Aqua Net. It throws me back to this day, without fail, whenever I so much as catch a whiff of it in public.

Lisa and I were sitting on the couch together, watching a movie she had picked that I don't remember the name of anymore—something about dancers in love—when the pounding started at the front door.

Lisa stood up, hesitated, and told me to stay put. She walked up the three steps out of the den, checking her watch as she went. It was late in the afternoon, but it was dark inside; we'd closed the blinds to keep it cool.

Ignoring her warning, I climbed off the couch, peeking around the corner to see who was at the door. As soon as Lisa turned the lock, Charlie burst in. His eyes were wild, ringed with red, and some kind of mask was bunched around his neck. He was wearing black, engulfed in an oversized sweatshirt that fell past his knees. Hanging from his shoulder was what seemed like an empty trash bag.

Later, I found out that the bag had a gun in it.

"Charlie?" Lisa said, her voice shrill. She went to high school with my brother. They were both supposed to enter their junior year in the fall. Instead, in October, she testified as a witness against him in court. "What the hell?"

He shoved past her. She screamed, but he was already barreling into the den, his Nikes tracking mud on the carpet. He collided with me as he turned the corner, and I stumbled backward, knocking into a potted plant.

"Fuck, Emily!" he shouted, whipping the hood back from his face. His hair was matted to his forehead with sweat. I think I must have started crying, because he lowered his voice. "Sorry, I just—" One gloved hand reached out toward

me, as if to brush the loose soil off my shoulder, but then he drew it back, hopping from foot to foot. “I have to go,” he said, racing down the hall to his bedroom.

Lisa grabbed me, tight under the arms, and hoisted me onto her hip, carrying me into the bathroom. She locked the door behind us and sat down on the toilet lid, holding me to her chest. Her watch ticked in my ear, hoop earrings tangling in my hair.

Charlie’s footsteps thudded down the hall again a minute later, and then the back door slammed, rattling the thin walls of the house. Lisa tensed. I didn’t know why she was scared, but it was scaring me. Her watch continued to tick, and before long, we heard sirens blaring down the street.

“Jesus Christ,” Lisa whispered.

The next time I saw Charlie, he was in handcuffs, behind a sheet of bulletproof glass.

I come home from Jenna’s around nine at night, pizza grease still on my fingertips and a *Cosmopolitan* shoved in my backpack that she lent me. Dad’s slouched in front of the television, chin dropped to his chest, asleep. I tiptoe past him into the kitchen for a glass of water. As I’m running the tap, I notice movement beyond the window of the back door—a long shadow, a pinpoint glow of red. Peering through the screen, I turn on the light and illuminate Charlie, sitting in one of our cracked plastic deck chairs on the back porch.

He glances up at me when I open the door, one hand stuffed in the pocket of an orange puffer jacket, the other holding a cigarette to his lips. The porchlight filters through the smoke, creating a cloud of haze between us. I wave it away.

“What are you doing?” I ask, tugging my scarf up to my nose as a shield against the chill. “It’s cold out here.”

He shrugs. “Not too bad.”

I close the door behind me, so we don’t wake up Dad, and take the chair beside him. Our backyard is a mess of shrubs and dirt. Not even a single tree grows within the confines of our fence, which meant no tire swing for me as a kid. Everything’s covered in grey slush now, a mix of mud and rain and ice. The doghouse I used to pretend was a playhouse for my dolls is decomposing in the corner; the blue paint has

long since chipped off, and the roof is sagging in the middle. As long as I've been alive, we've never owned a dog.

"Did you ever have a dog?" I ask. "Like, before I was born?"

Charlie takes a drag, and his brows knit together. "Yeah. Marco. You weren't around for Marco?"

I shake my head. He flicks his cigarette carcass into the yard, rolling his eyes at my disapproving glare. "He was a good dog," he says, rubbing his hands together before shoving them back in his pockets. "Beagle, or something."

"What happened to him?"

He glances over. "What do you think? He died."

I sigh into my scarf, and the hot air heats up my cheeks. "Dad doesn't like dogs," I say. Charlie nods, keeping his eyes straight ahead. "Was Marco Mom's dog?"

"Yeah. She was all cut up after he was gone."

I stay quiet, but I wonder if Charlie was all cut up after Mom's death. I don't even remember what her face looked like outside of pictures; she died before I turned four.

"You were an accident baby, you know?" he says suddenly, leaning forward to brace himself against the wind.

Dad never talks about my birth—or Mom at all, really—but it hasn't slipped my notice how much older he is compared to the fathers of my classmates. "Seriously?"

Charlie shakes his head, and his scar catches the light, a ghostly white fission, separating one eyebrow into two sides of a chasm. "Did you think the eleven years between us was planned?"

"No. I just didn't think about it." My brother wasn't around often enough to remind me of the difference in our ages. Most days, it was easy to forget that I had a brother at all.

Charlie shifts in his seat, the plastic squeaking. "I have to go to work," he says, standing up. His parole officer helped him get a job at the 7-Eleven down the street, as the night clerk. For the past few weeks, I've been at school all day, and Charlie's been at the gas station all night.

"Do you like your job?" I ask.

"No," he says, squinting into the porchlight, blowing air through his teeth. "But it's something."

That night, I can't sleep. I'm either too hot or too cold. At around five in the morning, I give up and roll out of bed, even though I don't have to be up for school until seven. I brush my teeth, get dressed, and decide to study for my algebra test later. My desk is positioned in front of a window that faces the street, and as the sun starts to rise, something moves between the narrow slit of my curtains. I peel them back, revealing Charlie on the sidewalk, walking home from his shift. In the grey light of dawn, among the quiet houses and leftover clumps of snow, he seems small, like a little toy soldier, eclipsed by everything else.

He pauses at the foot of our driveway, staring up at the sky. Then he looks away, a shadow falling over his face as he zips up his orange jacket and keeps walking.

Jenna holds up one of my flannels, sticking her arms through the sleeves and examining her reflection in my vanity mirror. "I need one of these," she says. "Where did you get it?"

"It was my dad's," I say, flipping through the copy of *Tiger Beat* Jenna brought over. Her mom always buys her the cool magazines. Dad only subscribes to *The Family Handyman*, even though he barely knows how to change a lightbulb.

"It's so grunge," Jenna says, tossing the flannel onto my head.

I pull it off, wiggling my finger through one of the holes in the collar. "I thought grunge was out."

"That's what makes it cool." She flops down next to me on the bed, groaning as she glances over at the red numbers of my alarm clock. It's noon on a Saturday, and my best friend is bored. "I want to go to the mall."

"Ask your mom to take you later," I say, too engrossed in an article about fashion fiascos on the red carpet.

"I want to go *now*," she whines. "Can't your brother drive us?"

Jenna doesn't know much about Charlie, except that he's related to me and is living with us again. I close the magazine, thinking about the way he walks everywhere. "I don't think he knows how to drive," I say, just now coming to the realization myself.

Her face scrunches, freckles swallowed up by the wrinkles of her nose. “But he’s, like, old.”

“He’s twenty-six.”

“Oh. He looks older.” She distracts herself by rummaging through my cardboard box of CDs, pretending to deliberate. I know she’ll choose Alanis Morissette—she picks her every time. “I would die if I didn’t have my license by twenty-six. Shouldn’t he have a job?”

“He does,” I say. “He works nights.”

She shrugs, and then extracts *Jagged Little Pill* from the box. I feign surprise.

Charlie sleeps through dinner, on the couch. There hasn’t been a day yet that I’ve seen him sleep in his own bed. Ever since he’s started working, he usually passes out in the den at around nine in the morning, waking up after Dad and I have finished eating dinner. Then he eats the leftovers, smokes a cigarette or two, and heads back to work.

Tonight, it’s Chinese takeout. Dad and I don’t even bother getting out plates—we just eat straight from the cartons, leaning against opposite sides of the kitchen counter. After I finish my noodles, I tell him I have homework to do in my room, which is really just an excuse to go listen to music and finish reading the magazine Jenna left here. He nods, saying he needs to go pull some weeds in the backyard, which is really just an excuse to stand outside and pretend he’s a busier man than he actually is.

I’m lying on my bed, a CD playing low in the background, when Charlie walks by. He shuffles past my open doorway, and then doubles back, popping his head inside. “What is this?” he asks, making a face.

I sit up, crossing my legs. “The music?”

“What is it? What are they saying?”

I glance up at the Hanson poster beside my bed; Jenna’s lipstick is on Taylor’s cheek. We’ve never been able to understand what he’s singing about. “I don’t know,” I admit, shrugging.

Charlie steps into the room, inspecting the poster. “Is that them?” he asks, raising an eyebrow. “They’re . . . children.”

“That one’s my age,” I say, pointing at Jenna’s lipstick mark.

He crosses his arms, in disbelief. His face remains blank as he shifts his gaze to the other posters that decorate my hot pink walls—most of them featuring various boy bands. Not a single spark of recognition flickers in his eyes. "Jesus," he mutters, and then he looks at me. "Do you want to hear what I listened to when I was your age?"

"Obviously. Yes."

He leaves the room, returning a minute later with his Walkman. I scoff as he slides in a cassette, the lid clicking closed. "You need an upgrade," I say. "That thing's ancient."

He shushes me, adjusting the flimsy headphones over his ears as he holds down the fast-forward button. "It's not *ancient*. It works fine." Finding the right spot in the tape, he presses stop and hands me the Walkman.

I reach over to my nightstand, silencing the Hanson brothers before slipping on the headphones for myself. Charlie hesitates for a second, staring at the clutter of notebooks and glitter pens on my desk, and then he rolls out the swivel chair and sits. I press play.

The percussion starts up with a few fast beats, mellowing out as a breathy voice begins singing. Once the strings come in for the chorus, the voice turns into almost a moan, sighing about how great it would be to be killed by double-decker buses or ten-ton trucks.

I shoot a look at Charlie halfway through, questioning how this is better than my innocent pop albums, and he smirks.

Flutes flutter in and out through the end of the song, the strings swelling one last time, and then fading. I hit the stop button, pulling the headphones down around my neck. "Sounded a little depressing to me," I say.

"It was the shit," he insists, leaning back in the chair. "Girls went crazy if you told them you were into the Smiths."

I trace along the faint scratches in the Walkman with a fingernail. There are a couple stickers plastered on the back, but the pigments have rubbed off and the vinyl's faded to white. "Did you have a girlfriend?"

"You're always asking questions." He picks up one of my pens, tilting it upside down and watching the ink flow in the opposite direction. "No. Well, yeah. But I don't know what the fuck she's up to now. Probably married. Pregnant or

whatever. The normal shit." He shakes his head. "The normal *stuff*. Sorry."

"What was her name?"

He places the pen back on the desk—more delicately than I would have—and presses his hands into his knees, lifting himself out of the chair. "Doesn't matter now, does it?"

It's dim in my room; the sun has set and there's only one lamp on, in the corner. But I can tell his eyes have clouded over, his face shutting down again. He grants me a closing nod, and then turns, heading for the door.

I hold up the Walkman, headphones dangling. "Don't you want this back?"

He glances at me over his shoulder, one hand on the doorframe. "Keep it."

"Where are you going?"

"Work."

"It's only eight."

He sighs, in the hallway now. "So many damn questions."

"That wasn't a question," I say, but he's gone.

I wake up to my alarm at six the next morning—the time that Charlie gets off work. It's Sunday; I don't bother changing out of pajamas or fixing my hair. I sit at my desk, wrapped in a blanket, my curtains pulled open slightly so I can better see the street.

Charlie appears between the gap a half hour later, and I lean forward to watch as he performs his little ritual: pausing in the driveway, kicking at some pebbles on the ground, staring up at the grey sky—almost like he's facing down an invisible barrier, one that will bounce him right back if he tries to step through. And then he steps through.

I hear the front door unlock, the jingling of keys, footsteps and creaking floorboards. I get up from my chair, opening my bedroom door to poke my head out.

The kitchen light is on, spilling into the den. Charlie's standing by the open fridge, his back facing me. He's gripping the handle as if it's the only thing holding him upright; his shoulders one straight, rigid line. Abruptly, he closes the fridge, bends over, and rests his forehead on the kitchen counter, arms coming up to shield his face. For a second, I

think he's fallen asleep on his feet, slumped over like that. But then he picks himself up, moving out of my limited frame of vision. The kitchen light goes out, and the front door scrapes open again.

I hurry down the hallway, grabbing my sneakers off the rack and shrugging on a coat that's not even mine. Charlie's already halfway down the street, so I have to run to catch up with him, rubber soles slapping against the icy asphalt. My breath's coming out in white, crystallized puffs by the time he turns around.

"What are you—" he says, scar puckering as he furrows his brow, staring at me. "Why are you even awake? It's freezing. Go back inside." He nods towards our house, hands stuck in his pockets.

I glance back, at my empty bedroom window and our front lawn, sparkling under the streetlight with frost. The sun is a faint pink on the horizon, not yet bright enough to light up the neighborhood. I don't move. "Where are you going?"

He shifts his feet, and I realize he's wearing Dad's beat-up hiking boots. He doesn't fit into any of his old shoes anymore. "I'm—nowhere. I'm taking a walk. Go back inside."

"Why can't I come with you?" I step up next to him, crossing my arms. Dad's coat sleeves hang, too long, from my fingertips.

Charlie drops his head, exasperated. "Because you can't, okay? I said so. Now, go back."

"No," I say, firm. "Why? Where are you going?"

His hands fly, out of his pockets and into the air. "Nowhere!" he says. On the telephone pole above us, a bird chirps, flapping its wings. "I don't know, all right? I don't know anything. Everything's different. Your music, that messaging shit, the cars people drive. You. You're different. You were just a kid—Jesus. Ten *years*, Emily." He exhales, shaky and slow, pulling a pack of cigarettes and a lighter out of his pocket. With fumbling fingers, he snaps the sparkwheel, unable to get a proper flame going until the third try. The heat radiates between us, pulsing red. "Whatever, it's fine. You don't understand. You're still just a kid."

"I'm as old as you were."

He blinks at me. The cigarette trails a tendril of smoke, lazy

and loose, up to the sky. “Yeah,” he says, swallowing. “I guess you are.”

I sit down on the curb, drawing my knees up to my chest, but the cold still seeps in, stinging wet, through my fuzzy pajama pants. Charlie sits down next to me, offering me a cigarette. I shake my head.

“I wouldn’t have given it you anyway,” he says, slipping it back in the pack. “Bad habit.”

I roll my eyes, but I’m smiling.

For the first time in the month he’s been home, he smiles back.

We fall quiet. In this moment, I don’t have any questions to ask, and Charlie doesn’t have any answers to evade. I run my fingers through the grass of our neighbor’s lawn, collecting the drops of dew and half-melted ice, forming a pool in my palms. I don’t know how long we stay out there, but it’s long enough for the sky to brighten. Charlie watches, silent and smoking, as I cup the reflection of the sunrise in my hands, pink and orange and full of light.

Ronita Sinha

Leaving Behind

It wasn't easy to pigeonhole a life of some forty years into cardboard boxes and have them shipped off to Godknowswhere. Every day Binita went about taking stuff down—pictures from walls, clothes from closets, books from shelves. Often, when the past came knocking on her door, she teared up like an idiot and that tidy little secret, buried deep inside the unspoken memories of her house, came bubbling to the surface. She caught her breath and sat awhile nursing that morsel of knowledge until her heart quietened, and she was able to move on to the next wall or closet or shelf.

Through the mist in her eyes, the boxes appeared blurred and unreal, pudgy clouds that never drifted away; they only brought a shower to her eyes. She wiped her tears and the magnolia tree outside brightened. The faint hum of an aeroplane floated in the air, and Binita wondered if it were a seven-forty-seven like the one that brought her to Toronto all those decades ago.

A smiling Mrs Dutt, Shuvo's Bengali co-worker at the hospital, had been waiting to welcome Binita and Shuvo, the new bride and groom, home from the airport,. From a silver plate, she raised a piece of homemade sweetmeat to Binita's lips and then some tepid milk from a crystal shot glass. Her daughter, Ina, blew into a conch shell and its auspicious bass, marked by Mrs Dutt's high-pitched ululation, sliced the frigid air into two neat halves. Mrs Dutt threw a handful of rice over the couple's heads signalling to Shuvo who swept his bride in his arms and carried her over the threshold as if it were no less the ocean they had just crossed.

No, day-dreaming wouldn't do. Binita had to get things done before she forgot them. Forgetting was her new enemy. She needed to take down the stacks of plates, serving bowls, platters, dishes, from a chestnut cabinet, all languishing unused since Shuvo died a year ago from an aneurysm. Or was it his heart that gave in? She couldn't always remember these details anymore. She jimmied open the door of the

cabinet. Instantly, the startled air from inside escaped in a wispy plume of dust. The smell was stale, musty. Of course, Shuvo had no right to die and leave her alone. But who cared anymore about what's right and what's wrong? In the end, we each had to go our own way into the thickets of eternity, alone and empty-handed.

She taped the box and stepping outside, sat on the front steps where she and Shuvo had sat for a lifetime of a marriage, their dreams blooming like stars in a darkening sky. They had listened to their silent soirée and made the most momentous plans of their lives; the parties they threw, the vacations they took, the cars they bought. Their son's future.

Binita is seventy-one, not old. She told herself, if seventy-one is old then what is eighty-three or ninety-four? Until a few months ago she jogged around Silverhill Park three times a week, her iPod in her ear, listening to old Bengali songs. She probably would have jogged in that park for the rest of her life if one day she hadn't forgotten her way back home. She wandered around, confused, the side streets familiar yet not so. In the gathering twilight, a police cruiser stopped and the policeman at the wheel asked if she needed help. She said everything was alright. He did not believe her. He got out and stood rooted like the blue spruce next to him and asked her name, his words clipped as if he were dicing potatoes with his tongue.

"Binita Roy."

"Age?"

"Sixty-nine." Good sign, she still remembered to lie about her age.

"Address?"

That's where he got her. She thought of flowers over an arbour but nothing else would come to her. She fumbled in her belt bag and retrieved her phone. The policeman took it from her and called the last number. It was her son, Jay's.

There is something inglorious about a mother arriving at her son's in a police car. Jay and Rina were waiting for her on their porch, all the lights in their house turned on as if it were Christmas. That night, Binita saw in advance the expressions Jay and Rina would wear at her funeral.

They wouldn't let her return home that night, although by

then she remembered her address and wanted to call that nice policeman and give it to him.

The next day, after Jay dropped her home, she picked up the reins of her life as if nothing untoward had occurred. Then, she made the terrible mistake of inviting Jay and Rina to dinner. Binita usually took them out to a fancy place where she couldn't go alone anymore because it seemed the waiters gave her strange stares and took an awfully long time to serve her, making her feel lonelier than ever. This time, she wanted to cook something special for her children.

Rina was setting the table. Binita swept the pan free of all the vegetables she had just sautéed into a serving dish and, instead of snapping the oven off, she blew into the gas flame as if it were a candle. The red On/Off markings on the knobs eyed her expectantly but for the life of her she could not figure out what to do with them. She blew again, harder, and the circle of flickering flames thought it was some sort of game and changed their shape, dancing a Will-o'-the-Wisp dance.

That was it. Binita had played with fire. Rina made an appointment with her family GP, and Dr Nandi diagnosed Binita with early onset of dementia. She argued that she remembered plenty of things from her past, it was only some of the immediate tasks that she was having trouble with.

"Classic dementia symptom," Dr Nandi confirmed. "It might be years before your long-term memory is affected."

"But it *will* be, at some point, right?" Anxiety buzzed in her ears as she hoped he'd say no.

"At some point, yes, but meanwhile try to keep yourself engaged, Mrs Roy. Read, talk to friends, start a hobby. These things could delay it." The kindness in his voice filled Binita with dismay.

While he wrote out some vitamins and chatted with Rina, Binita dreaded what it would be like when she forgot Shuvo and the secret they shared. Sitting in Dr Nandi's chamber, in a band of caramel sunlight, she shivered.

Overnight, from a perfectly normal woman, she became an invalid. Jay and Rina asked her to move in with them, which she flatly refused. They insisted. She still refused, politely, with deep care for feelings. Then, they started a weekend ritual of taking her around to places where Binita could retire

in comfort with her independence safe in her pocket.

The last place, Jay said, was a place that his dad would have liked to see Binita in. She could furnish it with whatever furniture she chose. There was a kitchenette with a fridge but no stove; only a microwave.

"You could move in here on the first of July." A slight pause like the synapse in an addled brain, then, "If you like." Jay's tone was cautious like feet on soapy floor tiles.

"To this place, with an apology for a kitchen, you mean?" She spat out, a fire snarling inside her.

"Ma, you can just rest, you don't need to cook or clean, there is onsite service for all of that." He opened cupboards, twisted on faucets, checked the electric panel.

"Ah! Great west-facing window, the evening sun will warm your bed nicely."

Binita hated the setting sun. It reminded her of the evening Shuvo died. Why do sons know so little about their mothers? This son she bore and birthed and brought up. Does he know what her favourite colour is? If she preferred a bath to a shower, an apple to a pear? Yet here he was, wielding the baton, directing her life.

Jay smiled tightly at her silence. Binita couldn't locate her son in that smile.

"This won't do, I need at least two bedrooms."

"For?"

"In case your uncle visits from Calcutta, or a friend drops by and wants to spend the night."

Jay's smile wiped itself off his face, his eyes becoming impatient, hostile. But Binita dug her heels in. Her independence was not a cheap thing sold in a roadside kiosk. She wasn't going to make it easy for him to wrest it from her.

"We'll discuss this later." He started to walk towards the car park.

She screamed in silence at his taut back; what do you know about being old, and alone, and heartbroken? Binita wanted to warn him, prepare him. But then, some things are best learnt on your own.

She sat in the car in sullen silence, her mind winging to the time when Jay was just a hum in her belly. Her mother's weekly letters from Calcutta had been anxious and peppered

with things Binita should do and not do. Do not eat anything sour, the baby will be cranky. Eat an apple every day, the baby will be fair. No matter what you do, do not eat pineapple, it's a prescription for miscarriage. And the question of paramount importance—in which direction was the feathery line leading down from under the navel bending, right or left? Left for boy, right for girl. Binita tried to see but it was impossible to peek over the growing mound of her belly and determine its trajectory. In any case, it was no use to her. In her heart, she knew it was a girl. It had to be a girl. Binita yearned for a girl.

"It's a boy!" The pretty nurse handed her an angry, slimy bundle.

Jay made his entry into the world, fist in the air, bawling. That was thirty-seven years ago.

She got out of the car and, holding her back straight, walked up to her front door. Jay let her in, hung the keys in the foyer, and left. Binita stood alone in the living room, in the womb of a terrifying silence.

She pretended to hold hands with Shuvo and wandered around the house. She sat in the garden under the night sky with a bowl of cubed melon on her lap, spearing the stars with her fork and carrying them to her lips. Memories flashed around her. The roll of the garage door signalling Shuvo's return from late-night surgery. She'd take his coat, smooth his hair, get him a drink. And listen. Sundays, when the sweet fuzzy smell of pancakes clung to their clothes all day. The two of them at a creamery on a summer evening, gobbling ice-creams before the heat gobbled them. At a picnic table with Jay on the grass, the birds wheeling above, hopeful, and Binita licking the sandwich crumbs off her fingers to spite them.

Moving implied an egregious theft of life as Binita knew it, and the secret that's planted in her house. A secret that couldn't move with her. It was hidden in the weft and warp of 132 Blossom Street, nestling in the tangles of the cedars, in the beam of the porchlight, and in the filigree of sunlight on her bedroom floor. The plan was for her to die in this house with her secret intact, but her own traitorous mind had turned upon her, and thrown all her plans into a box of jumbled-up puzzle pieces.

The day Binita loaded the dishwasher with her laundry, she gave in. She let Jay win.

She avoided looking at the "For Sale" sign on the front lawn like one would a bloody head on a platter. Instead, she concentrated on filling those boxes. Miraculously, one day, they were all done, and suddenly, she had nothing to do. She walked out to the garden, the yellow sun splattered in a white sky, and sat on the wrought-iron bench by the magnolia tree.

Under that tree lay their baby girl.

Just as her mind was betraying her now, her body had betrayed her once. It had shown no respect for the new life brewing inside her, giving her hair its sheen, her breasts their fullness, and her heart a joy she could barely contain. It had let the tiny life slip away from her on that spring night two years before Jay was born. Memories swam in Binita's head—of Shuvo fetching his surgical bag and severing the umbilical cord, of blood and more blood on the white bathroom floor. The unbearable anguish of becoming unpregnant.

Shuvo laid the foetus on the bed. She was still and cold; a luminescent moonbeam. An unspoken sentence quote marked by parents curled on either side afraid to speak in case they woke the baby up. Although that's what they desperately wanted; to wake the baby up.

In the pallid dark, Binita's hand rested on the baby's chest, as white and still as she.

When dawn trembled on the horizon, Shuvo stood by her bedside, his face shrivelled like a walnut, bits of leaves and clay clinging to him. They read each other's thoughts like they always did.

From the bottom drawer of the armoire, Binita took out her sandalwood jewellery case and removed the top tray. She flipped the case over and a tangle of bangles, necklaces, earrings, and brooches tumbled out. She grazed her shaking fingertips on the red velvet lining, checking for bumps, sharp points, anything that could hurt her baby. She picked her up; her sealed eyes crisscrossed by tiny mauve tributaries, her body like gentle glass through which no organs throbbed. They gazed at her hungrily, drinking her in, trying to write every minutia of that beloved face into their hearts. Binita touched her lips to her cheek and they came away with an

appalling iciness. Draping her in a silk scarf, they laid her in the jewellery box. White against the red. Tiny and flawless. A muffled snap as Shuvo closed the lid. She reached for her tailoring chalk and on the top, over the mother-of-pearl inlay Shuvo, in his calligraphic hand, wrote *Baby Jewel*. Binita didn't want her tears to smudge the words so she averted her face.

Together, they plodded through the house made unfamiliar by silver shadows. Outside, they shuddered in the dark breeze that wrapped around them. Under the magnolia tree, Shuvo had dug a hole and Binita filled it with the fallen petals and her tears before he lowered their baby into the earth.

With tired arms, they piled the sod, damp and black, over the grave. After, they fell back on the dew-drenched grass, their unimaginable sorrow holding up the cavernous sky.

Shuvo called and wrote letters to inform all those that mattered; parents, close friends, but they never discussed that night. It remained embalmed and entombed in the jewellery boxes of their hearts, in the solitariness of truth, lonely but never forgotten. It hovered like an iceberg under the surface of their daily lives, sharp and glinting, ready to shipwreck them and allow grief and unspeakable pain to pour through every crack, every crevice until they thrashed and wallowed and eventually drowned in them. The silence was a kindness they owed each other. Over time, there came to be an intimacy about sharing their secret. They felt her presence often; in the first snow glazing the yard or when colour returned to the magnolia tree, but she came to them most in other people's baby girls, in pink ribbons and princess shoes. They would then turn to each other, their unspoken words morphing into smiles. Sad, shy smiles. A shyness that years of marriage could not banish.

Someone was shaking Binita hard as if trying to shake out tiny butterflies from the wrinkles of her skin.

"Ma, Ma, are you okay?"

Binita gazed into the eyes of her son. Her living child. She reached out to hold his hand but fear was already holding it.

"What are you doing in the garden at this time? I couldn't find you in the house, and that scared me." Jay helped her to

her feet and clasped her tight for a few seconds.

"The sun made me a little drowsy," she whispered to the wind, over his shoulder.

"I'm taking you home for a few days until the house closes and your new unit is ready." Jay's old smile had returned to his eyes.

Binita did not resist and Jay looked relieved, happy almost.

He packed her into his car, slammed the door shut, snapped his seatbelt in, and revved the engine. The For Sale sign was gone from the lawn. Maybe this was right, she thought. It's better to sell the house than to burn it down. Her memories, precious and sacred, were for her to hold as long as she could.

As Jay drove off, Binita steeled herself to not look back, but she had this sudden, insane desire to know who would move into her house. Who would cook in her kitchen, make love in her bedroom, stand naked in her shower, watch her magnolias bloom, and do the many things that were meant for Shuvo and her to do. Who, who?

"Jay, do you know anything about the people . . . ?" A lump of tears in her throat wouldn't let her finish.

"Yes, a young couple. Both architects."

"Do they have any children?"

"A baby girl."

Travis Lee

A Mermaid's Garden

"You're not a real mermaid."

The hardest part of my job is learning not to argue with kids. Every one of them thinks they're the first to point out that I, with two legs, sitting in a plush chair at Seaworld, am not a real mermaid.

"Is that your mother over there?" I ask.

Another lesson I learned: use mother, not mommy. Father instead of daddy. The formality helps sell it.

The boy nods.

"Would you like to know what I do all day?" And without waiting for an answer, or worse another accusation, I dive right in, "I listen to humans."

"Grown-ups too?"

"Especially grown-ups." I glance at the line. He's near the middle of the pack and I'll be damned if he hasn't brought it, just like he said he was going to.

"What do mermaids eat?"

I answer the boy. I tell him what time mermaids go to bed. I never end our talks on my own. I allow them to expire naturally and when I sense the boy growing restless, I put my arm around his shoulder and point at the camera.

"That woman there is going to take our picture."

I don't encourage them to say cheese—would a real mermaid do that?—and I smile. The boy doesn't.

The camera clicks.

Seaworld started doing this five years ago. Intended for children, they sell picture packages of your mermaid encounter. One package includes a doll, the other doesn't, and when you leave the mermaid's lagoon shelves of merchandise await you.

I never thought I'd work at Seaworld. I majored in Public Relations. No scholarships for me, no parents rich enough to pay California's high tuition, and those tales you hear about people working through college, paying it off by working

low-wage jobs? Where do these people come from? I took out loans. The interest grows every year and I cannot afford to pay it off.

I looked for jobs after graduation, but everyone wanted a year or two of experience. Wasn't college supposed to help me? I settled on an internship at Seaworld. My parents let me live with them rent-free under the promise that my internship would lead to a job and the further unspoken promise that this job would lead to me leaving their home.

I'd hoped the internship would lead to a full-time offer, but as it became clear that my unpaid time would be a resume line and nothing more, I asked around. Turns out Seaworld was hiring, for a different position.

A year and a half later, I'm still a mermaid.

A few more children file through. One girl clings to her father's arm. Sometimes kids get scared. Fortunately, I'm an old hat at this.

I reach behind my chair. "Guess what? I found something for you."

I hand her a seashell doll. She hesitates, only accepting it after her father nods. She holds it, unsure of what to do. I place my hands over hers.

"Did you know if you press your ear to a seashell you can hear the ocean?"

The girl presses her ear—to the wrong end. I correct her, gently, and after she listens I press my ear to it.

"Wow. Can you hear that?"

She listens one more time. Then we pose for the photo and I wave on my next visitor.

Derrick.

He comes at least once a week and wears the same white tank top every time. When he first started, he was as shy as some of the kids. He's since warmed up to me, but today I can tell something is wrong.

"Good morning Derrick. How are you feeling today?"

Derrick doesn't respond. He dwarfs me and the chair. This was designed for kids and I'll admit that the first time he came through I didn't know what to say.

I press on: "Last night I collected some seashells from the

bottom of my lagoon. Would you like to see one?"

He shrugs. Swift, and barely noticeable. I reach behind the chair and pluck another seashell doll from the basket I keep hidden back there. I hold it up.

"Did you know you can hear the ocean?"

Derrick shakes his head.

"You can't?"

He mumbles something. I ask him if he wants to hold the seashell and he takes it in hands big enough to crush it.

"If you put your ear to this end," I indicate the opening, "you can hear the ocean."

He whispers, "No."

"Oh." I feign disappointment. "Why not?"

"This isn't a real seashell."

I put my arm around Derrick. My hand barely reaches his right shoulder blade. "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

"Hot today."

"Yes. We're in summer. You can expect many hot days."

Talk to children long enough, you develop a manner of speaking which becomes second nature. You find yourself explaining things to adults like they're children, and while I have to catch myself when I do this at home, here it's expected. Derrick doesn't mind.

"I don't want to get sunburnt."

"Do you wear sunblock?"

"My mom didn't put any on me this morning."

I pat his shoulder. "Well maybe you won't get burned. How was the walk?"

Haphazard about the sunscreen, Derrick's mother will not drop him off. She doesn't drive him anywhere, far as I know.

"I almost got hit."

"Oh," and I hope I sounded genuine because I was. A man like Derrick shouldn't be walking anywhere on his own. "What happened?"

"The green man told me to cross. I crossed. A car turned and honked at me. It almost hit me."

"Some people are awfully rude." I think about the Fatal Four, the four intersections in San Diego with the most fatalities. As I can attest, it's not always easy to see who's

going to cross. And drivers here will wedge themselves into the space beside you and turn, even scraping the curb if it means saving a few extra seconds.

One thing I've never figured out is where Derrick lives. At first, I thought he must live close because he walks, and close means Mission Bay or Pacific Beach. But if Derrick's mom can afford to live there, why can't she afford to drive him?

"Did it scare you?"

Derrick nods. Not a pleasant topic. He has a habit of doing that. Bringing up something terrifying, then shutting down. I know the people in line are staring. They might not whisper amongst themselves here, but they'll do it first thing when they leave.

Paul adjusts the tripod. Beside him, Ana wrinkles her nose, signaling time's up. It's bigger than yesterday. Too many people, and their kids.

I hand Derrick the seashell. "Take this with you. Remember what I said about listening to the ocean."

"It's not real."

"Okay, how about this? Next time you go to the beach, you bring me back a real seashell, and we can compare. Deal?"

And Derrick says his next words so quietly I almost don't hear them.

"I don't know where the beach is."

When they first put me in the makeup and the costume, I asked Ana, "Do the kids really believe this?"

"The little ones do."

"What about the older kids?"

And she laughed at me. Older kids do not come to Seaworld to see a mermaid. They barely come at all, dragged along by their parents. Then she told me that the strangest thing sometimes happens: adults.

"They'll drop down in your lap, so be careful."

And they do. All kinds. I've seen grown men cry. I have consoled an old woman after the death of her husband. But Derrick stands apart and the questions which want asking—where do you live? What about your mother?—seem to have no answers. Derrick knows the way to Seaworld, to the mermaid and little else, and someone is either paying for him

to come every day (unlikely) or they've bought him a yearly pass (likely), and for what reason? To give him something to do?

He doesn't know where the beach is. I grew up here, so I've gone to the beach all my life. I've been to all our beaches, from Imperial Beach to La Jolla. You can hardly escape it here, yet . . .

The San Diego people imagine is not the one that exists. The San Diego of your imagination is this pleasant coastal city with comfortable weather year-round, and if you were to come and stay in La Jolla or Point Loma or Pacific Beach, I can see how you'd think that. But San Diego is bigger than the coast; there are the inland regions, clusters of houses and curbside cars arrayed in rows on steep hills. Gangs, drug trafficking, homelessness. Drop in a scattered military presence and temperatures exceeding 100 in the summer, and you have the real San Diego.

Derrick did not grow up in the same San Diego as me.

The summer grew hotter. The kids lined up, we talked, took pictures. Some bought the photo packages, others didn't. I went on with my routine, checking the line for a familiar hulking presence, a giant with the ferocity of a bunny rabbit.

He returns wearing the same white tank top and when he sits down beside me I greet him and reach behind the mermaid's chair. I keep my purse back there. They told me to never break character and keep everything that might remind them I'm a mid-twenties woman out of sight.

I wrap my fingers around the seashell and hold it out to Derrick.

"I brought this for you."

"What is it?"

I know other people in line can hear him. With the kids I lower my voice and they know to copy me. I drop my voice further, leaning in.

"A seashell."

Derrick stares at it.

"Where did you get it?"

"My rock garden under the sea."

Derrick nods.

"If you hold it to your ear, you can hear the octopus swimming by."

Again, Derrick holds the wrong side to his ear. I gently correct him. He presses his ear to the opening and wonder sweeps over his face.

"Wow."

"Lovely, isn't it?"

He lowers the seashell. "A real octopus?"

"They love playing in my rock garden."

Derrick tries to hand the seashell back to me and I stop him.

"Keep it."

He looks from me to the seashell, uncertain.

I smile. They told me off-the-record that I need to use whitening strips on my teeth. Their reason? Mermaids have perfect teeth. They made me smile during my interview.

"It's a present from the mermaid," I say.

After work, I go to the beach.

The best beach in San Diego is Imperial Beach, though my friends would smack me if they knew I'd said that. La Jolla? Too crowded. Coronado? Mission Beach? The only thing Mission Beach has going for it is the boardwalk, and the real gem comes from the strip of sand close to the Mexican border.

I walk along the wavefront, the foam caressing me. The sand slides under my soles on the waves' retreat, seashells plunged into the sand like placement markers. I squat, and pry one free. A wave washes over my hand. It's a decent-sized seashell, good form, and I press it to my ear. The sound of eternity. An alien world contained in our own. I regret giving Derrick that seashell. Not because of attachment but because it's not real; I bought it from a souvenir shop in Honolulu, my first spring break in college. And besides, I don't want Derrick thinking that all seashells are that big, on the off-chance he finds his way to the beach or that mother of his deigns to take him. I cup the shell in my palms. As big as a Pringle. I raise it, listening to the gulls cry in the early evening, and then I chuck the seashell back into the ocean.

The line is long today and I'm not paying attention. I don't notice Derrick until he's next up and he drops down beside me, chin on his chest.

"Did you listen to the ocean?" I ask.

They told me in training I must embrace the role. Don't say *ocean* or *sea*, call it *home*. Like with the fin-pants I have to wear. They make getting up to go to the bathroom impossible, but as my boss told me with complete seriousness, mermaids don't go to the bathroom.

"I went to the beach yesterday," I tell him, aware that I'm breaking character but I don't know what else to say, "it was beautiful. You said you haven't been?"

"Mermaids can't walk."

"Right. We can swim, and when we come ashore, did you know—" and I proceed to explain how mermaid fins can turn into legs. I say this with the conviction of a child's belief in Santa.

Derrick grins. His teeth are crooked. "Mermaids are neat."

"Where do you live?"

The question leaps out of me, and I compose myself. I try again. "I live in a rock garden. It's so serene down there. How about you? Do you live in a rock garden?"

Derrick shakes his head.

"No? How about a . . . people-house?"

Derrick shakes his head again.

"No? How about . . . is it big? Small?"

Derrick withdraws. I place a hand on his back, and he flinches.

"Sorry. It hurts?"

Derrick nods.

"Sorry," I say again. "Here," and I slip my arm around his shoulders and describe my beautiful rock garden. I even tell him about the naughty octopus who likes to steal my rocks, though he always brings them back when I ask nicely. Derrick relaxes. My hand drifts over his back, lightly touching here and there.

Derrick flinches every time.

I lower my phone.

Part of knowing what you're going to say differs from

saying it, and while it makes sense to me it will not make sense to the police.

I think someone's being abused raises questions about that someone, and how I know. Well, how do I know? He flinches when I touch his back? Is that all?

No, you have to look at his demeanor too.

But Derrick is slow. He'll act that way regardless of abuse . . . ?

I don't know what to do.

I play my mermaid role during the day and evenings I walk along the beach. For thousands of years no European saw the Pacific. Then Vasco Núñez de Balboa came along and waded into the cold waters, claiming it for Spain, and I think of the others who've touched it before and since, numberless and nameless. I kneel in the sand. Seawater foams about my knees. A pile of dead seaweed. The wave surges, recedes and the seaweed doesn't budge.

When Derrick visits me again I sink into my role. He seems the same. Sometimes I think he can't remember longer than a few days ago, and I ask him about the seashell.

"I can hear the ocean."

"That's good," I say, and I mean it. The seashell belongs to him now and he can hear whatever he wants in it. "Would you like to see my rock garden?" I take his hand. "I would really love to show it to you."

Derrick's face lights up. "You would?"

I nod, and lower my voice. "First we have to go to the beach. Can you meet me there?"

"I think."

"Good." I smile, showing off the hard work of this morning's whitening strips. "Where do you live?"

He shakes his head. I ask him to point in the direction, and I ask if there are a lot of people where he lives.

He doesn't know this either, but the direction means Ocean Beach.

"I'd really like it if you could meet me at the Pacific Beach Pier this evening? Can you do that?"

"I don't know."

"The pier. You'll see a big sign for it."

He seems unsure, but this is the best I can do. Next step is

taking him there myself.

He gathers his strength. “Okay.”

I show up to the beach that afternoon. I tell myself this is a stupid idea. Derrick doesn’t know how to get here and if he tries he’ll get lost and then what?

I have a margarita from a drink stand. I walk the beach. A lifeguard truck passes me. I step into the rugged paths left by the tires and I slide close to the water. A wave washes over my sandals, trapping a sealeaf between my toes.

I make my way to the pier and spot Derrick, alone. He’s wearing the same shirt and I bound up to him, the leaf between my toes.

“Hey you made it.”

Derrick lowers his head.

“What’s wrong?”

“What happened to your fin?”

“Oh that?” I slip back into my mermaid character. “Mermaids can turn their fins into legs when they need to walk around, remember?.”

“Can you turn your legs back into a fin?”

“Not here silly.” I lay a hand on his shoulder, and he blushes. “Beautiful isn’t it? Look at that sunset.”

“Where’s your rock garden?”

“Under the sea.”

“I want to see it.”

“Derrick,” I say, hooking my arm through his and leading him onto the sand. “Did you walk out here?”

He nods.

“Did you walk far?”

He nods again. Maybe he doesn’t live as close as I thought.

“Did you tell anyone where you’re going?”

He shakes his head, barely, and the question makes him uncomfortable. I glance at his back. “The beach is pretty, isn’t it?”

He doesn’t answer me, but I think he feels the same way. We stop short of the waves and I go ahead, letting them wash over my feet. The leaf stays put between my toes.

“C’mon. The water’s fine.”

Derrick trudges up beside me. Waves wash over his feet,

soaking his lower pantlegs.

"See? Not so bad."

Derrick goes deeper into the water, soaking his pants to his knees.

"Don't go—"

He laughs.

I've seen him smile, but this is the first time I have heard Derrick do an honest-to-God laugh. I want to get my phone and capture this moment.

He goes deeper into the water.

"Hey wait. You're still wearing your clothes."

He looks back at me like a child. I run up beside him and hold out my hands. He copies me.

"Feel the waves coming at us. Like this."

It's night before we're through. I buy Derrick an ice cream cone from a boardwalk stand and chatter rises from the beach bars and restaurants and a waiter sparks a furnace on a packed patio.

"Do you feel cold?" I ask. I take him to my car and give him my towel. It barely covers him. I open my car door and Derrick is hesitant to get in. "It's okay. I'll take you home."

"I can walk."

"It's too dark."

Derrick hesitates for another moment, and gets in. As I drive, I ask him where to go. He gives me directions like Straight or Left. We don't get on the freeway and Derrick isn't directing me anywhere close to the beach. I don't know this area but the houses are situated on hills. We find ourselves on an uphill street. No neighborhood watchsigns here. Just nice cars and houses whose appearances don't indicate their cost.

"Where to?" I ask.

"Up."

My little car groans. We're past his house when he points it out, a one-story with a garage and a Honda sitting in the driveway. The living room light is on, the curtains drawn shut.

I park at the curb. "Need me to come in?"

Derrick shakes his head.

"Did you have fun?"

Derrick nods.

"You can go there yourself now."

"And see your rock garden."

I chuckle. "Yes, and see my rock garden. The sea is a wonderful place."

"I won't let the mean octopus steal your rocks."

I give him a stern look. "Make sure you don't."

"Okay." He opens the door.

I tell him Good Night. He tells me Good Night too and shambles to his front door. He knocks three times before it opens and spends a few minutes talking to someone through the steel outer door. I can't tell what they look like. I watch Derrick's cheer fade or maybe it's my imagination filling in the gaps night has created. The outer door opens, Derrick goes in and both doors shut.

I drive uphill, turn around and head home.

I play my role as summer ends and the crowds dwindle. School begins and we're left with the normal weekday visitors plus the weekend swell. I chat with the kids, telling no one else about the rock garden, keeping an eye out for the white tank top and a big frame.

The weeks pass and I go back to Pacific Beach, where I walk along the wavefront till sunset, lifeguard trucks passing me and a young couple exchanging kisses on the sand. I take refuge from the nighttime chill in one of the beachside bars and order a Long Island Iced Tea.

The bar chatter is quiet. A voice rises above the din, "—I'm telling you, that's why—" and I turn my focus on two men a couple stools down. Shirtless surfers with bleached hair. I listen.

"—lifeguards not paying attention?"

"What could they do? Dude was like 400 pounds."

"He was not 400 pounds."

"Whatever he was, I'm telling you what I heard. I mean, lifeguards tried of course, but it was too late."

"Who'd you heard all this from?"

"Ph—"

I leave their conversation. I leave the bar.

I head to the beach.

The kissing couple has left. A ribbon of clouds on the horizon. I sit close to the boardwalk watching the waves and thinking. They could have been talking about anyone. I don't own a TV. I won't look it up on the news. Tomorrow I'll sit in my mermaid's chair and there he'll be, ready to tell me about the rock garden and how he protected my rocks from the mean octopus. If that mean octopus is going to listen to anyone, it's a big guy like him. I love the rock garden. I bet it's beautiful.

Broderick Eaton

Ann, Without

Ann without an *e* glares across the café at Anne with an *e*. Ann without an *e* has always wished her name had *e*. Anne with an *e* has an *e*. Anne with an *e* has it all.

Ann, without an *e* to echo the extra-ness of having an *e* with the same fanfare of townes and shoppes that are always olde and sound like fancy places to drink frappes and talk about jewels and extravagant vacations, stares hard at the chip in the lip of her brown mug. Anne with an *e* probably doesn't have a chip in her mug like this one that keeps funneling drops of coffee to land on Ann without an *e*'s lap before a good swallow has a chance to roll across her tongue. The coffee's bitter warmth is lost on the barren wasteland of her third-best pants with the purple thread running down the outside seam that she sewed in from the knee to the ankle, in an effort to get Thomas to look at her again, to get him to notice the results of all those new Zumba classes at the Y that she's been going to since he started working longer and longer hours and sometimes had one excuse or another to not come home at all.

The image of herself seated at the old Singer, bent over the pulled-apart denim and tough purple thread, working like her entire Home-Ec grade depended on the straightness of her lines and the closeness of her loops to hold the parts together, seems a little desperate now.

Well, she failed that project anyway. It was never about the pants. The seams came undone, but not of the pants, which she now wears with the same determined flash of color as any warpaint in history smeared from finger to cheek, but of the marriage they had stood on either side of and passively stared at for more years than either of them wanted to admit. They would have to acknowledging that they'd both let it deteriorate like a car left parked and unmoved until its tires begin to slacken, though no one notices until the frame suddenly reclines to one side more than the other and the terminal stain is discovered seeping into the pavement below.

Thomas now sits across from Anne with an *e*, his back to his wife without an *e* several tables away. Anne With looks up and makes brief eye contact with Ann Without. No sign of recognition or discomfort crosses her pretty face, so Thomas probably hasn't mentioned that he's married. That he's been married for fourteen years. Anne with an *e* doesn't know she's looking at her namesake who is one letter short of having everything.

Anne With lets her eyes drop back to the conversation she's having with Ann Without's husband, though her gaze nervously flits back up a couple of times to see if Ann Without is still looking at her.

She is.

Ann Without watches them order. Anne With crinkles the corners of her eyes at the waitress and Thomas shifts against the back of his chair in a way that allows him to slump a little as his groin pushes toward Anne With under the little round table as the waitress walks away smiling. Their legs touch and Anne's hand traces circles on his knee. It's a casual, familiar move.

What does she see in him? Ann Without can hardly fault her, though, because she herself was drawn to his borderline helplessness, his almost humanness, that made him appealing in the way that a sullen dog at the pound sits in the corner, unafraid but certainly not effusive, and somehow gets adopted by someone bent on rescuing a creature that might not actually feel itself in need of rescuing in the first place. From the moment Ann Without met Thomas, she saw him as a scribbled sort of person who didn't really know what he wanted ahead of time but definitely knew what he didn't want after the fact. The kind of man who passively bobs along the surface like a jellyfish without making any real decisions for himself, but who is also quick to point out when things aren't to his liking.

When she planned their honeymoon after giving up on getting his input, she was giddy to tell him about the cabin in the mountains that she'd reserved. A few days of being alone, just the two of them, sounded like a fine way to start their marriage.

"It sounds cold," was all he had to say.

She rebooked a cottage at the beach.

"It's always cloudy."

She scheduled four nights at a casino resort where they could eat buffet dinners and watch recognized singers wrap up their dwindling careers by performing for small audiences as cocktails and smoke made the rounds of the room. She chose not to tell him where they were going until they were on the road and he realized he didn't know the plan and it was easier for him to just go along with what Ann without an *e* had planned for them both.

Little did she know, this was just the preamble to a long lack of planning together, a day to day of Ann speaking for both of them and looking for his satisfaction in the results of her efforts. She made plans, he complained about the details, and they ended up doing things and usually having a decent time. It was okay, she told herself, it wasn't like they fought or worried about outcomes. By dropping her unrealistic vision of great, she found she could live with good enough.

And now he's ditching her without so much as the courtesy of a conversation. She saw the text on his phone this morning that confirmed what she'd already begun to assume. *Hi Love, Rosie's for lunch, 12:30?* But she didn't know the other woman had her name, only with that *e* that changes everything. And Anne not only has an *e,* but Ann's husband now, too.

Ann Without is startled back to herself by the appearance of the waitress's coffee pot under her nose to refill the chipped mug. She considers asking for a new mug that maybe doesn't have a spot in it that causes her pants to bear the discoloration of coffee, but she doesn't want to be a bother. She can just turn the mug around and drink from the other side.

The way she jumps in surprise makes her chair squeak against the floor and several people look up, including Anne, whose *e* practically hovers over her head like a halo. Even Thomas half turns her direction, enough that she is reminded how much face he has on so little territory of his head, leaving a remarkable amount of head without face. It's a little odd, distracting even, but she'd not really paid attention to the extent of it before. It was part and parcel of the whole Thomas. Now his small face feels like settling for so much less than great that she wonders how she ever convinced herself they

were good together at all. Maybe she deserves someone whose face is stretched into more normal proportions and whose eyes would meet hers as they spoke to one another.

Ann Without notes with cheerless, but nonetheless gratifying, satisfaction that he's not really looking at Anne With as they chat, either.

She wonders what Thomas might have noticed about herself that he just put up with. What did he settle for as their marriage crawled through the first decade and into the second? Probably the flashy threads she likes to sew into her pants. Definitely the way her body put weight on right around its center before it thought about adding some anywhere else. It was the very reason Thomas didn't want to have kids. Most men would probably worry about their lifestyle changing when kids come on scene, but Thomas was worried that her body would go through what is essentially a war with itself to produce an heir, giving up its tight borders for the softness of motherhood. The absence of life blooming from her is suddenly very evident. She'd always thought of herself as someone who would have a family, but she had allowed her desires to be flattened into the slow rolling wheels of Thomas's superficial concerns. Who was he to be superficial, anyway? Why did she ever agree to that? Her own weakness, the willingness to give up every bit of self to preserve the couple is beginning to glare through as darkly as the things Ann overlooked about Thomas.

So her midsection got a little thicker. Did Thomas read that as permission to take up with someone else? And damn, her legs were looking good from all that Zumba and her middle was slowly shrinking back to what it was a few years ago, but he hadn't even been home enough to notice.

Ann Without turns her gaze back across the café to inspect the other Anne, who is picking at a pile of fries drizzled with cheese sauce that arrived a moment ago, causing their conversation to stop while Thomas shoves a burger in his face. Ann Without adds Thomas's atrocious table manners to the list of things she's overlooked.

Anne with an *e* looks nice, but more a hair shirt than fur coat kind of woman, the kind just like Ann Without who would sacrifice herself to keep Thomas. Thomas really has

a type. Anne looks like someone with simple goals who would search for her dream home among a sea of identical floorplans and paint jobs in a development called Déjà View Estates and never see the irony. A girl who was holding out for a rock star in her twenties but, now pushing thirty, ends up settling for a part-time master of the bongos. She looks innocent enough that she might march unknowingly right up to death's door and ask to borrow a cup of sugar. She's an inexperienced gardener who plants what she thinks will be a towering sunflower but instead a vining hybrid squash grows from the soil and produces warty fruit that tastes . . . .

Ann Without is yanked from her thoughts by the realization that Anne With has stood up suddenly, letting her polite napkin fall from her lap and onto the floor, an action she seems not to notice as she turns and hurries across the diner to the back hall with blank silhouettes of a triangular skirted woman and a blocky man above the doorway. The neon sign above has burned out its "rest", leaving "rooms" glowing red against the pasty wall.

Ann Without is relieved that her husband's back is to her, so he won't see her grab her purse and follow Anne With into the bathroom.

As the heavy door sighs closed on its long hinge, Ann Without sees that there are only two stalls and one is already closed. Water drips into the single sink, tapping a spot that has darkened from years of this same drip slowly weakening the clean porcelain surface and leaving it stained. She steps through the open stall door and tries to figure out a reasonable position to assume in the confined space as she works out why she followed Anne in here in the first place. She sets paper on the seat and sits with her pants still up and her purse on her lap.

In the next stall, a trickling sound gives way to silence. But only for a few seconds.

"No . . . no no nonononononono . . . ."

Anne With is whispering frantically. The toilet paper dispenser spins around and around. In the ensuing silence, Ann Without thinks she hears the labored breathing of someone holding back sobs.

Thomas would hate to hear this. Not because he empathizes

with someone who is in pain and suffers alongside them with a supportive—if obligatory—arm around the shoulders, but because he dreads the lasso that someone else's pain in his vicinity drops around him, dragging him like a helpless calf to the branding iron into helping another human sort out their emotions. She almost giggles at the image of Thomas with his arms pinned to his sides by the tightening rope of Anne's upset here in the bathroom.

Ann Without waits silently as Anne With pulls her sobs under control and commences with sniffling, enough that Ann Without can tell the other Anne's nose is dripping at a higher speed than her body can manage on its standard breathing schedule. Ann Without wonders why Anne With doesn't just wad up a tad of that ream of toilet paper she's just unleashed and use it as tissue for her nose.

What feels like a very long time ticks by, marked by the persistent drips landing in the sink every few seconds and the periodic sniffs from Anne With. Ann Without shifts her legs and weight to make it sound like something legitimate is happening in her stall. She pulls at the toilet paper theatrically, then folds it carefully back over and over itself to rest on top of the roll, knowing no one will ever use this because it's already been touched. She thinks about ripping off a few squares and suggestively pretending to blow her nose into it. But why would Ann want to help this woman who is having lunch with *her* husband and tracing love circles onto his leg under the table?

Rummaging commences in Anne With's stall. It pauses, then continues at a more frantic pace.

"Do you have a tampon?"

The way she keeps getting lost in her own head makes Ann Without like a nervous fawn alone in the woods today, because she jumps again at the question and the hand that appears beneath the partition.

Aha! Anne with an *e* doesn't have everything after all. Ann Without considers the small, lightly callused and very utilitarian hand open and asking under the metal divider. She thinks about the battered-wrapper tampon lying somewhere at the bottom of her own purse. The kind every woman has unless she is past the time of fruitful delights or is in fruit at

the moment and doesn't need one for a long time.

"Eh, no, sorry."

The words quietly escape her mouth, lingering on the *nooooooo*, before she has a chance to ratify the final bill of sale this statement represents. She's shut down the possibility of conversation before she even decided whether she wanted to talk to Anne.

The hand pulls back to its side and disappears. The unfurling of yards of toilet paper begins again. Ann Without is certain Anne With has pulled sufficient paper out to float away on her own tissue raft.

After Anne With has passed so many minutes of stuffing and rustling in the next stall that Ann Without's legs have gone a shade of numb just shy of cold dead stone, there is a semi-triumphant completion to a zip in Anne With's stall that sounds strained against what it means to contain, and then a pause before the feet turn around to face the toilet.

Ann Without feels her ears tense in preparation for the assault of sound she expects from the imminent flush and its echoes off the hard surfaces that surround the capsules that contain the two Ann(e)s together, yet apart. Instead, a cavernous silence beats its nothingness against her eardrums and the drip from the sink sounds louder than before. Its rhythmic tick . . . tick . . . tick marks seconds that threaten to turn into minutes and Anne With hasn't moved. Neither, accordingly, has Ann Without.

The sole of her shoe squeaks quietly against the polished concrete floor as Ann Without leans forward to peer under the divider. She sees the deep plum flats that Anne With chose to meet her lover in and Ann Without can't disagree with this choice. They're very cute shoes. Just as Ann has to brace a hand against the metal door to stop herself from falling onto the floor, from the stall next to her the slowest flush she has ever heard from a public toilet begins to swirl and finishes with an echoing roar.

The latch slides open and the plum flats walk haltingly out of the stall. As the sound of water filling the bowl subsides, Ann Without hears faint beeps being dialed. The bathroom's rigid surfaces echo even the sound of the phone ringing on the other end until a click and a cartoonishly distant voice

picks up.

"Momma, I'm not pregnant anymore," Anne With whispers into the phone.

A wail tremolos through the phone but is quickly drowned out by Anne With keening through clenched teeth until she gets her tears under control. The voice on the other end makes noises that lilt upward at the end in a question and Anne With answers in a shaky whisper.

"I know," she shudders into the phone, "we only figured it out last week." She draws a shaky breath. "He was going to leave her because of it. But now . . . ." Her words trail off into wet sounds somewhere between moaning and weeping.

Somewhere far beyond what Ann Without considers her world, a great tilting jolts her sideways and out of earshot of the conversation outside her stall door. The cold of the porcelain she sits on that has crept into her deadened legs flashes into her core and freezes Ann in place. The planet's spin, the way life courses around each being's movement, is suddenly very evident to her stopped body. The stagnation of her own life, the pause of her body's patterns and desires so that she could wrap her existence around Thomas, becomes a looming wall that she never saw until this moment when she has left that reality to enter an unrecognized space in the café restroom where she sits fully clothed on a toilet she doesn't need with her husband's lover on the other side of the thin metal partition.

She knew. Anne with an *e* knew about her.

The Anne outside the stall door continues making noises and eventually ends her conversation. The Ann inside the stall feels her dizziness pass and hugs the leather purse on her lap to her chest as an anchor to keep herself tied to the cold surfaces of this reality.

Ann Without listens to the faucet spray water into the sink and overtake the sounds of Anne With sniffling. Good. Let her wash away what is on her hands. The paper towel dispenser grates and after a few minutes of dabbing sounds, the door hisses open and groans back closed.

This time, in the new silence, the muffled sobs come from Ann. Ann without a husband or a child or even any dignity left.

The shrapnel of her previous existence settles onto the unforgiving white tiles around her. The purple threads down the outside of her third-favorite jeans, the ones she altered to get Thomas to look at her again, burn into her skin. The lazy naivete they represent weighs against her legs. It was never about what she did to get noticed—he was never going to see her fitness, the thread in her jeans, or the style of her hair. He might not even know to this day whether her name has the flourish of an *e* on the end of it or not.

Ann Without rummages through her purse for the nail clippers that roll around the bottom somewhere with the unoffered tampon. The folded metal tool lands in her hand with a satisfying chill, and this satisfaction grows as she uses it to snip open and tear at the end of the purple threads on the hem of her pants. As she pulls at the loops higher and higher, the jeans bell open wide from her ankle to her knee. The threads stop at her knees, and so does she. This movement has brought the blood rushing back into her legs and she rises to her feet with the ends of her pants swaying loosely around them.

The chill she felt from the porcelain has drifted into her chest and formed a knot there. She wads the purple threads into a similar tangle and digs through her purse for the tampon. Then she wrestles off the ring Thomas bought, the smallest diamonds available at the jeweler that day she still remembers with a warm glow that is quickly fading in a new clarity that allows Ann Without to see that their excitement was really only hers and Thomas had just been along for the ride. The stones had long ago stopped glinting in even the brightest light. She pushes the ring against the tampon, but it won't fit around the wrapper and applicator. Once she removes those, the gold band slides effortlessly over the cotton bundle. It looks much better there, on the plain white wadding with its little braided mouse tail. She feels an unexpected relief in recognizing that fighting to stay married to Thomas is no more effective than harvesting snow. It's just making her cold with no yield.

Purple ball with tampon and ring wadded into her fist and her third-favorite jeans now flatteringly tight around her thighs and swinging widely around her ankles, Ann Without

strides from the bathroom and back out into the brightly lit restaurant. She's already halfway across the room of tables when Anne With, seated back next to Thomas, looks up and her eyes grow wide as the pieces fall into place in her mind, as though the growing acknowledgement is too much for her cranium to contain. Thomas turns in response and leaps out of his chair when he sees his wife.

"Ann(e)!" Both with an *e* and without.

Two Ann(e)s look back at him. It's the most animated Ann has ever seen her husband and the look on his face is one she'll remember for a long time to come: a sudden swarm of details and lies and realizations like so many biting flies he can't wave away. A shiver of delight at his surprise and discomfort thrills her spine and motivates her forward to their table where the congealing remains of their lunch lie in puddles of their own seepage. She doesn't bother looking at the other Anne's face because she knows the pain already etched into the space between her carefully cultivated brows.

Keeping her eyes locked onto Thomas's to glean more satisfaction from his shock, Ann unfurls her hand to reveal the messy nest of purple threads with the dull shine of her ring on its white carriage in the center.

"You might need this."

The pile rolls from her palm to land with a muffled metallic clunk next to Thomas's plate, the end of the tampon string dipped into a spot of ketchup. Perfect.

She spins and marches toward the light pouring through the glass front door, dropping a five next to her half full chipped mug on her way past, and revels in the silence at the table where Anne with an *e* and Thomas stare after her. Ann without an *e* thought Anne with an *e* had everything. She was wrong about so many things, but of one idea she is sure, and this thought propels her out into the sunshine. Ann is better without.

Olivier FitzGerald

The Woodfall Home

SquidToad sneaks in after dark. Most nights, he wears an overlarge wife-beater, gym shorts, and hotel slippers that whisper quietly. His buzzed head is capped by a Red Sox hat. It's an every week thing, the burglaries, sometimes more than once. He walks until he finds a new house and then tries the back door. If it's locked, he's gone. If he hears a noise, he's gone. He's never been seen, but once, on the way home after pinching a wallet, a policeman stopped him. SquidToad didn't get in trouble. The cop just thought it was too late for an eleven-year-old to be out alone.

Popponesset Island is familiar territory. Tucked away in the Nantucket Sound, it's separated from mainland Cape Cod by the narrow Popponesset Creek, passable over a bridge only wide enough for a single car. It's an autumn night when SquidToad crosses. Boats from the marina laze in the tide. SquidToad imagines diving from the bridge and floating with them, but knows he can't. Squid never taught him how to swim. She promised to years ago, before Toad moved in.

The island is a closed community. The owner of the Patriots has a mansion here, somewhere far from the bridge, where the normal houses are. In the scrub forest off the road, SquidToad claws through bramble and black oak, his path lit by an iPhone he can't unlock. Moss and salty dirt extend to the brink of the sound. It's too cold to be sleeveless. SquidToad's fingers tremble like a bad dream.

After a while, he stops outside a house. The front gate is made of steel with new-gold spirals. Its topmost portion is styled into a curve, and the lower part splits to form bronze flowers. Gravel from the driveway crunches noisily under SquidToad's feet. He reminds himself of the rules:

Watch out for nosy neighbors.

Watch out for dog walkers.

SquidToad circles the house's wide, spacious porch. He dodges a leaf falling from the steeply sloped roof and stays low to avoid bay windows. The backyard has a yacht anchored

to a private dock. It's so different from the boat SquidToad lives on. This one has two floors, and portholes paned with glass instead of duct tape. The gangplank clunks as he steps aboard.

All of a sudden, a man stumbles forward. He is on the opposite side of the ramp in a white button-down with white slacks and a captain's hat. SquidToad is blinded by the yellow dust of a flashlight. He turns around, running as fast as his slippers allow. He doesn't see the mesh pool cover, indistinguishable from the lawn in the darkness. Before he can process his mistake, the mesh gives, and SquidToad falls in.

He is submerged. The water is a freezing, gelatin-like substance, much thicker than he would have imagined. Toad always says swimming is a waste of time since there's nothing valuable underwater. The Red Sox hat and iPhone float away as SquidToad flails, helplessly trying to latch onto something. Before his legs give out, his fingers find the stainless-steel rung of a ladder. He wills his body to the pool's edge and pulls himself free.

Drenched, he goes around the house, past the gate, and back into the driveway. Except now there is a car. Teenagers sit on the hood while music plays. Their laughter dissolves into the night as they see SquidToad and point, screaming what-the-fuck as if he is an animal, wild enough to startle but too small to fear.

He tears into the brush. Without the light from his phone, SquidToad can barely see, cutting his hands on low-hanging branches and offshoots. He comes out to a different yard, this one large and pristinely landscaped. There is a pergola decorated with buntings of the American flag. Across the yard is a single-floor building forming a horseshoe around a pond. A sliding door encircled by Christmas lights has been left open.

SquidToad pauses for a moment to catch his breath. He whispers a rule to himself: No houses with lights on—especially Christmas lights. He never steals from houses with Christmas lights. Inside are families laughing as they argue over boardgames or snap pictures by the tree. Fireplaces crackle. Carols play softly over the radio. Those are the things

that can't be taken. The things he wants most.

A police siren sounds in the distance. Its warning gets louder with each turn. Toad only has one rule, but he reminds SquidToad of it every night: Don't get caught.

The door makes a rubbery squeak as SquidToad closes it behind him. Though the building seemed normal from the outside, the inside is expansive. Instead of a hallway, there is asphalt on the ground separated by double yellow lines like on a road. On opposites sides of the road are lawns separated by picket fences and front yards made of fake grass. The yards are occupied by small houses, each with doors and mailboxes. There are windows too, though their curtains are drawn.

The ceiling has stars and a moon illuminated by fluorescent lights that cast a dim glow. Under the synthetic beam, SquidToad spots a pill bottle resting on a swing bench. He reads the peeled label: *Mematine, 20mg three times a day*. He looks inside and sees a dozen or so pills, which he shakes into his pocket.

"Are you the new postman?"

An old woman stands at the doorway of one of the homes. Her hair is gnarled with knots. She wears large glasses and a moth-eaten nightgown with loops for a missing cinch. Without looking at SquidToad, she walks out carrying a broom and sweeps a patch of grass in no apparent need of sweeping.

"Nice to meet you, mister postman," she says, her gaze lingering on his hotel slippers, soaked and streaking mud. "Should you be doing deliveries at midnight?" The woman leans on the broom, presumably waiting for SquidToad to answer. When he doesn't, she shrugs. "No mailbag, no uniform," she says. "Bad first day, huh?"

SquidToad can only stare.

"Come have some milk," the old woman says. Rubber crumb infills are caught in her broom's brush. They dribble free as she spins the handle. "Wash away the mistakes, mister postman."

Inside, the house is mostly empty. The space is split into a front room and another room separated by a door. The front

room, where SquidToad and the woman are, has a table and a single armchair facing a television. There is no kitchen or bathroom, not even a microwave. It looks like the waiting room at a doctor's office. Never before has he entered a home without anything worth stealing. It's as if the space was abandoned long ago, the furniture shadows of a life scaled down.

There is an empty bottle of milk on the floor near an all-white trashcan. SquidToad picks the bottle up and sticks his nose over the opening, cringing at its smell. He presses his eye against the rim and sees that it's empty, the inside a ceremony of light glistening through the glass. SquidToad remembers the Christmas decorations Squid used to line the boat with before Toad decided to sell them—the lights, and the generator they ran on too.

SquidToad's tank top leaks chlorinated water. There is a twig stuck in the band of his gym shorts. He unfolds a towel on a chair and dries off before taking a seat opposite the old woman. In her hands is a notebook lined with graph paper labelled ESCAPE PLAN. There are shaky outlines of the facility's halls, with homes labelled numerically and exits highlighted in yellow.

"Do you have any mail?" she asks. She isn't paying him much attention, but instead stares at the notebook. "I haven't heard from my son in a while. He doesn't like to go too long without writing."

"I'm not . . . I don't—"

"He and his wife moved to Boston a few years ago," she says, absentmindedly clicking her nails against the table.

SquidToad peels the towel off. "I have to go."

"My husband, whew, he's a great guy," she says. "He's a . . . sorry no, my *son*, my son is a wonderful boy. Only he's a man now of course. Lovely, tall, handsome," she says. "He builds them if you can believe it. Isn't that a kick?"

"Builds what?" asks SquidToad.

"Boats," the old woman says emphatically, as if she'd told him a hundred times already. She bundles the hem of her robe, clutching loose threads in her fist, varicose veins pulsing purple and red. "Not those sea monsters you see in

the marina belonging to billionaires. No, he makes the real thing," she says. "Fishing boats. You ever been on a fishing boat before?"

SquidToad stole a tackle box and rod once. Squid promised she would string and rig it so they could catch great whites together. Toad warned he'd hook their lips if they wasted any of the bait. Everything was gone the next day.

"My son's name is Jacob," the old woman says. "And my wife's name . . . no, sorry, *his* wife's name . . ."

"It's okay," SquidToad says. "He sounds nice. They both do."

"What about you, mister postman?" she asks. "You have a name?"

"SquidToad," he tells her. The empty milk bottle sits on the table between them, untouched.

"I'm Ms. Meriam," the old woman says. "Pour yourself a glass, SquidToad." She nods in the direction of the bottle, oblivious to its emptiness, gesturing with a weak flourish at something—cups that don't exist, a pot of honey that was never there. "You look like you could use it."

SquidToad reaches for the bottle. He passes it between one hand and the other, unsure what to do. Ms. Meriam's eyes widen in response.

"What kind of a name is SquidToad?"

It was forcibly applied. Older boys at the trailer park teased him for always being around Squid, clinging to her like driftwood in open water. They called him Mini Squid until Toad showed up. No one could believe he wasn't SquidToad's real dad: same blue eyes, same buzzed black hair, same dimples. They even spoke similarly, SquidToad's voice unusually gritty for his age. And so the name SquidToad was born.

He tells her something, but Ms. Meriam isn't listening. She stares at the notebook, blinking as if just having woken. When she looks back up, there is something there that was missing before. She flexes her finger joints against the table's boundary. "They've been talking in the local news about houses getting burgled," she says. "Know anything about that?"

SquidToad stands.

"Easy now, I'm not accusing you of anything," she says.

"But"—she pauses to clear her throat—"I have a deal for you. If you help me get out of this place, I'll pretend we never saw each other. You can even keep those pills you stole."

SquidToad puts the pills on the table, backpedaling. He knocks into the television set. It's one of those you never see anymore, heavy as an anvil with antennas sticking out the top. Its frame and screen are plastic and wobble on impact.

Ms. Meriam says, "They call this place a home and make it look like one, but it's not." She closes the notebook. "I've tried to sneak out before, but I lose track of what I'm doing," she says. "This notebook has everything outlined to get me on a bus to Boston. All I need is someone to help me, in case I . . . get confused."

"I—"

"If you get me to Jacob," she says, "I can forget all about you breaking in. I'm good at forgetting."

"I can't," SquidToad says.

"Don't you take things that aren't yours somewhere else?" Ms. Meriam says. "That's all I'm asking. Just take me to the bus terminal."

There's a long pause. Behind her is a picture of a lighthouse, its gilt frame the only embellishment on a wall otherwise cracked and empty.

South of Popponesset Creek and the Nantucket Sound, away from neighborhoods both rich and poor, there is a private beach. It was originally owned by a real estate developer before he lost everything in the recession. The beachfront resort stopped construction, leaving behind a skeleton of softwood and pink fiberglass that became a popular haunt for addicts. Eventually, someone got shot in the driveway, making it impossible to sell. The property is abandoned now, though the sign for Sunrise Beach still remains.

Squid claims she found Sunrise Beach first, but Toad says different. Before, they lived in a trailer park over by Bass River. It was there that Squid taught SquidToad how to slip into other trailers unnoticed, how to find things of value quickly, and how to take without guilt. "It's not like stealing or whatever," Squid would insist after bedtime prayer, when she would paint her nails neon green, the smell of acetone

sharp and heady. “They just got what we need.”

Toad did the fencing. He’d been to prison a few times and wasn’t allowed to leave the state or drive a car. He looked the same as most of the men in the trailer park, with squinting eyes and a gut able to table three beers at once. There was nothing fun about Toad. He spoke little, swung often, and lived for money, which he never seemed to have.

No doing this. Watch out for that. SquidToad learned the rules of survival not in the homes of others, but his own trailer. For every night lying with Squid in their twin-sized bed guessing at Jeopardy, there was a night that Toad got too fucked up. Whenever that happened, SquidToad added to his list. Before rules became rules, they were lessons.

SquidToad stole constantly. When he came back empty-handed, he was called a liability, an unnecessary burden that was “anchoring everyone down.” As if SquidToad was the one who would shoot bottles off the park’s storage lockers. As if SquidToad stayed up all night doing whippits in lawn chairs. As if SquidToad smashed their neighbor’s head in, causing them to have to leave Bass River for good. In the end, it made no difference what SquidToad came back with. He was jetsam either way.

When the three of them fled to Sunrise Beach, the trailer got left behind, its aluminum shell traded for open air. At night, the beach came alive. The moon and stars spangled, the current crawling the shoreline, froth sticking to the seaweed like spit. Everything was in motion, the wind, the sea. Even the dunes seemed active, shrugging their crests into different shapes when no one was looking.

Squid stole a boat from the nearest marina. When she brought it back to the beach, Toad swam out and climbed aboard, taking the wheel and steering the runabout ashore. It crashed into the sand at full speed, as if he wanted to get stuck. But Squid said he didn’t mean for it. At the end of the day, Squid said, Toad was just high.

SquidToad doesn’t get back to Sunrise Beach until morning. He has nothing to show for his trouble but the towel Ms. Meriam gave him. When he climbs the surrounding dunes, the beach is empty. They’ve been living out of the boat for over a year and it has never been taken to water. Not even

when high tide creeps up the shoreline. The towel blows away as his feet sink under the sand.

There isn't much left behind. A couple toilet paper rolls. A Diet Coke can missing its pull tab. And a Bruins beanie Squid used to wear when it rained. SquidToad puts it on. Pebbles rub against his buzzed scalp, but he yanks it down anyway. There's a hole in the sand from where the boat once was. It's rimmed with toxic green kelp and a collection of shells, one of which is moving. SquidToad watches the hermit crab scuttle towards the stagnant remains of a wave. The water gets clearer as it ebbs, leaving nothing but wet sand to prove it was ever there at all.

By noon, SquidToad walks to an open-air shopping center. There's a Vineyard Vines and L.L. Bean and Williams Sonoma all painted white to match the beach-town aesthetic. Everything is clean. Cars are plugged into Tesla charging stations while people wander store to store with their pumpkin spice lattes.

SquidToad hasn't eaten for over a day. His stomach twists and screams. He waits by a garbage can for an hour before a couple walks out of a Mexican restaurant. They throw away a half-eaten burrito, its tin foil wrap like fish scales. SquidToad dives inside and retrieves it, stuffing his face as onlookers shake their heads. Someone is on their cellphone, watching him pointedly, so he takes off before he can finish.

SquidToad doesn't mind it so much, trekking long distances. But his slippers are barely staying on his feet, the upper vamps torn to shreds, the midsoles split from their binding tape. He throws them in a roadside ditch and cuts across a golf course, careful to keep out of sight from a cluster of carts.

When he finally gets to Bass River, it's obvious Squid and Toad aren't there. The spot where their trailer used to be is empty, replaced by a trash heap. There's a baby stroller on its side, a pair of discarded flip flops, and a rusty keg with what looks suspiciously like a knife stuck in its center. A car with no doors or tires has been left abandoned. SquidToad puts on the flip flops and crawls inside. He scavenges a bottle of water with gum in it.

"Hey!" shouts a man, approaching the car, where SquidToad

is sitting in the driver's seat. "You're that pickpocket."

"No," says SquidToad.

"Like Hell you aren't," the man says, his voice rising with operatic insistence. He straightens a John Deere hat and wipes his hands on a pair of blue jeans. "You and your parents are pond scum. Hear me?" He looks around. "Where are they, huh? Your dad owes me money."

"Toad's not my dad," SquidToad says.

There's no steering wheel left on the dash, only a metal shaft where it used to attach. SquidToad pretends to wrap his hands around the wheel, turning as if in hot pursuit, driving away from the man and Bass River, into the ocean, where he can float until he finds an island with enough fruit and water that he won't ever have to steal again, can just pick the trees and drink out of crystal blue pools, no more trash cans and gum-tinged backwash. On the island, he can't be left behind, or be seen when he wants to stay hidden. He can live without rules.

"I'm calling the park manager," the man says.

SquidToad tries to get out of the car, but the man is blocking his path. He stretches out broad, flabby arms—"forget it"—but SquidToad has been penned in before, has evaded the flying fists of Toad in tighter corners than this. Looking up, the moonroof has been smashed out. He grabs the frame above his head and pulls himself free faster than the man can stop him.

Don't get caught, he tells himself as he disappears into the surrounding woods. Don't get caught, don't get caught, don't get caught.

Popponesset Island has a copse of pine trees that feed the ocean. Some are rooted further inland, while others are already on the beach, dry and toppled. They don't have leaves and look more like day-old chicken bones.

"They're called woodfalls," Squid told SquidToad when he asked about them. "They sink to the bottom of the ocean after the trees get knocked over by storms. They're basically like mini-houses," she explained. "Deep sea animals live on them and eat the wood for food."

SquidToad had asked if the animals were stealing from the

forest, but Squid shook her head. “Stealing is only stealing if you don’t need what you take.”

But he doesn’t need the iPhone he stole, or the Red Sox hat, or pill bottles, those fancy watches. What he needs are things that can’t be taken, like in the houses with Christmas lights. Things only she can provide. To him, she is the boat on Sunrise Beach, or a tree waiting to get washed out to sea. SquidToad sees her face everywhere.

It’s around dinnertime when SquidToad gets back to the building on Popponesset Island. He knows the hour because the sun has set, and his stomach is frustrated again. There are clods of dirt stuck between his toes from hiding in bushes. Instead of going in through the back, SquidToad tries the front entrance.

He arrives in a reception area. By the door is a table with pamphlets for Popponesset Assisted Living, with a picture of the facility on a sunny day. A helix-shaped light fixture hangs over the front desk. There is a flatscreen TV that flashes a message: WE ARE HERE BECAUSE WE CARE. On a swivel seat at the desk sits a man in blue scrubs typing away on a laptop, the clack of keys syncopating with wind chimes SquidToad cannot place.

“Excuse me,” SquidToad says.

The man pulls headphones from his ears and looks up. “Can I help you?”

“Yes,” SquidToad says, feeling compelled by the nice furniture and clean floors not to say *yeah*. “I’m here to see Ms. Meriam.”

“Oh!”

Out comes a clipboard with a form pinned beneath the clamp. A pen is thrust into SquidToad’s hand eagerly. “Great—this is great! She, ah, doesn’t get visitors often. I didn’t know she had a grandson.”

SquidToad tries to say that they aren’t related, but the man is already out of his seat, talking about how important it is for visitors to come regularly, how Popponesset Assisted Living, or PAL as he calls it, gets more people through the door than the last home he worked at, but it’s never really enough. Ms. Meriam deserves the attention, he says. She’s a sweetheart, an arrowhead, a genius, a little devil.

The man adjusts the nametag on his shirt inscribed: Jacob. "Don't tell her I talked her up," he says hurriedly. "She's mad at me for taking poker night away this week. You know how she can be."

"And also," Jacob goes on, "don't take it personal if she doesn't recognize you." Coming around from behind the desk, he leans in. "Your granny is my favorite, but she doesn't take care. You know what I mean when I say *take care*?"

Jacob doesn't wait for a response.

"Just too wild sometimes," he says. "At first I thought her plan to sneak out was funny. Gave her something to do." He rubs his sole patch listlessly. "I even got her a notebook so she could map out her escape like a . . . whatchamacallit . . . like in that Shawshank movie!" He laughs. "Your granny is so funny," he says. "But sometimes she goes too far. She doesn't understand how old eighty-nine is. She thinks she's a young girl."

It's only then that Jacob pauses, looking at SquidToad as if seeing him for the first time. He sniffs. "You need a shower, kid."

The residential hall is more active than before. There are old people out on their lawns, reading on park benches, playing checkers. Under a fake blue sky are the same miniature suburban houses, fit with white picket fences and slatted porticos. The street and grass look no less real by day. SquidToad and Jacob walk past octogenarians whistling to bird chirps, but like the wind chimes, there are no birds to be seen.

They stop at a familiar door. Of all the houses, this is perhaps the least convincing. Someone knocked a hole in the front window since SquidToad was last here. There's an odor of turpentine and wax coming from within. Toad stinks the boat up with a similar smell when he cleans his guns.

Jacob taps the door. Pushing it open ever so slightly, he whispers—Ms. Meriam, Ms. Meriam—to no response. He looks back to SquidToad before flicking on the light. The table is situated in the middle of the thinly carpeted floor, the fabric too frail to mask concrete underneath. Ms. Meriam is sat in the same place as earlier. There is shoe polish on the table. A dirty rag in her hand.

Jacob excuses himself.

"Hello," says Ms. Meriam. The nightgown has been replaced with a ruffled shirt. "What would you like?"

SquidToad takes a seat at the table. He stays where he is for a while, considering himself, the scratches on his arms, cuts on his feet. His tank top is in tatters, gym shorts torn. Jacob was right—he stinks.

"I'm here to break you out," says SquidToad.

"It's a lovely night," says Ms. Meriam. She speaks forcefully, drawing out her words.

SquidToad can sense an imbalance but doesn't know what to make of it. Instead, he tries again. "You wanted me to get you out of here," he says.

Ms. Meriam asks, "Do I know you?"

SquidToad starts to cry.

The room is beaten up. The lighthouse picture has been yanked to the floor, and the television is off its stand, antennas snapped and scattered. Ms. Meriam reaches for her notebook but doesn't open it. "My son Jacob is on his way," she says. "He's going to take me to Boston on his fishing boat. A real one, with a big ice box and radar. You're welcome to come if you'd like."

"I used to live on a boat," SquidToad says. He wipes snot with his hand, but it sticks to him. "It's gone now."

"Don't worry about it," she says. "A house is temporary. Seasonal for lots of people in the Cape. We build them, we break them. Sometimes the ocean even takes them away. When the weather's bad, waves pull them right off the beach."

"Do they ever come back?" SquidToad asks.

Ms. Meriam pantomimes taking out a cigarette. There is nothing between her index and middle finger, but she holds them to her mouth regardless, igniting the empty space between with a nonexistent lighter. "Not usually," she says.

SquidToad tries to tell her there is nothing there, but his throat is closed, and his heart is pounding like a shutter in wind. His chest tightens. His vision blurs.

The room fills with smoke. It becomes so thick he can barely see Ms. Meriam at the table. She is unaffected, her voice growing louder with every puff. The rules circle his mind: watch out for pets, watch out for alarms. No talking, no

houses with the lights on or TV playing. And most important of all—don't get caught. Don't get caught, don't get caught, don't get caught.

SquidToad tries to run, but the chair bottom is stuck to him. He struggles, reaching out for the bottle of milk, suddenly reappearing. It falls when he touches it, spilling endlessly over the table and floor. He tries to twist free as the milk fills the room past his knees, then chest, its form no different than the swimming pool, thick and gelatinous.

Toad appears. He floats comfortably, buoyed by his beer belly. SquidToad is barely able to keep his head above the rising milk, bobbing in and out, screaming for help. "Nothing valuable underwater," Toad says. SquidToad's arms have turned into anchors. They drag him down until he can no longer see the surface. There is only Toad looming over the abyss.

Without warning, everything is back. His panic attack eases, slowly at first, and then completely. There is no milk bottle and no Toad. Only two people in an empty room. SquidToad goes to the lighthouse painting and puts it back on the wall. He lifts the broken TV and sets it upright.

"Thank you," Ms. Meriam says. "You shouldn't bother though. Jacob will be here any minute. He doesn't mind picking up."

"No problem," says SquidToad. He goes over to her side of the table, and when she is not looking, takes the notebook, its delusions a constant reminder of what will never be. She is not so different from himself, SquidToad realizes. They are both weathering storms, hoping high winds uproot them to a better place. As he slips the notebook under the band of his shorts, he promises himself it is the last thing he will steal.

Sunrise Beach is quiet that night. A light breeze blows east, gulls squawking across the shadow of a settled sun. SquidToad climbs the dunes on his hand and knees. When he reaches the top, he pushes away a curtain of beachgrass. Stars across the night sky bounce their rays off the sand.

The boat has returned. It's grounded well into the backshore, still wet from its time in the water. The deck is lined by a series of wires leading to the old generator Toad

had previously sold. He is nowhere to be seen.

Around the opposite side of the boat, Squid emerges. She is wrapped in a puffy jacket and moves with a limp. As she goes, a coil of Christmas lights unfurls, whites and reds and greens twinkling across the hull. SquidToad can make out a crab as it shimmies from the dune toward a stranded piece of woodfall. The rising tide laps the lumber. SquidToad slides down the dune and picks up the crab, cupping it in his hand delicately to ensure it reaches home before being carried out to sea.

D.E. Hardy

Media Studies

In retrospect, the tip off should have been that it was Wednesday of School Shooter Preparedness Week. Every year, it was a total joke. Not the threat of school shootings—that shit was terrifying—but Preparedness Week.

Monday meant a school assembly with a surprise guest, who was always the sheriff. He would proceed to scare the living piss out of us for half an hour—get us thinking a Navy-SEAL-level-ninja-killer could basically drop from the sky and start shooting at any moment—and then end his lecture of terror by assuring that the simple act of locking classroom doors could save us. Um, noted.

On the Tuesday, some dude from student government would make the rounds and restock all the preparedness supplies, which just meant the painter's buckets that sat next to each teacher's desk, the ones filled with hockey pucks, ropes, and other BS, would get fresh bottles of water. Hydration was definitely going to matter when we were all bleeding out.

Then, Wednesday, or sometimes Thursday, we would get to practice the elusive skill of door-locking in a *random* shooter drill. Even the teachers rolled their eyes at this.

And that was it. That was Preparedness Week. Total joke.

Junior year was different though. The assembly started with the principal giving an impassioned speech about how we didn't take this seriously. How we were complacent and didn't understand life was cruel.

"Jesus," Kevin whispered to me and Eli mid-way through.

"Seriously," I agreed.

"Pace yourself, Dr. Ranklin," Eli said, "it's only 8:30 in the morning."

But Dr. Ranklin was on a rant. We all needed to be vigilant. "Look for loners who need help. Be that help." He said it like ten times. *Be that help.*

"That was intense," Kevin said as we left the auditorium.

"He does realize that if there's ever actually a shooter, we're fucked, right?" Eli said.

"Sure," I said, "but who's really shooting up a school on the Peninsula?"

"Dude," Kevin said, "that's elitist."

I shrugged. I mean, the Bay Area wasn't really known for its gun culture.

Also, we were elitist.

I'm not saying I never worried. The whole age-of-the-school-shooter thing freaked me out as much as anyone else. The threat was real, but not *real*-real. Way more likely you'd get in a car accident or fall down the stairs or get cancer or something. Shootings happened to kids somewhere else, like in Kansas or wherever. Not here. Except, that's probably what those kids thought too. I don't know. It was something that had my attention but wasn't in my day-to-day thoughts. I had homework and my parents and my grades and fencing practice and my stupid lost AirPod that my mom was going to make me pay for and the fact that Liya Abebe still didn't see me that way.

Anyway, that was Monday. On Tuesday, banners appeared all over school, saying *Be Vigilant* and *Reach Out* and *Say Something*.

"Wow," Kevin said as we walked down the hall, "Dr. Ranklin's on fire this year."

"The man must be going through something," Eli said, "because this is just creepy."

And it was. The hall was spooky quiet. Like the banners had taken over everyone's minds. There was some laughter here and there, but it was all nerves, like nobody trusted what was funny.

We passed Jayden Baral at his locker. Not talking to anyone or on his phone or anything. Just standing with his back to his locker, staring at a drinking fountain across the way.

Jayden was the kind of dude I used to look at and think I knew his whole story. In elementary school, he was the kid who always got hot lunch and actually ate it. *That* kid. Rumor was his mom had stabbed a cop in the eye and that his dad was on death row. But then sometimes he lived with his dad, so who knew what was real. It was sad. But like, what could you do? By high school, he predictably wore hoodies with pot leaves on them and kept his hair in cornrows, which was kind

of off—he was half Indian/half Jewish—but I wasn't going to be the genius to explain appropriation. Dude had half a foot and forty pounds on me, easy.

"Hey," I said to Kevin and Eli after we passed Jayden, "if we were going to have a school shooter, who do you think it would be?"

"What kind of fucked up question is that?" Eli asked.

I pointed at a banner that said *Be Vigilant*. "You think Jayden?"

"No way," Kevin said.

"I don't know," I said, "he's kind of textbook troubled-teen."

"Um," Eli said, drawing out the vowel, "he's more mom's-boyfriend-punches-him-in-the-face-from-time-to-time troubled, not sort-of-autistic-plays-a-lot-of-video-games-in-the-dark troubled."

"True," I said. But I guess my voice didn't sound convincing because Eli continued: "Also, not to be racist or whatever, but he's Jewish. We don't do that."

"Yup," Kevin added, "*and* South Asian." Then to me: "No offense, man, Jayden's just not white enough to shoot up a school."

I said, "None taken," but still I couldn't think of anyone who needed help more than Jayden. Not that I had a lot of data points—it was a big school, and I only had one class with him—but he'd had a ghost-vibe lately, like *he* wasn't even sure he was there. I remember having that exact thought and wondering if he could see how far from the path he was, how the rest of us were going to lap him before we even turned twenty.

Now, I wish I could press pause on that moment, go back and say to myself: Seriously, you've had like ten years to go say hi and see what's up. Check yourself. Do you actually worry about him or do you just like staring at his pain? Because there's a difference.

Also, finding a path and being placed on a path are two different things.

Totally different.

Anyway, by Wednesday, life felt pretty ordinary. First Period, Calc. Second, AP Physics. During the passing period before Third, Eli had a mini freak-out over the SATs that were

coming up. Kevin got him to ramp down: "Dude, breathe. Your mom's a professor, and your dad's an X-ray crystallographer. Do you really think you're not going to college?"

Kevin was always good like that. Super cool. Practical. He kind of had to be. Like when Kevin got a 93 in first semester English, and his parents got him a tutor. I would have lost my shit, but Kevin just shrugged it off, and joked, "Strict Asian parents," and I was like, "My mom is pretty strict," and he was all, "Um, ok, but this is sort of different. Strict white parents are more like—I don't know—" and when his voice trailed off, I said, "Assholes?" and he said, "I mean, you said that not me."

College was the only thing my mom seemed to care about. Like that was my purpose. My mom was an M&A attorney, and this was our contract: she would work all the time, and I would become someone worthy of that. Or I guess that was it. It's not like we ever talked about what her deal was. What mattered was that I was going to get into a good school and do something that sounded important. She started grooming my resume in fifth grade.

Seriously, elementary school.

"We'll need a strategy," she'd say, "especially coming from the Peninsula. It's hard to stand out."

I had to play the bassoon, not trumpet, because the bassoon was rare, and I had to drop soccer for fencing because too many kids played soccer. I used to complain: "Why does no one care what I want?" But Kevin would say, "Worst case scenario, you get into a really good school. Why is that bad? Plus, if you do what she wants, she'll leave you alone. Then, you can do whatever."

And, honestly, he was totally right. Love that kid. Why not just let my mom walk me into a bougie life? I didn't really know what I wanted anyway. Plus, I only had to get into UCLA to make her happy. Kevin had to, like, invent a new planet or something.

Third Period. AP History. Then, Fourth. Media Studies.

Media Studies was an elective that we all had to take. Yup, exactly. Part of the Future of Technology curriculum the school board got a hard on for our Freshman year. The whole point of the class was to read a bunch of social media posts

and decide which were fake. Only an old person would come up with a class like this. Um—hello—they're all fake. Total waste of time.

Eli was already at his seat getting his articles out. All highlighted and everything. Classic Eli. Trying in a class that didn't even matter. I guess he was primed for it. School was in his blood. Destined for Stanford like his parents. Future academic. The hilarious part about this was that his mom was a psychology professor who studied the effect of homework and early school start times on teens. So, although the family knew for a science-fact that too much homework had a detrimental effect on creativity and self-esteem and sleep and, like, all good things, Eli was sure as shit expected to stay up doing his.

I sat down, nodded hey to Eli. Kevin walked in talking to Liya, who was laughing at something Kevin had just said. Jesus, she was beautiful when she laughed, and I should have gone over to her, right then, and told her so. Told her that I had loved her since the first time I saw her in kindergarten, the only girl with a Pokemon lunch box. That playing Last Airbender with her at recess was my favorite part of third grade—that shitty year my parents got divorced—me pretending to bend the water in the clouds while she bent the earth beneath us. How I would never forget that she was the only girl in sixth grade to talk to me like I was still a person even though I was so zitty then. I should have said all of this, told her she was the most awesome girl ever. That her smile was perfect in every way and lit me up like I was made of stars. I don't know. Maybe it wouldn't have mattered, but maybe it would have been a line in the sand, something to hold on to later. But I wish I had at least told her that when she looked at me, I was worth something, because after that day, I would never be able to hold her gaze again.

Jayden came in after them, head down. He'd been like that all week. Quiet. Something was definitely up.

Ms. Martinez started class like normal. I was getting my articles out when the alarm went off. Not the fire alarm. The blue one. Somebody said, Lord. Somebody else groaned. I mean, it was School Shooter Preparedness Week. This drill wasn't exactly a surprise. A couple of people started flipping

desks like you're supposed to. The alarm was so loud that you couldn't really think about anything but the alarm and how you wished it would stop. I sat with my fingers in my ears. No reason to rush. Eli decided to be a good boy and flip his desk. Kevin had already popped the doorstop and was pulling the shade.

Ms. Martinez checked her phone. The office always sent a text verifying it was a drill. Teachers never told you. But their faces said it. We all knew. Still had to do all the stuff—lock the door, make the barricade of desks for us all to hide behind—but knowing it was a drill made it just another thing you had to do. But this time, Ms. Martinez just frowned and put the bucket of hockey pucks on her desk. Then, she checked her phone a second time and squinted at the classroom door. Everyone else was doing the thing, but I was watching Ms. Martinez's face, so I guess I was the only one to see her when she checked her phone one last time and said, *Shit*.

But that was nothing because a second later—not even a second—a shot came from down the hall. A single shot. Not too near, but way too close. Maybe not in our hall. Maybe the next? Eli and I locked eyes a sec. A jolt shivered through me like I just drank all the Red Bull in the world. Some kids were still dragging desks for the barricade, but now most were pushing to get to the back corner, crying and yelling and stuff.

I needed to move, needed to get behind the barricade with everyone else, but I was stuck, frozen at my desk like a dumbass. Ms. Martinez started calling my name over and over. *Hunter. Hunter. Hunter.* She called until I stood, but I swear, I don't remember standing. My body was not mine right then. All I could feel were my fingers. Thick and dangly. Like I was some kind of spirit and these finger-like meat tubes were sewn on the end of my arms to make me look real. I must have started moving though, because by the time I started to feel my body again, I was planted next to Eli behind the barricade, my torso shaking and the front of my jeans warm and wet.

A voice behind me started whisper-singing: S*hooter, shooter bar the door.*

It was Liya. She was right behind me, and I hadn't even

noticed.

Turn the lights off, speak no more.

She was singing to herself, the song they taught us in elementary school, the one that goes to Twinkle, Twinkle.

Run behind the desk and hide.

I turned to look at her. Her eyes super-wide and fixed on the door, looking past me like I was already gone.

Stay until it's safe outside.

Her legs to her chest, she was rocking.

Lockdown, lockdown, when it's done.

She was crying, and I wanted to hold her so bad—right in that moment, I thought it—I wanted to be the guy to tell her that no one was going to touch her. I wanted to be that guy so fucking bad. But I had nothing.

Then we'll play and have some fun.

Fucking nothing.

Footsteps sounded in the hall, crisp as a drum. A silhouette appeared in the window of the classroom door. The shooter. Not *a* shooter—*the* shooter. The actual shooter who had come for us. The shooter who would end us. The shooter who carried a real gun with real bullets.

Eli balled himself up and tucked down earthquake-style. I pushed right up to the back of a desk like it was made of magic, like it could make me invisible or something. From my spot, I could see through a crack between two desks. Small, but I had a full view of the window. I probably should have ducked down further, but I had to look. The window was the only thing left in the world, and I had to see.

The silhouette didn't move for a minute or a year or forever. I don't know. Time was not a thing anymore. Maybe the shooter was calculating. Maybe he was toying with us. Maybe it was all a dream, or maybe the universe had never existed until that moment. I would have believed anything. My senses were on hyper-alert—I swear, I could hear dust move—and I remember thinking my heart was going to straight-up explode in my ears.

But then, just like nothing, the silhouette disappeared. Steps echoed down the hallway toward the next classroom. I became aware of my breathing again, started to lower my shoulders until I remembered that our room was next to

last at the end of the hall. There was nowhere else to go. The shooter would have to come back around.

The footsteps stopped. I imagined the shooter looming in the window of the room next door. If we were going to try to escape out a window or something, this was the moment. But we just sat there, like loyal pets. All that homework, the tutors, the extra lessons. We didn't know a thing. We just sat there, waiting.

I mean, what were we supposed to do? He was all-powerful, and we were lumps of shit.

And I was thinking this—I specifically remember thinking this—when Jayden jumped up, straight to his feet. Ms. Martinez hissed at him to get down, but he didn't listen. He just walked to her desk and eyed the bucket of hockey pucks and random crap that were supposed to save us. Then he turned and started surveying the room.

And it was insane what he was doing—standing up like that—but it was completely badass. His hands didn't even shake. He was so solid standing there, sizing up the situation. Like he was true, and everything else in the world was a lie.

Ms. Martinez told him to sit down again. Jayden shook his head and said, "I'm so fucking sick of this shit," as he made his way to the door and grabbed the fire extinguisher that hung next to it. He hefted the thing like he was getting a sense of it and then positioned himself with his back pressed against the wall next to the door.

The footsteps started again, were getting louder. The shooter was coming back around. This was it. All the drills and the anti-shooter supplies and the pep talks and the you-can-do-anything pamphlets. It was all shit. We had Jayden, and who the hell knew what made him ready for this. Maybe life had pressed on him too long. Maybe he figured he had nothing else to lose. I don't know. But the reality was we were scared little kids, and he was a man standing.

Jayden bent his knees and bounced a little, like he was timing something. The steps were close. Jayden started counting: One. Two. Three. He kicked the doorstop away and opened the door and started spraying. I saw the whole thing, and it was incredible. Like you can't even write a movie that good. It was one elegant motion: doorstop—door—spray.

He was in the hall now, out of view, and there should have been gun shots, but the sounds were more like a thud and then a whack and then a big thwack, which had to be a body hitting the floor. And then it started. Whack. Whack. Whack. Slow, but it was a rhythm. And Jayden's voice coming over top: *Fuck you. Fuck you.* It was like that over and over again. *Fuck you.*

One by one, we started popping up, and Kevin got the stones to go out and look.

"Holy shit," was all he said, and I took that as the all-clear. I rushed over, and—holy shit—Jayden was beating the ever-living crap out of the shooter who had dropped his gun and was now full-fetal trying to survive Jayden's blows. Jayden did not ease up. He just pounded like a machine.

Our whole class was in the hallway now, and other classes were starting to come out too. No one tried to stop Jayden, not even the teachers, although the shooter was taking a total beating and not really moving anymore. No one said a thing, but you could basically hear us collectively thinking—Get him, Jayden. Fuck that guy.

The school safety officer and the school secretary appeared, yelling at us all to disperse. They pulled Jayden off the shooter. The safety officer radioed for a medic, and the secretary pulled the shooter's mask off. Every single one of us gasped at the same time. It was Dr. Ranklin. Jayden saw him and started yelling—"What the fuck?"—as the safety officer dragged him down the hallway.

Some girl said—"So, it was fake?"—the words of her question all long and drawn out like she'd just invented speaking. But she was right, and we all just stood there with our mouths open like, what the actual fuck?

School was chaos for the rest of that semester. We had a week of half days so we could process. No homework for a long time. Parents created exactly the shitstorm you would expect. There were lawyers and PTSD counselors and reporters. So many reporters. News trucks, the whole thing. All the local news, obviously. We were a feature story in The Atlantic. A million researchers descended. We were going to get studied for, like, forever.

The story that came out was wild: Dr. Ranklin had told the

police there would be a routine simulation—so they wouldn't come if called—but only Dr. Ranklin and the safety officer actually knew the whole plan. The shot we'd heard was a recording. Dr. Ranklin's gun was real, but it had no bullets in it. He'd just meant to scare us into being serious. (I mean, what?) No one could believe it, and none of the other details that came out added much light either. Dr. Ranklin was in the middle of a divorce. He was drinking. He was burnt out. (Um, ok. . .) Dr. Ranklin and the safety officer were fired, obviously, but the school board waited until Dr. Ranklin was out of the ICU to do it, which seemed like a weird curtesy, but whatever. The whole thing was so messed up.

Meanwhile, Jayden was all anybody talked about. A real-life hero.

Except, he never came back to school, which was the most fucked up thing of all of it. He was on his last chance, apparently. And *although the circumstances were highly unusual*, the school board decided it was bad precedent to let a student back to school who'd beaten a principal unconscious.

Everyone was outraged. Would they have done that to a white kid? It was bullshit. We marched out of school one day, the whole school, like we were starting a war.

It was my idea actually, the walk-out. My therapist thought leading something would help me get my sense of agency back. We talked about it in session. Did a visualization thing. I was amped. I would stand up at lunch time and make a big announcement that this whole situation was total shit, that we needed to stand up for Jayden the way he stood up for us.

I worked the whole thing out: exactly what I would say, how I'd do it ten minutes before lunch ended when most people were still eating. But when the time came, I didn't have it. And it wasn't that I was afraid. It was something else. Moment after moment after moment passed until I turned and said my thing to Eli instead. He was like, fuck yeah, and then he stood up on the table and shouted my words. The cafeteria was electric. Everybody standing and banging on tables. Grabbing backpacks and starting to leave. Kevin and Eli were one of the first ones out. Liya came up to me and said, "Walk out!", like we were in this together. And I could feel her looking at me, her eyes looking for mine. But I just kind of

shrugged and kept looking at her shoes and then toward the crowd of people headed for the door. And I wanted to look at her. Take her hand and say, "Let's do this," but I couldn't. If she actually looked in my eyes right then, I was convinced she'd finally understand I was nothing, and I just didn't want to have to watch her realize.

She shrugged and went on without me, and I just stood there, the last one left, and I kind of liked being the only one in the cafeteria, such a big hollow space. I don't know. The walk-out didn't seem real anymore. In my head, this moment had been daring and brave and important. Something. But now, it kind of felt lame. Sort of selfish almost. Jayden was already gone. So, what was this really about? And I kept picturing him that day, in the hallway after. How he just kept punching—again and again and again—and how I wanted him to never stop.

Ashleigh Catsos

Black Beans

Remove your shoes or leave! The sign on the front door was handwritten, accented with crudely drawn stars and what looked liked bits of brightly colored confetti, and an exclamation point at least three times the size of the text. But the entryway was loud beyond the aggressive punctuation—the paint on the door, tacky from recent refreshing, was a blazing red; a dog barked incessantly from a room within. MariaSofia hadn't mentioned a dog.

Alison knocked several times. She pressed the doorbell. The only indication she'd been heard was a distinct change in the barking in both volume and timbre, and the addition of a new sound—squawking, cawing—from yet another interior room. MariaSofia hadn't mentioned a bird either.

Alison's phone buzzed from somewhere in her bag and she dove for it, fumbling.

"Hello?"

"Alicia, hi. It's MariaSofia." The woman's voice was flustered, but authoritative. "You're there? At my apartment?"

"It's Alison—sorry, and yes. The doorman sent me up. You said 3A?"

"Terrific. I'm in the neighborhood, but I can't seem to find my car."

"Okay—"

"So excited to meet you. I'll be there soon, dear. Just go on in."

Click.

Alison was at a point in her life where she was eating black beans straight from the can. She was new to the city, sharing a one-bedroom so small that she and her roommate had resorted to bunk beds. At twenty-five, she needed a job, direction, some meaning. She thought about calling the woman back, mumbling an excuse. Instead, she removed her boots. She tucked them beside a pair of intensely yellow clogs, and nudged the other hallway shoes into neatness. The door jingled as she pressed it open. She was greeted by the smell

of onions and garlic, essential oils and the distinct must of old carpets. The animals, yet unseen, cried out with renewed enthusiasm.

When Alison responded to the Craigslist ad, MariaSofia had self-identified as *eccentric*; the word did not do her justice. A statue of a pot-bellied elephant stood just inside the door, multiple arms raised as if in greeting. Each surface in sight was covered with wooden and ceramic masks, skulls, rich fabrics—and mail. Piles of mail. Everywhere Alison looked was cluttered, chaotic—but *cultured*. A large poster of Barack Obama—iconic, stylized "Hope" in red, beige, and blue—hung on the wall.

The barking continued.

To Alison's left was a long tiled hallway leading, she guessed, to the kitchen. To her right was the living room. It was a large space with an even larger rug, folded at the ends to fit. More masks, more clutter. Plants and flowers, stacks of large, tasseled pillows where another person might have an armchair—and in the far corner of the room, a Christmas tree.

It was April.

The decorations were intact, and lovely, but the tree was long dead. What few needles clung to the branches were brown and crunchy; the floor was littered with the rest. The trunk in its metal base lilted sadly to one side, and the ornamental topper—not the typical angel or star of Alison's youth, but a glittering glass polar bear—looked in immediate danger of crashing down.

Alison didn't know whether to laugh or run or document the bizarreness of it all with an Instagram post—when she was reminded of the presence of the bird. Not six feet away, in a metal cage on the floor, it emitted a high-pitched shriek loud enough to make her ears ring. It was big—a parrot or something—and looked directly at her, rapidly bobbing its blue head and blinking its eyes.

"Hi," Alison said, attempting soothing tones. "Nice bird."

She backed away to the opposite corner of the room, where she found a desk, a half-eaten Mounds bar, a computer. The screen was peppered with Post-its, each a handwritten reminder—*Dientes 2pm* and *DO YOUR TAXES DAMMIT!*

and also, *You deserve to be happy*.

Alison sat down at the desk, as far from the bird as she could be while still in the same room, and waited. She thought often of fleeing, and each time recalled the ad and the prospect of twenty-five dollars an hour. When the front door finally opened, the bells and beads and baubles that dangled there announced the arrival of her newest employer. Alison stood to greet her, but MariaSofia didn't give her the chance.

"Stop everything," she commanded from the door. "The tulips are blooming."

Born to expats in Mexico City—*a white woman with a Mexican heart*, she'd say—MariaSofia lived by her whims, and her inheritance. The name on her birth certificate—*Anne*—lacked the flare she demanded of life, so she'd simply made up a new one. Two names pressed together, imbued with her adopted heritage and a flourish of the tongue. While she never legally changed her name, her friends knew her only as *MariaSofia*.

She had a lumbering, uneven gait, rocking side to side with each step.

"Bad hip," she explained. "From a bad horse."

"Oh, wow," Alison mumbled. "What happened?" She'd never been on a horse.

"He got spooked and bucked me off." The woman sighed. "It was a long time ago."

Despite the old injury, MariaSofia was surprisingly spry for her age—Alison guessed late sixties—and for her shape: pear. She smiled widely as she guided them toward Riverside Drive, toward the tulips.

"You never know how many days you have," she told Alison, panting slightly. "When it's mild like this, the bloom might only last a few."

She had graying hair, highlighted reddish-brown. Her puffy purple coat was unzipped to let in the warming weather and swung behind her like a cape, beneath which she wore what Alison could only describe as a muumuu. Billowy, breezy, floral print. Pulled over that was a soft, pink cashmere sweater. On her feet: a pair of purple UGG boots identical to a pair spotted in the hallway outside her front door—but in

better condition.

"Do you speak Spanish?" MariaSofia asked her.

Alison was embarrassed to admit she'd forgotten what little she'd learned in high school. "Un . . . poco?" she stumbled.

MariaSofia graciously bustled on as if she hadn't heard.

They slowed at the corner of 91st and Riverside. MariaSofia held open a gate, Alison passed through, and the two women entered a secret garden of luscious plant life—and quiet. The buzzing of bees and birdsong masked the squeal of traffic. The scent of flowers masked the city stench. They sat on a bench facing a bed of pink and blue and yellow. MariaSofia closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

Just a few hours earlier, Alison had opened her eyes to an unfamiliar room, in the bed of a stranger. Now she found herself sitting beside one. The morning, the taste of cheap tequila and stale cigarettes on her tongue, had left her empty, but the warmth and the garden and the woman on the bench—her unabashed delight in beauty, in literally smelling the flowers—filled her with an excitement like first-day-of-school butterflies, and longing. She wanted this colorful woman to like her.

"Can you tell me a bit more about the position?" she asked timidly.

MariaSofia kept her eyes closed, and pursed her lips. "Don't make yourself small on my account."

"I'm sorry?"

"Ask like you deserve an answer. No apologies."

"Okay." Alison repeated herself.

MariaSofia opened one eye to peek at her. "We'll work on that—and your Spanish." She gave Alison's knee a reassuring tap. "This will be fun. I need help with emails—I'm terrible at typing—and with bills, stuff like that. I can be forgetful."

"Oh," Alison said, remembering. "Did you find your car?"

MariaSofia shook her head. "But I'm sure a parking ticket will." She seemed remarkably unbothered as she went on. "It's just one day a week. You'll have plenty of time for your other pursuits."

"I don't really have any other pursuits," Alison confessed.

"You have sex, don't you?"

Alison felt her face get hot. "Yes," she admitted.

MariaSofia nodded, satisfied. “You can tell me all about it.”

The dog was only a little thing, brown and shaggy, but he made himself known. He barked and snarled as he tug and spun on the leash, as his owner’s arm swung madly from her shoulder.

“Don’t mind Jefe,” MariaSofia told her, leading him from a room in the back of the apartment, fastening his leash to the closest doorknob. “He’ll get his walk soon.”

He had sunk his teeth into everyone in MariaSofia’s life at least once, she told Alison, but she wouldn’t part with him. She was convinced that the spirit of her dead husband was lodged inside that dog and it was her role to protect him—however begrudgingly—when no one else would.

“He guarded the temples of Sri Lanka,” she’d say to justify his terrible temperament. He didn’t; his breed had, but Alison didn’t question her. She would come to learn that her employer spoke often like this, with grandeur and hyperbole, rolling her *r*’s whenever she got the chance.

“But *do* mind *him*,” MariaSofia went on, stopping at the elephant statue to rub its belly. “The remover of obstacles. My dear Ganesh.” She peered into its face, wrinkling her nose fondly, and then turned to Alison. “What obstacles would you have him remove for you, Alicia?” she asked.

“It’s actually *Alison*—”

MariaSofia chuckled, unapologetic. “How about I call you Al?”

“Sure,” Alison replied—and while she would have expected to feel annoyance, she was warmed by the nickname. “Sure,” she said again. She gestured to the towering pile of unopened mail. “Want me to open these?”

“Eventually,” MariaSofia said. “Aren’t you hungry?”

One day a week, Alison did her best to keep her employer out of trouble. She tracked her bills and credit card statements, responded to emails—texts, too. She patiently walked the neighborhood in search of MariaSofia’s frequently misplaced Prius, and appealed her many parking tickets. She memorized her online usernames and passwords for those frantic phone calls whenever MariaSofia misplaced the

master sheet of personal data—often at inconvenient times for Alison, like first dates, or in the middle of the night. With this strange woman in her life, each day was an adventure. But as she quickly discovered, what MariaSofia desired in her, more than anything, was an *enabler*.

"Tell me it's okay to give Barack all of my money," she commanded Alison in the days leading up to his reelection. Or grabbing the remote mid-sentence while dictating an email: "There's a *Law & Order: SVU* marathon on USA!"

Her moods followed the weather. On rainy days, she'd nap while Alison sifted through the never-ending stack of papers, filing things away in folders marked *Keepers* and *Africa*. On sunny days, MariaSofia would declare, "I feel like a latte, don't you?"

They would sit outside a café on the bustling street, sipping thick foam from French coffee bowls, a chocolate croissant between them. The servers would brush crumbs to the sidewalk and ask cheerfully, "Is this your daughter?"

MariaSofia would chuckle as she produced her Amex. "No, she's my friend."

"I feel guilty," Alison confided to her roommate. "I'm being paid to drink coffee."

"At least you're being paid. Maybe she's lonely."

"Yesterday we had a photo shoot for her *parrot*."

And there was the Christmas tree.

"I just couldn't bear to take it down," MariaSofia explained, eyes on the stark branches. "January is so dreary."

"And February," Alison agreed.

"March, too. And then I didn't want to get those needles everywhere."

"Do you have a tarp? We could wrap it up to carry it to the elevator—"

"That sounds *exhausting*." MariaSofia dropped her weight into the sofa, added a dramatic sigh. "Doesn't that sound exhausting?" She propped herself against a pillow, cupped her chin in her hand. She nodded. "Let's throw it out the window."

Alison reminded MariaSofia that she lived in a third-floor

apartment on a busy—and wealthy—Upper West Side street. There were very few homeless people in the neighborhood, little trash; its residents didn't appreciate mess.

"And it's probably against the law."

But MariaSofia was already clearing her way to the window, pulling ornaments off the tree in a cascade of needles and brittle branches.

"Don't worry, Al," she cooed. "We'll say I have dementia."

When the police arrived, Alison was instructed to hide in the bathroom. MariaSofia hummed as she shuffled to the front door. She spoke to the officer in Spanish and Alison heard the two of them laughing, then the door jingled closed.

"What happened?" Alison asked, peeking around the corner.

"Oh, he was adorable!" MariaSofia beamed. "And wouldn't you know it?" She patted her chest proudly. "He has family in Mexico City."

MariaSofia employed two other people: a grumpy, grey-haired handyman from the building who helped her hang, move, or paint things whenever the mood struck; and a tiny middle-aged, Mexican woman named Juana. She'd been with her for years, doing the shopping and cleaning, and wrestling Jefe from MariaSofia's side so that he could relieve himself out on the sidewalk and not, for once, on the expensive antique carpets. But her calling card was her black beans.

Juana made the most delicious black beans, texture like melted chocolate, in big batches simmered for hours on the stove. (Alison would carry leftovers home in mason jars for the next eight years.) She served them slathered on homemade tortillas, fresh from the pan and topped with her signature green salsa. On occasion, she poured pulpy glasses of fresh-squeezed orange juice. She never joined them at the table, but would pause—briefly—in her work to chat. The older women delighted in teaching Alison simple Spanish phrases—like *pase la aspiradora* ("vacuum"), *planche la ropa* ("iron the clothes"), or *el pendejo* ("motherfucker").

Alison always brought the laptop to the dining room table where it sat ignored. MariaSofia chewed with her mouth open

and moaned in pleasure with every bite while offering Alison advice on anything from cold remedies—*Swallow half a clove of raw garlic at the first sign of symptoms*—to personal grooming—*Don't cater to the preference of men. Pubic hair is there for a reason.*

MariaSofia was already feeling under the weather when Bella flew out the window.

She had taken the parrot out of her cage so Juana could clean it, and neither woman noticed that the window, tossed open to let in the crisp fall air, had been left that way.

Alison arrived to find MariaSofia in tears, frantically calling her friends and neighbors, urging them to be on the lookout for her beautiful blue bird. The day was spent creating and hanging flyers up and down the street, big flashy text and one of the pictures taken by Alison with MariaSofia's professional camera and its overkill specialty lens: Bella looking demure with her head tipped, posing on an Oriental rug, her orange-rimmed eyes vacant and probing at the same time.

MariaSofia mourned her parrot, and cursed herself. She led Alison in a tearful ceremony where they burned sage and wrote their desires on slips of paper. They took turns reading from them aloud. *I want Bella to come home. I want Bella to be happy.*

"I want her to fly free," MariaSofia added, wrapped in curls of sage smoke.

"Bella?" Alison asked. "You want Bella to fly free?"

MariaSofia was uncharacteristically quiet, subdued. "And you," she answered finally.

Alison didn't know what to say.

They sat outside in the chilling weather. Alison sipped her latte. MariaSofia's foam, untouched, receded into the creamy base. When it came time to pay the bill, Alison reached for her wallet; for the first time, MariaSofia let her.

"Such a good daughter," the server commented, and neither woman corrected her.

The following week, MariaSofia clutched her stomach for the entirety of their time together before finally falling asleep on the couch. Alison paid the bills and closed the door softly behind her.

The pile of mail at the door expanded beyond the usual windowed envelopes to include cards and flowers, fruit and soft things: blankets, slippers, robe. The note on the outside of 3A about shoes was amended to include negative energy and Jesus—*Leave them both at the door.* MariaSofia rarely moved from the bed. The emails she dictated to Alison were no longer about making plans—no cruises, or *Hamilton* tickets—but making peace.

"She's dying," MariaSofia's niece told her, finally. "She doesn't want you to know."

But she *had* known, all along, in her gut.

"How bad is it?" Alison asked.

"She has cancer, Al. I'm sorry."

"How long—?"

There was a pause, and Alison heard the woman cry quietly into the phone.

"You should probably start looking for another job."

They went on pretending: in their relationship, death didn't exist.

Juana cleaned up the vomit, cleaned up the shit. Juana continued to prepare MariaSofia's favorite foods, scraping plate after untouched plate into the garbage. And Juana was the one to bathe her, dress her.

Alison, though she knew what was happening, was kept in the dark. She still reported to work once or twice a week to email and sort and file. At some point, she stopped paying herself from the envelope of petty cash in the desk.

It was a Wednesday.

MariaSofia had been vomiting all morning. Juana had yet to arrive.

Alison knocked softly on the bedroom door. She heard grunts and groans, water running. Jefe, for once, was silent.

"Don't come in," MariaSofia moaned. "I'll speak to you from here."

Alison grabbed the laptop and stationed herself on the floor.

"I'm right outside the door," she called. "Want me to read

your emails?"

No answer.

"Can I help? What do you need?"

"Don't come in." MariaSofia's voice was thin, but her words sounded thick. Tongue dry, lips cracked. Alison heard the toilet flush, followed by painful heaving, more moaning. "Just go."

Instead, Alison pushed the door open.

MariaSofia was in her bathroom, a crumpled ball on the floor, loyal guard dog at her ankles. Bunched-up paper towels encircled them, and someone had covered the tile with a layer of Jefe's pee pads to try and mitigate the mess: the vomit, tears, urine, feces.

Her legs were grossly thin, sticking out from the filthy robe like toothpicks. No longer a pear. Her head was bald, her skin so gray it was almost translucent, crinkling like Saran. Alison stood at the doorway, gawking helplessly, as Jefe turned to her with a growl.

"Go," MariaSofia said again.

There was so much Alison wanted to say; she wanted nothing more than to leave. She had never seen it before, not in real life. Not like this. Her friend was dying.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, finally, and moved to leave—as Jefe lunged.

She felt his hot breath at the back of her leg, registered a sharp pain as his teeth made contact with her thigh. She yelped and kicked blindly back with her other leg, feeling her sock hit soft body, shaggy fur, and he released her, taking skin and the fabric of her pants with him. She retreated to the hallway, Jefe to his post.

"Al?" MariaSofia called.

She sounded so weak.

"It's okay," Alison assured her, though it wasn't. She was shaking from adrenaline, and a gash in the back of her pants revealed a streak of blood. "It's okay."

"I can't do it anymore," MariaSofia whispered, turning her cheek to the cool tile.

"I know," Alison told her, as she realized she was crying, too.

No one acknowledged Alison at MariaSofia's celebration of life. Family and friends gathered over troughs of tacos, cheese congealing as the Mariachi played and people tried to dance. Alison stood by the food. She filled a paper plate with tortilla chips—store bought, already stale—and ate in tiny bites until the salt burned the corners of her mouth. She watched MariaSofia's sons receive hugs and condolences, saw one look her way. When she waved with greasy fingers, he averted his eyes.

Two days later, MariaSofia's niece called to tell Alison that the locks had been changed on the Upper West Side apartment, and that Jefe had been put down.

Alison got to work making a big pot of black beans—lots of garlic; onion; two bay leaves; hours of simmering—and cried herself to sleep.

Long after she gave up on New York, Alison imagined Bella cruising through Central Park. Flourishing in freedom. Flying high over the common pigeon, screeching as she soared. A streak of blue on a tourist's snapshot, a blur so brief they might, in later inspection, think it was a plastic shopping bag taken hostage by the breeze—or maybe just a smudge, a fingerprint, on the film. They'd gather their friends to retell their adventures of the Big Apple and rifle through the glossy stack, and struggle to describe the photograph in their lap. They would look at it and pause—*Huh, how strange*—before writing it off as insignificant, a mistake; and while they'd move it off to the side, they wouldn't be able to bring themselves to throw it away.

Parker Fendler

Three Dollar Ticket to Happiness

Stanley did not know he had become a millionaire when he descended the steps of his third bus in as many hours. The doors snapped shut behind him, the engine groaned, and the behemoth lurched from the curb. The sliver of daylight that usually escorted him home had taken its leave. Snow flurries stirred the air as he shuffled along the ice-slicked pavement. He silenced the shrieking wind with a heave of the door as he fled into his darkened apartment. He peeled off his icicled overcoat. The polyester jacket underneath would warm him until he swapped it for his bedtime flannels. Chapped fingers dug into his pocket and withdrew a small strip of cardstock. A weary smile touched his lips. The Metro bus ticket. Unlimited transfers for three bucks a day. Way cheaper than Uber.

He browned half a pound of hamburger meat and steamed some rice while spooning out the occasional black speck that wriggled to the surface. The boiling water would kill any bacteria. After dinner, he sat on the good side of the sofa. The local news talked about the snowstorm. Almost two feet expected. They lauded the white Christmas that would be upon them in a few days. Stanley was fine with it. Not owning a car or house, he had no windshield to scrape or driveway to shovel. The gas bill might spike but he had budgeted for that.

"Next up," the newscaster said, "the record-breaking lotto. As we announced earlier there's a winning ticket. Stay tuned to see if anyone has come forward to claim their winnings."

Stanley rolled his eyes, same as he had done Friday when he came into possession of his first and only lottery ticket in his forty-one years of life. Everyone had cheered when he approached the table to select his white elephant gift at the company party. Bucking the trend of choosing the present that clanked and came in a tall narrow bag, he had grabbed one of the envelopes. Probably a gift card. He'd hock it on the web for cash minus three percent.

He tore open the envelope, peeled the card apart (it said *Meowy* Christmas and had a bunch of cats on it) and looked

inside. A single lottery ticket with a row of numbers stamped across the top. In the middle was a dollar sign and a three. Not even close to the ten-dollar suggested purchase price for the gift exchange.

He aimed a smile at his co-workers daring the anonymous cheapskate to cast his eyes aside or play with her hair. All he got were claps and a few oohs and ahs. The odds of getting struck by lightning exceeded that of winning the lottery. What a stupid gift.

After the commercial break, the newscaster continued. "Nobody's come forward, but we've learned the ticket was bought from a gas station right here in town. Someone will be having a Merry Christmas this year."

Stanley perked up and then scolded himself. His odds had gone from impossible to microscopic. He clicked off the TV and went to bed. He would check the numbers in the morning.

The next afternoon, he stood holding a table-sized check made payable to Stanley Chaat while camera flashes assaulted his eyes. By evening he had cleared his voicemail messages twice after reaching the maximum space on his phone. He spoke to a few callers. The last was from his coworker Marianne.

A senior customer service representative, Marianne was one of the longest tenured employees at the call center where Stanley worked. Stanley had clashed with her a couple times. Once she had accused him of stealing her lunch from the company fridge. He had wanted to tell her someone was trying to do her a favor, but he had held his tongue.

Her voicemail message didn't state the reason for the call, but Stanley had a good guess. Marianne picked up on the second ring. She congratulated him, and he thanked her for the well wishes. She bumbled through some small talk. Crazy storm, huh? Ready for Christmas? A call center representative his entire career, he found himself critiquing the mechanics of her phone call. Adequate opening, decent attempt at rapport building. Next, she would state the reason for the call. He waited for it. And waited.

"Marianne," he said, "I don't mean to be rude, but I've had a crazy day and it's a bit late."

"Oh, of course. You want to know why I'm calling."

"That would be great."

"Well, you probably guessed from the card that I was the one who gave you the lottery ticket."

"The card?"

"You know," she said. "The cats. *Meowy* Christmas?"

"Oh. Yeah, well—"

"You know I love cats, Stanley. Remember? I'm always talking about Snowball and Snowflake?"

To deny it would be ludicrous. Everyone in the building knew about her stupid cats. She never shut up about them. "Sure."

"You believe I was one who gave it to you, right?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," he said. "It was an anonymous gift exchange."

"There was nothing anonymous about those numbers, Stanley. Remember my daughter, Becky? You met her at take-my-daughter-to-work day. Her birthday is May twenty first. And Ben. His birthday is June thirtieth. And Earl . . . "

A reminder on his phone flashed. Eight o'clock. Off-hours wattage rates had kicked in. Time to throw in a load of laundry.

"Marianne—"

"I know it's getting late and your day has been so *long*." She stretched out the last word as if its pronunciation were long too. "I've been picking the same numbers every week for five years, Stanley. Earl was sick. I didn't have time to buy a gift for the stupid party. I made a mistake. That ticket never should've been in that envelope."

"I don't understand, Marianne." But he did. "Are you saying *you* are entitled to the winnings?"

A long pause. "I don't know about *all* the winnings."

At least she had finally gotten to the point. He summarized. "You spent three dollars and meant to give a worthless gift. Now that it has value you want it back?"

There was a pause, and he envisioned her face turning Christmas red.

"You can't possibly spend all that money," she finally blurted.

"So, I should give it to you? Your husband and you aren't exactly hurting for cash."

"Everyone's hurting for cash. Why are you so stingy? I

don't think I've ever seen your name on the list for the team baby gifts, wedding gifts, retirement gifts, nothing. Everyone chips in but you."

He couldn't disagree, and he felt a bit of shame. "I—"

"If you don't give any to me, then give some to someone." Her voice had risen a notch. "And another thing. I know you were the one who stole my fucking lunch." Click.

After switching his clothes to the dryer, he flopped onto his bed. He listened to a few more voicemails. He regretted not paying the extra two bucks a month to have a nonpublished number. Eventually, he ignored the continuous buzzing of his phone. He didn't feel like a guy who had just won the lottery.

The next afternoon, about the time the snow had stopped falling, the doorbell rang. He counted out a couple tens. One for the food and one for the tip. First time he'd ever be tipping a hundred percent, but it was Christmas Eve and he could afford it.

He opened the door. The delivery driver handed him a bag tied at the top.

Stanley held out the money.

"Actually sir, this one was taken care of by your neighbor. We're all set. Just pay it forward."

The driver jogged off and another man stepped into view. The new man, who was not his neighbor, was wearing jeans and a parka.

Stanley grinned. "Bobby? What the heck are you doing here?"

Bobby blew into his hands. It was like a hiss of steam from an iron. "Seeing as you didn't return my calls, I came to congratulate you in person. I'd high five you but my hand might break off."

Stanley invited him in and started a pot of coffee. He offered the good side of the sofa to Bobby. They shared the sandwich Stanley had ordered.

"Can I still call you Stanley?" his friend said. "Or is it Mister Chaat now?"

"Your Excellency will do."

"I'm glad to see the money hasn't gone to your head, *Your Excellency*," Bobby said. He took a sip from the mug and

grimaced. “You need to have one of your servants fetch some better coffee. What’s this, the Ninety-Nine Cent Store special blend?”

He wasn’t far off. “It works.”

Bobby removed his snow-caked beanie. Wavy strands of blond hair fell across his eyes. “Dang. Look at you. A millionaire. What’s it like?”

“Not much different. Everyone’s coming out of the woodwork. You know, to congratulate me.”

“And ask for money, I bet.”

“That too,” Stanley said. “You’re not here to tell me you’re the one who gifted the lottery ticket, are you?”

“Me? Fuck no. I gave the Crown Royal party pack with shot glasses. The only one moronic enough to give a lottery ticket is Marianne.”

“Funny you should say that,” Stanley said.

“What? Ha! She already called you, didn’t she?”

“Sure did.”

“That chick’s crazy,” Bobby said. “Always writing her name on her lunch and dotting the “I” with a little heart. Do you know she packs a bologna sandwich, juice box, and a twinkie? Like a six-year-old.”

“How do you know that?”

“Can you keep a secret?” Bobby feigned seriousness as he scooted closer. “I stole her lunch one time.”

“You’ve got to be kidding—”

“Oh yeah. At first, I just wanted to see how she’d react, so I hid it. Then I got hungry.”

“You’re terrible.” Stanley shifted a little so that the zipper from the flipped cushion stopped digging into his leg.

“Good times,” Bobby said. “Hey, not to be sentimental—I mean you are kind of an odd bird—but I’m going to miss you.”

“Miss me?”

“Yeah. I guess we can still hang out outside of work, but I’m assuming you’re not coming back to that shithole.”

“I don’t know,” Stanley said. He hadn’t decided whether to quit his job. “What would I do all day?”

“Anything but take calls from idiots,” Bobby said. “You can’t be planning to stay?”

Stanley shrugged. “What would *you* do if you won the

lottery?"

"Me? I'd wait for a good call to come in. A real juicy one where a customer has their panties in a bunch. I'd wait, real patient-like, for them to finish yapping about God knows what. Then I'd tell them to go fuck themselves. After that, I'd flip Josephine the bird and stroll out the front door. Maybe do one of those kicks on the way out. You know, where you jump up and click your heels together."

"Sounds like you've given it some thought," Stanley said. "So you quit your job. Then what?"

"Hookers and blow."

Stanley waited for him to say he was kidding, but Bobby gave a thoughtful expression as if he were envisioning the very thing.

"I could use the money," Bobby finally said. "We all could. Shit. If I won the lottery, I'd make a list of my friends and give each a piece of the pie."

Thankfully, that was as close as he came to asking for money.

Over the next week, Stanley's phone buzzed with wishes of a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. He had to give them credit—always building rapport before they asked for something.

He rang in the new year with a pledge to do what lottery winners are supposed to do starting with a call to his boss. As he dialed the phone, he tried to recall the words he had rehearsed.

"Hello?"

"Hi Josephine, it's Stanley."

"It's about time," she said. "I thought you would've called on your way to the bank last week."

As far as bosses went, she was better than most. Stanley met his targets and Josephine left him alone. "I'd like to come in and talk," he said.

"I assume you're giving your resignation?"

"Well," he paused. "yes, but—"

"That's fine. You don't need to come in for that."

He had planned to say he appreciated her leadership and enjoyed working there and was sorry to leave her shorthanded.

She had disrupted his chain of thought. “What about my resignation letter?” he said instead.

“Can you email it to me?”

“Sure, I guess. Should I come by for my stuff?” With no close family, he didn’t have any photos. In fact, his personal items consisted of a Yoda coffee mug that said *Coffee I Need, Have it I Must*, and a glass figurine with a faded Employee of the Quarter inscription. He didn’t care about either. He just wanted to say his goodbyes.

“Sure. Or we could box it up and mail it to you.”

“I’ll come in.”

“No problem. I’ll let security know. Any time after six o’clock is fine.”

“That late?”

“Yep. Company policy, we don’t like terminating employees disrupting work.”

“I’m not being terminated,” he said.

“Oh, honey, of course not. I meant *voluntary* termination. Same policy either way.”

Too late to back out now. “Oh, okay. Sure. I’ll be there then.”

“Sounds good. Oh, can I call you in a few weeks? I have an investment proposition for you. A little side business I’m starting. I need funding to get it off the ground.”

He rolled his eyes. “Sure. Thanks Josephine. It was nice—”

“Great. Talk to you then.”

He arrived that night at a locked door. The security guard said Stanley’s badge access had been terminated, and why would anyone tell him to come in? They usually boxed and mailed personal belongings. After two calls to HR, the guard gave him a large box and escorted him to his desk at the empty call center. The man hovered over Stanley who dropped the coffee mug and award into the box.

“Sorry, man,” the guard said. “I have to make sure you don’t steal customer information.”

“Steal customer information?” Stanley’s cold-numbed fingers curled into a fist. “Do you know who I am?”

“Uh, yeah. I hope you’re Stanley Chaat or I’m in big trouble.” He had mispronounced the last name as “shat.”

Stanley rushed out the door, his two small chotchkes jostling inside the box. Minutes later he watched the back of

the Metro as it pulled away. He took an Uber home.

He busied himself the next week watching television until he was *re-watching* re-runs. It was time to upgrade his cable plan and buy a TV that could stream. He cleaned his apartment until it was spotless—and then he cleaned some more. He hassled with the paperwork to enroll in continuing health care coverage. At the end of the week, he met with a financial advisor.

"Brock Harland, Esquire," the man announced as he pumped Stanley's hand and offered him a seat. In case Stanley forgot, Mr. Harland, *Esquire* was kind enough to hang four framed certificates on the wall behind his desk. Harland appeared to be in his forties and had a patch of hair below his lower lip. A striped dress shirt clung to his muscled frame and bowed out between each button. He explained that when it came to money everyone was motivated by fear or greed.

"Which one are you?"

Stanley thought he was motivated by the desire to make wise financial decisions, but he sensed that that was the wrong answer, so he was silent.

"Exactly," Harland said. "A little of both." He tapped his pen. "How much are we talking?"

During their conversation, Stanley asked several questions. Harland never failed to say how good each question was and how glad he was that Stanley had asked. Most went unanswered. The question that got the wheeziest laugh was: *Can't I just put the money in the bank*?

After Stanley remained quiet, the man said, "you serious?"

The advisor explained that he got paid by fees rather than commissions. Then he paused until Stanley mumbled how great that was. Harland couldn't give away all his secrets, but if Stanley were to pay for a financial plan (one of the fees), his money would be well-managed. Perhaps motivated by fear, Stanley wrote a check for a thousand dollars for the plan.

When he got home, a wave of buyer's remorse struck, and he soon found that the "no hassle" money back guarantee was not as advertised; it came with hassles. He canceled the check and blocked Harland's calls.

He couldn't block everyone's calls, and his phone continued

to ring. Since the time for congratulating him had passed, the callers were becoming bolder in their requests. Marianne was among them. She now threatened to sue and go to the press.

Bobby called again. Stanley invited him over. It was a test of sorts to validate his colleague's intentions; if Bobby didn't ask for money, then Stanley would give him some. If Bobby asked, well that was a different story.

"What's up bro?" his former coworker said after Stanley let him in.

"Hey Bobby. How are things going?"

"I'd say I was living the dream, but that's all you, man. Why are you still in an apartment? Shouldn't you be in a mansion or something?"

"I don't know. Still adjusting, I guess."

"What's there to adjust to? You can pretty much have anything you want."

"I guess," Stanley said. A growing self-awareness about his relationship with money had begun to fester. "Can I ask you a question?"

"The answer is yes; that shirt looks like it's from the eighties."

Stanley sighed. "A different question?"

"Shoot."

"Do you think I'm cheap?"

Bobby didn't hesitate. "Biggest cheapskate I've ever met. Is that a trick question?"

Stanley laughed. "No but the next one is. Why do you think people like me are tight with their money?"

Bobby thought for a moment. "A means to an end? If they pinch pennies now, they can live comfortably in the future."

Stanley was quiet.

"What man? You can talk to me."

"I'm worried that for me, being frugal *is* the end. Like no matter how much money I have, I'm going to be afraid to spend it." It sounded ridiculous and he braced for the insult.

"Look," Bobby said, "there's a reason they say money doesn't buy happiness. I feel you. Have you thought of donating it?"

"Yeah. I'd like to get to a place where I can give most of it away, but I'm not ready. Right now, the thought makes me feel like I'm going to shit myself."

"Well, we can't have that. Maybe you could start with baby steps." Bobby twiddled his fingers like a baby stepping. "My homework assignment to you is to buy something. Like a car. Buy me one too." He smiled.

Stanley blew a sigh of relief. Bobby had just failed the test.

The next day, Stanley found himself wandering inside a local car dealership. He craned his neck to take in the high ceiling, and he wondered how the glass walls supported it. Somehow, he took comfort in the smell of rubber and Armor All emanating from the new vehicles on the showroom floor. Customers and salespeople sat at small tables in the open room smiling and talking.

Stanley took a couple deep breaths as a salesperson approached.

"Hi, I'm Chelsea," she said. She wore glasses that framed a babyface. She reminded Stanley of a child playing grown-up. "You looking to buy a car?"

Stanley said he was. They spent the next couple hours walking the lot, talking about features and benefits, and test-driving cars. Despite her young appearance, Chelsea was knowledgeable and professional. When they returned to the showroom, she grabbed Stanley a water bottle and they took a seat at one of the tables.

"What do you think?" Chelsea said.

Stanley told her which car he liked best.

"Will you be financing?"

"No, I'll be paying by check."

"Even better," she said. "That saves us the step of pulling a credit report."

Chelsea handed him a sheet. "We're a no haggle dealership. This takes away the stress of negotiating and ensures you get a fair price. Here is the invoice price of the vehicle, what we paid the manufacturer, and here is the price you pay. The difference here is the commission."

Stanley's heart started racing. Did he even need a car? He'd gotten by fine without one. "This is the price I pay?"

"That's it. If you're good with that then I'll hand you off to the finance manager who can talk about things like the service plan and extended warranty. Obviously, those are

extra."

"You don't just throw those in?"

"Well, no. The finance manager can talk about different plans with different price points though."

This was starting to feel like a bait and switch. First, Chelsea had said there was one price and now there was another. "Can I decline the warranty and service plan?"

"Of course. The service plan offers discounted oil changes though, so in the long run you save money by including it."

"That's not *saving* money," Stanley said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Saving money is putting it in the bank. You just described *spending less* money. It's still spending money and not saving it. There's a difference."

"Sure, sorry," Chelsea said. "Hey, are you okay? You look a little pale. Can I get you another water?"

"I'm fine. I just don't know if I really need a car."

"Okay. Is it the price? Because we have less expensive—"

"I said I need to think about it," Stanley said.

"Sure." If she cared about losing a potential sale, she didn't show it. "Let me give you my card."

As Chelsea reached into her jacket, Stanley launched himself from the table as if the woman were drawing a gun. He knocked the chair over and almost tripped on it as he fled to the door.

The absurdity of owning a car brought forth a chuckle as Stanley waited at the bus stop. What had he been thinking? Wrestling traffic, pumping smelly gasoline, scraping the windshield. All for a depreciating asset that would be worthless in a few years. No thanks. He dared anyone to convince him otherwise. Crafty Bobby with his *buy-us-each-a-car* baby steps or fast-talking Chelsea with her bait and switch tactics. At three dollars a day, nothing could beat the Metro. Why should he waste money on things he didn't need?

Sunlight winked off the windshield as the bus arrived. It was one of the sleek articulated ones with tinted windows and an accordion center. Right on time as always. Stanley reached into his pocket, found the familiar strip of cardstock, and palmed the flat side. The bus lowered with a hydraulic hush so that the first step was flush with the curb. Meeting me at

my level, Stanley thought. The doors parted, beckoning him. He strolled up the steps and flashed the ticket to the driver. The only passenger was a smiley face someone had drawn onto a fogged window. Stanley smiled back. Just like having his own personal chauffeured limousine. He stood because he could. No need to contort his body in this luxury coach. He closed his eyes drawing comfort from the scent of Armor All on the faux leather seats. As the bus pulled away from the curb, a gentle draft from the overhead vents warmed his neck like the breath of a lover. A lazy smile crossed his lips. Holding a vinyl strap in each hand, he swayed to the familiar rhythm of the bumps and turns and squealing stops.

Elizabeth Lyvers

Humble

This was the way death should arrive, the way it so often did in the mountains—after a lifetime of hard work and love, tended to by family and friends. If only death didn't arrive with so much pain—an unexpected, knife-sharp curve in the road at the end of the journey.

Lark Mills left her grandmother sleeping. She closed the bedroom door, shutting out the faded wallpaper and sun-soaked hardwood floors, the rise and fall of Opal's frail chest. She went downstairs to her own bedroom and changed out of restaurant clothes, instead putting on shorts and a white tee shirt. August in West Virginia simmered like steam trapped inside a soup pot.

She went into the kitchen, intending to peel potatoes but instead finding herself transfixed at the window over the sink. The yard stretched under golden light interspersed now with purple shadows. Tree boughs at the forest line hung unusually still as if waiting. Listening.

Lark forced herself to step away. There was still time. She didn't need to dwell on it now.

Behind her, Snoop slept under the scarred, oak-top table. Part hound and part lab, he stirred when Lark preheated the oven and removed a steak from the fridge. She dredged it in flour and placed it in a dish with mushroom soup. While the steak baked, she peeled and sliced potatoes and dropped them into a skillet of hot oil. She cooked without thinking, her hands moving on their own to prepare a meal she'd made a hundred times in this very kitchen.

"There's still time," she said out loud, and Snoop cocked his head as if politely acknowledging that she had spoken. By the time the smells of gravy and crisp potatoes filled the room, the linoleum floor and oak cabinets were touched by familiar evening colors.

Gran was fading but not gone, still able to laugh and greet visitors and sip iced tea on the front porch. But Lark could feel it, the way time stretches when the day is nearing its end. She

wondered how many incandescent August evenings like this were left. Which sunset would close out her grandmother's life with a shimmering display of color, like well-deserved fireworks.

Lark had a family—a mother and father, a brother and sister. She loved them all, of course. But without her grandmother, she would be as uprooted as a sapling following a storm. Twenty-eight years old and untethered.

Outside, car tires crunched on gravel. Lark returned to the window in time to see a blue Nissan Altima trudge up the curve of the hill and emerge through the trees. It disappeared towards the front of the house. Lark frowned, not recognizing the vehicle.

She wiped her hands on a dish towel and headed towards the front hall, but the doorbell pealed first. Snoop howled. Lark unbolted the front door, not truly registering her guest until the screen door was half-open. She stopped short.

"It's Lark, right?" the man said. "Remember me?"

Of all the times she'd imagined seeing him again, not once had he said something as stupid as this. She'd imagined turning around and seeing him in the back of church or looking up and finding him at a table in her restaurant. They would chuckle awkwardly, make small talk, reveal what they "did" these days. Then she'd say something nice about his dad. He might ask about her grandmother.

But never was there any scenario where they acted like they might not know each other. Never had she planned to play coy. *Oh yeah, it's Daniel Piper, right? Madison High?*

In the ensuing years since he'd left home, she had never allowed herself to daydream far. Some memories were best left unvisited. But she had wondered, like any friend would do. She just wanted to know where he went, what he was doing. It was the mystery of his life that hurt, as if he had died but didn't have the decency to let anyone know.

Did she remember him? *Of course,* she wanted to say. *It's been twelve years, not thirty, and even then . . .* But she was too startled to say it, couldn't decide if she was waking or dreaming, his face was so unexpected.

"What . . . ?" She swallowed and realized she was still behind the screened door. She stepped onto the porch, summer heat

immediately washing through her hair. “What are you doing here?”

He looked appropriately embarrassed. Twelve years ago, his face had been boyish. Now it carried a harder version of the same handsome charm—a lean face, firm jaw under a couple days’ scruff, brown eyes beneath sharp eyebrows. His sandy brown hair was still shaggy. In her opinion, it was a little too long for a man in his early thirties.

“Cole Cartwright is missing,” he responded. “I’m part of a volunteer search and rescue group assisting police.”

“Helping the police? But you don’t live here.”

His hands disappeared into worn jean pockets. “I moved back in with Dad about a week ago.”

A week ago and she hadn’t heard through town gossip? That sounded like a flat-out lie. Lark glanced over his head and saw only the sedan parked next to her blue Tacoma.

“Where’s your *group*?” she asked.

“I work faster alone. Got a tip that I should check Buck Ridgeline.”

“That’s county property.”

“Shortest way there is through your woods.”

She lifted an eyebrow at his intimate working knowledge of her property. How could he appear here like this, as if he belonged? She nearly despised him for his straightforward words, battering into years of carefully constructed imagination.

She crossed her arms, the porch floor boards rough under her feet. “The woods have overgrown themselves. Think you could find your way there?”

His grin was strangely sober. “I’ll have to give it my best shot.”

She sighed. “I could show you.”

“I won’t say no.”

Lark scratched at Snoop’s ears. He was no longer growling or whining but, like any good guard dog, sniffing feverishly around Daniel’s boots as if in hopeful expectation of finding an illicit drug or cheese.

“I just finished fixing dinner. Let me take a plate up to my grandmother, and I’ll be right out.”

“You might want shoes, too.”

She manufactured a smile, knowing it was tight and that he'd read her discomfort like an out-of-tune note on a piano. "Those would be helpful."

He nodded at her and meandered to the right side of the porch, easing himself onto the wicker swing. He leaned forward, gray tee shirt already damp with sweat, his gaze sitting on the forest line. Now the tree branches bobbed and waved as if greeting their visitor.

Lark stepped back inside, perturbed by how easily he seemed to fit in. *If* she ever saw him again, she'd half-expected him to appear well-dressed and aloof, *city-fied*, as her grandmother would say.

She prepared a plate, filled a glass with water, and carried the tray upstairs. Opal was awake and reclining on the four-poster bed, her hands fiddling with the oxygen cord.

Lark set down the tray. "You need help with that?"

"Just a little short on breath."

Gently, Lark looped the tubing around Opal's ears and positioned the opening into her nostrils. "Better?"

"Fit as a fiddle."

"I brought dinner."

"Oh goody." Opal pushed herself to a sitting position. Her voice was always raspy, but today it came in short bursts as she sucked in air. "I can come downstairs."

"I like spoiling you." She set the tray on her grandmother's lap and unfolded a napkin.

"Who came to the door?"

Lark busied herself combing through pill bottles on the nightstand. "Part of the search and rescue team looking for Cole Cartwright." She opened a bottle and dropped two tablets into her hand. "Time for these."

Opal took them obediently. "Do they really think he's lost out there? Boy grew up here."

"They found his truck at a trailhead more than two days ago. Maybe he's injured."

Opal caught her gaze. *Or worse*, her eyes said. The hills weren't without their perils, particularly after nightfall.

Lark kissed her grandmother's forehead. "I'm going out to help. I should be back before dark."

Downstairs, she grabbed hiking boots and a flashlight out

of the hall closet and reemerged on the front porch. Daniel stood at the railing inspecting a hanging fern. He turned to look at her. She looked away.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yep."

Snoop kept pace at her side as she crossed the yard to the west of the house and found the path into the woods. Shadows greeted them. The trees grew old and tired here, the ground a snarl of roots and fallen limbs, thorns and vines. A toppled oak split the path and Lark searched for a way around it, eventually deciding to climb over it. She twisted her body over claw-like branches.

"Like I said—overgrown," she laughed, feeling self-conscious.

"You weren't kidding," Daniel said.

"It's a steep climb to the top of this hill, then we'll cut down before going up again onto Buck Ridgeline. A mile or so." A sharp branch caught the inside of her thigh and she sucked in a breath. "Why are we checking the ridge?"

"Some kid thought he heard gun shots up there a couple days ago. Didn't think anything of it until he heard that someone was missing."

Lark swallowed a sour taste. "What are you expecting to find?"

Daniel shrugged, but it was a pretense at casualness. "Not sure, honestly. Do you know Cole Cartwright?"

"Sort of. His mom comes into the restaurant to complain about him every now and then. Sounds like he's been doing about the same as most other boys who don't find gainful employment out of high school."

"Marijuana?"

Lark couldn't hold back a laugh. "You have been gone a while."

"Prescription narcotics, then."

"And heroin once money gets tight."

They trudged in silence for several minutes, the woods quiet outside the *scrape-crunch* of their boots and Snoop's panting as he pulled ahead.

"So," Daniel began. "You've been here living here since . . ." He cleared his throat. "You know. High school?"

Lark quickened her pace. "I started working at my grandparents' restaurant and never left." She wiped sweaty palms against her shirt. "I'm not sure why."

She didn't know why she added this. It wasn't as if she was embarrassed that she'd stayed in Humble. She loved managing a restaurant. Took deep pleasure in the days when it was just her and the sunrise prepping for opening. When she greeted the first customer with a cup of dark roast coffee and a cinnamon roll right out of the oven. She even liked the late evenings when she sat alone at the counter finishing the inventory order, not leaving until the moon was out.

She was *happy* in Humble, happy with her life.

"Where have you been?" she asked and quickly chose to rephrase. "Where have you been living?"

"Charlotte, North Carolina. I was an engineer in a consulting firm down there."

"What made you come back?"

Daniel didn't meet her gaze. "Oh, just felt like it was time." He still carried a trace of the easy, rolling accent of the region. She wondered if he used that in Charlotte, too, or if he was turning it on for her benefit.

They reached the summit and Lark paused for breath. It'd been years since she'd climbed this particular hill. "We don't exactly have many engineering firms in Humble."

"I'm going to help Dad for a while with the construction business."

"Ah. How is Gary?"

"Doing fine. Just getting older. Needs someone around to . . . tend to things."

Lark studied him for a moment, curious if he remembered past conversations. If he would acknowledge the truth they'd once shared.

"Beautiful out here," he said instead. "I haven't been in these woods in a decade." He took a deep breath. Lark smelled it, too—earth and old leaves and water trickling between moss-covered rocks—the smells of home.

He stretched his arms over his head. "Didn't realize how much I've missed it."

Lark turned and kept walking. It had always been unclear to her if Daniel had left because of his father, the verbal vitriol

and occasional physical abuse. Or if he had left because of *her*.

Perhaps in the end, she was nothing more to him than a symbol of all that he wanted to leave behind.

Daniel found the body just as the sun left the sky. By now the clearing was saturated in purple twilight—the maples and wind-spurred grass, even the air itself, weighed down by the quietness, the held-breath of encroaching night. Especially in the mountains, night brought such a descending sense of aloneness.

Cold chills prickled the back of his neck as Daniel knelt beside the body. He didn't reach for a pulse. The man had been long dead—cold and purple. Not the purple of twilight but of bruising and decay. There appeared to be a single gunshot in the center of his chest, the blood dried black on his red tee shirt.

"White male, early twenties," he said mechanically, his own voice hollow in his ears. "Longish brown hair. Hundred-forty pounds?" He turned towards Lark. "This him?"

She had gone pale, one hand held against her throat, the other limp at her side. She stepped closer, boots swishing against matted grass. She bent beside Daniel. The humidity rested like dew in her French braid, the fine hair around her face curling. She tucked it behind her ears.

"No," she said at last. She reached out to touch him but pulled back as if she could feel the coldness hovering above him. "No, that's his brother."

Daniel breathed out, sickened. After an adolescence spent hunting in these mountains and a stint in the military, he had seen his portion of death. But not like this, not in small town Appalachia, cloaked in summer twilight and surreptitious motive. Shot and abandoned.

Even Snoop appeared disturbed as he sniffed around their perimeter, tail lowered, occasionally whimpering.

"Our missing person is still out there." Daniel stood and eyed a circle around the body, checking for a weapon, footprints, anything awry. "What's his name?"

"Trent Cartwright."

"Did anyone know he was missing?"

"I guess his family assumed he was at college. Sophomore at Marshall."

He checked his phone. "You got cell service?"

Lark slipped the phone from her shorts pocket. "No."

It would take at least thirty minutes to hike back to the house. Already shadows were filling the clearing with surprising swiftness. The police would need a spotlight by the time they got out here, if they could find their way at all.

"We better get moving."

"I hate to leave him."

Daniel looked into her face and noticed for the first time that she was as sickened as he was but not afraid. Whatever color her eyes were, they reflected violet in this light, depthless and perceptive.

"He'll be all right," Daniel responded reflexively.

"His mama . . . She . . ."

"You can't think about that."

Lark's mouth drew tight, her gaze fixated on the bloody hole in Trent Cartwright's chest.

"It's not supposed to be this way," she said softly.

Daniel touched her elbow, understanding but not able to respond. The words stuck in his throat, right next to the need to vomit.

He pulled her to her feet. "We should hurry."

They backed away until they hit the edge of the clearing, both watching the body, checking the covering of trees. Afraid to look away.

Finally, Lark stirred. "All right." He watched her tear away her gaze with effort. "All right. Let's go."

As always, the woods were different under cover of night, not just an alteration of appearance but of mood, as if a distinctly separate presence took over once light was gone. They tore through overgrowth and clambered over fallen logs as if pursued, going too fast but unable to slow down, both eager to be outside the woods before complete darkness fell.

Daniel felt physical relief when the lights of the Mills' farmhouse glowed through the lacework of tree branches. He rechecked his phone. "I'll call it in."

"I need to check on Gran," Lark said, breaking into a jog as they finally cleared the trees and reached the grass. "Come in

when you're done," she called over her shoulder.

Daniel slowed to a walk, breathing heavily as he crossed the lawn. The porch lights lit the stone path up to the white clapboard house, potted ferns casting shadows into the yard. The lonely house soaked up quiet like a cotton towel absorbing water. He imagined that normally he would find it peaceful. Tonight it felt unnatural.

His call was finally transferred to Olson, the town's longest-running sheriff who answered with a sharp, "Dan."

"Hey, I'm up at Opal Mills' place. I checked out Buck Ridgeline." He cleared his throat, bile returning with the memory. "Lark and I went out. We found a body. Lark identified him as Trent Cartwright. Single gunshot wound to the chest."

Olson swore. "How long do you think it's been?"

Daniel glimpsed something wet on the walkway, glinting under the porch lights.

"If I had to guess I'd say it's been a couple days."

He bent to inspect more closely. Small puddles led up the path and onto the first porch step.

"I'll call the county examiner," Olson replied. "We'll be out as quick as we can. Can you stick around?"

"Sure, I'll stay put, although Lark will be the better candidate to get you guys out there. It's a hike."

Olson hung up, and Daniel reached out and touched a wet spot. His fingers came away slick with blood. He knew instantly why the quiet felt wrong. Someone else was here. Someone who didn't belong.

He bounded up the porch steps, feeling for the concealed carry tucked into the back of his cargo pants. The screen door burst open a foot from his face and Lark appeared.

"He was here," she said. "Cole Cartwright was here."

"When?"

"He left just ten minutes ago. Gran gave him cash and her car keys." She saw the blood smeared on his fingers and stopped short, mouth open in an unasked question.

"He threaten her?"

"She says he had a knife." Her eyes returned to Daniel's face. He saw now that they were a pale blue. The anger in her face came unmasked. "She's not hurt but she could've been. I

never should have left."

"It shook me up is all," came a voice from the other side of the screen. Opal appeared with Snoop at her side. She coughed deeply, the bones in her chest stark against the rose-print nightgown.

Behind her, lamplight spilled in an empty foyer. There was a staircase directly ahead and a small table against the wall to her right. Fresh lilies bloomed in a blue vase, the picture of equanimity, but beneath Opal's house slippers, splotches of blood marred the woven rug.

"You sure you're not hurt, ma'am?"

Opal's white hair appeared snow-like under the lamp. "Poor boy was out of his mind, but he wouldn't have hurt me."

Lark's face was still, quiet, but the pulse in her throat beat rapidly. She addressed Daniel. "Police coming?"

"Should be here soon."

"Gran, sit out here with Daniel. I'll be right back."

Daniel helped Opal into a rocking chair.

"What I wouldn't give for a cigarette," the old lady said, her veined hand patting Daniel's arm.

"Afraid I can't help you there."

"No worries, son. I quit ten years ago," she replied and chuckled.

Lark reappeared with a shotgun and a glass of water. She handed the glass to Daniel. "I'm sure you're thirsty."

"Thanks."

Lark kissed her grandmother's head then sat down at the top of the porch steps, the gun across her lap. She faced the yard as if waiting for the woods to yield another danger, her fierceness palpable.

"We found his brother," she said and her voice choked. "Somebody shot Trent and left him in the woods."

Opal didn't respond but her rocking chair creaked. The wind rustled. Katydids sang. Ordinary sounds that reminded Daniel of safe and ordinary things. But a safely spinning world seemed incongruous with such a night. He thought he heard a car on the road and put one hand on his Ruger LC9.

It had never been clear to him why he'd left Humble. After high school, there had been many factors at work. Plenty of reasons to stay. Starry nights and peach-colored sunrises.

Mountains steeped in fog. A thousand parts that created home, like patches to a quilt.

But tonight, he felt the answer nearby, as if it were a ghost about to speak. He'd never been able to reconcile how closely good and evil abided in these hills. How quickly beauty could be marred by violence. His own father was a living testament to contradictions.

"*Did you see*," Opal said at length. "That's what Cole kept saying to me. *Did you see what it did?*"

Lark shivered and looked over her shoulder. "It?"

"I didn't have any idea what he was talking about. I asked how I could help. He said he needed money." Opal rocked harder. "He looked like death, so skinny and pale. I hardly recognized him. His eyes were blood red and his nose running snot. He was shaking so bad I thought he'd keel over."

Lark glanced at Daniel. "Withdrawal."

"Yep."

Opal smoothed her night dress over her knees. "Poor boy kept crying. Wailing, really. Couldn't tell if his shirt was soaking wet from tears or sweat. My heart broke for him."

She let out another deep-chested cough. Her hands shook as she touched her hair. Then her voice grew soft, aching with compassion. "He said to me, *I never would've done it if it hadn't made me.*"

Daniel watched Lark's face, wondering if she understood. If she saw how death stalked these hills. And if she saw, why she didn't leave.

But Lark's face was set as she faced the forest line. The very air around her seemed to hum with anger. He could read the challenge in her posture. The strength.

The first glimpse of police lights flashed through the trees, and Daniel let go of his gun.

Jeffrey S. Chapman

The Bikini

My 30th high school reunion is coming up this weekend. In three decades, I've watched classmates die, divorce, lose houses, lose children, fight cancer, shuffle through careers, wander aimlessly through lives. But in June 1982, on the last day of 6th grade, we hadn't felt these pains. The biggest controversy was what kind of fucking bullshit Darth Vader was up to. Those were Bill's words: "What kind of fucking bullshit is Vader up to?" It had been two years since *Empire Strikes Back* came out and Vader said he was Luke Skywalker's father. Half of us believed him, half of us didn't, but we still argued about it after all this time.

Summer vacation started at noon on Friday, but in our minds, the real summer vacation didn't start until the next Monday. That's when Mrs. Lusk opened up her pool for the neighborhood kids. Every weekday in the summer she let all of us swim in her pool for free.

Mrs. Lusk was the grandmother of a boy in our grade, Trevor. His father had run off and his mother was a drug addict, so he lived with his grandparents. She opened the pool up to all the kids, I assume, so that Trevor would always have friends around, and perhaps because she wanted to keep an eye on him better than she did his mother. Every day, Mrs. Lusk sat at the end of the pool as a lifeguard, in a one-piece bathing suit with an attached skirt.

At ten-to-one on Monday afternoon, Bill—my neighbor and best friend—showed up on my porch in a bathing suit and tee shirt, a towel draped over his neck. On the way to the Lusks, we picked up Missy and Nate. There were no parents, just groups of kids. There were never any parents.

It was not the warmest day, but the sky was cloudless and there was the slight desert buzz in the air. It certainly wasn't cold enough to keep us from our first afternoon swim. Mrs. Lusk held a morning session for kids under 12 and an afternoon session for kids over 12. This would be the first year that we were allowed into the afternoon session. It

was bathed in mystery, as if we would be told the secrets of adulthood at the gate. We didn't talk much on our walk.

So we were disappointed to discover that the afternoon session was just like the morning. There was no big secret, no secret ritual. If anything, it was more boring. The older kids spent less time playing and more time lying on their towels, working on tans.

Still, we smelled the sharp smell of chlorine, and the pool was crisp blue and clear. Summer was here. Bill, Nate, and I quickly shed our shirts and flip-flops and dove into the pool. Missy, however, took her time. She sat down on her towel; she got up and went into the changing room; she came back out and dipped a toe in the water; she finally took off her shirt and shorts. I saw why she hesitated. She had traded in the one-piece bathing suits she had always worn before for a bikini. She immediately jumped into the water. When she surfaced, she made eye contact with me, blushed, smiled.

I was dumbfounded. I had lived next to Missy for my entire life. I had never thought much of her other than how you think about something that has always been there. Like air. Or the telephone pole outside your house.

Missy was as nice as anyone I knew. She had a tendency of looking you right in the eyes and laughing; it was clear she was always laughing with you, never laughing at you. I had never really seen her as a girl. The bikini changed that. It was just a simple black bikini—nothing skimpy or exotic—but all of a sudden, I realized she had a body. A female body. I noticed her dirty blonde hair—back in a ponytail, as always—and the freckles across her cheeks, as if for the first time. I looked away, worried I was staring. No one else seemed to notice and pretty soon they were playing our usual games. We played Marco Polo and had chicken fights in the shallow end. During the chicken fights Missy came over to get on my shoulders but I shook my head.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm getting tired," I said. "I'm going to go lie down in the sun for a while."

She shrugged and I ducked under the water to cool down.

The following weekend I slept over at Bill's. We had sleepovers almost every week, but we never grew tired of it. We both felt that it was the best part of the week.

I couldn't remember a time before Bill. He and his mom moved in next door when we were both two. We were like brothers in every way other than biology. Sometimes Bill and his mom would come home to find I had let myself in and was playing in his room. We shared everything.

We played D&D until we could be sure that everyone in the neighborhood was asleep, then we climbed out his window with two backpacks full of toilet paper. It was summer, the season for toilet-papering.

"Missy first, then Chad, then Nate," Bill said.

"Maybe we should go straight to Chad," I said.

"Why?" Bill asked, and I had no answer.

There were two trees in Missy's front yard. Bill unraveled one toilet paper roll and then hurled it as high as he could. The roll unfurled in flight and left a long trail of toilet paper over the tree. He picked it up and threw it again. I paused, watching, until Bill motioned at me to get going, and so I set to work on the other tree. Missy was sleeping, right there, in that house.

"Hey, what did you think of that bathing suit?" I asked Bill, trying to sound casual, like bathing suits were our usual topic of conversation.

He looked at me like I was crazy, talking while toilet-papering. But I needed to know. I'd wanted to talk about it all week, but I couldn't. Bill always laughed when people had crushes.

"What did you think of that bathing suit?" I whispered.

"What bathing suit?"

"Missy's bikini."

He shrugged. "I don't know. A bathing suit is a bathing suit."

I wasn't surprised that Bill didn't notice. He didn't give a shit about things like girls, clothes, and popularity. In our whole lives he had never given even one second's thought to his appearance. In 5th grade, my mom made me start wearing jeans so that I would look older. But I don't think Bill ever wore anything other than sweatpants in his life. It wasn't a

big deal in elementary school but in junior high he would have to try harder and be cooler, or the other kids would tease him. He should get jeans too.

But this wasn't a question of fashion. It wasn't about bikinis. It was about Missy. It was about the fact that she was suddenly a girl. No. More than that.

"But she's never worn a bikini before. That's the thing. She looks—" I paused. *Pretty, like a woman*. "—different."

He stopped tossing toilet paper and turned to me.

"Do you have a crush on Missy?" he asked me.

I forced a laugh. "God no. It's Missy!"

He looked at me a moment, then he considered the matter. "I guess you're right. She does look older this summer. She's cute."

We woke up late the next morning and found Missy outside, in a flower-print dress, pulling toilet paper down. We stood next to her and looked up.

"I have to clean this up before church," she said. "Dad is sure it's one of my friends. Was it you guys?"

We both shook our heads. The great thing about Missy is that she believed us.

I couldn't stop thinking about Missy now. How could I get her attention? I couldn't bring her flowers or take her to dinner. It would be years before I could drive. Still, I had to make my move soon, so we could spend the summer as a couple. I'd seen the older kids: they put their towels next to each other, lay there chatting in low, secret tones. But I didn't know how to approach her. I really wanted to ask Bill's advice, as I would in any other problem, but he knew nothing about girls and he loved to tease people about that stuff.

So while he asked me a couple times over the next few days whether I liked Missy, I'd always laughed and said *Hell no*. Finally he shrugged and let it go.

Everyone was talking about *E.T.* that summer. Nate's sister said she cried all night long after watching it. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a perfect opportunity. I would ask Missy to go to *E.T.* with me. She would love it and when it got sad she would cry on my shoulder. I knew it would work. I could already see Missy leaning into me, arms around

my neck. It was as good as a memory.

I was quieter than usual at the pool the next day. I was in a state of quiet panic, trying to find the right moment, and the courage, to ask her out. I needed to be alone with her.

My chance came after about an hour. We were sitting at the edge of the pool with our feet in the water. Mike, Ann, me, Missy, then Bill. Bill was telling his bad jokes and Missy was giggling.

We were playing our favorite game. It was simple but we loved it. We would throw a rubber hopscotch puck called a hoppy taw anywhere in the pool and then take turns diving down to retrieve it.

The whole pool was tiled with small blue tiles that made the water feel fresh and tropical. At the deepest part of the pool, under the diving board, was a mosaic of a swordfish jumping and twisting. All the kids who ever swam at Mrs. Lusk's pool had a deep fascination with that swordfish. It was a totem animal to us and we all felt it contained a certain power.

When the hoppy taw landed on the swordfish, it was a special challenge. You had to be able to swim with your eyes open underwater, hold your breath for a while, and power downwards against all your instincts of self-preservation. It was deep enough that the pressure hurt your ears. There were some kids who never retrieved a puck from the swordfish.

It was Bill's turn and Missy threw the hoppy taw toward the swordfish. It slowly sank down. Bill wasn't the strongest swimmer, and his eyesight was bad, so it often took him a couple tries, but he was stubborn. The kids on the diving board paused. When someone was swimming down to the swordfish, it was understood you stopped diving. Ann got bored watching Bill try to swim down, so she slipped into the pool and swam off.

And suddenly I was sitting alone with Missy. This was the moment. I felt like barfing.

"Hey Missy?" I said. I paused.

After a minute she looked at me expectantly.

"Have you seen *E.T.* yet?" I knew very well that she hadn't.

"No. I can't wait."

"We should go this weekend."

She smiled a big, excited smile.

"That's a great idea!" she said.

And it was done. I had asked her. She had said yes. Everything would click into place now. I felt a surge of excitement rush through me. I could already feel her head on my shoulder.

Bill emerged from the deep end with the hoppy taw and climbed out of the pool to do an exaggerated victory dance, as if he were the first to make it down to the swordfish. Missy laughed. Ann and Nate swam back to us.

"Are you all coming to E.T. this weekend too?" Missy asked them.

I looked around, wide-eyed. *Please say no.* But of course they said yes. Everyone wanted to see E.T.; why would they have any idea that it was supposed to be a date? Missy clearly didn't. Pretty soon there was a big group going to the movie at the mall the following weekend.

Bill sat there just as excited as everyone else. I tried to kill him with lasers from my eyes. This was his fault. He should have realized that I had set up a date and run interference. He should have been a better friend.

Eight of us went to the mall to see *E.T.* that Saturday. But just because there was a group of us didn't mean that my plan was dead. I was still in good spirits..

It was our first time spending time alone at the mall. We tried to look cool but there was a nervous jumpiness running through the group. We filed into the movie theater and bought treats. I stayed close to Missy to ensure that I got a seat next to her. The eight of us were loud and rambunctious. Bill and I threw popcorn into one another's mouths over Missy's head while she told us we would never be elected president if we kept this up. We grew still when the lights dimmed. On the screen, the camera panned across the night sky down into the dark forest and E.T.'s spaceship. It wasn't the explosive beginning of *Star Wars*, but I still ate it up. I believed E.T. was real. At the point when E.T. got sick, it was clear the whole movie theater felt the same way. I heard sniffles and muffled sobs coming from all around me. I had to blink back my own tears because I was sitting next to Missy. I noticed her brushing tears off her own cheeks.

This was my time. If I was going to console her, this was the

moment. All I had to do was reach out and touch her hand. My body shimmered with trepidation. I glanced over to find her hands.

Since that moment, many things have happened to me. I have made friends and lost friends. I have graduated from high school and from university. I've held jobs and been fired from jobs. I've dated, broken up, gotten married, had kids, gotten divorced. My parents have died. Friends have died. Pets have died. I've bought a house, lost a house, and moved twelve times. I've had much more serious relationships than those in sixth grade.

Maybe.

In 1982, at age twelve, we didn't question anything. We didn't question whether we should be walking alone to Mrs. Lusk's. We didn't question whether we should be scrambling through gullies all day. We didn't question whether our parents should be at home when we got back from school or even if they should know where we were. We just did.

We develop, our whole lives, towards complexity and ambiguity. This is neither a good thing nor a bad. It's just the way of life. At twelve, there was simplicity in every action. Every friendship. Even love, no matter how naïve and silly. You never have that simplicity again. I will love many people in my life. But not like that. I had known Missy my entire life; I had loved Missy my entire life. I just didn't know it at the time.

I saw Missy's hand in her lap but something was wrong. It took a few seconds in the dark to realize that her fingers were entwined with Bill's. She was holding hands with Bill. Bill. Bill in his sweatpants. Bill with his big thick glasses. Bill with his complete aversion for fashion or any proper behavior. No one could love Bill. He was the Han Solo to my Luke Skywalker; he was the sidekick. I didn't know then that everyone always loves Han Solo first. I didn't understand how true it was when Leia said "I love you" at the end of *Empire Strikes Back* and Han Solo responded, "I know."

And worse, how could Bill do this to me? Yes, I never admitted my feelings about Missy—in fact I had consistently mocked the idea when he brought it up—but he should have known. He was my best friend.

I was frozen in my seat. I stared at the movie so I wouldn't look to the side, but I couldn't pay attention. I didn't care that E.T. lived, even though everyone around me cheered when Elliot saw the flower come to life. I would have normally lived for the bike chase scene and soared with everyone in the theater when the bikes took off into the sky, but I was anchored by my fury.

When we left, I positioned myself with all of our friends between us, shoved my hands into my pockets, and stared down at the ground until the bus came. My shirt felt too big, my jeans felt too uncool, my hair felt all wrong. I went home and closed myself in my room and stayed in there all Sunday, ignoring the doorbell.

At the pool, on Monday, everything was the same and everything was different. Bill and Missy weren't holding hands, but they sat next to each other and let their shoulders touch. No one else cared. All my friends were sitting on the pool's edge, taking turns diving after the hoppy taw.

I lay off to the side, on my towel. The weather was in the mid-90s and soon I was baking in the dry sun. I had no desire to join everyone, so I stood in line at the diving board. It felt good to jump in and let the water cool off my overheated body and mind. I tried to make enough of a splash for it to reach where they were seated.

I got back in line and did another cannonball.

The next time I was on the board, Bill was diving for the hoppy taw. Jamie had thrown it right down onto the swordfish, just where Bill liked it. He had tried for it twice already.

Bill smiled and tensed at the side of the pool. He drew a big breath. He looked over at Missy.

My fists clenched so hard I could feel my nails in my palm. At that moment I hated him more than I had hated anyone in my twelve years.

He launched away from the wall, toward the swordfish. Normally I would wait until everyone was out from under the diving board before jumping. But I wanted to give him a scare. So I waited until he had grabbed the hoppy taw and was headed up to the surface.

And I jumped.

I intended to jump right next to him, to splash him and surprise him. I pulled my legs up to my chest. I was in the air for a few seconds. I don't know if I miscalculated where he would come up or whether he changed direction as he swam, but I landed on him, not next to him. He had been underwater a while, so he didn't have much air in his lungs; what air was there was driven out by the impact and replaced with water. His arms flailed, panicked. My weight pushed him down into the water. Then he stopped moving.

With my high school reunion coming up, I've been thinking about high school and junior high. I've been thinking about the kids I knew and comparing them with my own daughters. It was a different world back then. I would never let my daughters roam the neighborhood alone with a pack of friends at the age of eight. They would never spend an entire afternoon exploring the gulley and building a fort without me knowing exactly where they were. They wouldn't ride their bikes alone to a store all the way across town, on a major road moreover, without a helmet. They would never walk down to 7-11 and buy whatever candy they could afford.

No one would ever let all the neighborhood kids swim in their pool. I can't imagine anyone being generous enough, or patient enough, to let so many kids into her home. But much more than that, I can't imagine someone willing to accept the liability. We would worry about getting sued.

Because of the reunion, I've been hearing little trickles of information about people. Mike has a big family—six kids—and owns a plant-watering company. Nate is a lawyer who never really managed to make a relationship work full-time. Ann lives in Boston and is a powerful investment banker.

Missy, I hear, has two kids. She had breast cancer a few years back and almost died. I've seen pictures of her online and she doesn't quite look like herself—gaunt, lined—but I can recognize her smile.

And Bill.

I felt as his body went slack. Without air in his lungs, Bill sank straight down. I was tangled with him and I grabbed his hand. I remember the feel of his fingers in mine. I was

trying to pull Bill up toward the surface but I had no leverage. We were right above the swordfish.

Bill touched down on the tiles. We were so deep. My ears hurt. I stared at the swordfish for ages. I had been here so many times over so many summers. I felt like I was looking into its eye, like we were old friends. I told the swordfish that Bill was going to die. *Please*.

The swordfish twisted. The swordfish flipped its tail. The swordfish pushed up, infinitely strong in the water. It got under Bill and lifted. I lay there, underwater, calm as a starfish, watching it carry Bill up and away from me.

It's what it was there for, to protect us.

I finally pushed up, after four decades underwater. When I broke the surface, it was Mrs. Lusk who was lifting Bill, limp and lifeless, from the pool. I had never seen Mrs. Lusk get in the pool. Other kids were grabbing him and pulling him onto the hot cement, laying him flat in case he had a broken neck. A boy scout was performing CPR. He was unconscious and he was unconscious and he was unconscious. Then he coughed up water and breathed and I was treading water in the pool and, thank God, no one was watching me.

I only meant to land next to him.

I think.

It took Bill a long time to recover. He had been underwater for several minutes. He didn't have permanent brain damage, but he wasn't exactly normal either. For a while it felt like he was in slow motion, like Han Solo after being released from carbonite. He's done okay. He's a manager at an electronics store now. He's good with computers.

He didn't blame me for what happened, but I couldn't act normal around him for a while. I couldn't make eye contact with him. We were still friends, we still played AD&D together, but there was a distance between us. I wasn't Han. I wasn't even Luke. I was Vader. I knew it, and I think he knew it too.

But he had Missy. She was there for him. She was nice. She'd always been nice. She spent hours and hours at the side of his bed, reading *The Sword of Shannara* to him. I couldn't help but think that it could have been me. She could have been reading to me. No one, in the thirty-six years since, has read to me like that.

Mary Tharin

Mirage

The waiter with the short ponytail appears next to my table.

"Back again, *signora*?"

I muster a smile that I hope looks sincere, then nod and order a macchiato. The waiter disappears into the cafe and I wonder what he must think of me. The American with grown-out bangs, puffy from the humidity, who has sat alone at this sidewalk table every day for a week. He probably assumes I'm an aimless tourist with no agenda and a fondness for over-roasted espresso. He can't know that I chose this table for its view of the building across the street.

The building is the color of a raw egg yolk. Green shutters jut from its windows, flower boxes burst with geraniums and dangling ivy. Varnish peels from window frames and stucco has chipped away in erratic patches, exposing faded brick below. The building is elegantly stressed, like those effortless women who look flawless in old T-shirts and tattered jeans. I am not one of those women.

On the first day, I walked straight up to the door and scanned the bronze nameplates on the wall. The bottom name on the right made me catch my breath, and I pressed the shiny button next to it. Nothing happened. I tried again, holding the button longer. Still nothing. After the fourth try, I became aware of the people walking past. Of the security camera pointing down at me. Of how odd I must look, lingering there on the doorstep.

I have not been back to the door since. Instead, every afternoon I sit and watch it for several hours with a leather-bound notebook open in front of me to defray suspicion. In it I've jotted down some things I might say to the man who lives in that building.

How have you been?
Are you pleased surprised to see me?
When did you leave Rome?

How was your last tour?

Do you remember when we used to sit at cafes like this one all afternoon?

Do you ever think of me?

Next to each line I've copied down the Italian translation, supplied by an app on my phone. But Alberto will do all the talking. He could squeeze conversation from a stone.

Meeting Alberto was how I learned that some people could make you fall for them without any effort. On that night fifteen years ago when I first saw him perform, he mesmerized the whole crowd in that smoke-filled underground bar with just three words into the mic. After his first song everyone whistled and cheered, spilling beer on the floor. It didn't even matter that he couldn't sing the highest notes.

Alberto thought I was exotic. Really I was disoriented, far from home, and willing to be whatever he wanted. At least for a while. The glossy photos of our time together are tucked in a box somewhere, but I can picture him sitting across this small round table, guitar case propped against the cafe wall. Dark messy hair, flannel shirt and ripped jeans. He would appreciate that I came here to find him, that I didn't write or call first. He loved spontaneity; most people bored him. I was more adventurous when we were together. I could do that again.

I think of another question and pick up my pen.

Did you hear about the—

"Scandal" sounds too dramatic. But it's the most appropriate word. *Scandalo*. I copy it into the translation column.

At the click of a latch—a sound to which I have become singularly attuned—I drop the pen and look up. The door of the building across the street opens and a woman stands there, her back framed in the rectangle of empty space. A long cotton dress the color of marigolds swishes around her calves. I slump down in my chair and watch her prop the door open with her hip. She pulls a stroller across the threshold and swings it around, then down the shallow steps. The wheels jostle as the bulky contraption bounces from stone to

stone. The infant hidden inside starts to scream.

Maybe there's no such thing as an effortless woman.

On the evening of Symbal's IPO gala, the venture capital guys clustered around me, cooing their congratulations. They were all wearing patterned bowties that seemed somehow mocking, and they were only talking to me because they couldn't find my husband.

"Preston's done a brilliant job positioning the company," one of them said.

I tightened my grip on my champagne flute. Yes, sure, my husband spent four years leveraging his connections into meetings with musicians and big-label executives. But I was the one who'd "positioned" the company. I'd led the analysis of the music-streaming market, drafted the business plan, spent late nights reviewing UI specs with engineers. I'd signed the lease on this building, designed its open-office concept. I'd even planned this stupid party.

But I was familiar with the looks I'd get if I pointed this out—the widened eyes, raised brows, sideways glances. So I stayed quiet and flashed a cheerful, acquiescent smile that was fine with everyone. They didn't expect me to say much.

"Sonia, can I have a word?" Tessa was behind me, a tablet tucked under her arm. She always knew when I wanted to be interrupted. We escaped the knot of bowties and I followed her to an empty corner of the rooftop terrace. The sun was setting over the Bay, diffusing the fog with a dusty mauve tint.

"Preston was scheduled to start his speech five minutes ago," Tessa whispered, though no one was close enough to overhear. The salty wind brought a slight flush to her cheeks.

"Ok, thanks. I'll find him." I downed the last of my champagne and cringed as the bubbles climbed up my nasal passages.

"I think—" she trailed off, pressing her lips into a pale line.

"Is something wrong?"

"No." Her eyes went from her watch to the sky to her shoes. "I think you should check his office."

I had espresso machines installed in Symbal's employee kitchens as a nostalgic nod to my semester in Rome. But no one knew how to use them, so they were always clogging and spewing coffee-scented sludge all over the minimalist office decor. Eventually they had to be removed and replaced with Keurig machines.

"It feels like a personal defeat," I told Preston on the balcony of our twentieth-floor SOMA apartment one grey Sunday morning. He sat across from me, legs stretched long beneath the table so I had to tuck mine back, holding a vape pen in one hand and his phone in the other. He glanced at me and flashed that perfect, triangular smile. "You're so cute when you try."

Down on the Bay, container ships the length of city blocks crept past each other through the fog.

"You shouldn't use that so much," I said.

"This?" He looked at the vape as if he'd forgotten it was there. "Jesus, Sonia. You need to lighten up."

This was our dynamic. I told myself it was healthy. Preston was the yin to my yang, the chill half of the power couple. It had been that way from the beginning, in business school, where he'd been the ultimate catch. A man who radiated confidence, but who managed to stay endearingly self-effacing. Never in a hurry, because life moved on his schedule. Everyone had wanted to be in Preston's orbit, to revel in a bit of his reflected glow. I was simply the most determined. I sidled up to him at every bar during every happy hour and class mixer. I drove him home when he got too drunk to stand. I helped him pass his classes. I never flinched when he slept with other women, when he told me he loved me one day, then disappeared the next. I needed that glow.

"I don't understand what you're asking."

Nine men in suits shifted uneasily around a long oval table. They'd put me at the head, in the seat closest to the door. Beyond the boardroom's glass walls, sea and sky blurred together in a haze of amber, the color of marine layer and slanting sunlight. No blue at all.

A week had passed since the first allegation went public, and the harassment claims against Preston were now blooming

like mushrooms. It had started with his assistant, the one I'd found leaving his office the night of the gala. If I hadn't seen her face at the exact moment she'd shut the door behind her, I might not have believed the report. But that expression—that mix of disbelief and anger and shame—left no room for doubt.

Preston resigned four days later and flew to his family's beachfront property in Mexico. He didn't ask if I wanted to go with him. Anyway, I didn't. I had to stay and manage the fallout.

"The Board thinks it would be better if you took a step back."

"Back where?"

Furtive looks flitted around the table.

"Sonia," said the suit next to me. "We're asking you to leave Symbal."

Each meaningless word spoken after that, along with every intervening sound and pained expression, carved itself into my memory like a cave etching.

"It's a matter of optics. People associate you with Preston. You two are a . . . package. With him gone, and all the mess in the news, the Board feels it's better for the company if you step away."

"But it's my company."

A pause, more glances.

"Not anymore."

Another pause.

"The Board has already voted. We have to do what's best for the shareholders."

A cough.

"If you'd like to collect your things from your office, Tessa will escort you."

My singular thought as I left the room was that I would not cry. I would not.

"They want me to watch while you pack up," Tessa said, standing just inside the door of what had been my office. "I'm not going to do that. Just buzz me when you're done and I'll walk you out."

I descended into the ergonomic desk chair. "Tessa—"

She shifted her eyes to mine. It seemed to take great effort.

"I'm glad you decided to stay."

Her lips tightened and she nodded.

"But . . ." I couldn't say 'I thought we were friends.' It was too pathetic.

Tessa's accusation against Preston had come out last, a miserable coda to the parade of horrors that had kept me awake all week. I didn't know the other women well, but this was my Tessa. The bright woman I'd plucked from the intern pool, the one I'd been grooming. Grooming for what, I wondered. Maybe for something she never wanted.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked finally.

A flash of contempt crossed her face. I shrank back and my eyes fell to the desk. Then I heard her sigh. "For a while," she said, "I forgot who I was."

I couldn't look up. I heard the door close, the click of her heels fade.

Of course I'd known something was wrong. But when Preston started coming home late, making excuses about meetings that I knew weren't real, I told myself he was just blowing off steam. And when six months passed without the barest hint of intimate contact between us, I told myself it was the stress. Once we got past the IPO, we would be better.

On the night I woke up to the heat of my husband's body on top of mine, it had been months since we'd so much as held hands. The sensation of him pressing into me had a far-off quality, and I thought at first I was dreaming. But his hand clamped my hip, and the pain was real. I lay still and waited for him finish. The glow of the alarm clock caught his eyes staring at some spot on the wall far above my head.

I felt no shock, no anger. Only gratitude. That he still wanted me. That I remained worthy.

It wasn't until after the sun had seeped through the blinds, when I was in the shower, a longer one than usual, rubbing the loofa absently back and forth across my stomach, that I remembered about the tampon. I squatted under the spray of the shower and tried to find the braided string. I forced myself not to panic, to let my muscles relax, so that I could reach up and claw it out. Finally the finger-sized hunk of cotton emerged, curved and solid crimson like a sickle cell. I

choked back a sob while water and blood swirled around my feet and into the drain.

I should have said something, then, there. I should have shrieked, thrown things, slapped his face, torn the curtains, burned the building to the ground.

But I didn't make a sound. Because I knew what he would say. So he got a little carried away. I was his wife, wasn't I? And anyway, I hadn't objected.

Lighten up.

I scrape the last of the milk foam from the bottom of the little white cup. It's sweet with a hint of bitterness at the finish. The shadows of the table legs have stretched and thinned, marking the hour to switch from coffee to wine. Tables around me are filling with old men sipping grappa and teenagers ordering their first evening spritz.

It wasn't strictly ethical to look up Alberto's home address. But after Preston's tornado-like destruction of everything in his path, I felt entitled to one small transgression. In those last few minutes before my accounts and passwords were deleted forever, I found him in Symbal's client database. I scribbled a street, number, and town onto the back of an old receipt, folded it twice, and tucked into my wallet before Tessa escorted me out.

"Can I get you anything else, *signorina*?" The waiter smiles down at me, a black tray balancing on his tented fingers. I return his smile and think, not for the first time, that he must know where Alberto is. The man is a celebrity now, and this is a small town. With a simple question I could put an end to this desperate crusade. The idea exhilarates me for one thrilling heartbeat, then passes. This chair, that door; without them I'm lost.

"No, *grazie*."

Waiter, tray, and cup disappear. I stack a trio of coins on the table but don't get up. Around me the street buzzes as a human tide shifts from work to home. Bicycles rattle across flat, square cobblestones arranged in imprecise rows. Locks click and wooden shutters bang open. I close my eyes. Someone is playing a violin in the piazza and the sound stretches through the air like taffy. The wobbling, imperfect

notes hit me in waves until I almost cry. It would be so much better if I could. Instead I sit rigid, adhered to this chair, trying to gain back some echo of what I've lost.

A voice pierces the suffusion of sound and I wonder, again, if I am dreaming. The staccato words, too fast to comprehend, punctuate the clattering wheels of a suitcase. I don't need to turn around to know it's Alberto. But, anyway, I do.

He's wearing a bluetooth in his ear and big, square sunglasses. His hair is slick like lacquer, his white linen shirt matches his pants. The teenagers at the table beside me elbow each other, lift their phones to snap photos. Alberto doesn't notice them. Or me. A cigarette balances on the edge of his lip, forcing him to speak from the side of his mouth. I told him over and over that he should quit. Each time he'd say the same thing. *Lasciati andare*.

Lighten up.

At the door he pauses and fishes into his pocket. Then, in one sweeping movement, the door is open and he is through. I feel the subtle quake of it shutting, like a train passing beneath my feet.

The notebook lies open in front of me, full of desperate words repeating themselves. One by one, I tear out each inked sheet. I crumple the paper into little balls. I toss them in the ashtray to mix with the burnt-out remnants of things spent. When I tuck the notebook into my bag, only ruffled strips of frayed pulp and blank pages remain. I stand, and decide I'll follow the cobbled street to where it curves up toward the piazza. A place I've not yet seen.

Joey Porcelli

Parachute Drop

The girl sees the man with the brown leather satchel once a year. He sells gadgets out of the bottom of that bag; at least that's what her mother tells her. Brushes for your hair, brushes for your bath, brushes for your beard. Her mother says he sends them money, but she doesn't think so. If he did, there would have been more books on the shelf, a new dress for school, maybe even flowers for her mother's empty crystal vase, the red glass one etched in poppies.

In the spring, not on her birthday but his, he wanders back to their walk-up apartment and declares himself a Brooklynite. All those other nights, it's just the girl and her mother, alone together while he "travels."

Last year, he brought the girl a blue and green parakeet in a white wicker cage. She named it Skeeter. Her mother doesn't like all the chatter and bird droppings, but he told her it was for their protection. "You don't have a dog, so here's a 'watch bird' for my little girl," he said. "This neighborhood's rolling downhill faster than a loose tire."

Her mother installed a deadbolt soon after he left.

The girl spends the year inside her books. She loves *The Secret Garden* and animal stories, especially about horses. Her mother blames the girl's lame leg on the family upstairs. "Squatters, they probably brought the polio with them," she says.

When the snow melts, the girl listens to the other kids on the block play Double Dutch on the sidewalk below. When the temperature rises, she watches them dance in and out of the spray from the illegally opened fire hydrant. Envy curls her deeper into her green corduroy armchair, the one by the window.

"Look at those juvenile delinquents in their underwear," her mother says. "What if we have a real fire?"

On the last day of May, a knock on the door sends Skeeter into a squawking frenzy. The girl's mother lifts her

Sunbeam Ironmaster from the board and shuffles over in her fluffy beige bedroom slippers to see who's there. She needs to finish the cuffs and collar of her client's starched cotton shirt before the two o'clock pick-up. She stares her left eye into the peephole.

The girl knows who it is before her mother unlatches the chain. His cigar smoke sneaks in from under the space where the door is warped. He'd been standing out there for a long time debating whether or not to knock. He still has a key.

Her mother lets him in, a crack at a time. His fedora leads the way, extended out front like a peace offering. Her father puffs his way into the room, but he looks different to the girl this year. A little rounder 'round the middle and a lot more well-to-do dressed all fine in a natty brown suit and matching wingtips.

He plants himself on her mother's crocheted rug in the middle of the living room like he centers their galaxy. "You look good, Mary," he says to the girl's mother. The girl isn't sure what he sees; her mother looks old and chipped.

"And aren't you all dapper," her mother says. The girl looks to see if he has on a necktie. Her mother told her it was obvious why he never wore one; he didn't like anything that tied him down.

"Aren't you going to wish me a happy birthday?" he asks.

Her mother points to the silver flask in his pocket. She lifts that same peeping eyebrow and arches it into scorn, a signal the girl has learned to heed. "No need, Charles. Looks like you've already started celebrating on your own."

He offers her a swig, but her mother never touches anything stronger than elderberry wine, and only on holidays. He turns to the girl. "How's my little radish?" he asks. He nicknamed her that because her ginger hair matches her freckles.

Her mother turns her back on him and stands over her ironing board.

"Ready for a day at the beach, sweetie pie?" he asks.

The girl puts her book down on the yellowed vinyl TV tray that sets balanced over her knees and waits to hear what her mother will say.

"Don't be absurd, Charles, you know she can't swim." A bead of sweat drips off her mother's eyebrow and lands on

her cheek, an exclamation point to the deep frown that forms.

"Not a problem. I got bigger plans than water ballet for today." The fan whirs overhead. Her father points at the girl in the chair. "Snap on your leg, radish, and make it snappy." He chuckles at his own pun.

The girl does as she is told. Her hands vibrate her book and the can of Cream Soda off the TV tray and onto the windowsill behind her chair. She pulls the heavy metal contraption up from the floor and fastens three worn leather straps around what remains of her shrunken limb. If she doesn't act fast, the only adventure she'll have this summer will disappear out the door without her.

"There's a corn dog and cotton candy in your future, baby girl. Hope you're hungry."

Her mother pushes that little button on the iron that releases the steam. "Give me the envelope, Charles," she says. The girl suspects she is the purchase. "Have her back before supper, she needs her medicine."

"Fresh air, that's the best medicine, right sweetheart?" He lifts the girl from her chair like she weighs less than nothing. He doesn't notice the worn white spots on both corduroy sidearms or how her small body has conformed to the stuffing underneath. Her frame leaves a small but permanent indentation behind.

Her mother goes to the closet and pulls out a plastic poncho. She puts it over the girl's shoulders. "Could rain," she says.

Boosted up to her piggyback perch, the girl's useless leg dangles behind like a red flag warning a heavy load. "Bye, Mama," she says as her father whisks her out the door. The deadbolt turns behind them.

It takes her father no time to ferry her down the stoop and lower her into his shiny, apple red, Cadillac Coupe de Ville convertible. The girl wonders how many brush sales it took to buy this car. She looks back at her mother's grimace pasted against the bars of the second-floor window and waves both hands at the same time. She's a little ashamed at how happy she is and how much she welcomes the relief from the heat, the boredom, and the daily routine.

When her father squeals his Caddy's fancy whitewall tires away from the curb, she stares straight out the windshield.

She doesn't want to miss a single storefront, alleyway, stop sign, or tree along the way. Tailpipe exhaust and a hot wind sweep her bangs into her eyes. She brushes them back with a grin. Her father turns the radio up loud. A man sings a song about a rock and a clock. *When the chimes ring five, six, and seven, we'll be right in seventh heaven*. She tries to memorize the words, but they go by too fast.

"Next stop, Coney Island," he says.

"Papa, what are we going to do there?"

"We're going to fly, baby, fly."

She feels like they've already taken off when he streaks that Caddy over the solid white line and maneuvers it between two disgruntled taxicabs. One of his swerves sends the girl's good knee into the dash. The black and blue bruise will stick around long after the day ends.

Up ahead, a maze of amusement park signs beckon in bright yellows and reds. One says, "Pony Rides, Five Cents," another, "Girls, Girls, Girls," and then she sees the one that reads, "Freaks Inside" and worries.

Her father parks at the farthest end of the lot, as far away from any of the other cars as possible. "Don't want some jackass backing into my fins. They cost more than your mother's rent," he says, mostly joking. "Hop on out."

The girl grips the handle, opens the door, and swings her body out of the car. Her feet sink into the hot asphalt and she wobbles off balance. She doesn't want him to notice how weak she is, or to be a bother, or to spoil his birthday.

"Need a lift?" he asks. He cradles her in his arms and carries her through the "Welcome to Coney Island" gate. She reminds herself to tell her mother that he is actually very kind.

The view from his back swirls around her in a sea of parents who lug ice chests and children who clutch helium balloons. She smells the sweet of caramel corn mixed with the sweat of the crowd. The girl exhales relief when they pass the tent that holds the bearded lady and the alligator-skin man inside. When her father carries her by the Oriole Baths, the girl almost asks him if Skeeter could come next time, but she knows it sounds stupid. Maybe her father will stop at the Steeplechase Ride on her left. She wants to cheer for the black

horse who prances around the track in front of the grown men seated on the bleachers.

"Should we eat first?" he asks her. She wonders what comes second.

He scans the food truck menus, orders, and points her to an empty picnic table. She waits until he shows up with two sloppy joes and a strawberry slush in a cone-shaped cup for her. He talks mostly about himself while they eat. Something about the "rules of the road" and the pressure on a man to provide. She feels a little sad for him when he spills mustard on his pant leg close to his crotch. She doesn't dare spit in her napkin and wipe it off. Her mother warned her to never touch or be touched by a man below the waist.

Stomach full of forbidden foods, she waits while he chats up a pretty woman in a flowered sundress who is hawking tickets to a bingo game. Her father hands the woman a business card and a pen. She hands it back with some numbers written next to a tiny heart. The girl wonders if the woman is one of his customers who will buy some of his brushes.

After lunch, she bobs up and down caboose style on his back over the boardwalk. On the midway to her left, barkers call out to her father to throw baseballs at bottles. She would love it if he won her a Kewpie doll, but she's too timid to ask. At the next booth, a blindfolded man is throwing a hatchet at a real-life person strapped onto a spinning wheel. She digs her knees into his sides, a jockey move to get him past that one.

On her right, swimmers stroke arm over arm through the surf. Closer to shore, children splash one another from polka-dotted innertubes shaped like puffy dragons and giraffes. She wants to leap off her father's back, run into the water, and drift out to sea until she reaches a magical island. She read in one of her mother's *Reader's Digest* magazines that saltwater keeps you afloat.

"Here we go, kiddo." Her father stops in front of an iron gate and lowers her down onto the boardwalk. The metal bar under her clunky right shoe splinters the wooden planks. A red and white painted sign overhead reads, "Parachute Drop."

The girl cranes her neck to see a giant mushroom-shaped contraption; its steel arms reach out over Coney Island like a

patron Saint. Attached by guide wires, rickety metal chairs hold couples who ascend into their outstretched folds. Their voices fade as they disappear into the clouds. She hopes her father doesn't see her tremble. He might take her home.

When they reach the front of the line, the attendant looks at the girl and then at her father. "You sure you want to take a gimp up there?" he asks. "She might not be able to hold on to her leg or her lunch."

Her father blows a circle of smoke into the man's face. "She paid her money, just like everybody else."

"All's I'm saying is she looks a little puny. And, we got the right to refuse anybody, ya know."

With his smoldering cigar stub cupped into his hand, her father leans in close. She can't hear what is said, but a dollar bill exchanges hands. She waits, her eyes focused down on the pearl buttons of her yellow and white checkered blouse. The girl isn't sure she wants to fly after all.

Her father gently unstraps her leg brace, sets it inside the ticket booth, and helps her into the empty silver chair that swivels around and stops in front of them. When he squats down in the seat beside her, the base tips in his direction. She tucks her gasp back inside.

"Ready to be my co-pilot?" he asks.

She nods.

The parachute ride's gears ratchet, the pulleys pull, and the girl and her father rise above Coney Island in slow motion like seagulls hover over the ocean. She can see for miles. All the beach blankets and folding chairs blend into colored specks on a sandy white canvas. Children on their rubber toys look like confetti sprinkled on a big, blue, watery cake. His birthday cake.

"Papa, this is my best day," she pauses, "ever."

He reaches over and takes her hand in his. "Thought you might like it up here."

When their chair reaches the top, they are suspended 250 feet over the earth. The wind rocks the chair gently. Organ music plays through a speaker above their heads. The girl focuses on the view and then shuts her eyes to savor the moment, weightless and free.

Without warning, the guidewire trips, the chair flips

sideways, and the girl and her father plummet. A rush of air pushes their faces into clownish smiles. The girl laughs with a mixture of delight and terror as the force pushes tears out from her eyes. Halfway down the tower, their parachute opens on cue, right when she was forming a scream in the back of her throat. In the last few minutes of descent, the girl makes a wish and blows smoke from imaginary candles out into the sky.

When they land at the base, the chair bounces up and down four times wrenching her crippled leg into the cement pad. A sharp pain travels up from her foot to her thigh. The girl doesn't complain or care. "Happy Birthday, Papa," she says. "Can we go again?"

A glance at his watch and her father shakes his head. A few raindrops spot his suit on their way back to the car. He brushes them off and says, "Looks like your mother was right."

He flips the convertible top back up just in time to keep his two-tone, leather upholstery dry. They drive back to Brooklyn in a cloudburst. Right before the Cadillac pulls up in front of the girl's apartment, Nat King Cole's voice comes on the radio singing "Autumn Leaves."

Since you went away, the days are long. And soon I'll hear old winter's song; this one the girl will always remember.

Contributor Notes

Anastasia Carrow was born in Budapest, Hungary, and has lived in quite a few states within the U.S. She loves writing fiction and tries to incorporate humanity—and maybe a little bit of humor—into each of her stories. Currently, she's a writing student at the Savannah College of Art and Design. After that, she plans to go abroad for graduate school.

Ashleigh Catsos is a storyteller. She studied Theater at Connecticut College and worked for several years as an actress and playwright in New York City. Her children's musical *Molly Bloom-Lately* has been nationally produced, most notably at the Walnut Street Theater and Gallo Center for the Arts. Her poem *Water: unsafe to drink* can be seen in the July 2021 edition of Berkshire Magazine. Her first novel is forthcoming. She lives in Williamstown, Massachusetts, with her husband, son, and dog. For inquiries, please contact Carolyn Savarese at The Kneerim & Williams Agency.

Jeffrey S. Chapman is a fiction writer and graphic novelist living just north of Detroit. He is an associate professor of creative writing at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. He is working on a graphic novel and his short stories and comics have been published in journals including *South Dakota Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *The Florida Review*, and *Cutbank*. He is a recent recipient of a Kresge Artist Fellowship and a Sustainable Arts Foundation Award.

Broderick Eaton's work has appeared in Crosswinds Poetry Journal, Writer's Digest, Verseweavers, and "Stories That Need to Be Told", among others. She has won Sixfold's Poetry Prize and was a finalist for the Erskine J. Poetry Prize, the 49th Parallel Award, New Millennium Writings, and Tucson Festival of Books. Her education included studies with Mary Oliver at Sweet Briar College and an MFA through Lindenwood University. She lives in the high desert of Oregon.

Parker Fendler has been conjuring up stories ever since he could dream. He recently began transcribing them after waking. This is his publishing debut. He lives in Phoenix Arizona where he gravitates toward indoor hobbies (like writing) that pose a low risk of dehydration in the desert heat.

Olivier FitzGerald is a 30-year-old Franco-American from New York. He attended Angie Cruz's fiction program at The Kenyon Review Writers Workshop, and has also worked under Don Lee at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

Emily Hancock is an incoming first-year at Smith College, and a prospective English Literature major. She enjoys running, reading, hiking, and writing, and lives in Illinois with her family. "Catching Tadpoles" is her first published work.

D.E. Hardy's work has appeared in *New World Writing* and *Clockhouse Magazine*, among others, and will be featured on twitter as part of the 2021 National Flash Fiction Day. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Michael Kozart hails from the Redwood Empire of Northern California, where he lives with his astronomer wife and a mini-lop house rabbit. By day he works in a community health center. By night, on weekends, and some holidays, he's an aspiring writer. His published stories can be found at https://michaelkozart.com/

A graduate of the University of Tennessee, Travis Lee lived in China for three years in the late 2010's, where his short story *The Seven Year Laowai* went viral among the expat community. He currently works as a weather forecaster and lives in Japan.

Elizabeth Lyvers grew up in the hills of West Virginia, molded by books, trees, and basketball. She recently published a suspense novel called *The Honest Lies.* She lives happily in Texas with her husband and infant son, writing during nap times. You can find more of her words on grief, family, and leaving home at her blog, *Dear Life*.

Joey Porcelli is the author of two restaurant guides, a history of the Denver Film Festival, and numerous magazine feature articles. She teaches memoir at the Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities. Porcelli's debut novel *Into the Waves* tells the story of a British World War II veteran. Her second novel focuses on her Italian family at the 1964 New York World's Fair. Porcelli has a journalism degree from the University of Michigan.

Ronita Sinha resides in Toronto, Canada. She is a traveller, recipe experimenter and gardener, tilling her soul for words and images. She holds an M. Phil degree in English Literature from Calcutta, India. Her work has been published or forthcoming in *Cicada*, *East of the Web*, *The Academy of the Heart and Mind*, *Lemonspouting* and *The Literary Yard*. She was awarded "Storyteller of the Month" by The Magic Diary. She writes her personal stories on her blog https://knowingheartblog.wordpress.com

Mary Tharin is a former attorney from the San Francisco Bay Area who now lives in Italy. Her work has appeared in *Five on the Fifth* and *Collective Realms Magazine*. She is currently working on her first novel. You can find her on Twitter @ MaryTharin or Instagram @bymarytharin.