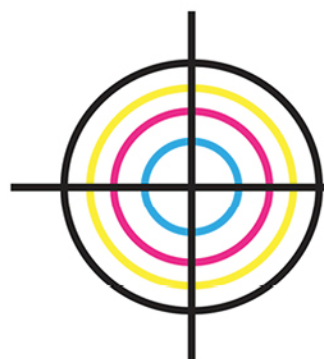
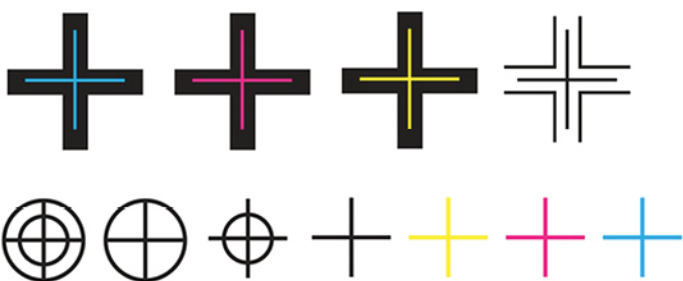
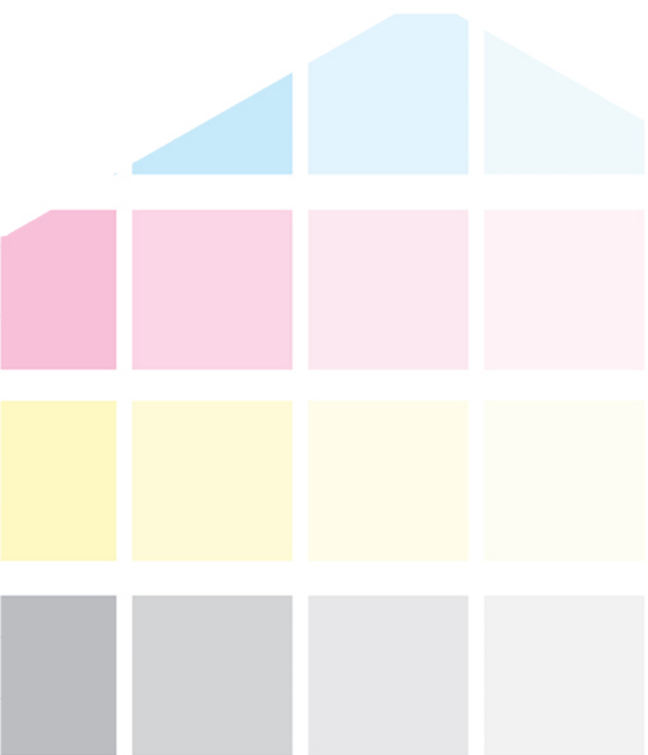


SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2022



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Emily Rinkema

You've Got to be Vigilant, Wes

I think about killing people all the time.

When I'm waiting for a subway, I think about pushing other passengers onto the tracks. I stand with my back against the wall until the train pulls in and distract myself by watching people's feet.

When I'm on a balcony I think I'm going to throw someone off. I actually imagine exactly how to do it. I picture getting them to lean over a bit first, maybe point out a cat on a lower roof, or a woman throwing a vase at her daughter.

If I'm cutting a lime, I hold onto the knife tightly to make sure I don't accidentally stab my boyfriend through the heart.

Steve, the boyfriend, signed me up for a First Aid class at the Y. He thinks it might turn things around a little, make me think about saving people instead of killing them. I'm touched by his thoughtfulness, so I go, even though I know it's not going to change things. I've been like this since I was a kid.

The first hour is CPR. I don't know anyone in the class, so I pair up with the only other woman, figuring I could take her if things turn bad. I can't go into a room without categorizing everyone within the first few seconds: Those I Could Take and Those Who Could Take Me. It's usually pretty clear.

Clara, my CPR partner, asks me to go first, so I kneel down next to the dummy and go through the script we just learned:

"I'm trained in First Aid, are you okay?" And then, "CALL 9-1-1!"

I place the heel of my right hand on the rubber pad, place my left hand on top, lock my elbows, and start pushing to the tune of *Staying Alive*. The instructor yells at all of us to push harder, that it's impossible to push too hard. I doubt that, and start thinking about how I am certainly strong enough to break through a sternum, especially if I was all pumped up on adrenaline.

Clara is crying. I mean, really crying. She's not loud about

it. In fact, she seems kind of embarrassed and tries to pretend she isn't. I stare at her.

"I'm sorry," she says. She takes a gulp of air. "He's going to die."

"He's not real," I say, still trying to keep him alive.

"In my last class, they said 92% of people who have a heart attack on the street die, even with CPR."

Four times. That's how many times Clara has taken this First Aid class. Turns out, she's a mess, my CPR partner. You wouldn't know it from looking at her. She's sporty, put together, looks like a model out of a Patagonia catalog.

Our instructor is helping some big guy (Could Take Me) across the room get his rhythm right, so I stop saving the dummy and sit back against the wall. Clara gets on her knees and moves over to take her turn.

"What's the point?" I ask. "Why keep taking the same class over and over if you don't think it will matter?"

She's crying still as she gets her hands in the right position and leans her weight on the dummy's chest. There's no way she could push too hard. Her nose drips onto the blue plastic chest.

"Because you never know," she says, starting the rhythm, and I realize maybe we aren't all that different.

Later, I stand behind a cop in line at the bagel store. I usually don't let myself get this close to cops because I'm one unintentional impulse away from killing someone at all times anyway, so why add guns and nightsticks to the mix. But I'm starving, haven't eaten since well before the First Aid class, and I get cranky when I don't eat for this long.

I could lean to the left, say something to the cop quietly so he has to lean in, then grab the gun off of his right thigh. There's a safety clip, but I would be quick. Or the nightstick, strapped to his left hip, held in by just a snap. Wouldn't take much distraction to have that out.

"I just took a First Aid class," I say out loud, which is something I do sometimes to make sure I don't do anything stupid. If people are watching me, I figure I'm less likely to do something. My last therapist suggested this strategy, which I haven't given up on yet.

The cop turns to look at me. He sizes up my arms, checks out my chest.

“Why?” he asks, which I think is a strange response. I mean, why not take a First Aid class?

“I’m going to Haiti on a service trip,” I say, even though those are two things I would never do, go to Haiti, or do a service trip. The guy behind me in line says, “Building a school?” A quick glance back tells me I Could Take Him, particularly with a nightstick.

I don’t love lying, but now I have to keep going, and I’m already out of things that I know about Haiti, or service for that matter.

“No,” I say, and then, “Corneal transplants,” because I had read an article while I was waiting for the First Aid class to start about this doctor who goes to Haiti every year to save people’s sight.

“Are you a doctor?” the cop asks.

I just want to order a bagel without killing anyone.

“Yup,” I say, because who the fuck else could do corneal transplants.

“Then why’d you take a First Aid class?” says the guy behind me. I look at the cop and shake my head knowingly, like we’re in this together, the two of us against all the dumbasses in the universe. He puts his hand over his holster and orders his bagel.

Itell Steve about Clara that evening while we’re having a drink on the balcony. Steve has his feet up on the railing, and I am as far back from the edge as I can be and still be outside. I try to explain how desperate she was, how pathetic. But in retelling the class I start to worry about her, start to think that maybe she just needs a friend.

“Did you think about killing her?” Steve asks.

He really wants to understand me, which I think is a bad idea.

Idecide to take the First Aid class again, this time at the community center by the theater. I really think things have been better since I went, though I’m not entirely sure because I thought about pushing a child down the stairs in

my apartment building last night. The difference this time, though, is that I also thought about making a splint for her arm from my belt and the takeout chopsticks.

I breeze through the CPR portion of the class, partnered this time with Mark, an electrician (Could Take Me). After my turn, he takes the instructor's direction that we can't push too hard as a dare, and before he can save the dummy, he's popped the bag in the plastic chest.

"You killed him," I say, a little surprised by how quickly it happened.

"No shit," he says. He tells me he's taking the class because his partner died in an electrical accident, and even though he wasn't with him, he could have been, and then maybe he could have saved him. The guy was sixty-two years old and on Christmas Eve he got paged for an emergency call in Westchester, some rich couple's new dryer kept blowing a fuse, and he went alone, even though he could have said no, it's just a dryer, and even though it was Christmas Eve (or maybe because it was Christmas Eve?), and he showed up and screwed up and rewired things wrong and BAM. Dead.

"I should've been there," he says. "I could've saved him."

"You can't save everyone," I say. I mean it to sound comforting, but I think it just comes across as cold.

Ten minutes later, I watch Mark through the electrocution part of the required video. I want to hold his hand, which I think is real growth.

When I get home, I tell Steve what to do if I ever get a projectile stuck in my eyeball. You're not supposed to pull it out, which is counter-intuitive, so I thought he should know in case it happened, because chances are he would just yank it out. He's kind of a fixer. I tell him you're supposed to take a Dixie cup and poke a hole in it and place it over the projectile and then tape it to the person's head until you get to the hospital.

"Got it," he says, and then, "Your sister called. You should call her back." He is close with his family.

I think about taking the pen off the kitchen island and jamming it into his neck.

I think Steve's idea may have backfired a bit. Knowing 50 ways to save someone also means knowing 50 ways someone could die. Yesterday I had to leave the hardware store early because I pictured shoving "Hello! My name is Wes!" into the wall-cutter. I was having some 2 x 4s cut into blocks for a furniture project I wanted as a surprise for Steve, and there's this wall size saw that only the employees can use. They have to put in a code (3697#--written in pen on his hand) and then they cut the pieces you want. There's a roped off area around the saw, but who are they kidding? It's a rope. In less than two seconds I could be under and shoving Wes' hand right into the blade.

People don't make sense, Wes. You've got to be vigilant.

In the case of amputation you have to stop the bleeding immediately with a tourniquet, and then you have only minutes to get the amputated part on ice before it becomes useless. You're supposed to put it in a baggie and then write the exact time on the baggie with a Sharpie. I bought a box of Sharpies this morning.

I run into Clara at the grocery store. I am inexplicably glad to see her, and I tell her this. I think she is surprised by my enthusiastic hello. She looks like she may start to cry again.

"I'm sorry," she says, clutching her cart.

"It's okay," I say, smiling. I appreciate people who apologize for no reason.

A man with a baseball hat turns into the aisle and I reach towards the paper towels so I won't think about slamming my cart into him. I know that if I did, there's no chance of Clara being able to resuscitate him. Once he passes, I move over to the Dixie Cup section and pick out a box with bees on it. I hand one to Clara, which she adds to her cart.

"For projectiles," I say.

"Or juice," she says, which I think is funny.

"Who's Clara again?" asks Steve, which makes me want to grab him by his hair and submerge his head in the pasta pot.

"My new friend," I say, starting to feel a little bit proud about not killing him. I add aloe to the grocery list.

Clara and I meet for coffee a few days later because I think I'm going to make a go at this friend thing even though I have not always been so successful in that area. I had gone back to the Y by the waterfront and waited around until the First Aid instructor showed up. I told him I needed to get in touch with a woman from our class, that she had lost her engagement ring and I had found it, and I went on to say how she had given me her number but I lost it, and that I understood it was probably confidential and all. I could have saved all those lies. He didn't give a shit about confidentiality.

Clara wasn't surprised I called. It was like she was expecting it, like virtual strangers called her all the time wanting to be friends. I started in on some sort of excuse, but she just cut me off and asked if I wanted to get coffee.

"I don't really know anyone in the city yet," she said.

"This is nice," I say when we sit down the next day at the coffee shop. I'm nervous I'm going to say something stupid so I drink my coffee, which is too hot, and I burn my tongue.

"Fuck," I say.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Thanks," I say. We're going to be good for each other.

I think I need to break up with Steve. Or marry him. I can't decide which, so I buy a bottle of tequila and decide to have a few shots before he gets home and let what happens happen without overthinking it. There are too many decisions to make in the world, and there's a fifty-fifty chance you'll make the wrong one each time. I had to make at least 10 that I can think of on my walk back from coffee. Eleven, if you count what kind of tequila to buy. Twelve, if you count deciding which credit card to use. Thirteen if deciding not to grab the bottle by the neck and swing it into the 19-year-old cashier's head counts.

I hear a key in the door, straighten my back so my boobs lift a few inches, and move the tequila bottle so it's not within immediate reach.

But it's not Steve who opens the door. It's my sister, who has a key because she owns the place and never forgets to remind me that I'm 27, underemployed, and underachieving. Her overactive guilt keeps me housed, so I accept the attitude.

“Hi,” she says, and then looks at the bottle on the table. “Really? It’s not even five o’clock.”

“You could have knocked,” I say, not getting up. This is how we are with each other.

Turns out my mother is off her meds. My sister shares what she knows, which isn’t much, just what the neighbors told her.

“It’s your turn,” she says, “I can’t take off work again.” She has an important job.

“You could have just called,” I say.

“Right,” she says.

I invite her to stay, but we both know I don’t mean it and she says she has to go back to work.

“We can’t keep doing this,” she says at the door, and I don’t know whether she means the mom thing or the us thing. “It’s just a matter of time before someone gets really hurt.”

She’s gone before I can tell her she’s a little fucking late with that concern.

I don’t break up with Steve or propose when he arrives. I tell him about my sister dropping by and that I need to go to my mom’s in the morning, and he hugs me in a way that worries me. Even though there are dozens of sharp or heavy objects within reach, I don’t imagine killing him.

Clara comes with me to my mother’s. We were supposed to meet for lunch, the next logical step in our young friendship, and when I called to cancel, she offered to come along instead.

“I’m good with mothers,” she said, as if they were a particular breed of dog. Even though it’s a terrible idea for at least a dozen reasons, I agree to bring her along.

Steve offered to come too, but I told him no, which led to our first real fight. He said something about how I never let my guard down even for one goddamn minute and I said something about how he never stands up for himself and he said something about me being too controlling to let him stand up for himself and I said something about him letting me be controlling because he can’t handle control and then we both just drank tequila until we forgot why we were fighting. The truth is I become fourteen again when I am home, which was

not my best age. Not sure 27 is a whole lot better, but if there is any chance Steve and I are going to make it as a couple, which I'm starting to doubt, there are things he shouldn't see.

On the ninety minute drive upstate, I tell Clara just enough to make her helpful, but not enough to make her pity me. I tell her my mother is mentally ill, has been since I can remember, that my father was gone by the time I was five, that my sister, six years older, was the responsible one for awhile, but then had enough and left us alone, that it was all good, really, in the grand scheme of global trauma.

"She's fine when she's on her meds," I say, as we get closer, and then, because I'm worried I may have sugar-coated the situation, "It may not be pretty," I say. "She can be mean."

"I'm sorry," Clara says, putting her hand on my arm.

"Is what it is," I say.

When Clara and I get to the house, my mother is in the kitchen. She has painted the walls with paprika—actual paprika, not the color—and nailed lemon slices to the doorway. It must have been hard work, because she is sitting at the island, sweating through her tee shirt, which says Save the Manatees. She is wearing pink sweatpants and no shoes. There is broken glass all over the floor, and I notice that all the frames with the school photos that lined the back wall are missing their glass.

It's best not to challenge her when she's this way, you never know what will set her off, so I step carefully through the mess to get a broom.

"Hi Mom," I say like a fourteen year old.

"Fuck you," she says like my mother.

"Get me a drink," she says, and then notices Clara, who is standing with her back against the wall and her hands clutched in front of her as if praying. Maybe this wasn't the best idea.

"Who the fuck are you?" My mother says, and then turns back to me. "I said, get me a fucking drink." It's ten o'clock in the morning. I can hear my sister's voice in my head, but I shut it down and get the gin out. Maybe I can get her to take her pills with the cocktail. The goal is to either to get her back on her meds or to get her committed, which means things

will have to get pretty bad here. Last time I tricked her into taking the pills, so I have hope, which is perhaps the most destructive of my coping mechanisms.

Clara takes a deep breath and carefully pulls a stool up next to my mother. She is making strange little cooing noises, which I'm not sure she is aware she's doing. She starts rubbing my mother's back. My mother has never been one who likes to be touched and she makes that clear with something close to a growl. But Clara soldiers on and my mother gives up and goes back to yelling at me, which I am good at ignoring.

I find a lime in the back of the refrigerator drawer. It's a bit hard, but I'm pretty sure she is not going to notice. I grab the first knife I see in the drawer, a big one, and am too distracted by Clara, who is now hugging my mother, to imagine killing anyone with it.

And then I cut the tip of my finger off.

It takes me a second to realize it. The wedge of lime is halfway to the glass before I notice the blood, and it turns out that despite my overactive imagination, I can't handle the sight of my own blood.

I wake up on the floor. Clara is leaning over me. "I'm trained in First Aid!" she yells. "Call 911!" she yells. My mother is standing behind her, hopping up and down like a toddler.

I look at Clara and then at my hand. There's a ridiculous amount of blood. I try to say something about getting a Sharpie, but I'm pretty sure it just sounds like a scream.

"Give me your belt!" Clara yells to my mother, who is not wearing a belt. "We need to stop the bleeding!"

"Fuck you!" my mother yells back, and I think she is laughing, or maybe crying, always hard to tell. I notice that her bare feet are covered in blood and I wonder if it's mine or hers or if it even matters.

I remember something from our class about remaining calm, about applying steady pressure, but all I can get out is a barely audible apology.

The EMTs are kind and efficient. Clara apparently pulled it together and wrapped her fleece vest around my hand

to stop the bleeding until they arrived, and they praise her as she hands them the gin and tonic glass with the tip of my finger on ice. I see them look around at the kitchen. I'm sure it will be hard to retell this one back at the station. One of them tells Clara on our way out that she may have saved my life, and it strikes me as a kind thing to say.

My mother and I ride in the ambulance together. She is strapped to the gurney, her feet wrapped in white bandages, and I am belted in upright. The EMT in the back with us offers to call someone, but I tell him not to, that we're fine, that I could really drive myself, that this is really no big deal and everyone is overreacting and that I can take care of it all.

"The fuck she can," says my mother, and I can tell from her tone that things are about to get pretty bad.

My hand throbs, wrapped tight in bandages and tape.

"I'm so sorry," I say, maybe out loud. It doesn't matter.

I'm released a few hours later. My mother is not. We'll have at least 72 hours to figure out a plan or try to get her committed again. When Steve picks me up, I tell him we'll talk about it tomorrow, and he just squeezes my hand.

While on painkillers, I don't think of killing anyone. I even try to imagine it, just to test myself, but the water glass next to me is just a water glass and the balcony is just a nice place to sit with my feet up and watch the rain. It should feel good, this absence of violent thoughts, but I just feel vulnerable. Empty.

Clara comes over to help take care of me. She is different. Confident. She spills my water and doesn't apologize. Steve laughs at something she says as if he's sixteen. It's all a bit too much, honestly, how easy they are. I think once I can feed myself and zip up my jeans by myself and open a bottle of wine by myself, I'm going to break up with both of them.

Kent Nelson

Where's Far Away?

It's fall in Escambia County, the northmost west county in the Panhandle, right up next to the Alabama line. Last week down in Panama City, my older sister Loretta got arrested for meth—she was living with a parolee—and, Daddy, in response, sold his cattle, including the two longhorns he kept as pets, and disappeared into the night. This isn't our first family disaster. Two years ago my younger sister LaShonna was killed mid-afternoon driving home on Route 4 near the Blackwater River. A bee stung her, and she went off the highway into an oak tree. We think that's what happened, because her face was swole up, but the police said she'd been drinking.

Daddy worried over us three girls, but less about me, because I have a job in the county road works, keeping track of men and machines—where they are, who's driving, where they supposed to go, and for how long. My office is in Pensacola. I don't much like the city because the air force and navy are all over everywhere. "American is always at war," Daddy said. "You got to remember the fear of a nation."

After Daddy left, Tom Markham called me, and, a few days later, I drive the forty miles up there, near to the Perdido River. The house isn't much for speaking of. It's the first place you come to half a mile out of Walnut Hill, a clapboard nothing with peeling paint. Not locked. The roof doesn't leak, though, and the windows are mostly tight.

Daddy's truck isn't there, or the cattle, either, and most of his stuff is gone—guitar and clothes and boots and some pictures. The fridge has mold in the plastic containers and a few limp vegetables. I don't know what to do except clean up for when he comes back.

On my way home to Pensacola, I stop up to the Markham place on the hill and thank Tom for calling. "I liked your Daddy," he says, "and I trusted him. He kept his promises."

"He didn't make too many," I say.

"Martha and I, we'll keep an eye out down there. I'm sorry

the longhorns are gone. If I'd known, I'd have bought them and rented the pasture."

"When the time comes," I say, "we don't always know what we need to."

"If I can help," Tom says, "let me know."

Things go on for some days, work and such, and one night I'm cooking dinner, waiting on Cale to get home, thinking helter-skelter about paying our rent money, and where Daddy ran off to, and whether Loretta's still in jail. Grits is cooking and a ham steak and leeks. Past eight, Cale comes in skunky-drunk. I'm eating already, and his food is across the table. He sits down like nothing and says, "I jus' threw a cinder block through the window of Jasper Trumbull's truck."

I look up and see his fiery red eyes. "He owe you money again?"

"An' he knows I knows he has it."

"We got enough trouble without you being ornery," I say. "You bet on Tampa again?"

"Bet against."

"Caleb, we're not suffering. We got two cars, a tin boat, and food on the table."

"Mine be cold," he says.

"You didn't call. Was you over at Pelegrin's seeing Miss Big Tits?"

"Seven guys was in there because of her."

"She ought to be in a magazine."

"One time she was, but, when you get old, you gotta work extra."

I eat and wash down my grits with iced tea. "I'm thinking of taking a break from you, Cale," I say. "I'm going to go to the country and live at Daddy's."

He looks at me as if he's got hearing loss. "And do what?"

"Commute back. People do that. It's a little more than thirty minutes."

Cale pokes at his chicken. "I hear yo Daddy went to Mobile. You gotta hope he don't waste your inheritance in them casinos."

"What inheritance? Anyway, he's his own man. He wouldn't go to Mobile."

“You can’t leave,” Cale says. “I won’t allow it.”

“Change comes fast,” I say, “and you don’t vote.”

Daddy kept cattle and farmed vegetables and was respected because he paid what he owed and didn’t raise his voice. What he knew was less than some and a lot more than others. We had some fence, but the longhorns had none around them, because Daddy fed them salt treats by his hand. He named them Tom and Martha for the Markhams on the hill, though the Markhams never knew.

When we girls were growing up, Mama was a mystery woman, so quiet you barely knew she could talk. She gibbered about nothing and scurried about in the garden, watering and weeding, and fetched feed for the chickens, and cleaned the house. Sometimes she prayed out loud for a miracle to come, though she never specified what the miracle might be. She knew we three girls were in jeopardy and thought nothing could save us, so she spent more time with whatever self she saw over there in the trees by the river.

One night a storm howled with lightning and heavy rain, and nobody in a right mind would’ve ventured out, but Mama did. In the morning, trees were thrown about, and the Perdido River was running every which way through the farm, and Mama was gone. That happened when I was ten, Loretta twelve, and LaShonna seven.

We thought Daddy’d go back into himself more, but instead he decided then everything was up to him. He dug a new well, cut posts from scrub trees and built a fence around the garden, and cut down the kudzu that ran wild all over everywhere.

Cale and I live in a rented duplex out east of the city, and it’s not much to move my possessions to the farm. We argue about who takes the Corolla and who gets the Mercury. Cale’s going to live with his brother in Navarre, so he needs the Corolla to show himself not to be a worthless black man—I get that—but I need it for the mileage on my commute. So we toss up a coin.

When I win, he whines and won’t help me pack. He doesn’t care I’m going, except for my paycheck, and I don’t mind he’ll be in the rearview mirror. Neither of us ever tried too hard

to have kids. After work, I did the cooking and cleaning and laundry on weekends, and Cale didn't do anything much. We folks haven't been slaves since the War, but from Cale I get the idea I've been one more recent than that.

So on a Saturday, I load up the Mercury with my possessions instead of the Corolla because it holds more. It's a warm day, light clouds, no breeze. The highway's easy. I turn off the expressway onto 45, and in Cantonment get gas and some seeds for a garden I want to lay in. From there, it's twenty-five miles of two-lane to 99A and Walnut Hill.

Descending the farm road, I see Martha Markham at her mailbox, so I stop and tell her I'm staying a while.

"We've seen lights down there at night," she says. "We thought you were already there."

"Maybe Daddy's come back."

"No truck," Martha says. "No other car, either."

"Could be Mama's ghost," I say.

I drive on to the house, turn in, and see tire tracks in the mud that go around back.

The house has never had a lock, so right off that's a fix I need to make. I leave the seeds on the stoop and go inside. The living room looks the same, except there's a jacket I've never seen before on the sofa—too small for Loretta—and in the fridge is a pizza box with half a pizza in it. Also, in the bedroom the sheets are in a twist. My guess is kids had a party here, but I don't see any bottles or beer cans, no trash or undies lying around. And nothing's been destroyed.

I unload my stuff and drive back to Pensacola, thinking my last load will be in the Corolla, and about what's been going on at Daddy's, and should I call the police. But the sheriff isn't going to help a black woman out in the county. My fallback is to wait and see, which is how I confront a lot of problems. At the least, though, I need to buy a hasp and a padlock.

The Corolla isn't at home, and Cale doesn't answer his phone, either. He's stolen it is what I think, so I've got no choice but to toss the rest of my clothes and the pots and the blender into the Mercury.

The padlock I bought only fits on the inside of the front door, but it will keep out intruders. And I can prop a two-by-four against the back door. I make the bed up fresh, wipe

down the counters and windowsills, and set the pizza box and jacket out on the front stoop. By evening I'm sitting on the back steps looking at the colors in the sky.

Already I sense more's going on than I know about, but I can't tell if it's something in the woods over by the river, or in the way the cattle have beaten down the meadow, or in the air all around. Is it a good something or a bad something? Daddy taught us to pray when help was needed, but I never saw it made a difference. At the same time I'm glad to be here, I'm also afraid. No praying will change that.

My guess is the parties happen on weekends, and it's Saturday night. But, thinking about it, who would come here to party? More likely, it's a person who needs a place to stay. I don't want that, either. Whoever wants to trespass can see my lights on in the house and the Mercury parked in the yard.

The air gets so dark I can barely see, and the trees are black scallops with the sky over. Then a whip-poor-will calls. The bird gets a reply from farther away, and the frogs and cicadas start in. Pretty soon the air is solid sounds, and skeeters come up crazy, so I go in.

I eat greens and a piece of cold chicken. Daddy has no TV, but books are all over everywhere, even on his workbench where he tinkered at fixing things—the chain saw, a stovepipe that needed beveling, a tree-trimmer than didn't work right—all the time listening to music.

During dinner, two cars come by on the road, and neither one slows down.

I worked the week and carried boxes all today, so, at ten o'clock, I get into bed. I think of Mama and Daddy sleeping in this bed together, and I wonder how they made children with each other, how Mama gave permission—whether she did—which leads me to imagining where they are now, *at this moment*, each of them. I'm hoping Daddy took the money from the cattle and went to find Mama, but I'm not good at imagining, so I close my eyes and drift.

In the morning a mist rises from the river. I put water on for coffee and unlock the padlock on the door. The pizza box is gone and the jacket, too, and a car's parked in the drive beside the Mercury—a maroon Subaru station wagon with fogged-

up windows. It has dents and rust and a busted headlight, so I'm not so much afraid. In bare feet, I go out across the prickly grass and look in the window that's cracked open.

In the backseat, folded into herself, is a white girl, nineteen or twenty years old. I whack hard on the driver's window, and the girl starts up and hits her head on the roof of the car. In a few seconds, she comes to her senses and opens the window. Right off she says, "I'm so sorry."

She waves skeeters away from her face. Her eyes are puffy. She isn't used to sleeping in her car in a strange yard.

"What are you sorry for?" I ask.

"I didn't mean to bother anybody," she says.

"You are, though. What're you doing here?"

She works her body around, opens the door, and gets her feet out on the ground. She's thin and all angles and has long messy blond hair. She's wearing frayed jean shorts and a rumpled shirt that says CHARGERS on the front.

"People in town told me about an abandoned house, so I drove out. This was a few days ago. No one was here. I waited a couple of hours, and when no one showed up, I parked in back and went in."

"Goldilocks," I say.

The girl smiles a not-smile. "Last night, I came back and saw the car parked here, but I didn't have anywhere else to go. The pizza box and my jacket were on the stoop, so I knew whoever was here was a good person."

"That isn't me," I say.

In the passenger seat, clothes spill out of a duffel bag. A toothbrush is on the dashboard, and in back groceries are tipped over, along with a bottle of wine.

"I have shredded pork and barbecue sauce," she says. "The pork should go in the fridge. And chicken gizzards. They were cheap."

"You don't have a cooler?"

The girl pauses. "I'll clear out right away, but I left something in the house."

"Like what?"

"All I need is three minutes," she says.

I don't know what to say, so I look off into the low clouds moving fast along the treetops. A loud noise would make it rain.

Then I remember the coffee water's on, and I turn toward the house. She must take this as consent, because she follows me with her groceries.

"Does this concern the law?" I ask. "I mean, you break into somebody's house and are hiding money or whatever?"

"I didn't hide money. I hid myself."

I stare at her. "You're running away?"

"My boyfriend went ballistic and threatened to kill me. You ever had a boyfriend?"

"Until two days ago I had a husband."

"Then you know."

Inside, she goes straight to the fridge, sets her sacks on the floor, and puts in pork and gizzards, eggs, and milk. I can't remember if there was ever a white girl in this house. When Daddy was here, Mr. Markham came in once or twice, but Mrs. Markham never. The girl puts vegetables and snacks and wine back into her bag and stands up again.

She's white, I see that, and I wonder what trick she's up to. But the water's hot, and I say, "You want coffee?"

"Coffee would be lovely," she says.

The water makes two cups, and I spoon in instant and set the cups on the table. Now comes awkward. She sits opposite and cradles her cup like her hands are cold. Her eyes are tired, and her body slumps at the shoulders. She's been through worse than she can talk about.

"My boyfriend's in the navy," she says. "We've been here a few months. We're from far away."

"Where's far away?" I ask.

"Ohio. It's not as hot as Florida. Lake Erie isn't pretty compared to the ocean, but people think it is. You ever been anywhere?"

"Mobile, Panama City a few times, Tallahassee once."

"Before Ohio, we were in San Diego. He was mean, and I should've left him then. So this house is yours?"

"My Daddy's. I'm living here till he gets tired of being gone."

"Where'd he go?"

I come short of an answer, because there's more to the question than I can deal with. *Why did he leave? Is he happy. Does he think about me?* So I say, "He just sold his cattle and left."

The girl sips her coffee and looks around the room, which makes me wonder what she sees. Daddy has a sofa with a sheet thrown over it, a couple of wooden chairs he made, Mama's scarves in a wicker basket, books and sheet music here and there Daddy forgot to take with him. One door leads to the two bedrooms in back—she knows this, I guess—and the other to the back steps. But she can't see the past. Mama left, and after we girls moved out, Daddy made our one room, three girls in a bed, into storage for Mama's stuff. Otherwise, close by, is a horse calendar three months behind, and a picture of Mama Daddy must have forgotten—my mother sort of blurry against the faraway green trees.

"So what did you leave?" I ask the girl. "Where is it?"

"It isn't specific," she says. "I wanted to smell the air and feel the house again."

"What you talking about?"

"The softness in the room," the girl says, a little dreamy, "what it felt like to be safe for a few days."

"It's the house it always was," I say, "nothing different."

"But look out the window," the girl says.

I look and see the meadow out there, the barb-wire fence Daddy fixed, and the lean-away shed. Honeysuckle blooms pink and white along the corral. Farther off are trees and the low clouds.

"It's what's been here forever," I say.

"I guess for you," the girl says.

On her face is sadness I've never seen in a white person and have no reason to care about, except I know what she means—she has to go back out *there* and figure her life out, and *here*, for a few days, she didn't.

Then she says, all cheerful. "You hungry? I have eggs and can fry up some."

"Eggs sound good," I say.

The rain holds off, but clouds are still low, and the next thing I know she's helping me dig in the garden. It hasn't been planted since Mama left. Hannah—that's the girl's name—is wiry and strong and digs faster and deeper than I do. We pitchfork and turn over and break up clods. In a half-hour we're sweating like the devil, so I go in and make iced

tea, and we sit on the back steps side by side on the second stone.

Hannah tells me more about her boyfriend, a football fan and about San Diego and about a dead child she had when she was seventeen and never told anyone about, even her mother. She was in Ohio then. And I find myself telling her about Cale and his drinking and Big Tits and stealing the Corolla, none of which I mean to tell anyone, leastways a stranger.

Then I ask, “You ever hear of Ferguson, Missouri?”

“You don’t give me much credit,” Hannah says. “But I know what you mean.”

I see plain as get-out she can’t know what I mean, because she has no trace of anything in her but white. “How can you know what I mean?”

“I do,” she says.

Her answer is part of the trick she’s using, but, anyway, from somewhere in me comes a sensation I don’t expect: I forgive her. I forgive her for being wrong, for breaking into my Daddy’s house, and even for helping me in the garden I was going to do myself.

But I don’t say anything.

We chop the dirt fine, make furrows, and bend over with the seeds—beans, cantaloupe, squash, tomatoes, and cucumbers. We get about halfway, when the mist comes in on the wind. We look up and feel our faces get wet. But the mist gets heavier, and the clouds open up. Hannah takes cover under the roof of the lean-away shed, while I stand out in the open. I don’t know why the wet feels so good to me. I raise my face to it and close my eyes.

Then Hannah joins me and holds my two hands. She shrieks and laughs, and, for a few seconds, I think we’re going to spin around and dance. But a bolt of lightning flashes down close by, and thunder booms, so there’s no dance. We share what’s more like prayer. That’s the closest word. We embrace and don’t move. The rain isn’t ever going to stop, the storm isn’t going to end. Hannah steps away from me and smiles, and we get serious together about laughing.

The storm meanders past, and we go to the back door and shed our clothes. We go inside wearing almost nothing, puddling water on the floor. It’s the strangest thing—her body

and mine so close and almost naked. Water drips off our elbows and our chins and from our hair.

I point to the bathroom. “Shower’s in there,” I say.

“I know,” she says and goes in.

Alone, I feel confused. I don’t get what’s happening. I go into the kitchen, find the shredded pork, and dump it into a fry pan to warm up. I put the barbecue sauce into the microwave. I open the package of chips she bought and pour more iced tea.

While I wait, I look at Daddy’s house again. Yes, I have memories of Mama and Loretta and LaShonna—the best ones, before I knew how they’d end up—Daddy and Mama. I get *that* part. But what I see is the new house I live in, the same configuration of rooms, the past I can’t erase, but also the future I can’t know.

Hannah comes out wrapped in a towel. “You have anything I can put on?” she asks. “I didn’t bring in my clothes from the car.”

I turn off the pork on the stove, and we go into the bedroom. My clothes are in sacks and boxes, but I find a pair of yellow shorts Hannah likes, a shirt with a bird on it, and some underwear.

“I’ll leave you mine,” she says.

“I made lunch,” I say, “and you can take the leftovers with you.”

“Thanks,” she says.

We help ourselves to the shredded pork and glob on barbecue sauce and share the chips in a bowl in the middle of the table.

“Thanks for providing the food,” I say.

“You provided the table.”

“Should we finish the garden?”

“The rain made it too wet.”

We finish eating, and while Hannah clears the plates, it’s my turn in the shower.

The hot water is sporadic, but I have enough, and I wash my hair, rinse it, and step out on the wet mat Hannah used. I drape a towel around me and, in the bedroom, put on fresh undies and one of the loose sundresses I’ve brought with me. Why I think I should make myself up fresh is a mystery I

smile about.

I come out, and Hannah isn't there. I look at the garden—not there, either—and I open the front door. Her car's gone. She's left me what she put in the fridge, as well as the vegetables and the bottle of wine, but no note. The rain's moved off, and the air's heavy with smells of honeysuckle and wet. The garden's almost planted. I'm glad of that. The trees along the river are in sunlight again, though, as yet, the sun hasn't reached my Daddy's house.

J.R.P.

Belly Up

It's fall now. I watch the TV reflecting in a glass bowl, where your face is a fish. You sit on my kitchen table, your picture next to a man reporting the news. And I look through the water, which could just be time. And your face is not your face, but something warped and backwards. My hand moves. Glass is everywhere.

You fall from the TV or maybe it's just the bowl. You are a dozen glass shards staring at me. And the man delivering the news is still delivering the news. My hands shatter, they pick at your body. The more I try to touch the more we both break. That's what your death felt like. But the man doesn't care. He says the name of our town, Coshocton, just like my mom. Like it's a sneeze on his tongue. He says it with the beginning of his breath.

Then he is off the TV and the story ends, but it's really your story. And they quit talking about you. I don't know what to say, so I tell you I hate this man. This man who only knows you through scripts of paper. Every one of your faces nod. I say he is just like the people in this town, the ones who look like upside down fish. There is no water now, so I touch you with all my pieces to try and save you. But this touch is time and it turns us back to June.

A year in Coshocton taught me the town runs going backwards. Mom said it's a place where stupid goes and stupid does. Even stupid bugs that didn't have enough sense to find the Ohio River, where breeding was better. When I asked why we were there, she said, "Stupidity doesn't exclude you or any other boy, Junior." Then she paused, "It doesn't exclude me, either."

I stopped trying to understand her a while ago. She was the kind of woman to put salt on her melon and sugar on her peas. I didn't think the town was that bad, anyways. It smelled like the next season coming, and everyone said hello so much even the trees were doing it.

We moved here after dad left us alone with the Mississippi bugs. Mom said he went away for work. Somehow, that meant we had to leave too. She still talks with him on the phone sometimes. They yell and I pretend not to hear. I'm not supposed to tell anyone about their fights, not even the trees. Not that I would, considering how they spread their hellos.

Everything was that way for a long little while. We were in a nowhere town with nowhere people. The kind of people who sleep-walk through county jobs and noon lunches. The kind I saw my mom becoming.

Then June before seventh grade came. The whole town woke up on the first day of summer to find the air smelled just of that—summer. It was as if overnight everything finally got tired of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and changed without so much as shaking a leaf. Something was wrong.

We learned why when those county workers took their noon lunches. Cooper H. Harley's small body was found swimming belly up in the Walhonding river. The coroners, or officers or maybe just my mother, said he'd been like that for sixteen hours. It was enough time for those stupid bugs to make home of his body. Only the bugs weren't there anymore. They chewed the boy up and finally left like mom said they were supposed to.

That night, she sat me down at the dinner table to talk. We had peas with salt this time. "It doesn't feel like that kind of day, Junior," she said. That was okay with me. I didn't want to eat peas with sugar anyway.

She told me what all the other mothers told her, speaking more seriously than when we were sitting at this table in Mississippi, talking about divorce over spaghetti. She explained it like cutting a meatball in half, one that was too big to fit in your mouth.

This time, I rolled peas around my plate. Mom talked about Cooper. I didn't want to look at her, so I watched an ant crawl over the wood. I thought that was okay, because there was a grainy spot on the table that kind of looked like her frown anyways.

The ant twisted over her mouth. I thought about how easy it would be to kill. I could do it in a single touch. Like my hand

wasn't my hand, but the hand of God. Instead, I watched it enter mom's mouth where the conversation stopped.

I guess Cooper's parents thought he was at my house, or Curt's, or Al's. They thought he was anywhere, really, but in the Walhonding river. So with Coop blown to the size of a balloon, and turning a funny color, mom said the officers were going to start an investigation. The trees shook at that.

We watched TV for the rest of the night. Then I didn't feel like watching TV anymore, so we went to bed. Only sleeping didn't really feel like sleeping. And thinking only felt like "Cooper H. Harley wasn't stupid at all." He wasn't like the rest of us. He was smart. So smart he was going to jump a year ahead in math, smart enough to ask for a locker next to our English class, so there would be more time to talk between the bell. He was going to get out of the fish bowl.

I spent the whole of that night trying to convince my eyes to close. But their flutters kept me awake, like they had more to say. I finally had to pull them down with my hand.

I guess morning didn't care too much, because it came anyway. Just like that, the first day of summer was over: quick as death.

Unlike Cooper H. Harley—Allen J. Fillmore was stupid. He was as stupid as stupid does. Stupid enough to call a meeting in the treehouse and think it could still be our place, even without all of its people there.

I watched Al munch on potato chips. He acted like something mighty, waving salted fingers in the air as he spoke, "It just don't make sense to me. Harley hated that river. He said there was no place on Earth mud stuck to you more than down by that river." Al talked in the mimics of his father, like a boy playing an adult.

He wiped his mouth off with the back of his hand. It was no use. All the real crumbs were stuck to his tongue.

"I'm telling you guys, Coop hated that river." Al wasn't saying anything we didn't already know. He was just saying it for himself, saying it to feel like his words mattered when nothing else did. But those words fell like fat flakes from his mouth. They weren't going to take us anywhere.

He looked to Curtis for support. As always, Curt found

footing in Al's boot marks.

"He's right, bad things aren't supposed to happen to people like us. They're only supposed to happen to idiots in big cities, like Philly."

When the body was found, Curtis's mom told him he was a gift from God. She said there was no way God could take away a gift like that. Curtis believed it too. I saw it in the way he made temples with his hands, pointing them high to the sky. But the way he spoke of Cooper made it seem like he wasn't a gift at all.

"All I know is someone has to spin us back around, because this place has gone all out of whack since Coop died," Al spoke and the leaves rustled outside. For a moment, something felt too alive.

I wanted to ask them how the unfamiliar salt on your peas could be worse than your friend floating in the Walhonding. I wanted to say none of us were out of reach of the stupid. But these weren't my friends, not really. Cooper was my friend. And I was the one stuck with them in a town beginning to feel not so great.

I saw Curt's eyes begin to tear up. I thought something from our conversation must've gotten through to him. Like he finally realized God had the power to take him away, too. It didn't even matter if he was still wearing the pretty little bow his mom gave him. It was more likely he just got salt in his eyes.

That night, mom made potatoes with gravy. We watched something on TV only she liked, and sleep came as it had the night before, slow like tossing and turning.

In the morning, my dreams whispered funny things into my ear, "Junior? Junior," and they shook me a little. Then they started to shake me harder. "Junior P. Raymond, get up. Your friends are at the door," I felt a pull on my ear, making me yelp. "I am not gonna have any more moms talking behind my back about you. So, get up and play with your friends." For a moment, mom's face wasn't her face, but the face of a trout. I decided my dreams were leaking into reality. I blinked. The water went from my eyes and she was herself again.

Curt and Al dragged me to play kickball with other kids in the neighborhood. I went, hoping it would get mom to pull my

ear a little less.

It wasn't so bad. Our team was up a few points, and the sun was warming my skin like I forgot it could. And when I got hit in the face with a red ball, it made red blood come from my nose. And when I closed my eyes, I felt something real for the first time in a while. I felt pain.

Curt's mom watched the whole thing happen. She called my mom and suddenly I felt more embarrassment than I did pain. Everyone watched the blood drip from my nose while I stood still, waiting for someone to tell me what to do. Maybe this was how Cooper felt when his body went belly up. Like the trees, the bugs, the sky were all watching him.

Mom drove me to the doctor, even after telling everyone in the neighborhood I was fine. I was careful not to get any blood on her seats. I didn't want her pinching my ear again.

At the doctor's office my nose got the most attention it had ever seen. It was cleaned with Q-tips and set with a metal beak. When the doctor finished, she smiled kindly at me, which made my nose fall into a small throb. The pain was better.

The doctor grabbed a mirror to show me the work she did. I told her I looked like a bird, and we laughed together. Then she left me alone for a while, so I listened to mom speak with a nurse outside my door.

"He's just — he's been having a really hard time with it." She said, her words leaking through the crack under the frame.

"Oh my goodness, poor thing. How long has it been?" The nurse asked.

"Oh, about three weeks." I could almost hear mom chewing on her nails. I thought I must still be dreaming from this morning. Mom was a fish, and I was under water because it didn't feel like a few weeks. It felt like a couple of days.

"Here." A piece of paper was ripped, and we were going home.

I realized I forgot to ask the doctor if they had extra wings laying around. That way maybe I could meet Cooper in the sky somewhere.

We had Chinese for dinner. Mom picked the sesame seeds off of her chicken.

"Junior?" She asked.

“Yeah?” I ate the last of my rice.

“What do you think about seeing a special kind of doctor? Not like the ones at the emergency room or anything, but one that helps with something different.”

“Like what?”

She closed her eyes, “They’re the kind of doctors that help dreams feel more real. They help with reality.” She spoke softly, not in a whisper like this morning. She spoke like her words would shatter into glass, leaving me to touch the pieces.

The doctors today weren’t so bad. I could see more of them if it made her happy. I told her that would be okay.

She said, “Okay.” And the conversation was over.

I started to see the doctor that came from a ripped piece of paper, and things were getting better. Summer was halfway through. Mom and I kept our routine of watching TV and eating dinner every night. Curtis and Al found something for us to do almost every day. The blood that came from my nose was red. I knew all of those things were real, but I don’t think they were what Dr. Calhoun wanted to hear.

“Junior,” he treaded carefully. “Do you know how Cooper passed?” His pen tapped against some papers on a clipboard. Pass. I kept hearing that word. Like death was a ball thrown to your face. A missed moment with a red consequence.

I shook my head. Dr. Calhoun had funny things in his office. There were yellow walls and lines of blue books on the shelves. There was a bobblehead of someone whose name I should probably know, but I couldn’t think of it.

Dr. Calhoun wasn’t a funny guy. He always talked with my mom after we talked, using more serious words than we had, while I would think about those yellow walls and blue books. And the baseball player I didn’t know the name of.

I was looking at yellow for some days before mom told me Dr. Calhoun had a recommendation for us. He thought it might be helpful for me to see Cooper’s parents. A reminder that something was real.

Mom and I had a very serious talk that night.

“Junior, do you know how Cooper passed?” She asked. And I couldn’t remember why those words sounded so familiar. We were sitting on the couch, without the TV on this time.

“No.” I didn’t really care how it happened, just that it did. I think she already knew my answer before I gave it, though.

“Well, you know Martha, his little sister?” I nodded. “She was playing down by the river the day before it happened.” Mom poked at her food. “Her grandmother had gotten her those earrings last Christmas. You know, those silver ones, because she just got her ears pierced?”

I knew. Martha showed them off to me whenever I’d come over. They weren’t much more than cheap sterling silver, but she liked them.

“Well, while she was playing by the river, she lost one of those earrings.” Mom touched her own ear, almost like she was remembering.

“The next day, just after supper, she and Cooper went down to the river to find it. They were hoping to get it back before their parents found out.” I didn’t want to listen. Yellow walls. “Spring had just ended; all that rainfall made the river rise and the mud even muddier. At least that’s what the officers said.” She was talking about the same ones that made the trees shake, the officers responsible for the announcement that flipped this whole town upside down. I didn’t like them very much.

Mom continued, “Cooper’s shoes had gotten stuck in the mud, right by the bank. And when he finally pulled them out, he lost his balance.” I noticed she wasn’t using her hands to speak like she normally did, they were just laying real pretty in her lap. The bobblehead is Bob Brenly. How did I forget?

“He would have been fine, but —” she choked on her words or air or something I didn’t see. “He fell right into the river. The rapids were so strong that day. Well, he just got carried away.” Away with the water.

Just like that, quick and without much reason. Like your hand reaching to crush an ant.

“But, Martha?” I asked.

She smiled a little, “Martha was scared, the poor girl didn’t know what to do, so she ran home.”

“Why didn’t she tell her parents?” Suddenly those cheap silver earrings were the ugliest things on the planet.

She grabbed my hand, “Well, Junior, I guess for the same reason she didn’t tell her parents about the lost earring.

I think she was afraid of getting into trouble.” I didn’t like Martha much anymore.

Mom took her hands out her lap, so they could be stern now, “At dinner tomorrow, I don’t want you saying anything to Martha, okay? She’s only six, the poor girl doesn’t really know what happened. She doesn’t understand, and it needs to stay that way, Junior.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.” Mom sounded back.

I didn’t sleep so well that night. My dreams were feeling real this time, and they came as quick as it takes to get your foot out of mud.

Dinner at the Harley’s looked okay on the outside. They set out the china they had stored away, organizing the table in a way that made me wonder why people don’t always do this. I guess everyone saves pretty things for sad occasions.

Mr. and Mrs. Harley hugged me so tight I thought my stomach might pop out of my mouth. They made a pot roast with plenty of potatoes and green beans. It was pretty good for what the Harleys normally make.

After dinner, Cooper’s mom walked with me around his bedroom. She asked if I wanted any of his things, something to remember him by. I wanted to tell her I needed to forget.

I looked around because I thought it would make her happy. There was an attendance trophy on his bookshelf, and some baseball cards he tried to teach me. He asked me to come over that day. The day he walked around with God’s hand like a shadow over him. Cooper wanted to show me a new card he got. I didn’t like baseball very much and I was a little tired of doing what he always wanted to do. I said no. Maybe if I had been there, my hand had been there, it would’ve counteracted God. And I would be looking at my best friend.

I shook my head instead of giving Cooper’s mom a real answer. I think she had her own answer in mind anyways. Her eyes darted to Bait, Cooper’s pet fish.

“Would you mind taking care of Bait for me?” She asked. “I’m not very good at feeding him. It keeps slipping my mind. Cooper was better at taking care of him than me.” I looked at the fish, who didn’t really have eyes. At least not any like the kind that look full of life. His small fins darted to the left

and he went with them. I nodded my head yes, because it was faster than saying any words.

We walked out of the room and I held on to the fish bowl. Mom smiled at me and continued talking with Cooper's dad. I sat next to Martha and we watched TV. I could've set the bowl on the coffee table, but I didn't. I held on to it until mom and I got home.

It's fall now. There is glass everywhere. I knocked the fishbowl off the table. I did it because I could. Its small body is flapping, looking for life. I did it because I never killed the ant. I did it because this was the last news report on Cooper. The one where they announced the cause of his death, after the town finally pressured Cooper's mom to talk about it. I did it because today I spoke the words out loud to Dr. Calhoun.

"Cooper is dead, and I am not."

Ronita Sinha

The Days of Phirianna

Ma planned a big party for my thirteenth birthday. A piano shaped cake, in deference to my newly-started music lessons, was ordered at Flury's, the best bakery in Calcutta in those days. The rugs and drapes were dusted, the cutglass polished, and the brass shined. My birthday dress, a coral tulle lined with taffeta, was fitted by one of the tailors from Ripon Street, and around my neck I was going to wear the crystal necklace my aunt from America had mailed. I often removed the ornament from its velvet case and caressed its sparkling facets, the light dripping through my fingers.

While I was trying on the new birthday dress in my room, Phirianna asked me. "What's a party, Kiki?"

"Umm," I thought for a moment. "It's a time when all my friends will come to wish me for my birthday and there will be lots of food and fun."

Phirianna stared back blankly.

"Besides the neighbourhood ones, all my school friends are invited as well. I shall wear this new dress, and Ma has one for you too," I added.

"How many school friends do you have?" Phirianna asked.

"Plenty, but I shall tell them all that you are my best friend because you teach me things that none of them knows," I replied.

At that, Phirianna smiled shyly, her eyes bright with delight.

It was the winter of the year I turned twelve that Phirianna came to work in our house as live-in help. She was thirteen years old—emaciated, chap-skinned, and her fierce hair filled with lice. Her teeth flashed white against her ebony skin, and her front incisors had a gap through which, I would learn in time, she had a habit of wedging a very pink tongue.

She squatted on the verandah floor beside her father. The man's eyes were hopeful as a seagull parked in the air above a picnic table, while Ma explained the terms of his daughter's employment. Ma was to money-order her monthly salary to

an address he left in an envelope.

“What’s your name?” Ma asked, looking at the girl.

She mumbled a reply that sounded like “Phirianna.” Her speech bore the sing-song cadence of folks that inhabit the villages lining the Bay of Bengal.

“Phirianna,” said Ma gently. “Go with Kiki. She’ll show where you can put your things.”

She held her tin suitcase, a pink lotus painted on the lid, close to her as if it contained not just her meagre possessions, but packed tightly in it were all her dreams, too.

About a week after she started her job, Ma opened the envelope her father had left. She pulled out a scrap of paper on which was pencilled in missionary calligraphy—

Jogen Sardar (father of Philomena Sardar)

C/o Sister Jacintha, Convent of Jesus and Mary

251 Canning Road, Basanti.

24-Parganas South, West Bengal.

Ma threw back her head and laughed, the paper shivering in her hand like an apology.

“Trust the nuns to name a dark, Bay-of-Bengal lass Philomena.” She gasped between fits of laughter. “Christianize them, anglicize them, patronize them, all for a handful of rice.”

“Well then, we should stop calling her by that ridiculous Phirianna and use her proper name,” Baba, without joining in his wife’s laughter, replied from behind the newspaper.

But there was no turning back. Phirianna had already been christened and was not about to be re-christened back to her real name. The new name was etched into the limestone plaster of our red brick house. It ricocheted off the walls uncountable times a day—Phirianna, did you pluck the dry laundry from the clothesline? Phirianna, where are my red socks? Phirianna, did you remember to fill the drinking-water pots? Phirianna, can you massage some Wintogeno into my temples? I have a godawful headache. Phirianna, Phirianna, Phirianna we all chanted and Phirianna, light as a butterfly, flitted around, fulfilling every bidding, till she became the custodian of all our comforts and the uncontested finder of our sundry missing possessions.

She attended to all minor chores that Ma’s part-time

scullery maid had no time for. She quickly learned how each of us liked our breakfast toasts, how tepid our milk, how runny our eggs, and made sure my school uniform was on my bed when I emerged from my bath, the pleats of the skirt neatly pressed so they swung ever so slightly when I walked. She knew exactly which day of the week I had to wear my sports uniform and made sure my Keds were Blanccoed to a perfect white.

In the afternoons, when we were in school, Ma taught Phirianna the alphabet and it didn't take her long to graduate to reading simple sentences in Bengali. When I decided to introduce her to the English alphabet from my *Better English*, Thama, Baba's mother, said that was not too good an idea. The adults always discussed private family matters in English in Phirianna's presence.

On the afternoon of my birthday party, Phirianna slipped on her new frock, an inexpensive silk in a happy print. It sat against her dark skin with good-natured defiance. She had a glossy flush in her cheeks, a sheen in her, now lice-free, hair, and a general plumpness endowed by all the rice Ma fed her.

The unfolding day was a shimmering trophy in my hands. My new dress swished against my legs and all thirteen years of me flushed with a grown-up glow. Around my neck hung the string of crystal beads, its brilliance putting every other piece of jewellery in the room to shame. I wore my new princess shoes in which I no longer walked but skimmed the floor as though I was on a stage pirouetting before a spellbound audience.

Stacks of presents, in colourful wrappers, swayed precariously in a corner of the room guarded by my nine-year-old brother who, in a three-piece suit, was stewing to a mottled perspiring heap. The room filled with casual chatter like the hum in a theatre before the curtain goes up. An expensive perfume clung to the air, jolted occasionally by the clink of glasses. Girls, wearing masks of make-up, allowed by mothers for the occasion, strutted on high heels, their nascent breasts accentuated by push-up bras. Everywhere girls masqueraded as women.

Phirianna hovered on the periphery of the action, silent and invisible, clearing glasses and plates with half-eaten food, mopping spills of coke and orange juice with a nimble, working-girl demeanour. At one point, she sidled by me with a kebab on a stick and whispered, “When will you play hopscotch and kabbadi?”

I pretended I hadn’t heard her. Instead, I gathered my friends in a circle and played Passing-the-Pillow to music orchestrated by Baba on the Phillips radiogram. He had his back turned to the players in order to be fair and square when he paused the music. To the catchy beat of *Dancing Queen*, the game started up, and the pillow jumped rapidly from girl to girl to girl amidst rolling laughter and squeals of glee. Phirianna caught on quickly. She lingered around Baba, and each time the pillow was about to reach me she managed to distract him, keeping him from pushing stop and calling me out. With Phirianna’s active machination, I was declared the winner. The friends clapped and cheered.

“What a shame,” Ma said. “The host cannot be the winner.”

So, I stood in the centre of a charmed circle of twenty-odd aspiring winners, grabbed the red velvet pillow, and threw it high towards the ceiling. The air crackled with excitement. Lace-clad, silk-clad, chiffon-clad arms reached up, and I felt the pressure of warm fragrant bodies as the circle pressed in on me. Before anyone could grab that much-coveted cushion of luck, with a huge whoop, Phirianna swooped in on eagle wings, scattering the little women like a brood of chickens, and grasped the pillow in her strong sinewy arms.

With frustrated sighs, the cluster of contenders collapsed like the sepals of a withered flower. Anger flared in me. I was the original winner but Phirianna stole the prize.

“What does she think she’s doing?” Thama shrieked from her wing-backed chair in the corner. “How dare she?”

“Well, she’s played by the rules and the prize is hers,” Baba declared, raising his hands above his head and clapping loudly.

Amidst high-pitched goodbyes and thank-yous and slamming of car doors, the evening drew to an end. Long after I was in bed, the rattle of utensils and cutlery floated in from the kitchen but I was asleep much before Phirianna

retired for the night.

She slept on a straw mat on the floor beside my bed. She was the only person I know who could annihilate a mosquito resting on the inner side of my mosquito net from outside. She stealthily loosened the tucks under the mattress so she had enough of the netting around the bug to clasp between her palms, squishing it in the process. But then, there were plenty of other things that Phirianna could do that never failed to fascinate me.

She would lie there in the dark and tell me stories of her village, Basanti. Stories of the clay hut they lived in, the sea-storms her father and uncles braved to catch fish, and gather honey from the forest filled with wild animals. She said she loved bathing in the Matla river with her sisters, and on hot afternoons while everyone slept, they stole mangoes from the *zamindar's aam-bagan*. She giggled quietly at those memories, but her voice held a weight when she talked of her mother boiling yams on a cow dung-fired *unoon*. And of her sister, Lushi, who, tired and hungry from a day of dung-picking, had eaten one of the yams raw and died of a stomach ache that not even the doctor at the Gosaba hospital could cure.

In the silence that followed, I felt I was looking into a house through the glass insert of a locked door, the key of which was hidden in Phirianna's tin suitcase. I saw a fragmented world; the vitality and power of a landscape and the stoicism of its people. It was, at once, exciting and terrifying, intimate yet alien, the unseeable painted over by my own ingenuity. I imagined the thundering waves, and the jungles where Royal Bengal tigers freely prowled, crocodiles grinned in the marshes, and migrating birds roosted in ancient trees, under whose canopy the dim earth lay virgin, un-kissed by the sun. Young as I was, I knew Phirianna had sprung from that very soil.

The morning after my party, I woke to the small sounds of Phirianna tidying the room. My sleepy eyes found her by the window with my crystal necklace resting around her neck. In the glow of the morning light, she stood admiring her reflection in the casement glass as though she were

gazing upon a deity. Her lips were slightly parted, and her eyes partly shut. The necklace was on fire. Each hungry bead snatched a slice of sun. The velvet skin of Phirianna's neck absorbed their light and then tossed it in a million pieces across the walls and ceiling of my room, where each danced an elusive waltz.

"What are you doing?" I shattered her reverie. "Return the necklace to my drawer at once." My voice sounded hoarse, unfamiliar. I could not believe how magnificent my necklace looked on her.

She unclasped it from her neck and turned to me, the string of light winking in her hand.

"Are these diamonds?" Her eyes opened wide.

"Yes," I replied cruelly, not wanting to extend the conversation and turned over on my side, away from her.

When I came to the table, Phirianna had finished buttering the toasts and asked if I wanted some jam as well.

That same evening, Phirianna sat in the great room, crocheting doilies for Ma while I leafed through one of the books from my presents. She hummed a haunting boat song from Basanti. A song, she said, boatmen sang when they rowed the souls of the newly-dead across the Gangetic delta. Her singing stirred something in me. I walked over to my new piano and tried to play the first few bars of "Row, row, row your boat." Phirianna sprang to my side and began striking the keys at random. I grabbed her wrist, horrified she would excel at playing the piano, too.

"Stop, stop!" I screamed.

She snatched her hand back and in a voice laced with reproach, said. "I was hoping you'd play hopscotch or kabbadi on your birthday, but you didn't. We could have both won, you know."

It's true, it was Phirianna who taught me to play hopscotch. "Lean back," she urged as I staggered hopping on one foot, and she showed me the skill of holding my breath as I cried "Chooooooooo" while under attack by the foe in a game of kabaddi. She tried to teach me to climb the guava tree in our yard, on whose lower branches I still teetered while she scaled the higher ones with feline grace. Together we dug out shiny pink caterpillars from the garden and stuffed them in

matchboxes lined with leaves. We left the holey match-boxes in the small drawer of the hat-rack in the foyer and agonized over when the time would be ripe to discharge the butterflies. After releasing them, we chased them for as far as we could laughing till tears overwhelmed us and joy-cramps split our sides.

When the dying sun painted the garden red, I played with the neighbourhood kids, and Phirianna raced through her chores so she could join us. These kids adored her to a point where it seemed they came to play, not with me, but with her. Phirianna ran the fastest, climbed the highest, skipped rope the longest, and could trip others the quickest by extending a foot just in the nick of time.

Ma said she was adept at such things because she was not raised to be a lady, only a survivor. But I loved Phirianna for all the things that made me envious of her.

One night, we had crab-curry for supper, a rare treat for my brother and me but Phirianna flatly refused to eat it.

“Whoever eats crabs?” She asked no one in particular with an outspokenness to which we were all unwittingly giving in. “My Baba hates them because they get tangled in his fishing net and it’s a pain to get them out and throw them back into the water.”

“So what will you have your rice with?” Ma asked in a voice thin with dismay.

“Why, with my fingers.” Phirianna looked at Ma as if she had to be crazy to ask such an inane question.

And so it was that sitting on her haunches on the kitchen floor, Phirianna ate a mound of fluffy white rice with nothing save the juice of one whole lime and a generous helping of salt.

During the holiday season in October, Phirianna went home on a break. She made preparations for several days. Out came her tin suitcase from under my bed in which she arranged and rearranged her clothes, mostly mine that I had discarded. She pulled a seashell from the bottom of the trunk and held it to her ear. She listened with her eyes. They held a dreamy look in their depths. A smile spread over her face, a pink tongue poking through the gap in her incisors.

“I hear the sea,” she said. “Here, try it.” She held out the shell to me.

A faint rushing filled my ear. Nothing that enchanted me. Although years later, the day my marriage to Rono ended, I pressed a seashell, brought home from our honeymoon in Digha, to my ear, and I probably heard what Phirianna had heard that day. Not just the sea, but the silence of memories, the gliding of time, and the drip-drip-drip of love trickling away.

A neighbour from Phirianna’s village who had business in the city came to take her home. They had to board a bus first, then a train, a ferry and finally trek a good half hour to reach home because there was no easier way for them to do the hundred miles or so. Her eyes glistened as she watched Ma make her a hamper of as much food as she could, and thus weighed down under her baggage, Phirianna duck-walked towards the bus stop. I leaned out of the verandah waving to her until she disappeared around a bend in the road.

Silence stalked me after she left, and regret climbed into my thoughts at night. I still played in the yard with my friends but without Phirianna, it was as if the bass was missing from our band. In the evenings when the sky turned a bruised blue, I could not control myself; I cried for her. I wished I had given her more of my trinkets and my clothes and taught her some English words. My sleep was peppered with dreams of Phirianna. There she was, leaping off a mud porch, her dry hair, redder in the sun, chasing her like a flaming halo as she ran towards me. A wild joy rushed into my heart. Behind her, the bay was a crystal blue and against it stood the village of Basanti, which I could only visit in my dreams.

Phirianna did not return on her appointed day. It was the day we were to attend a wedding, leaving Thama in her care. Instead, Ma had to stay back. My brother and I would go with Baba. I slid my birthday dress over my head and reached into the drawer for my crystal necklace but the case was empty.

We looked for it in every corner and crevice, where we thought it might have found its way, but it was almost as if it had melted into the rusting autumn air.

“No matter how much you train them, give them, in the end, they all turn out to be thieves.”

Thama’s words peeled the skin off my heart. Not Phirianna. Never. I searched for words in her defense, but before I could say anything, Ma stepped in.

“It’s not as if she took cash or gold. It’s only a fake necklace, for goodness’ sake. She is such a young thing, and maybe she couldn’t help herself.”

After a few weeks, we accepted that Phirianna was not likely to return, yet every time the latch of the front gate jangled, I darted out, hoping to see her familiar face.

“She’s not coming back. The children better learn to iron their clothes and make their own beds. Moreover, the government is passing a bill. You can no longer employ children for household jobs,” Baba said, at breakfast one day. “The *panchayats* are luring them with milk and bread to keep them in school.”

Thama snorted at her son’s words as though she herself was the government. I listened, trapped in a rectangle of sunlight. My fingers felt leaden, unable to lift the spoon to my mouth as I watched helplessly the egg yolk on my plate congealing into a dirty-yellow heart.

More weeks slipped by but Phirianna did not return. Instead, one spring morning brought her father.

His daughter was not going to work anymore, he said. Working in the city had corrupted her, she now wanted to be a *mamsaheb*, a lady, and learn English. She had joined Sister Jacintha’s convent where, in lieu of an education, she worked in the kitchen after school.

“What good is learning *ingreeji* to a fisherman’s daughter, can you tell me?” Her father, sounding sad and bewildered, looked for support from Ma.

“She’s an intelligent girl, Jogen, she will learn fast and do very well one day. Remember, education can never be useless.”

When Ma placed some money in an envelope and gave it to him, he broke down. Tears wobbled in the hollow of his cheeks.

“I don’t know how I’m going to say this but I’ve come to set right a terrible wrong,” he told Ma. From his weather-beaten bag, he plucked out the crystal necklace. I could barely

recognize it. The beads were as dull as the eyes of dead fish. Clinging to its clasp was a large blue crab. By the wiggling of his bag, it was clear there were several more inside.

“My child is young, she made a mistake when she took your diamond necklace. I have come to return it.”

“Whoever said it’s diamond?” Ma was aghast. “She can keep it.”

But the father left it on the verandah floor, where it lay, a sick grey eel curled into itself. When Ma tried to pay him for the crabs, he said, “They are a gift from my girl to yours.”

Ma did not press him anymore.

After he left, I picked up the necklace. It was coated with slime from the crabs with which it had travelled all the way from Basanti. I held it to my ear, half-expecting to hear the sound of the sea. Instead, I heard a deathly silence. I held it under my nose. It smelled of red hair and intolerable grief.

Camille Louise Goering

The Taste of Sand

I.

According to their mother, it was a special day. She wouldn't say why, but told them only it was special, and they were going to have a party.

She was a woman who invented holidays. She was a woman who laughed with her mouth open and sometimes stayed awake for days, playing Gilbert O'Sullivan records and re-arranging her borrowed furniture around her rented house.

She was also a lonely woman: the sort of woman who kept on having children so as never to be by herself. And her children loved her the way children love lonely people: tentatively, fearfully, as sinners before a capricious God.

They loved her most when she was happy. She let them stay up late and watch *Law and Order: SVU*. She made caramelized popcorn and sometimes cookies too, and even let them eat the dough when their father wasn't around. She took them on adventures: to the park, to the zoo, to race bumper cars and play mini-golf. She would catch them as they ran down the cool marble hallways of that empty house, and hold them very tightly, her chipped acrylic nails digging into the wings of their shoulders.

"My angels," she would say, "my sweet babies."

And the world opened up like a flower.

And then: "let's have a party!"

The children cheered.

It was childhood as it was meant to be, replete with endless possibilities.

She always got to pick the theme: Hawaiian Luau, Black and White Ball, glow-in-the-dark. They made costumes. She painted their faces.

Everyone was assigned a chore. The kids cooked and cleaned. She made decorations and poured drinks. Sometimes they invited people: neighbors, friends. Sometimes people came. For a while it was fun—especially when the adults first began to drink.

And then, as the drinks began to spill, as the adults began to raise their voices and the dense Arabian night crept in on quiet haunches, just as suddenly as she had blossomed, their mother would fade and crumple like a fallen leaf, bled of color.

Six months ago when they first landed abruptly on the blazing tarmac—the heat so loud it warbled in their ears—Darcy was excited. He was still a kid then. He'd never left the country before, never left rural Alabama. He was eleven years old, and the rest of the world was still a place that existed only in their grandfather's wild stories, in the dim, liminal space between dusk and sleep.

Because he was the eldest, he stepped out of the plane first. He breathed deeply of the hot, saturated smells of the desert, the thick sunlight that rippled out over roiling, simmering ribbons of sand. He was Indiana Jones on a new adventure. Robinson Crusoe washed up on a new land. He was Darcy Sayer in Saudi Arabia, and here, his mother had assured them, they could be anything they wanted to be.

Darcy's paternal grandfather, a navy captain, awaited their arrival in Riyadh. He'd rented an entire compound for his family to live in while he swept through the Persian Gulf, looking, Darcy imagined, for Somalian pirates with skin black as envy and teeth gold as the glaring sand.

The compound was not far from the National Air Base, and nestled behind a thick, yellow adobe wall, laced with wrinkles and beaten by the bleaching sun. There were three houses reigning over each corner of the triangular property, all two-stories high and made of burnt, sun-dried bricks of mud and sand. Each house embraced a sheltered courtyard, ornately paved with glass tiles depicting flowers and animals, and little fountains in which goldfish glittered like jewels. They were surrounded by thirty acres of charcoal trees and desert roses, thick brush that hummed with the silken sounds of alien insects. A clothesline hung between two acacia trees, draped with white linen sheets that cracked in the sharp wind. Beneath it was a small stone birdbath, at the center of which two stone turtle doves groomed one another. The water was dark and grizzled with dust, but pigeons and sandgrouses still came to bathe there. Darcy loved the birdbath most of all. It reminded him of something from long ago, though he

could not remember what.

Darcy remembered everything. This was his gift. His mother had told them everyone got a gift from God when they were born. These were mostly practical gifts. Children, of course, were meant to be of service. His sister Michaela had a knack for interior decorating. His brother Junior knew his way around cars and other machines. The twins were too young to really do much, but they tended to the animals, and animals have a way of speaking with small children.

Darcy swore he remembered being born. It happened in a small abandoned cabin, deep in the wild, lonesome swamps of Southern Louisiana, when his mother was seventeen years old and fresh to disappointment. He remembered the spiced smell of the pine trees and the still lake outside, the wailing of warblers mourning the dawn. He remembered that first searing shard of light embedding itself into his blinking, bleary eyes. But he wasn't supposed to remember such things. He wasn't supposed to know things his mother didn't.

His mother's gift was that people loved her. Before she'd been a mother, she was a pageant girl, a prom queen. She glittered against the backdrop of her small, dusty Alabama town. She was beautiful: thick, blonde hair the color of country wheat that gathered in curls at her hips, eyes like clean water: placid and sweet. She had a smile like the sunlight and was slim in those early pictures, before she had him.

All her children looked just like her except for Darcy, whose features sharply echoed his father's: the darkness in his eyes and sleek black hair, the rich depth of his warm, brown skin. None of the other children resembled his father, who was often offshore, toiling relentlessly on the dangerous Arabian oil rigs when the telltale swell of their mother's belly betrayed the arrival of another child.

For this reason, Darcy often stood behind the camera.

"Get one of us," his mother would say, casting a smile that would make the birds sing.

Though he saw few photographs of himself around the house, he paid no mind to it until much later, long after his mother was gone. He didn't mind taking pictures. He had an eye for stillness and beautiful things. Also, he heard that Australian Aborigines refused to have their pictures taken,

because they believed the shutter would suck out their souls, and Darcy knew there was truth to every tale.

On the day of the party, he was taking pictures. He went to the neighbor's pool with his siblings and his grandmother's old 35 mm Canon hanging around his neck, which was so heavy it drew his head down and Ms. O'Leary called him "Quasimodo," which he didn't understand, but laughed at anyway because he was polite.

The O'Leary's pool was a haunting relic of a bygone era, built of pearlescent marble tiles featuring strange, nightmarish animals and the poisonous petals of foreign flowers. The water attracted all sorts of alien animals, particularly at night. The children would arrive in the morning to find lizards of every conceivable color in the pool filter, insects as bright and big as their own blue eyes, and the occasional unfortunate Cape hare, its rigid body bumping softly against the plastic shutter.

They spent their summer days there, lulled by the soft purr of cicadas, floating in the water half asleep, until the setting sun dragged the luminous azure blanket of sky down over the horizon, exposing the vast and empty basin of space beneath, and the air was chill with moisture, sweet and milky with the scent of sleeping lavender fields. At last, fearful of the animals darkness would bring, they ran home, chasing each other through the fragrant brush, hissing like snakes and cackling to the hyenas calling to them from the distant mountains.

All day Darcy sat under the diving board, two feet from the edge of the chemical blue water, photographing his siblings as they posed in mid-air. The rattling of the board was deafening above him; the polyrhythmic pounding of wet footsteps compounding the battering sound of blood in his ears. He imagined he was being hunted by some mythic chimera—half-man, half-monster—and sat as still as he possibly could, holding his breath, until he could see the little toes curled around the gritty edge of the diving board, and finally gasped a sigh of relief. His little siblings would then come tumbling down into the water, splashing cool water on his face and freckled arms.

Tom and Martha O'Leary, an Irish couple (both of whom worked in the foreign service and spoke in telltale gentle,

diplomatic voices), were stretched out in their lawn chairs by the side of the pool, clapping as each of the children performed their tricks. They were both so pale they looked translucent in the sun: like two salamanders, their eyes glowing bright green. They had no children, which everyone thought (but would never say) was a grave disappointment in their otherwise happy marriage.

The Sayer siblings knew, in the dim way children do, that in spending time at the O’Leary’s, they were meeting an unnamed need. And it was nice over there in the small house with the exotic pool. Martha made sweet tea lemonades just the way it was done in the American South. Sometimes she cooked for them (though her skills were regrettably lacking.) Tom picked up their clothes while they swam in the pool and put them in the laundry with bleach to get the black mold out. All their shirts and dresses came out looking like Easter Eggs, pastel pink and blue. But it was good to feel clean. And it was good to feel loved too.

“Darcy, do a jump, will you?” Martha’s excitement was palpable, childlike. She clapped her hands together. “We’ll count down for you!”

Darcy shook his head and held the camera up.

“I can’t.”

“Yes you can. I can hold your camera for you, honey. Go on!”

Darcy stood up and picked at his bathing suit where it clung to his lean brown legs. He placed the camera on the edge of Martha’s chair and climbed up the ladder to the diving board, counting the steps, holding his breath.

“What sort of jump should I do?”

“Anything you want! Show us your best.”

He could feel their eyes on him: expectant, questioning. They were searching his face for a smile. Searching for some evidence that he was still a child. He felt suddenly very far away from everyone, the diving board a thousand miles off the ground—a stairway to heaven, like in the song his mother listened to when she was sad.

He took a deep, shuddering breath and looked out over the edge into the cerulean water below. The bright, chemical smell of chlorine burned his throat. Threads of sunlight shot

through his body. He closed his eyes and imagined standing on a cloud, peering out at the deep blue sky and the little people below: people he loved. People who loved him back. They smiled and waved. He smiled and waved back.

“Jump!” Junior’s jangly pre-pubescent voice pierced him like a draft through a warm blanket.

He leapt out into the open air. For a moment, he was unattached, boundless. He was a part of the Earth: the dusky red mountains on the horizon, the warm, stirring sea just beyond. He was the rising rapture of sand in the wind. He was the sun-stroked stone and the silt and loam over deep, subterranean aquifers—the vaporous promise of a mirage in the deep desert. He was one with the strange, fearful landscape, and far away from his own fragile body hurtling through the air.

He felt his toes break the cool filmy surface of the water, and then the rest of him—all at once. He lingered there beneath the surface a long time, imagining he was in the womb—not his mother’s womb, but whatever had come before that.

“Darcy!”

The shrill voice shot through the water like a harpoon. Though the voice was faint it was urgent, pained.

“Darcy!”

He surfaced and opened his eyes to his mother’s face inches from his, the upper half of her body leaning precariously over the water. Her eyes were wide and strangely bright.

“Hi angel. What happened to watching your siblings?”

Her voice was taunted, quivering, threaded through with unusual enthusiasm.

“I was.”

“He was!” Mrs. O’Leary held up the camera. “I told him to have a go himself!”

He watched a thousand familiar shadows pass over his mother’s blue eyes.

“Okay.” She stood up straight and smoothed out her skirt. “Well we’re having a party. So I need you guys to help me. Do you know what today is?”

Junior looked at Darcy, his eyes narrowed in confusion. Michaela clenched her jaw, appearing to think very hard of an answer. Darcy looked out across the pool at the barren

clothesline, buoyed by the gentle, sandy breeze and the sad stillness of the empty bird bath below. Through narrowed eyes he could pretend the stone doves were real birds, resting momentarily from some great migration to distant and stranger lands.

“Do we have to?” This from Michaela, though all five children were already out of the pool, shivering despite the thick, dense heat.

Their mother glanced at Mrs. O’Leary, who carefully examined her cuticle beds.

“It’s a special day, guys. Come on! I’ll tell you all about it later. Get out of the pool.”

They were accustomed to their mother’s strange holidays and ever-evolving customs. She had recently become involved in a Kabbalistic “prayer group:” a self-proclaimed coven of mostly middle-aged American expats who met on Wednesdays to read ancient scripture and play with Tarot cards. Before that, it had been the Hare Krishnas. Before that, she was a Christian. She often said, with her Alabama accent wrapping itself around each word, that the name you gave to God didn’t matter so long as you believed in Him.

She snapped her fingers impatiently. “Chop chop.”

The kids scrambled out the pool, tumbling over one another like weeds. Her words conjured in their minds images of frosted white cupcakes and balloons full and shiny as berries, staying up late to watch their father set off fireworks on the roof.

But Darcy was skeptical. He always tried to remain skeptical—for his brothers and sisters. He was twelve years old now, and, as his mother often reminded him, the man of the family (at least when his father was offshore). He was responsible for his siblings’ expectations, their disappointment when things fell through. He was responsible for their joy in dull moments, their faith in the future.

The last time they had a party, their mother drank too much rum and insisted on driving to a friend’s house on the outskirts of Riyadh. Darcy, determined to ensure she returned safely, sat in the backseat as she wove in and out of traffic, attracting the attention of the mostly male Arab drivers that surrounded them. And when they’d returned home, he’d had

to undress his own mother and put her to sleep. The shame: seeing his mother's naked body sprawled out before him, flesh pooling out underneath her heavy limbs, freckled skin pink and raw-looking like a skinned chicken. It was the most afraid of her he'd ever been, and he'd had nightmares about it ever since. The kind he couldn't share with anyone.

She wrapped each of her children up in warm, dry towels. They snuggled up to her, their shimmering eyes adoring and hopeful. They knew the look on her face; it was the sprinkles-on-toast look, the ice-cream-for-breakfast look. And because they were only children, and time was, to them, still a figment of fairy tales, they believed their mother would remain this way forever.

It was easy to believe on nights when they fell asleep to the sounds of their parents whispering on the porch, drinking tea and listening to the creatures of the desert. It was easy to believe when their mother sat beside them and sang Celtic lullabies, holding their hands in her slim, cold, aristocratic fingers. Or when, on rare occasions, she read aloud her favorite bedtime story, *Goodnight Moon*, over and over again, as she had when Darcy was little. This he remembered too: his eighteen year-old mother, filling the room with the smell of peaches and vanilla, her purple lips leaving marks like bruises on his little hands and feet.

She herded her children out the gate. "In case I don't see you Martha—goodbye!"

Mrs. O'Leary waved weakly.

"So tell me what today is," she said as they barrelled through the backyard, kicking up a cloud of dust like a herd of elephants.

"The 21st of December," Darcy replied.

"What year?"

"2012."

"Precisely. And do you know what's supposed to happen today?"

She opened the door and a gale of cool air engulfed them like water. There was a collective shiver.

"What is it Mommy?" Michaela's skinny limbs were covered in goosebumps and her lips already blue from the cold.

"It's the last day of the Mayan calendar, my babies."

She was whispering now, though there was no one else in the house.

Michaela giggled and her little body shook like a reed in the water.

“The Maya what?!”

The woman clamped both her hands down on Michaela’s shoulders and pressed down hard. The child’s feet squealed against the marble floor and she lost her footing. Darcy caught her arm and she righted herself.

““The Mayan calendar. It’s a special calendar that tells us how the world works. Today is the last day! Which means we are going to have a big celebration.”

She turned to look at herself in the gilded mirror that hung in the entry hallway, an ancient relic, they’d been told, of an earlier time when a sultan had lived in their home. They watched her watching herself. They waited.

“You guys think I look ok?”

“Beautiful,” the twins said in unison.

“Good. Because Daddy’s coming home today.”

There was a collective screech as the children dropped their towels and pranced around her.

“You guys have to help me set up and decorate, okay?”

Darcy sighed, crouching to pick up the towels. He’d planned to spend the afternoon taking pictures by the pool. Adults were always trying to trick him into doing chores. And of course he always complied. But he had reached the age at which children know they are being lied to.

“ I already went to the store to pick up decorations. You boys can put them up and Michaela can do the food. I’m going to clean up some.”

The children sprang at once, clambering up the stairs. Their mother watched after them with a self-satisfied smile. *I made this*, it seemed to say. Darcy lingered.

“What time is Dad coming?”

“He said today sometime.”

There was no telling when their father would show up or what kind of mood he would be in. He worked hard, and the work was hot and dangerous. Living on a ship changed a man, he said; it made him quiet and reflective. It made him humble.

As Darcy followed his siblings up the stairs, he could feel his mother's chilling gaze on the back of his sunburnt neck. Miss America, with her flaxen hair and crystal-blue eyes. He knew she looked at him and saw evidence of something in her life gone awry, a glitch in the seamless trajectory of her success. He was everything strange and alien that had crept into her life when she wasn't looking, and dragged her away to this distant, hostile, desert land.

He took off his swim trunks and stood before the medicine cabinet, examining himself meticulously for any additional evidence of his impending adulthood: the long black hairs crawling down from his bellybutton like insects, the thick, knitted eyebrows, the stern curl of his upper lip, the depth of his dark eyes, set back in the sharp architecture of his face.

In the violent Saudi sun, he looked right at home. Though they discouraged tourists (white people) from walking alone down the streets of Riyadh, no one looked twice when he passed them by. No one suspected him. It was only here, in the glacial halls of marble and ice, among his blonde and blue-eyed siblings, that he seemed never able to escape notice.

"Darcy! I need you!"

Her voice had dimmed, the words mangled and slow, as though tumbling from her mouth, letter by letter. He could hear the chattering of ice cubes in a cold glass, the cotton softness of her heavy tongue.

"Darcy, come down here!"

"I'm coming Mom."

He cast a furtive glance at the door and rummaged beneath his mattress, where he had hidden one of his mother's cigarettes, now crushed and misshapen but not beyond salvation. He tucked the cigarette into the waistband of his boxers and plodded down the stairs.

She placed both hands over his shoulders and bent over to speak to him, so close he could smell the richness of rum on her breath. "You're still wet!"

He shrugged.

"I'm putting you in charge honey. I gotta to the market for party stuff. I need everything to be ready when I get back. Put those kids to work."

"Alright Mom."

“How do I look?” She twirled, casting up a cloud of cloying, metallic perfume and menthol cigarettes. She wore a blue floral print dress and her eyes were heavily made up. Her hair had been carefully arranged to frame her face, a blue silk scarf draped over it. Sometimes he could see her beauty—as though she were not his mother—and he wished she would forget she had ever been beautiful at all.

“You look pretty Mom.”

“That’s my boy.” She cupped his head in her palms. “Behave yourself. It’s especially important today.”

“Okay Mom.”

A horn wailed from beyond the gate.

“That’s my ride!”

But she did not move. Her eyes were damp and chlorine blue. She cupped his face between her hands, cool as water.

“Listen, you’re a good kid, okay?”

He nodded, looking over her shoulder at the laundry, rusted with sand, billowing in the breeze; at two grouses splashing in the warm water.

As the door shut it sent a sweeping gust of wind through the house. The smaller children came running out. But she was gone.

II.

All that afternoon they scrubbed the house clean and scoured the floors. They dusted the courtyard furniture and mowed the lawn. They put away their mother’s clothing and lined up her shoes. They hung fairy lights and paper garlands and home-made banners that read “Happy Mayan!” and “December 21!” The twins drew pictures of the family with crayons and tacked them around the house.

In the evening, they gathered in the kitchen and cooked. Darcy baked sweet potatoes and peach pie. Michaela made a lamb just the way their mother liked it: nearly raw on the inside. Junior knew only how to make Saudi dishes—he didn’t remember much from before the move—and mixed yogurt and sauces the way the housekeeper had taught him. The twins dumped nearly the entire jar of sugar into a pitcher and squeezed lemons with their little hands, the bitter milky juice streaming over their strained knuckles. Michaela put a

BeeGees record onto the old Victrola and they danced around the kitchen.

It wasn't until seven o'clock that somebody said: "Hey, where's Mom?"

They all paused, contemplating this. Their mother had been gone a few hours, and their father was not yet home. The record ended abruptly, and the silence was suddenly stifling: an awful weight that hung over them like the heavy, humming darkness of Arabian nights. The sounds outside were unfamiliar: the croaking of strange creatures, the hoots of midnight birds, the occasional car passing by their isolated compound. For the first time, they could hear neither the melodic, percussive sounds of the city nor the discordant, clumsy sounds of their parents milling about the house. It was quiet. They were alone.

"She'll be home soon I bet," Michaela said, peering through the kitchen window into the awful, gaping darkness. There was the eerie sound of something splashing outside, the smell of smoke and spices curdling in the wind.

They hung in uncertain silence, tension that crackled like sparks. Darcy felt suddenly like he was standing on the diving board, looking down at his worried siblings and at his own dejected figure, fragile and helpless as a paper doll.

"We can start without them," he heard himself say, "and that way when they get here, it'll be like a surprise party."

Michaela slapped her hands together. A diaphanous mist of flour and sugar cascaded to the ground.

"Good idea. Junior, go put the music back on."

The child clambered up and scurried over to the record player. Darcy watched himself reach for Gabe's hand. It was cold and sticky with sugar.

The record scratched painfully. And then, the voices of Carole and Louise—so familiar to them—strained and warbling, wandered through the room and filled their hearts with something like peace. The soft, resonant sound of the piano broke the ugly silence and Darcy felt his body begin to move. He took his sister's hands and they danced like they had seen their parents dance: carelessly, kicking their feet up in the air and swinging their arms around.

At first, the younger children watched them with uncertainty.

The twins were busy picking snowflakes of sugar out of each other's hair and eating them. Darcy picked his sister up and swung her over his shoulder, moving exaggeratedly from side to side such that she swung precariously close to the ground. Her laughter, clear and bright as running water, set the rest of them loose.

Each sibling, determined not to dampen the joy of the others, put on a smile and danced. They danced and danced until the record was over. Then they played it a second time, and then a third until, exhausted, they held each other and swayed slowly together, like a tangle of seaweed deep in the ocean.

At last they collapsed on the living room carpet, hungry and content.

"I'm sure they won't mind if we eat first," Michaela said, and no one disagreed.

They ate the pie first. They only meant to taste it, but they were famished and it was warm and sweet. Then they roasted marshmallows on the stove until they were blackened and wrinkled like burnt paper and melted soft on the inside. They drank all the lemonade, chewing contentedly at the big chunks of sugar at the bottom. The boys ate Michaela's nearly raw lamb, daring each other to swallow the bloodiest bits. And when they were all done, they toppled over one another on the tattered living room couch and fell asleep. They slept deeply, dreaming of recent memories that seem so distant in the minds of the young. They dreamt of their parents swimming in the pool, and the cousins they had never met. And they dreamt of America, a land they missed deeply and hardly knew—homesick for a world they didn't remember.

At one-sixteen in the morning, Darcy woke abruptly. There was that awful curdling feeling in the pit of his stomach, the sour taste of adrenaline in his mouth. A feeling like falling. He listened for the sounds of his parents stirring in their bedroom above. Nothing but the crackling chill of silence. He crept out from beneath his siblings and reached for the television remote that hung precariously over the edge of their mother's settee.

The bright, colorful sounds of the television lulled him back into a daze. And then, just as he was falling asleep again, he

heard those same words his mother had used that afternoon. *Mayan Calendar*. He opened his heavy eyes. Dimly, dreamily, he read on a colorful banner at the bottom of the screen: “World population survives Mayan prophecy.” The news anchor, a pretty young Asian woman, was laughing with her head tossed back and her mouth open. It reminded him of something their mother had said once about tempting God. Darcy narrowed his eyes and pulled the crumpled cigarette from his pocket. He held up an imaginary lighter and flicked it.

“Well Scott, it seems like the end of the Mayan calendar was not meant to be the end of the world after all. People everywhere are celebrating their survival in fun and creative ways. We turn to Myesha from Times Square.”

He took a deep, shuddering pull of his cigarette and muted the television.

The end of the world?

He curled up on the cold marble floor and closed his eyes, the cigarette hanging from his mouth.

Had his mother and father really believed it was the end of the world?

As he fell asleep, he dreamt fleetingly of his mother dancing in a dark room, flitting in and out of the shadows like a pale, fragile moth. He dreamt of stone birds coming to life, and of real birds turning to stone. He dreamt of a fine mist of sugar and flour, wrapping the world up in its soft embrace. He wove in and out of sleep for hours until his sister crept out from beneath her siblings and stretched out next to him, grasping his fingers in her own warm, damp hand, and at last he slipped into the deep, dark embrace of sleep, and dreamt he was underwater.

David Simpson

Puzzles

“All lawsuits are puzzles.”

It was second semester of law school when one of our professors said that. I knew most of my classmates took it as little more than a rhetorical nod at the “game” element of every lawsuit, two sides playing each other and all that. But I knew that wasn’t what the professor had meant. He hadn’t said lawsuits were games. He said they were puzzles. Which is different. Games can be unwinnable. But not puzzles. With a puzzle, there’s always some way to win. You might never find it, of course, but with puzzles you always know that somewhere, somehow, a solution does exist.

So, if all lawsuits are puzzles, and all puzzles are solvable, that meant all lawsuits are winnable, which I knew was the real point our professor had been oh-so-cleverly trying to make.

And it was cleverly put.

It also was utter crap, a fact I not only learned soon after hanging out my shingle, but a fact I was painfully being reminded of that very moment as I sat at my counsel table, leaning over my elbows, listening to my client’s case drain away under cross examination.

I’d just met her yesterday: Margaret Flynn, age 78. A friend of a friend of a friend had referred her to me, so she claimed, though as I later thought about it she’d never actually put names to that lineage, so who knows? A senior’s shuttle dropped her at my building. I lent her an arm to help her to my office. She was stooped like a white-haired question mark in scuffed red sneakers and a paisley coat-dress sort of thing and vaguely reminded me of someone I couldn’t quite place.

After a few niceties, Margaret had teared up and explained that her landlord was evicting her, “For just no reason.” She promised she was a quiet tenant, a good neighbor, and was never once late with her rent. “Always on the first,” she’d boasted. She surrendered an envelope to me fat with papers. “It’s all jumbly.” I’d thumbed through them, stopping at a

scheduling notice.

“Miss Flynn—”

“Maggie,” she’d insisted.

“Maggie.” I nodded and mirrored her smile with my own. “Your trial’s set for tomorrow, did you know that?”

“It’s my home.”

I nodded again, rubbed my cheeks, and thought about how much a last-minute trial, even a short one, would wreak havoc with my week and how I didn’t know this woman and probably wouldn’t make a dime off her case, and I was still mentally running through the names of a half-dozen attorneys who either owed me a favor or would love it if I owed them one when I was more than a bit surprised to hear my outside voice suddenly interrupt my thoughts with, “We’ll beat this. They can’t throw you out for no reason at all.”

As it turned out, the landlord actually did have a reason.

He was evicting Maggie for violating a “no pets” clause in her lease. Not that he had any proof, of course, unless you counted the fact that Maggie had just admitted on the witness stand that, “Yes,” she did have three cats at her apartment, which, even at that, was extra troubling as I distinctly remembered a welcoming committee of four felines, not three, when I’d dropped her off the day before. I couldn’t help wondering which of the four she was covering for and why.

“And do all those cats live with you, ma’am?”

At the podium between our two counsel tables, a lanky chap in department store pinstripes had peeled back another page of his yellow pad and was leaning into the microphone. He spoke with an affected drawl that sounded like he’d rented it special, just for the occasion.

“They’re my children.”

“Uh-huh. But do they live in your apartment, Miz Flynn? That’s really what I’m asking.”

“Well, of course,” she tittered. “They’re *inside* cats.”

Pinstripes pawed at the back of his neck like a mutt digging for fleas.

“No, ma’am. What I mean is—”

“I get the point, counsel.” The judge waved off the question with the back of his hand.

The hand belonged to the Honorable T. Orsen Herbert,

municipal court judge, bottom rung of the judicial food chain. Herbert called balls and strikes in courtroom 19A, the minor leagues, home field to all the cases wisely deemed too trivial to litter the dockets of the Superior Court Judges on the upper floors. A dingy little rathole, his courtroom was created in the 1980's from a men's room and two janitor's closets and gamely retained all the grace and ambiance of its historic roots. The air was permanently stale, the ceiling stained and uncomfortably low, and every wall was lined shoulder-to-shoulder with bruised file cabinets and sagging stacks of cardboard boxes.

Pinstripes removed two stapled sheets from a manila folder and hoisted them aloft.

"You knew, ma'am, that your lease said no pets were allowed in your apartment, and that if you violated that rule your landlord had every right in the world to require you to move out. That's a fact now, isn't it, Miz Flynn?"

"I—I'm sure you're right. I don't know papers. I just pay my rent." She turned to Judge Herbert, raised a pudgy finger and braved a smile. "Always on the first."

"Move to admit the lease, your honor?"

"Without objection," Herbert ordered.

A few questions later Pinstripes mercifully flipped his yellow pad closed. "Nothing further." The judge nodded, then planted a weary gaze at me.

"Mister Gideon?"

I'd been tapping the side of my head with my pen, mining for inspiration. I paused. "No questions, your honor." I resumed mining.

"You may step down, Ms. Flynn."

Maggie pushed out of the witness chair, steadying herself at the rail. She smoothed the front of her dress, then shuffle-stepped back to the seat next to me.

"Was I okay?" she whispered.

I touched her arm. "Perfect," I lied, as the judge intoned, "Call your next witness."

Pinstripes nodded to the man next to him.

"Plaintiff calls Sarkis Kovich."

The man shot to attention and marched to the witness stand, right hand already raised to take the oath. Kovich was

squat with a face like boiled ham and a few strands of gray hair banjo-strung from one ear to the other. His testimony was measured and precise. He was the landlord. His building tolerated no pets. It was in every lease. Strictly enforced. No exceptions. He'd personally seen cats in Margaret Flynn's apartment on Thursday and posted her eviction notice the very next day. He had no doubts what he'd seen. Or when. His recollection was excellent. All his papers were in order.

"Cross examination, Mr. Gideon?"

"Thank you, Your Honor."

For fifteen minutes I poked and jabbed at Kovich's story, trying all my best tactics: coming at him from different angles, running the clock backwards, pressing for exact words, pushing every button I could think of. For Kovich, it was batting practice. I could hardly bear to listen as he crushed another of my anemic questions into the left field bleachers.

"A minute, Your Honor?"

Herbert took pity with a curt nod.

'Puzzles,' my ass, I thought and not for the first time in my legal career. I was out of time. Out of ideas. Maggie was a sweet old lady, and I'd have gladly paid her rent myself if that's all it took. But she violated the lease. Got caught. And they called her on it. End of story. Sometimes, it's just not that complicated. I turned to Maggie to buy a few more seconds. Sometimes—

Her eyes were pink and moist, shining like mirrors, and her eyelids fluttered. I could instantly tell she knew. She might be pushing four score years, was a bona fide 'Cat Lady,' and had gone all-in hoping this friendly-faced lawyer could somehow pull a rabbit out of a hat, but I could read it in her eyes. She knew it was over. Though she still forced an encouraging smile as her hands trembled and she tried to quickly hide the nail file she'd been fidgeting with.

Nail file.

That's when it hit me—stooped, paisley, nail file—and just like that I was vaulted back to that sixth grade summer, vacationing at crazy Aunt Viv's lake house. I could hear my mother when she dropped me off, "Remember, Alex, your Aunt Viv is a little . . . well, just be sweet, dear, okay?" I

could see myself crossing their back lawn, spotting my aunt on the raised porch. She was wearing her paisley housecoat, hunched over a table, working something with her hands, I wasn't sure what. I mounted the porch stairs and when I reached her side, I could finally see what she was doing. On the tabletop in front of her was a rainbow of jigsaw puzzle pieces surrounding an island of assembled work. Aunt Viv was using a nail file to meticulously reshape a puzzle piece, filing down an annoying bulge, enlarging a too-narrow groove, pausing, blowing the dust away, testing to see if it fit, then more filing, more blowing, re-testing, until finally, victoriously pressing it home.

"Aah!" she cheered.

Only then did she look up at me, her smiling face like a radiant, chubby sun.

"You're Alexander."

"What are you doing, Aunt Viv?" It was more an accusation than a question.

"Exactly as you see, exactly as you see."

Even then I was reluctant to let a witness's non-answer get them off the hook.

"You're ruining the puzzle."

Aunt Viv never lost her smile but didn't respond. I tried again, pointing to the crazy-quilt of altered pieces in the center of the table.

"That's not what it's supposed to look like."

"Oh?" Now curious. "And how do you know that, dear, when I'm not near finished?"

"Because—" I'd grabbed the lid of the puzzle box and pointed to the picture on its cover, "—that's what it's supposed to look like."

"Is it now?"

I didn't understand.

"That's why they put a picture on the box. So you know what to do."

Aunt Viv patted my hand. "You go by Alex, don't you." I nodded dumbly. "Well, Alex, I'll share a secret with you." She'd glanced conspiratorially over each shoulder, then beckoned me with a finger. I reluctantly leaned in. "That picture may be what the box people wanted their puzzle to look like," she

whispered. “But it’s my puzzle now. And Alex, when you call something your own, it gets to be whatever you choose to make of it, not what anyone else says.”

“But it’s a jigsaw puzzle.”

She stared down at the assembled mass for a long moment. “I don’t know what this might be when I’m done, but oh my, what an adventure.” She’d laughed aloud. “That’s the best thing about a puzzle, Alex. You get to make it whatever you want it to be.” She wagged the nail file at me. “Isn’t that so much better than just making it whatever some old box person wanted?”

I recalled that as a 12-year-old I thought what seemed so much better right then was getting away from crazy Aunt Viv. But at 31, at my wit’s end in Courtroom 19A, I wondered if maybe crazy Aunt Viv and my old law school professor might have had a thing at some point.

I tapped Maggie’s nail file, thought for a beat, then turned back to Kovich.

“Mr. Kovich. You heard Ms. Flynn testify she always paid her rent on time?”

“Yes.”

“Well, did she?”

Kovich looked amused. “As I recall, yes.”

“Always on the first?”

He nodded. “She was very good about that.”

“Every month?”

“Why—yes, that is correct.”

I stepped to the side of the podium.

“Ever talk to Ms. Flynn when she paid her rent?”

“Did I—”

“Chat. Talk. Whatever. Did you talk with her?”

“No. She pay rent. I write receipt. Nothing more.”

“What about other times, Mr. Kovich, when, let’s say, maybe you ran into Ms. Flynn around the complex. Ever talk to her then?”

“I am paid to work, Mr. Gideon, not to, how you say, chit-chat.”

I clasped my hands behind my back and took a step toward the witness box.

“It’s quite a responsibility, being landlord.”

“I suppose.”

“Lots to keep track of?”

“Yes.”

“Difficult decisions?”

“It is my job.”

“Decisions about what the leases say?”

A single worry line momentarily creased Kovich’s forehead.

“At maybe sometimes, yes.”

“Look at Margaret Flynn’s lease, Mr. Kovich, paragraph eighteen, the ‘no pets’ clause.” Kovich fumbled with his copy.

“It says tenants can’t have any pets *li-ving* with them.” I squeezed out the last words for emphasis. “You see that?”

“Yes.”

“You’re familiar with that provision.”

“Of course.”

“Read it before.”

“Many times, I—yes.”

“You’re sure?”

Kovich’s head nodded with confidence.

“We don’t want you to guess.”

“I do not—” He stopped himself. “I read it, Mr. Gideon. Yes.”

I stared at Kovich, all smiles.

“Now Mr. Kovich, where the lease says you can’t have pets ‘*li-ving* with you,’ let me ask you this: In your opinion as manager,” I extended him a deferential hand, “if a tenant has a friend visiting, and that friend brings a cat along to visit, that doesn’t mean the friend’s cat is ‘*living*’ with the tenant, does it? I mean, that wouldn’t violate the lease’s ‘no-pets’ clause, right?”

“Just a visit?”

“Just a visit.”

“Then, no. No violation.”

“You’re sure.”

“We are a friendly building, Mr. Gideon.”

Pinstripes stifled a chuckle.

“And if that friend ended up visiting for the whole weekend, with her cat, of course, would that violate the lease?”

“A weekend?” Kovich pumped his lips like a goldfish, then shook his head. “No. No violation with a weekend visit.”

I nodded. The good student.

“Now suppose, Mr. Kovich, suppose this friend was from out of town and was visiting for an entire month. Just one month. But for the whole month. And, again, with her cat. Would *that* violate the lease’s ‘no-pets’ clause?”

Kovich tipped his head back and searched the ceiling for guidance.

“Mr. Kovich?” I prompted.

“A month? Well . . .”

“The cat’s just visiting, remember?”

“Just visiting.” Kovich pumped his lips one last time for good measure. “Visiting. Then, no violation. But—” Kovich extended his arm at me with a raised index finger, “—that was not case with tenant Flynn.” He sat back and defiantly folded his arms.

“Alright, let’s talk about Ms. Flynn.” I took another step toward the witness box. “If I recall, Mr. Kovich—and tell me if I’m wrong—in response to your attorney’s questions you told us you saw cats in Ms. Flynn’s apartment on Thursday and posted a notice the very next day, saying she’d violated her lease?”

“Correct.”

“You saw the cats on a Thursday?”

“I did.”

“That’s what you swore to?”

“It is truth.”

“That’s what you told us in response to your attorney’s questions?”

“Yes.”

“On that Thursday?”

“I am not mistaken about the date, Mr. Gideon.”

“You’re certain.”

“I do know my days of week.” Kovich forced a chuckle.

“But Mr. Kovich—” I bit off my words and scolded him with a finger wag “—if you only saw the cats that one Thursday, and if, by your own admission, cats just *visiting* never violate the lease, then the truth is you personally had no evidence when you served your eviction papers that the cats you’d seen in Ms. Flynn’s apartment that Thursday were actually *living* there and not just *visiting*!”

I stood tall and knotted my arms at my chest. A human

exclamation point.

“Isn’t that true . . . Mis-ter Kovich?”

Kovich sparked with sudden awareness. “You twist my words, what I—”

I cut him off. “You didn’t really know if they were just visiting, did you?” I fixed him with my best sneer. “Or did you even care?”

Kovich’s eyes became slits. “I—”

“Because the truth is you only saw cats that one day. One time. That’s it.”

Pinstripes shot to his feet. “Objection, your honor. Counsel—”

“Just one day,” I pushed.

“Your Honor—”

“Admit it, Mister Kovich.”

“Your Honor!”

Kovich’s face flushed wine red. He didn’t appear the least bit interested in being rescued by his lawyer or by his Honor. He emitted a low growl, then raised his thick voice to try to drown out both lawyers.

“What I know, Mr. Gideon, is that—”

But I wasn’t ready to let him talk yet. I crowded Kovich further, spearing my finger inches from his face. “But you swore, you swore you only saw the cats that one time. Just once, Mister Kovich. That’s what you said. Just one day. Just one time.” I flung his arms wide apart. Christ on the cross. “You weren’t lying, were you?”

“Your Honor, please!” Pinstripes shouted to be heard. “Can the witness—”

“You’re not trying to tell us—”

Finally, Judge Herbert had had enough. “Order.” His gavel thundered into its wooden base, pounding for silence. “Order! Or-der! Or-der!”

I turned to the judge, my hands in palm-to-palm prayer. “Your Honor, I just want—”

The gavel hammered again. “Order, counsel.”

“But this witness—”

“Counsel.”

“If you’ll just—”

“Mis-ter Gideon.”

“But—”

Herbert leaned forward, his belly smothering the front edge of his desk. He leveled his gavel at me, right between the eyes. “Not. Another. Word.”

I stopped. Out of breath. I wiped at my mouth with the back of my hand and looked around like I wasn’t sure where I was, then backpedaled at gavel-point toward my counsel table.

“Mr. Kovich.” Herbert turned and zeroed his gavel at the witness. “You may finish your answer.”

Kovich dipped his chin to the judge. “I thank you, mister Your Honor.” He drew himself to full height and cleared his throat. “It is truth, I was asked about seeing cats on a Thursday, and it is truth, I did see them on that day. But—” Now he was the one wagging a finger at me. “I was not asked if that was the *only* time I ever see them. No, Mr. Gideon, that I was not asked.”

I stood motionless and could almost feel the bullseye Kovich was no doubt visualizing on my forehead.

“I tell you now I see those cats many times before that Thursday, Mr. Gideon. Many times. Tenant Flynn had them for so much more than just days or a month as you trick me to say. With my own eyes I see them for many months. Ma-ny, ma-ny months. So, no, Mr. Gideon, those cats are no visitors, of that I know for my own self. No mistake. And,” he tapped a finger to his chest, “if I can testify without interruption, Your Honor, sir, that is my testimony.”

Kovich leaned back and re-folded his arms, gloating over his fallen prey. “So, Mr. Gideon, now have I answered your question?”

He faked a smile at me.

I faked a smile back.

“Yep.”

I buttoned my suitcoat, then stood at attention, squarely facing the judge’s bench. “Your honor,” I announced, “defendant Margaret Flynn hereby moves for immediate dismissal of this entire eviction case.”

Kovich swallowed a chuckle.

“The landlord’s own testimony has now conclusively proven the following.” I held up my hand with one raised finger. “One, that the landlord had personal knowledge for, as he swore,

‘ma-ny, ma-ny months,’ that Margaret Flynn was keeping cats in her apartment in apparent violation of her lease.”

I extended a second finger.

“Two, that during each and every one of those months Margaret Flynn tendered her rent to the landlord, in full, on time, and her rent was duly accepted by Mr. Kovich without him ever saying a thing to her on any of those occasions, meaning, without him ever legally voicing any exception, objection or reservation about the cats he admittedly knew she was keeping.”

Another finger.

“Three, that Margaret Flynn was never told by landlord Kovich that the cats he knew were living with her were unacceptable or that the lease provision against them would ever be enforced against her or against them. Not once. Not ever. Not a word.”

A fourth finger.

“Four, that by electing to accept Ms. Flynn’s rent each month with full knowledge of her cats and without voicing any objections to them, this landlord is thereby deemed to have legally, knowingly and voluntarily condoned the cats’ presence and waived any objections to them, which means—”

I fanned all five digits.

“—five, that, he is therefore conclusively estopped and legally barred from making an about-face now and claiming that the very same cats he accepted and condoned for months and months and months are now suddenly unacceptable. By law, he cannot have it both ways.”

Kovich looked dumb-struck.

“Those are the landlord’s own facts, Your Honor. And that is the law.”

His Honor stared back at me, no doubt still calculating just how long he could reasonably hold me in jail for that last stunt. His chin finally dipped in reluctant assent and he shifted his eyes to the landlord’s attorney. “Counsel?” Pinstripes, still on his feet, rolled his eyes, parted his lips, but no words came out. He dug for fleas one last time, shook his head dismissively and sat down.

“Case dismissed!” Herbert gaveled the lawsuit to a close.

I spun to face Maggie and squatted, dropping my head level

with hers.

“Does this . . .” She trailed off, as if she didn’t dare say the words.

“You kicked butt, Margaret Flynn,” I said. “You get to stay in your apartment.” She blushed, smothering her mouth with both hands, then parted her lips to ask another question. I read her mind. “All of you. All thr-all of you.” I was still dying to know which cat she’d short-counted on the stand and why. But since we were still in court and Judge Herbert was still on the bench, I decided now probably wasn’t the best time to discuss the pros and cons of her convenient amnesia.

“And Mr. Gideon.” Judge Herbert. I stood and pivoted to face him.

“Your Honor?”

“My chambers. Five minutes.”

“Of course, Your Honor.”

K. Ralph Bray

Heart with No Companion

Our family had a minimalist consumption philosophy. My father was the author of this philosophy and constantly reminded us of it. “If something new comes into the house, then something old goes out.” Any gifts I got at Christmas or for my birthday required me to throw away or donate an earlier gift. I received exactly two birthday presents and five Christmas gifts every year. We could pack our entire house in the time between breakfast and lunch and within an hour of arriving at a new house, my parents had stacked the empty moving boxes in closets, ready for the next move. I got one box for my toys and books and another for my clothes.

When we arrived in Mackinaw I’d just turned twelve and was going into grade seven. My parents signed leases that ended in the summer when sunshine and warmth help to preserve our tattered cardboard boxes. I wished we could arrive mid-year; by February kids are bored with their friends and enemies and my arrival—the new kid in town—might have stoked their egos and generosity, but in July they’d already sorted themselves into summer packs.

For the first two weeks in July I sat alone on our front porch.

“Why are you sitting there doing nothing?”, my mother asked me. “Don’t you know anyone yet?”

She made daily trips to the COOP grocery store to buy brown iceberg lettuce, over-ripe fruit, and day-old pastry.

“There’s no one to play with. This town is boring.” I chastised all our towns.

“Only boring people are bored,” she said.

“I’m not boring. We keep moving and I can’t make real friends.”

She came closer, as if she might hug me.

“Most children would love a chance to live in different places and be adventurous.”

“This isn’t adventure. It’s hell.”

I shimmied my backside along the concrete porch,

anticipating a sharp smack as she passed on her way to the car. She kicked my leg instead.

“You better not be sitting here when I get back Ross. I’ll give you a dime to get something at the convenience store.”

I took her dime and slotted it between my front teeth.

“And don’t choke on it,” she said.

I walked fifteen minutes to the convenience store, careful to cross the road where the town’s one traffic light failed to moderate pickup trucks driven by impatient men. I rifled through an ice chest at the back of the store, looking for a blue popsicle and watched a boy in the hardware and canned foods aisle stuffing spools of fishing line under his sweatshirt.

“Hey,” he said to me. “Go up the aisle with me. Pretend we’re friends.”

We walked alongside each other in the narrow aisle. I bumped into a shelf, knocking a can of spaghetti onto the floor.

At the register the boy asked the cashier to add five pieces of gum to my popsicle.

“I’ll wait outside for you,” he said.

I paid ten cents and walked out. The boy shouted at me from the side of the store.

“I hope you’re going to share the gum,” he said.

I gave him three pieces.

“That’s fair.” He stuffed all three into his mouth.

“My name is Dirk, so you won’t be giving it to a stranger.”

I asked Dirk what he was going to do with the fishing line.

“Steal a fishing rod of course. Want to help me?”

I’d never fished and told him I didn’t eat fish.

“Me neither. I’m just having some fun.”

“One thing I have to ask,” he said. “What’s wrong with your teeth?”

My two top canine teeth were wonky. One was a short peg and the other looked like a sliced almond. I never smiled and kept my lips tightly pursed. My mother told my father that I’d eventually need new teeth once I stopped growing.

“I doubt Ross is going to grow anymore,” my father said. “And if two teeth come out, then two teeth can go in.”

“It’s a congenital thing,” I told Dirk. “From my mom. She

has bad teeth too.”

“Too bad I can’t steal some for you.” Dirk smiled and punched my arm.

For the rest of the summer, I was Dirk’s lookout when he stole. He shoplifted from six different stores, the limit of retail opportunities in Mackinaw.

“When I’m older I’ll buy a car and drive to Prince George and spend all day doing it,” Dirk said. “They have twenty times more stores than we do.”

He showed me how to pop metal slugs out of the electrical boxes in the new homes being built for an influx of loggers and their families. We used them in the arcade to play pinball.

My mother was happy that I was out of the house and had a friend. I woke up surly, spent the day flipping pinball paddles and laughing at Dirk’s jokes, then silently ate dinner with my slightly drunk parents.

“Now there’s a boy who hangs his fiddle at the door,” my mother said when I came home.

“How’s your new friend, Ross?” my father asked.

I told him that Dirk knew a lot about fishing and electricity and that he might be the best friend I ever had.

“Don’t get used to it, Ross. Nothing lasts forever,” he said.

“Dirk and I will be friends forever,” I said.

On the last weekend of the summer Dirk decided that he’d pay for things, even comic books.

“Where did you get the money?” I asked.

“Took it from my old man’s wallet. A fiver at a time so he won’t notice.”

Dirk had fifty dollars in his pocket.

“I like Marvel comic books,” he said. “Especially Spiderman. I’d just rather not steal them.”

“Then they sort of feel like you own them,” I said.

“Yeah. Spiderman ends up killing his true love Gwen Stacey by accident. Wait ‘til you meet Mr. Webb, our grade seven teacher. Mr. Webb is like Spiderman. He tries to be a good guy, but he’ll end up killing us. I heard that from last year’s class.”

“Spiderman. Good name for him,” I said.

At the end of the first week of school, Spiderman had put Dirk at the back of the class and me at the front. Beside me sat The Res Kid. Everyone knew him as The Res Kid because he lived on the Martin Lake Indian Reservation. Twenty kids from the reservation, grades one to seven, travelled on a yellow school bus from Martin Lake to Mackinaw, an hour each way, to attend school. The bus often arrived late and sometimes The Res Kid didn't get to class until ten in the morning. Spiderman hated tardiness, especially when a kid interrupted music or reading.

"The Res Kid's head almost hits the door frame," I said to Dirk.

"I bet he's older than us. Probably failed a few times," Dirk suggested.

By the fifth day of class The Res Kid had been late five times.

"If I can get here on time, so can you," Spiderman yelled at him. "It's not like we live in a city with traffic."

The Res Kid barely spoke. He kept to himself and in group work he was silent and invisible.

Our school district didn't have money for much of anything beyond salaries and workbooks; in gym we used paint cans filled with frozen water as curling stones and in music Spiderman gave us two-by-four lumber cut into three-foot lengths on which we drew a fret board and strings using black markers.

"I'll play my guitar and you'll use your boards to chord along with me," he said.

Spiderman taught us the four chords to play Leonard Cohen's song, Suzanne. He showed us each chord on his six-string guitar and then walked around the room to see us stretch our fingers around our two-by-fours. The Res Kid's wide hands effortlessly bounced from chord to chord. "Slow down Chief," Spiderman told him. "You'll get a splinter."

Once we'd mastered the chords Spiderman sat on top of his desk and played and sang Suzanne while we played along on our lumber.

Spiderman finished playing and asked if anyone in the class wanted to try his guitar or sing.

"I'll do it."

I turned to my left where The Res Kid sat. I'd so rarely heard his voice that he sounded like a movie character offering to defuse a bomb.

"Really, Chief? O.K., good luck with that." Spiderman passed his guitar and sat down.

The Res Kid stood up beside his desk, slung the guitar strap around his neck, and started playing and singing. He sang about tea and oranges from China and a river and drowning men able to see Jesus walking on water. When he finished, we clapped until Spiderman waved us to stop.

"That was O.K.," Spiderman noted. "Maybe a bit too deep. Next time we'll get a girl to sing it."

For the next week Spiderman made The Res Kid do a push up for every minute he arrived late.

Dirk stole a Batman costume at The Bay and wore it to school for our class Halloween party. I didn't have a costume, even though Dirk offered to steal one for me. Spiderman wore a red wig, dressed like Raggedy Ann.

"Nice get up Dirk," he said. "Batman huh?"

"Yes sir. My favourite superhero."

"Not mine," Spiderman stared at Dirk for a long minute. "I like the Joker."

Spiderman sat on his desk and read aloud to us from the novel *Carrie* but skipped so many pages that the story didn't scare anyone. At ten a.m. the yellow school bus pulled up. None of the kids getting off the bus wore a costume.

"Late again Chief," Spiderman said to the Res Kid. "And I'm reading to the class."

"My name is Thomas," the Res Kid said, "not Chief, and I'll get a copy and read it on the bus."

Spiderman threw *Carrie* on the floor.

"What are you doing?" he asked The Res Kid.

"Looking for my desk. It's not in the spot."

Spiderman walked to the front of the room, grabbed a desk and pushed it into the hallway. The metal legs sliding in the puddles of melting snow sounded like ice skates carving through slush. Spiderman hurled a chair out into the hallway.

"Out! Now!"

The Res Kid walked out of the classroom, righted the chair,

pushed his desk to the wall, and sat down. He remained there until the bus returned at three o'clock.

The next week the Res Kid wasn't in class from Monday to Wednesday.

"Chief's not here again," Spiderman announced each morning.

"I think we should call him Thomas," I said.

"Yeah, thanks for the advice," Spiderman said. "You can call him whatever you want, but I do attendance and I've got him in the class list as Chief. Helps me learn names."

Once a month on Sunday night my mother cut my hair. She sat me on the kitchen stool, combed my hair down the sides of my head and face and cut around the circumference of my head as if she had placed a bowl on it.

"I hate this," I said. "I'd like to go to a barber, like Dirk does."

"With what money?"

I closed my eyes as she clipped the hair on my forehead in a straight line.

"Mr. Webb is a dick. He's tormenting one of the kids from the reservation."

She closed the scissors and hit my forehead with the handle.

"Ross, do not use that language!"

"Fine. He's a penis."

I bobbed and weaved like a boxer, but she managed to whack my ear.

"No allowance this week Ross. You get nothing."

"I don't need money. Dirk steals stuff for me."

She looked at me, genuinely concerned, as if I told her that Dirk had leukemia.

"That's sad. Your only friend is a criminal."

She smiled and cut another inch from my bangs.

On Monday morning I wore a toque to hide my hair and the small cut on my forehead.

"Salad bowl special last night, Ross?" Spiderman grabbed the toque from my head and dropped it on my desk.

"I guess," I replied. I cooled my hot face with the snow on my mitts.

"I'll lend you my Anne wig if you want."

“No, I’m good.”

“I’m joking Ross! Maybe smile once in a while, huh? Show us those pearly whites.”

Dirk walked into the class and raised his middle finger to Spiderman as he passed me on the way to his desk.

We’d spent two weeks without music lessons because Spiderman had to catch up on math. He handed out worksheets each day and we filled the blank spaces beneath questions about fractions or decimals. Thomas finished his worksheets faster than me or Dirk and we asked him if we could check our answers against his, but because he missed every second day of school we messed up answers on half the problems.

When the last worksheet was finished, Spiderman brought out his guitar and threw a few chords around on his fretboard. The yellow bus pulled close to the school’s front doors. I saw Thomas get out and heard him in the hallway, stomping snow off his boots. Thomas didn’t have extra shoes at school and wore his winter boots all day.

Thomas came into the classroom, got his wood, sat at his desk, and started singing. Spiderman stopped playing.

“Hey Chief. Stop making noises while I’m up here.” Spiderman gently laid his guitar in its case, slammed the lid shut, and walked to Thomas’s desk. Thomas kept singing.

“Did you hear me Chief?”

Thomas’s left hand, chording on his pretend strings, streaked the wood red with each strum. I saw a long splinter in the flesh between his thumb and forefinger and blood oozing from his palm.

I’m not sure who moved first, or who kicked the chair, but there was no doubt when Thomas swung his two-by-four like a baseball bat at Spiderman’s leg. We heard the crack at contact and Spiderman fell to the floor, grabbing his knee and screaming, and Thomas swung the board again, landing the bloodied end of it on Spiderman’s thigh. Both me and Dirk tackled Thomas before he could seriously hurt Spiderman.

“Go to the office Ross,” Spiderman commanded. “For Christ’s sake, get someone here.”

I knelt beside Thomas on the floor, hating Spiderman, and thinking what might happen if I took the wood and hit him.

Dirk bolted to the main office to get the principal.

Thomas stood up and smiled at me. I couldn't help myself and smiled back.

"Your teeth are crooked," he said. "Did someone hit you?"

"A long time ago. But I can fix it."

He put on his jacket and hat and walked into the hallway and out of the school. I ran to the window and watched him cross the street over to the mall and into the woods.

By now the principal was attending to Spiderman.

"That kid has got balls for doing that," Dirk said to me.

"I think he just got tired of it all," I answered.

That night I told my mother what happened.

"That boy needs to learn his place," she said. "Injuring someone with a piece of wood is unacceptable."

"What if it wasn't with wood? What if he just punched him?" I asked her.

"He still needs to know his place."

On Saturday morning, the day after Thomas broke Spiderman's kneecap, Dirk and I sat on a bench in the mall, outside the COOP, and watched a few drunks weave from the liquor store to the back exit and off into the woods.

"I'm going to steal something," I said.

"You are?" Dirk slapped my shoulder.

"Something small," he suggested. "A chocolate bar, or a pair of socks."

"How about an orange?" I said. "I can roll it into my sweatshirt sleeve."

I walked into the grocery store, past the cashier who was pulling tins of waxed beans and bruised bananas along a rolling black belt, to the produce aisle where the oranges were piled in a pyramid. I plucked the top orange and turned it over in my hand, like a pitcher does before throwing to the batter. I looked to the front and saw Dirk doing jumping jacks and pointing. My mother pushing an empty grocery cart, pulling tins from shelves and replacing them in a different spot.

That morning she said that I should get the two boxes from my closet and start packing. I'd heard her and my father had talking about debts and rent, and a town called Smithers.

"Ross hasn't made any real friends, so he won't mind moving," she said to him.

“Just make sure he gets everything into two boxes. I’m not paying for a bigger U-Haul,” my father said.

I palmed the orange, squeezing and softening the pulp. When my mother turned her cart into the next aisle, I threw the orange at her leg and missed, hitting the cart’s wheel.

I grabbed another orange and walked past the cashier.

Dirk slapped me on the back.

“Holy! Your mom is going to ground you forever.”

I tossed the orange into a garbage can at the exit.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“To the woods.”

Dirk stopped.

“Why? He won’t be there.”

I looked at the spindly pine trees behind the mall. Maybe Thomas had found a way to disappear, and we wouldn’t find him, but I knew this was my last chance to smile before my parents took me away from Mackinaw, before I had to learn a different song in a strange town.

Joanna Galbraith

JULY 13, 1995

ADEM:

I can feel my left eye beginning to twitch—the tap-tap of a butterfly about to take wing. I wonder if anyone else in the university hall has noticed. Probably not. They all have butterflies of their own to attend to.

My butterfly is cobalt blue. Or is it lapis? I can never tell the difference. But I remember the way they used to bluff in the July heat. Tumbling down the hillside beside Deda’s cottage—little blue enchantments amongst all the green.

“Boy,” Grandpa used to say, rolling a black cherry between his teeth. “See how they work? Early to bed, I bet. Early to rise, too.”

I only ever twitch when I am sleep-deprived, and I am only ever sleep-deprived on examination days. It’s not just my eyes either. It’s my entire body as well. Buzzing, a thousand cicadas. Like my pulse has begun colonising on the outside of my skin.

“Boy. You should have slept last night.”

“I couldn’t, Deda,” I whisper. “I had to be sure I’d learned *everything*.”

HASAN:

I can’t remember the last time I slept! I mean *really* slept. Like one of those cartoon characters with the trail of unbroken Zs.

Or how it feels to be so clean your feet squeak across the tiles.

Or to have eaten minced beef until your guts begin to ache, and you stagger through the wheat fields releasing all that wind while everyone else is laughing, even the crescent moon.

The compound we are sheltering in smells exactly how I feel—like too many other people who can’t remember these things either. Outside we hear exploding shells and the crack of approaching gunfire. Sometimes it sounds far away, and I tuck my heart back inside my chest. Other times we feel the

earth break and we know *they* are coming.

I feel myself flinching every time someone fidgets. How can this be? I am a young man. I'm not supposed to be afraid and yet here I am sweating on this cold, factory floor.

If only I could sleep.

“Early to bed. Early to rise.”

I wonder where Deda is. Somewhere in the woods. He always liked it best out there. I should be with him, not here beside my mother and in her jealous curve, my sister, Merjem. I watch them slumped together. We are lucky to have purchased wall.

They aren't awake,

I don't think.

But they can't be asleep, either.

Not with father dead, throat slit like a gormless goat.

I am the man of the house now,

except we have no home.

ADEM:

A woman in a too tight blouse, blue—paler than my butterfly—has announced to the hall that the examination has commenced.

LA403—Intellectual Property

The study of incorporeal rights:

things you cannot touch, let alone truly feel.

I skim through the questions. I only need to answer three. My left eye is still fluttering, the butterfly will not rest. Finally, a triumphant exhale. I can answer all of them. I even predicted one. Can I scrawl underneath it—*I predicted this!*

The cicadas are beginning to settle. The butterfly has fallen asleep. I try not to think of that too tight, blue blouse.

HASAN:

A woman is circulating amongst us working as a translator. She has a clipboard and a shattered biro. She is taking down the names of the people who have disappeared. The list is getting longer every hour that we are here. I don't want to add to her list, though. Father is dead. Deda is in the woods. I want something different. That biro will do. It feels like a surrender to have nothing in my hands.

Nearby I see a blue helmet bluffing over a field of motley headscarves. Is it cyan or capri? I can never tell the difference. Now it has stopped and is shouting at three crouching lads: “*You, you, and you.*” The field of scarves begin undulating, pulling their sons to-and-fro until finally, brutally, the boys are wrenched away—what a callous way to weed! The blue helmet doesn’t seem to care. It just starts bobbing like a happy cork through the field again.

I’m not sure that shade of blue does any good anymore.

ADEM:

There is a sharp crack in the room, like a pistol being shot. Or a snapped branch when walking by The Drina in the deadest frost. A student three seats left of me has broken his pencil clean in two.

Why does he even have one?

We were asked to bring only pens.

I want to lean over and whisper in his ear: “I am with you, brother.” But there is nothing about the two of us that relates us in any way. He’s got a head full of casual, blonde hair which waves as he writes and broad, upbeat shoulders—the type that comes from being told *you* are always right. My hair is black. It sits tight on my head. I don’t speak with an accent, but both my parents do. I have a blue butterfly. He has only pencils.

Our bond is this exam—not quite a brotherhood.

HASAN:

Merjem is prodding my left shoulder—tap-tap. I don’t feel it at first. I have stopped feeling anything. It is better that way.

She wants to go outside. I shake my head. When people go outside, they don’t tend to return or if they do it is only their body. Something about them has been taken. I can’t say exactly what.

“Go here,” I whisper. “It’s summer. You will dry.”

I catch a glimpse of a U.N. soldier who has been stripped to his underwear. His blonde hair lies aghast. He has lost his blue helmet. Another man has it now. I know he isn’t one of us, but he has been stripped all the same. Our fates seem entwined, but they can’t really be, I don’t think.

We are bonded by the captors—not quite a brotherhood.

ADEM:

The examination hall is silent but for the desperate scratching of three hundred earnest biros. I glance up to the clock hanging at the front. She is handing out time as only she sees fit. Her face is wilted mint if that is even a shade. Not luminescent like the evergreens in the woodlands near the Pliva Lakes.

Two questions down, one more to go, although I am half expecting to find another one, hidden, just for me. Asking—no demanding—how it is exactly that I am even here, surrounded by students whose families graduate *ad nauseum cum laude*. I sound bitter but I am not. Believe me when I say, I am as surprised as the rest of them.

My dad is painfully proud although he can't express it in English. "Very good" he says, a clap on my back—skin flushed like raw salmon.

It is hard to imagine how it must be for him, speaking in a language that he cannot feel. Gazing on a land that holds no memories. He says the old land is finished. Brisbane is his home now. But sometimes as he sits out on the porch, watching the mechanical slug of traffic wending past his house, sipping on tea, two cigarettes on the go, I see him looking someplace else. Beyond the neon lights that shout 'Sexy Time', the advertising billboards, the concrete overpasses, the buildings made from glass, and I know he is searching for the fields of ancient pines. And I know all he can hear is the chop-chop of crystal water over tufa limestone, and the sound of children giggling as they chew on ripened cucumbers.

I glance hurriedly up at the clock, spitting out tick tocks. They seem to be getting faster.

HASAN:

The wailing is getting louder now and somewhere, verging upon us, we hear screams as well. These drab factory walls feel like a prison, and I find myself becoming agitated by all the colours they are constraining.

I should have gone to the woods with Deda. We could have whittled weapons from the branches—come back and rescued

everyone. Here I can do nothing, not even for myself.

Merjem is nuzzling into my arm. “I’m glad you are here, brother” she whispers. “Not out in the spooky woods.” I want to laugh (with some bitterness) at her use of the word ‘spooky.’ This is by far the spookiest place I have ever seen. But she is only a child. She doesn’t need to hear that from me—she can hear it from all the others—so instead I begin talking about the forest near Deda’s cottage and the creatures that are hiding in it, and somewhere between the goblins and the nymphs with thunder eyes, we enter a game of make-believe. And we begin to smell the scented pines, feel the long tips of feathered grass, hear the trickling flow of the ancient water mills as they play catch and throw with bewildered fish.

I know it is too late now for me to go to the woods and yet, somehow, we have managed to escape to them anyway. I keep drilling forest images into Merjem’s nuzzling head. Better she remembers that than the scent and broken darkness of this unholy place.

ADEM:

I have saved the easiest question until last. It is based on a court case about a lemon juice company, but the examiner has changed the product into oranges instead. If I ever write exam papers, I will be cleverer than that.

Even when I am done writing about oranges, I won’t leave the exam. Not until the clock spits out *pens down*. The pencil-snapper has already gone, only his severed pencils remain. I never leave an exam early, even when I am done.

You never know how it will all turn out.

How it all might finish.

HASAN:

I think I may have fallen asleep because when I open my eyes I am in Deda’s cottage, sitting on a wooden chair, my feet twisted around its painted legs. In front of me is a white-haired Stravarka, and in her creased hand is a bowl of water which she is holding over my head while pouring lead onto a spoon. I don’t know how I know she is doing this since I am sitting underneath the bowl,

but I do.

Now I can hear her chanting but then I realise it isn't her. My eyes startle open, and I see the men in blue helmets have begun taking down names. It is clear by the way they are wearing them, lopsided and unfastened, that their heads were not originally chosen for these hats.

"Don't tell them anything," I hear a woman whisper nearby. "They're only pretending to be who they say they are."

I nod. My breath shallows.

I don't even know who I am, anymore.

ADEM:

The winter sun is squinting down on me as I leave the university hall. It isn't cold. Not like the brittle funnel of wind that blows down from Trebević mountain, but I still feel a chill underneath my knitted threads.

"Coming to the party, Adam?" a girl asks. (*No one ever gets my name right.*) Her name is Sally. (*I always get names right.*) Our acquaintance is only peripheral—attending the same lectures, occasionally checking the same Statute book. This is the first time I am being invited into her circle. Just as the circle is about to dissolve.

I can see my dad waiting in his beat up holden out front. He is beaming through the wound-up window. Cigarette between his lips; an Olympic ring of smoke circling his head. He wants to take me out to lunch.

"Can't we celebrate tomorrow?"

"Your mother will be disappointed. You know how sad she gets."

"There's a party."

"It won't be the same."

I am not sure if he means the party or tomorrow. But I know tomorrow will come and my mother will still be sad, and I will still be the same.

My father notices Sally waving me over. Her wheat-flecked hair bobbing in the pale sun. He grins.

"OK, son. I explain your mother."

I can see he is proud of me. Perhaps now, even more.

HASAN:

We are being told to stand up. Everyone is moving forward,

oozing like a blood stain across the concrete floor. *There are buses, they say. To rescue us, they say.*

Somehow, miraculously, I am still with Merjem and my mother, but I have seen them taking all the men away. I keep staring straight ahead. Perhaps if I cannot see them, they cannot see me in return. But then the oozing halts and there is a forced grip on my arm yanking me to the side. It won't let me go so I know that I will have to. I watch Merjem looking back at me as the stain carries her away. She has thunder in her eyes, she is screaming out my name.

"Go," I call out after her. "I'll find you later on."

ADEM:

The after-party is being thrown in a marquee rented by the Student Committee. I never liked the Committee, striding down the Law School corridors in their chambray shirts and pressed trousers. Dressed up like wannabee lawyers instead of plebbing it with the student crowd. But today I like them, even their pretentious ties, because being here is better than watching my mother cry.

The Committee have decorated the marquee with celebratory banners, mushroom heaters, and tables bent from booze. Not much for me here, then. The pencil-snapper is standing near me peeling open a beer.

Crack.

Stealth is not his game.

"Hey," he says. "You sat near me in the exam."

"Yes, I heard your pencil."

He doesn't seem embarrassed. Like the pencil had it coming.

"Wasn't so bad though?" I reply. The pencil-snapper just stares at me. Perhaps I sound too confident for a boy with tight, black hair.

He slaps me on the back. "Yeah. Well, I hope I pass. My dad will murder me if I have to repeat it all again."

He saunters off into the crowds, another pencil stashed in his back pocket. I start looking around for Sally. She is huddling around a heater, waving me over.

"At last," I whisper to my blue butterfly. "I shall finally belong."

HASAN:

The wheat field sprawled out in front of me I have known my entire life. I don't know this particular crop, but I know the earth from which it has sprung. I know the perimeter of pines around it, and I know the sky above. I can see little blue butterflies dancing along its rim.

Not everyone is as well-acquainted with the place where they will end.

The soil in front of me has been freshly turned, but the tractor engine has gone quiet. They are trying to make us kneel, digging their guns into the backs of our skinny legs. I lock mine tight. I won't beg for my bullet. They'll have to give it to me straight.

There is no escape for me now and the fear feels like an ice stream being injected into my veins. I keep staring at the wheat field as the boys begin to fall. I imagine myself running with my cousin, Adem, from all those years ago. Laughing, spitting out wheat heads, until suddenly he begins to cry.

"Why are you crying?" I ask him.

"I don't want to leave."

"But you get to fly in a big plane. I wish I could be that lucky."

"No," he replies. "You are the lucky one, Hasan. You get to stay exactly where you belong."

I feel my knees begin to loosen.

I shall stay where I belong.

Natalie Shaw Evjen

Cost-Benefit Analysis

“It looks *just* like him, right? I’m not crazy?” Madilyn says. Her left eyebrow, freshly microbladed into a perfect chestnut arch, twitches.

Kami squints, leans towards the open MacBook. Her chest presses up against the mahogany table, making her fake boobs bulge from the neck of her pink Lululemon yoga top like overproofed bread dough.

“Okay, Mads? That’s *totally* Hunter,” she says. “Either he was separated from an identical twin at birth, which, I mean . . . didn’t his mom have, like, *seven* kids? I’m ready to give a child away right now and I have *three* . . .”

In different circumstances, this would be a perfect gem to keep tucked away for the next time any of Madilyn’s other East Bench friends bring up Kami’s extraordinary ability to steer any conversation towards herself. She resists the urge to snap her fingers, the way she does when trying to keep Benson and Ava on task during homework time.

“Or?”

“Or he’s cheating on you.”

Madilyn runs her thumbs against the flat tips of her nails (freshly painted into perfect red rose petals) as she looks back at the Tinder profile. *Simon Walker, New York City, Consultant*. Studies the broad shoulders, the chiseled jawline, the manicured beard à la Chris Hemsworth. The man in the picture—Simon, Hunter, *whoever* he is—stares right into her eyes.

“I don’t recognize those clothes,” Madilyn says.

“He could hide clothes anywhere. Sweetie, he could *burn* a Billy Reid outfit a week and your bank account wouldn’t even flinch.”

“But isn’t the face thinner?”

“It’s the angle of the shot.”

Madilyn’s thumb slides up to the gold band on her fourth finger, traces the facets of the three-carat princess cut diamond on top. It was Hunter’s grandmother’s.

“Maybe he’s gay,” Kami continues, clearly not sensing the very steep cliff Madilyn is teetering inches away from. “There’s a show on Netflix about it. Guys you’d *never* suspect, all part of this secret network on the dark web. *Under the Closet*, maybe? Something like that.” She pulls a stick of spearmint gum from her Givenchy handbag, folds it onto her tongue. “What sucks is that you can’t call him out on it, at least not until you make a plan. He could pull a Mark Hacking. Did I ever tell you he went to high school with my cousin Courtney?”

Madilyn suddenly wants—*needs*—this insane woman, this stranger she inexplicably has on speed dial, out of her house.

“Okay, Kam, he’s not going to *murder* me.” She forces a laugh. “I think I hear Porter.”

“Really? I don’t hear any—”

“Weren’t you going to try and make that pilates class?”

Kami lifts her phone. “Crap. It’s ten-thirty. Call me if you need anything, k? We can brainstorm.” She stands, slides her bag off the table, and pulls Madilyn in for a stiff, one-armed hug.

Madilyn recognizes the floral scent emanating from Kami’s skin as some saccharine Tom Ford perfume a Sephora clerk tried to sell her a few days ago at City Creek. It makes her nauseous.

She waits until the front door opens and closes before sitting in the chair, still warm from Kami’s Luon-suctioned backside, and studies the MacBook screen. Slides the cursor to the search bar. Her fingers hover over the keyboard for a few seconds before reaching up and slamming the screen closed.

Her eyebrow twitches again. The sensation reminds her of something, but she can’t quite put her finger on what.

Madilyn’s boobs aren’t fake. Her skin is naturally flawless, her Scandinavian-blond hair falls in wispy coils when she lets it air dry. Her nose is small. Her lips, full. She’s 5’8” with heels on, 120 pounds fully clothed. The insides of her thighs don’t touch.

The first time she was aware of her good fortune was in second grade. The boys were chasing her around the spider

web dome, breathlessly trying to catch her so they could put her in prison underneath the aluminum slide. She knew the boys were chasing her, as opposed to Lily Reiser or Samantha Thompson or Sara Childers or any of the other girls in her class, because she was prettier than them.

The boys were chanting, “Ruth! Ruth! We’re gonna get you, Ruth!” because that was her name then.

At eleven, the grandfather clock in the entryway (a wedding gift from Hunter’s hedge fund manager uncle) begins to chime, echoing off the vaulted ceilings, reverberating through the walls and floors and up the legs of the chair and into her body, creating a syncopated rhythm against her heartbeat.

Porter cries.

She picks up her phone, clicks the baby monitor app. Her home screen wallpaper (a favorite wedding photo) is replaced by the scotopic outline of a bow-legged toddler grasping the rail of his crib, bouncing at the knees as if trying to build up enough momentum to hurl himself over.

Normally she drags out the minutes between first cry and retrieval, giving herself enough time to swallow down any irritation that tends to accompany the end of naptime. Today, she’s hit with an almost primal urge to reach him, to feel his warmth against her skin.

The crying stops as soon as she opens the door. Porter’s tear-stained cheeks dimple, his blue eyes light up, framed by the blotchy red patches around his temples. Without daring to take his eyes off of her, he bends down and picks up the Minky blanket with a plush monkey head sewn on one corner, then reaches his stubby arms towards her.

The theme of his nursery is ‘Vintage Circus’. Madilyn knew Porter was going to be last, months before she even made the appointment to get her IUD removed. This, she told Hunter one night, was the reason she had to raid Anthropologie. Buy all the things.

He just laughed. They were lying in bed, his giant hand cradling her swollen belly the same way it had cradled an incalculable number of footballs. “You’ve had an excuse every time. Benson was the first, Ava was a girl . . .”

She wrinkled her nose at him, narrowed her eyes in mock

scorn. “Well, if you’d quit knocking me up.”

She crosses the wool rug (lions in red fez hats, smiling blue elephants) and lifts him out of his crib. He lays his head on her shoulder, nestling his blonde curls into the crook of her neck and tucking his arms and knees up in fetal position.

She strokes the soft patch of skin behind his ear. Stares passively at the red- and white-striped fabric draped like a big top tent in the corner, the merry-go-round mobile dangling over the crib, the screen print of a seal balancing a ball on its nose, until her eyes land on a family portrait hanging over a slack strip of felt bunting on the wall.

Madilyn spent weeks planning everyone’s outfits for that photo, settling on taupe and white with burgundy accessories: lipstick for herself, a bow for Ava, ties for the boys, a cardigan for Hunter. She paid the photographer \$1500 to meet them at Aspen Grove for an hour’s worth of shots, then Photoshop the vibrancy away. Muted hues, somewhere between sepia and full color, are in right now.

Her arms suddenly feel like they might give out. She sits in the overstuffed rocker and Porter unfurls, reaching across her chest and pulling *Goodnight Moon* from his book rack. She reads it three times without registering any of the words.

The twitch in her eyebrow is faster, more pronounced now. With Porter on her lap, she suddenly realizes what the sensation reminds her of: the first flutters of pregnancy.

Quickening, they used to call it before science stripped away all the mystery and intrigue of new life. The moment you know something foreign is growing inside you, something that exists completely beyond your control.

Ruth Gaskill became Madilyn Smoot in waves. The earliest stages of this transformation exist in her mind not in a fluent storyline, but a series of isolated images: a decrepit trailer home being swallowed in quackgrass, dark circles beneath her mother’s eyes, a hunting rifle proudly displayed above the 32-inch television. Though she doesn’t allow these images to haunt her often, they are sometimes conjured by smells (cigarette smoke, yeasty beer, body odor) or an occasional awareness of the topographical souvenirs on her palms where her father’s belt more than once ripped the skin

open. Hunter thinks she touched a hot stove as a baby.

For book club last month, they chose some True Crime thriller about a doctor who nearly got away with killing his pregnant wife. She told everyone she couldn't come because Benson had a football game.

Her parents' case got relatively little attention. Public intrigue for murder-suicides is directly correlated with how much money is left behind. Luckily, between the bank auction of the two-acre plot of land the trailer was parked on and Social Security survivor benefits, there was just enough that at sixteen she could run away from her twelfth foster placement (the true origin of most of her residual nightmares) and keep herself alive. She hitchhiked from Oregon to Idaho, then from Idaho to Utah because she heard the people were nice and there were plenty of jobs.

Ruth was eighteen for three years. She found a room to rent with four girls going to hair school and let them practice on her whenever they wanted. She got a job as a bagger at a grocery store. When she actually turned eighteen, she learned you could change your name, bury your skeletons even deeper into the closet, for a relatively small fee. She got her GED. Enrolled in community college. Transferred to the University of Utah. Joined a sorority. Became the mysterious It Girl whose parents tragically died in a plane crash. Caught the eye of the first-string star quarterback at a party one night.

Her pixelated photo is probably still hanging on the Missing Children Network bulletin board in some Walmart in Eastern Oregon. Anyone who cared, if there was such a person, probably long ago accepted that she ran off with a manipulative, drug-addled boyfriend, setting herself up to suffer the same fate as her mother. Apples don't fall far from the tree, people say.

But Madilyn knows you can crawl your way not just out from under the tree, but into a whole different orchard. And if you're smart enough to act the part, and lucky enough to look it, no one will ask questions.

Madilyn turns on *Bluey* for Porter, gives him a juice cup and a pouch of Annie's Cheddar Bunnies.

She's overdue for an Instagram post for some start-up vitamin company that has been breathing down her neck over DMs. She moves into the kitchen, pulls a box of tiny glass vials from her cabinet. *Magic Magnesium. Essential Bs. Long Life Elixir.*

She hasn't tried any of them. Truthfully, she doesn't believe in vitamins.

Becoming an influencer was not a conscious choice: when you marry a Heisman nominee-turned-Goldman Sachs analyst, the fifth son of a prominent Utah family who can trace their entire lineage on both sides back to the Mormon pioneers who began Salt Lake Valley's transformation from barren wasteland to bustling metropolis (Hunter is Brigham Young's great great great grandson) people want to know where you bought your dress and what your Christmas decorations look like and which organic snacks you feed your kids and how your Bali vacation went. And you feel obliged to tell them.

She picks up her phone and snaps a picture of the vials on the granite countertops, but the lighting isn't right. (*Sweet Things* paid her \$1,000 to post an Instagram story of her eating one of their sugar cookies.) She moves the vials to the table and arranges them in a neat semicircle, but it feels too forced, too formal. (Her friends keep saying she needs to start a TikTok account. Diversify.) She picks up one of the vials with her left hand, takes several shots of her holding it with her right.

They all turn out blurry. It's not until then that Madilyn realizes her hands are shaking.

"You don't have to keep doing it," Hunter said the last time she complained. They were in bed and he was propped against a pillow, MacBook open, typing an email. His fingers didn't slow down as he spoke.

"I can't just *disappear*."

He shrugged. "Why not? They'll get over it, find someone else to obsess over. There's plenty of fish in that sea."

She played it cool, even though she felt the hollow cavity in the back of her throat expanding.

It was, incidentally, the same night he told her he'd have to start leaving a week at a time for work. "Just once a

month,” he said. “We can’t lose this client, and it’s getting too complicated to make it work long-distance.”

She played it cool again, even though the thought of single parenting more than she already did stung no less than a belt being whipped over and over across her palms.

“The one in Los Angeles?”

He shook his head. “New York.”

She picks Benson and Ava up from school at three. The two of them are arguing before they even get in the car.

“Stop, Ava! Mom, tell her to stop *bugging* me!”

“Shut up, I’m not even *by* you!”

“You guys . . . just . . .” Madilyn pulls on the black lever behind the steering wheel. The windshield wipers spring to life, shuddering across the dry windshield. Their Audi Q7 is new, just purchased last month, and she keeps mixing up the blinkers and wipers. “Hurry, cars are waiting behind us.”

She finally finds the blinker (click, don’t pull) and waits for the slam of the backseat doors before merging back into the traffic circle.

“Mom, Brecklyn is taking everyone to the Nutcracker for her birthday,” Ava says.

“Oh yeah?”

Ava keeps talking. Madilyn somehow knows when to appropriately insert interjections, the correct vocal inflection to use, without hearing a word Ava is saying.

The five-minute drive is enough time for a shoving match, a heated argument over who is the better skier, and a meltdown after Porter drops his snack cup and it rolls just out of Benson’s reach beneath the passenger seat. Madilyn can almost feel a spark traveling up her spine like a fuse.

“Who wants screen time?” she says when they get home, smiling over clenched teeth.

They shriek (the spark travels up, up) and race down the hallway. Two doors slam, one after the other.

Madilyn turns on *Bluey* for Porter, gives him a juice cup and a pouch of Annie’s Cheddar Bunnies.

Her eyebrow pulsates. She becomes keenly aware of the tick of the grandfather clock.

In the quiet, her mind drifts from hypothetical to

hypothetical: Erotic scenes in dim hotel rooms, Ladies' Night interrogations, seven-hour meetings with drooling divorce attorneys, parroting rehearsed, euphemistic half-truths while the kids eat gelato.

She touches up her makeup, sorts the mail, reorganizes the pantry. Sleepwalks from room to room to room to room. (Why would anyone ever need so many rooms?)

At four, she packs a bag with fruit leathers and water bottles, hair ties and mouth guards. Wrestles the iPads away. Shuffles her kids into the car.

They travel from home to football practice to ballet to football practice to home, arriving at each destination without incident, exactly on time, but she can't recall a single moment of the drive.

At six, Madilyn begins chopping vegetables in the kitchen. There's a Blue Apron box in the refrigerator, but she'll save that for tomorrow. Tonight, they'll have Instant Pot ribeye roast and mashed potatoes, sheet pan Brussels sprouts, tossed salad.

She chops quickly. Hunter will be home in half an hour.

It's meditative, the chopping. Her mind is a gallery of tableaux vivants, and she lets herself wander, searching the frozen images for hidden meanings. (She knows, somehow, that she must find the answer by the time Hunter walks through the door.)

Seven-year-old Ruth hiding in a closet, clutching a Dollar Tree stuffed rabbit and praying harder than she ever had before, or ever has since.

The sparkler tunnel at their wedding reception, long as a football field.

A gray cat casually licking its paw on the arm of an orange floral print couch, backdropped by a blood-splattered wall.

A triptych of three dusty purple babies being gently laid in Madilyn's lap.

Something about the moment—the urgency, the rhythmic slicing—catalyzes into the sudden release of shockwaves that pulse through her veins and condense at the back of her skull. She blinks back angry tears, surprised to realize it's not Hunter's face she sees behind her eyelids.

Instead, it's the face of a former sorority sister, the one who sent her a link to the Tinder profile at one a.m. last night, three question marks in the subject line, and a single unpunctuated sentence ("OMG this guy looks exactly like Hunter") in the body of the email. The one who married a charming Brooklyn architect and lives in a three million dollar apartment with exposed brick walls and barrel-vaulted ceilings, whose two cherubic, plum-cheeked babies trickle incessantly from Madilyn's Instagram feed.

And who, for some unfathomable reason, has a Tinder account.

What she can't quite figure out about these people—yes, they are still *these people* in her mind—is why, insulated from a world full of unspeakable horrors, they choose to self-destruct.

She sniffs once, wipes her eyes. Continues chopping. The swelling subsides and the kitchen gradually comes into focus: a ceramic bowl brimming with fruit, two globe chandeliers above the island, the Vitamix blender on the counter, still plugged in from this morning. She smells the searing meat, hears the sound of Ava and Porter commanding Alexa to play Taylor Swift and Imagine Dragons in the playroom.

She realizes she already knows the answer.

Tonight, she will lock herself in the bathroom upstairs that no one ever uses, call Kami, and in the voice she's spent a decade perfecting, tell her that she created a Tinder account and messaged Simon Walker, actually *messaged him*, and he replied right away ("Um, yeah, of *course* he did, Mads," Kami will say, joking but with just a hint of jealousy) and asked if she wanted to *video chat* and of course she said yes, and it turns out the whole thing is just a crazy coincidence because he was legitimately in New York City, he even showed her the skyscrapers out the window, and the two of them talked until he asked her to take off her top and she hung up and blocked him, so, yeah, there's *no way* Hunter is Simon because Hunter is home this week, but it's *crazy* how much they look alike, and the whole thing reminds her of this podcast she listened to the other day about Simulation Theory, how we might all just be carbon copies of a few dozen prototypes, and Kami will seem to be following, but will suddenly veer

into a monologue about how she can't decide if she should get that tummy tuck, she hears it leaves a *nasty* scar, and Madilyn will somehow know when to appropriately insert interjections, the correct vocal inflection to use, and by the end of their conversation Madilyn will be certain Kami has already forgotten about the whole thing altogether. That it might as well have never happened.

The door opens, and Madilyn feels a sharp pain in her left thumb. She looks down to see blood seeping from a half-inch-long gash that runs from the nail to the pad, collecting in the veins and tributaries of the lettuce leaf she's chopping.

Hunter's Berluti loafers click against the wood floors of the entryway.

She slides the cutting board to the kitchen sink. Rinses the lettuce in the colander, lets the cold water run over her thumb until it's numb, until all she feels is a dull pulsation. The cut is deep, but she'll bandage it and no one will notice.

Hunter appears in the doorway. He sets down his bag, slides his arms out of his black overcoat. Stares right into her eyes.

William French

Greg

Just to clarify, my name is Greg, only Greg. Definitely not some of the other names people call me. Sometimes, I think it would be much less troublesome if we could wear nametags or, better yet, those photo ID badges hanging from solid black or red lanyards. I brought this up at the last group meeting, but my suggestion was ultimately rejected. As our manager, Mr. Sentry, put it: “How often are they actually going to see you anyway?” I had to admit he did have a good point—although I still may raise the issue again the next time we all meet, whenever that is.

Also, I want to say for the record, I don’t love what I do, in spite of what others might think or read in various stories (usually written by people who don’t actually know anything about us). Oh, there may be days when I don’t mind it too much. And I know that some of my colleagues really do enjoy the work, even to the point of always asking for the tough assignments and voluntarily working overtime. But to me, it’s just a job, perhaps a bit better than some jobs and definitely worse than others.

Mostly, we operate alone, with each of us having a specific territory matched to a specific specialty. My particular specialty is old people, although I do occasionally get the name of a younger person, if that person is in my territory and no one else is available.

For instance, a while back, I was assigned to Marnie Louise Cameron. Her profile said she was twenty-three years old, lived alone, and had lost her mother, her job, and her boyfriend all in the same week. Apparently, her despair had overwhelmed her to the point of pushing her to the edge where our intervention becomes a viable option. And, given her recent losses, I could certainly understand why—not that it matters what I might think.

I found her on the couch in her cluttered one-bedroom apartment. She had a needle stuck in her left arm; a half-empty bottle of Jack rested next to her. She appeared to

be well on her way to a coma but awake enough to see me approach.

“Who are you?” she asked in a garbled, barely discernible voice.

“Greg,” I replied.

She made a sound like a chuckle and strained to open her eyes more fully. “Greg?”

I nodded.

Her eyes closed and her breathing slowed. I leaned over to touch her, but before I could, she re-opened her eyes and looked at me again. “Wha . . . d’ya want?”

“I was given your name as someone who might need me.”

“You were given—”

In a rare flash of clarity, I could somehow detect her inner and outer beauty and even see a future, in spite of her ragged appearance and her recent losses. I stepped back away from her, as we are occasionally permitted to use our own judgment, especially in cases like this. “Yes, apparently someone thought you were ready.”

No doubt it took all of her remaining energy, but she managed to sit up. She pulled the needle from her arm—along with a few drops of blood—and cast it onto the dirty floor next to a small empty syringe. Her blue eyes shifted aimlessly before finally settling on me. She formed what I thought was a rather seductive smile and pulled up the hem of the stained nightshirt she was wearing, exposing her underwear. She pointed to the bottle of Jack with her left hand. “Greg . . . I . . . think I could hang out with you. Help yourself . . . to whatever you want.”

Some people—nearly all of them women, of course—seem to flirt with me; others attempt to bargain. It’s an occupational hazard. It is also a gross violation of policy to accept—or even acknowledge—any gratuities that may be offered. As Mr. Sentry reminds us, we’re there to do a job as quickly and efficiently as possible. “No, thanks,” I said, sensing what she was offering. “You can do a lot better than me.” I pointed to her cell, which was on the arm of the couch. “You better call the paramedics before you pass out. You don’t want to be found like this.”

At first, she gave me a small pout, but then she nodded as

though she understood, although I'm not sure she really did. It isn't often that someone who actually sees me gets a second chance. And those who are granted that second chance don't always appreciate it right away; some never do.

"Marnie, get yourself together and don't do this again. Your turn will come over the course of time." Then I pivoted and left without waiting for a reply. I don't know if she ever got herself together (we don't do follow ups), but I do know I didn't get her name after that night.

As I said before, mostly we operate alone. But occasionally, if a particular situation becomes hurried and chaotic, we get called in to work as a group. Remember the World Trade Center? I got pulled away from a nursing home because my colleagues who had that territory got overwhelmed very quickly.

Remember Hurricane Katrina? Hurricane Sandy? With practically every natural disaster, every epidemic, every mass murder, we get called away from our normal territories to work together. In such cases, we don't have time to socialize or even communicate with each other. One of the supervisors arrives on site and gives us our instructions, which generally begin with 'move fast.'

Afterward, a few of us may get together to talk shop, if we don't have any pressing assignments elsewhere. I have to admit I do enjoy sharing stories. One time recently, after Hurricane Maria, Bob, Madeline, and I got together. I told my story about Marnie, which they enjoyed, although Madeline said she probably would have done what she was there to do—definitely no second chance. "Leave it to a male to be so forgiving," she said.

Bob told us about how he snuck up on a fifty-two-year-old man while the man was mowing his lawn—quite a feat in the daylight, and one that I've never been quite able to master—not that it makes any real difference to the outcome. Still, sometimes you have to challenge yourself just to keep things interesting.

Madeline told us how she actually seduced a sixty-year-old man and took him while they were in bed together. Neither Bob nor I had a story that could top that. Besides, Madeline

is one of those colleagues who truly enjoy their work, so it would be just like her to commit a gross violation of policy in order to put her own frame around an assignment.

The truth of the matter is, what I could really use is a long vacation or even another job, any other job. I offer two very recent experiences—among a great many—to illustrate my point.

The first was John Bruce Capsahw. His profile indicated that he was eighty-four years old and lived with his wife of sixty-two years. For the past three years, his health was failing. He had been hospitalized five times for heart and lung problems and was in very early-stage dementia.

As I studied his profile, I thought this would be a simple and routine assignment. After all, the man was old, sick, and clearly ready—no problem, right? I chose a nighttime approach, having learned through experience that the process is much more efficient and less stressful when they're asleep. However, as I approached in the near darkness (they always leave a light on somewhere, usually in the bathroom), John awoke. He sat up straight in the bed and looked right at me, nodding as though he knew who I was and was even expecting me. He didn't appear at all surprised or frightened—not the typical reaction.

At first, I was a bit unnerved but soon relaxed when I saw his calm, almost serene demeanor. This would be very easy, I thought, in and out and on to the next.

“So, are you the one then?” he asked.

I knew what he meant—I've been asked that question before. “I'm Greg,” I said. “And it's time.” I moved closer.

But before I could reach him, he nudged his wife, who was sleeping next to him. She awoke with a start. “What is it?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

He smiled and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. “He's here for me. Do you still want to go together?”

She sat up and stared into the near-darkness. For at least a minute, she said nothing. I knew she couldn't see me, but somehow, she sensed my presence in the room. At last, she nodded as though she finally understood. She clutched her husband's hand. “Yes,” she said with conviction and love in her voice.

John gathered his breath, not an easy feat given his diseases. “Greg, we want to go together.”

I’d never gotten this request before and wasn’t quite sure how to answer it. “But . . . it’s not her time.”

“Please,” John said.

I looked at them both, saw the love and the pain in their eyes, and I confess I was moved. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” they said in one voice. John put his arm around her and pulled her into his body. She rested her head on his shoulder, a shoulder that was bony and bent with age, but, no doubt, familiar and comforting, at least to her.

I thought about it for a few agonizing seconds. I didn’t think I would get into trouble if I took them both. In fact, there was a good chance my supervisor would never find out. After all, a lot of people go without our help. And we have been known to take a few by mistake with no consequences. “Very well. As long as you’re sure.”

“Thank you,” John said. He kissed his wife on the forehead and eased back against the headboard. She closed her eyes and smiled.

I leaned over and touched them both. Then I watched them for a minute or so. They appeared to be asleep. I knew at a glance they were at peace together. If, at that moment, I would have had the ability to cry, tears would have been streaming down my face. It’d been a very long time since I’d seen love like that, a love that is truly eternal, a love I myself had never experienced.

As I moved on to the next assignment, I couldn’t help wondering what Madeline would have done in this situation. I would like to believe she would have acted as I did. Rupert, on the other hand, probably wouldn’t have. He is known to be a real stickler for the rules, definitely no sentimentalist. But then, I didn’t think I was either—at least not anymore.

However, one of my most recent situations is probably the best example of how much my attitude may be shifting away from the emotional indifference necessary to do this job. I was working in one of the largest hospitals in my territory, an assignment I get every so often. During this particular assignment, I had three names, all over eighty and all very

ill, mostly from exacerbations of chronic diseases.

The first was George Washington Jackson, eighty-six years old and in failing health. I found him in the intensive care unit already sedated. I took him without incident, and I was hopeful that this night's work would be quick and routine.

The next person I was to visit was Louise Aspen Dumbrowski, eighty-two years old with severe pneumonia superimposed over congestive heart failure. She was asleep as I approached. In fact, she never did wake up. However, just as I leaned over and touched her, her nurse entered the room.

Of course, the nurse didn't see me or what I had just done. However, she did see the result. This is one of the risks of working in a busy hospital, and I should have been more alert. The nurse called for assistance. And while I stood off in a corner and watched, at least ten people raced into the room. They worked on poor Louise for a long time before finally giving up. When I take someone, that person does not come back. But what should have been simple and peaceful turned out to be very messy and chaotic. It was also extremely unpleasant to watch. I mean, I never ever want to see so many well-intentioned people try so hard to undo my work. I vowed to be more careful in the future.

My last assignment at the hospital was Martha Jane Simmons. Her profile indicated that she was eighty-eight years old and suffered from several chronic disorders, mostly related to age. She was a widow. I didn't remember this then, but apparently I took her husband a few years back. I found her in bed, where she should have been at this time of night. But she wasn't asleep. Rather, she was sitting up watching television. She saw me approach and appeared startled by my presence. "Who are you?" she asked.

I gave her a quick smile in an attempt to provide reassurance. As I said before, I try to make these encounters as peaceful as possible, both for their sake and mine. "I'm here to take care of you," I replied. We're permitted to stretch the truth, if it fits the situation. In my judgment, this was one of those situations.

Her eyes narrowed behind her glasses. "No, you're not," she said in a near whisper. "You're . . . you're . . . him, aren't you?"

I got closer, close enough to touch the bed, then stopped. "I

don't know who you mean by him. I'm Greg."

She huffed. "I don't care what you call yourself. You're him, although you don't look like what I imagined."

I'd never been told that before, but I saw no point in prolonging the charade. I was still a bit shaken by the last encounter and wanted to get this one over with as quickly as possible so I could get a little R and R—and certainly before the nurse or someone else came into the room. "Who were you expecting? Robert Redford?" Given her age, I naturally assumed she had seen the *Nothing in the Dark* episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Mr. Sentry had probably made us watch that particular episode a dozen times. We always shared a good laugh, as none of us comes close to looking like a young Robert Redford.

She actually laughed at that. "Maybe," she said. She looked at me, then up at the ceiling. "He is a good-looking man, even at his age now. But that's not what I imagined."

I had a sudden vision of what she was thinking. "I know, you thought I would come as a grim-looking man with a white face dressed in black carrying a large scythe . . . right?"

She laughed again. "Something like that."

I had a vision of another movie Mr. Sentry made us watch, *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*, with William Sadler playing the Grim Reaper. We shared a good laugh at that depiction—the common stereotype—as well, although I have to admit the image is pretty scary in its own way. "Sorry to disappoint you," I said.

Her expression became very serious and several tears leaked from her eyes. "Does it have to be now? What if I'm not ready?"

I should have just reached over and touched her right then, gotten it over with. That's what Rupert would have done; Madeline and Bob too probably. I was tired and ready to move on, to leave this crazy hospital behind.

But there was something about the way she looked at me, something about the profoundly sad expression on her face, a face that was scarred with age and disease, but in its own way reflected the young and robust woman she had once been. "Martha, why aren't you ready? Your husband is gone; most of your friends are gone; you're living with pain and

discomfort that will only get worse.”

She shrugged. “I know,” she said. “But . . . I feel like I need more time.”

“Time for what?” I shouldn’t have asked the question, but I really was curious.

She seemed to consider it for a moment. “I don’t know,” she said. “I just don’t think I’ve done everything I want to do.”

“Nobody ever does.”

She shook her head. “Please, Greg. More time.”

I gave her a hard look. “Extended time isn’t free, you know. You have to pay for it.”

“How?”

A simple yet surprisingly good question. “I don’t actually know,” I said. And that was true. I really didn’t know how she would have to pay. I only knew how I paid. Maybe she would fare better in the overall scheme of things. And then again, maybe she wouldn’t.

She sat up straighter in the bed, probably as straight as her age and infirmity would allow. She looked at me and took a deep breath. “Death, be not proud.”

I froze. The poem by John Donne has always been one of my favorites. Madeline prefers Emily Dickinson: “Because I could not stop for death . . .” (although she always replaces he with she. “Why discriminate?” she says). I may have smiled at Martha, I’m not sure. “‘Though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, thou are not so . . .’” No, I have never thought of myself as mighty and dreadful, just a simple agent trying to do a job that isn’t always easy or pleasant—or appreciated.

She returned my smile with one full of hope. “What happens if you don’t take me?”

Once again, I didn’t know the answer to that question. In fact, I didn’t—and still don’t—know how the process actually works. All I do know is that someone somewhere decides who we are to take then gives the names to our supervisors, who pass the names and profiles on to us.

Suddenly, at that moment, it struck me how much I didn’t know. And just maybe that’s how the universe truly operates. Like a big impersonal machine—everyone doing their job as if they were on an assembly line, with no-one giving much thought to what anybody else is doing or why. So, if an

individual—such as me—were to deliberately defy the system, would the whole system come crashing down? And what would be the consequences of bringing down the system?

For the longest of moments, I remained where I was, gripped with indecision and doubt. I could complete my assignment and move on or I could turn around, slink away, and see what happens. Perhaps nothing at all would happen. Perhaps someone else would get the assignment I failed to complete—and probably wouldn't hesitate. Or perhaps the universe would simply stop functioning the way it always has, leading to total chaos.

For an instant, I thought about John's wife, whose time had not yet come but I took her anyway because she asked me to. I thought about Marnie and how close she came before I walked away. I thought about all the people who go without our help, the result of war or murder or suicide or just plain bad luck and stupidity.

And that's why I need a long vacation, or better yet, a reassignment to a completely different job. When agents start to ask the questions I was asking, they begin to lose their effectiveness. In the end, it's the organization that matters, not the individual, never the individual.

I gave Martha another long look, then shook my head. "I'm sorry," I said. I reached over and touched the side of her face.

Contributor Notes

K. Ralph Bray is a former teacher and lapsed economist living in Toronto. His work is found online and in print, including *The Healing Muse*, *Sixfold*, *Grain*, *Apple Valley Review*, and the *Globe and Mail*. He's writing a novel that owes much to Bel Kaufman's "Up the Down Staircase" ("the book that got teaching right" according to *The New York Times*).



Natalie Shaw Evjen has a predilection toward things that make her cry, which she blames on her Enneagram number. (She's a hard Four.) Her work has been featured in *Touchstones*, *Dialogue*, and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *Brilliant Flash Fiction*. A Utah native, she currently lives with her husband and two kids in Lincoln, Nebraska where she writes, teaches, and cheers for the Huskers.



William French I am a retired health care professional and professor emeritus. I have a MA in linguistics and studied fiction and poetry at Ohio State. I have multiple publications in several different genres and am the author of three books, including *Breath of Life: Poems and Stories from the Front Lines of Health Care*.



Joanna Galbraith grew up in Brisbane, Australia, where she studied Arts/Law at the University of Queensland. She currently lives in Tuscany, Italy, where she teaches English while simultaneously butchering the beautiful Italian language one phrase at a time. Her work has appeared in journals, magazines and podcasts including the highly acclaimed Clockwork Phoenix series. She is an avid traveller and always runs her work past the editorial eye of her cat, Pirate.



Camille Louise Goering is a public school English teacher and writer in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, Louisiana. Originally from New York City, she graduated from Pomona College and obtained a Master's Degree in Secondary Education from Johns Hopkins University. She now lives in the Tremé with her two black cats and a python named Abraxas. Camille's work has appeared in various publications, such as *Big Easy Magazine*, *Decaf*, and *Strange Horizons*. More of her work is available at MilktoGin.com.



J.R.P. is a graduate from Colorado State University with a degree in English. Her writing focuses on expressions of human emotion through images of nature. Her work in *Sixfold* is her first published fiction.



Kent Nelson lives in Ouray, Colorado. He has identified 767 species of birds in North America and has run the Pikes Peak Marathon twice. His story collection, *The Spirit Bird*, won the Drue Heinz Literature Prize.



Emily Rinkema lives and writes in Vermont. Her work has appeared in *Syntax*, *Phoebe*, *The Newer York*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and twice in *The Sun Magazine*. She has won the Sixfold Fiction contest once before, and her winning story was in the *Best American Nonrequired Reading 2019*. When not working, she can be found on the patio with her favorite human, Bill, her dogs, Frankie and Chet, and Jack Reacher the cat. IG and Twitter @emilyrinkema.



David Simpson is a can't-wait-to-retire attorney, mediator, law school professor and sometimes writer. He's married with three grown children, one grandchild, lives in California and enjoys poker, NASCAR and cheering or bemoaning the fortunes of UCLA basketball. He's the author of the not-yet-published "Detecting Lies In Legal Proceedings," and is working to complete his first novel.



Ronita Sinha resides in Toronto, Canada. This is the second time Ronita has been shortlisted by *Sixfold*. She was a finalist for *Globe Soup's* annual short story content in 2021. Her work has appeared in *East of the Web*, *Globe Soup*, *the other side of hope*, as well as others. In August 2020, she was awarded "Storyteller of the Month" by *The Magic Diary*. Ronita is a fiction reader for Atticus Review.

