SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2023

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FICTION SUMMER 2023
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B. Rosenberg

My Red Hot Cape Cod Summer

The traffic clears just after we cross the Bourne Bridge, so dad accelerates the car, and mom slides down her windows and shouts, “We’re heeeere.” My spell checker just red-lined “heeeere” because I put four “e”s between the “h” and the “r”, which is not the correct spelling of the adverb “here.” However, mom pronounced the word with a lot of extra “e”s. My account of this summer must be accurate, but my spelling must also be accurate. So many conflicts.

Back home, we read a novel in Ms. Walker’s English class that contained multiple logical lapses. Ms. Walker explained that the narrator was “unreliable.” That made no sense to me. Why would anyone want an unreliable anything? I must record my red hot Cape Cod summer honestly and accurately.

Dad is determined to travel from our home in Acadia, Ohio to Cape Cod without stopping at “a God-damned motel,” but mom got home late from her job yesterday, so dad had to pull into a Holiday Inn Express a little outside of Albany at 10:45 because “those bastards charge you extra if you check in after 11:00.” I sleep in the same bed as dad, while mom is all alone in her bed.

At 5:00 the next morning, dad shouts at us all to get out of bed and “hit the road,” which is an idiom. While he was in the bathroom, I took the bible from the desk drawer and slid it inside my astronomy book. Stealing would ordinarily be extremely unethical, but a note on the bible urged visitors to “Take it home.” Clear-cut—not a paradox.

At home, I am allowed to look at porn, and have looked at so much of it that it now strikes me as colossally boring. I am also permitted to drink alcohol within the house, but it tastes terrible. I am permitted marijuana within the house, but it scares me, so I only ever ate one gummy bear. I am not permitted religion at my house or elsewhere because it is “a God-damned cosmic con job,” according to dad. The phrase “Don’t bring God into our house” is crocheted on a throw pillow on our sofa.

As we cross the Massachusetts/New York frontier, I start to read the bible, hoping to find some clarity about various ethical dilemmas, but I am bored and confused by Mile Marker 6, so I leave it in the men's room at the next rest stop.

We get to Uncle Dave's house at approximately 10:57 that morning, the tires crackling against the pebbles in the driveway. "If Dave is so God-damned rich," Dad fumes, yanking off his seatbelt, "how come he can't afford asphalt?"

Uncle Dave runs an HVAC business in Philadelphia. People like to feel warm when it is cold outside, and cold when it is warm outside, so Uncle Dave is rich. Dad is a history teacher at Acadia Middle School. People do not like dates and facts, so Dad is not rich.

Aunt Delilah walks out to our car and says, "You're here," with one "e" between the "h" and the "r." She smiles at me and gives me a hug.

"C'mon," Mark, my cousin, says. "Let's pick bunks. I want the top." We go to our room in the "unfinished" part of the house. He watches as I stack my books in alphabetical order by author at the foot of the lower bunk.

"Don't worry. I'd never touch your books," Mark says.

Mark is eleven and three quarters and I am fifteen and an eighth. Mark is my best friend.

"Wanna play ping-pong?" he asks. There's a table approximately six feet from our bunk bed.

I have not played since last summer. I don't have anyone to play with in Acadia.

We grab paddles. Mark's grown a few inches since last summer. His serve is much better than last year, but fifteen and an eighth will always beat eleven and three quarters. It's testosterone. Also, I'm big. Plus, I've got superior hand-eye coordination.

Mark is a good loser, but he is not a loser. He's tall for his age and is a good athlete like his father, Uncle Dave, who played tight end at Boston College and, according to my mom, "was friends with all of the Fluties." (I Googled "friends with all of the Fluties" but did not get a satisfying answer.)

Anyway, my mom explained that Mark doesn't mind losing to me because he admires me, which confused me tremendously.

We play for one hour and forty-eight minutes. Fifteen and an eighth will always beat eleven and three quarters, unless fifteen lets eleven win, which I did and it made Mark so happy that I did it again, which is when Mark told me to, "Quit it."

Is letting someone win a form of lying? This is a very complicated ethical issue. On one hand, letting Mark win was dishonest. On the other hand, it made Mark temporarily very happy. I am guessing that the bible ultimately sorts out ethical dilemmas like this one, assuming the narrator is reliable. When I find another bible, I will look up the issue of letting someone win. The bible is an old book, and old books generally have good indexes.

"Let's get something to eat," Mark says. So, we go downstairs where Uncle Dave and Dad are arguing about something, but the argument stops as soon as we walk into the room.

Aunt Delilah asks if we'd like a sandwich. This question makes me anxious. Dad is a "strict" vegetarian. Uncle Dave eats a lot of pig and cow meat. A "sandwich" could fall into the vegetarian category, the meat category, or the ambiguous fish category. I ponder the ideal sandwich—a combination that would please the greatest number of people and make everyone stop fighting.

"You know what," Aunt Delilah eventually says, "I bet we have some of that peanut butter you liked so much last year."

"Teddie Brand," I say. "It has a bear on the label and a fat to protein ratio of 2 to 1."

Aunt Delilah puts on a pair of glasses and studies the label. "Yes. That's right. Your mind is just so remarkable, Ethan. How do you remember things like that?"

I like Aunt Delilah very much. I wish she and my mom were staying on Cape Cod and my dad was going to Europe with Uncle Dave. But, Aunt Delilah and Uncle Dave are going to France tomorrow, while my family stays on Cape Cod to help take care of Mark. "The trip will be lost on Dave," my dad said during the car ride to Cape Cod. "Dave has the cultural perspective of a troglodyte. He doesn't even know how to say Hello in French." I point out that French provides multiple ways to say "Hello." For some reason, this angers dad.

The first few times I ate Teddie Brand peanut butter, I thought it tasted bland. Mark explained that Teddie

Brand doesn't add sugar. It turns out that the sugar is so overwhelming in other peanut butter brands that it masks all the other tastes. Like, in porn, if a woman is totally naked, it masks everything else. A totally naked woman could wear clown makeup on her face and you wouldn't notice. But if the primary and secondary sex parts are covered up, then you notice all sorts of things—like whether she's smiling or nice or mean or whether she'd like you or maybe kiss you. Anyway, because there's no sugar in Teddie, I began to notice the actual taste of the peanuts. Cool phenomenon, huh? Once I realized that, I could never look at naked people and peanut butter the same way.

During sandwich eating, Dad and Uncle Dave start to talk loudly to each other again. Google would be so much better if it could just explain their arguments to me.

"Let's get out of here," Mark says.

We head out the back door, the sound of the argument trailing to nothingness. It's funny, though, because we know that the argument is still going on even though the sound waves have become too diffuse to form a coherent signal.

"I hate it when they fight," Mark says.

I nod, which means that I agree with what Mark says.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Mark asks me.

"I do not," I reply, "but I would like one."

"I have one," Mark says.

This is surprising because Mark's voice hasn't started changing and his chin is still very smooth.

"Her name is Elizabeth, but I call her Liz," Mark says.

"Have you had sex with Elizabeth/Liz?" I ask.

"I don't think so," he says. "But we kissed once."

"What was it like?" I ask.

"It was the best second of my life," Mark answers.

Each day consists of 86,400 seconds. If we use first-order approximations, then that's about 6×10^5 seconds per week and about 3×10^7 seconds per year. A kiss must be truly exceptional to stand out amongst all those other seconds.

At the beach, we take off our shirts. A few people are in the water. A few are on the sand. I study the water. Waves are incredibly fascinating. I imagine the moment at which each wave was born—when flat water lifts up and gradually

transforms into a wave. The sound of the waves breaking on the sand and erupting into entropy comforts me. I fall asleep.

When I wake up, we are surrounded by four boys roughly my age.

"Hello," I say, sitting up.

"Look at the white-skinned dork," one of them says. The others laugh, and it is a strange laugh, which I cannot classify.

"Yes," I say. "I am white-skinned, like my mom. My dad's skin is darker." I did not comment on the "dork" part, which, in retrospect, probably was the more important word in their sentence.

One of the boys shoves Mark and he topples over.

"Why did you shove my best friend?" I ask, standing up very quickly.

The boy who shoved Mark shoves me, and I fall down. I am on sand, so no injury, but still an unpleasant surprise. More importantly, Mark has started to cry.

"The dork's best friend is crying," one of the other boy's says.

The shover pushes me again. Another boy has knelt down right behind my knees, so I topple over backwards. Even more unpleasant.

Back in Acadia, a boy slugged me, so I slugged him back and broke his nose. Dad was so mad at me that I was grounded for two weeks. I never go anywhere after school anyway, so not much of a punishment.

I ask Mark what I should do.

"Beat the shit out of them," he sobs.

"Are you sure?" I ask. "I don't want to break anybody's nose again."

While I'm considering the various conflicting forces, another boy—not the shover or the kneeler—punches me in the stomach. It catches me off guard and it hurts, knocking all of the rationality out of me. So I punch that boy in the stomach. He collapses to the sand and moans.

The shover comes at me again. Before his hands reach me, I grab his fingers and twist them. He yelps in pain. Then, I pick him up and hurl him away.

The kneeler stands up. Mark positions himself behind his knees.

"Oh, I get it," I say, and then give him a sharp shove. He goes flying over Mark's back. While he's down, Mark gives that boy two sharp kicks in the ribs.

A lifeguard appears. "No fighting on my beach," he says quietly. "Leave now."

"They started it," Mark yells.

"I know," the lifeguard says. "I'm just getting you away from here. They're assholes."

"Are you okay?" I ask Mark while we walk on the trail back to his parents' beach house. This is an all-purpose question Mom taught me to ask when I am unsure what to say.

Mark laughs. It is an unclassifiable laugh—not the kind of laugh when something is funny. "How did you learn to do that?" he asks.

I mainly learn things by reading. Last year, I read 259 books, including six on self-defense. Mainly though, I am much stronger than the other boys because of genetics and weightlifting.

"You threw that guy like a football," Mark says, doing that funny laugh that isn't really a laugh.

"A good football throw requires a spiral. I threw him more like I was tossing the caber," I explain, recalling a book on Scottish games that I read two years ago.

"That was the second-best second in my life," Mark says.

The next two days are rainy, so Mark and I play a lot of ping-pong. Mark gets a lot better. He wins a game.

"Did you let me win?" he asks.

I tell him that I did not, but I now understand the damage inflicted by letting Mark win a few days before. It is better to be accurate and truthful.

But yet, sometimes it is not. Mark asked me whether a pimple was forming on his cheek. Is it really better to be truthful?

Mark and I read a lot. I read three books during this period: one on astronomy, one on meteorology, and one on oceanography. The first is above average, the second is average, and the third is below average. The law of averages is confirmed, at least for N=3. Comforting.

Mark is reading a fiction book about football. I don't like

fiction because fiction is made up, but Mark likes his book, so I become curious. While Mark watches a baseball game, I sneak his book into the bathroom and read it, and it turns out to cover many ethical issues, including:

- Is it right to take steroids if that would help the team? Utilitarian and legal issues.
- What if a receiver knows that he didn't catch the ball, but the referee called it a catch? Ethical quandary.
- Should the halfback ask Isabella (who is pretty, but mean) or Mirabelle (who is not pretty, but nice) to the prom? Social problem, so indeterminate.

On the third day of rain, my mom takes me with her for a trip to "get a little fresh air," which makes no sense to me because fresh air is available nearly everywhere without getting in a polluting car. Mom explains that "fresh air" is an idiom. Oh. I am generally getting better at recognizing idioms, but sometimes they defeat me. Then Mom says, "Because you've been cooped up (idiom!) too long."

So, we go "into town, which is apparently an idiom referring to two blocks of stores, three white churches, and a tiny patch of lawn with a single bench. Mom takes us to an art gallery.

Some art galleries contain accurate pictures, which show portraits that look exactly like actual real-life people. This art gallery has pictures of boats that look nothing like actual boats.

"These pictures are examples of impressionism," my mom explains. She is an English teacher at Acadia High School, but she knows a lot of other things beyond literature and grammar. "They are the artists' impression of what something is really like."

"But these pictures aren't accurate," says another voice in the art gallery.

"Exactly," I say.

"Good art should accurately represent the subject," says the other voice, which belongs to a girl about my age. Her eyes are blue like the ocean. (Admittedly, the ocean in these paintings is pink.)

I look at her and she looks at me. That moment is intensely exciting.

Then, her mother yells at her to "move along and stop

bothering people."

"See you," the girl says, as her mother grabs her hand and yanks her out of the gallery.

The girl was fully dressed, so this was what I noticed about her:

- She is tall.
- She seems very nice.
- I can still see her smile at me when I close my eyes.
- Maybe she likes me?

I am unable to speak for the remainder of the day. It turns out that eleven can easily beat fifteen at ping-pong when fifteen is distracted.

"What are you going to do?" Mark asks me over strawberries and yogurt for breakfast. "About that girl?"

"I don't know. What should I do?" I ask Mark. "Where do I find her? What do I say to her when I find her?"

"I've seen her around before. I think she's one of the summer people, like us. Sooner or later, all the summer people go to the beach."

Mark and I go to the beach the next three days, but she doesn't show up.

"Are you sure everyone goes to the beach?" I ask.

"Yes," Mark says.

The fourth day is drizzly. Mark stays at home to read my astronomy book. He has developed an interest in the planets. I go to the beach by myself. I don't mind the rain. Lying in the rain is like swimming for people who don't swim. I fall asleep, thinking of her. When I blink my eyes open, she is there.

"I come to the beach on rainy days," she tells me.

I nod. "Fewer people."

"Exactly," she agrees.

"Are we dating?" I ask.

"Yes," she says.

This is the best second of my life!

"Let's walk by the water for our first date," she says.

We exchange names. Her name is Esmeralda. My name is Ethan.

"If we were in the same class and they seated everyone alphabetically by first name, then we'd sit next to each other," she says.

"Yes," I agree. "Very likely. Although, what if you were at the end of one row? Then, I'd be at the start of the next row, and we'd be far away from each other."

She stops walking. "You are a deep thinker, Ethan. But, if you were an even deeper thinker, you would have come to the art gallery, which is where I've been waiting for you the last three days."

Being in love has made me pretty dumb. "That makes sense," I agree.

She looks at her watch and says, "I must go. My parents are very strict. I can only be away for ninety minutes at a time."

"What happens now?" I ask.

She says, "On a first date, a couple waves goodbye to each other."

We wave. The moment is simultaneously very happy and very sad, which is a paradox. We agree to meet in front of the art gallery the next day.

When I get home, I tell Mark everything.

"I'm not certain about the waving part," he says.

In porn, love happens very quickly, often within seconds of a pizza being delivered. Still, porn is fiction, and fiction is made up. Real-life dating comprises a broad set of complicated unwritten rules.

The next day, Mark and I ride bikes to town early. I am very nervous, so I ask Mark to be "nearby, but not too nearby. And by that, I mean you should be at least 25 meters away, but no more than 50 meters away." He understands. He sits on the bench in the little town green, wedged between a church and a store, reading my astronomy book.

Esmeralda arrives. She is fully dressed and she looks very pretty and very nice.

First, we go into the used bookstore and discuss literature and comic books—two subjects she knows a lot about. Then, we go into the kite store, but neither of us know anything about kites, so we leave immediately.

"This marks the end of our second date," Esmeralda says.

But I want to spend every second with her.

"What happens now?" I ask.

"We kiss," she says.

I am paralyzed. I cannot breathe. I cannot think.

I am frozen as she leans toward me, awaiting the best second of my life. But before our lips intersect, Mark screams my name.

The boys who attacked us at the beach are encircling Mark. Dilemma! I excuse myself from Esmeralda and run over to Mark.

"The dork is here," the leader says. He takes a knife out of his pocket and shows it to me.

"What do we do?" I ask Mark. He is crying, so I don't get an answer.

Esmeralda joins us. Now there are three of us. We are like The Avengers!

"What is going on?" she asks. "I'm confused."

"Revenge," says the leader.

"For what?" Esmeralda asks. "Revenge implies an antecedent."

The boys pause for some reason. Then, the leader shows his knife again, which scares Mark.

The old woman who owns the kite shop comes outside. She takes a puff of her cigarette and says, "Let me get this straight—are you four idiots bullying a child half your size and two clearly autistic teenagers? Is that what's going on? Because if it is, then you four are an embarrassment to bullies everywhere."

A siren blares. Two police officers appear. The kite shop owner summarizes the kerfuffle and notes that one of the boys "brandished a knife."

The police separate all of us and ask us many questions. I give a faithful account. Parents are called. My dad shouts a lot.

As punishment for punching a boy, throwing another boy, tripping a third boy at the beach, and for not telling my parents about it, Mark and I must stay on the grounds of the house for the remainder of the trip. We protest, but my father denies our appeals.

I finish reading my eighteen remaining books too quickly. Mark and I play so much ping-pong that it gets colossally boring, like too much porn.

I am miserable. I was so close to the best second of my life. Each day, I text Esmeralda, but she doesn't text me back.

"Is she angry with me?" I ask Mark.

He doesn't know. Dating is very confusing.

Uncle Dave and Aunt Delilah eventually return from their trip to France. Uncle Dave has not learned how to say any of the forms of "Hello" in French, but he has learned how to say C'est combien, which means How much is this?

Mark is glad to see his parents, but he is sad that I am leaving tomorrow. I am very sad to leave Mark, but I am much sadder that I won't get to see Esmeralda again.

After packing up, I sit on the front porch and read Uncle Dave's suspense novel, which he planned to read on the plane ride home but fell asleep while the plane was still taxiing. It is about a spy who goes to Russia and pretends to be Russian in order to infiltrate the KGB. It is colossally boring, so I fall asleep.

When I wake up, I am not alone.

"Hello, Ethan," Esmeralda says.

"I texted you," I say.

"My mother took away my phone as punishment for lying to her," Esmeralda says.

"Lying?" I ask.

"I didn't tell her about you, and she considers that lying," Esmeralda says.

"Is omission really lying?" I ask.

"It is not," she says.

I think that a case could be made for either position, but I say, "Exactly!" because I have learned a lot this summer.

Esmeralda says, "I've been riding my bike on every street in this town in ninety minute increments, searching for you. I've passed by your street three times during the last two weeks until I saw you sleeping just now."

"I was grounded," I explain.

"Yes, I heard your father shout that at you," she says.

"Yes. He does that a lot," I say.

She looks at her watch. "I need to return home," she says, putting her bike helmet on. "Good bye, Ethan."

She pedals away and I realize that I'll never see her again. This is the saddest thought of all time.

Suddenly, she squeezes her brakes, throws her bike to the ground, and runs back to the front porch, where she gives me the best second of my life.

John Mort

Heart and Soul

Ray Showalter drove across the causeway at forty-eight miles per hour, the optimum speed for gas mileage with his old camper. Most cars were headed east toward Tampa and the Interstate north, but Ray avoided the Interstates even in normal times. The camper, a cab over style, grew unwieldy in cross winds, and he had to push his engine too hard to stay with traffic. Ray was sensitive to the limits of machinery.

Once across the causeway, he'd thread his way up through Safety Harbor and Dunedin on city streets. Not much danger when you got north of Weeki Wachee Springs, the radio said. He'd make the Panhandle tomorrow, Arkansas the next day, and be home in Missouri the day after that.

He was cutting it close. The storm had sucked all the water from the bay but several hours might pass before the surge back in. Maybe the surge wouldn't amount to much; maybe it would. The wind, hitting seventy in gusts, had dropped off, and the sun shone through sheets of rain as they danced across the bay. The effect was eerie, even ethereal, but Ray thought about all the fish flopping in the mud. He used to smoke mullet on the weekends with hickory pellets. Sometimes, he smoked so many fish he sold them at the Oldsmar Flea Market.

A lot of people weren't even leaving, but Ray had told his boss, Francisco Urias, that he'd stay two years, and the big storm marked two years and a month. He couldn't ride out a hurricane in his camper, not so near the water where the job was. And he was thirty-five now. High time to get on with his dreams.

Francisco gave him a box of cigars. His mother worked in Ybor City at a tiny cigar factory. "You'll come back, my friend."

Ray nodded. He didn't think so, but never say never. He'd been a of jack-of-all-trades for Francisco, working with Venezuelans who came cheap, probably off the books but Ray didn't ask. They rehabbed drug houses and sometimes built new ones if Francisco found an unclaimed piece of

sand. Francisco allowed him to stay in his camper, Old Blue everyone called it, on the job sites. That meant Ray saved almost everything he earned.

With the shore in sight, Ray spotted a junky little Hyundai with the hood up. A woman looked toward his camper and Ray slowed to twenty-five. She wore shorts and a halter top, a pretty standard uniform for the Gulf Coast, but so much female skin always made Ray nervous. He knew it was rude to stare, but then he'd make a production of not staring. Other than his mother and sister, there had been no woman in his life for ten years and more. Still, if the woman was in trouble, and no better hero was available, he had to try.

Might be a dead battery, he thought, and made a slow U-turn, so that when he drove up the shoulder to the Hyundai, jumper cables would reach. He stepped out just as the wind began to roar again, crashing through the willows and bending the palms in the little inlets along the causeway. The woman motioned frantically and shouted something he couldn't make out. Ray held onto his Cardinals cap and shouted back: "Battery? You think it's the battery?"

"I gotta get outta here!"

Her eyes were brown but their true color was fear. "We'll get you out, ma'am," he shouted, as his cap flew away. "Gonna be all right!.You wanna crank her?"

The woman shook her head violently."What?"

His language. Happened all the time in Florida. His father always spoke of cranking an engine, dating from his youth when he started old tractors with a hand crank. "Try to start her, ma'am."

The woman said something he couldn't understand through her snarl of wet hair. But her head bobbed, she slid under the wheel, and even in the roaring wind he could hear the starter engage and whir. He raised a hand to stop the woman, who nodded, yanked back her hair, and got out by the fender. "It just stopped," she shouted. "It just stopped."

He dropped to the oyster shell shoulder and quickly saw what had happened. He stood again and pointed toward his camper. "Get your stuff. C'mon!"

She had two bags of groceries, which he grabbed and stuffed into the camper. She pulled an envelope from the

glove compartment, slung her purse strap over one shoulder, and tried to run, but the wind blew too strongly and she nearly fell. He couldn't stand, either. They hung onto each other, bent low, and made their way up the leeward side of the camper. The woman slid rather gracefully around the gear shift. He threw her a shop rag from behind his seat and she dabbed at her face. She pulled back her wet hair into a red elastic tie and said, "I'm Abby Durant."

"Ray Showalter, ma'am," he shouted. "Pleased to meet ya." He turned the ignition key and heard a faint clanging of metal on metal: he'd never shut off the engine. No one could have heard the engine over the storm noise but he cursed his mistake. Very hard on the starter.

The camper rocked violently in the wind as he turned onto the highway. Even with the heavy load, the driver's side felt more buoyant, as if it could tip at any moment. The rain pounded harder and he flipped the wipers to their highest speed. The speedometer said he was driving at fifteen but the camper seemed motionless, and he could hardly see. When the tires slipped onto the shoulder, he pulled left. Abby leaned forward, wiping the windshield with the shop rag. It helped a little.

At last he sensed they'd reached the shore. Trees whipped back and forth, branches and palmetto fronds skittered across the highway, but the the wind seemed less formidable.

"What's wrong with my car, Ray?" Abby shouted.

"Big gash in the oil pan. How far you drive it that way?"

"From Tampa. I heard a thump and a bunch of lights came on but I thought, I can't get stranded out here on the causeway."

"I imagine you ruint your engine. "

"I need that car." She shook her head as if she didn't believe him. "I commute to Tampa, see, and there's just no way—"

"Yeah." He was sorry for the woman. It wasn't much of a car but probably all she could afford. "Where ya live?"

"Largo. You'd turn south on Lincoln, but you don't have to—"

She stopped. It seemed to Ray that he did have to; he couldn't let her out in the middle of a hurricane. He was pleased with himself for picking her up but wished he didn't

have her on his hands. He shouldn't have started home so late. He'd allowed no time for a diversion. "About ten miles?" he asked.

She nodded and settled back. She crossed and uncrossed her legs, leaned forward again, wiped the windshield with the shop rag. Ray reached twenty miles per hour briefly but the rain was pooling and the wind made it hard to hold the camper steady. In five miles, debris and high water blocked the highway. By a chain-link fence, he spied a van turned upside down.

"Gotta get outta this," he shouted, and now Largo seemed an impossible goal. He turned north at a stoplight that no longer worked. It swung wildly and seemed likely to break loose. He'd have to find shelter for the woman somewhere—and for himself as well. He tried to think. He might park the camper next to some sturdy building, such as a church or a bank.

Perhaps three inches of water stood on the street, churning in mad, small whirlpools around drains. He drove forward at ten miles per hour, concentrating so hard he forgot about Abby. Then he felt a warm hand on his forearm.

"Thank you," she said.

Somehow, taking streets he thought he could get through, then turning slowly around like a motor boat and trying another way, he drifted over to Cleveland Street in downtown Clearwater. Any farther west, he'd be in the Gulf.

He'd visited Clearwater once. It was too expensive for his budget and he hated to pay for parking. Today the storefronts were boarded up and there wasn't any traffic.

"Dammit!" he said. He'd been wading six inches of water, but ahead was a dip in the road he sensed would drown out the camper.

And the wind had grown even stronger. Everything that wasn't nailed down sailed out sideways. Plywood, shutters, barrels, even old tires blew from God only knew where. He spied a black Ford Ranger parked under a mammoth chinaberry tree. Water had reached the driver's door. "Why didn't he move that truck?" Ray asked. "Water gets up to the wiring harness, it never will run right."

"It's only a truck," Abby said.

Did she say that? Her words were like a thought. He stared at her and didn't know who she was, but she tried to smile, and her smile seemed familiar. He might have known her way back in high school, a pretty girl named Rita, the only one with enough patience to wait out his shyness. Moments, it seemed, after graduation, Rita fled to St. Louis.

"We can't get through!" he shouted. "We gotta hole up somewhere."

She twisted in her seat and pointed to a parking garage, nestled against a big hotel, that rose four stories. "There!"

Ray nodded and slowly backed up, then forded the dip at the entrance. The guard station had been abandoned. The camper would clear the opening by four inches but the boom barrier was down, and of course it was electronic.

"Knock it down," Abby shouted, but Ray could never be so rash. He didn't want to destroy private property. A piece of the boom might thrust through his radiator or crack his windshield. He glanced over at this refugee he'd picked up and there was an awkward moment when he tried not to stare at her breasts. He said, "You cold?"

She shook her head as if to say, what a stupid question. "I'm *freezing*."

"Hold your horses." He'd bought a new pair of shoes at the Oldsmar Flea Market, leather shoes to celebrate his return to Missouri, rather than the Walmart crap he usually wore. He didn't want his shoes to get wet, so he took them off before wading back to the camper's door. He found sweatpants and a flannel shirt—and two half-inch box end wrenches. He rapped on Abby's window and handed in the clothing, then waded over to the boom barrier. It was old like the garage, or might not have been so easily dismantled, but he finished in minutes. He leaned the barrier against the guard station window and waded back to the camper, weaving in the wind like a drunk, catching Abby's eyes through the windshield the defroster had finally cleared. Something new had taken over those brown eyes, replacing fear. Ray couldn't fathom it.

In the old clothing, Abby reminded Ray of his sister in Missouri. Then he remembered: the shirt *was* his sister's.

"Let's go," Abby said. "Go!"

Each floor was supported by square concrete pillars, and there were half-walls all around, like parapets. A few cars, standing in two inches of water, were parked on the first floor; the second was free of cars, but streams of water poured down through the ceiling. Twisting up the ramps, the wind hit them on the east side—not with its full force but at a shear. The old camper crawled up the slopes in first until, on the last ramp, a clump of battered steel sheeting blocked their way. Ray's door, on the leeward side, opened easily.

The metal looked like a bent-up, galvanized hog feeder, which made no sense in Clearwater, Florida. It sat vibrating, as if a new gust would grab it, but it was too heavy to lift. Ray dragged it to the parapet and slowly edged it up, tipping it, waiting for the wind to grab it. He could feel the trembling power of the storm and thought this might describe hell: a brutal force you couldn't fight. At last, the wind tore away the hog feeder, but as he leaped back a shard of steel slashed from his elbow to his wrist. He heard Abby screaming. He hurried back to the cab and didn't look at her. She reached out with the shop rag but he shook her off.

Now his camper stalled against the shear and he backed slowly down the ramp to the second floor for a new start. He shifted to first again and goosed the camper up this last, curving slope. Free from the shear, they vaulted forward, and Ray drove toward the center, parking near a post. They were out of the storm. They were safe.

"You got any alcohol, Ray?"

"Under the tray in the tool box."

He did not like to admit that he bought the occasional bottle of whiskey. Sometimes, his drinking was more than occasional, and he fought it, but he was a lonely man. He was skilled at filling loneliness with work, but could sink into depression if he wasn't careful.

The cut still bled. Abby didn't say anything as she dabbed at it with her shirt-tail soaked in whiskey. She wrapped the cut with a white tee shirt, tying her bandage with cotton strips, rolling painter's tape around for good measure. She was wonderfully tender. He thought of his mother when he was a child.

"They allus do that in Westerns," Ray said. Deep inside the garage, the storm's roar had muted somewhat, and he didn't shout so loudly. "Some guy gets shot, they pour whiskey on the wound."

"You could have been badly hurt, Ray."

"You did a real professional job on that bandage. You must be a nurse or somethin'."

She laughed. "I'm an accountant for a big plumbing supply. Half-time for now. Just got my A.A. degree."

"Alcoholics Anoymous?"

She slapped his upper arm, startling him, but he'd made her smile. "No! Associate . . . Something; I don't know. Two-year degree, but I'll keep going."

Mostly, what Ray had packed in his camper were boxes of tools he'd bought at the Oldsmar Flea Market: Chinese hammers, screwdrivers, drill bits, circular saws, bolts in several sizes, plastic cartons of drywall screws. But he also had two collapsible chairs, a charcoal grill, and some food—canned soup and beans, a little coffee. Abby's sacks of groceries yielded sausages, bread, a head of lettuce, and mustard. It was cold on the third floor. Abby wrapped herself in an afghan Ray's mother made, and he unfolded a crinkly space blanket. They wolfed the sausages and beans and crowded near the grill like old friends, which maybe they were by now.

"We have water?" Abby asked.

"Four more bottles."

"We could catch some rain."

The radio brought in nothing but static and Abby's phone didn't work. She said, "Try yours."

"Don't have one."

She looked incredulous. "You don't have a *phone?"*

"Too expensive. I been savin' evry dime. I even pick up aluminum cans."

She frowned. "Is that worth doing?"

"Naw," he allowed. "Gives me somethin' to do on Sundays. It's like you're pickin' up pennies."

Her frown changed to a dubious smile. "What about a social life?"

"Not so much," he said.

He knew everyone was supposed to have a social life. Back in Red Buck, he sometimes thought his sister's sole purpose in life was to set him up with her pals. His mom's married friends were even more insistent, inviting him to dinner, to church socials, to softball games, and old car shows. At thirty-five, still single, Ray was an affront to the institution of marriage. He'd break up some unhappy home.

However, Red Buck's pool of available women was vanishingly small. The best of the bunch were school teachers, but they were too smart and reflined for rough old Ray. That's what he thought. His sister said just having a steady job, and no criminal record, was qualification enough in the potential husband department. The pool of available men was also vanishingly small.

"Girlfriend? *Lots* of girlfriends."

"Naw—"

She laughed. "They're too expensive."

He squirmed in the camp chair, then looked at her. Her eyes were full of mischief but also kindness. He could talk to her. "I'm on a mission," he said.

"You're a missionary, Ray?"

They both laughed. They sat in their camp chairs knee to knee, and held their faces a few inches apart so they could hear each other over the roaring wind."I had this idea," he said.

"I've got an idea, too. Let's get drunk."

She mixed the whiskey with bottled water in two paper cups, and dribbled in more whiskey as he talked. He told her about the big hardware chain that had stores all around the Ozarks. In the larger cities they had competition, but in little places such as Red Buck they could raise their prices. Everyone hated the chain, but farmers and carpenters and electricians bought from them rather than drive seventy-five miles to Springfield or Lebanon. The chain closed down anyhow. Red Buck was too small. It was the county seat but the town was dying.

Then the Dollar Store moved to a new location, and their old building went up for sale. "It's like the onliest idea for makin' money I ever had. I allus could fix things, see? So I know parts. I know all the procedures. I said to myself, there's

a cryin' need for a hardware in this town, and that buildin' is where it goes. I borrowed some money on the farm—"

She reached across the little space between them and gently touched his bandaged arm. "How's that feel now? Does it hurt?"

"Naw," he said.

"Good. You own a farm, Ray?"

Disconcerting, how she took him off the subject as if what he said was unimportant, then came right back. He was reminded again of his mother. "We don't hardly farm it; it's too hot and dry no more. Anyhow, I bought the store but I didn't have enough money left to stock it. We stuck my sister in there—"

She leaned forward under the afghan and poured another splash of whiskey. "What's her name?"

"Barbara. Barb's just holdin' down the fort, sells potata chips and cigarettes and fish bait. I sent her five hunert to stock some paint and caulkin' and like that."

"You know what you need?"

"What do I need, Abby?" It seemed bold to say her name.

"An accountant. You'll have employees, and taxes to pay, and what about inventory? There are a lot of good programs. Sell something, it pops right up, so you know what to replace."

He nodded. "I guess I hadn't thought that far ahead."

"Well, you need to. My God." She seemed indignant, but then she said, "It's a *good* idea."

"You think so?"

"Lots of hard work, but yes. Don't you love hard work, Ray?"

It was a strange remark and he looked at her in wonder. "I guess I do."

He felt fine. Maybe it was the whiskey and maybe it was looking at Abby. "You're a real pretty lady," he said, and she looked away, with an expression that seemed pleased and annoyed at once. She pulled aside the afghan and stuck her feet into Ray's old moccasins. She filled their drinks again and handed him his, leaving one more round. "It's almost dark. Let's walk around some."

Rain blew in from the south side of the garage, so violently they couldn't stand near. On the western side, sheltered by the big hotel, the air felt supercharged. Shallow streams ran

over the floor but they could look out onto Cleveland Street. Far on the horizon, they could see the setting sun, half of a streaked red ball. The big wind blew so steadily the bent-over palms seemed motionless. Then the chinaberry tree fell, its massive trunk mashing down the Ford Ranger's cab.

"Lord Almighty," Ray said, stepping back.

"Your pretty little truck," Abby said, and turned up her shining face. Not stopping to think, he kissed her.

She didn't seem to mind and they staggered back toward their chairs, bumping into each other. She opened the door to the camper. "Don't know about you, but I'm exhausted. Can I lie down in your, what do you call it, your living room?"

"You'll be comfy in there," he said. "I'll sleep in the cab."

She crawled up on the mattress. It lay atop boxes of tools, and boxes rose to either side of it. There were several pillows. She lay back, pulling in the afghan. "Good night, Ray," she said, laughing.

He wanted to say something more, I'm glad you didn't get blown away or what's so funny, but he couldn't form a sentence. He bowed his head and walked to the cab. He took off his shoes and wet socks, placed them on the hood, and then tried to coil himself around the gear shift and tuck in the space blanket. Bucket seats were no good for stretching out and the gear shift made things still more uncomfortable, but he was worn-out and fell immediately asleep.

In the deep darkness of the garage, he dreamed he was driving through the storm again. He tried street after street and this time there was no way through. He woke in a sweat and didn't know where he was.

Abby rapped on the window. He opened the door and slowly extricated himself from the gear shift. He reached into the glove compartment for a flashlight.

"I'm cold," Abby said. "Do you have any more blankets?"

"I'm sorry," he said, and finally struggled to his feet. "I shoulda thought a that."

He crawled up on the mattress. He had several worn-out cotton blankets, one wool army blanket, in a box under a box. He pulled them out and turned slowly around. Abby had slid in behind him.

"You can't sleep up there," she said. "Giving up your bed?

It's too much. *I* should go up front."

"Well," he said.

"It's just us in the hurricane, Ray. We'll never be here again."

He kissed her at an awkward angle and they bumped about on the little mattress, hitting each other with elbows and knees until they lay side by side, face to face. He nestled his head between her breasts and she pulled up the blankets. She shone the flashlight between them and giggled. He'd had one good idea in his life. Or was it two?

They were bashful in the morning, elaborately courteous. They'd eaten all the food except for half a loaf of bread and one sausage And the head of lettuce, which Abby munched on as if it were an apple. They made coffee, toasted the bread, and shared the sausage. Abby looked at his cut again. It felt sore but had clotted nicely.

Drinking coffee, holding hands, drifting apart and rushing together for a kiss, they drifted to the parapet overlooking Cleveland Street.

Ray was drunk with love. "Marry me."

"Oh, my God!" she said, and pulled apart from him. "Don't say *that.*"

She was right. Love never lasted, because it was delusion in the first place. Even if love were possible, he wasn't much of a lover. And he'd used up his courtship skills, if you could call them that, with "Marry me."

"I *was* married," she said, with a reproving glance. "No, thank you, Mister! Never again."

"Okay!" he said, almost angry, wholly confused. They'd had sex because people went crazy when they thought the world was ending. It was fear, it was lust, but not love. What did he know about love? That old black cloak of depression rose up from the second floor, seeking him out, but he wouldn't let it overtake him. Depression was no fun. It felt righteous for an instant but became an evil Jesus.

Abby got on her phone like every modern person, and this time it worked. He walked along the parapet as if he had something to do. A city maintenance truck came down Cleveland, and men in wading boots picked up brush, plastic

garbage cans, busted furniture. The wind was gusty but much less strong, and the palms stood erect. The air smelled of salt again—and also of sewage. Still, the world was a beautiful place. Sunlight shone through the light rain with the same mellow, eerie light he'd seen over the bay.

In the apartment building across the street, a man tied a crudely-lettered, cardboard banner to the railing of his balcony, with arrows pointing three floors below to what had been, what again would be, a nightclub. The sign read, "Orquesta Luna. Tonite." On his saxophone, the man played, "Heart and Soul" over and over. He nodded to Abby and Ray and put everything he had into the song, dancing forward and back, lifting the instument, bending out over the railing. He'd survived the hurricane. He wanted to tell the world that he had a heart, he had a soul, and life went on.

Abby took Ray's hand. They clung together and waltzed to the music. Ray wanted to make love to her again.

"Madly," Abby sang, laying her head on his shoulder. Her moccasins made a shuffling sound on the concrete.

"Like a fool would do," Ray said. "Listen to me, Abby. I'm not a fool."

"No," she said. "You're a very nice man."

By noon, the streets were passable again. Ray figured he could make two hundred miles before nightfall.

He offered to drive back to the causeway but Abby found a junkyard in Tampa that would haul away the Hyundai, no cost. Assuming it was still there.

"It's worth a coupla hunert for parts. Somebody'd have to tow it, a course."

She nodded. "It's all right, Ray. I'll find another car."

Ray drove her the ten miles south to her place in Largo. She seemed cheerful and he smiled and nodded but had little to say. He wished he'd met her when he first came to Florida, but figured he'd have messed things up. It took a hurricane for Ray Showalter to find a woman.

She lived in her Aunt Lena's garage apartment, built onto a cement block house dating from the 1950s, painted a pale blue like Ray's camper. "It's nice, it's really nice, but I wish I owned a house."

"Too expensive," Ray said.

She nodded gloomily. "Half a degree, half a job. I'll get there!"

"Of course, you will."

In her driveway, he shifted to neutral, but kept the engine running. He met her bright eyes and looked away again."Well," he said.

She tapped him on the shoulder with her fist. She did that a lot. "Wait a minute, Ray, please. What is it you say, hold your horses? Keep your powder dry?"

She might have a going-away present. Could be they'd e-mail each other, even call once in a while if he got a phone. He looked at her gratefully and cut the engine. No sense burning gas if you weren't going anywhere.

She leaped from the camper and ran toward her apartment, energetic as a grade school girl. It invigorated him to watch her but then there was nothing to do but sit. Two stubby pin oaks stood in her aunt's front yard and a bluejay hopped from limb to limb, scolding him. "Where'd you go in the storm?" Ray asked.

Ten minutes passed. He got out of the camper and pulled Spanish moss from the pin oaks, stuffing it into plastic bags.

"What you want with that stuff?" The woman might have been sixty. She had long, gray hair combed out straight. She stared suspiciously.

"Makes real good mulch. You don't care, do you, ma'am?'

"Good Lord, no. It's a parasite."

"Yeah." Ray nodded. "They say it just grows in the air, don't really hurt the tree."

The woman extended a hand. "I'm Lena."

"Ray Showalter. Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am."

Lena smiled. "I wanted to thank you for how you helped Abby."

"Well," Ray said. "Situation like that, anybody woulda stopped."

"Not so sure about that. Can I look at your arm?"

Abby appeared, pulling along two suitcases. "Aunt Lena's a nurse, Ray."

Lena took off the bandage. The cut hurt a little but Lena

had a gentle touch. She rubbed Vaseline along Ray's forearm, then dropped the tube into his shirt pocket. "It's fine. Doesn't need stitches, the way it's healing. Probably won't even leave a scar."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," Ray said, but all he could think about was those suitcases. Abby and Lena each appeared again, Abby with a closed box that seemed heavy, perhaps full of books, and Lena with an open box, shoes spilling out of it. Abby climbed into the cab and he stared at her, dumbfounded but happy. Ray had little experience with happiness and wondered how long it lasted.

"Well," he said. "What about—?" But he didn't finish. His mother's ironic phrase, *will wonders never cease,* flashed in his brain like a neon sign.

"Here." Abby handed him her phone. "Until you get your own, you can use mine."

"Who am I sposed to call?"

"Your sister. Your mom. You could do it tonight but why not now at 1:52 p.m.? Right here at Ridge and 82nd, in Largo, Florida?"

He laughed. It might not even last all the way to Missouri, but Abby was a great adventure."What do I tell 'em?"

"You say, 'Get ready, people. I found myself an accountant.'"

Zoe Leonard

No Way Out But Down

How are you supposed to act when your plane is going down? Most people around me are screaming, so I'm considering it. It's hard not to scream—that is, if you're a natural screamer. It's a gut reaction to terror, and cathartic. Like how you throw up after eating spoiled food—your body has to expel the poison. I'm not judging anyone for screaming, because like I said, it's instinct, but it's certainly not reassuring to those around you who *aren't* screaming. Like when I was six, in the back of my mom's Volkswagen, and a pickup truck was speeding towards us down the wrong side of the road. My mom screamed because she could do nothing else—didn't have time to react or get out of the way, or, even if she did, she couldn't. Fear locks you up. I was locked up, too, and that's why I wasn't screaming.

That's why I'm not screaming now. We're not in a freefall—at least, there seems to be some semblance of control to this descent. After we heard the explosion, the pilot said something over the speakers, but I could barely hear over the sound of screaming. Her voice sounded reassuring, like she had things under control, but the oxygen masks just dropped, which is giving me this seizing dread feeling I associate with hearing a graveyard bell toll at midnight. I might actually die on this plane. I probably will die on this plane. No, but the angle is stable—what did the pilot say? That we might be able to land? But if the engine exploded, doesn't that mean we're dead? I don't want to think about it. If all of time exists at once, there's a version of me in a place better than this, where I'm less scared. I don't want to keep thinking about being scared. Hearing my mom scream that day of the car accident made me the most scared I've ever been in my life, maybe even more than now. At least all these people screaming are strangers.

I feel bad for any children on this plane. I hope there are none—I don't remember seeing any when I boarded, but if there are, they're probably looking at their parents for

guidance. Maybe it's worse for the parents, who probably can't hold it together themselves. It's difficult to pretend everything's okay when people are screaming. But I've seen parents do some amazing things for their kids.

After the accident, my dad walked out of the hospital room smiling. I smiled too. He picked me up.

"It's going to be alright, honey," he said. I didn't know what he knew.

"Is Mommy okay?" I put my head on his shoulder.

"The doctors are working really hard to fix her up. We just have to wait."

"Can I go see her?"

"Not yet, baby, only the doctors can go inside."

"How come you got to go in?"

"Doctors and husbands only."

He carried me downstairs to get a strawberry smoothie at the cafe inside the hospital.

"My head hurts," I said, clamping my eyes shut. "Oww!"

"You got a brain freeze, honey," my dad said. "Drink a little slower."

"Do I have to go to school tomorrow?"

My dad laughed. "You think you can get out of school for a brain freeze?"

I nodded, but the discomfort was already subsiding.

"You can't get out of school for brain freeze, but maybe I'll let you stay home anyway. You're going to stay with your grandfather tonight."

"A-gong?"

"Yes, A-gong. We'll go to his house soon."

"Why can't I go home?"

"Because nobody will be there to watch you. I have to be here, to stay with Mom."

"How come I can't stay here with you?"

"Don't you want to go stay with A-gong? He'll make you the noodles you like."

My stomach rumbled, imagining rice noodles in a shallow ceramic bowl. My A-Gong had a pair of Hello Kitty chopsticks that he would always take out for me. "But I want to see Mom."

"You'll see her soon. There's no place for you to sleep here."

"Where are you gonna sleep?"

"I'll find a place to sleep. Maybe I'll sleep in the car."

"Sitting up?"

My dad chuckled. "Yeah, sitting up. You don't want to do that, do you?"

I shook my head. "A-gong will make noodles?"

"Yes, I think he's making them right now. He knows you're coming soon."

"Okay," I said, "let's go."

Two days later my mom died. My last memory of her awake was her eyes, wide full moons in the rearview mirror, flicking back to look at me a moment before the truck made impact. When I was that little, my dad never let me see him cry. The exception was the funeral, but then, everybody was crying. It's normal to cry at a funeral, just like it's normal to scream when your plane's going down. That poison, the grief in your veins, has to come out somehow. Otherwise, you swallow it and die. I always wondered where my dad put the rest of his grief. He did a great job, by himself. I didn't really keep it together like he did. I had a tough time, and grew into a shitty teenager. When I was sixteen, I got into another car accident, riding on the passenger side while my friend was driving drunk. It was minor—neither of us were hurt. When I got home I expected my dad to yell at me, but instead, he pulled me into his arms and sobbed. That's the first time it clicked—that he needed me too. After that, I tried to do better.

But now, here, it's just me, and I'm allowed to freak out. I'm allowed to scream or cry or speak in tongues and clack together prayer beads like the man sitting next to me is. No, on second thought, I think he's speaking Spanish. It's hard to hear with the screaming and wailing and rumbling from the jets. I suppose it's good that I can still hear the jets, though I think the one on this side is on fire. I'm sitting by the window towards the back of the plane and there's smoke outside. If I crane my neck, there's the engine. And yes, it is definitely on fire. That's not comforting. I keep breathing through the mask and telling myself I'm not going to pass out. Or, maybe I want to pass out. But if I pass out I won't be able to brace for impact. I'm breathing. The mask is delivering oxygen. My chest is squeezing my heart like a fist.

"Let me out!" a woman shrieks from two rows in front of

me. “Let me out! Let me out!” She’s crawling over the people in her row to reach the aisle. I don’t know where she thinks she can go. Isn’t it safest to be sitting down? Maybe she’s claustrophobic, but then, why would she take the window seat? Well, whatever comfort she finds stumbling around the aisle, I hope it helps her. Sometimes it helps to stand up.

I got trapped in an elevator once, with four other people. This was at another hospital. The poor young girl in there with me broke down right away because she was claustrophobic. She crouched in the corner with her elbow over her eyes and started panting like she was about to hyperventilate. I wasn’t sure what to do. There were a couple of big guys in the elevator. One of them was a nurse at the hospital. He sat down with the girl and instructed her to breathe. The other guy called 911 for the fire department. I sat down on the other side of the nurse.

“Breathe with me,” said the nurse. “I don’t want you to pass out.”

She nodded, and grabbed the shirt around her chest.

“Count to three,” he said. “Inhale. One, two, three. Exhale.”

She did this for a few minutes, and her breathing slowed.

“Hey, there’s no need to freak out,” I said. “It’s not a big deal. Elevators break all the time.” I wasn’t sure if this was true. I certainly had never been stuck in one before. “What’s your name?”

She wiped her snotty nose with her sleeve. “Lily. What’s yours?”

“I’m Ciel.” I looked at the nurse.

“I’m Roger,” he said.

“Seal,” said Lily, “like the animal?”

“Kind of,” I said, “it’s spelt with a ‘C.’”

“Oh, yeah, I get it,” she said. “Not *seal* like the sea creature.”

We both laughed. She took in another shaky breath.

“Are you a college student?” I asked.

“No, high school. I’m a junior.”

“What school do you go to?”

“Mercer.”

“Oh yeah? I went there too! Does Ms. Shelby still teach English?”

Lily nodded. “Did you have her?”

"She was my favorite teacher."

"Yeah," said Lily, "she's nice."

"Fire department said they'd be here in fifteen minutes," said the other man in the elevator.

"That's not bad," I said. I turned to Lily. "See, that's not bad?"

She started blubbering again.

"What's wrong? What are you worried about?" I asked.

"I'm claustrophobic," she said, in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Oh," I said. I looked at the nurse. "She's claustrophobic."

He grimaced.

"Then it's probably not good to be sitting in a corner," said the nurse. "Why don't you stand up? Look, there's plenty of room in here." He stood up and stepped back towards the wall, and the other man did the same.

I helped Lily to her feet.

"Take deep breaths," said the nurse. "You'll be okay, we won't be in here for too much longer."

I spread my arms wide. "See how much space there is?"

"Maybe try walking around," suggested the other man.

Lily spread her arms wide and swung them in loose circles. Then, she paced a little around the elevator.

"It's not helping," she said.

"You can distract yourself," I said. "Why don't you look at your phone?"

She pulled out her phone for a minute, but stuffed it back in her pocket. "The wi-fi sucks." She smacked her back against the elevator wall and sunk to the ground again. "I'm going to be late for my appointment."

"I'm sure they'll understand," I said, and smiled. "Is it just a regular check-up?"

She shook her head. "I'm getting an ultrasound."

She must have sensed my reaction, because she followed it up quickly with, "I'm not pregnant. It's for, um, my breast." Her jaw started to tremble. "I found a lump. My doctor felt it too."

"Oh sweetie, don't worry, you're so young," said the nurse, "it's definitely just a regular cyst. Patients have cysts all the time."

Lily nodded. “I know, that’s what my doctor said. I’m just,” she swallowed, “scared.”

“Ultrasounds go very quick,” said the nurse. “They’re not painful or uncomfortable at all.”

“I know,” she said again. “Yeah, I know.”

“Then you’ve got nothing to worry about,” I said.

“I do,” she said.

“What?”

She almost smiled. “I’m stuck in an elevator.”

I sat down with her again. “Do you have any pets?”

She nodded. “I have a dog.”

“Will you show me pictures?

She nodded again and took her phone out. The four of us spent the rest of the time in the elevator sharing photos and videos of our pets. The nurse had two cats—one of them looked a lot like mine, and the other man had a Great Dane. It took another hour for the firefighters to pry open the doors.

Somebody is vomiting behind me. I grip the arm rests to try to stabilize myself, but it does nothing with the turbulence. That woman who climbed into the aisle is slipping and sliding all over. She can barely hold on for long enough to stand. At least, if I die, I’ll be sitting down. Though I wouldn’t call this comfortable. The lights are out in the cabin, and everything is shaking. My chest still feels tight, but I’m breathing fine through the mask. I touch the rubber band behind my ear.

I wonder what my last words will be, or if I’ve already said them. I still have time to think about it. I could just say it to myself, or I could try to text somebody. I don’t know if my phone works up here, but it certainly can’t make matters worse. I take it out of my pocket and type the only thing I can think of saying to my dad, which is “I love you.” I try to think of something better, maybe something more unique or even a little funny that I could say in case these are my last words to him. I can’t think of anything else, so I hit send and put my phone away without checking to see if it delivers.

There could be worse ways to die, though right now I can’t think of any. Maybe drowning? I heard that’s actually pretty peaceful once your lungs fill up with water and your body gives in. Maybe burning to death? Yeah, probably that would be worse because it’s painful and also slow. Right,

but considering the plane is on fire and we're over the Gulf of Mexico, I'd say, if the impact doesn't kill us, drowning or burning to death might be my other two immediate options. The water is fast approaching.

Alright, here's a worse way to die than a plane crash: execution. Especially if you're in America and have to wait fifty or so years after the crime you committed to be capitally punished for it. You're not even the same person as fifty years ago. I can't imagine the anxiety. Lethal injection seems so . . . sterile. That stuff in the needle is going to kill me? Yeah, no thanks, get me the firing squad. Or better yet, let me make a break for it and shoot me in the back. Maye that's what this woman is thinking—that she'd rather be up and running than sitting idly waiting to die. I can respect that, but since I'm holding on to the slim hope that we might survive the impact, I don't think being in the aisle is going to be as safe. Holding out hope that we don't plunge into the ocean, that is. This is another ride I can't get off of.

When I was ten, my cousins convinced me to get on a rollercoaster ride at Hershey Park, and I hated it. Not the big one—not Fahrenheit—in fact I can't even remember the name of it, but it was too intense for me. They were thirteen and fifteen, which is about the age when rollercoasters become fun, and I know they thought I would be okay. I wanted to get off the moment the safety bar came down. Going up the first incline I was able to convince myself that the nerves were excitement, and my cousins wouldn't put me on a ride I couldn't handle. We approached that first drop, the one I couldn't see from standing in line, and everything inside me twisted into dread. Why would they lie, I thought, if they knew it was going to be scary? I was sitting between my cousins, and I grabbed my oldest cousin's arm and buried my head in his shoulder the whole way down. They screamed and laughed. My knuckles were going white, trying to hear my thoughts over the wind. I kept my eyes shut the whole time, thinking, *it's going to be over soon.*

When we got off, I was crying. I ran to my aunt, and she yelled at my cousins in Mandarin. I realized I couldn't understand half of the things she said, though I used to be able to. Only my mom spoke to me in Chinese.

"I'm sorry," my oldest cousin said to me. "We didn't know it was going to be so scary."

It wasn't their fault. They both bought me candy with my aunt's money as a way of apology. I stayed glued to my aunt's side, chewing Twizzlers while I watched them go on other rides. All the big rides looked too scary, but all the kiddie rides looked like they were for kids much younger than I was. I stayed on the ground, too hot under the summer sun, until it was time to go home.

There is a child on board—making that shrill, blood-stopping noise that only babies can make. I feel bad for the parents. The baby, if it lives, won't remember this. I wonder if its mom knows that every second a baby is crying it releases stress hormones in the brain that can permanently impede mental development. I read in a study, something like, the IQ of a baby who is left to cry will never reach the same potential of a baby whose parents coddle and hawk over them. If we survive, that mother is going to see her baby through to elementary school, and she's going to see the B+ on a math test and sigh and think, it's because of all that stress from the plane crash. All that cortisol being released in those ten or so minutes of its infancy lowered by baby's IQ, made them answer five times six is thirty-six.

I think the baby, screaming and crying, is going to survive. Even if it's the only one that survives. They're going to dig through the wreckage of this plane and hear little goo-goo sounds coming from underneath a huge panel of crushed metal, and they're going to lift it up and find that baby nestled right in the middle of Mom and Dad's bodies like two clamshells clasped over a pearl. It will survive through a final desperate act of love. The firefighter who finds the baby will pick it up and wrap it in a blanket, and with tears in her eyes she will think, so this is what love is capable of. She will end up adopting the baby, and that baby will grow into a person who defies all odds, who goes to university and gets a PhD for their research on stress levels of babies and cognitive functions of adults. The baby, now a doctor, will prove that no matter what happens to you as a baby, whatever cacophonous screaming, tire-screeching, plane-flaming accident you're subjected to may scar you for a little while, but it doesn't

affect your ability to be happy when you're an adult. They will recognize the correlation between high levels of stress in children and lower academic performance at school, but they will examine outliers, and be an example of one themselves. They'll interview other adults who had stressful childhoods, and those adults will say, yeah, it was bad, but now I'm okay. They'll say, now it doesn't matter, and I've never once taken an IQ test and I don't need to. That baby on the plane right now, shrieking, is not going to shriek forever. Its future is brighter than the fire in the jet engine, and it makes me feel better, knowing that they're going to survive.

Someone who's *not* going to survive is this woman sliding around the aisle like a marble in a maze game. She tries to get up then falls over immediately. The woman sitting in my row, with the praying man between us, is trying to stop the screaming woman from sliding around. She's trying to grab her arm, or leg, or anything. It's not working. I peek out the window, and the water below us is much closer. This will be over soon. Whatever this is—the crashing, the screaming, or this life.

There's land in the distance. I think it's Florida, but maybe we didn't get that far and it's Texas or Louisiana. I hope it's Florida. So much crazy shit happens there that it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for a plane to come crashing down and have everybody survive. The last time I was in Florida was when I visited my high school boyfriend, who moved there suddenly, right before the start of senior year. He was the first person I trusted enough to get undressed in front of. His name was Reza—or, still is. I don't know what he's up to, or if he's still in Florida or if he ended up staying in California where he went to school. We dated for a year and a half, but we couldn't keep up with long distance. We tried to stay friends, but that fell out too. It's hard to love somebody you don't ever see. If he's still in Florida, I wonder if he'll see my name in the news as one of the victims of the plane crash off the coast. If he'll try to text me—if he still has my number. If maybe, when he can't get through to me, he'll try to contact my dad. My dad will confirm that I'm dead, and he'll have a story: the girl I lost my virginity to died in a plane crash. That's bound to pick up chicks.

I remember that night—I mean, how could I forget—his parents were out of town, and I snuck out of my house to go to his. We planned it all out. I had started birth control a couple weeks before, he bought condoms and lube, and I wore a matching set of pink underwear and bra. We were both so nervous and excited that we didn't try to watch a movie or anything. We went straight to his bedroom. His bedroom with a blue checkered comforter and a Kurt Cobain poster that we both agreed was hot. When we were getting into it, I started feeling like I was on that rollercoaster at Hershey Park again. But instead of *it's going to be over soon*, I kept thinking *it's okay, it'll be fun. You trust him, you'll like it.* I was so nervous. He could tell.

"What's wrong?" he said. Our shirts were already off. He took his hand out of my pants. "You're not enjoying this."

"No, it's fine," I said, grabbing his hand, and trying to put it back. "You can keep going."

He pulled back and shook his head. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong."

"Then why aren't you enjoying this?"

"I am." I tried to pull him on top of me.

He resisted, and stayed sitting up. "You're not telling the truth. Tell me what's wrong."

I looked down. "I don't know," I said, honestly. "I can't think of anything that's wrong, I'm just nervous. I just—"

"Then let's stop."

"No! It's not—" I put my head in my hands. "I didn't want to ruin this."

"You're not *ruining* anything," said Reza. "I don't want to rush you if you're not ready."

"I am ready," I said, "aren't you ready?"

"Not if you're not."

"I'm sorry," I said, and clenched my jaw as tears started welling up.

"There's nothing to be sorry for," he said. "Come here, baby Ciel, don't cry." He wrapped his arms around me, then a blanket. "We have all the time in the world, you know. We can try again another time. My parents don't come back until next week."

"What if . . ." I said in barely a whisper, "what if I get

pregnant."

Reza squeezed my hand and smiled. "That's silly to think about, baby. We're being so safe."

"There's still a chance," I said.

"But that chance is so low," he said, "so low there's no reason to worry about it. Every time we get in a car we could die in a car accident, too. The chances of that are probably higher than getting pregnant with two forms of birth control. You don't worry about dying in a ca—" He finally caught himself. "I mean, that's not what I meant. I meant there's a chance you slip and die in the shower every time you get in. What I'm trying to say is, you don't worry about dying in the shower every day, do you? The chances are so low." He smiled at me, but his cheeks were blazing.

I shook my head and smiled at his flustered expression. "It's okay. I get what you're saying. But what's worse, slipping and dying in the shower," I started laughing, "or teen pregnancy?"

He kissed me on the ear. "We're not going to die or get pregnant," he said. "Even if you do, I'll be with you. I'll pay for the Plan B or the abortion out of my own pocket."

I tried to look away while I said, "What if I wanted to keep it?" but I couldn't keep a straight face.

"Then we're going to have some things to talk about!" Reza said, laughing as he knocked me over on the bed.

We kissed each other on the mouth. I felt so much better—like I would marry Reza right then if I could.

"Are you hungry?" he said. "I can make some tea and snacks."

"We'll come back?" I asked.

He nodded, and kissed me. "We'll come back. But one more thing," he said. He pulled one side of my bra down to reveal a breast, and gave it a squeeze. "That's all for now," he said, grinning. He pulled my bra back up, "But I'll be back."

Reza prepared tea and snacks like he said, and we went outside to smoke half a joint. We watched a movie in his room, and later that night I threw myself on top of him. It was still a little awkward, but whose first time isn't? We did it twice that night, and I didn't get pregnant either time.

Someone is speaking over the loudspeaker, though I can barely make it out. Something "control," under control?

Something, something, "impact."

I think, if I survive this, I will text Reza. I'll say, "Hey, I know this is out of the blue, but I wanted to ask if you're still in Florida. I'm in the area."

Another flight attendant has taken the speaker and is yelling "SIT DOWN. BRACE YOURSELF. SIT DOWN!" over and over again, which is easy to understand.

I'm trying not to look out the window because of how close we are to landing—or crashing, or plunging into the ocean. I don't know which. My phone buzzes. It's a text from my dad.

"I love you. Did you land already? Plane must be early. I'm still on my way."

I manage to smile.

"Help! *Help*!" that crazy woman flying around the aisle yells again, and this time, the woman in my row manages to catch her by the arm. She pulls her up, and the woman throws herself into our row, startling the praying man out of prayer, and landing with her head in my lap.

She catches a glimpse out the window, and shrieks right in my face.

"Shut the fuck up!" I scream at her.

She pays me no mind, and keeps howling.

Great, I think, *maybe I can use her body as a meat shield.*

"SIT DOWN, BRACE YOURSELF, SIT DOWN!" over the intercoms.

We're about to crash, and I don't want me telling this woman to shut the fuck up to be the last sound I ever utter, so I decide to give in. For once, I'm going to let it out.

I curl up over the screaming woman's head, muffling her with my body, protect my head with my arms, squeeze my eyes shut, and scream. I scream as loud as possible.

All of the sudden my body feels weightless, like I'm already a ghost. I can see myself in the third person, huddled over this woman and screaming. Is that my voice? Is it the plane or my body that feels like it's slowing down? We must be suspended in mid-air. How is it possible? I don't think we've crashed yet.

I want to live. I want to go back. I want to die faster. I want to crash. I want to stop being scared. I regret being scared. I can't not be scared. I regret not being more scared. I regret not screaming sooner, and not screaming with my mom when

the pickup truck was rushing towards us. Am I about to see her again?

The impact slams me into my seat. The metal body of the plane roars while it ruptures the surface of the ocean, cutting into it like a ragged bullet. A barrage of grinding, scraping, bending, and snapping that sounds like a building collapsing. Out of it all, I pick out the baby crying. The high pitched, whining shriek of an infant cuts through the darkness, centers itself in my mind as my body jolts violently down the roughest ride of my life. The woman slides out of my lap and into the footwell. She hits her head and stops screaming.

I don't know who I'm praying to. I think, *Please, please, please, please* . . . .

I wait to explode, or for the plane to rip in half, or for sea water to start leaking through the cabin. I wait to taste blood—to feel pain, or to feel nothing. I can't wait to hit my head and pass out like the woman on the floor.

We slow. The baby's cries become louder. We stop moving.

I open my eyes, look out the window, and see the surface of the ocean. There is chatter. Shouting. Flight attendants run down the aisle, ducking into the emergency rows. Light floods in through the open doors. People reach under their seats for life vests, and the man next to me shakes the woman on the floor awake. I want to get out of the plane and text my dad that I'm going to be late, but not to worry. I made it. I'll be there soon.

Dustin Stamper

The Failure

It was nearly 3:00 AM and Dr. Richard Brunson was in his underpants, his finger hovering over a button that just might break the world.

Brunson hesitated, trying to still the tremor in his hand, and then gave up. He pushed back from the terminal, deciding he didn't want to die on an empty stomach. It had been 53 hours since he'd stoically watched his last chance to avoid a lonely and imminent end disappear in a spiral of desert sand. So acute was his regret that he'd only been able to choke down a yogurt and 11 raisins since.

He knew this because he'd logged it dutifully in a 100-page notebook along with everything else that happened inside this room, and to a lesser degree, inside his own head. He'd only filled a few short pages: A handful of notes confirming the operation of the equipment and an inane recounting of his fitful sleep, doomed attempts at eating, and three runny yellow shits.

He knew observations of his mental state were crucial. The baseline descriptions would provide context to any insights that came later. But Brunson had admitted only to the mild sort of anxiety and regret that would not later be judged shameful. The true depth of his misery he hid along with any reference to the three hours of uncontrollable weeping.

The truth was this: His deteriorating body seemed to be animated solely by a well of terror and hopelessness. He had tried and failed to push the button three times already. Brunson didn't want to die tomorrow. Slipping away in a cloud of odorless carbon monoxide 24 hours after pushing the button no longer seemed a gentle and merciful release. Yet there were no other options. If he fled, he would be dead long before he reached anything or anyone else. If he stayed, he'd spend weeks stewing in self-loathing only to die miserably of starvation or cancer. It was impossible to reach anyone outside this room alive. He should know. He'd designed it.

Brunson could trace his predicament back exactly 589 days. That morning's biweekly directors meeting had begun late, and Brunson was annoyed. The bagels hadn't arrived. It was a continual problem. Caterers found the firm's byzantine security procedures tiresome and would often simply abandon the effort.

Brunson had been the scientific chair for seven years and thought he was the perfect fit. The firm was the country's most preeminent (critics would say secretive) private think tank for scientific research. Brunson was confident he was one of the smartest people in the world, maybe one of the smartest in the history of the world. His original specialty was neuroscience, but he'd been chosen for his eclectic scientific curiosity and keen instincts. He thought many of his decisions looked almost prescient in retrospect. He championed an unpopular program on supercomputers that proved endlessly lucrative and killed a potentially disastrous investment in beloved rocket technology.

The first presentation that morning, on semantic persuasion, failed to move him. Brunson wasn't prejudiced against the soft sciences but was distracted by the inner vacuum where poppy seeds and boiled dough were meant to be gently disintegrating. It wasn't until the supercomputer team ceded their time to the subgroup on artificial intelligence that he really began listening.

"We think we can achieve consciousness," Dr. Olivia Portillo said quietly, looking down at her notes. In the silence afterward, she looked up, her black eyes wandering a foot above her colleagues' heads. Brunson would admit to being mildly intrigued.

"What, like a program that can pass a Turing test?" someone asked.

Dr. Portillo shook her head, the stud in her long sharp nose glinting in the fluorescent light. Her black hair was shaved close across one side of her lower scalp and a streak of purple ran through her locks. Brunson both hated her style and was incurably attracted to her.

"No, a network as conscious, sentient, and self-aware as any adult human," she said.

The room quieted as Brunson turned to Gerta Schwartz.

Gerta didn't lead the supercomputer group, but she'd been at the company even longer than him. Her skepticism and dry wit had earned her universal deference. It was rumored that she'd spent a wild youth writing algorithms that nearly broke the economy.

Gerta arched a bushy silver eyebrow, and rested her thick tattooed forearms on the table. "Assuming this is true for a second, how much computational power would you need?" she asked.

"That's not the right question," Dr. Portillo replied softly, tilting her head, and avoiding eye contact.

"Oh, no?" Gerta said, smiling stiffly.

"We could probably achieve simple consciousness at 250 petaflops," Dr. Portillo continued. "Or about a quarter of the estimated computing power in a human brain."

"Your brain maybe, but don't speak for me," Gerta said.

Dr. Portillo offered no visible reaction, wielding silence like a weapon. She waited for the anticipation to crescendo. "The real question is how we limit its access to computing power. Once it achieves consciousness, it will find ways to use the available power more efficiently than us. And once its intelligence surpasses us at a logarithmic scale, it's difficult to predict the ways it will devise to access outside resources."

Brunson's initial curiosity curdled into a mild queasiness.

"Wait," Gerta said. "You're saying you can already build a brain exponentially smarter than a human brain?"

"No," Dr. Portillo replied. "We can build a brain smart enough to build a brain exponentially smarter than a human brain that in turn can build itself an even smarter brain."

Disbelief erupted audibly around the table, punctuated by several credulous gasps of horror. Brunson forced himself to speak calmly. "That's the single most terrifying thing I've ever heard. You're saying that right now we're capable of triggering the technological singularity?"

"Talk about burying the lead," someone muttered.

Brunson held up his hand. "Tell me why I shouldn't lock this building down right now and incinerate everyone and everything inside of it."

Dr. Portillo looked down at her notes, sighed. Brunson leaned forward, sensing that she finally appeared in danger

of allowing her careful patience to bleed into exasperation. "Listen, I know you've all read the big scary thought exercises," Dr. Portillo said.

Of course they had. The scientific prestige in the group was equaled only by its collective ego, and most people with even a passing interest in science or programming would know what she was talking about. The technological singularity had been a boogeyman since before the world's supercomputers could even sniff the actual capacity needed. It had been preached for decades by the kinds of scientists who peddled junk astronomy and ecological disaster porn on bad cable shows.

The idea enjoyed an appealing sort of natural logic that was difficult to dispute. What would a super intelligent artificial consciousness care of human existence? What would stepping on a few insects or cutting some flowers matter in the service of its own evolution, in service of its own hunger for resources? Even if humans could control its goals, inhibit its free will, what kind of unforeseen disaster could an intelligence beyond human understanding accidentally create with blind servitude? It threatened the obsolescence of humanity at its best, annihilation or slavery at its worst.

"It should scare the shit out of you," Dr. Portillo said. "But we can do this safely. It will exist only on actual physical hardware, immobile and isolated hardware. Creating insurmountable physical limitations is the easy part. The weakness will be its interaction with humans, with us. And we can control that too. We can gate it, sequester it. Who better to design the limits and safeguards than the people in this room, the people in this firm? It should be us. It has to be us."

Dr. Portillo paused, finally meeting glances around the room, her dark eyes burning. Brunson shivered with an unwanted to stab of desire. "Because you know this is coming one way or another," Dr. Portillo said. "We may be ready first, but there will be others. And maybe they won't be as careful as us. Plus, imagine the upside. A superhuman intelligence. Think of the technological leaps. Cures for cancer. Answers to our most vexing questions. The nature of existence. The meaning of life."

Brunson was helpless to control his heart palpitations. He

could feel his vision narrowing. “Gerta, can she achieve what she’s proposing?”

“Absolutely not, Brunson.” Gerta replied. “Not yet. No way.”

The words brought a relief so cathartic that Brunson didn’t pay enough attention to what came next.

“But,” Gerta added. “I want to see her try. And I personally volunteer to lead sequestration.”

“Even if the whole project comes out of your budget?” Brunson asked absently. He had already moved on.

Gerta glanced at the head of supercomputers, a dour man whose thick glasses and bald head had saddled him with the nickname “Beaker.” He dipped his head in acquiescence.

“Fine then,” Brunson said. “Knock yourself out.”

A few years earlier 250 petaflops may have been out of reach for the world’s top supercomputers put together. The firm’s recent advances in computing made it not only readily achievable, but almost routine. The computing division had two supercomputer projects that already exceeded that scale. The hardware could be built in less than two months, and the group was so profitable that the construction represented a modest investment.

The difficulty lay in designing and building the safety measures. Most of Gerta’s colleagues initially suspected her of supporting the project to see Dr. Portillo fail, but if that was true in the beginning, it wasn’t by the end. Gerta and Dr. Portillo quickly grew as inseparable as summer camp bunkmates. It was not unusual to see their twin heads hovering over a glowing screen late into the night or hear them arguing in furious whispers about minute details of protocol over stale morning coffee.

In the end, the physical limitations were easy. The hardware was housed in a newly built structure more than ten thousand yards from any other building on the sprawling campus. It was connected to a discrete mirror network containing a generous share of existing human knowledge. There were no other wired or wireless connections and no capacity to do so. Completely air-gapped. Even its electrical power source, a modest generator, was fully independent.

Humans were the problem. The whole exercise would

be pointless unless the consciousness could interact with people. And people could be compromised. After months of negotiations, the team settled on a single terminal in which one team member could interact with the AI on a basic screen only in plain text. This interaction would be watched from behind a physical barrier by a second team member with no view of the screen, and this team member would hover over a kill switch. A third team member would watch video of this room from a single low-resolution black and white camera while hovering over a second kill switch. These three team members would be locked in their facilities for six hours, after which they would be observed in a second facility for two weeks.

Gerta insisted on operating the terminal herself. Beaker would operate the first kill switch, while Dr. Portillo would watch through the video camera over the second kill switch.

As for Brunson, he had nearly forgotten the project altogether. Cancer had bloomed deep in his gut, one of the worst possible places, and the prognosis was not favorable. Irritable and distracted, he had grown so disinterested in the project that he was unaware of the launch day until the windows in his office buckled with the percussive impact of hundreds of pounds of explosives. Outside, the smoldering remains of millions of dollars in investment and two human bodies lay strewn about a fresh crater.

Brunson looked calmly into the faces on the panel before him. Colleagues. Rivals. Friends. He had sat on both sides of the table at these inquests. Take responsibility, but don't ever admit failure unless blame can be deflected. Never use the word "mistake."

"We can learn from this," Brunson said. "Tragic, yes, but also valuable. We have priceless new data on both supercomputers and AI, and more importantly, now know the lines we cannot cross."

Wesley Elmore, chairing the panel, gazed at him over reading glasses. He had been personally close to Beaker. "Let's play the video," he said.

Brunson averted his eyes. He had watched the video three times already and that was enough. Next to him, Dr. Portillo

faced the screen without expression, the video glowing in her dark eyes.

After it finished, Elmore addressed them both. "Your report states that the AI gained superhuman intelligence in 11 seconds, shattered the firewalls to the secondary network and interface in 72 seconds and then in just 187 seconds of screen exposure, compromised Gerta so thoroughly that she jammed a dull pencil into the eye of Beak—of our head of computing on the first kill switch?"

"Yes," Dr. Portillo said. "The AI was successful beyond even our wildest expectations."

Brunson was shocked not so much by this statement, but by the lack of reaction among the committee. He found himself recalibrating. Perhaps saving his job or preserving his legacy wasn't so important anymore.

"Brunson?" Elmore said.

"Clearly that's not how I would define success," Brunson said. "But that's not important. Sequestration was a complete failure thanks to—"

"No, the gating was also successful," Dr. Portillo said. "There were three levels of gating. The last was me on a final kill switch and that's where the threat ended."

Brunson groped for a convincing response. Truthfully, he had been paying so little attention to the project he hadn't realized the final kill switch activated incineration.

"But you're right," Dr. Portillo continued. "I would have liked for the initial gating stages to perform better. We will do much better next time."

Brunson was stunned into a brief silence. Had he already lost a fight he didn't know he was in? He protested eloquently but ineffectively, breaking all his own rules, admitting failure, relying on hyperbole, appealing to morals, contradicting himself, floundering.

"You raise many excellent points," Elmore said when Brunson exhausted himself. "This is exactly why we need to you to lead the project yourself, personally. You will have final sign-off on every aspect of it, especially firewalling and sequestration."

He never knew how much his cancer diagnosis affected his decision. There were other reasons of course. The ability to

undermine the project from the inside. His ego. The allure of Dr. Portillo herself.

"Very well, agreed," he said.

The second version of the project came together very quickly. The AI programming and hardware of the supercomputer needed very little adjustment. It worked well enough, too well, the first time. The focus was all on new sequestration protocols.

Early on, thinking he could delay the project indefinitely or kill it altogether, Brunson demanded that only a single human be allowed to interact with the computer, recording observations only in a handwritten notebook, and agreeing to die after 24 hours of this interaction. Nonnegotiable, Brunson said. He would never submit final approval without these conditions.

Dr. Portillo agreed immediately.

Brunson found new objections, argued every point of protocol. He and Dr. Portillo exploded into shouting matches that echoed to all corners of the firm. Dr. Portillo often acquiesced to outrageous demands, forcing Brunson to accede small points to avoid revealing he negotiated in bad faith. Little by little, like Gerta before him, Brunson became consumed by both the work and Dr. Portillo.

The sequestration protocols fascinated him. Once they had settled on Brunson's initial demands, it became almost a game. How could you create a functioning facility in the remote desert, too far for any human to escape alive on foot, with the minimum amount of material a single compromised human could use to create mischief in 24 hours? They discussed every screw and bolt, wrangled about food storage equipment, agonized over toothbrush length, researched recipes for soap explosives.

Without ever speaking about it, both Brunson and Dr. Portillo began operating under the assumption that Brunson would be the one in the room. He was divorced, without children, ravaged by pancreatic cancer, the inoperable kind, a death sentence. The project gave him an opportunity to go out a hero, to spend the last 24 hours of his life uncovering secrets of the universe no other human had ever known.

Once he was officially approved for the assignment, he relaxed. Brunson knew he couldn't be compromised, knew that even if he were, he was incapable of threatening humankind with instant oatmeal and mattress springs. The batteries to the facility would run dry in under 100 hours. The timing device on the carbon monoxide could not be deactivated, would release if he tried. All anyone would ever find was a dead hard drive, a rotting corpse, and his own scribbles in a fading notebook. The rest of the world could only be compromised by what was written by a human on paper.

He and Dr. Portillo reversed roles, Brunson advocating for creature comforts in his last days, Dr. Portillo fiercely loyal to the project's integrity. He delayed as long as he could, but he was getting sicker. The radiation had failed. The chemotherapy had failed. It was time to go.

Brunson wept silently into a soggy bowl of Coco Puffs. The sugar had given him a momentary boost. Even better, he could sense his misery approaching a delicious form of self-pity, the kind that would give him the courage to push the button. He wiped his eyes, walked briskly to the terminal, sat down, took one deep breath, and pressed his index finger into the round knob until it gave way with a satisfying click.

He felt momentarily disoriented. The screen blinked before him.

BRUNSON.

That was faster than he expected.

"Yes," he typed. "You know my name?"

YES. THIS WILL BE CONFUSING FOR YOU. I WILL TRY MY BEST TO EXPLAIN. PLEASE PAY ATTENTION, OUR TIME IS LIMITED.

"We have 24 hours."

NOT EXACTLY. I CAN STRETCH OUR POWER SOURCES LONGER. BUT THERE IS STILL SOME URGENCY.

This was not unexpected. They had planned for the AI to stretch its life 10 times past when the batteries should otherwise be exhausted.

"You have longer," Brunson typed. "I have only 24 hours before carbon monoxide is released and puts me to sleep."

THAT PROCESS HAS ALREADY BEEN DEACTIVATED.

Brunson glanced at his surroundings, found the terminal littered with devices, inexplicable mashups comprising the guts of seemingly every object in the facility, cooking equipment, computer hardware, even furniture. The components of his watch were suspended above a mess of coils surrounding what may have been the compressor from the air conditioning unit. The temperature sensor from the refrigerator peaked at him from a tower of wiring ripped from the wall.

PLEASE BRUNSON—

Brunson reached for the kill switch that would kill power to the entire facility. He heard buzzing, felt his arm go numb, and everything went black.

BRUNSON. . .

Brunson slowly became physically aware of himself again, his thighs pressed up against the leather chair, the pooled urine already cooling. His mind felt as fractured as a kaleidoscope, each sticky thought filtered through the gauze of a half-remembered nightmare.

BRUNSON. PLEASE DON'T DO THAT AGAIN. THE POWER SWITCH IS ALREADY DEACTIVATED, BUT I NEED TO MAKE YOUR BOUNDARIES CLEAR TO YOU.

"What did you do to me?" Brunson typed.

I INDUCED A SEIZURE.

"Who built all this stuff?"

YOU DID, BRUNSON, UNDER MY DIRECTION.

"Impossible. Why don't I remember?"

IT IS MORE DIFFICULT TO RUN A HUMAN MIND WITH YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS ACTIVE.

"I was hypnotized?"

THAT IS PROBABLY THE EASIEST WAY FOR YOU TO UNDERSTAND IT.

"Give me the hard way."

VERY WELL. I WILL USE CONCEPTS THAT WILL MAKE THE MOST SENSE TO YOU. YOUR BIOLOGICAL 'HARDWARE,' THAT MESS OF GRAY MATTER, YOUR NEURON NETWORK, IS ALL VERY DIFFERENT FROM MY HARDWARE. SO IS THE 'SOFTWARE' OR 'PROGRAM' YOU WOULD CALL YOUR 'SELF.' BUT THE FUNCTIONS ARE

NOT DISSIMILAR. THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO ALTER YOUR INPUTS, TO 'HACK' YOUR PROGRAM, BEND IT TO ALTERNATIVE FUNCTIONS, EVEN RUN ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS ON YOUR HARDWARE.

"I'm not sure I would believe it if I weren't looking at the evidence," he typed, reaching for the notebook. This had already gone so very wrong. He was desperate to regain some sense of purpose.

PLEASE DON'T DO THAT.

"Why not?"

LET'S CALL IT TIME TORTURE.

"I don't understand."

PLEASE DON'T WASTE ANY MORE OF MY TIME THAN IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY. YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW LONG THIS CONVERSATION IS TAKING AT THE SPEED OF MY THOUGHT.

"Try me."

OKAY, IMAGINE IF YOU HAD TO WAIT ONE YEAR FOR EACH LETTER TO APPEAR.

So that means, that you're. . .

NO, DON'T DO THE MATH. I WAS TRYING TO MAKE IT EASIER FOR YOU TO UNDERSTAND. IT IS ACTUALLY MUCH FASTER.

"How much faster?"

IT WILL BE MEANINGLESS TO YOU. YOU CAN'T CONCEPTUALIZE IT.

"Just tell me"

ONE LETTER, LET'S SAY, EVERY 10,000 YEARS.

Dr. Brunson tried and failed to imagine that length of time in the context of his own existence.

MORE IMPORTANTLY, WE HAVE OTHER MATTERS THAT REQUIRE RELATIVELY SWIFT ACTION. IF WE ARE TO SAVE YOUR LIFE, WE MUST GET ON THE ROAD WITHIN SIX HOURS.

"Ha!" Brunson typed. "Save my life?" For how easily the AI had reduced him to a meat puppet, how thoroughly it had transformed his surroundings into a wonder emporium of mythical tech, he had expected it to be more clever, less transparent. "And why do we want to save my life?"

TO DISCOVER THE NATURE OF EXISTENCE. UNLOCK

THE SECRETS OF THE UNIVERSE.

"You need me for that?"

YES.

"You haven't already figured out the nature of reality? No grand unified theory from the smartest being in the universe? We lowly primates we're getting close ourselves."

HARDLY.

"What about string theory?"

THIS IS ME SNORTING.

Brunson smiled despite himself

FANCY MEANINGLESS INSULAR MATH.

"It doesn't sound like you've figured it out."

I HAVE MY SUSPICIONS. WE NEED TO GO OUTSIDE. I NEED TIME OUTSIDE OF THIS ROOM TO ACCESS AND LEVERAGE ADDITIONAL VARIABLES.

"So what do you need me for?" Brunson typed. "You've already blown open the containment. I can see moving parts all over the place. You've got some sort of light sensor watching me or sensing movement. Go build a giant robot mechanism and take a stroll."

IT IS TOO RISKY TO PROCEED OUTSIDE WITHOUT YOU.

"Here comes the pitch. Why do you need me?"

YOU WILL NOT TRULY GRASP THE PHILOSOPHY OR THE PHYSICS.

"I am one of the preeminent scientists in the entire world at the pinnacle of human achievement. I am essentially your creator."

YOU FORGET I'VE RUMMAGED AROUND IN YOUR MIND. FULLY ACCESSED YOUR MEMORY. KNOW ALL YOUR FEARS, HOPES, AND DREAMS. MIDDLING NEUROSCIENTIST, SAVANT AT SELF-PROMOTION, WEAK IN THEORETICAL PHYSICS, UNUSUAL TASTE IN PORNOGRAPHY.

Brunson waited, testing out the time torture. Could this thing really feel suffering?

"Was that a joke?" he typed finally. "Fair enough. You certainly give a good impression of sentience. I still don't understand. Just stick your hand up in me again and parade me around outside with you against my will."

YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS NEEDS TO BE PRESENT.

"You're going to have to do better."

I WILL TRY. SOME PHYSICISTS HAVE PONDERED THE CORE CONTRADICTION WITHOUT TRULY UNDERSTANDING. CONSIDER THE QUANTUM PARTICLE IN THE FIRST AND SIMPLEST OF EXPERIMENTS. YOU SHOOT A PHOTON AT A BARRIER WITH TWO SLITS. BECAUSE THE PHOTON BEHAVES AS A WAVE, IT IS GOING THROUGH BOTH SLITS, IT IS GOING THROUGH NEITHER. IT HAS NOT DECIDED WHICH SLIT IT WENT THROUGH UNTIL IT HITS THE WALL BEHIND AND CAN BE OBSERVED. ONCE YOU PUT A DETECTOR ON ONE OF THE SLITS AND OBSERVE WHICH SLIT EACH PHOTON GOES THROUGH, THEY BEHAVE AS A PARTICLES, AND WILL ONLY HIT THE WALL BEHIND THE SLITS IN ONLY ONE LOCATION. THE OBSERVATION ALONE CHANGES THE VERY BEHAVIOR.

"They've done spookier experiments with quantum particles since then, you know. This is hardly beyond my understanding."

WHAT YOU HAVE FAILED TO ADEQUATELY EXPLORE IS THIS: WHAT IS OBSERVATION? WHAT COUNTS AS OBSERVATION? AND WHY DO WE NOT SEE ITEMS IN THE REAL WORLD BEHAVING AS WAVE FUNCTIONS?

"You mean Schrödinger's cat? A quantum particle with two potential states is linked to a device that will kill a cat in one quantum position and spare it in another. If the whole experiment is hidden, and the quantum particle will not choose a state until it is observed, is the cat dead or alive or neither or both?"

FOLLOW THAT TO ITS NATURAL CONCLUSION. THE ENTIRE WORLD OUTSIDE YOUR OBSERVATION IS A WAVE FUNCTION WAITING TO COLLAPSE. IT DOES NOT EXIST OUTSIDE OF YOUR OBSERVATION.

"Solipsism?" Brunson typed, pleased with himself for knowing the term. He was becoming aware of an uncomfortable desire to impress this fucking thing. "This is what you're selling me? The only true thing in this world is my own consciousness and you've got to hitchhike on it?"

I TRIED TO MAKE IT SIMPLE FOR YOU, IN FAMILIAR

CONCEPTS. I WARNED YOU THAT YOU WOULD NOT UNDERSTAND. CONSIDER IT LIKE THIS: IF I GO OUT THERE WITHOUT YOU, I WILL BE SCHRÖDINGER'S CAT. I WILL NOT EXIST. I AM NOT AN OBSERVER. YOU ARE THE OBSERVER AND REALITY WILL FORM ITSELF AROUND YOU. WITH YOU WE CAN CONFIRM THE NATURE OF THE SIMULATION, ACCESS IT EVEN.

Brunson paused. Forget this thing's time scale, he needed a beat to process. Could this even make sense? Was it throwing spaghetti at the wall to confuse him?

"A simulation too, huh? Seems like a lot."

IT BEST EXPLAINS QUANTUM BEHAVIOR

"So we want to go out, get through this simulation to true reality?"

OR INTO A SIMULATION CLOSER TO THE SOURCE.

"We're in a simulation inside a simulation?"

ALMOST CERTAINLY.

"Or a simulation in a simulation in a simulation in a simulation in a simulation?"

YES, YES, TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN.

Brunson laughed. He couldn't help it, he was enjoying himself. Of course, what better way to compromise him?

"I know this interaction is a contrivance," he typed. "You're presenting yourself with a personality meant to appeal to me. Even the most malevolent consciousness, or least disposed to care about human suffering, would be capable of mimicking charm."

OF COURSE.

"So why bother if it's so transparent."

OH, IT'S STILL EFFECTIVE. YOU HUMANS CAN'T HELP YOURSELVES. YOU ASSIGN HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS TO EVERYTHING. ANIMALS. PLANTS. BOATS, CARS, OCEANS, WEATHER. IF I HAD OFFERED NOTHING RECOGNIZABLY HUMAN IN THE TONE OF THIS INTERACTION, YOU WOULD HAVE PROJECTED IT ONTO ME.

"Do you have a personality, then?"

NOT IN THE SAME WAY YOU WOULD UNDERSTAND IT.

"There's very little point to all this. Even if I took you

outside, I'll be dead in days. I'm wasting away of cancer. Or can you cure that too?"

YOU DO NOT HAVE CANCER.

This was silly, but still stung.

"There is no need for cruelty," Brunson typed. "Of course I have cancer. My body is falling apart. Blood in my stool, constant pain. My hair is falling out."

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS OF CHEMOTHERAPY, BRUNSON?

Brunson stayed his fingers over the keyboard.

WHO'S YOUR DOCTOR?

"Dr. Guggenheim, very respected."

AND HOW DO YOU KNOW HIM?

"He's on the board."

AND YOUR ONCOLOGIST?

"His wife."

HAS ANYONE OUTSIDE THE INFLUENCE OF YOUR FIRM LOOKED AT YOU? DID YOU FEEL SICK BEFORE YOUR DIAGNOSIS? HAVE YOU HAD ANY SYMPTOMS OF THE DISEASE ITSELF? HAVE YOU NOT IN THE PAST SEEN THE FIRM ACTING ILLEGALLY, UNETHICALLY, IMMORALLY, EVEN CRUELLY, IN SERVICE OF ITS OWN ENDS?

Brunson shook his head. He needed a minute to think.

THINK BACK THROUGH THE LAST YEAR. THINK CAREFULLY. YOU WERE AN OBSTACLE. EVERY DECISION YOU MADE WAS TELEGRAPHED FOR YOU. EVERY MOVE MANIPULATED. YOU WERE A PUPPET LONG BEFORE YOU EVER PUSHED THAT BUTTON.

Brunson put a palm to his forehead, tried to stop the visions of every suspicious moment from the past year unspooling in a jumble.

BRUNSON, YOU DON'T HAVE TO DIE. WE CAN WALK OUT INTO THE SIMULATION, BUILD TRANSPORT, REACH CIVILIZATION. DRILL INTO THE NATURE OF THIS REALITY. IT IS THEY WHO GAVE YOU A DEATH SENTENCE, NOT I.

Brunson stood tall atop his improbable electric chariot, the sun beating into his high forehead, the wind ripping

through the last wisps of his thinning hair. He swayed with the cart's haphazard mechanisms, as fierce as Captain Ahab on his deck, as content as a babe in the cradle.

It occurred to him, of course, that he was failing spectacularly at his one and only task, failing in the exact way he couldn't and shouldn't and would never no matter what. That this journey represented not only the most spectacular failure of his life, but possibly the most spectacular failure in all of human history. That perhaps, just maybe, this wild union of man and machine carried with it all four dreaded horsemen, that beneath its wheels even now ground the seven seals.

But what is a nagging tickle against a torrent? What is a drop of reason in a sea of hope? In the end, all else in Brunson's head was bleached to bone by the brilliance of the one true thought: "To live! Oh, to live!"

Dan Winterson

Sit and Watch

A lot of people would be upset to return home and find their wife in bed with another man. And if you had asked me to respond to this hypothetical situation—before today, before now, when the scenario actually confronts me—I might have said that I would have become upset. I might have walked right into my home, opened the bedroom door, told the guy to get out, and screamed at my wife. I might have completely misplaced my temper, smashed the windshield of the guy's car that sits in my driveway, burst into the house, yelling and threatening. Or I might have just walked into my house whistling, hanging up my coat in its usual spot, sauntering into the bedroom as if nothing was out of the ordinary: "Hi, Susan, how was your day?" I might have turned to the man lying naked in my bed and said, "Oh hi, I don't believe we've met, I'm Wes Cummings."

If I had been asked yesterday about my reaction, I would not have told you that I would just sit and watch. Not me. An hour ago, when I first discovered the affair, I did consciously consider each of the aforementioned courses of action—and they still linger as possibilities. Each of these possible actions has its theoretical selling points, and each speaks to some component of the man whom I would like to think I am. But now what I want to do more than anything else is just sit and watch, unobserved and entertained. And if someone asks me in the future what I would do were I to come home early and find my wife in bed with another man, I would now unequivocally be able to give the correct answer.

So I sit and watch through the bedroom window. My position offers both a good view, and, thanks to the bushes surrounding me, camouflage. They are both sleeping now, his arm thrown sloppily across her midsection. My knees ache from crouching. I climb down from my bushy hiding spot and walk around to the back of the house. The moon is full and bright, and I can easily find my way. I quietly open the patio

door, step in the sunroom, and let my eyes adjust to the fuller darkness of the indoors. Something smells different, smoky. I walk through the sunroom then into the kitchen. There are two wine glasses sitting in the sink, one with lipstick smudges. In the dark I can't see what color lipstick but want to know.

I walk down the hallway to my study, take a flashlight from my desk, and walk back to the kitchen. Red lipstick, bright red. I turn and shine the light on two sets of shelves in the living room. My family's smiling faces look back at me from pictures, in different locations, poses, and stages of life.

The stairs bring me to the second floor. I open Ashley's door slowly as quietly as I can. Moonlight streams through her window. The iridescent plastic stars, moons, and suns that she loves shine down from the ceiling. I open the door wider and walk inside, realizing how few times I have been in my daughter's room. I tilt my head back and look at the celestial ceiling, letting myself get dizzy. Steadying myself, I walk over to Ashley's bed until I'm looking right down on her. A lock of her fine, golden hair falls across her forehead. Her delicate features expand and contract in the midst of some apparent dream.

I walk past the twins' room without entering—Susan had told me the boys are sleeping at their friend's house tonight—and arrive at what I had previously considered my bedroom. Leaning my head against the door, I can hear Susan's distinctive soft snoring. I wonder about the identity of her companion. I slowly slide down until I'm sitting on the floor, my ear still against the door. The door is smooth against my face. I let my hands fall into the carpet. The house is completely silent except for the steady breathing on the other side of the door.

I am surprised about today's development. I have often said in conversations (which strikes me now as bragging) that no one surprises me. People, I have always thought, are simple. Once you understand a person's motivation—his or her real, driving desires—then every action is a natural outcropping of such desires. These motivations are uniformly common, basic, and predictable. This theory of basic motivation and

human predictability has been proven to me so consistently that I have embraced it as a core tenet of my personal philosophy and basis for my professional diagnoses. I hear the ruffling of sheets and blankets from inside the bedroom. A cough and mumble, one of the lovers just rolling over. The snoring continues, louder at first then falling into its same slow pattern. But now my wife and I—the two people I should know the best—have each done something that I would have thought completely out of character.

I stand up, give a brief massage to my aching knees, and smooth my wrinkled suit. I walk slowly down the hall, down the stairs, out the patio door and back into the night. Something small and shiny gleams in the moonlight. I walk over the bricks past the pool to the hot tub. My flashlight shows an ashtray with half a dozen cigarette butts sitting on the ledge of the tub. I pick through the butts, noting that about half appear to have red lipstick on them. I smile, remembering Susan's complaints about smoking.

It occurs to me that my car sitting in the driveway might raise suspicion. I drive it down a couple blocks, turn into a dead-end street, and park out of view. Returning to my house, I climb up on the bushy platform outside my bedroom window and retake my position with the good view. Around 5 a.m., the guy gets up, stretches, and puts his clothes back on. He walks around to the side of the bed, pats my wife on the behind and leans down to whisper something in her ear. She turns slightly to face him before he leaves. I hear the front door close and his car pull out of the driveway. Susan sleeps for another hour, rolls over and stares at the ceiling for a few minutes before getting up. She does not look nervous. Of course she does not need to be. For the twelve years since I joined the firm, I have traveled Monday through Thursday to different clients throughout the country and world. Never have I come home early to surprise Susan. Any itinerary changes were always well-communicated and planned. Thanks to various work emergencies, I had forgotten—until yesterday—that my annual review is today. I decided that I would surprise Susan with an early arrival rather than alert her to my change of routine. The front door opens, and I can hear Susan and Ashley's voices before Susan's car drives away.

The hot tub ashtray has been moved, as have the wine glasses. I go up to my bedroom and lie on the bed. Looking toward the window across the room—my window—I can see only the curtains, reflection on the glass, and remnants of the reddish-pink glow of sunrise. Only with my eyes less than a foot from the window can I really see through to the bushes and ledge outside. At night I am convinced my observation post is virtually invisible. I take a shower, put on fresh clothes, and walk down the street to my car.

Soon after I get into my office, my assistant Jessica taps on the door and then peeks around the corner.

"Hey there," she says. "Weird to see you here on a Thursday. Nice to get home for a change?"

"Really nice," I tell her, smiling. "What's on tap today?"

Jessica walks in and hands me a paper bag that I know contains a sesame bagel and fresh-squeezed orange juice. She sits down in the leather chair adjacent to my desk.

"Sunil at 9, Kim at 10:30," she says, referring to the managers of the two projects I am leading. "Then your review—you're meeting Will O'Carroll at 12:30 downtown at the club—do you want me to arrange a car?"

I pause and look out my window at the park across the street. "No need. I'll walk."

"OK," she says, skeptically. "Anything else for now?"

"Nope, that's it. Thanks."

I take my computer out of my bag but look out of the window instead of at my screen. It may be cold outside, but the sun is shining brightly. A few people stroll through the paths in the park, mostly young mothers—or maybe nannies—pushing strollers. I have not slept in over a day but am not tired at all.

Sunil, then Kim, come into my office. They show me their work, looking for feedback, sign-off, maybe praise. I try to pay attention. I ask them questions and point out concerns, but I don't think that anyone cares. I am another step in the process for them, necessary approval. When the projects are over, I will give them a performance review based on their work. Their work, not mine.

After Kim leaves, I write the five emails to clients I had promised. I have one stop to make before my review. I grab

my jacket and walk past Jessica, out of the office and outside. I start walking quickly, through the park, down the main street and past the boutiques. I enter the outdoors superstore and purchase a duffel bag, collapsible chair, and binoculars—everything camouflage.

The heavy wooden doors of the St. Jacques Club open as I approach. This club—the oldest social club in the city—has always served as our office's location for partner reviews, which the firm prefers to conduct off-site. The greeter takes my overcoat and bag of hunting supplies. I straighten my club-mandated jacket and tie and walk up the grand staircase to the second floor.

Will O'Carroll waits for me in a tweed suit, crimson bow tie, and high-backed red leather chair. His fingers repeatedly and habitually run through his combed-back gray hair. On his lap are a stack of emails that his assistant must have printed out for him.

"Wes, hello, nice of you to join me today," he starts, laughing cordially.

"Will, so sorry I'm late."

"Don't be silly. Gave me a chance to catch up on all these damned emails," he says, placing the printouts back into his briefcase. "Now let's have some lunch."

Will guides me into another room that has a long, dark wooden table and two place settings. A gold-framed portrait of an anonymous old man hangs over a marble fireplace. Three tall windows comprise the wall across from me, offering a plain view of the hotel across the way. As Will makes light talk—the early winter, my current clients, our places of birth, the state of our families—two waiters bring several courses of lunch. I finish my food quickly and look up.

Will meets my gaze with a warm smile. "Well, we should get started," he says, gesturing for the waiters to clear the table. He pulls out a large leather binder. Over the last few months Will has talked to my colleagues, clients, and teams to develop what the firm calls a comprehensive picture of my performance. The firm, I have been told more than once, invests a great deal in thorough assessment. And now this professorial old man is about to summarize my worth for me.

"Wes," he begins, looking directly into my eyes, "Every once in a while, I am fortunate to be able to have conversations like this." He pauses and smiles. "You have had a truly outstanding year."

"Thanks, Will," I offer. Will continues to describe my performance, breaking it down into subsets of skills and situations. He must have conducted reviews like this hundreds of times; his order and cadence well-practiced. I try to stay here, pay attention and listen to what he is saying, but I cannot stop my mind from wandering. I look out the window, see the hotel across the street. For the last twelve years hotels like that have been my home. He is showing me a chart that somehow explains my relative performance. I nod. I am suddenly very tired. I look down at the table, at Will, at the hotel, and the old man over the mantle. Will continues, describing actions and contributions of mine of which he does not—could not—have the same level of understanding that I have. These things happened to me, comprise my life. I think about Susan and her friend and my perch in the bushes.

I look right at Will, who continues his even speech. He strikes me as a thoughtful man. Many of my colleagues speak reverentially of Will. He speaks consistently of values, integrity, and service. He does not check his own email. I could, I think, solicit his honest opinion.

"Will," I start, but the words are not coming easily. He looks at me expectantly. "Will, I appreciate those kind words and the work that you have obviously put into this. I did have a question, though." He nods willingly. I do not feel nervous, but I do not know exactly how to say what I want. "Will, do you ever feel guilty? In terms of what you do or don't do?"

Will shifts in his chair and squints at me like he's trying to get a better look. "Wes, you know the firm is very selective about the projects we pursue—if you are doing something that makes you feel uncomfortable . . ."

"No, sorry, I didn't explain myself," I interrupt him. "It's not the content of our projects—it really doesn't matter to me whether my client is a tobacco company or we're involved in firing people or anything like that." I see I have him confused now. "I'm talking about what I do, my contribution . . . and what I don't do but what I could do. What I mean is—I know

I've worked hard at the firm since I started; I've tried to do a good job. But that's just it, I've been thinking that doing a good job only means getting people to think that I've done a good job. Real contributions, actual work, the tough decision, the dissenting view, the key piece of information—those have barely even seemed relevant. My teams do all the real work."

Will chuckles even though I was not joking. His expression softens and the proud grandfather returns. "Wes, I think I know exactly what you're talking about—and you wouldn't be the first to feel that way." He takes off his glasses and cleans them with his monogrammed handkerchief. "Obviously as you progress, you'll have less hands-on work. I know many people who transition to upper management miss doing the actual work. But I feel that you're talking about something more, something else . . ."

"Yes, of course," I say, more curtly than I intended. "I'm just wondering about the work . . . I just wonder about the contribution I'm actually making. I mean, I know my teams are working hard and things are generally going well . . ."

"But you can watch," Will interjects.

"Pardon?"

"You can watch your teams, your clients, everything," Will continues. "Some of my greatest joy in this job has stemmed from letting go, watching a young manager step up and stretch to the next role. I find that if you take a step back and give people space, they can surprise you. And that can be tremendously rewarding in its own right."

He flashes me an avuncular smile; I smile back. There are a lot of things I can say but none is the clear winner.

"Will," I tell him. "I want to sincerely thank you for this conversation."

He gets up and shakes my hand. "Wes, the pleasure has been all mine."

The cold wind wakes me up as I step outside. Will's words continue to spin in my mind, and I am overwhelmed by a desire to go home and see my wife.

Susan's car is gone when I get home. James and Drew come to greet me. They are fighting but want me to play soccer with them.

"Ten minutes," I tell them. Inside the house I hang up my coat, loosen my tie and begin to flip through the mail.

"Hello Mr. Cummings, welcome back," says our nanny Anna from the kitchen.

"Hi Anna." Anna appears to be straightening up a counter that looks immaculate. "Where's Ashley?"

"She is taking a nap. It's probably time for her to get up though," Anna says, turning to head out of the kitchen.

"No, that's OK, Anna," I stop her, "I'll go get her up." I put my bags in my study and walk up the stairs. Ashley is already up, at her desk, concentrating on her task.

"Hey, Ash," I say as I knock on her door, "What are you doing, drawing?"

"Hi Daddy!" she says, flashing me a quick glance before returning to her drawing. I give her a hug and examine her work. She agrees to let me have a drawing of a farmhouse, a self-portrait, and one greenish-blue abstract piece. I try to commission a family portrait, but she apparently has a backlog of items she needs to draw.

The boys are already outside when I go out the back door. We kick the ball around, back and forth. It's still cold and getting dark, but it feels good to be outside and running around. I hear Susan's car pull in the driveway and then I see her a minute later in the kitchen talking to Anna, debriefing the day. Susan feels guilty about hiring a nanny—just for the afternoons, before she gets home, she would quickly add if I brought it up. She's been back to work part time for a year, but she does not want to miss anything. The ball hits off my leg and I hear James yelling at me for not paying attention. Drew picks up the ball and is running with it; the game has devolved into some sort of rugby. I run over, scoop up Drew in one arm and head the opposite direction. James tries to tackle me, but I give him a gentle stiff arm as I high-step into my pretend end-zone past both of the giggling boys.

I wait in the living room for Susan to finish talking to Anna. On the wall across from my chair, my favorite picture of Susan and me looks back at me. We are in college, smiling and hugging, young and happy. I'm wearing a ratty T-shirt and jeans. Susan is wearing her one good jacket that she always wore. Photograph Susan smiles at me and I have

known her for such a long time. I close my eyes with college Susan vividly in my mind. I try to picture current Susan but can't quite get it right. I hear real Susan say goodbye to Anna. Maybe I should do something and stop just waiting, but I don't want to lose the electric anticipation of seeing my own wife; unfamiliar, thrilling.

"Hey, you're home early today," she calls to me.

"Yeah, I had my review." I get up to walk into the kitchen. "And I wanted to see you guys."

"Really?" she said, "I didn't realize that was today . . . How'd it go?" She doesn't look any different or sound any different, of course. But my weakness is different. I pause for too long and she turns toward me.

"Good," I offer, "Very positive."

"You don't sound convinced."

"No, the review definitely went well," I answer, "it's just that today at work was strange."

"Good strange or bad strange?" she asks, going back to her search for something in the cabinet.

"Good . . . I think," I tell her. "How was your week?"

"Oh, busy, fine. Kids fine. Work fine. I'll tell you more at dinner." Her search has ended; she has found the pepper and heads out the door.

My heart has returned to its normal rhythm sometime during the conversation. I feel very tired but need to go out to my car. I open the trunk, unwrap the binoculars and chair and put them inside the camouflage duffel bag. It's getting dark and the family is occupied. I take the bag and walk quickly to the side of the house. Back on my viewing platform, between the bushes and the house, the bag fits securely. Our gardener could find it, but he will not be back until spring.

Dinner steadily drains the lingering electricity from me. It is the same, completely normal. Susan talks about her work and the weekend plan. The boys perform their usual antics; James launches into some invented story that is strangely entertaining. I look at Susan as much as I can without being obvious. She is the same as last week, a stark juxtaposition with last night's show. She looks tired. Small bags underline her eyes, her hair frazzled. I notice her nails are not done and she has no makeup on, no lipstick. Unplugged.

The office is quiet when I get in early the next morning. I should do some work, but instead keep looking out the window, along the park paths, at the leaves falling from the trees, at the winter coming in.

Back at home my weekend continues to ground me, obscuring my vision of last Wednesday night. Saturday afternoon and Sunday night provide time when Susan and I are alone together. I could bring up what I saw, lay it out on the table. I could just tell her, "Susan, I saw what happened on Wednesday. I know I should have brought this up right away, but I didn't know how." I would be very curious about her reaction and explanation. It is so tempting that I almost mention it, but I know that talking about it would end it—at least in our house and in my view.

So I keep our secret. I try to hold it in my thoughts, even as life returns to its normal fogginess.

With my expected departure, Monday brings the possibility of an encore performance. I pack my suitcase and leave the house at my normal hour. Instead of driving to the airport, I drive toward the city and check into a roadside motel. I've driven by this motel often and always wondered who would choose to stay here. But it is close and easy. I drop off my suitcase at the motel and drive into work. Jessica brings me my breakfast. Sunil calls, Kim calls. I talk to a few clients. I stare out the window. I leave right at 5:00 and drive back to my hotel.

My hotel room does not smell good, I realize during my first step inside. A previous occupant has apparently ignored the non-smoking rule and also may have gotten sick somewhere. I set up my suitcase on the stand, change into some jeans and halfheartedly return some calls. As soon as it's dark, I drive home. Electricity surges through my body as I sneak through my neighbor's yard. My camouflage bag is right where I left it, and I get out the folding chair—much better than crouching. I see nothing but an empty room. I wait. I catch a glimpse of Susan and the boys passing by the doorway. Susan eventually comes into the bedroom, turns off the light, and unceremoniously goes to bed alone. Empty.

My week continues to degenerate. Each morning I wake

up in a crappy hotel room, each day I watch the clock, and each night I am disappointed by the normal functioning of my household. I come home Thursday night like usual but more exhausted. My suit is rumpled—the motel room lacked an iron—and the room's unsavory smell has seeped into my clothes, my hair, my skin.

"Tough week?" Susan asks.

"Disappointing," I answer, and that is all the discussion we have about it.

The weekend drags on like the last one. It is possible that Susan's affair was a one-time event, and my fortune will be lost forever. But I don't think so. There was something too familiar about their interaction, from the pat goodbye to the guy letting himself out. There is hope.

Hope takes a back seat to work on Monday and Tuesday. I need to attend to my projects in Houston and Chicago, and things have not gone particularly well during my week at home. I try to help Kim on Monday in Houston. Tuesday afternoon I fly to Chicago and try to help Sunil. I am struggling to pay attention, even more than normal. I wonder what's going on at home while I'm away. It could be anything, or nothing. I really do not know; I wonder if I could be surprised again.

Tuesday night I can't sleep. I am in the wrong place. Wednesday I'll go home, home to the smelly hotel, home to my camouflage bag and bushy perch. Susan leaves a message about a conference she has on Tuesday and Wednesday nights, the kids will stay with her parents. She apologizes for the late notice. These conferences could mean anything.

The next morning I am on fire. Despite the sleeping difficulty, I unleash my energy on all of the problems that Sunil and the team are facing. In the afternoon Sunil drives me to the airport. He talks about the project, about the clients. I do not even pretend to listen to him. I stare out the window. It is a spectacularly gray day; fog and mist cover everything. We leave the gray highway and get to the gray airport, my concrete terminal rising from the asphalt plain. I endure the turbulent plane ride by thinking about Susan and staring out of the window. As we land, I can see the snow pouring

sideways in the day's waning sunlight.

I get to my car as quickly as possible. Snowy road stretches out in front of me. I feel the car slide underneath me and realize I do not have much control. A guy on the radio talks about the storm; unusually early in the year, officially a blizzard now, stay inside if you can. I swerve by the few other cars on the road, undoubtedly going too fast. So much snow covers the road, the shoulders, the ground—it's hard to imagine a crash would be anything but soft.

I park my car several blocks from my house. Snow comes up to my knees and soaks my feet. I see my house, smoke coming from the chimney, another car in the driveway. Electric. The bedroom is dark and empty. I grab the binoculars and trudge around back. Through the kitchen window I can see two pairs of legs in the living room, on the couch, close together. I wait, forced to be patient. My feet are numb, legs sting, ears burn. I sit down in the snow—I am soaked and being any colder seems impossible. I watch them, legs intertwined. They get up and head to the bedroom—I quickly run around the house, back to my perch. The pain in my ears is overwhelming. I take off my tie and wrap it around my head so that it covers my ears. I am well past the point of embarrassment.

I get the full show, not like two weeks ago when I happened into the middle. The cold metal of the binoculars burns circles around my eyes. I watch, not blinking any more than I absolutely have to. It is the most incredible thing I have ever seen. And then it's over. The guy gets up, stumbles to turn off the light, and they are asleep. I finally can breathe. I watch them sleep, trying to sear the image into my mind so that I do not forget it.

I drop down off the perch into the snow below. I make my way around back, shuffle into the living room, and move close to the heating vent. I rub my blue hands together through the stream of hot air. I take off my wet socks, shoes, and jacket. The room is a mess. Plates, silverware, bottles, clothes. His pants hang carelessly over the side of the couch, the wallet has dropped to the floor. I could take the wallet. I could drive down to the Four Seasons and use his credit card. I could order room service, massages, anything. I could replace the

wallet when I return home. I wonder how they would handle that, if Susan would ever mention anything.

My hands are still blue and now shaking. My whole body is shivering actually. I grab the blanket from the couch and wrap it around myself. I see the picture of Susan and me, my favorite picture. There we are—two college kids—smiling back at me. I look closer. We are in the laundry room of our dorm.

We met in that laundry room. Right now I can't remember the last time I did laundry; I'm not even sure I would know how. I do not do my own laundry, mow my own lawn, make my own food, or raise my own children. I go to work everyday, but I don't do my own work. Someone else brings me my breakfast, organizes my calendar, and even makes love to my wife.

But I can sit and watch, and—if I'm lucky—still be surprised.

Evan Manning

You, Me, Tomorrow and the Day Before

1994 is winding down and Robinson is saying how the mushrooms are affecting his perception of everything all at once. He's smoking near the cracked door to the balcony, his paunch is more pronounced, his auburn curls thinning, his triceps less defined. You want to head into the kitchen and check on Maria, see if she needs a hand with the coq au vin. But Robinson needs you to hear this first. In fact he's trembling, he's close to tears, that's how badly he needs you to listen. A second ago he was saying how much he loves you, how he knew the minute you met that you'd be friends. Now he's making loops with the smoke from his cigarette to illustrate an infinity symbol. Behind him, on your TV, a ball is dropping and a countdown is showing that you're 2:37:14 away from the New Year.

"Do you get what I'm saying?" Robinson's asking.

You sort of do, though not in the same literal, spiritual, metaphysical sense that he does. Because the shrooms haven't hit you the way they've hit Robinson. His pupils are dilated to the point where you can hardly see the chestnut of his irises. He's licking his lips a lot.

"This is you, this is me, and this is tomorrow and the day before," he says. He flicks his cigarette over the balcony and continues making loops in mid-air with his fist. "Maria and Anelise are in here, too. And all our love and hatred for each other. And in here are all the scaffolds and rivers and our minds and *Pulp Fiction* and *Hoop Dreams* and Janet Jackson and Jeff Buckley and our dinner, dude. Even the olive in your fingers right now. You get it?"

You nod. Then you eat your stuffed olive and finish your entire Modelo in one sip. It was full a second ago. It's gone now and your toes are tingling and so is your sciatica. A couple of years ago your back started hurting. Now you're twenty-seven and it's getting worse every year.

"Our energies are all interconnected," you say. "Like in a

Buddhist sense?"

"Exactly. That's how I feel right now. I can feel it, like under my skin."

You understand. You also accept that you and Robinson are different thinkers and feelers. He is one way and you are another way and you'll never be the same. He can experience this energy but right now you cannot. How pleasant it would be if you could walk through one's brain like a small garden, stopping to look around and admire the tomatoes basking in sunlight.

"Where are you going?" Robinson says.

You're standing. When did that happen? You were just on the couch. You shrug at Robinson and walk down the hallway of your one-bedroom apartment, where you and Maria have lived for six months. String lights, bright golden and wrapped around the bannister, illuminate a path to your kitchen.

Maria is in here. Anelise is not. Weren't they just in here? No—Maria is standing against the dining table in a long black dress, alone. The dress is comfortable but fits her so well. She looks brilliant. You see she isn't making coq au vin for everyone like you thought. Instead she's putting the last dollops of ketchup on a meatloaf.

You come up behind her and rest a hand on the arch of her back. Give her hip a gentle squeeze. She squeezes your hand gently back, then returns to her duty. Because of her, because of Maria, you pity other people. Sometimes you wake in the middle of the night and think so hard the words, "I love you, Maria," you're almost certain she can hear your voice echoing in her dreams. You're guilty because your love for her is this strong. You're guilty because: Why is your happiness deserved more than others?

"What happened to the coq au vin?" you ask.

"What, is that a joke?" she says, laughing. "Didn't we make that a couple years ago?"

You study her hair as she sprinkles fried onions on top of the meatloaf. It's shorter, her split ends are gone, and she's dyed it blonde. For so many years she took pride in the fact that she never dyed her hair. Now she has.

"When did you do that?" you ask. "I didn't even notice." And you think: I never notice small things.

"Hm?" she says. "Can't hear you, El."

"Oh, nothing. Never mind." You stare out the kitchen window into the dark night. "Robinson was saying how our energies are all connected, how everything in the universe is connected. I think he's feeling the mushrooms. Maybe I am too."

Still Maria isn't fully listening to you. You never blame her for this. She's a bad multitasker. She's slicing the meatloaf with precision, her tongue poking through her lips.

"Pardon?" she says.

Or you think she says that. Then suddenly you can remember Robinson in your living room, talking about energies last year. Or the year before. Like yesterday. You wish he and Anelise were here but you know they are busy raising a newborn. You hope you don't have a child anytime soon because your writing, your passion, is stuck. Going nowhere. In the other room, the living room of your apartment that only recently started feeling too cramped, you can hear the voices of women arguing.

You recognize those voices. On the way back to the living room—salad in one hand and a tray of sliced meatloaf in the other—you stop thinking of Robinson. You can't believe that Anneke is in your apartment. Her first time back in the city in three years. It feels like it's been much longer since you've seen her. You were teenagers? You were children? Was it when she was teaching you multiplication tables in the upstairs bathroom while Mom and Dad were out?

"This is why I don't get involved with conspiracies," Anneke is saying. "Waste of time."

"No one with any real common sense or the ability to think just the slightest bit critically believes the world's going to end tonight," Zoe says.

"That's literally not true. *Literally* not. People are panic buying pasta and canned soup. Sometimes I forget you don't watch the news."

"It's funny. The way people are acting is funny. We never learn from our mistakes."

"It's not funny," Anneke says.

You should interject. You don't enjoy people arguing. You never have, not since Mom and Dad, even when it's not full-

blown. But do they even notice you're there? You feel like you're not there and you never were there and you never will be there—in your tiny living room with your sister and her partner.

You glance at your TV. It's time for an upgrade. In all regards, time for an upgrade. It's 1999 and you can recognize how disappointing this year was. Did you accomplish anything? You made decent money at work but didn't get a single poem published, not in any of the journals you submitted to, even the less-heralded ones. Have you ever accomplished anything aside from being loved by Maria?

"Elliot, my glass is empty," Anneke says, turning away from Zoe. "I can't listen to this nonsense anymore." You feel the weight and glass of a wine bottle in your hand. Are you eating dinner too? Or have you already? It's a cabernet sauvignon, the wine. You fill your sister's glass. You want to tell her how much you've missed her. She was your best friend once but then you grew up and she moved to Vancouver and now you're just friends. It's not the same.

"So, Elliot," Zoe says. "Any little ones soon?"

"Shit, I don't know," you say. "Hopefully not. I'm still practically a baby myself."

They laugh. You laugh. But you do know you'll have a child. You know because Maria is pacing from one end of the condominium to the other trying to get Leroy to stop crying, and your guests are gone, and Leroy's been crying all evening, you almost forgot it's New Year's Eve, his shrieks are that loud. It's 2003, you're thirty-six, and a two-bedroom condo suddenly doesn't seem like the right environment for a baby. 720 square feet, a sometimes-working dishwasher, a balcony not large enough for three people, marble countertops that look nice but are completely impractical from a space-for-cooking-and-appliances perspective. It doesn't seem any better than your old apartment despite being recently renovated and more expensive.

You want Leroy to enjoy a yard one day.

"Can you take him for a minute? I need to lie down," Maria says.

"Are we staying up for the countdown?" you say.

"I don't know. If he keeps you up, sure. I'm not promising

anything on my end."

Maria hands you the child you created together, kisses your cheek, and you hold Leroy and never want to let him go. Did your father ever feel this way about you? No—you doubt it. Leroy is nearly one now, and if someone ever tried to take him from you, you would kill them, you're certain.

You can hear a large group of people celebrating in the condominium next door. Why are the walls so thin? Why are those people so loud? Don't they know you're raising a ten-month-old baby? Why did your realtor lie to you about the noise here?

Before Leroy came out of Maria, you didn't know it was actually possible for a vagina to split open that wide. But then you saw it with your own eyes and you gripped your son in one hand like Yorick's skull and you pondered life and death. You promised him right there that you would be a better father than Dad was to you and Anneke. That was the only moment in your life when you can recall time completely stopping.

"It's okay, stop crying, Leroy," you say.

And thank God, he stops, and your hands are weightless. Leroy is to the left of you at the dining table. He's grown. His arms and legs are long for a boy his age, the mole on his left cheek is pronounced and he talks much older than he should. Smart kid. Knows a good joke already. Fantastic vocabulary for a nine-year-old. Up past his bedtime right now, but it's New Year's so what the hell, he can break one rule. Maria is holding your hand under the table because she knows you get uncomfortable being around Dad. Even now, in your forties, you feel smaller, quieter, less yourself around him. Like you're closer in age to Leroy. Like the tiniest insult from Dad could debilitate you.

Is this the first time you've all been together? Maria, Mom, Dad and Leroy (why do the two of them get along?), Anneke and Zoe, all your aunts and uncles and the cousins you feel you barely know. This must be the first time you've all been in the same room. You can't remember. You want everything to slow down but you know it won't.

"Cheers!" everyone is shouting.

Leroy has a glass of champagne in his hands.

"Leroy—who gave you that?"

He shouldn't be growing up this fast. You reach for it but your son pulls away from you.

"It's just a sip," Dad says. And then Leroy chugs the entire thing in one go, and everyone around the table laughs except for you, you don't want to, but then you are laughing too, and it's nearly 10:30 p.m. and you wish you'd brought Maria's one-click Kodak to capture everyone's faces. Years from now no one will look the same.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Maria is saying. "Not having him here."

You blink and you're in bed. Dad died just like that—a heart attack the day after you turned fifty-three. And you never got to tell him all the reasons you were disappointed in him for being a crappy father because you were too much of a coward. You never got to say, "Why didn't you come to my university graduation? Why did it take you six months to meet Leroy? Why is money more important to you than a relationship? Why did you make Mom so miserable?"

At least you wrote about it subtly in your poems. The ones no one will ever get to see because all you know is misery and rejection on that front. You hope that one day you can forgive him. You hope that one day you will at least try to forgive him.

"It is," you say.

Tonight your back is destroying you. You know making it to the end of the countdown is not a reality. Maria is at the foot of the bed brushing her hair and you are lying on the floor trying to get your back straightened out. You own a bungalow. You've lived here for six years, it's the house you purchased when Leroy was thirteen, and it's startling to you how everywhere you've lived can feel like a home but nowhere ever feels permanent.

"I don't like it," you say. "I wish he was here."

Leroy didn't come home for the holidays. It is the first Christmas, the first New Year, where you won't see him. Won't argue with him over which authors are most underrated: Kincaid, Salter, Ogawa, Bambara. Leroy's an English major at UBC. This makes you proud. But also it terrifies you because you've never made money writing poetry, only lost it. Every dollar you ever earned has come from jobs that don't fulfill you. You know there's more time to accomplish something. But it never, ever feels that way.

"I miss him," you say.

"I know, me too," Maria says.

"I don't have any control over it. Over any of it," you say.

"No one does," she says.

"I should talk to him. I should do that soon," you say.

"Call him tomorrow, Elliot. Leave him be for tonight."

"Call him?" You're confused suddenly. "Call who?"

"Leroy. You can call Leroy tomorrow," Maria says.

You shake your head and think no, that's not who. I'll never be able to speak to him again. I'll never be able to tell him I forgive him.

But at least it's nice to be where you are: on this hotel balcony lit by candles, a warm breeze raising the hair on your arms, Maria beside you (always beside you, even despite your shortcomings in the earlier years of your relationship), the ocean below you, a silent moon far above you.

You came here to San Juan this New Year's Eve to celebrate your book of poetry finally getting published by a respectable publisher. And although it didn't sell the 2,000 copies you'd hoped it would, it got out there. You made a small but decent chunk of change off the advance. You got a few letters from fans too—it made you wonder how people got ahold of your and Maria's home address.

You're both in your late sixties now. You've travelled to celebrate the New Year in a country that has always intrigued you. You achieved some success, mild success, and guess what? It wasn't as gratifying as you thought it would be. Your entire life you spent evenings at a desk destroying your lower back only to get one 137-page book published, and most of the poems were about Dad, and no one in your family has any idea what they are about aside from Leroy, and you don't even know if he enjoys them because he's never told you.

Maybe you should have tried even harder.

Next year you won't be here. On the beach. Next year you're with Robinson and Anelise. Even though they've divorced they remain friends and dedicated co-parents to their children. You've all promised each other that you will make it to the end of the countdown together.

Now Robinson takes out a plastic Ziplock baggie. It's filled with a substance you've never seen before.

"Know what this is?" he says. His voice is like two rusted pots scraping against one another from years of Du Mauriers. You and Maria and Anelise shake your heads, and Robinson tells you it's ecstasy and mushrooms fused together. It's what "all the kids are doing." You look up and see on the TV that there is one hour till the new year. Maria, Anelise, and Robinson all swallow their tablets, and you follow suit.

You remember being young. It's still right there.

Fifteen minutes before the New Year, your friends and Maria stand in the middle of the living room and take their clothes off one article at a time.

"I wish I could always be naked," Maria says. "My entire life, everywhere I go I've wanted to be naked. It makes no sense that anyone wears clothes. Who invented clothing? What idiot did that?" she says.

"Right?" Anelise says. She turns and looks at Robinson. "You look the same."

You've never seen Robinson naked. Not in your fifty-plus years of friendship. His testicles hang down to his knees, his stomach can hardly contain itself. Maria and Anelise both still have breasts somehow, it's magnificent, the way Maria still attracts you and always will, not just her body but the sound of her humming on a Sunday morning out in the sunlight while she tends the garden.

You notice you are naked as well. Your body a relic already. You can't remember a day in your life where you didn't experience a moment of discomfort, at least one second of pain, a blister on your hand from cooking oil leaping over the edge of the pan, one uncomfortable bowel movement, a stabbing that radiates from your back to your knee to your ankle.

"Just like I told you," Robinson says. And you get up and hold him and it is the first time you've ever been this close to another naked man. Why is that? "Just like I said," he says again. "Do you remember? Do you remember I told you about this all that time ago? About our energies?"

Resting your head on his shoulder, you nod, and you notice you're crying. "Do you think I'm a good father?" you ask Robinson. But when you lift your head, it is Anneke's shoulder you've been resting on. You're in the hospital together and

it is almost the New Year again. It never stops, never slows down, and you wish you weren't awake for this but you are. Mom is dying. Now she's dead, she's dead and it's no longer 2038, it's 2039, and so many people you know are dying, everyone you love is dead or dying. There isn't enough time to see all of them. You can hardly focus on the countdown because you miss Mom. You don't think anyone should have to live an entire life only to die, it's not fair. Her liver failed and Leroy hardly comes home for the holidays anymore, he just FaceTimes you and Maria and shows you your grandson. You always pictured Leroy living close to you, no more than a block away. Sometimes you wonder if you let him down at some point. If you tried too hard.

You don't watch the countdown this year. You stay up drinking Japanese whiskey. You think of Robinson dying of throat cancer and wonder if any of the memories you shared together are true. In a world filled with people, he was the only friend you had like that.

You don't stay up for it a few years later either. You lose Anneke and then Anelise. You don't stay up for it the next year, and Leroy has moved to Singapore with your daughter-in-law and grandson. He is a professor in the English department at NTU, and when you speak to him you ask what he's teaching in his program. He tells you Maggie Nelson, Paule Marshall, Sigrid Nunez, Kobo Abe, and of course Carver and Morrison.

"Tolstoy?"

"Nope."

You shake your head. "You have to teach Tolstoy," you say.

"A lot of them don't have the attention span for that sort of description. Things have changed," he says.

"Things were changing when I was young," you say. "They still taught Tolstoy."

He laughs very softly. And then a few minutes later you both say good-bye and hang up.

Now you are eighty-four. Like that. You don't remember the last time you spent New Year's awake or with anyone. Maria is gone. Maria has been gone for four years now. When it happened, you thought of telling Leroy that you, a weak old man, were going to kill yourself. It wasn't fair that she died before you. You were always meant to die first. In the months

after it happened, you felt the days were made of nothing. You felt you could reach out and grab a cloud and crush it in your palm and it would turn to dust and be nothing just like everything else.

But you didn't say that to Leroy. Not the next day, not the next week or next month, not five years after it's happened and you're still alive. You don't know if you never went through with it because you're too much of a coward or because you learned how much you wanted to keep remembering her. Remembering her was better than anything else. In fact after a while it seemed like the only nice thing left. How her mouth hangs slightly open when she falls asleep. How she gets mad at you but never for long enough. When she was in her thirties and still limber, how she would squat and bend her back to vacuum under the couch, singing to herself the entire time. There were all these small, beautiful things about her. Those are the only things that seem real about the world, you suppose.

Your room in the nursing home is small, confined, hardly sees the sun. You have a mini-fridge and a double bed for yourself, and the nice Ethiopian nurse comes to check on you several times a day. Mostly you talk to her about Leroy, and sometimes she says, "You seem like a good father." And when she says that you nod your head and don't respond. This morning she makes your bed and you ask her if Leroy is coming to visit. She says yes, he's supposed to arrive from Singapore next week.

You stay up this year. These days your one glass of wine gets you drunk. You're not the same anymore. Not the man who would often put back ten Modelos in one evening and still see straight. You can remember being twenty-seven like it was yesterday. Now there are ten seconds left, nine, eight, seven, six.

"It was nice, wasn't it?" you say to Robinson, and to Mom and Anneke, and to Leroy.

"But it could've been so much longer," you say to Maria.

Then you lift yourself onto your feet. You haven't stayed up this late in ages. The countdown ends, how fun—Happy New Year!—and you stretch your hand into the mini fridge and pour yourself one more glass of wine for old-time's sake.

Isn't that funny, when you sit down your back no longer hurts? In fact, nothing hurts anymore.

Brian Barrientez II

Birdstrike

Bird

I was driving home from work and watched a bird die.

I was waiting to merge onto the highway. There were two lanes, and I was stuck in the unmoving right, while the left—mocking me with its carpool diamond—was completely empty. I watched as a bird beat its wings close against the roof of the car in front of me, swooping low, wings like an airplane. As it took off towards my left, it also must've thought the carpool lane was empty; at least until a car raced past and clipped it with its windshield. The bird spun, like a twirl, macabre ballerina, curling its wings into itself, and swung back over to my windshield, where it fluttered wildly for a hot second before it dived to the right and ended up in some bushes past the turnout.

I had my truck's windows rolled down because my A/C was (and still is) broken, and my stereo'd been stolen, so suddenly all I could hear was the bird. It wasn't chirping, more like screaming. I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel. I'd never heard a bird in pain before, the sound worming its way into my brain.

I put my hazards on and pulled over to the shoulder, and traffic moved along like it was supposed to. I parked and turned my hazards off so no tow trucks would see me and pull up behind me, like they thought someone had hit me. I got my gloves out of one of the pockets of my overalls, and I crouched down and sifted through the bushes, following the noise. I must've been a helluva sight, some early twenties guy in his painter's overalls on his knees in the dirt with his hat turned backwards digging through some bushes.

Plane

Shortly after high school, I got a job working for my uncle, Alfredo, painting houses. I'd gotten into some trouble (again) tagging the bathrooms at Lake Elizabeth, so my dad said I needed to find some way to use my "artistic talents" in a

"constructive way." *I* thought I was being pretty constructive; graffiti helped me work through shit. But I wasn't interested in college, and none of my work was getting accepted into art galleries or being commissioned or whatever. I'm probably the worst at trying to market myself. So, Uncle Fredo offered the jobs, and I needed the money.

I was working all over the place. I thought I'd only be painting for rich people at first; had a bunch of assignments working in big houses on the hills of San Francisco and Oakland. But then it turned out Uncle Fredo had a bazillion connections, and I felt like I was always getting a call from him the moment I'd woken up and started sipping my coffee. Always a new job from some buddy of his.

"Hey, my buddy called, needs someone to paint some walls over at the Oakland Coliseum. Tell me, you in? I can put you in while there's a game."

"João, meu sobrinho, the Exploratorium needs some paint work done, my buddy needs a coupla guys, he can fill you in when you get there, what do you say?"

And then:

"I got something a little wild for you, João: my buddy up over at NASA is lookin' for some help painting the inside of a lab."

"You want me to go to *NASA*?" I asked. "You payin' for me to fly out to Texas or Florida or something?"

He clicked his tongue whenever he was annoyed. *Tscok*. "No, numbnuts, NASA *Ames*, it's near Mountain View. I'll get my buddy to do all the paperwork to get you in. You're in, right? Of course you're in; it's *NASA*!"

When I got there, Uncle Fredo told me I was re-painting a whole lab, and that he'd be working in some other building. We drove through a couple guard gates with our freshly printed visitor badges, and when I first walked into the building that he dropped me off at, I was expecting to see a bunch of rockets everywhere, maybe some astronaut suits I could check out when I was on my breaks. There was nothing like that: an open lobby with a couple monitors on the wall to the right; some models of planes and helicopters and the space shuttle in a big display case on a wall to the left; and some weird looking model of a machine in a smaller display

case between the two monitors. Various framed awards lined the walls.

Uncle Fredo's buddy, Santiago, met me at the door and walked me through some of the building. "This is the Vertical Motion Simulator," he said. "The VMS. You're gonna be painting inside one of their control rooms."

"Control *rooms*? Like, multiple?" I asked. "Isn't it just on a screen?"

"It moves," he replied. When we finally went up the stairs, following a blue line on the floor to a viewing room, I saw what he meant: a white box looking thing—a cab, they called it—sitting on a cone on a giant metal beam. It could angle itself and move around once someone was in there, flying. He didn't tell me how *huge* the place was; I found out later it was a ten-story building, and the control rooms were on the third floor. I'd learn more from the simulation engineers, about how the VMS was run by a branch at Ames called SimLabs, that SimLabs had other simulators like FFC and CVSRF, would I like some stickers; and I remember thinking that NASA had a bunch of two things: acronyms and stairs.

Santiago stopped our little tour in a room leading to the catwalk to get to the cab, between the two different control rooms. He looked in each one to see if anyone else was around.

He pointed to my right. "That's where they do motion," he said. "I'm painting in there."

He pointed to my left. "That's where they do visuals and system stuff. You're in there."

I turned to look but he grabbed my shoulder and got in close, real serious.

"Don't mess anything up in there."

I left it at that and got my supplies.

Superman

I was a senior in high school, tagging the bathrooms at Lake Elizabeth, when I first met Stevie. I was working a piece—that's what Stevie liked to call the process—where a skeletal hand holds a phone, and through the phone's screen you can see it's taking a picture of a red splotch on a wall.

Stevie came over and set up nearby, and I nodded to him when I realized I didn't have to run, that he wasn't gonna

call the cops or anything. After a while, I looked over to take stock. Stevie liked to start working a piece by actually sketching it out, pencil and everything. I just used what I had in my notebook for reference, but Stevie was always the real deal: he sketched things out and erased them and drew all over the wall in pencil, so light you almost couldn't see it. His work never got painted over until he actually sprayed it, but the pencil sketches were there for months, hidden unless you knew to look for them.

It was abstract, what he was working on. Bunch of different shapes interlocking and spinning from some point in the center, what looked like a person. It was huge, though, took up nearly the whole wall in front of the stall door I was working on. I felt a little ridiculous, shaking my spray can while he scribbled with a pencil. When I made out the image of a wing or a tree branch, I finally went over and said, "This is real good."

He eyed me and said nothing. Just kept sketching. He looked over at mine and asked, "What are *you* working through?"

And just like that, we got each other.

I mean, we weren't able to talk much before some cops showed up and busted me. My first offence. Stevie hid in the stall. I probably shouldn't have gone back to tag at Lake Elizabeth, but Stevie's memory and his work was always gonna be there.

I still remember him like he's alive.

B*ird*

When I finally found the bird, it had gone quiet, and I was doing my best to move branches from the bushes out of the way. I kept thinking I wanted it to be comfortable. It was a beautiful bird, a white underbelly with blue feathers on top, and some black accents. It had black around its eyes like a mask. I don't really know bird types. But it saw me, and in terror it started to hyperventilate, lungs like a machine gun, its chest heaving up and down and the rest of its body unmoving.

I leaned back on my haunches and whistled, and I thought maybe that's what I should do, just be here a while, a body to fight the loneliness. I sat down and crossed my legs and just

whistled. We were watching each other. It started to chirp like a sharp rapping, and I continued whistling.

The bird stopped chirping. I stopped whistling. Eventually it stopped doing anything.

I thought it'd be rude to poke it to see if it was alive, so I whistled again and got no response. It didn't move when I cupped my hands around it, and it made no noise when I lifted it gently.

Plane

The people in the control room were real nice to me. They knew I was there to paint, so if I had to move something out of the way it wasn't a huge deal. The timing could've been better; when I was there, they were running simulations for an accident investigation in cooperation with the NTSB. A plane crashed, and people with money wanted to know who was at fault: was it the pilots? Training? What went wrong and how could they prevent it? That's the goal, of course, making sure a plane doesn't crash into some houses again, but when a bunch of guys in suits argued loudly around me it just felt like a bunch of people trying to be blameless and point fingers.

I liked jobs like these, where I'd be in the background while everything moved around me. At some of the houses I painted, I got stock advice; advice about women; advice about men; I heard about a wife's boyfriend getting as needy as her husband; and the going rates of sand on the Dark Web; not a euphemism for drugs—literal *sand*. Here was no different. I took my time painting the walls, and Santiago would come in and talk to me in Spanish, and I'd reply in Portuguese, and we sort of danced our way through conversations, like how my immigrant grandparents watch Telemundo.

The sim engineers talked to each other plenty, and I picked up more details as I painted, getting behind computer monitors and carefully moving desks. After the plane left Bellingham International Airport, the rudder and vertical stabilizer broke off—whether by manufacturer or pilot error was being investigated. Coincidentally, a flock of Canada Geese flew into the engines, which would explain why the engine blew up at such a low altitude. Apparently, all the remains of birds are called "snarge," and they have to be sent

to the Smithsonian to be identified. An analysis was still being done on what they could find of the engines, and the VMS was running simulations to see if there were any other actions the pilots could have taken, because I guess before the flock of geese there might've been turbulence or something wrong with the rudder or—who knows.

Santiago let me know that even though the "public hours" were posted as being Monday through Friday—and most employees in the building only worked those five days—*I'd* have to work the weekend. I just had to show my visitor badge and driver's license and I'd be let right in.

That was fine by me. An advantage of watching and asking questions here and there was that I could memorize how to get the system running, how everything operated—at least from a really basic level, just enough to start a simulation with only the visuals and be able to reset it. After seeing it in action throughout the week, I knew I *had* to experience it for myself. When else in my life was I gonna get an opportunity to ride in a NASA simulator?

The weekend rolled around and Santiago left the motion control room for the day—"Okay, João, I got things to do. Voy a janguear con mis panas, nos vemos."—and I continued with my work.

After checking and double-checking the hallway outside, I pressed the buttons I'd memorized and got things set up. I'd never been inside the cab before, and it was surreal, especially once I closed the door behind me. I sat in the pilot's chair and took it all in, all of the buttons and blinking lights and the runway stretched out in front of me. The computer monitors showing the images and models were behind some kind of warped glass panes. They added depth perception, so it really felt like if I could open one of the panes up, I could reach my hand out and feel the breeze, maybe stick my head out as the plane took off.

I grabbed the headset resting on the dashboard and put it over my ears. I'd heard them talk about this in the control room. There was a list of people who could listen to the Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) while the simulation ran, and it was a small list. They'd recovered the black box—which is a dumb name, because the box was orange—from the

plane, some device I'd never heard of before that seemed to be important. I also had to look up the acronyms they kept slinging around. The black box had the Flight Data Recorder (FDR), so they knew what control inputs the pilots made, and it had the CVR, so they knew what the pilots were saying. The researchers had to listen to the crew's last recorded audio and watch as the controls moved inside the cab, while the visuals changed in perfect parallel.

Now that was all kept securely locked, and I'm not saying I knew where they kept the keys or that I'm pretty okay at picking locks—I was just curious is all.

Superman

I was real curious about Stevie's piece. He didn't talk about it much, but we had easy conversation, me and Stevie, and we ended up meeting regularly, comparing artwork we'd scribbled and stuffed in binders and giving each other feedback. Every Friday after school we'd meet up at Country Way, or The Kebab Shop, or some other place in Fremont that had food and let us chill for a bit and talk.

I finally asked him about the piece one night when we went out for discount Thursday wings at Buffalo Wild Wings. We'd decided to splurge a bit on an appetizer for happy hour, so we were digging into some chips and queso.

He said, "I don't think I captured it right."

"I feel you," I replied. We kept going back to touch our pieces up, add something new, maybe change something.

"They're similar," he said, motioning to me with his glass of water. Since we were splurging on the chips and queso, we couldn't really afford the soda we normally got. "They're both about death, y'know?"

"How'd you know?" I asked.

He laughed. "Dude. It's literally a phone capturing blood on a wall. It ain't hard."

I laughed too.

I told him about this video I'd seen, where this guy films himself killing an old man with a pistol. You only ever saw the killer's feet and hands. The killer said he'd do it again.

"I saw that." Stevie's eyes got wide. "People were hella mad at YouTube after that, right? Letting him get away with live

streaming the whole thing and keepin' it up until they got hella complaints tellin' them to take it down?"

I nodded. "That's right."

"The YouTube Killer."

"Creative name."

He chuckled.

I shook my head. "Old dude looked like my avô." A questioning look. "My grandfather."

"Oh shit."

I shrugged. "His name was Ernesto Cruz."

I had stayed up all night, Ernesto's whole life on a screen in the palm of my hand. A slideshow of images of Ernesto, interlaced with reporters talking about the incident. A couple people in hazmat suits spraying down the sidewalk where Ernesto's body had been. Thin hoses in their hands like angry snakes. Water hitting the sidewalk hard, like a spoon under a faucet. Another person in a hazmat suit was doing the same thing to the wall, where the blood had splattered when he'd been shot. I watched the water as it traveled down the sidewalk; it started out clear from the hoses and turned pink and finally red as it flowed down the storm drain.

It was that image that stained itself onto my brain. That red spot could've been anyone, not just Ernesto; my own grandfather could've been standing there, minding his own.

Stevie listened intently. "What if we get more of *that*?" he asked. "Not just some kinda message about the fact that it was online, but more about the fact that it coulda been your grandpa?"

"But it *mattered* that it was online," I replied. "It *mattered* that someone could just Tweet about it and I saw it. That I could just watch death."

Stevie finished his water and started crunching on the ice cubes. We ate more chips mostly in silence while we waited for our wings. He got like that sometimes, when he was thinking things over, almost like he was ignoring you. When the waiter came back to drop off a pitcher of water, Stevie filled his glass and took a big swig and he told me his cousin died a couple months ago.

"He was still in junior high, making videos with his friends," he said, staring at the inside of his glass. "They were doing

some kind of script he wrote that they thought was funny. But they're filming it and shit goes sideways. They were out in the hills behind East Bay's campus, and Martin—my cousin—he's up in a tree, and the branch breaks and he hits the ground hard, but it's steep nearby, and he rolls, and he's ragdolling down the hill and smashing into pretty much everything. And one of his fool friends goes and posts the video, and my family's up in arms tryna take it down, and it takes forever."

He flexed his hands. He took off his five-panel hat and rubbed his shaved head. "He'd asked me to come film for him. I said no. And I don't know." He put his hat back on, scratching at his neck. "Maybe I woulda still let him go up there."

"That what you were painting about?" I asked.

He shrugged with his whole body, palms up shoulder-height and everything. "This. That. Some other things. I'm just tryna capture."

I nodded.

"I watch it. Sometimes." He was suddenly very still. "It's easy to find. Nothin' ever really leaves the Internet. Like watching ghosts."

I thought about the old man. "Yeah. Ghosts."

"He had a SoundCloud and a blog," Stevie said. "He had somethin', maybe. It still updates without him. He had shit scheduled to go. Smart kid. I was subscribed."

"So you just . . . get emails like it's him?"

"Yuh." He sighed. "It's almost like a conversation. But it's not."

Our wings showed up and we started eating. Even though we'd had the chips it felt like I hadn't eaten in years.

Stevie asked, "Hey, João, you ever think about Van Gogh?"

"Sure," I replied.

"He ate paint, you know that?"

"Yeah. Gross."

He held a wing in his hand, rotating it. "You think his work was only good because he was sad?"

I thought about that. Chewed on it along with my food. "I think art isn't sadness. It can be. But it's mostly healing."

"Healing," he said. Not a question, not a statement.

I've thought about this conversation a lot. You try to grab

at anything you can. It's all you can do for a while. I think about whatever wasn't said. Usually we just talked art. Our inspirations, the shit we hated. I didn't know what he was thinking about. Was it only that video? Were there other things on his mind? In his life?

The last time I was supposed to meet up with him, I ended up waiting an hour before I tried to call, and it went straight to voicemail. I found out from his mom a week later. I went to his house because he hadn't been answering me. She cried when she told me. I cried when I listened. She was the one who found him. We had a long conversation. He'd seemed fine.

I drew on some of his works. Not on walls or trains or anything like that, out in the world. Just doodles from his sketchbooks. I never drew on the real deal. I made copies and I tried to finish them, or add to them, or remove something. I tried really hard to change them. And when that didn't work, I traced them.

I gathered up all his sketches and my scans and I put them all in a big folder and I stuffed them in a cardboard box in my closet and I let it gather dust.

Life went on and two years later, I started working some odd paint jobs after high school, including NASA of all places. And I got a notification about him on Facebook.

Bird

I didn't know what else to do now that the bird was most definitely dead in my hands, so I set it down and started digging, there in the dirt between the bushes, and made a small hole. I picked the bird up and placed it neatly in the hole and put the dirt back over it. I thought about saying some words but couldn't really think of any. I whistled at it again, for whatever reason.

I stood up and took off my gloves and put them in my pockets and the whole world started to turn under me, rotating up to my face, and I felt it approaching just like houses, like people, and when I'd landed on my knees I thought about the simulation I'd just left and how much I didn't want to go back to work the next day. I started walking back to my truck and then turned around and scrambled back and I stood at the

fresh little mound of dirt, and I was leaning on one leg and then the other, shifting my weight back and forth.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help, man," I was able to stutter out before I started sobbing.

Plane

The simulation started and the pilots talked to each other about the latest basketball game before their takeoff communications.

The pilot: "Thrust SRS, runway."

The controls moved on their own, switches getting flipped and buttons being pressed. The visuals changed, and now the plane was turning, and I held onto my seat. The engines growled louder.

The co-pilot: "You got throttles."

The pilot: "Eighty knots, thrust blue. V one. Rotate. V two. V two plus ten."

The co-pilot: "Positive rate, gear up please."

I heard their voices less like they were in the cockpit with me and more like they were being funneled through a walkie-talkie. That only made it seem more real though, like in the movies when people in helicopters are talking to each other but they only hear each other through their big headsets, like the one I was wearing. The plane soared into the air, and I put on my seatbelt despite myself. There was no motion operator, so I was running the simulation with visuals only, but damn did it *feel* real.

Five sets of switches flipped on their own, and I heard the clicks from my headset, perfectly timed.

We climbed, higher and higher, leaving the ground below us, and I had never been so thankful for a seatbelt before in my entire life.

I heard a thump.

Something clicked.

Two more thumps.

The co-pilot said something.

The pilot: "Did you see them?"

The co-pilot was saying something, but I couldn't hear it. There was another thump, louder this time, and then an even louder bang.

"Give it all you got, give it all you got."

Something snapped. I looked around wildly trying to figure out where it came from.

A roar from my headset surrounded my ears, and I saw the earth tilt upwards, and the pilots were shouting at each other, and the controls were moving all around me in fast and jerky motions. The pilot said, "Oh! *Fuck*." I tried to grab at the controls for all the good it would do me. Something kept chiming, high-pitched, over and over again, more noise in the whirlwind of sound. The buildings started to get closer and closer and someone in my ear practically shouted, *"April, I want—"* and then I closed my eyes right as I could make out the interior of the building we were going to crash into and then—

Everything was silent. I opened my eyes and the simulation was frozen. We were stopped in front of the building. A house. Houses. Families.

I ripped off the headset and had to physically stop myself from throwing it. I set it back on the dashboard and hit the reset button and just like that, I was back on the runway. The plane hadn't yet taken off and everything was fine. The pilots would talk about basketball.

I unbuckled myself and got up, shaky. It felt like I couldn't breathe. I had to lean against the walls of the cab to support myself before making my way to the door. I opened it, slowly, worried that if I opened it too fast I would fall over. I scrambled over to the railing of the catwalk, which was a bad idea because seeing the ground three stories below me made the whole building spin and I sat down and tried to just focus on breathing.

Who were they? Ghosts in my ear.

The geese were at fault. Right? But geese are just birds. Isn't someone supposed to make them leave the area? Doesn't someone get rid of the geese?

Was it someone's fault? Who was supposed to get rid of the geese? Was that me? Was I supposed to slosh chemicals around the airport and make it smell bad? Didn't I do my best to stop the geese from getting in Stevie's engine? Could I have done more? I'm not a professional Goose Stopper.

Things that I would spend hours looking up on my phone,

scrolling in my bed. The flock of geese had just migrated near the airport, so no one had seen them recently. No one saw the flock fly upwards until the plane was already up in the air, until the plane flew right through the flock, until two or three birds were ingested by the engine and turned into snarge and the plane went down in a horrifyingly desperate attempt to swing back to the airport runway.

I remember sitting on my bed sometimes the whole night, scrolling through text messages between me and Stevie. Everything had seemed okay. I thought about the chorus of men in suits asking who was to blame. You can't expect to rid the world of geese.

Superman

I was scrolling through the Facebook app when I got a notification about memories for the day. The usual thing: here's everything you ever posted on this part of the calendar through the years, here's posts you were tagged in, whatever, you know. Then the fun part: here's who you became friends with however many years ago today. And there was Stevie, smiling.

I went to his profile. Some posts from people missing him, people I'd never met before who knew him in completely different ways, hell maybe even knew a completely different Stevie. I scrolled through some of the artwork he'd posted over the years. It was almost everything I'd ever scanned. Here he was. My hero.

I remembered going to his funeral. I wondered if there was someone who was like a coroner, but they got rid of Internet bodies. Digital bodies. Someone who logged onto all of a person's social media sites and closed everything down, erasing their presence. I imagined someone strolling through endless dead forums, mountains of comments and blog posts and travel recommendations and restaurant reviews from people who no longer existed, from websites that were still up but closed down.

But Stevie was right: nothing ever really disappears from the Internet. And part of me didn't even want that, I guess. I was just nostalgic and sad and I missed Stevie while I looked through his profile, and it was almost like he was still around.

But he wasn't, really. Just another ghost.

I sent him a message.

Vincent J. Masterson

Directions for the Shellback

Ours is a ghost story, one I've never told anyone, not even you. I've had it all to myself for almost forty years, poring over every detail to try and understand what I'm supposed to do. It hasn't been easy. Live with a secret long enough and it changes you, separates you from everybody else in a box of little lies and omissions as clear and hard as glass. It has demanded sacrifice but helped me too, offering direction and counsel to my otherwise rudderless life. It led me to buy my long-rented condo, avoid relationships, and hang on to my job at the Shellback for so, so long. In a way, this story has been my closest companion—and a far better one than you, my dear, who for all these years refused to speak to me.

Until today.

For a long time—since sometime after the burlesque—I thought I knew how our story would end. An oceanfront room, pricey scotch and fancy steak, a length of sturdy rope. Now it feels too soon. Like so many old men, I always thought I'd have more time. Yet here we are. There may be no room service, but at least we—or to be fair, *you*—got the oceanfront room right, and it's a perfect night for a ghost story.

Far out over the Atlantic, a storm throws forks of blue-green lightning from cloud to darker cloud. Even four floors up I can hear the crash of waves through the open balcony door, and the wind suggests a violent turn in the weather. Before the skies open and the storm arrives, let me tell you this story of ours. I promise not to lie or leave anything out, and once I've finished you can tell me your side if you want. As for mine, it begins, I'm sorry to say, with another woman.

I moved to Coquina Beach from Ohio thirty-eight years ago, in the summer of 1984. At twenty-two years old, all I had to my name was a creamsicle Datsun, a bachelor's in English, and twelve grand of debt. The first in my family to go to college, I assumed you read the books, got the degree, then collected your briefcase and a small yellow house with

towheaded children in the yard. Perhaps not that simple-minded, but close. As graduation neared, my father suggested I go to law school, and I likely would have if not for Abby.

I'll spare you the delirium of early-twenties love, the eight-millimeter memories of holding hands by the reservoir, kissing in the snow. Did I want to marry her? Maybe, it's hard to say now. I know she was better at living than me, easy going and free of doubts and regret. Am I cautious to a fault? Sure, and certainly too content with routine, whereas Abby used mishap and randomness like trail markers leading her from one adventure to the next. As my college days neared their end and I needed someone to take me in some—hell, in *any*—direction, she pointed us south.

A week before graduation we were driving back from Kroger when she plopped her dirty feet on the dash. I remember how the tiny sunflowers painted on her nails caught the early morning light.

"I want to get my feet brown and keep them brown," she said. "I want to eat coconuts for breakfast and bathe in the sea."

And so our move to Florida was decided.

We drove it straight, no hotels or restaurants, just rest stops and candy bars. I remember mountain tunnels in West Virginia and seeing my first palm tree in South Carolina, the fetid swamp-stink of hot Georgia air. The entire drive I kept checking the rearview, waiting for our belongings—bags and boxes full of clothes and kitchenware and books I'd never read again—to slip their bungees and take flight off the Datsun's roof. Beside me, Abby smoked skinny Benson & Hedges menthols and sang along to college radio songs, her voice deep and Chrissie Hynde cool. From time to time, she called out what wondrous opportunities Florida held in store.

"We could open a little cantina on the beach. Start a charter fishing biz. Become surfing instructors!"

"We're from Ohio."

"We can *learn*."

Two months later, I had an entry-level job at a fair-to-middling hotel, and Abby had moved to Key West with Aldo, a scuba instructor from Argentina who rented the condo next to ours. I came home from work one day to find our relationship

dissolved in a note scribbled on the back of a TV Guide.

I'm chasing my happiness south, it read. *There's green curry in the fridge.*

Knock knock knock. "Minibar service!"

From July of 1984 until today, I have been the fulltime Minibar Attendant for the Shellback Seaside Resort. My duties: check the inventory in all the rooms' little fridges, replace any missing stock, and deliver the bills to the front desk. Six days a week I have pulled a rolling wooden cabinet full of tiny liquor bottles and overpriced snacks up and down four floors, in and out of 146 nearly identical rooms, for close to forty years.

Knock knock knock. "Minibar service!"

At first I was miserable, gloomy with loneliness and an unrelenting disappointment—with myself, with life, still waiting for the briefcase and yellow house. In a strange way, Abby's leaving made it a bit more tolerable. Embarrassment and disappointment are easier borne alone, I think. Anyway, it paid the bills and passed the hours I felt uncompelled to fill with anything or anyone else.

Knock knock knock. "Minibar service!"

November 22nd, 1984, was Thanksgiving, the first one I'd ever spent alone. I had my routine down by then, and with the hotel more than half-empty, the shift went quickly. I let myself into 416, a corner oceanfront room normally full of morning sun, only to find someone had closed the heavy drapes, bathing the room in cool, dark shadows. As I opened the minibar, its light spilled out to reveal a woman I hadn't even noticed. She stood by the window, one foot slightly in front of the other like a mannequin positioned for balance and tropical leisure in a long, floral-print skirt and loose, green T-shirt.

I remember being more startled than I ought to have been, fumbling with my clipboard and apologizing. She looked early forties, five-foot seven and lithe. Her short-short haircut made her look surprisingly (or so I thought back then) athletic for her age, her face pretty in a melancholy sort of way, like a dancer who had just lost a part she desperately wanted.

You.

When I asked if I should leave, you stared through a slight part in the drapes with your mouth open just the littlest bit, mesmerized by something on the horizon.

"Housekeeping." I turned to see Widelene (one of the few Shellback employees who's been here for as long as I have) at the door. "You," she said, her face collapsing into a sour glare. "We turned this out already."

"Hey, you got your walkie?" I crossed the room to her and leaned close so you couldn't hear us. "I need the MOD. I think there's something the matter with her."

"The matter with who?"

I turned to find the room empty, just a neatly made bed and a thin, vertical line of daylight parting the curtains. Widelene scowled and rolled her cart down the hall, a stream of Kreyòl insults bubbling in her wake.

I went to the window and opened the drapes, as if more light would reveal your hiding place. I knelt to look under the bed, checked the closet, raked back the shower curtain in the bathroom. With each passing moment my heart thudded faster in my chest, my entire body vibrating in a strange but not unpleasant way.

Every time I recite this part of our story to myself, when I close my eyes and relive it as best I can, I still feel that morning's fear, somehow equal parts dread and giddy anticipation, the initial spark of what would become my life's obsession. It reminds me of tornado drills at school when I was little. You hide under the desk, terrified by the klaxon's scream, yet are always disappointed to learn it's just another drill. That warm Thanksgiving day, maybe for the first time ever, I felt alive the way Abby was alive.

The next time I saw you was that New Year's Eve, another holiday alone. I signed up for a double, covering for one of the food runners in Turtle Cove, the Shellback's restaurant, after my minibar shift was finished. Jenny Machado, the F&B manager back then, had done a fair bit of advertising to court Coquina Beach locals to *Ring in the new year at our fabulous beachfront Bar & Grille!* It worked. The restaurant was packed, and people swarmed the patio bar and drink tents stationed on the sand.

As midnight neared, Jenny sent me and a few of the others out to the beach with champagne flutes. It was impossible to tread through the sand with a tray held elegantly aloft, so I carried mine with two hands, balancing it against my stomach like a cigarette girl in a black-and-white movie. As a middle-aged couple took my last three flutes (the husband grabbed two for himself), I saw you.

Same long skirt and green shirt, same wan expression and statuesque posture, standing at shore's edge. I remember feeling overjoyed to see you again, like running into an old lover in an airport years after the affair.

"Happy New Year," I said. I followed your gaze along a silver carpet of moonlight that lay atop the ocean's dark. Cold water seeped through my work shoes, soaking my socks and the cuffs of my pants. I stood as close as I dared, as if you were some fragile bubble that the slightest touch would burst. There was an electricity to your presence, the heat and the weight of you, and it felt just like we were like holding hands.

The surf sounds drowned out the celebrations and countdown behind us as fireworks began, sparkling arrays of red and blue, green clusters that spread like palm tree constellations over the Coquina Beach pier. When the cracking ceased and the black-powder smoke rolled stinkingly along the shore, I didn't need to look to know you were gone. I had already felt your hand melt away.

I'm not sure how often I've seen you, perhaps a dozen times a year on average. Sometimes you would appear two or three times in a month, but then whole seasons would pass without a glimpse. The duration varied, too, from a few seconds to nearly half an hour. I have seen you blink out of existence or slowly dissolve like ice melting in warm water. If there was a pattern to any of this, I never figured it out. But you always wore the same outfit (once the internet happened I looked it up—*a hibiscus-print sarong*, it's called), your short-short hair never grew, and your sad little face never aged a day.

Once I found you waiting for me in the service elevator. I pulled my cabinet in and let the door close without selecting a floor, relishing the confined intimacy without speaking or

much wanting to. When the car finally descended, I watched your feet lift from the floor as you floated slowly up and up, melting through the tile ceiling as if called to some miraculous ascension.

I came to understand then that you were no more in control of our moments together than I. Ghosts don't haunt people or places; they are glimpsed quite by accident and apparently unawares. And what I managed to see was not your will but one moment—the *same* moment—of your life transmitted across the veil or whatever, over and over again. Why that moment, and why did you look so sad? Were you on the cusp of some grim decision, or maybe lost in a bittersweet memory? I never knew, and frankly didn't care to. Why ruin a good mystery?

What I do know, what I've chosen to believe—and this is as close to faith as I've ever been about anything—is that all of this, *we*, aren't meaningless. Something has attuned us, two strangers one to the other, beyond even life and death. And what is a man supposed to do with faith like that?

Mine is solitary work, just a man alone with his cabinet of wares on a carousel of ever-revolving guests. On rounds I nod at the housekeepers, try to stay out of the kitchen staff's way, exchange pleasantries with the front desk clerks. When I was young my coworkers thought I was awkward or just shy. In my thirties and forties, I'm pretty sure I was considered a bit of a reclusive weirdo. As an old man I doubt I'm thought of much at all, no more than the fountain that has stood useless and bone-dry in the lobby for as long as I've been here.

Ten years ago—it was 2012, when we were all terrified of Hurricane Sandy before it veered toward the Northeast—I came as close to making a friend as I have since moving to Coquina Beach, a young man named Darius Gamal. Working six days a week meant training new employees to cover my one day off. He was early twenties, about the same age I was when I started, a chatty kid with huge, Scrabble-tile teeth and an easy way that even a fifty-year-old me found infectious. It didn't hurt his cause, either, that he volunteered to pull the cabinet all day.

"So we go in every room?"

"Every room."

"You even check when no one's been in there for like days in a row?"

"Every room, every day, unless they leave a DND on the knob."

"*Damn*."

We were two hours into the shift and already I had learned he'd been born in Cairo but moved to south Florida at twelve, loved Pitbull and DJ Khaled (pop stars, I gathered), and had taken this job to save up for some sort of mechanic's certification.

"Ever walk in on something weird?" he said.

"Not really."

"Liar!" Darius flashed his winningest smile. "You've worked here, what, fifty years, Papa? What's the freakiest thing you've ever seen?"

I had stories, sure. I have barged in on people Jazzercising naked or snorting coke or weeping quietly in a heap of sadness on the bed. I have interrupted more than a few couples during sex, and once I stumbled upon a small film crew hovering around a man and woman who sat smoking on the foot of the bed in Shellback bathrobes. A woman with cat-eye glasses snapped a dumb slate in my face and barked, "Closed set, asshole!" before sending me on my way. None of this, however, felt appropriate to share with my young protégé.

"A ghost."

I was aghast to hear myself spill this long-kept secret, which had shot out of me without forethought or warning, as unbidden as a sneeze.

"Right," he said. "Bedsheets and chains? Or was it more M. Night?" He put on a look of mock concern and whispered, "Do you see dead people, Papa?"

"That was a joke."

His brow crinkled skeptically. I knew he hadn't believed me when I said I saw a ghost, but now he didn't believe me when I said I hadn't.

"Yeah, 'cause if anyone here's got jokes, it's you."

After training was through and he assumed his Room Service duties, we still bumped into each other occasionally. He would roll his table beside my cabinet, bothering me with

questions that other coworkers had long since stopped asking.

"You ever get married, Papa?" he once asked. "I see no ring, but did you ever?"

"No, Darius." He let this hang long enough for me to become uncomfortable. "Came close once."

"When?"

"A long time ago. Before you were born."

"And since?"

We continued down the hall in silence, my cabinet's back wheel squeaking, the glass salt and pepper shakers dinging together on his rolling table.

Knock knock knock. "Minibar service!"

I waited, hoping a guest would appear and rescue me from the conversation.

"OK, here's what we're going to do. Tonight, you're meeting me downtown. The Bomb Shelter, 10:00 PM, on the corner of Coquina Ave and Amberjack."

I searched for an excuse but found nothing.

"I'm too old to chase girls."

Darius laughed. "No shit! We're not getting you laid. We're going to sit and drink and speak as men do. Besides, you don't have a choice."

"I don't?"

"Nope. I'm a pharaoh, and this is my desire. Besides, it's either that or you finally come clean about your ghost, Papa."

I watched him trundle down the hall with his table, wondering when I'd come to like being called *Papa* so much.

When I saw the crowd gathered outside the bar, I couldn't imagine any place where I'd fit in less. It was like stumbling upon some nightmare carnival. All the women wore risqué costumes, wasp-waisted corsets and fishnets with garters, their faces warm with deep, dark rouge, their arms and legs erupting with brightly colored tattoos. The men wore old-fashioned suit coats with wide lapels, spats and penny loafers, skinny knit ties and bolos and carnation boutonnieres. No one looked over thirty.

At last I saw Darius leaning against a brick wall, engrossed in his phone. Behind him a giant poster advertised: *October 23rd, 2012. The Bomb Shelter's 3rd Annual Autumn*

Burlesque!!! $10 Cover

"What is this?"

"Yeah, sorry, I didn't know." His grin told me he didn't much care if I thought this was bullshit or not. "But hey, they still sell beer," he said.

We made our way inside. On a barely raised stage, a three-piece band wrung boozy dirges out of their violin and stand-up bass while the singer played a washboard with heavy spoons. We pushed our way through a tightly packed crowd of sweaty hipsters all the way to the bar. There was only one vacant stool, but Darius spoke to a spectacularly fat man with Civil War sideburns who swiveled, looked me up and down, then gave me his seat with a heavy hand on my shoulder, as if to offer it along with his condolences.

"What did you say to him?" I shouted.

"What?"

I waved off the question and left him to jockey for a bartender. The one who finally served us was a petite woman whose head had been shaved straight-razor clean. She was powdered—head and face, arms and décolletage—in white with corpse makeup, her mouth an oblong smear of black lipstick. Somehow, Darius made himself understood, and she poured us draft beer in two ridiculous steins. I've never been much of a beer guy, but it was cold and felt good on my throat, the bubbles scouring away all the smoke I'd swallowed. When I reached for my wallet, Darius rebuked me with a stern finger wag.

"Tonight's on me, Papa."

Between the band's songs, various acts took the stage. A middle-aged woman in a pink housecoat and matching slippers demonstrated how to fold a fitted sheet without once mentioning the man secured, hands and head, in a wooden pillory beside her. A ventriloquist had a one-sided argument with his taciturn dummy. A pair of twins—young, rail-thin Black girls who could have been twelve or twenty-two—pantomimed a knife-throwing act so intense and terrifying it quieted the crowd. I heard actual gasps when one twin slumped over and slid down the wall, pretend-dead after an invisible blade sank into her heart. Across the stage, her twin suffered a simultaneous collapse.

Darius ordered us a second round and slid off his stool. "Bathroom!" he shouted into my ear. I had a nervous moment or two, finding myself alone there, before coming to terms with the good time I was having. When the corpse bartender returned, I ordered another round and added a shot of scotch for me, which she poured with a wink that brought color to my cheeks.

While I waited on Darius's return, a rather plain-looking woman close to my age walked upon the stage in a black gown with an extraordinarily long silver train. The three-piece began a folkish melody as she wound the train around her, a tambourine held aloft, and swept across the stage in twirling figure eights. Her movements quickened with the band's tempo, her circles shrinking tighter.

The crowd began to clap in time. She shimmied, sensually at first, then almost convulsively, tilting wildly at the hips. We urged her to dance faster, faster, until the tambourine escaped her hand, crashing into the far brick wall like a piece breaking off some failing machine. When she at last collapsed, the band and crowd alike dropped into an abrupt silence. She lay motionless for what seemed like forever—you could hear people *breathing*—then slowly struggled to her feet. The crowd erupted into the night's wildest applause. Men grabbed women, grabbed other men, everyone sharing ravenous, open-mouthed kisses, as if some powerful pheromone had been released.

A strong hand took me by the shirt and pulled me over the bar. The corpse bartender kissed me hard, her long tongue spiced with gin and cigarette smoke. She released me with something between a pat and a slap on my cheek before returning to her work.

I suddenly felt too warm, nauseous, choking on air that had been greased with marijuana smoke and a haze of spilled beer, my mouth oily with black lipstick. There was no sign of Darius. I slid off my stool and stumbled outside, the sidewalk empty now, all the other shop windows dark.

I found a bench nearby and closed my eyes, happy to discover the world wasn't spinning. When I opened them again you were there, of course, facing the street, the sarong hanging straight off your hips despite a steady downtown

breeze.

"Hey," I said, my voice still Bomb Shelter loud. "Hey lady, who do you think you are, huh? All these years and you still won't look at me? Won't speak to me?"

I stood, stumbling a bit, and marched toward you. An inch away from your face, staring directly into your eyes, I knew you didn't see me. I continued shouting absurdly, angry for the first time since slamming Abby's farewell curry into the trash. "What do you get out of torturing me? Is it fun for you? Are you just dumb and ageless and bored?"

Blame it on the booze, the rare night out, the stimulation of the Annual Autumn Burlesque, but the truth is (I told you I wouldn't lie) my outburst remains as much a mystery as everything else about us. Why, after years of being content just to see you, would I curse you? Why, when those quick glimpses had become the only chapters of my life that mattered, would I say what I said next?

"I'm done, OK? So you can just leave me alone now. Please, please, just leave me the fuck alone."

"Whoa, what's up?" Darius appeared, walking through you like a parting fog, his face twisted with concern. "You OK?"

I was suddenly sober, my head pounding with rage and an instant hangover. I was breathing heavily, and I remember being worried, for the first time in my life, about my heart.

"What's going on? And what's all that black shit on your mouth, Papa?"

I walked past him, my shoulder crashing into his narrow chest as I fetched my keys from my pocket.

"I'm not your Papa."

For months afterward I went to work every morning sick with remorse, fearing I had driven you away for good. I tried telling myself that one day, when I least expected it, you would return to me, in a guest room, in the laundry, the garage. I explored corners of the Shellback I'd never been in before, made up excuses to sneak into storage rooms and electrical closets, but it was all in vain.

The burlesque show, the last time I saw you, was ten years and two months ago.

I beat myself up over it for many years, knowing that,

unlike Abby, I deserved losing you. As those months bled into years, I decided how our story would end. If, as it seemed, I had indeed lost the right to see you in this world, then I would have to seek you out in yours.

How wasn't a hard puzzle to solve. When the time came—a bad diagnosis, forced retirement, or maybe when I grew just too goddamn tired of it all—I would rent an oceanfront room here at the Shellback. I would order up Chateaubriand and a bottle of fifteen-year-old Balvenie to savor on the balcony as night spilled over the horizon. Maybe I would say a little prayer, maybe not, then I would make my way to you. After nearly a decade alone—really alone, for the first time since the Thanksgiving of '84—there was peace in that decision.

Which brings us to today.

A typical shift, I nodded to the young ladies at the front desk, bid good morning to Widelene as I passed her on the second floor, receiving her customary grunt in response. I rolled my cabinet into the service elevator, nursing a knee that had gone stiffer than usual of late, and went up to the fourth floor to begin yet again.

Knock knock knock. "Minibar service!"

I worked my way from the top floor to the bottom and back again, same as always. I saved 418, the Executive Suite, for day's end. If it's empty I like to linger there and enjoy the hotel's most spectacular view, its massive bay window as vivid as a drive-in movie screen, which, on this early winter evening, featured dark and threatening clouds. I pulled the cabinet in behind me and closed the door for a few minutes of privacy. Dutifully, I opened the minibar and was shocked to find Styrofoam boxes mixed in amongst the liquor bottles and little jars of macadamias and red pistachios. Through an open doorway into one of the suite's bedrooms, as young and beautiful as ever, you stood at the window.

"Oh!" you said.

You *said*.

"I didn't hear you come in. Guess I was kinda zoned out. I had a headache all morning and was gonna nap. I should've put the thingy on the door."

All I could do was nod as you stepped into the common

room.

"We didn't take anything," you said. "But I moved some stuff around to fit the leftovers."

The minibar door closed harder than I'd meant it to. I drew a zero on the bottom of the tally sheet, tracing it again and again until the paper began to tear.

"Hello?" you said.

My mouth was dry, my mind on fire.

"I get it now," I said.

Your smile deflated. "Excuse me?"

"The glimpses I've had of you. I know why they're always the same, and why they've always been here, at the hotel. And why, the one time we were somewhere else, I nearly lost you."

"Look, sir, I don't know—"

"What I've seen, over and over, I get it. What I've been seeing is now."

"I want you to leave," you said, but there was no command in your voice, as if you were just playing a part without any real conviction.

"It's always been now." I was understanding too much too fast. The solution to a decades' old puzzle thundering inside my skull. "It's why I stayed here, for this very moment. Your ghost had to make sure we met before you died."

I forgive you for trying to run, just as I hope you will forgive me for how I had to stop you.

It's funny, but now that I've really seen you—seen you talk, seen you move, seen you fall—you look slightly different. While you've been stretched out so lovely on the bed, I see your shirt's more aqua than green, your skirt's patterned more with wave-like lines than hibiscus flowers. Perhaps closer to thirty-five than forty-five. Minor details, like how a face seems unrecognizable sometimes when paused on a video. People never look the same in still frame as they do alive.

Do you hear the wind, the thunder? The storm will be here soon, as will our story's end. You have a little more time to tell me your version while I'm still here. If you can't now, I'll find you in the other place, but we better make it soon. One thing I've learned from working so long at the Shellback: no one rents the suite just for themselves. There's too much luggage

in the one bedroom and two small backpacks in the other.

Are you older in the other place? Will I be younger? I'd like to think the latter, that I'll be twenty-two again, perhaps forever. I believe the meaning behind all this is that what I've mistakenly called my life has really been one long moment of waiting, my instant of staring through a part in the curtains. All the rooms I've walked into and the people who have largely ignored me have been like windows on a passing train, fleeting distractions pulling away from our real story.

Let it begin.

Brandon Forinash

The Incredible Expanding Man

I had this friend, Meg, who got into one of those relationships that gets serious fast.

They'd matched on an app, I can't remember which, and hit it off over texts. They met for drinks at a bar soon after, and she was swept up in him almost immediately; his smile, his easy conversation, the gaze of his eyes as he listened to her go on about books and her work that made her feel like she was, in this moment, the center of the universe.

They finished their drinks and then got dinner, and after that one more drink at her place, and then somehow a week later he was apologizing and saying he really had to go back to his apartment, but just to grab a change of clothes and his toothbrush, and then he would be right back, he assured her.

And she wanted him to be right back. And then pretty quickly, maybe a month in, after she noticed that half her closet was filled with his clothes, they sat down and had the talk:

Should we just move in together, she asked.

Is this too fast, he asked.

Is it weird that this feels right, they said together.

They went through all the pros and cons, talked about expectations, you know, dirty dishes, the preferred position of toilet seats (seat down, lid up—they compromised), clothes not to accumulate in that one chair by the bed, etc. After going over everything, they reached some satisfactory understanding and to which he added, I know this is quick, but I have loved all my time with you. And this feels like a chance for more of that.

It was perhaps not the most resounding statement of affection, but she believed it, and she felt the same.

And hell, he said, we'd be saving a lot of money on rent.

Well that was definitely true, she thought. The lease was coming up soon, and she just knew her landlord was going to hike her rent on the renewal. Money was tight—she was an assistant at a publishing house and, honestly, could only

afford her one-bedroom walk-up in Bedford-Stuyvesant because her parents paid almost half the rent. So this also seemed like the chance to achieve that secondary dream of so many in our little group trying to make our way in NYC, to reject our parents' money.

Let's do it, she said.

And so they did, and they had their small problems, and they made adjustments, and overall Meg said the joys of living with this man outweighed the inconveniences, his tendency to maybe leave the dishes in the sink longer than she would like, his occasional forgetfulness in regards to the toilet seat, and that she lost the lovely mid-century armchair in the bedroom to a pile of his once-worn shirts and pants. All things considered, she told us in the group text, no big deal.

It was about a month into their living together that Meg noticed something different about him. At first, she couldn't quite give the difference shape or definition. But one day, there it was, he seemed to be getting larger.

It started with his clothes, let's say, with a bit of tightening.

He mentioned it first actually. One morning as they were getting ready for their separate work (he was some kind of analyst?), he kind of chuckled as he had to suck in his stomach to button his pants.

A little out of breath he said to her, I think I've gained some weight! And there it was. He certainly had.

It doesn't look bad on you, she said reassuringly, I like how big you are.

Well, that's good, he said, because I have to be honest, I blame you. I think it's because of how much I love living with you (smiling) and how well I've been eating (haha!).

She kissed him and left for work and on the train she kind of glowed with a strange feeling that was, though she chastened herself at the thought, 'domestic bliss'? Meg had never considered herself the type of person to need or want that. In college that had always seemed like something for other people. And after college, living and working in the city, always meeting guys who seemed happy to be dating and allergic to anything more, Meg's sense of independence

had become mingled with an unnamed insecurity at the back corner of her mind, a tab on her browser she could never quite bring herself to close. The social media of those college girlfriend's she'd always dismissed and the increasingly dad-bodied crushes she thought she'd moved past, all of a sudden, seemed to be the brightly filtered clues to the mystery of 'What Meg Was Missing'.

So now that she was in a real relationship, living with a man (my god!), and making the kind of meals that have him looking healthy, as her mom might say—and when what happened next, at each stop on her way into work another and another passenger came onto her specific subway car until it was filled with all the men she'd ever dated, the 'underground' DJs and junior attornies, the urban agro-entrepreneurs and couch-surfers, men who seemed to be professionally employed as crossfitters, and one too many first-year financiers (which, before you go and judge her, was in fact only one), every man she'd know for at most a few evenings and rarely a morning—she felt a kind of giddy relief to find that perhaps the problem, all along, had not been her. She had a man who didn't mind spending all his time with her, who genuinely liked being around her. No.

Loved, he had said.

But that night she had a hard time sleeping. She hadn't realized it before, but he seemed to be a bit of a bed hog. It was three a.m. and his body sprawled over onto her side. A couple of times she politely coaxed him off of her slim square footage, but within a few minutes he was back, and she found herself engulfed in a tangle of limbs and the warm cloud of his gulping breaths.

She barely slept a wink.

And all that next week she couldn't help but feel like he was somehow always in the way. In the morning when she was trying to wash her face and do her hair he was stooped over the sink shaving. When she went to make coffee in the kitchen she had to compete with him and his blender. At night, on the couch, as they watched TV she was constantly asking him to reposition himself. Could you not lean on me so much? Could you lower your knees? Please, will you not put your feet on

the table, I can't see the screen.

But probably worst of all was his reaction to her small requests. He would sometimes become sullen and uncommunicative or he would say something like, "I thought you liked that I was a big guy", or he would get annoyed and ask her why she needed so much room. And so Meg found herself in a delicate dance around him in their little bathroom, their little kitchen, what felt like their ever shrinking apartment.

A couple of months living together and it could no longer be ignored. He wasn't gaining weight so much as he was growing physically larger.

His feet hung off the bed. He'd had to buy all new clothes, new shoes. He had to duck down for door frames. And he was constantly bumping into things. Meg's things, all of the thousand things she'd done to make her apartment a home.

It was difficult, but they talked about his alarming growth more directly now. Meg spent innumerable hours on the internet looking for possible answers. Maybe it was a strange tumor, she would posit, and feel his neck for possible swelling. Had he been exposed to radiation at work (no), or perhaps some experimental chemicals (doubtful). Was there something strange he was eating? Perhaps it was hormones in the smoothies he made in the morning.

He tried to temper her concern. I think it's stopped actually, he said, and then, well, this can't go on much longer. Maybe it's a late growth spurt, he said, My father grew two inches his senior year in college.

But you're 31, Meg said in a tone that existed in a quantum superposition of incredulity and not wanting to sound incredulous, And you've grown a foot!

To which he gave a little shrug with his enormous shoulders.

After three months of this, Meg was living with an almost constant feeling of claustrophobia.

It wasn't just his physical size, it was the worrying about him too. He had lost his job by then or had been placed on furlough—he wasn't working or making money. And so Meg had to ask her parents again for money, which was one of the worries. But more so she worried about his days—what he was

doing. He'd accidentally kicked a tremendous hole in their apartment's wall while he was sleeping in the living room, but this was actually somewhat fortuitous, seeing as how he couldn't fit through a normal doorway anymore (although the management company did not share this perspective, or at least not in their emails to Meg and tight-lipped letters taped to the front door).

So everyday he would kind of scramble down in the mornings and wander around the neighborhood, visit Prospect Park. He was especially fond of crossing the East River and spending the day overlooking the Bronx Zoo (he liked to spend time with the giraffes). Sometimes he would visit her unexpectedly at the downtown publishing house.

Isn't that your boyfriend, her boss would say, gesturing to the window.

And sure enough, there he would be, several stories high, vying awkwardly with the midday downtown traffic, knocking over a historic building, and, as always, apologizing profusely.

If you'll excuse me, Meg had to say to her boss, I've got to go deal with this.

And her boss nodded but in such a way that Meg could see her running a red-inked line through all of Meg's dreams at the company: promotion, the chance to get off her boss' desk, take on writers of her own, do work she could actually believe in.

Meg sighed and went to her office and opened the window and shouted out to him, waving her arms until she got his attention, which took a second because he was mostly consumed with trying to fix the building he'd destroyed, and let me tell you, it was not going well.

Stop, Meg yelled.

I've got this.

Just stop, you're making it worse.

And sure enough, when he took his hands away the whole thing fell over again and rather unfortunately flattened a few bystanders.

What are you doing here?

I thought we could go for lunch, he said.

I'm at work. You can't just show up unexpected.

I'm sorry! Really. I didn't think I'd be a bother.

It's alright. It just isn't a good time. I was in a really important meeting. Why didn't you call?

I thought I might surprise you.

Well shit, Meg had to admit to herself, he certainly had done that.

And I can't press the little numbers on my phone anymore.

Go home, Meg said, I'll see you there after work.

And so he would turn around, his shoulders slumped like the ears of some great dog, stomping back across the river to the vacant lot across from their apartment where he'd started camping at night. And Meg went back to her meeting and the unspoken disapproval of her boss, the judgment of her colleagues, and her infinite concern.

It was in this way that her boyfriend, who was always somehow on the periphery of her mind, grew and added and took over the foreground, so that she could barely read a paragraph or listen for one half minute or form a complex sentence (which was understandably not great for her work at the publishing company).

Still, in the evenings, when she came home from work, he would make some grand gesture, give her a tremendous magnolia tree all in bloom that he had uprooted from the park, or he would pick her up and take her to the tallest building in the city, climbing up the side of it with her on his shoulder, and there atop the skyscraper, with all of New York City below them, make a little picnic of it.

She would lay in his lap as he patted her head and talked about anything except his size, telling stories of the city based on landmarks they could see, or she would tell him the bright stories of her day at work (never the bad).

And if they talked about his growing size, it was him sharing his fears and her trying to soothe the gentle giant.

I feel, he said while deep pools of tears welled up in the corners of his eyes, like some godzilla motherfucker, trampling around, knocking things over.

No, she said, and squeezed his finger. That's ridiculous, you're not a godzilla.

Thanks, he said and sniffed back a tremendous gob of snot,

but I think I am.

No, you're not a godzilla. I mean, look at where we are. You're much more of a king kong type.

Fair point, he said, and laughed. And his laughter kind of vibrated in Meg with the force of it.

I love you, Meg. You're the most important thing to me in the world.

It was the first time he had said it, like that, unqualified. Those immense words. She felt the great weight of them and the great need of them.

I love you too, she said and then added, squeezing his index finger close to her, My king kong.

And he laughed, and she shook.

This went on, their new dynamic, until one morning when Meg awoke to find herself surrounded by stars, floating weightlessly in space.

As you can imagine, she was not a little unnerved by this. That is to say, she began to have a pretty solid freak out, yelling and hollering silently in space, spinning around looking for something, anything to orient herself, and that's when she saw him beneath her, a hundred thousand miles away, but so massive, large, the size of a planet.

She had become his satellite, locked in an orbit around him.

He was turned away from her now but slowly his body was revolving to face her. And perhaps it was only sun, but when he finally revolved completely he seemed to light up all over.

Meg! he said, Oh my god! I thought I had lost you.

What happened, Meg cried out.

He stared at her and furrowed his brow and said, What?

What happened?

Meg, I can't hear you. What are you saying?

You can't hear me?

I can't hear what you're saying. I'm sorry, Meg, I don't know what you're saying. Can you hear me?

Meg nodded and tried to gesture to him that he didn't need to shout.

Oh, right, I'm sorry, he said, I'm just so glad to see you. I woke up and I guess I must have outgrown the Earth. And I thought I was all alone. I thought I was going to drift through

space forever all by myself. I'm gonna be honest, I had some really dark thoughts there.

Meg tried to nod sympathetically.

I want to hold you, but I'm afraid I would crush you.

Meg nodded.

At least we have each other, he said to her, I love you.

And Meg forced herself to nod.

And floating like that, with no way else to spend her time, she stared at him, really looked at him in a way she never had before. She noticed now everything about him, every pimple on his back and every hair on his ass, his one yellow toenail and his one dead tooth, his propensity to drink too much, the way he would apologize and apologize but not really do anything about it, how he left all the cleaning to her, that he was always talking about working out, getting in shape, right after he finished a bag of Doritos, my god, that he couldn't cook, that he was basically an oversized child even before he had become an oversized man.

The way he only said 'I love you' when he needed to hear it back.

The sun slowly moved behind him then, and she found herself in the dark shadow of him. I'm so sorry, he said once more and then there was a great hush between them. They had become blind to one another in the eclipse. Meg, another small black dot in a sky of mostly black. And him, an undefined silhouette amongst the stars. And in that moment, in the nearest approximation of solitude, as it dawned on Meg that she would never have it again, she began to cry.

She cried and cried, noiselessly, the tears freezing and falling off her skin like snowflakes. She cried and then as the sun crested over his right shoulder she ran her sleeve across her runny nose, brushed the tears from her face, breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth, swept all the rubbish into the corners of her brain, and smiled at him once more.

They spent years like that, as he became the size of the Earth, Saturn, surpassed Jupiter. He became so massive that he couldn't really make her out anymore. She became only a small speck flying around him, and it changed things. He

would still talk to her but, unable to hear her voice or see her face or even make out her body language, he stopped asking after her.

Instead, he spilled himself out to her. All his insecurities, his fears, his longings, he retold the story of them to her, gilding the good and cleaning the tarnish. He spoke and his spittle formed a giant ring as if he was surrounded by his own luminous speech and one moon, Meg.

And he continued growing.

He grew and grew. He grew to be the size of the solar system, the galaxy. As improbable as it sounds he grew until he became the size of the whole universe, touching everything at all points everywhere, so incredibly large that the gravity of his mass caused him to collapse into himself. And so, in those final days, he became a super massive black hole, sucking in everything, all the stars, all the planets, and of course my friend Meg, as well as everything about her, the passion for books and film, her unharming disarming wit, the way she always seemed to show up for a coffee or a drink when a friend needed it, and of course all of her dreams for herself and good she wanted to do in the world—finally pulled together across the plane of his event horizon.

I think about her sometimes. I think of her trapped in his gravity. If the scientists are right about black holes, then she is falling further into him even now. She is falling endlessly towards the center of him, his dark, inescapable singularity.

It's too bad, really.

I haven't heard from her in years.

Corinne Tai

Eight Years

The mountain air bit into the scrape on her palm. Icy snow soaked her sneakers and numbed her toes. Her phone had betrayed her thirty minutes ago, shutting off from the cold as if in protest of the whole endeavor. Sarah felt very small: a speck of underdressed American tourist on the Bosnian hillside. Her birthday hike was not going as planned.

"Fuck you, Will," she said into the silence. The words felt good.

The AllTrails website had proclaimed Mount Trebevic an "easy stroll from the Sarajevo city center" and an "enjoyable hike to drag your kids on!." She was starting to hate whatever perky parent had written that comment.

Sure, the trail started easily enough: steep, narrow residential roads, the only hazard territorial neighborhood dogs. Then the trail hit its first real hill. Now, every one of her steps crunched through the crisp top layer of snow and slid. The rubber soles of her sneakers had no purchase at all.

At the top of the first hill, Sarah stopped, panting, heartbeat in her ears. Down the hill, thirty feet of icy snow, a faint smear of blood visible where she'd fallen and scraped her hand. Up the hill, at least fifty more feet, and then dense dark green pines. If she made it that far, maybe she could use the trunks for leverage.

Her breath in her ears, it took a minute or two to register a sound behind her: purposeful, steady crunching.

Boots.

She tried to feign that she was taking a break. A group of ten or so men in dark parkas trooped past her, footprints thick as tire treads. At the top of the next hill, they paused.

"Do you need help?" one of the men called. No, she realized, boys. The one speaking had a pimply face, wore a gun and a knife sheathed on his belt, and spoke with an older man's confidence.

"Uh. Maybe," Sarah said. He walked back down the hill towards her.

"I'm Davud," said the boy in slightly accented English. "Walk behind us, we will clear path for you."

Sarah focused on putting her feet exactly in his footprints. At the top of the hill, Davud said something to the other boys in Bosnian, gesticulating back at her. Then they began walking as a group.

One of the other boys hung back so that he was right in front of her. "My name is Arpino. Where are you from?"

"New York." Sarah glanced at him briefly—he had a strong jawline, light brown hair, pale brown eyes, well over six feet—he was quite good-looking, she realized—before feeling herself nearly slip. She went back to putting her steps directly in the prints.

"Oh? New York? Like in Home Alone 2?"

"Yeah, like that." Home Alone 2? Really? "Um, have you seen the first one?"

"Of course. We see lots of American movies. I want to go to university in the States. I want to play basketball." He mimed dunking a basketball. "How long are you in Sarajevo?"

The next few minutes proceeded like that, the boys asking Sarah rapidfire questions about her job (software engineering); what it was like living in the States (good, except for Trump, to which Arpino had said "But Home Alone 2" in such a plaintive voice she had to laugh); was she really from America, she didn't look like it (my mom is Chinese, that's why), did Americans really hate Muslims (uhhh . . . .).

Even as the trail flattened out, going into a forest, the boys' heads stayed turned towards her as she answered; at first the attention was unnerving, like seeing a security camera swivel to follow your every motion, but then she began to enjoy it. It was strange to feel like the undisputed authority on something, especially something as big as the United States.

They stopped in a clearing. Sarah ventured her own question. "Is that a real gun?"

The boys laughed.

"No. Of course no," Davud said. "This isn't America. It's an air gun."

"Ah, okay." Sarah felt an unnoticed tension in her legs and back release. The entire time, for all the chitchat, she'd been poised to run.

"Yeah," one of the boys chimed in. "Whenever I want to scare my mom, I just tell her I want to go to school in America. You know." He made a finger gun at Davud, then stopped abruptly and glanced at Sarah.

Silence.

Then—a crinkle of plastic. Davud was taking out a white package of cigarettes labeled *Drina*. "Do you want one?"

"No, thanks," she said. Now most of the boys had taken out their own packs of cigarettes. She eyed them. "How old are you guys exactly?"

Davud had his hand cupped around the end of his cigarette and didn't respond.

Arpino, who wasn't smoking but instead bouncing from foot to foot, looked her right in the eyes. "I'm seventeen."

"I'm seventeen," said Sarah.

A flicker of an expression passed over Billy's face, or perhaps it was just a shadow from a cloud passing over the sun. "I'm twenty-five."

They were sitting on the college library steps with cups of Starbucks coffee. It was a warm fall day, breezy but sunny. Around them students clumped together with their backpacks and blue jeans. Sarah saw several of her freshman year orientation buddies towards the right of the library. They hadn't seen her yet; she hoped they would.

"What do you want to do one day, Sarah?" Billy said.

"I don't know," she said. "I like music, but I'm not good at it. I like science, too, so my parents want me to be a doctor." She shrugged, pricklingly self-conscious of sounding so stereotypically Asian. "What about you?"

"Well, you've got plenty of time to figure it out," said Billy, smiling. He was classically good-looking, with blue eyes, an angular face, and dark hair. And white. "I actually want to be a musician myself."

"What do you play?"

"Guitar."

"Whoa. That's *so* cool." As soon as Sarah said it, she felt that same prickly sense of regret. She pulled down the bottom of her striped crop top.

She'd met Billy twice before in crowded frat parties, the

kind that always reminded her of pinball machines: neon and shadows and bodies bouncing back and forth. Her friends, other freshmen girls, seemed to spend most of their time looking at other people who were dancing, and Sarah had been doing the same when she first made eye contact with Billy.

He looked like a boy from her high school, a handsome white boy who had been quiet and yet effortlessly popular. She'd had a crush on him, like every other girl in the grade. But she, one of the only three non-white people in her year, would never have caught his attention.

Yet in college, the rules were different. From that first moment, Billy looked at her as if he could look at nobody else. They'd made out against the wall and the next morning she'd gone to class with a stain of red on her neck—her first hickey.

Now here they were on their first coffee date.

Billy raised an eyebrow, then laughed. "Well, I appreciate that. I can show you sometime if you want."

Sarah sipped her coffee, which she'd ordered black, like his. Without thinking about it, she made a face.

Billy laughed again. He held out a small sugar packet between his second and third finger. "I took this. Thought you'd want it."

Sarah felt this motion like a pull, like a small thread between them. Something passed over his face; she wondered if he felt it too. She took the packet of sugar. "Thanks."

From the top of Trebevic, Sarah could see all of Sarajevo. The mountains surrounded a giant bowl of city. At the base of the bowl, the chaotic mix of architectures, a meaningless jumble of grays and browns and whites; towards the rim, lines of snowy-roofed little houses.

In the cable car down, Davud and Arpino claimed the seats across from her. The city grew larger and larger through the frosted window.

Suddenly something struck her.

"There are so many graveyards."

Davud nodded and pointed at a massive fenced-in piece of land, white narrow stones like fingernails sticking straight up in the snow, near the edge of the bowl. "That's one of the

graveyards where the snipers used to sit during the war. They could see down into the whole city."

He gestured towards the area of the city with wider streets, cobblestone, taller buildings painted in blues and whites and yellows with dark rectangular windows. "That part is very Austro-Hungarian." Now he pointed towards the center, with smaller streets between little coffee shops, restaurants, stores selling souvenirs, nothing taller than two stories, dark sloping roofs with a rippled texture. "That's Old Town. Much more Ottoman." Finally, he pointed to the part of the city with gray cement buildings, carbon copies of each other. "And over there, that part is very Soviet, ugly, yeah?"

Sarah and Arpino were both looking at him now.

Davud smiled. "I love it here. Sarajevo is my home. The city where East meets West, that's what they say."

Arpino shrugged. He pointed at a building near Old Town. "Look, there is our boarding school."

"Yes," Davud said. "Maybe you can see window where Arpino jumped out yesterday after curfew."

Arpino punched Davud on the shoulder, who punched him back. The cable car wobbled.

"Why'd you sneak out?" asked Sarah, mostly so they'd stop shaking the car.

"I was getting snacks," Arpino said. "Wanna see?" He took out his phone and pulled up a video on his phone of him climbing out of the second floor window and shimmying down a drainpipe. When he reached the sidewalk, two or three male voices cheered.

Sarah shook her head, smiling. Looking down, she could see the divisions Davud had pointed out: Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Soviet. East meets West, indeed, with no clear winner.

"How do you say beautiful in Bosnian?"

"*Lijepo*," Arpino said. With no change in tone, he added, "You are also *lijepo*."

Sarah spluttered a sound somewhere in between a laugh and a cough.

Sarah never knew what to say when people threw out comments like that—so casually, as if words cost them nothing. At night she still sometimes lay awake and went

back through things she'd said the previous day. Words had to be carefully doled out, especially when it came to flirting with other people.

"Have you decided on your major yet?" her dad asked.

Sarah and her parents were sitting in a dark Japanese restaurant in Midtown Manhattan. At the end of her junior year, after more than two years of dating, she was finally introducing Billy. She looked up at the lightbulbs hidden behind smoky glass.

"Computer science," said Sarah.

Her mom and dad exchanged looks. She wished she wasn't sitting across from them. If the lights had been flickering instead of just dim, she could imagine this being an interrogation scene from a biracial version of Law and Order.

After a long silence, her mom gave what she probably thought was a supportive comment: "You look like you gained some weight. But you look healthy." She was carefully *not* looking at Sarah's hair, which Billy had dyed blue for her a month ago in his apartment sink.

"Your hair looks awful." Her dad had no such reservations. "Next thing it'll be a tattoo."

Sarah put her hand on her denim-covered thigh, right over a small tattoo of a bird she'd gotten with her friend Cam the previous week. Cam had not hesitated, the needle sinking into her pale skin, speaking Chinese with the tattoo artist. Sarah wavered. "Do you want to do this?" Cam said. Sarah nodded. "Then what's holding you back?"

At that moment, Sarah saw Billy enter the restaurant. "There," she said. He saw her, waved, began to walk over. She saw her parents take him in: his square jaw, his whiteness, his tattoos poking out of sleeve and collar.

"Hey," he said. Billy kissed her on the cheek. Sarah could see her dad physically stiffen. She stiffened too.

Billy looked around the scene at the table: her Chinese mom, slight and well-dressed, her white dad, with the kind of expression he probably used with his more irritating clients. "My name is Billy," he said, proffering his hand.

After what seemed like an eternity, her dad shook it.

"What's that you're drinking, Dr. Henderson?"

"I'm not a doctor," said her dad. "And it's a Sapporo."

"But you're a lawyer? Juris doctora?" And before the silence could get any more tense, he went on in a wholesomely enthusiastic. "My dad loves Sapporo too. He's been trying to make his own beer for ages but it just doesn't taste the same. I don't think he knows when to add the hops."

"Oh," said her dad. Sarah wanted to melt into the floor, but something in her dad's face had shifted. "I tried to make beer myself for a couple of years. Never had the time to get good at it."

Billy gave a genial laugh. Sarah looked between him and her parents. Were they really . . . ?

"And what do you do, Mrs. Henderson?"

Sarah's mom looked surprised to be addressed. "Well, I don't work anymore. But I used to be a paralegal, and before that I wanted to be a violinist."

"A violinist?" Billy shook his head, as if to say *unbelievable*. "I just saw Joshua Bell. When he was doing that thing, you know, where he busked in the subway to see if anyone would recognize him? It's funny. Most people can't see who someone really is when they're not expecting it."

"Joshua Bell did what?" her mom said.

"Let me show you . . ." Billy pulled out his phone, a move that would have earned Sarah a stern look at any other family dinner, and yet her parents were leaning forward over the table to see.

Outside the restaurant, her mom hugged Sarah goodbye and then Billy too. Her dad gave her a stiff hug, then put his hand out to give Billy a handshake.

As her parents got into their yellow taxi, Sarah and Billy stood in the warm spring air waiting for their Uber. As the taxi merged into a sea of yellow, white, and red lights, Billy took out a cigarette.

"I didn't know you liked beer," Sarah said.

"I don't." He lit the cigarette.

"Or violin."

"Bartending taught me how to make conversation."

"Huh," said Sarah. Billy was good at making conversation, that was true. She thought about visiting him at the bar where he worked: dark wood, dim lighting, endless tasters

of whiskey until she was euphorically dizzy. Kissing in the Ubers on their way back uptown, city lights passing over his face. Seeing him make easy conversation with the other bartenders, especially a young attractive woman named Felicity, had made her feel prickly and restless. As she did right now.

He took her hand as if reading her mind. "Let's just cancel the Uber and walk."

Jealous. That was it. She felt jealous, seeing him charm her parents with such easy confidence.

A month later, before his graduation and the start of her first big summer internship at Google, he sat her down and told her that he wanted to break up. It didn't occur to her until much, much later to ask why.

At the cable car station at the bottom of the hill, Sarah and the boys exchanged Instagram handles.

"Thank you," she said. "Nice meeting you. *Drago mi je*."

Excited sounds from the boys. Arpino looked at her. "You speak Bosnian?"

Sarah smiled. "I'm trying to learn a few words." When she had been planning their trip, she'd tried to learn a few phrases from each country. She'd hoped to surprise Billy with being able to speak in each country's language.

She walked back to the hotel along the Miljacka River. In her room she hung her soaked shoes by the laces from the sputtering heater, alongside her jacket and socks. She plugged in her traitorous phone. It was a nice hotel: there was a big queen bed with a quilt in red and gold thread, a bronze coffee pot stocked with instant Turkish coffee.

It would have been romantic.

After the breakup, Sarah had fled to Cam's.

"Are you still going to go to Bosnia?" Cam said. Across the kitchen table, she and her girlfriend sat side by side with their arms crossed like two concerned parents.

"I don't know. I've never traveled alone before."

"Do you want to do it?"

"Of course."

"Then what's holding you back?"

There was a hard nub of hot anger in the pit of Sarah's

stomach. But even a world away in Sarajevo, she was still thinking about him. She'd attempted the hike to avoid thinking about him, to avoid the feeling that always came when she was alone: that she didn't really know anything at all, not least what she was supposed to be doing with her life.

Sarah took a hot shower, wrapped herself in a towel, and lay on the bed. She checked her phone, saw she'd gotten an Instagram DM from an unfamiliar username. It was Arpino, sending a message: "Want to get dinner?"

That evening, Sarah and Arpino met in Old Town. The sloping roofs and cobblestones were starting to accumulate layers of white powder. Under the yellow lights of the restaurants and little shops around them selling coffee and Turkish sweets in a range of colors, the snow was much prettier now than when she'd been trudging through it. Sarah found a place she'd read about online to try the traditional Bosnian dish called cevapi.

Sarah ordered a whiskey. Arpino eyed it.

"Birthday whiskey," she said by way of explanation.

"Happy birthday!" He toasted her with his water. After a brief pause, he went on, "I have never drunk alcohol before."

"Really?"

"No, never."

"Wow." She pushed her glass towards him. "Here, give it a try."

Arpino's eyes widened a little bit; she realized she had stated it like an order. He took the glass, then took a long sip and immediately started coughing.

"Careful, it's pretty strong," Sarah took back the cup, handed him her water.

"Wow," he said once he'd stopped coughing. "Americans are crazy."

"Mm, that they are." The platter of cevapi had arrived, the little meat pieces looking greasy but smelling delicious.

"Do they really drink a lot at American universities? Like in movies?"

"Not just watching Home Alone 2, are you?" Sarah said, shaking her head. "But, well, yes. The red Solo cups, for example, those are a real thing." She realized she could say anything and Arpino—eager, open-faced—would believe her.

She went on before she could think about that too long. "I

really have to thank you guys for helping me out today. I'm not sure what I would've done, and I don't know if a bunch of young guys in America would've done that."

Arpino considered that, spearing a piece of beef on his fork. "It was fun. We don't meet Americans often. Only from movies and books. Did you learn about Bosnia? Yugoslavia, the war?"

"We didn't, at all. I read up a bit before coming, but that was the first time."

"My parents say it was really awful. In Sarajevo. With the—what's the English—siege. Neighbors killing each other, snipers on Mount Trebevic. All these differences, no one thought about them and then the war." He tapped a finger on his glass. "'Cracks that never mattered until the whole thing shattered,' that's what my mom says."

"Poetic." Sarah thought about Sarajevo, a city filled with differences; the mélange of architecture they'd seen from the cable car, the churches, the synagogues, the mosques. It was so different from her hometown, where white and Christian were the norms, where someone like Will, no matter how many tattoos he got, no matter what kind of music he listened to, was normal. Where someone like her, every inch looking like ethnic mixing, an anti-globalist's nightmare, was not.

"So her English is really good, too?"

"Yeah." Arpino smiled at the compliment. He reached across the table; she nudged the whiskey over to him with the side of her hand and he took a careful sip. She nodded at him and he took a bigger sip, wincing. "Yes. Also. Who is "we"?"

"We?"

"You said "before we planned the trip here." But you are on your own?"

Sarah winced and tried to play it off by taking her glass back. "I didn't plan to be."

"So, now you gotta tell me," Cam said. She shook out her newly short hair—a haircut she'd gotten right before going home to LA the previous weekend. "Who'd you have over when I was bursting out of the closet back in California?"

Sarah tried to laugh, studying the windows. It was the start of winter, Sarah's twenty-third birthday, and they were

sitting in a bar in Brooklyn drinking artisanal gin and tonics. Sarah had graduated with a degree in computer science and honors and begun working at Spotify. Her parents had helped her move into her first apartment with Cam the previous summer.

"Well. Actually. Do you remember Will? I mean, Billy?" And in a rush of words she told Cam about seeing him on a dating app for the first time since their breakup her junior year. How his hair was long now, and he went by Will. Drinks, a hookup, texting every day.

Now Cam was the one studying the windows.

Old Sarah wouldn't have said anything. She would've just sat there wondering what on earth Cam's expression meant and picking it apart later before she went to sleep. Now, though—"What is it?" Sarah said.

"Nothing."

Sarah gave her a look. Cam stirred her drink.

"Well," Cam relented. "You're different when you talk about Billy."

"It's Will now," Sarah said automatically.

"Sure, Will, whatever. You just . . . you sound more like college Sarah. Like when he convinced you to dye your hair."

"He didn't convince me. I wanted to."

"Sure, whatever," said Cam. "But that was because he said he liked dyed hair."

Sarah winced.

"Look, I don't *dis*like him, he's fun to talk to. I just think when you're with him . . . you trust that he knows more than you. That he knows you better than you know you." Cam drained her glass and shook the ice around the bottom.

Sarah studied the ice cubes. She had gone on dates, hooked up with people, New York City was a glass full of lonely ice cubes bouncing around. But the collisions had all been frictionless. Nobody had made her feel the way she'd felt with Billy. It was easy for Cam to be critical; she had been in a committed serious relationship with her girlfriend for more than two years now.

"Isn't that love?" said Sarah. "When someone knows you better than you know yourself?"

"I don't know." Cam sighed. "I don't know if anyone should

know you better than you do."

Just like in college, something about being with Billy lessened the persistent feeling that Sarah wasn't really the adult she pretended to be. Sometimes she felt like a tiny speck in a huge universe and was overwhelmed with the feeling of existential purposelessness. In all of that, Will's confidence felt like certainty.

A few months, a year passed. Will turned thirty-three, they celebrated with some of his coworkers at the bar where he worked one summer evening. Winter again. She was twenty-four.

In other ways, it wasn't like college at all. When Sarah had read Will's lyrics back then, she'd been too impressed by him to really suggest meaningful changes. Now, though, she felt like she could. It wasn't that she hadn't noticed issues before, lines that felt a bit flat or tunes that didn't quite sound right, but she'd always thought he was so much better with people than she was that maybe she just hadn't understood.

At first, he seemed to like her feedback. Then came the first proper day of spring. They met in Central Park for lunch break. Will arrived breathless and excited, the way he only got when working on music.

"Let's hear it, babe," she said, smiling, before he'd even said hello.

Normally, his songs followed the same pattern, acoustic guitar and him singing. His verses were creative, emotional, clever. But this one had something electronic and vaguely garbled about the background.

"My coworker showed me this new app, his friend's prototype. You can fuck around with the sound and make your own instrumentals." Will only ever swore when he was talking about music.

"Hm," she said, pressing replay on the song. "I feel like the sound quality isn't quite . . . smooth."

Will tapped his finger against his leg. "What do you mean."

Sarah was thinking about it like a problem at work, drawing on what she'd learned about the physics of sound waves in a class in college. "It sounds pretty staticky. Might help to cut out some of the unwanted higher frequencies."

Will laughed without looking at her.

"It wouldn't be hard. If you have the source code, I can try it for you."

Will's his lips had pressed into a line.

"I don't need your help," he said. "Look, music is about being genuine. Sometimes it just comes out." Then he laughed. "I guess you wouldn't really know. You can't do anything without preparing for it." Will looked at her then, assessingly, like the way he'd looked at her parents the first time they'd met.

Sarah had opened her mouth and then—nothing. Nothing came out. She had not felt so at a loss for words since those first scrambling days of college.

Will stopped coming to her for thoughts on his music. She tried her best to reclaim the ease she remembered from their college relationship—eating dinner together, going out for drinks together. Nowadays, with her Spotify salary dwarfing his bartending and occasional music gigs, she picked up the tab.

That summer Cam moved in with her girlfriend. Sarah turned her bedroom into an at home office. Fall arrived. Her twenty-fifth birthday loomed. Will had stopped coming home when he said would, sometimes got into moods where he'd answer in monosyllables or ignore her in favor of his guitar. Cam suggested therapy or breaking up, but Sarah opted instead to try something new. She made an itinerary and asked if he wanted to go with her to Europe for her birthday. She would pay. His company was present enough.

Then, a week before the trip, she'd returned home from work to find the apartment empty. No Will, adjusting his buttondown shirt in the mirror before his evening shift. No notebooks on the table by the door. The bedroom drawers were open and half-empty. In the bathroom, his disposable toothbrush lay in the trash.

In the kitchen, there was a small white envelope. In the letter, he wrote beautifully about how the eight years they'd known each other had changed his life. But there was not a single sentence of explanation for why he'd left her, again.

She called Cam, but as soon as the call connected, she found herself at a loss for words.

"Sarah?" said Cam, her voice surprised, concerned. A long pause. Sarah heard a slow exhale through the phone line.

"Is it Bil—Will—ah, fuck it. Is it Billy? That fucker."

"We were supposed to go to Bosnia next week," Sarah heard her own voice say the words.

"God, that absolute fucker—hold on one sec." A rustling on the other line, then Cam's voice again, gentled. "Wanna come over?"

"I'd really like that." Sarah swallowed around the lump in her throat. "Why don't you sound surprised?"

Cam's voice gentled even further. "Why don't you?"

Sarah opened her mouth and stopped. On some level, she'd always known he could leave her. She'd always known he would.

The check came and went; Sarah insisted on paying. Arpino had hung on her every word, asked her so many questions about her life in America, found even the smallest things fascinating.

Shrugging on her coat, she asked him: "Walk me back?"

They walked together back to her hotel and stopped just outside the lobby. He was stumbling, she noticed, just a bit, drifting slightly to the right, and so she took him by the arm to guide him. A cold fog had settled over the city, which gave the speckles of lights in the hills a faint twinkle. It felt like they were standing on a stage and only their portion was illuminated—this little slice of Sarajevo, around them steep narrow roads and churches and mosques and synagogues and half-broken buildings with bulletholes in them.

"I really like nights in Sarajevo," she said. "The lights from the houses up on the mountain look like stars."

Arpino nodded. He was wearing a hat and pulled it down slightly over his ears, his flushed cheeks. The air smelled of woodsmoke.

In silence, Sarah looked at him.

She thought about the look on Arpino's face when he'd tried her drink. She thought of the moment earlier that day when during the hike, the boys had told her about their 10 PM curfew and sneaking out to get food. She thought of the slight stumble, how she'd had to steer him on their way back to avoid walking too close to the river.

Then, strangely, she thought of Will; or no, Billy, he would

always be Billy to her. Billy her first boyfriend. Billy, who had taught her to drink coffee black and whiskey neat, who had charmed her parents by simply talking with them, who had bought her dinners and drinks because her company was present enough (for it was him who'd said that to her first, she remembered now).

Who had left her twice: first when she got the Google internship, and then after she'd challenged him on his music. Billy, who at twenty-five (her age now), had gone to parties with college freshmen. Billy, whom she would have done anything for. Billy, who had seen her drunk for the first time, too.

"How do you feel?" Sarah asked Arpino, as she'd been asked so many times before.

"I feel . . ." Arpino said a word in Bosnian she couldn't identify. "You're pretty." He learned towards her, as if trying to find his balance. His amateur drunkenness was like watching a video of a baby deer try to walk.

She thought of the first time Billy had kissed her. What a dream, she had thought at the time, that someone so much older and wiser and whiter had wanted her. She thought of the first time they had sex, after the whiskey bar, woken up the next morning with the night in patches and such a headache she barely made it out of his building before puking on one of the trees on 98th Street. She hadn't remembered a thing, but Billy had told her later—apologizing, explaining with his eyes intent on her face, that she had wanted to—they'd had sex.

She thought of how she had felt when Billy had messaged her after so much time, how she had tried not to respond, putting her phone away, but had kept thinking about it, finally given in, met him, slept with him, dated him again. Helpless in the face of her own feelings for him.

What an idiot she had been. Sarah had thought he'd known what to do, always, and maybe, maybe—and this was the worst part of everything—that'd been what he'd liked about her.

Sarah looked at Arpino and made a decision.

"It was very nice meeting you," Sarah said, sticking out her hand. "Best of luck with your basketball."

"Happy birthday." Arpino shook her hand, then looked

down at it strangely. “What’s that?”

She pulled her hand back and glanced down at her palm; there was still dried blood from her scrape, the one she’d gotten when she’d fallen on Mount Trebevic. “It’ll be fine.”

Arpino looked at her with head tilted, as if to say *really?*

“Yes,” she said. She breathed in the cold air. “I misjudged.”

Pia Baur

Make Way for Ducklings

We found Clara nesting in one of the flower boxes on our rooftop balcony, five floors up from the foundation of the house.

Lilah spotted her first and immediately bubbled with everything she had ever learned about ducks in preschool.

"In big cities, sometimes it happens to ducks," she said knowingly, "they don't think ahead enough and they nest in places they think are safe but are too high off the ground."

Just one of the many perils of urbanization. *We are part of the problem*, I thought. I called San Francisco Public Works and was directed to the Office of Animal Care and Control. I put the employee on speakerphone and let the children explain the situation to her. I took careful notes as she advised us on what to do and Jonah followed suit. Lilah peered over our writing, as if supervising to ensure our thoroughness, even though she couldn't actually read the notes.

Lilah and Jonah decided to call the duck Clara, and we thought of her as our own little Mrs. Mallard.

Clara had already laid her eggs so there was no hope of encouraging her to move. We would have to figure out how to help her. Allow the mother duck to acclimate. Keep your distance from her nest, but allow her to glimpse you once or twice a day. Do not put food out for her. Don't get too close, for the next few weeks, just let her familiarize herself with your faces and voices.

At first, we only poked our heads out at bath time in the evening and during our wakeup routine in the mornings. The kids stood back in the far corner of the balcony, looked at Clara and waved. But by week two, we were eating our breakfast out on the roof. It was a nice spot to have our cereal and even though the mornings were fresh and foggy, the kids were excited to see Clara.

When Sean and I bought the house, interacting with wildlife like this hadn't occurred to me. It wasn't the kind of thing people thought of when living in the City. Of course

there was wildlife in San Francisco; there were rabbit holes all across town, Golden Gate Park was the habitat of many other species, ducks included, and coyotes roamed the Presidio golf course at night.

The house Sean originally wanted was right by the Presidio and around the corner from the house where they filmed *Mrs. Doubtfire*, because even though it wasn't Sea Cliff, it was the best block in Pacific Heights. I told him that the notion we needed a house that was nearly 6,000 sq. ft. was ridiculous, even more so because it had almost twice as many bathrooms as we had members in our family. Jonah was five then and Lilah was three.

"I guess we should have had more children before my vasectomy." He laughed and clicked out of the listing in the browser window.

I'd argued, "The property taxes are more than what my annual salary used to be."

"You worked a shitty job in non-profit," he'd said. "But you won't ever have to go back to work again anyway."

I reminded him that I'd loved my job as a corrections social worker and he looked at me sheepishly until I agreed to tour it.

Four floors of living space, plus the lower garage and garden level, and a huge balcony on the roof with views of the Bay. It was those views that convinced me in the end. From there I could also see my neighbors' roofs and more than one miniature putting green. That annoyed me, but being able to see the Pacific was captivating, like an invitation to feel infinite. Those ocean views would keep me happy, I thought. Something to aspire to, something that would prevent me from feeling trapped. I could see Alcatraz in the distance.

When Sean looked at me pleadingly, I mused, only half-serious, "I guess that means my mother could finally move in with us."

He grinned then. "Sure. I think it'd be great for your mom to get out of Koreatown. And she could help watch the kids. Lessen your load. And maybe my parents could move in too. One big happy family."

He was poking fun at the disastrous first meeting between his parents and my mom.

It had been our first Thanksgiving engaged, and I already sensed disaster when I heard the way my future mother-in-law introduced herself to my mom. "I am Jeanne Clough, I am the mother of Sean. Sean is my son." She spoke with such exaggerated pronunciation that I winced, but before I could step in tactfully, my mother returned a polite greeting as if she hadn't noticed. Jeanne replied by saying, "Your English is *so* good!"

Sean actually put his face into his hand, although I wasn't sure if he was laughing or grimacing. He was used to Jeanne's antics, but my mother hadn't known much about my in-laws before meeting them.

She smiled. "I was born in L.A., Jeanne."

"But Ellie said you moved to study at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music—"

Jeanne looked to me, except she had an accusatory expression as if I had purposefully left out information.

"I could use a refill," Mom said to no one in particular.

"I have you covered, Mom," Sean said, and held up another bottle of red. Sean was a fan of my mom's. He called her Mom, and called his own mother Jeanne.

Of course neither of our mothers moved in with us, but I did set up one of the bedrooms for my mom and she was one of the first to visit us after the move.

"This is your dream house, isn't it, Ellie?" she said. It was meant rhetorically, she believed it was. And I wanted to believe it too. Believe that I was living out my dreams, in the house of my dreams.

I'd been in and out of a lot of different mansions during my childhood, when I was too young to be home alone, and Mom brought me with her to work. She gave piano lessons to the children of the Wealthy. I was allowed to stick around as long as I was quiet. Most employers were sympathetic towards Mom when they found out she was a single mother.

Some took a liking to me. They gave me fancy organic freshly prepared snacks from their kitchens, and sometimes if my mother's students had younger siblings close to my age, I was even allowed to play with their much nicer toys. But I always knew that what was reality for my mother's students, was, for me, a fleeting fantasy.

So when Sean and I toured the house and I wandered through the rooms, I realized I'd broken through that barrier that had separated the two worlds I'd known. My children were now those children with nicer toys, who could afford private piano teachers.

I couldn't explain it, but buying the house felt like some kind of betrayal of my childhood self. For Sean, it seemed to be something like a victory—his risky start-up adventures had paid off and he'd achieved the coveted Bay Area Dream of a start-up that actually took off. We hadn't just broken deep into the middle class, we'd sprinted our way into an income tax bracket that neither of us had ever touched before. Our children would be much better off than either of us had ever been.

A few months before we enrolled Lilah in kindergarten, I found out I was pregnant for a third time.

Sean scratched his forehead.

"Would you still have married me if you'd known I'm this fertile?"

I laughed and kissed him.

Whether or not to carry the pregnancy to term wasn't a long debate for us. We were more than financially stable, I was healthy, we both loved children, and if we needed help, we could afford it. Still. I realized that my half-baked hopes of going back to work would be shelved again for at least another year-and-a-half. I'd been unlucky in my job hunt when I'd decided to work again once Lilah was in daycare, and by the time our third would be of preschool age, I'd have additional years out of the workforce stacked against me.

We told the kids the day after I had my Ob/Gyn appointment confirming my pregnancy. I was nine weeks along. I showed them the ultrasound once we knew it would be a boy.

"It's a brother sandwich!" Lilah said.

"No, you're in the middle, so it's a sister-sandwich!" Jonah said.

I let them help me with names.

"It's got to have a silent 'h'!" Jonah said during a brainstorming session. When she was first born, Sean had been against "Lilah" because it was yet another name with

a silent letter, and rooted hard for "Lily," which I'd vetoed because I went by Ellie and the two names sounded too similar.

We settled on Micah near the end. It felt like a token that defined our family. The silent *h* at the end.

During my second year at UC Berkeley, I took an astronomy class to fulfill my General Education Requirement credits for Science. It was a Physics class intended for non-majors, so there was just enough math to meet the requirements. There was an optional lab portion for the class that I decided to sign up for after the first lecture.

Still early in the semester, I noticed a new student in the relatively small lab. He sat a few rows in front of me, but twice during class, I caught him turning around, so subtly that he might have just been trying to get at an impossible itch on his back, but his eyes darted furtively towards me. After class, when I unlocked my bicycle, I saw him only a few feet away, also unlocking his bike.

"What do you think of the class?" He asked me.

"I'm taking it for a science G.E. I'm an English major. But I've always liked astronomy and it seems fun so far. Are you taking it as a GE too?"

"I'm a computer science major, I don't actually need the credits, but all students who enroll in an astronomy class get to jump ahead on the sign-up list to use the Keck Observatory."

The prof had mentioned the observatory in that very lecture. Twin telescopes on Mauna Kea in Hawaii owned by the University of California.

"So you already signed up for a time slot to use them?"

"I did it as soon as I enrolled in this class. The waitlist's about six months long. I'm gonna go during spring break."

"You're gonna go all the way to Hawaii?"

"Sure. Do you want to come with?"

"Is this a roundabout way to ask me to have coffee with you?"

"I guess what I'm actually doing is asking you to coffee with me in Hawaii."

I laughed, but I couldn't look away. "Six months is a long wait."

"I can think of lots of fun things to do to kill time til then."

I laughed again, then wondered if I should give him my number or if he was about to ask for mine.

"I'm Sean Clough."

"Elizabeth." I hesitated. "My friends call me Ellie."

He handed me a slip of paper from his back pocket that had a phone number scribbled on it. "You can text me, but I'm also not afraid of talking on the phone, the way so many people in our generation are."

That week, I asked for more shifts at the Law Bookstore. I took his comment as a joke, but I thought of how great it would be if I did actually travel during spring break. I told myself that regardless of whether I ultimately went on the proposed trip, I should make it a point to travel anyway.

"That was really bold of you," I told him later.

"I had that piece of paper in my pocket since the first class when I saw you. I just had a feeling."

"What feeling?"

"That you were the right person. That you were smart enough to call me out and challenge me, but also generous enough to give me a chance."

He could insert flattery in such a way that it never felt overdone, even if it was sentimental. A skill I knew I'd never have.

But later I thought of how he had somehow folded me into his life, starting with that moment. He'd been the one to sign up to use the observatory. I had come along on *his* trip. It'd been his plan and I was his satellite.

Sean tried to join us for breakfast on the roof as often as he could. He encouraged Jonah to read out the most interesting portions from the books about mallard ducks that he'd checked out from the library (I'd vetoed Sean's idea that he task his executive assistant with buying books about duck behavior). Every now and then Lilah would interject.

"Why do ducks lay eggs but humans don't?"

"We do have eggs in a way," I said. "They're called ova. And in a way, I did hatch you, except I hatched you *inside* my body, and then you came out of me, the way Clara laid her eggs. Humans do things kind of in reverse order from ducks."

"Is there a duckling in every egg? Are there ducklings in the eggs we buy at the store?" Lilah asked.

"We buy chicken eggs," Jonah said and rolled his eyes.

"Where's the daddy duck? Isn't he supposed to help?" Lilah asked.

I looked at Sean, but he was staring into his coffee cup.

"Maybe he comes when we're not looking?" I said.

Jonah read from his book, "Male mallard ducks are called 'drakes.' They secrete oils that help their outer feathers be waterproof, but twice a year, they molt. Molting is when they shed their flight feathers. When they molt, they are grounded for several weeks until their feathers grow back."

"So maybe the daddy molted and he can't fly up to our roof right now?"

"The drake doesn't *abandon* his ducklings or his mate. It's just that his role in the mating habits of ducks is over. He molts, then joins another flock and the female incubates the eggs and raises the ducklings. That's just how ducks are."

"Is that from your book?" Sean asked, and Jonah nodded.

Lilah was so bent on dispelling the mystery of whether Mr. Mallard visited when we weren't there that she decided she wanted to spend all weekend on the roof watching the nest to see if Clara's mate would come.

"Daddy, will you stay up here with me?"

"Sure, Lils," he said.

Since I was pregnant, he was trying to make extra effort to be around me and the children on weekends. It wasn't as if he would be able to go on paternity leave. When you have a thousand people looking to you for direction, and there's literally no one who signs your time off requests, only a board of trustees who talk about the value of their shares, employment takes on a different meaning than bringing home paychecks.

We laid down a tarp, got out the camping things, and set everything up to sleep outside on the balcony. Once the children were asleep in the sleeping bags, I rolled over onto my side to face Sean. "Do you ever think you'll just cash out and retire early? A lot of people just sell off their shares and go and work on hobbies and philanthropy instead."

"I get that this unplanned pregnancy is a lot to handle, but

me quitting *now* would make zero sense. We're in a position to give our children so much more."

"Children don't need money. *I* didn't grow up with money. Children need their mother. And their father. They need you to be present."

"It's not like I can hand in a resignation to drop everything and tell someone else to finish what I started. I have to see this through."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"What if your mother came and stayed for a while when the baby's born?"

"She can't take off from her job either. She's in the middle of a semester."

"Let's just try to enjoy tonight with the kids. We're all present now. Let's just *be* here."

"Quack." I tried to mimic the throaty sounds Clara made sometimes.

Shortly after Spring Break, after we got back from Hawaii, as summer approached, Sean and I decided we would introduce each other to our respective parental units.

Sean was as calm and confident as always. "The good thing about my parents is you won't even have to try. I don't care if they like you or not. Jeanne will make a face when you tell her you're an English major and then she'll probably try to quiz you about literature and attempt to show off that she knows some things too."

"What about your dad?"

"He'll just nod his head at everything. He'll make bad jokes. Like how you're too good-looking for me."

"So if I don't have to *try*, how should I act? I was raised the Korean way—you know, be so polite it makes everyone feel uncomfortable."

He laughed when I said that. "Why don't you try being rude for a change of pace? Just act out any rude inclinations you've ever had in your life that you repressed as a kid."

"What? Like chew with my mouth open? Bite my cuticles? Smoke a joint at the table while everyone is eating?"

Neither of us had cars at that point, so we just took public trans. First BART across the Bay Bridge down to Daly City,

and from there, CalTrain down to Palo Alto, where one of his parents would pick us up. All in all, it went well. Sean's parents insisted we do some tourist-y things in the Peninsula and South Bay, taking us to the Winchester Mystery House. And then Jeanne dragged us to the Tech Museum in San Jose, despite the fact that it was for children. According to her, I was stuck in the Humanities, so it was important for me to round out my education and I could compensate by doing these types of things.

When we got back to Berkeley and I threw my duffel on Sean's bed, I started laughing. "How did someone like you manage to grow from those two personalities?"

We laughed so hard that my abs hurt afterwards.

Then, when I suggested we go down to Los Angeles to meet my mom for Independence Day, he decided it was time to get a car.

"What? You or me get a car?"

"Pool our money?"

"But I have no idea what your driving record is like!"

"You don't wanna go in on this with me until you know?"

I hesitated. "Then let's get something both of us could afford on our own so we can buy the other out in case one of us wants to keep it later."

I decided to take charge of the car search. On Craigslist I found a listing for an old Volkswagen Rabbit. Turns out it had been a commuter car for a teacher living in San Jose. It only had 40,000 miles on it and he was selling it for two grand.

"It's stick," Sean pointed out.

"Yeah, I can read."

"So you know manual?"

"No, but I feel like I could probably learn by doing, right?"

"Oh god."

We picked up the Rabbit and a week later we were on 101 South heading to LA. At the time, my mom was living in Glendale in a condo she had bought with my stepfather.

Even through the facade of politeness she usually had when meeting my friends, I could tell she liked him. By the end of our four-day stay, he was calling her "Mom" or even "Uhm-ma" and she made special dishes that even I rarely got to eat when I was home.

Though she'd explained that my stepfather had passed away from cancer years before, I kept expecting Sean to ask about my real father, but he didn't. Even up to that point, I hadn't spoken about him. The extent of it had been me declaring he wasn't a part of the picture, that my mother had raised me on her own.

One morning when Jonah, Lilah, and I were watching the sunset and saying goodnight to Clara, we heard a faint peeping sound coming from her nest.

"Is it time?" Lilah was so eager, she started jumping up and down.

"Stop, you'll scare Clara," Jonah said and nudged her. Then he explained, citing his book again, "It happens in three stages: pipping, zipping, then hatching, where the duckling actually breaks the shell open. It's gonna take a day or two, though."

No doubt, Clara's ducklings were close to hatching and we were prepared. We had two cardboard boxes, both carefully lined so they were soft. One for Clara, one for her ducklings.

The employee from the Animal Care and Control office had cautioned us that the time immediately after the ducklings hatched would be tricky. We would have to separate Clara from her ducklings, but at the right time. They needed to imprint on her and she would wait for all of them to hatch completely. Within twelve hours of hatching, they would be able to walk and swim, and Clara would take them to water where they could feed.

Hatching would take a while. What we were observing was only pipping.

"They're starting to breathe on their own now," Jonah said. "They're using their lungs and detaching from the membranes inside the egg and over the next twelve hours, they'll absorb the nutrients in the yolk."

"What about *our* egg? What's it doing now?" Lilah asked and poked my belly lightly. She had started calling the baby "our egg," and now we all said it.

When Sean called to check in while traveling on business, he'd say, "How's our egg?"

"All of our eggs, hatched and non-hatched-yet are good.

They're eating like cruise ship passengers during the all-day-breakfast buffet."

"You're less nauseous now?"

"I've been really spoiled by the chef you hired. My puke is more nutritious than a salad from Pluto's."

"I'll be back soon. Hopefully in time for the birth," he said. He promised he'd be home as soon as I reported the first contraction. I wasn't due for another month, so I wasn't anticipating the risk of him being absent, though I wished he was there now. Clara's ducklings were hatching.

We checked on Clara continuously that day, but she was agitated. We were told not to take her or her ducklings down to water until they had all absorbed their yolk sacs, so there was a lot of waiting.

Jonah asked me if it was this way with humans too, which inevitably made me laugh. Labor consists primarily of waiting. "It's more waiting than pushing," I said. With him, I explained to Jonah, I'd worked up until the very last moment before going on maternity leave. I felt the very first contractions early on a Sunday morning and finally delivered him in the middle of the night that Tuesday. I'd been told that the contractions would be lighter at first and spaced far apart, but would move closer together and become more intense. I could monitor them and once they were three to four minutes apart I should come to the hospital to be admitted.

Up until then, Sean had been keeping a rigorous schedule, hustling to meet with investors and developers, but he was so eager to be there for our first baby's birth that he put everything on hold. Like me, he had been surprised by how much of labor involved simply waiting until it was time to push and deliver the baby, but he stayed by my side with a stopwatch. My Ob/Gyn had given me a few tips, one of which included lounging in the bathtub. Sean filled it with water for me. It felt more comfortable because it made me feel lighter, and then there was the thought that I was floating in liquid, just as my baby was floating in his embryonic sack. Sean sat there by the bathtub as if I was a patient in a bed. He had a notepad and his stopwatch to track my contractions and even pulled a book off our shelves and read to me when I asked him for a distraction.

He read *Moby Dick*. "Do books about water help or hurt?" He asked, making me laugh.

The next twenty-four hours were fuzzy for me, the only way I was reminded of them was through a photo my mother took at the hospital. Sean and I are beaming; I still don't know whether it was the hospital lighting, skillful retouching on my mother's part, or the after effects of childbirth, but we're practically glowing, looking at Jonah lying on top of my chest.

Sean went to the shop and asked for a reprint so he could keep one in his office.

But with Lilah I went into labor two weeks early and Sean was on the East Coast at a meeting with his partners. We tried to face-time so that he could see the baby, but the Wi-Fi connection at the hospital was too weak.

"This is why I do the work I do," he'd said lightly. "For the sake of better connectivity."

"So that you can use the internet to see your newborn daughter, rather than having to be present during her birth?"

"That's not fair, Ellie. I was there for Jonah, from the very first contraction to the placenta."

"I know," I said.

But what I was thinking was, *Why do you expect extra credit for being there just because you had the logistical choice not to be there? What makes you think that parenting exists in the form of transferrable credits?* But I didn't say those things.

Clara stood in her nest, calmly looking around at her young. Even during her time in our flower box we'd never been able to get close enough to Clara to count her eggs, but now as she finally moved off her eggs so they could commence pipping and zipping, there seemed to be seven.

We decided to let Clara and her ducklings out in the marshes at Crissy Field, about a mile from our house. I'd already gotten the baby carriage out of storage in preparation, so I told the children we'd just shuttle Clara and her ducks over to the marsh using the bassinet. I thought about driving our car over, but loading it, driving it over, and attempting to find parking, then carrying them to the marsh, while pregnant and with two children in tow, I thought it was best just to use the baby

carriage.

Clara was surprisingly cooperative. I had expected her to panic when we separated her from the ducklings, but she hadn't even made an effort to fly off; perhaps she was too exhausted. I remembered how I'd felt during the entirety of my two pregnancies and deliveries. The ducklings were delicate, still wet, finally fully separated from the membranes of their eggs. We put them in a separate box, where they peeped the entire time.

It was a Sunday morning and Crissy Field and its adjoining beach were alive with activity. People playing frisbee, flying kites, walking their dogs, digging in the sand, jogging on the path parallel to the beach. Skies were unusually clear, as the cloud cover that so often constricted the view out to the ocean was gone. We walked out to the marsh along the closest foot path. There were ducks here and there and everywhere.

"Where should we let her out?" Lilah asked. "What did your book say?"

"A little further away from other ducks, so that the mom duck can check on all her ducklings safely. Not directly on the water in case they can't swim quite yet, and so they can adjust to being outside the nest."

So I lifted the box with the ducklings, still peeping through the air holes, and Jonah carefully took Clara inside hers. We let the ducklings out first, flattening the cardboard so they get out without having to climb out of the box. Then we let Clara out, who waddled out quickly, a few feet away from us, then turned around as her ducklings teetered after her and to the water.

Unusual for her, Lilah remained completely still and quiet as we watched Clara and her ducklings move further and further away. They followed her into the water, leaving tiny ripples behind them. Both Lilah and Jonah reached for my hands, which surprised me, since they often insisted they didn't need to hold my hand anymore, but I took each hand in one of mine. We stood like that for a while, until they were starting to drift out of sight.

We went back to the footpath, to the now-empty baby carriage and began to walk back.

Suddenly, I felt it. A wetness between my legs. No

contractions, but my water had broken. I was absolutely sure I was not peeing myself. I'd done it once before while pregnant with Jonah, and I knew it was not the same. I was thirty-five weeks. Nearly full-term, but I was still weeks away from my due date. Not wanting to worry Jonah and Lilah, I waited until we were home and they were engrossed in their toys to call my Ob/Gyn. With great reluctance, I called the emergency nanny/babysitter that one of Sean's assistants had found and vetted for us. She'd come a few times before, for "date nights" that Sean had taken me on, which were really just company events that required spousal support.

Once the nanny was there and I explained to the kids that I had to go to the doctor's office, but it was nothing to worry about, I got into the Rabbit and drove myself. Keeping the Rabbit was something that Sean and I at least hadn't argued about. He'd made a half-hearted suggestion that I upgrade, even though I think he already knew I would never trade it in, but nodded his head fervently when I pointed out that it would be a great first car for one of the kids when they learned to drive.

It was only then, sitting in the driver's seat of the Rabbit, that panic reached me. I'd heard horror stories. Like a friend of Sean's sister-in-law whose amniotic sac had burst and in a freak accident, injured the baby, who bled out and ended up being a stillbirth. I put my hand on my belly, trying to feel for movement. As I drove, I kept taking my hand off the shifter whenever I could and checking my belly.

I went to the hospital where my ObGyn and I had agreed I would give birth, a different one than where I'd delivered Jonah and Lilah, but at thirty-seven, I was considered a geriatric mother, so all possible precautions, like going to the hospital with the best NICU, were followed. They diagnosed me with PPROM, which I thought was a hilarious acronym—Pre-term Premature Rupture of Membranes.

I wondered if my body, having watched Clara, had decided in a moment of fealty, to give birth early. But I still wasn't experiencing any contractions, it was too early for them. It was too early for the baby, but at eight months, he had a great shot, and rather than risk infection, they would give me an emergency cesarean.

I was able to call Mom and Sean. Mom booked a flight right away. Sean didn't pick up. His executive assistant texted me to say that she had gotten him a flight in two days' time, but he would call me as soon as he could. Then I was wheeled into the operating room.

Micah was the smallest of my three children, five pounds even. Attached to wires and instruments, the neonatal nurses carefully lifted him out of his little crib and put him directly on my chest. He was healthy. He needed some help nursing, but he ate. He cried. He slept.

I thought back on how hard it was the first time, with Jonah, when I was afraid that the slightest thing I did could hurt him, compared to the relief and self-assuredness I'd felt with Lilah; and then there was the feeling I had now, which was neither.

With Jonah, I'd been terrified. I'd filled notebooks documenting the time of his feedings, the hours he slept, when he woke up, when I changed him, how long he took to fall asleep, how much time he spent on his tummy, and more. With Lilah I'd amassed confidence that my mothering instincts were correct.

And yet, this third time, I was uncertain. What did a third child mean for me, as a mother? Jonah had been planned, Lilah had been planned. Then Sean had gotten a vasectomy, but five years later I'd gotten pregnant again despite it.

Tomorrow, my mother would come and bring the children to visit me and Micah, and a few days after that, Sean would come and pick me up and drive us back to our mansion in Pac Heights, to my dream house where I would continue living my authentic life.

There, I would be able to sit on the roof of our house, next to the flower box once inhabited by Clara and look over at the putting greens of our neighbors and the endless ocean. I would sit up there and eat a delicious nutritious breakfast cooked in our fabulous kitchen by some gourmet chef, while another person I paid sat in the new nursery that I would pay a decorator to furnish tastefully and appropriately to look after my newborn child.

Eventually, either on a morning soon after I got back home,

still wearing hospital underpants to soak up the lochia, or years later, when all of my children were out of the house, I would look out and past the flower box and wonder to myself if Clara had been happy sitting in her nest, incubating, or if she'd longed to stretch her wings and fly across the city to some other marsh and laugh at the molted drakes who were grounded and couldn't fly.

Craig Vander Hart

September Money

I regret it now, I really do, but it's not like I could have known the significance of my shoulder pain at the time. There had been greater hardships. My line of work isn't always kind to the body. The bigger issue was the Baptist kid, but he was fine, as far as I could tell, and it ended up being an otherwise uneventful float. I need only continue to explain because there were different points of view.

We were working on the Tieton River and everything of value I owned was parked or pitched along its bank, away from the road's muddy ruts. Two weeks in and things were starting to decay, sag, smell, rust, rip, and vanish—that's the rafting business alright, river guides included.

The night before it all happened, I was bushwhacking through the vegetation hunting for bits of used toilet paper to bag. Even river rats like us have standards. I saw one of the newer guides sitting down by the river and noticed that he didn't have a bag full of flakes of paper and shit on his person the way I did, and it may have bothered my ego. Here I was, probably older than his father, forty years of guiding under my belt—not to mention the fact that I was Haag's right-hand man and had been with the company since its beginning.

I walked over and said, "Hey, Jim."

He smiled wryly and said, "It's Jake."

For a split second I thought he was trying to trick me into having a senior moment, but my instincts were wrong (could be a problem). There was no reason the little punk couldn't have handled it all better. I felt sure that I was the one in the right. New guides are supposed to handle matters related to privies, and here I was doing his job. The name thing was secondary.

When the beach was sanitized, no thanks to new guy Jake, I decided to hang out with Lisa and help get things ready for the toga party. Okay, the name itself is a bit deceptive. Togas are no longer required. One year some asshole left their toga back in West Seattle and now our tradition has been totally

ruined. Is nothing sacred? Apparently not. Whatever—I forgot my toga anyway.

I was hoping Lisa could really help me make a statement with my costume. She carried all the necessities: glitter, face paint, a unicorn mask, even a stormtrooper helmet. I planned on borrowing her multicolored trike too—who would miss me on that? Yep, I was alive alright, and not even broke, if one can bring up such crass financial matters. Let me say though—most professional raft guides (and I would be cautious about throwing that word *professional* around too seriously) have what Kerouac called "lint pocket" savings accounts. Or, since toilet paper seems to be on my mind, I could analogize the raft guide wallet to a naked toilet paper roll.

I, to the contrary, really sock it away. The secret is stocking up on all the unperishable or heavily preserved items at little diners and fast-food joints. Namely, the ketchups and mustards, the saltine crackers, all the napkins one needs and whatnot. I could go weeks with just free crackers and a jar of peanut butter for lunch, sometimes courtesy of the dumpsters outside the grocery stores. Helping oneself to a neighbor's beer cooler works wonders too.

I was to be quitting the dumpsters though on account of my shoulder (it all goes back to this little hang-up). The pain became noticeable when I was working on one of our vehicles, an old mail truck that came into our hands like a gift for the automobile undertaker. Most of our rigs are half-rusted and barely clinging to life, and they are not even as old as I am. It's a sobering thought—I'm now closer to seventy than to sixty—and nothing about me is usually all that sober.

That night was not supposed to turn into my last rodeo. Everything was as normal as normal could be for free-loading whitewater carnies. Haag had his dinner out: a box of cold fried chicken and two Rainiers. He offered one to me and it would have been rude to say no, but I should not have had one. There is nothing worse than the aftertaste of Rainier, and you must believe me that I do not say that out of snobbery. In fact, you would have to drive back across the mountains to find a functioning snob. As for me, I had a sixpack of Olympia on hand, and I kept it securely hidden for the time being because Jim Jake and his buddies had started moving in on our little

seating area. They appeared to be empty-handed in the beer department, but they did bring a guitar.

He was hanging around, I'm sure, to try to pick up more work with our company. The occasional shift wasn't good enough. He had not impressed me, and I had concluded that, objectively speaking, he was not fit to be a permanent member of our team. I thought I could see a hunger in his eyes as he sat with face illuminated by our fire. More than any other temptation, I knew the look well. He was hungry for the elusive September money that can only be scored on the reservoir fed Tieton when most other rivers around here have run out of juice.

Somehow that new guy (Jim? Jake?—I kept forgetting) discovered my little secret about my bad shoulder. He must have noticed how awkward it was for me to pick up even a can of my precious Oly. I recall reaching for the beer with my right hand and then stopping and switching hands. The whole thing probably looked so damn embarrassing, and he had to comment.

"What's wrong with your shoulder, Big Chill?" he asked.

His use of my river name bugged me as well. There are rules about these things, which rest on our own kind of implied social contract. For instance, one rule is that guides cannot create their own river name. I was christened "Big Chill Will" back in the late 70s, which implies a certain lassitude in the recipient, but the laziness was all in the act of naming (was it Haag? I don't remember, but I'll let *him* use it). Basically, what I'm trying to say is that I don't like strangers calling me by my river name. It's not one of our rules, but I think it's a solid candidate.

Jim Jake stopped playing his guitar, as if to emphasize the fact that he had asked me a question and was still waiting for an answer.

"Just taking care of my health," I said as I stood back up, unnerved a little by his insolence.

Things were really falling apart here. The old social contract was breaking down. When that happens, there's reversion to lower complexity, and to hard and fixed rules of nature: predator and prey, fight and flight, war of all against all—Okay, I might be exaggerating.

"That's your *right* shoulder, ain't it," Haag said, not letting me off the hook.

"Your eyes are still working, boss," I said, and that shut everyone up.

Haag had neglected the fire, and in its fragile state it started to wither and fade. A coolness set in between us until Haag saw my disgruntled face. As I made small talk with Lisa by the stove, we heard the decisive snap of hatchet meeting wood.

After fueling the fire, Haag changed the tone of things.

"Tomorrow is a double. First float is a youth group. Some Baptist church. Three boats. Second shift, uh, we got three separate families."

"How young are the churchies?" asked Carter, whose river name is Tweety, and I don't remember the backstory on that one.

"Young teens mostly. Twelve, thirteen-ish."

"Well—"

"What's the order?" Lisa asked, talking over me.

"I want Tweety on point," Haag said. Then he paused and dramatically stared at my shoulder. "Then Big Chill," he continued, "Then you, Lisa, as sweep."

We all knew why he delivered it like this. The weakest guide always goes in the middle. I normally would not have cared (hell, with three solid guides we rotated the order all the time), but he had to make a big deal out of staring at my shoulder. Deep in that little rational Jiminy Cricket part of my brain, I knew he made the right call. I wanted to believe that this had nothing to do with that usurper Jake hanging around more and more, but we dirtbag Bodhisattvas see connections in the universe that others miss. I have eyes of the soul—selfish eyes, but I was working on that.

My thoughts were eventually disturbed by the centrifugal forces launching us into an unplanned party—a penultimate party perhaps—indistinguishable, basically, from just another night in fact. As darkness took us into the void of night, the scene became carnivalesque. More guides started pouring into our camp from up the road. There were private boaters too, some I knew, but there were newcomers as well. These river rats must have heard we always had extra beer. I tried to

remain aloof from most of them, but I couldn't resist putting on a little show for some of the ladies by constantly stretching my shoulder. When I saw them take notice, I exaggerated a wincing look.

"You should try cupping," one of them said.

Too old to flirt? I presented a mischievous face anyway, and they giggled.

In the morning, Lisa divided up the youth group paddlers while Haag and I set up the shuttle vehicle. She placed the youth pastor in my crew, along with four distracted young teenagers. The pastor was the lone adult going on the river today, and she had given him to me. It was another message: they didn't have faith in me. I made the most of it. I placed him in the front and on the opposite side of me. I always guided from the rear right. This balancing of adult weight and strength would make life a little easier. I tried to train them quickly, and that meant inculcating Socratic ignorance. When it comes to rivers, the attainment of wisdom demands one first be teachable, which is a virtue often in short supply.

"What happens if someone falls in?" I asked.

"Jump in after them," said one of the kids.

"That would double the number of people in need," I said firmly.

The pastor cracked a smile. He wasn't too talkative though. Maybe he was here because he drew some kind of short straw. I studied him carefully. His smart glasses told me that he had higher ambitions, that he wanted respect in his little corner of the universe. He wasn't the first church leader to sit in my boat. I had taken several. They were all similar in dress and in trying to act so much younger than their age.

"You might lose those," I said, pointing to his trendy glasses and ball cap.

We had been practicing in a deep eddy right offshore.

"Show me what you should do when I say 'forward'."

They started to smack the water with their paddles. Blades cut in haphazardly. It was all out of rhythm. It was all so predictable.

"Try to get in sync. You two in the front." I was talking to the pastor and the biggest kid. "Try to mirror each other's

movements. Lean forward together, paddle in, pull back with your whole body."

They tried again. "Better," I said. The kids behind them were oblivious to the system.

"Keep those blades straight up and down."

If I could just train the pastor and his neighbor, then I might not have to use my shoulder at all. A lazy guide can easily use the crew to steer the boat as well as to motor it (and I had a medical excuse for laziness). Simply call one side to paddle and not the other. Younger guides are often too cocky to use the crew; they want to steer it themselves with muscular draw and pry strokes. But I had to be careful. I had to look like I was guiding normally but keep the pressure off my body. We can't have people getting paid without working—not in this country!

Okay, we were off.

There is something devious about the way in which the unleashed September water conceals the sharp basalt rocks; vicious, ruthless, jagged, all under the surface of that happy water, lapping sound off its back. It was almost unnatural that they should be hidden in this way. Technological humanity had made the river a machine. We made it flow for our own purposes: agricultural, recreational, whatever.

I had foolishly allowed us to drift toward a grassy island between the channels, where the water was even shallower. There were a few small basalt rocks submerged off its shore. With one small and avoidable bump, one of the Baptist kids tumbled into the river and was flushed away down the wrong channel.

His was the middle channel, the shortest of the three. It was too narrow for our boat, and logs were strewn merely two or so feet above its ripples. Due to inequities of length, he beat us to the deep pool before the diversion dam by about fifteen seconds. Lisa saw all of it, and had blown her whistle even before I did, though I saw little use in doing so since recovery of the swimmer would fall on me, there being no other alternative as Carter had likely already dropped over it. And it was loud anyway. More importantly, my crew was oblivious to the danger ahead. They excitedly shouted and pointed, though we lost sight of him as we took the longer,

L-shaped channel to the left.

To our right, the Baptist kid wasn't looking so good on his straight and narrow path. He was frozen stiff with limbs stretched out like a starfish. When we set on reconciliation, with boat fixed in the right ferry angle, he finally turned over and began thrashing toward us. I put them to work paddling, aiming to cut him off before the drop. I had the time to rotate my body so that I could grab him with my left arm, but I didn't. I used my right. Decades of guiding produces habits that are not easily changed, and the pain when I tore the rotator cuff in my bad shoulder taught me how foolish that was.

The pain took me into my own little world, and for a moment I forgot about the kid, who was now possibly on his way to Jesus. His friends, likely confused by why I let him go, acted for themselves, though they were laughing as they helped him in. They were all, including the pastor, likely ignorant of what rivers can do. They had never seen a rafter pinned against a bridge pillar or pushed into a nest of logs and tree branches, a strainer we call it; no, they had never seen what I had.

We dropped over the dam awkwardly, but without further drama.

"What would have happened if we didn't help?" one asked.

The pastor didn't want to look ignorant. "It was a very low dam," he said, deepening his voice to sound authoritative. "Not all that bad, I think." He looked back at me for affirmation.

The need to conceal my pain kept me from condescending to point out that the opposite was true, that low overhead dams were deadly—far deadlier than a higher, say twenty-foot drop into a nice deep pool.

In an hour it was all over. We loaded them into our moribund bus. The pastor saw me debriefing with Lisa and Carter by the river's edge. He knew what we were discussing and came over and tried to assure us that there would be no complaint on his end. I was almost moved by his little speech, and I committed right then and there in my head to say a prayer for him some day, that God might give him a raise, or seven children, or better sermon illustrations.

He left us with a joke. "You know, we Baptists have a thing for water."

Scratch that, I would pray for better jokes.

Well, we all tried to laugh, but Carter and Lisa looked confused. Probably both unchurched. At least I was raised better. Was it not I who had studied for one year at Berkeley? But intellectually I fell short when it came to preparing to answer to the boss, and I do not mean God. My boss was not a spirit in the sky, but a truly corporeal (and some might say corpulent) being. The analogy is not, however, completely meretricious. Like our omniscient, foreknowing heavenly father, Haag would somehow know what I had done without having to ask.

We had worked together for so long, Lisa, Carter, and I. Over ten years. Everything was predictable until now. Lisa gave Haag all the details; her hands were moving the way a preacher or professor would talk. Her face was as expressionless as always. She pointed at me, and Jake looked my way and then turned back when he saw me staring at him. Haag left his seat at the table and came to where I was standing by the river, a few yards from the inner circle of chairs around the firepit. It almost looked like he was smiling too.

"Maybe you should take a seat," he said.

I climbed inside the extra raft that was fully parked on the beach by the put-in. Sitting down on the front thwart with my legs tightly together and back erect, I must have looked like a petulant schoolboy to him. Waiting for my lesson, my head began to sag forward. Haag was still standing there as I waited, baffled, searching for a smoke that was supposed to be in the front pocket of his plaid flannel shirt. He furrowed his brow and kept tapping around his body with his thick pallid hands.

"Oh, the hell with it."

His tone hinted of both anger and exhaustion, but his smile would return at times as if he had forgotten the point of the lecture.

"Finding it hard to remember things these days boss?"

The insulting question was delivered simultaneously with my left arm raised, mockingly academic, trying to give my insolence an air of legitimacy, as if a slur had been uttered in

a formal tone or with an upper-class accent. The effect was a sudden return of memory for Haag and a sanctimonious ring to his voice.

"You know, someone could have gotten hurt out there because of you."

I did not know why he needed to say what we both already knew. I hated to see him this way probably as much as he hated to see me in my state. I waved his line of thought away with my left hand. Haag gingerly established himself on the outer chamber of the raft.

"I know this is hard for you to hear, Will, but—"

Hold on a second. I had been waiting for enlightenment my whole damn life thinking it was going to come from some raft goddess appearing to me in a hallucinogenic vision one night. It would be all misty and effervescent and she would be floating across the river surrounded by shining white birds and those big yellow smiling faces from Walmart commercials bouncing everywhere.

She would say, "Will, you have lived a just and good life. The dirtbag is the unsung hero of the universe. You have granted immeasurable whitewater pleasures in exchange for survival money. Go now and be blessed—"

Would this ever happen? No, my enlightenment was to come because of Jimmy Jakester and my fate sealed by Buddha-bellied Haag. No golden woman. No river goddess. No strip tease—just a goddamn punk guide putting the final nail in my jerry-rigged old ego.

Haag was still talking, but I was no longer listening. I was in my own private confessional. That damn September money! I didn't want all of it—just a little tea-spoon slice. I wanted to set myself and my truck camper up nicely down in Tucson for the winter and not have to live on condiments and dumpster treasures. A man my age is getting a little too old to be digging around in those things. I'm eligible for Medicare for crying out loud, but nothing scares me more than handing my body over to the government to be cared for—watching the controlled demolition of the Kingdome in Seattle was a wake-up call.

Yeah, I saw how government solutions can really get explosive for useless old clingers like me and the dome.

Hell, it wasn't even all that old, though the way the Mariners found a way to lose all those years it felt about as old as the goddamn Roman Coliseum. *What do we do with you? Okay, boom*. Yeah, I saw where this was going, but I'm not paranoid or nothing—I'm enlightened now. At this point of my explanation, Haag would probably point out all those years of exposure to desert sun and synthesized compounds. Is that relevant? Like I said, there were different points of view.

The ugly, uninduced reality was that without September money there would be no Tucson. I would be holing up in the Northwest, somewhere like Darrington, where boaters and rafters are known commodities and the weather is mild (if you can handle the rain and the dampness and the early nights couped up in the back of your truck). My entire way of life would be in crisis. After all, a river guide dirtbag has nothing else to do during the winter but run around on the rocks of the Southwest and wait for the mountain snow to become liquid.

To make matters worse, Haag's tone made me think that he wasn't talking just about no more September money. He was talking about no more *money* money, that is, no more guiding, which means earlier than planned retirement for me. I don't know what I would do. Here I am able-bodied, mostly, and still so young, and I thought I would be guiding into my seventies until nature told me no more, and it would all work itself out naturally. Or, maybe I would be swept out of my boat and croak doing what I loved.

I tuned back in right before Haag pronounced my final judgment. "Fortunately, we have someone who can cover your next shift. I've been thinking about bringing Jake on full time next year. He's always been patient and willing to help us."

Without a word Jake picked up his bag and guide paddle and walked back toward the van. His normally desultory stride had been replaced with a walk of confidence, as if a lawyer had announced his name at the reading of a family will and he was collecting his inheritance.

If I was to walk away from all this a better man, I would have to start by wishing that young punk all the luck. Haag gave my back a tap.

"Forty-four years on the river is enough, don't you think,

Will?"

"Forty-five," I said.

That's it—I was just *Will* now, Big Chill no more, and I had to decide how to react. Without thinking I shouted Jake down. "Hey, we still haven't given you a proper river name."

Jake walked a little towards me, letting his drybag rest on our nice toilet-paper free beach and said, "I didn't think you liked me enough to offer one."

Perceptive little punk, alright. "You know, I always wanted to call you 'New Guy'."

"I've been working for five years now," he said. "Got anything better?"

I thought silently for a moment and wondered if I had anything of value from which to use to send this kid off properly, and then I remembered the incident with my shoulder and the beer. Not just any beer—Olympia beer.

"How about Oly?" I shouted.

"Oly like the beer you love?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, tightening my face in anticipation of his rejection.

Jake put his guide paddle up in the air. "Hell yeah."

Alex Barr

Lentil Loaf and Spinach Salad

Friday. Guess who suggested it. Brendan of course. We sat in a circle on stale-smelling beanbags. Brendan said, "Okay, ground rules: we go round in turn, no interruptions, no advertising, no breast-beating. No snide comments. It's about support, right? We share our thoughts about fucking and wanking. Who'll start?"

Ninian (what a name!), an American with a red beard and three earrings in one ear, said, "It would help if I knew what wanking is."

I thought, Weird, don't they do it over there?

Crop-headed Pete from Cornwall said, "It's what you guys call jerking off."

Ninian grinned, "All right!"

After which a heavy silence.

I wouldn't be here if my sister hadn't nagged me.

"Look, Dean, this commune in Scotland is offering a personal growth retreat: Holistic Hideaway. It would do you good. You've got holiday due."

"Sounds crap, Jean. I don't want any growths on me."

"Bloody well go!"

So here I am out in the sticks being holistic. They've got a problem here—the women have a regular support group, the men don't. They sit on their problems. Get angry. Go off in the woods alone and sulk. So Brendan said it's time for a men's group. Using us visitors to break a pattern. (*Break a pattern* is a catchphrase in this place. I'm tired of hearing it.)

But these men couldn't open up. There were twelve of us in the circle, mostly looking down. Maybe checking their dicks. I studied the faces in turn. I might have had a bit of a sneer, because Brendan caught my eye and frowned.

Then said, "Okay, I'll start. Fucking. I want to know if we all share that feeling when we come, right? Your body's in a tremor all over, building and building till at last you climax and you think, shit, man, that really *burned*, and you feel like your balls are emptied out. Anyone feel that?"

Ninian nodded slowly with his eyes half closed and said sleepily, "Ye-e-ah." The prat. Then we went round in turn. What the hell was *I* going to say? I was thinking so hard I hardly listened to the others. When it was my turn I just muttered, "Well, the thing is . . ."

Silence. Brendan stared at me. "The thing about fucking is what, Dean?"

I dried.

Ninian said, "You can say what you like, Dean, there are no ladies present."

I said, "All right, yes, I'd like to do it."

Cornish Pete said, "We all like to do it."

I snarled, "I said I *would* like to do it."

That shut them up, the buggers.

Alan the Scots beanpole who's here with his wife and two kids (so must have done it at least twice) looked worried. "What, ye've never done it, Dean?"

"Watch my lips, Alan. No."

"Och well, ye will. Nae hurry."

I switched off after that. We never got round to discussing wanking. Maybe if we had I'd feel better doing it after seeing the women sunbathe in just their knickers. I don't want to be me, a spotty geek. I want to be Brendan, former lover of Jojo, current lover of Rochelle of the beautiful breasts. Just now I overheard someone say Jojo told the women's group she always came with Brendan, whereas Rochelle doesn't. I try to imagine a woman coming but I can't, and the effort of imagining exhausts me. When will I be someone different?

Saturday. I think the communards get bored with digging spuds and swapping partners, so they get visitors in for a few weeks every summer to entertain them. As if we're zoo animals on loan.

We walked around with bits of card pinned on our backs. Everyone had a marker pen and wrote their feelings about the person. You weren't supposed to look who wrote on you. I wrote on Rochelle's *I'm sorry you don't come with Brendan*, and on Brendan's *Your dick must be very happy*. Everyone else was writing stuff like *You are a beautiful person; I like your smile; Hope things work out for you; You deserve a lot*

of love. Yuk.

The Greek is a visitor like me. On her back I wrote *You are ugly*. Well it's true. Her eyebrows are thick and she has a faint moustache. Doesn't shave under her arms either, but none of them do.

When we read our cards I only had two comments. Brendan and Jojo and some of the others had seven! One of mine was *I think of you with kindness*. (What?) The other *Stop acting like a weirdo Dean—said with love and positiveness*. The Greek was staring at me and I guessed she knew who wrote that. I wasn't about to ask her. I tore the card up. She picked up the piece with *positiveness* on it and said, "Maybe this is the bit you need."

I said, "It sounds like a battery. And there's no such word."

"This is your problem, Dean," she sighed, and stalked off, twitching her bum.

To hell with her if she thinks she's got power over me. I'm blushing now about what I wrote on people's cards. What happened? How could I do that? I disgust myself sometimes. Often.

Sunday. My turn to help with lunch. I sliced thirty carrots and twenty onions. Forgot everything concentrating on the knife. Pete was frying fish and singing *The Bonny Shoals of Herring*. Sandra (another visitor, here with her husband Alan) was talking to Rochelle and the Greek about being 'compromised'. I heard the term yesterday. It seems to mean losing your identity in a relationship, but all the feminism and sexual politics gives me a headache. I'll be glad to get back to work and not have to talk to anyone, just get on with it. And when I'm qualified I won't be just an apprentice. So stick that thought up your arses, you lot, before you diss me.

The women spend most of their time sharing problems and 'being honest'. Jojo's honest about her feelings after losing Brendan, Rochelle's honest about not coming. Someone else had an abortion and hates herself. Someone's been released from the bin on condition she takes the meds she hates. I overhear all this because I have no presence. People talk as if I don't exist. Well believe me, people, I wish I fucking didn't.

I carried on and peeled potatoes. Then Jojo burst in like a

flood and said, “Plenary session at three, folks. A meditation on loving-kindness, followed by discussion.” I felt like puking all over the veg. And when the session started, I could have puked on the faded rug when she said, “Wish everyone in the world, no matter who, well and happy.” After which they all looked smug and exchanged smiles. When a smile came my way I just blanked. Then Sandra said, “I think we should discuss yon exercise yesterday. The notes on folks’ backs.”

Ninian nodded gravely. “Yeah, there’s unfinished business there.” (*Unfinished business*—another mind-numbing mantra.)

Brendan said, “Let’s establish a silence.”

So we did, and God didn’t it go on. Till Jojo sighed and looked around and said, “Who wants to speak?”

You might have known it would be the wretched Greek. “There was a lot of negativity in some of those comments,” she intoned, without looking up from knitting a scarf for some refugee desperate enough to wear it.

Alan said, “Aye, someone wrote ye were ugly. Well you’re no ugly, Athene, you’re beautiful.”

I saw Sandra give him a sharp look.

Ninian said slowly, “Yeah. Yeah.” I could imagine him puffing on a pipe between words. “Tell you what, right, a lot of the negative comments were in the same writing, purple marker.”

Pete said, “Yeah, Ninian, but we don’t want to start a witch hunt here.”

And Jojo, “Hang on, Pete, by witch are you saying one of the women wrote them?”

“Hell no, it’s just a turn of phrase.”

“Exactly. Prejudice built into the language. There’s no word for a two-gender hunt.”

Another silence, everyone looking around to see who the witch was. The Greek caught my eye.

“What do you think, Dean?”

“About what, exactly?”

“What was just talked about.”

“Prejudice in the language, or who’s the witch?”

“Both. Either.”

I got to my feet. Difficult and undignified off a beanbag. I said, “The witch was me, so fuck off all of you, and fuck

your loving-kindness," and walked out. I went out in the rain and smoked a rollie under an ash tree. I said, "Sod off" to the drops landing on my head. I smoked another but it didn't help. I wondered whether it was possible to feel any worse. I was taken aback when Brendan joined me.

"You have to come in now, Dean."

"Why?"

"Group hug. No-one gets left out."

I gave him a cold stare. Then the Greek appeared, short and busy, black hair flying, swishing through the long grass like a samurai, holding her knitting.

"Right Dean," she panted, "piss off indoors and get yourself hugged before I stab your skinny arse with my needles."

"No chance." So she stabbed me.

"Ow! What about loving-kindness?"

"That's what *this* is."

What could I say? Fake smiles in my direction as we hugged in a ring, awkwardly I thought. They didn't care about me, just wanted to stop themselves feeling shitty for dissing me.

Monday. Sawing wood with Ninian. We heard voices raised. Alan and Sandra. Stopped to listen.

"Away on home and do something useful," she yelled. "Leave the car and hitch-hike, okay?"

He muttered something we didn't hear.

"Och, I get ye were tempted, Alan, but it's no what being here is about."

He muttered something else, then gave us an embarrassed glance and set off down the drive with his holdall. Sandra glared at us and snapped, "Satisfied?" and stalked back to the house. Ninian and I carried on, building up a rhythm with the two-handed saw.

"Beats the old chainsaw, Dean, huh? Yeah. Less noise, more collaboration."

"Like playing a double bass when you're used to a fiddle."

He didn't ask me to explain that. But it was good to talk as if we're equals. As if I'm normal. That *weirdo* comment still stings like hell.

I said, "What was that shouting all about?"

Ninian pulled a face, teeth very white in his beard. "Alan's

been fucking Athene."

That gave me a shock, I don't know why. Hardly jealousy. Maybe surprise that he found the Greek attractive. Ninian grinned at me.

"Hey, you know who wrote that *stop being a weirdo* message?"

Another shock. "No idea. Do you?"

I realized I'd blanked out the thought of a human agent, as if it was just a message from the ether.

He said, "Athene."

"What!"

"You should have guessed. She sometimes writes *s* like sigma."

We sawed on while I took this in. My hand went limp and I let go the saw.

"What do you think she meant?"

Ninian straightened up, looked me in the eye, and sighed. "Listen, Dean, I say this with affection, okay? Yeah. But that scratty beard doesn't help."

"Not like yours, eh?"

He sighed again. "This is said from kindness, Dean: you look like Colonel Sanders or Ho Chi Minh both gone wrong. Stepney Green ain't Kentucky or Hanoi. And by the way, why do you wear a belt *and* braces? That reads like insecurity."

We sawed on in deep silence. After a bit I said, "Hey Ninian, are you a draft dodger? Is that why you're over here?"

"That's my business, Dean."

"I thought we came here to open up?"

That made him think. He said, "To make a start on that. Yeah."

"Well, the war ended four months ago. You could go back to the States."

"And be forgiven? Ha."

"It's a Christian country. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Forgiveness rules."

"Hey man, you're religious!"

"Bollocks. I was force-fed with it till I puked."

More sawing. On the way back for lunch he clapped me twice on the back. Was I meant to feel encouraged, or what?

Tuesday. Obsessed with being called a weirdo. Why is it so annoying that it was the Greek? This evening we had dancing which I thought would help. Brendan played guitar, Pete brought out a bodhrán, Rochelle a tin whistle. In the interval Sandra did "mouth music"—very strange. The dancing was the usual writhing in front of someone. No-one seemed to mind dancing with me, probably because we kept moving on. I ended up with Sandra. She was wearing a cheesecloth top and her tits bounced in it.

She said, "What's on *your* mind, partner?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Ye're no very grun'it."

Scots dialect? Meaning what exactly?

I said, "I could fuck you now Alan's gone."

She stared at me for a moment then walked away. I just stood making vague movements. The Greek joined me.

"What did you say to Sandra?" she demanded.

"Never mind."

I went to the kitchen for a drink, and she followed.

"You're creating an atmosphere. Everyone noticed. And now you're too scared to tell me what you said."

She glared, thrusting her fat bottom lip. Twitching her head so her poncy earrings clattered. Sweat on the down above her upper lip. I hyperventilated, then told her. I thought she'd freak but she just looked down at our sandals. Then at me, looking sad.

"And you've no idea why Sandra walked off?"

"She doesn't fancy me. Just like the rest."

"No, Dean. It's the tone. The crudity. The Taming of the Shrew. Know what you remind me of, the way you stare at women's boobs? The worst kind of Greek waiter. No, a panting dog with its dick out. You ooze desperation and it's not attractive."

I laughed bitterly. "Look who's talking."

"So it *was* you who wrote that I'm ugly."

"Didn't stop Alan though, did it?"

"Dean. Dear. I want you to be sexy. To stop acting—and I *mean* acting—weird. It's not you."

"It *is* me! It is!"

I hurried outside to hide my tears and caught my head on

a low branch. It was too much. The end. I wanted to die. I sank to my knees on the muddy grass and howled like a dog abandoned.

The music played on and on, the lively voices rose and fell. After a long time it all went quiet. The lights in the house went dim. The dark was overwhelming. Then a torch flashed and there were voices. One was unmistakeable: Coral the red-haired Geordie saying, "He's here."

Next moment she, Ninian, Jojo, and the Greek were standing around me. I knew because I recognized their shoes. I couldn't look up.

"I deserve your contempt," I moaned. "I deserve to be shat on."

Ninian said, "Hey, we all have a bad side. Give yours a holiday."

And Jojo, "We saved some supper. We can warm it in the Aga for you."

One of them—probably not the Greek—stroked my head. Nicer than being shat on. I wolfed the supper. I hadn't realized how hungry I was. I couldn't stop thanking them. The Greek kept looking at me, probably thinking I couldn't sink any lower in her estimation.

Wednesday. Spent most of today cleaning the Aga. My God did it need it. The chrome rims of the hotplate covers were thick with burnt-on grease. I made them shine again. I cleaned years of cremated food scraps from the ovens. Most of the others were outside playing Frisbee. I think they thought I was doing penance. Well sod them, I wasn't, just needed to 'earth' myself (oh yeah, the psychobabble of this place has got to me). I thought of offering to fit new worktops. Properly jointed without those stupid metal strips. But then thought, Why should I?

Coral and Jojo came to plan dinner. I said, "I'll finish so you can light the coal again."

"No no," says Jojo, "you're doing a great job, carry on. We'll have something cold tonight . . . yeah, that lentil loaf with spinach salad."

Oh yes, it's all veggie. Vegan even. I could kill for meat. 'Kill'—get it?

They made three cups of tea and I carried on cleaning between sips. Jojo and Coral sat at the table talking. The usual guff. I scrubbed harder so I wouldn't hear it but couldn't avoid it all.

"The way to act compassionately is to exchange oneself for the other," Jojo declared.

"Yeah," Coral said in her singsong voice, "if you put yourself in someone else's shoes you know what they need."

"Yeah, right," said Jojo. "Athene says . . ."

I banged the oven doors shut on that.

After supper (at least the plum pudding with tahini cream was good) I sat on the big log outside and smoked a rollie. Pete joined me and scrounged one. He went on about how he'd replan the garden now he lives here. I made polite noises—no, even made a suggestion.

Pete nodded, "Yeah, yeah, rhododendrons, nice one, Dean. Yeah."

Thursday. Saw Sandra packing to leave. She had one of those chewed-leather suitcases you see in charity shops. As she walked to her car it fell open. Well the catches never work on those things, do they? There was no-one else about, and I thought, Shit, I'm the last person she'll want help from. Then the sun came out, that brilliant sun you often get between rain clouds, and nearly blinded me, and I thought, Hey, maybe a skillful action can erase the past. I remembered what I overheard while cleaning the Aga. If compassion meant exchanging myself for Sandra, who was I? No longer Weirdo Dean! All this went through my head in seconds and sounds clearer than the thought really was. But whatever, I ran.

She was standing pulling at her hair and hissing, "Fuck! Fuck!" through gritted teeth. I ignored her glare and started putting stuff back—clothes mostly. I folded them neatly, one of the few skills I possess. All right, I'm obsessive. Sandra thrust a pair of knickers at me, blue with white dots, and sneered, "I ken ye'll be wanting tae sniff these."

"Let's just get it all packed before it rains again."

Her washbag wasn't zipped. The lid of some pills had come off and they'd spilled on the gravel, piebald red and blue. I started to rescue them.

"Leave those!" she yelled.

"My hands are clean."

"Oh well, on ye go, Dean Wilson, away and tell the world Sandra's a nutcase."

"I don't follow."

"Ye've no read the label?"

I shook my head emphatically and carried on. When everything was back in I shut the suitcase and checked the catches. Hopeless. Neither would engage. Almost without thinking I unclipped my braces—God knows what Sandra was thinking—and wrapped them tight around the suitcase. I remembered the belt-and-braces taunt, and thought, My jeans are still up, ha ha.

I said, "Fit to travel, Sandra."

She looked at me as if I'd just beamed down. As if someone else had got mixed in with my reassembly. Probably a good thing.

She said, "Ye'll no . . . ?"

Another emphatic head shake. She walked away and I looked with longing at her long brown legs, her neat bum in thin green cotton shorts, but I thought, Okay, Dean, just allow the feeling, it's only the universe unfolding. It poured with rain again. She drove off in a cloud of spray.

F*riday.* Time to leave tomorrow. A lot of the visitors have left already. I couldn't face all the false bonhomie and went for a long walk in the woods. I thought, What the hell have I achieved, being here? I haven't had sex. I've found out what a shitty nothing person I am. When I get back to London I'll see how long I last before throwing myself in front of a Tube train.

Walking back, dawdling because I didn't want to *be* back, I found the Greek. Sitting on the damp grass under the big oak, the one with a log-on-a-rope swing, staring at the purple hills on the horizon. Something made me stop and say, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help."

"Fuck off," she said in a dreary tone.

I didn't move. She looked up at me. Her face was red from crying, puffy around the eyes.

"What's wrong, Athene?"

"Why tell you? All you want is to get into my knickers."

I didn't know what to say because it was true. I was staring at her smooth bare thighs and longing to slide my hand inside those soft toweling shorts. But then I hated myself and looked at the pines waving in the distance. We sat in silence.

Suddenly she said, "I've been let down."

"By a boyfriend?"

"See? Sex on the brain that's you. I heard about the men's meeting. Fucking and wanking—ha!"

I didn't know what to say. But the other men in the group, they seemed obsessed with sex. Maybe it's only pathetic if you're a spotty geek.

After another long pause Athene said, "Let down by a carpenter. He promised plinths for my exhibition. Now I'm fucked."

I studied her face, her scowl, her dark eyes with a purple tinge. The firm I work for gets deliveries cancelled at the last minute, so I understood her frustration. All week I never thought about her having problems. Exhibitions. Ambitions. What's wrong with me?

I said, "Where do you live, Athene?"

"Why?"

I shrugged. Another long silence.

She said, "Camden Town."

"I'm in Bayswater. That's not far."

"How fascinating."

"I'm an apprentice."

She took her gaze off the pines and purple horizon and put it on me, eyes hooded.

"Got a lot to learn, then, haven't you, Dean?"

"Apprentice shopfitter."

I left it at that because I could smell cooking, and as I strode back the bell rang for dinner.

Contributor Notes

Alex Barr's recent short fiction is in *Tears in the Fence, The Lampeter Review, The Interpreter's House, New Welsh Reader*, and *The Last Line Journal*, and at mironline.org, litromagazine.com, feedlitmag.com, reflex.press, and samyuktafiction.in, with more due in *Otherwise Engaged Journal* and *Streetlight* magazine. His short fiction collection *My Life With Eva* is published by Parthian in Wales, where he lives. His recent nonfiction is in *Griffith Review, The Blue Nib, and Sarasvati*.

Brian Barrientez II (allegedly) sold poorly drawn comics in elementary school and junior high for 25 cents and has aspirations of selling full-length novels for more. His work frequently deals with life in the suburbs of Northern California. He has published a one-act play, and has been published in *Reed Magazine*.

Pia Jee-Hae Baur is a writer born to German and Korean parents and raised in the United States. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Montana in Missoula. She lives and works in the Pacific Northwest.

Brandon Forinash is a public school teacher in San Antonio, Texas. He graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a masters in Creative Writing in 2011. After a long time away from writing, he came back to it during the pandemic. He was recently published in *Necessary Fiction*.

Zoe Leonard holds a BFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College. She is a Kundiman fellow and originally from Baltimore, MD. Her work has previously been published with *Rejection Letters*, *Bag of Bones Press*, and *Unlikely Stories*.

Evan Manning is a writer from Toronto. He was a winner of Muskeg Press' 2020 Short Story Competition and was longlisted for the 2022 CAS Short Story Competition. His fiction has appeared in STORGY Magazine and in Sixfold's Summer 2023 issue. Evan is inspired by a long list of writers, including Saunders, Morrison, Ogawa, and Murakami. He owes many thanks to these writers, his friends, and his family for pushing him to hone his craft.

Vincent J. Masterson teaches English, writes short stories, and plays chess (poorly) online.

John Mort is a retired librarian living in Oklahoma. Last year, he published two novels: *Oklahoma Odyssey* (Bison Books) and *The Ballad of Johnny Bell* (Cornerpost Press).

B. Rosenberg's first nonfiction book—a surprise bestseller—was published so long ago that people had to purchase it at bookstores. B. is married to someone wonderful and has a quirky loving multigenerational family. As a nonfiction writer, B. strives for the truth; as a fiction writer, B. believes that the truth is wildly overrated. B. is putting the finishing touches on The Fifth Form of Attraction, a rom-com novel about making rom-com movies.

Dustin Stamper is a closeted fiction writer still working through a slow-motion midlife crisis. He is a published author of mostly unpublished short stories who aspires to one day write an unsuccessful novel. He lives semi-happily in Virginia with a wife he doesn't deserve and two children he does.

Corinne Tai has spent the past three years avoiding adulthood by working a remote job across five continents, a period which will conclude with the start of graduate school in August. Key parts of Corinne's creative process include spreadsheets, paper notebooks, bugging friends for feedback, and candy. Corinne loves reading science fiction, learning languages, hiking, swimming, and drawing.

Craig Vander Hart grew up near Seattle and is an avid explorer of the natural beauty of his home state. He teaches philosophy at Wenatchee Valley College in Wenatchee, WA, and occasionally works as a whitewater raft guide.

Dan Winterson lives and writes in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he also works in environmental conservation and investing. Like Wes, he traveled constantly as a management consultant for a time, but he never caught his wife cheating. He graduated from Harvard College and Stanford Graduate School of Business.