

SIXFOLD

FICTION WINTER 2013



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Tristen Chang

Bellasylva

My brother Luke meets me at the Allentown airport, his arms knotted over his chest and his guitar slung across his back. He shuffles toward me and lifts my duffel bag onto his shoulder.

“Hey,” he says, “Let me see it.”

We are here because yesterday I got a letter from my father saying he had committed suicide. I tweeze the letter out of my purse with two fingers and hand it to Luke. It is written on graph paper, in my father’s engineer-caps, and reads:

Ryann,

Come to Bellasylva right away. I have taken a bottle of sleeping pills and died peacefully on our lake. I don’t like the thought of growing old. Don’t be upset. Get your brother, swim out to the boat, and bury me under the gazebo. Come soon. I left the water on in the house and don’t want the pipes to freeze.

I love you, I had a great life, I’ll be pissed if you’re sad. Take care.

Love Dad

“Jeezus,” Luke says. He slaps the letter against his chest and says he can see why I panicked.

I shrug. “I told you.”

“He wrote this two weeks ago,” he says, pointing at the date printed in the corner.

“I know,” I say. “Dushore mail.”

Luke re-reads it, tapping his finger over the paper.

“Eighty words,” he says, “He summed up his whole life in eighty goddamn words.”

We rent a car and spend most of the four-hour drive squinting at the snow. We’ve spent about twenty percent of our lives out here, but always in summer, and everything looks so different when it’s dusted in white.

“Do you remember when he told us he had cancer?” I say. Luke never takes his eyes off the road, but he shakes his head

and pushes his hands against the steering wheel to dig his shoulders against the seat.

“Yeah,” he says, “That was so fucked.”

I scrub my palms over my knees, rocking slowly in the passenger seat, remembering the phone call I got a few years ago. I had been in college, Dad called and told me to sit down, he had something important to say. I sat in the middle of my bed, and tucked my thumbnail between my teeth. “Go ahead,” I said.

“I went to the doctor today.”

Silence.

“Ry, I don’t want you to freak out now.”

“Okay. What’d they say.”

“They said it’s treatable.”

“What’s treatable.” I pulled the cuff of my sweatshirt over my hands, covered my mouth and chin.

“I have cancer.”

I sucked in my breath in what sounded like fast, staccato hiccups, set the phone in my lap, and bit down hard on the heel of my hand. I didn’t want Dad to hear me cry, so I took a few deep breaths, swallowed hard, and raised the phone back to my ear.

Dad was laughing.

I swallowed again.

“I’m just kidding, Sweetie. I don’t have cancer,” he said. “But I got laid off.”

Silence.

“I just wanted to remind you that things could be a lot, lot worse.”

I am remembering that moment, the seizing clench of my ribs, when Luke says, *So, hypothetically, what do we do*. His left arm is straight and flexed on the steering wheel, like he’s trying to push it away from him.

“I mean,” he says, “So we get there. And he’s on the lake in the boat. And he’s dead. Or he’s sitting in the living room and he’s alive. Either way. What’s the plan.”

I slide off my shoes and pull my feet under me until I am sitting cross-legged in the passenger seat.

“You do whatever you want,” I say, “But I think if he’s

bullshitting I won't talk to him again. For a long time."

Luke shrugs. "Sounds good."

"Well no," I say, "That's just me. You react however you want." I pause, trace my finger through my fogged breath on the window. "I can't believe he wants us to swim in the lake when it's freaking snowing outside."

"I know," Luke says, "What an asshole."

We are quiet for a while and then Luke says, "I want us to do this together, though. United front, right?"

I nod. "For sure." I reach toward him and we bump fists without looking.

"But if he is alive, that fucker's paying for my plane ticket," he says.

We pass through Hickory, then Dallas; I ask Luke if he wants me to take a turn driving but he shakes his head. Only once we get to Ricketts Glen, two hours later, do I start recognizing things. The waterfall is frozen, and the trees are packed so tightly that not even the moonlight filters through, but I know we're only fifteen minutes from Lopez, then another fifteen to Dushore, and once we turn off Dutch Mountain Road and pass the water tower and cross Mehoopany Creek, the asphalt turns to dirt, that point in the drive where Dad would stop the car when Luke and I were little, and Luke and I would clamber into the trunk and drive the rest of the way squealing with laughter, and once we're on those familiar crunching roads we'll only have thirty minutes until we get to what Google Maps now calls SR 3001, which we've always called Bellasyva.

Bellasyva started as a 900-acre parcel in 1811, and got its name because my great-great-great grandfather misheard his Spanish friend describing it as a "bella selva." Straddling the borders of Wyoming and Cherry counties, Bellasyva isn't a town, though we do have our own cemetery, home first to my great-grandparents who died ten days apart, now also home to my aunt and uncle, and the baby sister I never knew. There used to be a post office as well, but it closed, and now we have to drive thirteen miles in to Dushore to pick up our mail. The only sign is the faded lettering on an old barn, where "Bellasyva" used to hang, but someone took the letters down years ago and now all that remains are the sun-bleached outlines.

Bellasyva is much smaller now, and the lots keep shrinking and subdividing with each generation, but the lake still looks the same.

The Bellasyva lake has been in our family for over 200 years. So has the crumbling green house at the end of the road, and the outhouse behind it, that my great-great grandfather built in 1837. Pennsylvania ferns and birch trees fringe the lake, there is a beaver house at the north end, you can hear the beaver cubs squeaking on summer nights. At the south end, there is a cherry tree that hangs over the water; Luke and I used to climb out onto the lower branches and spit down at the sunfish. The mist gathers in clouds and drifts over the surface each morning, and on still nights, you can hear leaves falling on the water. There are blueberries and water lilies, two mattress-sized rafts Uncle Jerry built, and the gazebo Dad and Luke and I hammered together last year.

The dirt roads don't crunch in the winter. They slush. I look at Luke, about to joke about getting in to the trunk, but he won't look at me so I stay quiet. We've never driven ourselves out here, without Dad.

When we finally get to the house, it's past midnight, and pitch dark. There is a rental car in the side yard under a few inches of snow. The water is on, like Dad said, and his suitcase is sitting empty in his closet, clothes put away into drawers. Like he just walked down to Uncle Jerry's for chain oil. The kitchen lights are on, there is bulgokee in the fridge, and milk that is starting to sour. Firewood is stacked. The sheets in our rooms freshly washed. Luke stands in the doorway of Dad's room, pulls his beanie off and rakes his fingers through his matted hair. "Fuck," is all he says.

I leave our suitcases in the hallway and grab the big flashlight from the basement.

"You ready?" I ask, and Luke nods, pulls his pilled brown beanie over his head. We take off sprinting toward the lake, kicking tree roots, pitching forward and catching ourselves, leaving naked handprints in the snow. We're both still in our California wear, just jeans and sweatshirts, which barely blink at this November Pennsylvania cold. But we hardly notice.

Luke gets to the shore before I do; I come up behind him

panting and swinging the broad beam flashlight at knee level. He grabs it from me and holds it at his chest, aims it over the lake. The fog is so thick, we can only see a few feet in front of us. Luke paws at the fog with his hands, as if to move it out of the way.

“Dammit,” I say, “That’s not going to work, Stupid.” Luke turns and shines the flashlight straight in my face.

Back in the living room, Luke builds a fire and I cook bulgokee and rice. It’s ten p.m. California-time, and neither of us can sleep, though I realize I haven’t slept since I opened my mail yesterday. Almost exactly twenty-four hours ago. I had torn the letter open hastily, already nervous, because I got exactly one piece of mail a year from Dad and it was always a Christmas card, blank except for “Dad” and the slant-eyed smiley face he always drew next to it, which he had drawn on our lunch bags as kids. I read it twice and then called Luke and told him Dad may have committed suicide. Luke said *Yeah right* then I read him the letter and he said *Ryann, he’s fucking with us* and I said *Maybe but I’m going out there, please please please come with me* and Luke groaned and I said I’d pay for his ticket and he said no and then we booked our tickets, mine from San Francisco and his from Sacramento, and then we were in Allentown, and then we were in Dushore, and then we were on the dirt roads, and then we were here. Then the lake. Then here. Now.

“Remember last summer?” I say between bites of rice, “The fish hook?”

Luke groans and asks why I keep bringing up these fucked-up memories.

“I think it was actually worse for you than it was for me,” I say.

“Oh, absolutely,” Luke says, “No question.”

“Actually, maybe it was worse for Dad. Remember how much he cried?”

Luke shakes his head. “Drama queen,” he says, “but I’m the one who had to get it out.”

I shudder, remembering the three of us on the lake, Dad casting drunkenly, snagging his lure deep in the skin of my outer thigh, just above the knee. At first, Luke’s eyes wid-

ened in alarm, but when he saw I wasn't bleeding, he laughed, called Dad an idiot, and cast along the edge of the water lilies. But when I went to pull it out, the barb snagged, and I sucked in my breath. Luke looked at me and wrinkled his eyebrows. I tried pressing down on the barb again and my gasp sounded like a windstorm in the quiet stillness on the lake.

"Oh shit," Luke had said, "That's not good." He rowed us home and he and Dad helped me hobble up to the house and I winced with every step, and by the time they got me up the porch steps Dad was crying softly.

"I'm so sorry, Honey," he said, "I can't believe I did this to you."

I said it was fine and Dad turned to Luke and said *Take care of her, Luke. Take care of your sister.*

They got me into a chair; Luke snipped the other two barbs off the three-pronged lure. They tried to give me vodka, but I waved them away, and asked for a washcloth. There was hardly any blood, but I dabbed at it anyway, then put a clean corner into my mouth to bite on. Luke knelt beside me and watched in vain as I pressed and winced, pressed and winced, making no progress but gasping with the effort each time. After half an hour, he took the pliers from me.

"Ryann, I hate to say this, but that's not coming out like that," he said.

He told me we had to push it all the way through. I shuddered and shook my head, eyes glistening. "Okay," I said, "I don't care, just get this thing out of me."

Dad wiped his eyes and asked again if I needed a drink. Luke pulled up a chair next to me, clamped the pliers around the barb, and pushed until the other side raised a small mound in my leg. I screamed so hard my whole body shook.

"Oh my God," Luke said, turning away from me to catch his breath, "I am so sorry Ry, this is going to hurt like hell, but it's too deep to just come out like that. I'm going to have to push the skin around it down and oh man it's going to hurt like hell."

"Okay," I said, "It's okay. Fishermen must do this all the time."

I held my breath and stiffened; Dad held my shoulders; Luke pressed the skin taut and tweezed the barb through. I

screamed through the rag in my mouth, screamed my cheeks red, screamed until snot flew. But the hook was out, it was out, and Luke lay face down on the porch, pliers still in hand, and Dad kept crying and pouring rubbing alcohol on the wound, but I didn't feel it, didn't feel a thing, not a whisper of sting but the full blow of sore, of dull pain I welcomed, anything but the sharp tear of the last almost-hour. I blew my nose on the washcloth, stood and walked over to my brother, still face down and breathing against the wood of the porch.

"I'm so glad that's over," I said, laughing.

Luke nodded, eyes closed, and dropped the pliers.

Early the next morning, we go back down to the lake. We pull our snowboarding pants and jackets over our clothes, roll wool socks up our calves, stretch the laces tight across our boots. Luke brings a rope. I don't know why.

The lake is only a few hundred yards from the house, but by the time we get there, my nose is already bitten with cold. Luke folds his arms across his chest and clamps his gloved hands in his armpits, the rope coiling around his elbow. The lake is quiet, humming with a soft wind, the water lilies gone and replaced by a veil of pale silver and white. It's not snowing, but the breeze unsettles the snow on the trees, and it falls around the lake in small flurries. The trees are bare, branches twisting like wires, trunks dusted with frost. Luke and I stand shoulder to shoulder at the bank. Our aluminum rowboat is alone on the lake, twenty yards from the shore.

"Oh my god," I say.

Luke is silent.

We stand there for several minutes, not saying anything. Then I start to cry and step onto the frozen lake with one foot. I put my full weight on the ice, and don't feel any give beneath me. I step forward with my other foot, crouching low, and my heel slams through the ice. Luke grabs my arm and pulls me back; I land hard on my elbows.

"Don't be stupid," he says.

He drops the rope and pulls me to my feet. The whites of his eyes are red, the irises sea-turtle green and brown, glassy as the lake under this finger-thin layer of ice. He is much taller than me now, almost six feet, with dark brown clumps of hair

framing his face, and stooped shoulders. He turns around, raises his foot, and kicks the gazebo, then turns again and faces the boat.

“Dad?” he says, as though Dad were across the dinner table, chatting with one of his waitresses, clinking his glass against hers.

Still. Quiet. The wind drops snow onto our cheeks.

“Dad!”

He covers his mouth and coughs into his hands.

I stand next to him and scream *Dad* toward the boat, loud and long, my voice raw with the cold. Luke yells with me, wheels around and kicks the gazebo again, harder, until the lattice work splinters. He kicks forward and back, like a man in flames, until the whole thing shakes and rattles the nails loose.

We hike to Uncle Jerry’s and carry his canoe to the edge of the lake. Luke chops the ice with an oar, settles the canoe on the water, and I climb in behind him. We tap the ice until it breaks, gently so we don’t tip, and paddle slowly toward our boat. As we get closer, I can see the blue tackle box, a fishing pole propped on the bench. We can almost touch the boat now. I see the metallic shine of a cardboard six-pack. The hood of a sweatshirt.

My father is lying in the middle of the boat, head turned away from us, body curled in like a fist. And without thinking, I am stepping toward him, foot in the air, in a panicked leap, then crashing into the water, breath frozen in me like a cast spell, arms chopping ice once, twice, pulling myself into our boat, arms shaking. I can’t grip the sides, Luke is yelling and waving his oar at me, canoe rocking. I heave my hips against the lip of the boat and it tips toward me, my father’s body pitches forward, face-up and into the water next to me. His eyes are closed, his mouth open, his skin the color of a rain cloud. I yell and Luke yells and jams his oar against the floor of our boat and steadies it, I fall inside, Dad falls outside, still curled, and floats between us like the red and white bobbers we clamped to our fishing lines as kids.

After Luke jumps in our boat screaming about what an idiot I am and rows me back to the house and throws me in the shower, boots and all, we sit in front of the wood-burning stove, passing whiskey between us, and talk about what to do with Dad.

“We should call the cops,” I say, “File a report or something.”

He waves me off, says nobody is going to come out here anytime soon, that the weather will just get worse, that we’d be better off dealing with this from California.

“We have the letter and records of our flights and stuff,” Luke says, “in case we have to prove that we didn’t kill him.”

That hadn’t occurred to me. I sip my whiskey and nod.

“We’re not going to be back here anytime soon,” he says, “Let’s just do this now and figure out the rest once we get home.”

I nod. “Should we call Mom?”

“What’s she going to do?”

I shrug. They had been divorced for over twenty years.

“Call her if you want,” he says.

We stay quiet for a few moments. My head is spinning questions about what we should do, who we should call, how likely we are to be suspects of a crime. The rules have always felt different in Bellasylva.

Finally I speak. “We should bury him,” I say. “Like he wanted.”

Luke shakes his head. “No. We’re not ending on that note.” He stares at the air in front of him and shakes his head gently. “He fucked with us too much.”

“Not under the gazebo then. Somewhere else.”

“Just let him sink. He wouldn’t care.” Luke swallows his whiskey with pursed lips, staring straight ahead.

“But that’s just gross. And I could never swim in there again because I’d be scared of finding him.”

We decide to bury him in the Bellasylva cemetery. We take the rope out in our boat, row out, tie Dad to one end, and the canoe to the other. We row back to shore, towing Dad and the canoe, then put Dad in the canoe, and slide it up the trail to the cemetery. We pick a spot, to the right of the big sister we never met, and hack at the dirt with a shovel until our hands

are sweaty and slippery inside our gloves. The ground is almost frozen, and chips away like rock. After two hours, we've only gotten a few inches deep.

"This isn't going to work," Luke says, "We should come back in spring and bury him when the ground is softer."

I don't answer him.

After a few minutes of silence, I throw down my shovel and stomp back toward the house. I boil a kettle of water, and grab a hoe and posthole digger from the basement. I trudge back to Luke with the kettle in one hand and tools clamped under my arm, and suggest we pour hot water over the dirt to soften it. He is dubious, but lets me trickle the hot water over the ground. Steam hisses up like a geyser and we stand over the warmth, unwinding our scarves and dropping our faces into the warm vapor, which cools and condenses on our cheeks almost instantly, and leaves us colder than we were. But the ground is softer, even though it's muddy, and we work quickly to shovel the muck before the water can refreeze. Every half hour or so, I hike back to the house, boil more water, and sprinkle it over the ground, like Saint Teresa warding off the devil.

It takes us two days to dig deep enough. Even through scarves, the air is so cold, our windpipes feel stripped and dry. At the end of the second day, the sun is sinking below the tree line over the lake, the forest looks like a black and white photograph. We've carved out a pit, the size of a long coffee table, deep enough for Luke to stand up in and not be able to see anything.

"Okay," Luke says, "I think that's good."

I nod and ask how we should get him down. Luke says we can *drop him in gently*.

"That just sounds awful."

"Well, what do you propose, Ry. What are the options?"

I tell Luke that we should straighten him out, cross his arms over his chest, *gently drop* his feet in, then lower his head slowly, using the rope.

"Fine."

But the body won't straighten. My dad is curled, with his knees to his chest, arms clasped over his knees, chin tilted to-

ward his left shoulder. The bald spot on the crown of his head is a pale beige tinted blue, like the bottom of a swimming pool. Snow has collected on the curly black hairs around it like a halo. It looks like part of his right ear is missing. Luke pulls on his ankle while I push down on his knee, but we both feel like something might crack. We decide to leave him curled up.

“Do you want a lock of hair from him or something?” I ask, “I don’t think he’d mind.”

Luke shakes his head. We fold the rope in half and thread it behind Dad’s neck. Because he is still curled, we lower him in knees-up, his forehead pressed toward the dirt wall. We lower his head down, pull the rope back up, stand there looking at each other.

“We should pray or something,” I say.

Luke shrugs. “Go ahead.”

I take a deep breath, and close my eyes, but all that comes to me is *For health and strength and daily food we praise thy name O Lord*, the jingle prayer our mom has sung with us each dinner since we were kids. *For food and friends and family we praise thy name O Lord*.

I nod at Luke, squeeze my eyes tight for a few seconds, then start scraping the dirt over my father’s body with my boots.

That night, Luke and I sit out on the porch, wrapped in blankets and watching the clouds blow past the stars. Luke smokes; I hold a flashlight straight up and breathe deliberately into the beam of light, my mouth open, breath crystallizing in front of me.

“Do you want to come back here?” he says, “In summer? Like normal?”

My heart seizes for a moment; I hadn’t thought that far.

“I guess we have to,” I say, “I think it might be ours now.”

“Holy shit,” Luke says.

I sweep the flashlight slowly across the yard in front of us, picturing it during the summer: knee-high grasses and the wild daisies Dad always mowed around, the fallen birch trees that line the path to the lake, the moss-covered rock that Luke and I scrambled over as kids. The years Dad would stand below us, his arms wide, and tell us to jump.

I click the flashlight off, turn my face to the right, toward the lake, and to the left, toward the cemetery. I think about my father, my sister, and wonder where we can go to buy a headstone. I wonder if he'd want a headstone. What he'd want it to say. The porch lights are off and the only light comes from the moon, and the fire in the living room flickering through the window. The lake reflects the moonlight like a broken mirror, patches of ice bright silver, throwing the light back to me. Two choppy lines on the edge of the lake look dark, converging like the heart line of my palm, taking the light in, underwater, to somewhere I can't see.

John Shortino

Final Notice

Marla saw her in the pharmacy aisle, slipping a bottle of baby aspirin into a maroon bubble coat that came down to her knees. The girl was probably in her twenties, but Marla couldn't be sure—she had her hood, lined with faux fur, pulled around her face, obscuring her features. Marla picked up the phone, prepared to call her manager, but the girl's hood fell down, revealing the rest of her face, and Marla recognized the girl she hadn't seen in over a decade, shoplifting only a few yards away.

It was the seventeenth of December, a fact Marla had realized halfway to work. For the local utility companies, this was the final due date before everything was turned off, the last day they would process a payment before the holidays. Everyone without a checkbook came to the courtesy desk at the last possible minute, hoping to get their money in on time to have gas and electric through the New Year. It happened every year, Marla's personal Black Friday.

The girl in the bubble coat stumbled toward the counter without recognizing Marla—she hardly seemed to notice her surroundings, let alone faces. She stared down at the counter and mumbled something unintelligible.

“What was that?” Marla asked.

“This is due,” she said. She reached into a different pocket and produced a folded envelope, the words “Important: Open Immediately!” stamped across the rear flap. She slid it across the counter, letting Marla take the bill from inside. Marla scanned the paper, hoping to confirm her suspicions, and she found the name: Faith McCrenn, a girl who had lived in her home eleven years earlier before vanishing back into the foster program. She stood at the courtesy counter like she had been thrown across these years to find herself in this grocery store today. Faith owed the electric company four hundred dollars, six months of overdue payments.

Faith had always mumbled. The social workers weren't ever sure if it was a chronic and incurable shyness, or a more pernicious mental problem, but it hardly mattered. The first moment she arrived at the house and Marla introduced herself, the girl stared at the floor and said her name without seeming to open her mouth. It was far from the worst problem Marla and her husband had encountered in their years fostering: Faith did not scream in the night or attack other children or swear through meals, all issues they had seen before. On the day in June they first met her, the social worker sat across the kitchen table and opened Faith's file, explaining where she had come from.

"Her mother got picked up during one of those massage parlor raids," she said. "Which wouldn't have been a big deal if there weren't drugs, but . . ." She trailed off.

"Is she in prison?" Marla's husband, Luke, always asked these kinds of questions, like he was interested in the sordid backstory of each child. He once explained to Marla that he wanted to know what kind of family they had around, in case they were likely to show up at the house.

"When have they ever?" she asked. Marla had been anxious at the beginning, worried about kids from bad homes and criminal families, but her fears had quickly subsided: they had never had a foster child steal from them, and even if they had, how much would they have gotten? Marla and Luke were not wealthy—they usually had enough, even without the money that came from taking in children, but nothing overtly expensive.

"I just need to know," Luke would say. "For my peace of mind."

Faith's mother got probation, and Child Protective Services had taken her daughter away and placed her into foster care. This would be her third home in as many months.

"Why has she gone through so many?" Marla asked.

"I wish I had an answer for that," the social worker said. "Some kids drift from home to home. They can't get pinned down for some reason. Both other families had good things to say about her, no incidents to speak of, but . . . well, here we are."

Marla looked into the living room, where Faith was watch-

ing television and rooting through a wooden chest. It was filled with secondhand toys from kids who had passed through years before, most of them out-of-date and worn, like toys in a doctor's office waiting room. Faith examined a robot from the early 1980s and discarded it, returning to the box in search of something more current. She glanced up as if she realized Marla was looking at her, and stared back in the same penetrating way she had when she had been introduced. Marla offered Faith a weak smile, which went unreturned.

"It's difficult placing kids when they're her age," the social worker said. "By ten, they have a routine, you know? A way of doing things for themselves. She can cook her own dinner, set her own schedule, like she's already on her own."

In the living room, Faith had given up on the toy box in favor of lying on the couch, sprawled and staring at the ceiling. One leg was on the sofa, the other stretched out, the sole of her foot resting on the carpet. She occupied the room as if it already belonged to her.

"We should get her back to the group home," the social worker said. "We'll look over the paperwork, but since you've fostered before, it should go through quickly. I'll call you in about a week."

By the end of the month, Faith was back at the house, carrying one of her two duffel bags inside. Luke threw the other over his shoulder and followed her in. He took the luggage upstairs and left Marla alone with her. Faith sat at the kitchen table for a few seconds before asking, in that same mumbling voice, "Do you have any soda?" Today she fixed her stare on the refrigerator door, as though she hoped to peer through the metal.

"No, I'm sorry. We don't normally drink soda. Do you want some juice? Iced tea?"

"Water's fine. I'm not staying here long, you know." Marla took her time crossing the kitchen, then turned on the faucet and filled a juice glass before she answered.

"Because your mom will be home soon?"

"No. I don't stay anywhere. Even when she comes home, I won't be there long." Luke came back downstairs before Marla could say anything more, and Marla asked Faith if she wanted to see her new room. She said yes, as if it didn't mat-

ter at all to her, and Marla reminded herself not to be upset. They all started off like this—no one wanted to be in a foster home—but she would come around, like every other kid they had taken in over the past ten years.

The first night Faith was in the house, Marla woke up late, hearing the television on in the living room. She felt for Luke beside her, hardly disturbing him when she smacked his shoulder. She rolled over and checked the clock: it was two o'clock.

Downstairs, Faith sat in the living room, not sprawled on the couch but instead sitting cross-legged in front of it, staring at the loop of an infomercial. She didn't move when Marla sat down on the couch, and she didn't know for a few seconds if the girl had even noticed her presence. Finally, Faith mumbled, "Did the noise wake you up?"

"No, I was up," Marla said. "I had a lot on my mind."

"That's why I watch these," Faith said. "They help me slow my brain down."

Marla didn't know how to respond—she had never had a foster child say something like this, give her an opportunity to ask more. She worried she would squander it, or somehow say the wrong thing. She wanted to know what Faith was thinking about, but also didn't want to pry. She couldn't ask directly about Faith's mother, or how much Faith knew about what her mother did. Instead, she asked, "Do you usually watch these on your own?"

Faith thought for only a few seconds before she said, "Mostly." Marla did not think she would get any more out of her, but a few seconds later, Faith added, "You can sit and watch too, if you want."

Before her lunch break, Marla pocketed the envelope. Twelve years at the same desk, and she had never done something like this, but today was something new. She took her sandwich to the car instead of sitting in the break room, and she stared at the address on the envelope, trying to remember which neighborhood it was in. Somewhere in town, she thought, but nowhere she had spent any time. She called Luke, and he answered the phone in a whisper.

"I'm sorry," she said, "are you still working? I thought you'd

be at lunch.”

“I got busy. I’ll take a late lunch.”

“You had better.” It wasn’t the lunch itself she worried about as much as the two pills Luke had to take with food in the middle of the day: one for blood pressure, and one for cholesterol. Marla had found them in his pocket a few times on laundry day, still folded in the plastic bag she put them in each morning, and every time, she would admonish Luke, saying things like, “We pay enough for these damn things, you may as well take them.”

“You didn’t call in the middle of the day just to make sure I’m eating right, did you?”

“No. Something odd happened today.”

“Hold on.” Marla heard him cover the phone and make his way outside, his muffled voice telling one of the younger warehouse workers he would be right back. He had been there long enough that no one hassled him about taking five minutes to answer a call, but she still felt guilty for taking time out of his day: what did it matter, her seeing the girl they couldn’t get to stay?

“What do you mean, ‘something odd’?” Luke asked.

“I saw Faith.” When Luke didn’t answer, Marla wondered if he could have forgotten, and now had no idea whom she was referring to. She realized, though, that he was trying to find the right words to proceed.

“Where?”

“Right here at the counter. Walked up and put her bill on the counter with an envelope full of cash. Didn’t even bother waiting for a receipt.”

“How much was the bill?”

“What?”

“The electric bill. How much did she owe?” Marla glanced at the paper; she had taught herself to look, always, for the largest number on the page that wasn’t the account number.

“Four hundred dollars. Is that really the most important question?”

“Just curious. How did she look?”

“Like hell.” Marla didn’t want to say it—couldn’t bring herself to—but Faith looked a lot like her mother, the one time Marla met her. Instead, she asked, “Do you know where 6 Plumtree

Street is?”

“Yeah, why?”

“That’s the address on the bill. I was thinking—”

“Don’t do it. Don’t go over there. For one, it’s a terrible street. The worst. Plus, why would you want to see her again? It’ll only open up old wounds. Forget it.”

Marla said she would, and that her break was over. She still had a half hour left, but she decided to take it at the end of her shift. She left Faith’s electric bill, folded in half, in her glove compartment; she would need it later.

For the first few weeks, Marla and Faith would approach one another, and then suddenly back away. They repeated their late-night television viewing a few more times, neither acknowledging that it had become a kind of ritual. They began to get into rhythms, the way Marla and Luke would with each child that passed through their house. Every afternoon, Faith would sit in the kitchen and do homework while Marla loaded groceries into the cabinets or got things together for dinner. Sometimes Luke would take over cooking for the night, and on these occasions, Marla pulled her chair from under the kitchen table and sat next to Faith.

“Want me to check your work?” she would ask sometimes, or, “Anything giving you trouble?” These were the questions she had learned to ask, refining her technique with each foster child. There was a way to ask these questions without setting off a fight, without sounding like you didn’t think a child was smart enough, and Marla had adjusted her line of questioning to be almost invisible. Faith would usually shrug in response: she had no use for Marla’s help, no desire for her charity. Like the social worker had said, Faith had her own way of doing things.

Of the kids that had lived in the house prior to Faith, two were dyslexic, three had reading scores well below grade level, and four adamantly—sometimes violently—refused to complete any work outside of class (or in it, if Marla was honest with herself). Faith was different, quickly finishing her homework and then staring sullenly at Marla or Luke. She got good grades and her IQ was slightly above normal, according to the social worker. When she finished her homework early,

Marla would let her help in the kitchen; for a girl of her age, Faith was competent with a knife and a pan. She had long limbs, thin legs that made her tall for her age, and she moved around the kitchen more like an adult than a child. While they worked, she would occasionally lob mumbled questions at Marla: “When did you start working at the store?” or, “Isn’t that a job for teenagers?” Marla would scramble around, trying to field or direct them, always feeling like the girl had some advantage over her.

Marla refused to answer one question: when Faith asked, “Why don’t you have kids of your own?” Marla said, “We don’t talk about that.” She was thankful Luke wasn’t in the room—there was no knowing what effect that question might have on him, what protective instincts would kick in. For Marla, all of their attempts—the fertility shots, the miscarriages—were behind them, the dark parts of their early marriage; Luke had mostly let go, but there were times when something would remind him, and the bitterness would come pouring out. When they first made the decision to foster, he had asked, only once, “Why do pieces of shit get to have kids they don’t even take care of?” Marla had told him not to think like that, that it would only bring them both a lot of grief.

After the first month, Faith settled in, and Marla began to make plans, short road trips to other parts of the state or across the border into New Jersey, to the orchards or parks. Marla bought Faith a pair of decent walking shoes to replace the flimsy canvas ones she had arrived in. These were the small things no one accounted for when they calculated the cost per day of fostering a child: the money provided was enough for basic subsistence, but wasn’t the point to provide a better life, at least temporarily?

Faith opened up—it was a slow process, but soon enough she was having short conversations with Marla, answering questions and talking without too much prodding. She still asked awkward, too-personal questions, but even so, Marla was glad to have her around the house. So many of the children they had fostered before couldn’t have a conversation or refused to, and Marla never felt like they were more than transients passing through.

One night, Marla woke Luke up after midnight. She had

been lying awake, listening to his snoring and wondering if the television downstairs would turn on that night. While Luke slept, she had stared at the ceiling, approaching and then retreating from what she was about to say to him. He woke up without moving anything but his eyes, his face still pressed against the pillow and his words muffled.

“What if we adopted her?” Marla whispered. Whispering felt right for this conversation, as though the volume might let her take it all back if he didn’t go for it.

“But we said—”

“I know. But I’ve never felt like this before. There’s never been any reason to think this way, but now it seems stupid, to say we would absolutely never do it. Right now, that whole conversation seems short-sighted, you know?”

Luke rolled onto his back. “What’s to say *this* won’t seem short-sighted in a few weeks? Besides, you know she’s only in the system for a little while.”

“You know she’ll be back. Once you’re in, you’re in until you’re adopted or eighteen.”

Luke sighed. He had this way of sighing that made his whole body seem to deflate. Marla pictured the air coming out of every pore, every inch of his frame exhaling.

“Can we talk about it tomorrow?” he asked.

Marla said yes, and Luke quickly fell asleep, leaving her to think alone about what she would do about Faith. She had never experienced this attachment before, not this quickly. There had been other kids that she had loved, in a way, but never with the intention to make them a permanent part of her life.

The afternoon seemed to drag on, the sky darkening early, a steady stream of customers walking up with their folded wads of worn cash. Marla processed each of them with her normal efficiency, the professionalism that had brought her the promotion to manager so quickly. That version of herself—the Marla who would never think of pocketing someone’s bill, would never allow someone to miss their overdue payment—seemed a long way off, as though she had set that part aside for the day.

One of the teenage girls she managed, Laura, came in from

a cigarette break and sat on the stool behind the counter, typing a message on her cell phone with long painted fingernails. There was a brief lull between customers, and Marla asked her, “What are you doing for Christmas?”

“Going into the city,” Laura said. It was always the same answer with some of these girls, always the same trip to New York, back to where they thought they belonged. They said they missed the congestion, the knowledge that there was always something within walking distance. For Marla, it was the exact opposite: she had been to New York only a few times, but was always relieved when she returned and could breathe clean air again.

She wondered—but did not ask—why they were so obsessed with escaping, when the whole reason their parents uprooted them was to give them a chance to grow up outside of the crowded blocks and subways. There was space here, at least: wasn’t that better, sometimes? You could still walk in the woods here, could still find a spot without the sound of traffic. They were close enough to amenities; there was enough to do. What would you find, escaping?

Laura asked Marla what she was doing for the holidays, and Marla had to stop and think for a minute: no kids in the house at the moment, only her and Luke. They would probably drive out to his sister’s in Washington, New Jersey to see their nieces and nephews. Church on Christmas Eve before Marla stayed up watching *It’s a Wonderful Life*. It would make her cry, like it always did; that had become as much of a holiday tradition for her as driving out to the Christmas tree farm with Luke.

She only told Laura about the first part—she would understand leaving town to be with family members. The rest, Marla kept to herself—it was a private ritual, not to be shared. Besides, it was not something she could explain, even to herself: she had no specific memory tied to the movie, but she cried for the world it mocked her with, the full house at the end of the film, the people surrounding him in the final moment.

Two weeks after she pitched her idea to Luke, Marla found herself at the county office of Child Protective Services.

She had been there a few times before, meeting with case workers or bringing a child back into their custody. She could say without exaggeration that it was one of her least favorite places on earth. There was a drabness to it, a grey institutional stillness far more dismal than the bright fluorescence of the grocery store. At work, she could at least take a break and wander through the produce aisle for some color and variety. Here, the plastic chairs seemed designed for minor discomfort and the tall desk held a single receptionist repeating phrases like “We’ll be with you in just a few minutes” like they were mantras.

Faith’s social worker came out into the lobby and told Marla to follow her back to the offices, down a dim hallway leading to the back of the building. In the office, at least, the chairs were slightly more comfortable, though Marla sat at the edge of one while the social worker spoke. She said everything Marla expected her to: it was a long process, there were no guarantees, the costs could be prohibitive. Marla wondered how it was less expensive to keep children in the system, paying stipends to foster parents, than to find permanent homes.

“What’s our first step?” Marla asked when it was her turn to speak.

The social worker opened the squeaking bottom drawer of her desk and produced a manilla folder. She slid several papers across the desk. Marla glanced quickly at them, spotting a form where she had to fill in her income, her expenses, all numbers that would be entered into the system to find out if they could provide a stable home. She wondered what questions weren’t on there, what couldn’t be quantified: willingness to make sacrifices, skills in negotiating behavior problems.

“You’ll want to take that home and fill it out with your husband,” the social worker said. “When you’re ready, you’ll return it to me, and we’ll file it with the state and see what happens.”

Marla would return with that form, and a few weeks later, she would return with yet another form, this one even more official, more intent on determining their suitability as parents. There was one more hurdle, though: since Faith’s mother was not in prison or declared incompetent, they had to get

her to agree to put her daughter up for adoption.

The day they met with her, Marla expected a fight. She thought Faith's mother would be like every other parent they had ever dealt with, pissed off that someone else was trying to raise their kid and angry with the state for telling them they weren't doing an adequate job. Faith's mother, Laureen, was neither: she sat in the living room and calmly lit a cigarette before Marla could find one of the old glass ashtrays they had inherited from Luke's mother. The social worker sat with several folders spread in front her on the coffee table, all ignored by Faith's mother.

"Why do you want her?" Laureen asked.

"There are a lot of reasons," Marla said. Faith sat in the kitchen, not quite out of earshot. As Marla explained the reasons she wanted to adopt, she was conscious of talking loud enough to be heard from the next room. She had to make her case to both mother and daughter. "We've become close over these past few months, and she's doing better in school, so this is obviously a good environment for her. I think she's happy here, and we're happy with her here."

Laureen pushed a strand of her mousy hair away from her face, and Marla got a clear look at her: her face was sunken, her cheekbones protruding. She wouldn't make eye contact with anyone around the table, and didn't speak until she had finished her first cigarette and lit another.

"I won't lie," she said. "There's not much for her at home. She's probably told you that, and she's right to."

Marla felt her pulse quicken—was this the permission she needed? Was this woman agreeing to let her daughter go? If so, they could sign the paperwork that afternoon, and it would be official soon. The social worker asked Laureen if she would consent, and Faith, sensing there was something major happening in the next room, came in from the kitchen. Marla hadn't noticed it earlier, but she seemed to revert in the presence of her mother, to become the gloomy, silent girl she had been when she first arrived. Marla motioned for her to sit on the sofa next to her.

"Your mom agreed to let us adopt you," she said. Faith stared at her own knees. "Isn't that great? Like we talked about?"

Faith looked up and stared straight at her mother. Lauren stared back and offered a smile; Marla noticed she was missing her top left incisor. She noticed everything about that moment, and would replay it for years because of what Faith said next.

“I want to go back with her.” She offered no more explanation, but after that Lauren wouldn’t sign any of the paperwork. Her probation had come to an end the week before, so Faith was free to leave with her. Marla sat on the couch, stunned, as if Faith had done her some physical violence instead of simply choosing to go home with her own mother. Luke went upstairs and helped her to pack the duffel bags, and then he carried them out to the social worker’s car. He completed both of these tasks in silence, as though he wanted to avoid further complications by stifling his anger. When they left, Marla went straight to bed and remained there until Monday, when she went back to work behind her desk.

Marla drove to the address printed at the top of the bill, a cul-de-sac off a street notorious for drugs and crimes. Plumtree Street was not in much better shape, two rows of one-story homes leading to a dilapidated Victorian set at the end like a keystone. It loomed over the block like a castle, originally built by a coal tycoon and surrounded by the clapboard homes that had once housed his workers. But that was a century ago; now, the grand house was boarded up, a place for strays both animal and human.

Most of the small houses had lights on. One or two had Christmas decorations up, some small effort to combat the gloom of the neighborhood. Marla inched down the block reading house numbers until she spotted the one she was looking for. She parked in front of a house two doors down and sat for a few seconds.

Marla had not planned past this moment; what did she think she would do once she found Faith’s house? She couldn’t knock on the door and expect a warm reception—she was a stranger now, more than she ever had been. Still, she could not convince herself to leave yet. She unbuckled her seatbelt and got out, closing the door as quietly as possible. She would walk past the mailbox, one look, and then she would go home.

There was no need for Luke to know she had even stopped.

Faith's house had a string of lights draped on the porch, knotted around a leaning bannister to the left of the door. The door itself was yellow, a tarnished silver "6" affixed above an ornate knocker that looked as if it had been salvaged from the coal-boss's house. Maybe it was the holiday, but standing at the base of the stairs, she thought of the ghost of Christmas past, Scrooge looking into the windows of a history he could not change.

Later that night, Marla would try to figure out what had carried her up the few stairs to the front porch. If she had mentioned it to Luke, he would have repeated his warning about old wounds, but it was more complicated: Marla wanted to know who the girl had become, what had brought her to the store that afternoon.

She stood on the porch, trying to position her body so she could look inside without being seen. She told herself she was acting insane, that she had no right to be there, that she could be arrested for prowling, but she couldn't walk away. Finally, she had a clear line of sight into the living room, and she gasped when she saw Faith holding a boy of about four.

Faith put her lips to his forehead, as if she was checking his temperature. She smiled and said something Marla could not interpret; she assumed his fever had broken, or some other sign of a slight recovery. Marla watched for a few minutes, the two of them sitting on the couch, until she felt cold and crept back to her car. There, she opened her glove compartment and looked at the unpaid electric bill. She pulled the cash from the envelope and walked back toward the house before shoving the bills in the mailbox and closing the lid.

Back in the car, she wrote a check for the full amount and stuffed it into the envelope. If Luke asked why they were suddenly missing four hundred dollars—he was bound to notice—she would tell him the truth. But for the moment, she sat alone with the car turned off, looking at the light coming from Faith's house as though she was waiting for it to suddenly go out.

Chris Belden

The Woodpecker Problem

An hour before the storm hit, Henry Leek killed a woodpecker with a rock.

“It was a lucky shot,” he told Bea afterwards. “I just wanted to scare him off, but I nailed him right on the noggin.”

He was trying to sound nonchalant, like Hemingway after bagging a rhino, but he shuddered as he recalled the feeling he’d had as the rock made impact—the dull thud of stone against flimsy bone. It was as if the rock had struck his own noggin.

Henry had been at the computer tracking the storm’s progress when he heard the unmistakable sound of beak against wood: Tap tap tap. TAP TAP TAP. He was surprised. Typically, woodpeckers chose calm, sunny days to attack the house. On those occasions, Henry would groan, sneak outside, arm himself with small stones from the garden and toss them at the offending bird, his shots wildly off target but just close enough to spook the woodpecker back into the woods.

Today, the sky was dark gray, and the wind was starting to pick up ahead of the storm. It was the kind of weather that usually sent animals—birds, squirrels, deer—into hiding, leaving foolish humans to fend for themselves.

And yet there it was: tap tap tap.

He reluctantly left the computer, where the storm swirled off the coast in menacing reds and yellows and greens, and went downstairs.

“Where are you going, Daddy?” his six-year-old daughter, Pearl, asked.

Henry forgot that school was canceled. Just when he was getting used to being home all day, here comes this storm—and the school closing—to throw him off balance again.

“Daddy needs to go outside for a minute,” he told Pearl, unsure of why he needed to refer to himself in the third person. He made a mental note to monitor this habit, to see if he spoke that way in particular situations. “Daddy will be right

back,” he added, stepping outside before Pearl could ask another question. Henry loved his daughter, but the relentless demands, the questions—they exhausted him.

Dead leaves scuttled across the grass; trees swayed out of sync with each other. Just above the roofline, it seemed, pendulous clouds rolled across the sky. Henry had already moved the porch furniture into the garage, along with both cars, and was considering taping the windows. News reports were warning of an “unprecedented storm,” with wind gusts of up to 100 miles per hour and several inches of rain.

“It’s Armageddon!” he’d joked to Bea, skeptical as he was of the media, but seeing that sky, smelling the roiled-up air, he was starting to get spooked.

Meanwhile, the woodpecker jackhammered away. Was it digging for insects before all hell broke loose? A cozy nook to hide in? Black, with a splash of red on its crest, the bird perched above the window at the rear of the house, unaware that Henry was peeking around the corner, rock in hand.

Truth be told, Henry really did want to nail the bird—just once, a solid kill-shot. He attributed his bloodlust to his genetically coded masculine instinct to defend his home. Just as in olden times a man might rush out with his musket to ward off a marauding bear, here he was armed with crude weaponry to challenge nature’s brutal onslaught. Well, okay, he admitted, it may not be equivalent, exactly, but there was the cedar siding to consider.

The woodpecker paused and looked around. Henry remained still. The fatal rock—about one inch in diameter, solid and smooth—felt good in his hand. He guesstimated the distance to his target at approximately twenty feet. He would get one good shot.

As Henry brought back his arm he imagined the face of his former boss, Mr. Kruger, superimposed on the head of the bird. He anticipated the joy he’d take in seeing Kruger beamed on the beak by a sharp rock. He pictured himself standing over his boss’s supine body, the blood gushing from the old man’s hairy nostrils, the terror in his eyes.

With this in mind, he threw the rock in an uncharacteristically rope-straight line.

Thud.

Henry watched the bird plunge toward the ground with a combination of elation (I killed it!) and sickening guilt (I killed it). Though it happened in less than a second, the moment of impact seemed to stretch on and on—it was happening even now, as the woodpecker lay lifeless on the ground. Henry kept watching it, hoping the bird would climb to its little feet, shake itself off, and fly away home; the poor creature just lay there, as still as the stone that had crushed its tiny skull.

“Sorry,” Henry said to the dead woodpecker before heading inside to tell Bea.

But before he could reach his wife in the kitchen, Pearl appeared, clutching a stuffed elephant.

“You killed the birdie,” she said in a babyish voice.

“You saw that?”

Pearl’s eyes looked shiny, as if she might cry. “You killed the birdie,” she said again.

Why was she talking like a two-year-old? Normally, Pearl came up with things like, “Daddy, I was thinking about God, and I’m not sure he really exists.” She’d said this just last week, out of the blue, convincing Henry that his kid was a genius, and now here she was clutching a fuzzy elephant to her neck and saying, “You killed the birdie.” Had he traumatized his daughter by slaughtering the woodpecker in front of her?

“Daddy didn’t mean to, sweetie,” he said, and then thought, *Dammit, there I go again with the third person.* He wondered if it was a way to distance himself from his actions.

“Mommy,” Pearl said, headed to the kitchen. “Daddy killed the birdie.”

When she heard what happened, Bea looked at Henry as if he’d told their daughter that everyone dies alone and terrified. Then she went to the back window to view the corpse herself.

“Oh Henry,” she said in her familiar tone of disappointment. “You need to bury him or something.”

“Bury him? Now?”

The wind swirled against the house, whistling through the eaves.

“Yes,” Bea said. “Do it before the storm.”

Pearl grabbed her mother around the waist and stared un-

nervingly at Henry. He noticed, for the first time, their strong resemblance. It was as if, in that instant, Pearl willed herself to look more like her mother. Until this very moment he'd considered her a small, softer version of himself, but he realized, with great sadness, that his daughter had just crossed some line away from him.

The telephone rang, making him jump. Bea answered it.

"Oh, hi," she said, and Henry knew it was their neighbor, Sybil. "I know," Bea said. "It looks scary out there." As she spoke, she directed a stern look toward Henry, as if to say, *Get out there and take care of business, buster*. He nodded and headed for the door.

By the time he'd gotten a spade from the shed and reached the rear of the house, the wind had blown the woodpecker several yards across the lawn. *This bird truly is light as a feather*, he thought as he stood over the body. Its eyes resembled dark little seeds glued to its head. The black feathers lay smooth against its body. He couldn't imagine how he'd been able to see the cruel face of his former boss on this poor, dead creature.

A movement at the window caught his eye. Pearl watched him through the glass, her face still locked in an expression of bewildered grief. Henry smiled, shrugged, as if to say, "Stuff happens," but Pearl's expression did not change.

The wind picked up. Overhead, the trees swayed, shedding leaves and dead twigs across the yard. Henry looked hard at the waving limbs, the shuddering trunks. There was one tree, an old silver maple, that if it fell would likely land directly on the house. He pictured the thick trunk slicing through the roof, the attic, the second floor, into the living room—a carving knife through a layer cake. He pictured Bea and Pearl pinned beneath the tree, the breath knocked out of them, and himself, electrified with adrenaline, hoisting the tree off their half-broken bodies. A hero! There would be a photograph in the local newspaper (*HUSBAND SAVES FAMILY*) where readers would finally put a face to the angry, sarcastic Letters to the Editor he regularly fired off. Maybe Mr. Kruger would see it and offer him his old job back. After all, the company would look good rehiring a hero. Pearl might even forgive him then.

He scooped the bird's already stiff corpse onto the spade.

Though it weighed nothing, the bird seemed huge—as large as a crow—in the rusted spade head. Henry carried it to the garden at the back of the yard and dug a hole alongside the clipped stems of daylilies munched to oblivion by deer over the course of the previous summer. Bea often threatened to buy a gun and pick off the deer from a window as they obliterated her hard work, but Henry—the bird killer—always defended them. “They’re hungry,” he’d say, to which Bea would respond, “Yeah, well, *I’ll* put them out of their misery.” What would Pearl say to that, he wondered. *Mommy killed Bambi?*

He dug a good eighteen inches into the soil, afraid that some other hungry animal might smell the rotting carcass and dig the bird up, then laid the body in the hole.

He supposed a few words were in order. As he considered what to say, he glanced toward the window, where Pearl still stood watching. He turned away, unable to bear her judgment, and stared down into the grave. The bird’s red, triangular crest seemed to glow in the dark hole. A pair of bold white stripes ran down the bird’s neck, and the beak, as big as the woodpecker’s head, was like a little chisel. Such a powerful little machine, useless now.

“Lord,” he said, “here lies one of your beautiful creatures. I sure am sorry to have brought his life to an end—though he was of course damaging my property. Nevertheless, his life was sacred, and I hope you can forgive me.”

As he spoke, Henry peered upward. Perhaps because of Pearl’s reaction he couldn’t help but fantasize that the black clouds represented God’s wrath at his moral indiscretion. The sky looked like something from a crucifixion movie, where the mocking Roman centurions go pale at the fury of Jesus’ father. He felt his own face drain of blood as the first fat raindrops landed on his cheeks.

He looked over at Pearl again and said, “Amen,” before quickly scooping soil onto the woodpecker’s body. From there he hurried inside, forgetting to return the spade to the shed.

“Why’d you bring *that* in here?” Bea asked, with her hand covering the phone’s mouthpiece.

Henry opened the door again, intending to set the spade outside, but the rain was coming down thick, blowing sideways against the storm door like buckshot. So he set the

spade against the wall next to the closet, careful to keep the dirt-crusted point off the rug.

“Henry just came back in,” Bea said into the telephone. She smiled at Sybil’s response and asked Henry, “Did you give that poor bird a proper send-off?” Then, back to Sybil: “He looks sufficiently contrite.” She laughed then, and Henry went upstairs to his computer. Parrot greens and yellows swirled clockwise around a pulsing crimson eye off the coast—just twenty miles away. From his office window he watched the rain bunch itself into smoke-like drifts above the lake’s rippling surface. The sky had been taken over by one big cloud, office furniture gray and descending like a movable ceiling. He had to switch on a lamp to make out his desk top: the stack of bills, the marked-up printout of his latest resumé, the legal pad populated by doodles of his own face (round, fleshy, a wisp of Charlie Brown hair). The lamp bulb flickered, and Henry’s heart quickened. It was only a matter of time before some tree somewhere blew over onto the power lines. Some of his neighbors—Bob Lucas, Tony Waters, Walter Wittig—had advised him to purchase a gas-powered generator, but these were competent men who built their own decks and chopped firewood with axes, the kind of men, ironically, who were most capable of surviving without electricity. In Henry’s mind, a blackout was preferable to blowing up his house in a generator-related accident.

Along the horizon, lightning flared behind the clouds, like a flashlight beneath a blanket. The lamp flickered again, then died, as did the computer.

“Henry!” Bea called from downstairs.

“I know,” he said.

Then the lamp came back on, and the computer rebooted.

“Oh, thank God,” Bea said, and he heard her dialing the phone. “Talk quickly,” she said to Sybil. “It’s only a matter of time.”

Henry found the weather website again and watched the red ALERT notices flash across the screen. Out in the front yard, the silver maple groaned. Though it was only three o’clock, it looked as though the sun had long since gone down, or had been wiped out entirely, leaving the world to be lit by thin, fragile wires and the occasional flash of lightning.

Henry felt his blood pressure rise, as it did whenever something terrifying loomed: Pearl with a high fever, his mother's heart surgery, a prostate exam. He was reasonably certain that he and his family would survive the storm, just as they had these other crises. *But look at those clouds! Listen to that wind!* He felt like . . . well, he felt like a tiny, weightless bird at the mercy of a cruel, rock-wielding world.

Out of curiosity, he ran a search for "woodpecker," and discovered hundreds of websites devoted to the bird. The first one he clicked featured a close-up photograph of what could have been the very one he'd killed, a pileated woodpecker. There was the shock of red on the crest, the long beak, the white stripes, and black feathers. Apparently, he had killed a female.

At the sound of a creaking floorboard he turned to see Pearl in the doorway, still clutching her stuffed elephant.

"Hi, sweetie," he said.

Her expression had lost none of its judgmental quality as she stared at the image on Henry's computer.

"Come here," he said, motioning for her to come close.

She stepped slowly toward him and leaned against his knees. He scooped her onto his lap, and while she did not resist, she did not scrabble on board the way she usually did.

"Are you scared about the storm?" he asked.

His normally motor-mouthed daughter just shook her head no and continued staring at the computer.

For the approximately one-thousandth time Henry felt ill-equipped to be a parent. How do you talk to these people, he wondered, without completely warping their plastic little minds?

"Did you know," Henry said, reading from the website, "woodpeckers' tongues can be four inches long? And they have some kind of sticky stuff on them to catch bugs? Did you know that?"

Pearl ignored him.

"Honey, Daddy's sorry—" he began, but stopped himself. "I'm sorry I killed the birdie. I didn't mean to. It was an accident."

She finally looked away from the screen, toward the window. The clouds flashed. Henry waited for thunder, but heard

only the sound of wind coursing through the trees and against the house. A gust sent a splash of raindrops against the glass, making Pearl flinch. He hugged her close, deciding this was better than words. When had words ever done any good, anyway? Well, maybe the Gettysburg Address, things like that, but he was no Abe Lincoln—he wasn't even a James Polk or Calvin Coolidge—so he hugged his daughter instead.

“Ow,” she said, pulling away.

“Sorry.”

He watched helplessly as she climbed off his lap.

“I’m going to need my own flashlight,” she said, “for when the lights go out again.”

Henry grinned. *That’s my girl.*

“Of course,” he said. “Let’s find you one.”

The power went off at about half-past eight. Though the lights had been flickering for hours and had momentarily blacked out several times, this power loss felt definitive—so much so that Henry and Bea both said, when the house went dark, “That’s it.”

Bea lit a fat candle that smelled of vanilla and set it on the coffee table. Shadows danced across the walls like ghosts. They had agreed to remain downstairs, to put another ten feet between them and that old maple, and Pearl had fallen asleep on the sofa. Outside, the wind raged in waves that crashed against the house relentlessly. As he’d done every ten minutes or so all night long, Henry went to the window and gazed out into the maelstrom, hoping to see some sign that the storm was almost over. But all he could see were the vague, skeletal silhouettes of swaying trees. Not long before, a branch had fallen to the deck with a loud clatter. He pictured the yard littered with them, like driftwood thrown up onto a beach.

Where would the poor woodpecker have sheltered, he wondered, had it lived? He imagined it lying a foot and a half in the ground, peaceful, quiet.

“How much longer is this supposed to go on?” Bea asked.

Henry could tell she was frightened; she hadn’t spoken in nearly an hour, not since coaxing Pearl to sleep with a series of lullabies.

“They said it was moving very slowly,” he said. He’d checked

the weather website a few moments before the blackout. “We’ve probably got a few more hours of this.”

Bea groaned. Henry sat down next to her at the foot of the sofa, but Pearl was taking up most of the cushion, leaving little room for the two of them. He balanced himself on the edge and took Bea’s limp hand.

“It’ll be okay.”

“I wish you hadn’t killed that bird,” Bea said, her face reflecting the flickering candlelight. “It brought bad luck.”

Oh, okay, Henry thought, *so the storm is my fault*. But he said nothing, just squeezed her hand and tried to listen to Pearl’s soft breathing as the wind whistled around the corners of the house.

It lasted till just past midnight. First the rain lightened up, and then the wind slowly but steadily faded, like a siren on a fire truck heading into the distance.

Bea had fallen asleep. Henry did not know when, exactly, because she’d been so quiet. At some point he glanced over at the sofa to see her head lying back, her mouth open, as if she were aghast at something on the ceiling.

He got up and went to the window again. For the first time all night he could see beyond the yard. The sky had faded to a pale gray, and a hole had opened up in the clouds to reveal a patch of black. As his eyes adjusted, he could make out the lake through the trees, and a cluster of dark houses on the far side. He wondered when the power would be restored, but then decided he didn’t care. It would be nice to ignore the computer for a while. No TV or radio, no phone ringing. For a few days no one would ask him about his job search. Yes, it would get cold—the house was already chilly after just a few hours—but he would light a fire.

Earlier, after the girls had drifted off, he’d been certain this storm would never pass, that the wind would forever pummel his house, the trees would always sway and groan, the rain would never cease to batter at the windows. He’d waited, hardly breathing, for the old silver maple to come hurtling down from above. Maybe Bea was right, he’d thought. Maybe if he hadn’t murdered that poor woodpecker, the storm would’ve passed sooner. But the squall had finally ended. The

maple stood tall against the thinning clouds.

Should he wake Bea and take Pearl up to her bed? Since the wind had died down, he could hear them breathing as they dreamed on the sofa together. He decided to let them be. He sat down and shut his eyes, and when he opened them again the sun was streaming in. From the angle of the light, he figured he must have slept for at least five hours, without the inkling of a dream. The girls still slept on the sofa. He glanced over at the radio clock, but the face remained blank. Everything was so quiet. He wondered what had woken him, and then he heard it:

Tap tap tap.

He went to the back of the house. The sound came from the same spot as yesterday, a foot or so above the window. He went out the front door, careful not to wake the girls. As he rounded the side of the house, he glanced toward the garden, half expecting to see a hole where he'd buried the woodpecker—maybe it had been alive all along, and had dug its way out—but the spot remained mounded over with dark, wet earth.

He peered around the corner and saw an identical bird—black, with a splash of red—hammering away at the siding. The bird paused, looked over at Henry, then returned to its work. *I dare you*, it seemed to be saying.

Henry leaned back against the house and looked up at the blue sky. The air looked and smelled as if each molecule of oxygen had been scrubbed clean. The trees, nearly leafless now, stood perfectly still. From the lake he could hear the water rushing over the dam. The house against his back felt warm, as if heated by the temperature of the people inside.

Tap tap tap.

Pearl awoke and saw the room lit up with sunlight. Her mother sat next to her on the sofa, sleeping. From the back of the house came that familiar sound.

She got up and went to the back window. Outside, the grass sparkled wet in the sun. Twigs and branches lay everywhere, dead leaves in piles where they'd blown. Peering up, she could see the bird perched on the side of the house. It was black, just like the other one, with a long stiff tail that the bird rest-

ed against the wood as it worked. Tap tap tap.

She watched her father coming around the corner. She looked to see if he had a rock in his hand.

“Hey!” he yelled. “Go away!”

The bird stopped tapping.

“Shoo!” her father cried. “Go!”

He rushed toward the window, and the bird flew off in a great flutter toward the trees, showing bright white patches beneath its wings, its long feathers like individual fingers.

Pearl’s father saw her in the window, and smiled.

Then the lights came on.

Naima Lynch

And I Will Bring You Oranges

*(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*
—e.e. cummings

She thought Julio looked ridiculous on his tiny bicycle with his pants sagging so far below his backside that she could see the entire race-car motif of his boxer shorts whose cars, she noted with boredom, were in a red-green-yellow-purple pattern, covering his sorry ass. The sagging pants coupled with the too-big fluorescent yellow hat that swallowed his cranium, the bill left straight as was the style, made him look clownish as he crouched atop the low-rider bicycle, his arms raised above him to clutch the impractically high handlebars. His pose was distinctly simian . . . *a monkey-clown*, Roxie thought, *a dumb-ass monkey clown*.

“Rox,” he called over his shoulder, “come on, yo!”

“Coming,” she yelled, and pedaled her own bicycle, a pastel blue beach cruiser covered with white Hibiscus flowers and the word *Aloha* across the seat. She caught up with him and side-by-side they meandered their way through the cast of characters that comprised Ditmars Avenue on a Sunday afternoon. There were the clusters of four that looked like pre-packaged stock families offered in every ethnicity, the kind you see in advertisements for cheap life insurance or friendly government announcements reminding you to immunize your children against the various scourges of New York City: the Muslim family, with the mother’s face hidden behind a veil, the Hispanic family in their Sunday best, the Caucasian family with ironic T-shirts like *Barack Your Body* and *Pug Life*. Every third person was an elderly Greek woman, facial hair sprouting from fertile pores like bouquets, shuffling in orthopedic shoes and wondering when the *hell* these unfamiliar species invaded her neighborhood.

They pedaled past the stores of the discount handbag, thrift and cheap furniture variety. Salons offered to paint

your nails in shades of *I'm not really a waitress* and *Iris I was thinner*. They inhaled the alternating odors of stale beer and cigarettes that wafted out of the Irish pubs and the piquant lemon and garlic that beckoned from the Greek restaurants. Skinned carcasses hung like warnings in the windows of butcher shops: *Do Not Blithely Wander Through This Neighborhood If Thou Be A Sheep, Pig or Cow, or This Shall Be Thy Fate!* A single Starbucks assured everyone that the modern world hadn't left them behind. *Who needs Manhattan? You can get your extra hot venti skim half-caff sugar-free cinnamon-dolce no-foam latte right here in Astoria! Hooray!* She saw their reflection in the windows they passed: two teenagers on bikes that looked like they'd just happened to merge onto the same route but were by no means together. Julio tried to look hard and intimidating on his child-sized bike, mad-dogging the homeless men fishing plastic bottles out of trash cans; Roxie, looking both disinterested and apologetic, a uniquely teenaged combination, avoided direct eye contact with passers-by.

Her back was sweating Rorschach prints through her T-shirt and her red hair was curling into tendrils at the nape of her neck from the heavy backpack she shouldered; filled with the cans of beer and sandwiches she'd paid for with her babysitting money. Her cousin, John Jr., had kept the change and promised not to rat her out as long as she didn't get drunk and stupid. She'd agreed not to. She didn't even really like beer. It had been Julio's idea that they have a picnic at the park. She'd been intrigued by the notion of a picnic. He'd never proposed an activity so . . . romantic, so *boyfriendly-girlfriendly* before. Their alone time generally consisted of hanging out in one of their bedrooms; hers with the door always ajar, her mother making periodic visits; his closed shut, allowing them to do all her mother feared, and more, she thought, as she couldn't imagine her parents doing the things they did. Julio aspired to be as *gangsta* as he could in bed, calling her the names and doing the things that were being constantly fed to his carnivorous brain through the ear buds of his iPod. She was sure he told his crew intimate details about all their activities, describing her body to them in terms of neatly separated sections—her ass, her thighs, her breasts . . . like a butcher di-

agramming a cow; she could tell by the way they both stared at and dismissed her.

When they went to the movies, it was always with a mob of Julio's friends to go see some action movie she wasn't interested in at all; something with a lot of car chases and weapons and women who became progressively sexier as they got sweatier and more beaten-up, tied lustroously to a radiator in a warehouse, seductively gagged, all six-packs, bra-straps, glossed pouts and bruises like jewels. Julio, their ringleader, would make loud jokes the whole time and throw candy at the back of his friends' heads, always keeping his left hand firmly on her upper thigh like she was another of the unpredictable pit bulls he trained with his dad. People in the theater would invariably ask them to shut up, which Julio happily anticipated. He would respond theatrically that they could suck his dick or shut the fuck up before he beat their ass. Roxie would sink low into her seat and try not to be seen, staring at the screen as if it were the most interesting thing on earth, willing the manager to come and kick them out.

At school they'd been restricted to the kind of interactions boys and girls had been engaging in for eons; quick, furtive handfuls of each other's body, kisses at lockers between classes with wads of sugary gum in their mouths—performance of maturity through displays of ownership. She preferred their relationship at school; it somehow made more sense. At school, teachers would see them together and give her certain looks that said *why are you with that fool* or *you're just rebelling, you'll grow out of this*. She took comfort in seeing herself through their eyes, in believing what their glances transmitted. Julio had just sort of morphed into her boyfriend; there'd been no ceremony or declarations about it. No courtship or shy flirting; he'd just called her his girl in front of their friends and she hadn't objected. Some part of her had been thrilled by being claimed so, mistaking it for chivalry or some old-school form of courtship. Now, though, they'd been graduated a week—she with honors and he just barely. It seemed she'd ferried Julio across the membrane that separated her childhood life from her new, adult one; the one where she would cut her hair short and professional and have her own apartment and decide where her furniture

went and make plans with girlfriends during those hours of the week where she'd always been in school. How strange it would be to go to lunch on a Wednesday at one fifteen, how very surreal. Bringing Julio into this new life felt more like a choice than circumstance and she was increasingly regretful.

They finally arrived to the park and walked their bikes towards a patch of shade under the foreboding arch of the Hell Gate Bridge. Their bikes flung in a pile of gears and rods like so many discarded leg braces and crutches. Roxie emptied the contents of her backpack while Julio lit a cigarette and turned his attention wholly to his phone as if he'd just discovered it. She spread the sheet she'd brought along, faded pink roses at the edges, and found handfuls of rocks and pebbles to put on the corners so it wouldn't blow away. She arranged the sandwiches and bags of chips in the middle of the sheet, and kept the beers slightly hidden in her backpack, just in case.

As an afterthought, Roxie had brought along her latest obsession: a small paperback of poetry by E. E. Cummings. Mrs. Mallory, their literature teacher, had written at the bottom of one of Roxie's own poems: *very original style—you might enjoy e. e. cummings*. She'd been dazzled from the first poem she read. The way he broke words in half and put them back together sideways, the way he ignored grammar and punctuation and all the rules Roxie'd been recently quizzed on. The way his invented words seemed more suited to describe the world than any she'd ever known. And, of course, he wrote of sex and bodies in such a way that made her feel juvenile and inexperienced; she'd never felt anything so jubilant . . . so nearing ecstatic, as when she read Cummings. In spite of all she'd done with Julio she relished in these unexplored physical vistas of some other body, some alternate her. Can a poem—ink on paper—change a body? Could she read these pages and be new? She felt like she'd stumbled upon something illicit; the very fact that a *teacher* approved of his reckless style was like seeing behind the curtain to the hidden lives of the adults around her, and being invited to join them. If Mrs. Mallory read poems like *there is between my big legs a crisp city* . . . maybe she also cried, or had a boyfriend, or was a lesbian, ran marathons or had an eating disorder. That

Roxie now read Cummings was a part of her new script, and she marveled at it. In any case, Roxie felt she might try to read Julio a poem or two. They were two graduated adults on a picnic, after all.

After she'd arranged everything and sat down in the middle of the sheet like some milkmaid in a nursery rhyme, Julio came and put his head on her lap; a post-pubescent tableau vivant.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Nah, not yet." They both glanced around the park, taking note of the people drifting past them: mothers with infants pressed to their chests, dogs on leashes with their chests puffed out, men with canes with their chests caved in. The slight breeze coming off the East River carried the smell of early summer sunlight and warmed soil, permeating the air around them like a tincture. So rare, this moment of comfortable silence between them, it was almost alarming. Maybe he was changing, too, she wondered. Perhaps Julio had felt the shift of graduation as she had—a persistent urge to expand.

"I've been reading this guy, this poet," she began, "he's totally different, you know, not boring or anything."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, it's no big deal. Want me to read you one? If you're bored." Julio had closed his eyes and taken off his hat. She stroked his forehead—a new gesture; her new hands, his new brow.

"Sure, go ahead."

"Ok. I think you'll like this one," she reached over for the book without upsetting his heavy head, opened the volume to the dog-eared page and began: "Anyone lived in a pretty how town; with up so floating many bells down . . ."

"Yo! What up, son!" Roxie looked up to see three clowns on bikes approaching: Julio's friends, they had an air of indifference towards the crowds they ploughed through that bordered on menace. They rode their bikes right onto the sheet, leaving dirty wheel marks on the faded roses of her mother's sheets. In one movement Julio was on his feet with his hat back on, "Yo playas!" They exchanged elaborate handshakes and nodded, serious and unsmiling. An onlooker would think they were unhappy to run into each other. They threw their

bikes down and spread their bodies across the empty spaces, taking care not to touch one another. They didn't acknowledge Roxie, who remained cross-legged with her book in her lap in the center of the four young men.

"Where the brew at?" one of the clowns jutted his chin towards Julio.

"Yo, Rox," Julio said in turn, "bust out those beers." Roxie reached over to the backpack and pulled out the six-pack of *Coors Light*, freeing each can from its plastic noose and passing one to each of them. They'd gone warm; it hadn't occurred to her to keep them cold, but the clowns slurped at them messily, wiping their chins and licking their lips. Her book had slipped off her lap. Another clown picked it up and studied the cover. "What's this, yo?" He was turning the book over and thumbing the pages like a harp. Roxie wondered if he was asking what the object itself might be.

"Just some book. It's Roxie's," Julio, bashful.

"E. E. Cummings," the clown read, "*Cummings*? What the fuck yo, *Cummings*? Is this some porn shit?" He laughed through his teeth. Julio leaned over and grabbed the book out of his hands and tossed it aside, "Yo, fuck off, man. It's nothing. Dude, did you see Big P's new ride? It's sick, yo. Fucking rims and shit, chrome, some OG shit for real. Don't know how that motherfucker's broke ass paid for that shit." The topic had been successfully changed. Roxie felt a stone of rage in her stomach, "I'm going to the bathroom," she announced as she got up and retrieved her book. Nobody replied.

She thought she might cry, or vomit. She marched away from the boys with her fists clenched and her teeth grinding. So blurry was her vision with the tears she wouldn't let loose that she didn't notice the ring until she'd almost breached it. She'd walked to the edge of a giant circle; marked by small, plastic yellow flags stuck in the earth like toothpicks. She looked around her, startled.

The circle was filled with exotic birds, plumage aflame. She rubbed her eyes and saw that they were not birds, but people, winged people. Brown men with sinewy calves and blue-black hair shimmering like motor oil were standing like guards around the circle; crowned with elaborate head-

dresses of feathers—improbably long, plucked from no bird Roxie could think of, quivering as if they would fly. Oxblood reds and dead-of-night blues . . . poisonous, extinct purples. Some had bells around their ankles and wrists, some carried objects like wands; all were shirtless under the blazing sun, wearing what looked to Roxie like leather mini-skirts. In the center of the circle, against the backdrop of the river, a cluster of drummers conversed with each other, passing instruments and implements between them, settling into a shape. They began abruptly like a clap of thunder and Roxie literally stumbled backwards.

She'd seen the various ethnic gatherings in Astoria Park before; the big Korean barbeques, the Jamaican Independence Day parties, the Greek family reunions; this was something altogether new. She felt like she'd stumbled into a church or a graveyard or some such hallowed place. Roxie, transfixed, watched the men dance as though they were plugged into the earth by invisible cables and cords, tethered and manipulated like so many marionettes. Their bare feet pounded and stomped. Sweat poured and coated their pulsing bodies. As they continued, a woman in a blue gown embroidered with symbols that looked to Roxie like mathematics, hair like wet paint down her back, entered the ring. She seemed to float, her small feet not bending a single blade of grass. She was absorbed like liquid, compelled to their center, until she was standing in front of the drummers.

A pause.

A sonic silence.

And then she moved. Subtle at first, shoulders rising and falling, a slight bending of the knees, one foot lifted, hovering, then noiselessly replaced. The drummers began again, accompanying her, following her cues. The dancing men took up *her* choreography: her body called *bird* and they were birds . . . her body cried *snake* and they were snakes.

Another dancer entered the ring carrying a banner printed with images that reminded Roxie of the cave art they'd studied in school, hoisted on a tall wooden pole. Roxie thought she recognized his profile, but before she could make it out he began to bounce and jump and twirl, his flag twitching like a fish on a taut line. Outside of the circle, a different kind of

dance was underway. Children were running around laughing and tagging each other. Old people sat in foldout lawn chairs in the shade, arthritic fingers tapping to the beat of the drums. There was a tent with a plastic table where women were setting out platters of food and opening bottles of soda. Roxie could smell citrus and chili and the almost female scent of fresh tortillas. Someone was emptying a bag of charcoal into the belly of a barbeque. There were other onlookers like Roxie, taking pictures on their phones, straddling bicycles or rocking strollers. There was a collective sorrow among the outsiders; a recognition of loss, of birthrights unfulfilled. Roxie felt utterly displaced. The drummers stopped and started, stopped and started; the woman in blue steady at their helm. Roxie couldn't guess as to the precise meaning of their movements or rhythms, but she felt they were working mightily towards something. Calling something into being, working up a froth.

There was a break in the dancing and a woman, dressed unceremoniously in too-tight denim cutoffs, her belly spilling out of her tank top, entered the circle carrying a large aluminum tray. The dancers were breathing heavy and shaking their manes like horses; bodies drenched in sweat; teeth dry from thirst. It seemed precipitous. The woman went from man to man, and gave them a slice of orange from her tray. *Thank you*, she seemed to be telling them as she presented them with fruit, *thank you for working so hard for us*. Roxie stared as the slices exchanged hands; precious and glowing, like the dying embers of the last fire. The man who gripped the banner had no free hands with which to receive his dripping portion so the woman put it right into his mouth and something inside of Roxie was torn to shreds.

How to describe an orange? An orange just is. It is both itself and its description. It is not something so very amazing, she told herself. She alone had consumed countless oranges, and did not feel at all changed for it. She vaguely remembered learning that oranges prevent scurvy—the sickness of sailors and pirates, of nauseous pilgrims making their salty way to new lands—so, there's that. Still, she couldn't shake the image—the gesture . . . what *was* that?

After the oranges, she'd returned to Julio and the clowns to retrieve her bike. She'd hopped onto it like a trusty horse and rode as fast as she could away from them, her little paperback tucked into the back pocket of her jeans.

Her phone had started ringing as soon as she'd sped away, but it was in her backpack on the rose-edged sheet upon which the clowns slouched. All for the better, as it was Julio calling to ask her *what the fuck yo*, and she could no longer answer that vital question. Later that evening, she heard her mother talking to Julio at their front door, thanking him for the backpack, explaining that Roxie wasn't feeling well and was asleep. Roxie had told her mom that she didn't want to see Julio, and that she didn't want to talk about it. *Did he hurt you?* Her mom had asked. *No, mom*, Roxie had answered, annoyed, but it felt like a lie.

The next morning was Sunday, and it was tradition that Roxie and her parents would meet up with her older brother and his wife for syrupy breakfast at the Starlight Diner on Steinway. She was still upset when her mom knocked on her door, but her hunger was stronger. Her stomach growled at the thought of her usual: a cheddar cheese omelet smothered with salsa and sour cream. She got dressed and climbed into the back seat of the car with her parents. Years later, she would remember with longing how safe, how impenetrable it felt to watch the back of her parents' heads from the back seat, to be checked on, even at eighteen, in the rearview mirror. They passed by Julio's house on the way to the diner, but nobody mentioned him. She felt Julio pass out of her life in that moment so easily as to make her feel slightly guilty. He'd never really had a place with her, and his role in her world evaporated with as little ceremony as it had begun.

Roxie tried to cheer up as she took her place in the booth by the window. Her brother's usual goofiness made it impossible for her not to smile, calling her by the nickname "box of rox" that always made her laugh. The table filled with paper napkins and spotty utensils, ceramic mugs filled with weak, steaming coffee. After they placed their orders, her dad paired off with her brother and her mom paired off with her sister-in-law for their usual tête-à-têtes. Roxie didn't mind, and took the opportunity to stare out the window with her

coffee, listening in on the conversations of people at other tables: there were grandchildren's birthday presents to buy, rents to be paid, teams that lost, teams that won, politicians that lied and hangovers to nurse.

At the sharp ring of a bell, her eye was drawn towards the window that opened onto the busy kitchen, where the waitresses huddled to retrieve dishes full of food, balancing them on their arms like circus performers. As she looked beyond the waitresses' big hair, over the plates piled with pancakes and pillars of toast, she saw him. The profile. It was the man who'd carried his people's banner in the ring yesterday. The man who'd danced under the sun, because that's what was needed of him; who'd been fed a slice of orange because he had made of himself their flag and standard. He turned and placed a series of platters on the ledge of the window, and she saw that her omelet was among them. She didn't feel she deserved it, to eat of his labor. She felt so unworthy of an ounce of his effort. At that moment, he looked out at the dining room and their eyes locked, she was sure of it, and that torn part of her began to repair, ripped fibers fusing anew. Her omelet was placed in front of her, garnished with an orange slice on top of a wilted lettuce leaf and it was all she could do not to cry.

Nothing was the same after those perfectly quartered oranges were spirited from the sparkling aluminum tray into the hands and mouths of those men. She wanted to be that woman with the oranges; she wanted to know men worthy of her own hands delivering fruit to their mouths—whose thirst deserved quenching. She would replay the moment countless times in her mind as she arranged her own furniture, cut her hair short and met her friends for afternoon lunches. She would replay it when she checked on her sons in the backseat through the rearview mirror. She would replay it in her final moments—the room filling with citrus and chili and the rising dough of life. Everything had changed in that one, isolated moment, but Roxie didn't think she could explain it to anyone. Instead, she carried it within her—a secret pregnancy of dubious paternity—wondering if anyone could tell.

Daniel C. Bryant

Balzac

Ask me back then about intermediary metabolism, the Circle of Willis, the seven causes of amyloidosis, and I can quote you chapter and verse. But Tonkin? Warhol? Dylan? Pot? The Beats? Aware, almost ashamed, of the narrowness of my pre-med education, most Saturday mornings after Clinical Pathology Conference I hang up my white jacket, shelve my books, and head for the subway. If any place has culture, it's got to be Manhattan. It certainly wasn't, or if it was I missed it, Massillon, Ohio.

Occasionally on these outings I visit The Museum of Modern Art in midtown, and this one Saturday afternoon the fall of second year, I'm sitting on a bench in the museum's Sculpture Garden. It's pleasantly warm and I'm happy to rest up after miles of galleries. For a while I simply admire *Balzac* looming mightily in the distance, but gradually my eyes wander to a young woman sitting on a nearby bench. By shifting my weight and cocking my head, as if studying Rodin's treatment of the great writer, I can study her as well. She's wearing a flowered dress and sandals and has frizzy hair that glows like a brown halo in the reflected sunlight. When occasionally she looks up at a passerby, I can better make out her features—large, dark eyes, even as she squints; an indoor palor that, along with defined cheekbones, gives her a hungry, oddly appealing look; and a prominent nose, slightly hooked. Aquiline, I think writers call it.

And that's the thing: she's not all that attractive, and yet she attracts me. Maybe it's because I haven't had a girlfriend to speak of since junior year at Williams. Maybe it's because she looks such an authentic part of the New York scene. Maybe it's because she's alone, vulnerable, writing secrets in a spiral notebook, smiling to herself off and on as she does. Whatever the reason, when she finally closes her notebook, stands, and walks back into the museum, I get up and follow her.

She crosses the lobby and disappears through a doorway—
STAFF ONLY.

It's mid-afternoon; she works there with art, has been on her break, and is writing the great American novel. Perfect. I sit down on the marble floor and lean back against the wall to consider my options. One is to enter the forbidden world of STAFF ONLY, the sort of thing I don't normally do. One is to go back upstairs and give *Guernica* another look. Another is to move on to the Frick or Guggenheim, or continue on down to the Village to a coffee house where I've seen people protesting things. Heading back uptown to the dorm is not an option. Yet.

I buy a booklet about Klimt in the museum shop, return to my station, and begin leafing through the glossy pages.

Just before five she appears. She walks right past, giving wide berth to my outstretched legs, and smiling ever so slightly, just the way she had earlier in the garden. I get up and follow her out to the sidewalk. She stops and turns.

"He wore that when he wrote," she says.

I look back over my shoulder, but it's me she's talking to.

"His dressing gown. Or maybe you knew that."

"No, I didn't."

"Not that it matters."

"No, no. It matters. That he did. Or I didn't."

She'd noticed me earlier. I go on, "He's so grand. Like his name. Balzac. I wonder if he'd look so grand if his name was, I don't know, mine. Curtis."

"Yes! Yes!" She nods vigorously, laughing. "You're right. BALZAC!" She looks up, squinting at the name exploding above us. "Wow!"

Never before—or in the forty years of patients, colleagues, neighbors, family since—has an offhand comment of mine made such an impression on a person. And this isn't just any person. This is a New York person. A museum person.

"Well," she says, her face back to baseline, "I've got to meet someone."

"Oh. Right. See you. Or not."

She turns and walks away down 53rd Street—biggish hips, slightly pigeon-toed, but a smart, directed walk—and soon I lose the flowered dress in the palette of the midtown crowd.

I head north, replaying our conversation. People frown and veer away when I mouth BALZAC, but I don't care. I said

something important. I made an impression. I was funny in New York. I can see her laugh, hear her “Yes! Yes!”, her “Wow!” And what’s more, I have to see and hear it all again. By the time I think subway, I’m almost to Harlem.

Second year in medical school, at least back in the Sixties, was all pre-clinical stuff—pathology, physiology, pharmacology. The only patients we saw were the ones rolled into the amphitheaters on gurneys and exhibited for their deformities and gaits, their tremors and murmurs; we had yet to engage a patient one-on-one. In preparation for that great day, I do my best to keep up with my studies, but it’s even harder now. Instead of cirrhosis, endocarditis, nephritis, I’m thinking MoMA, flowered dress, “Yes! Yes!” Harvey, my dorm neighbor, and study partner, says I’m dragging him down.

The next Saturday afternoon, book in hand this time, I’m back with Balzac. When she arrives, in blouse and long skirt, I get up and stroll around the courtyard, delaying once to inspect Picasso’s *She Goat*. Finally I arrive at her bench.

“Hello again,” I say.

She looks up, shading her eyes. “Again?”

“Oh, right. That would be next time. If there is one.”

She doesn’t invite me to sit down, but after a moment I do.

“Tragic,” she says, pointing to *The Rebel*, which I’ve positioned face up on my lap.

“It is, pretty.”

“His dying.”

“Oh, that.” At the time I didn’t know that Camus had died in an auto accident four years before. “Yes. Very tragic.”

We sit there regarding Balzac’s vast dark planes, voracious eyes.

“You work here?” I ask.

“I do.”

“As?”

“Cataloguer.”

“You log cattle.”

“Yes! Yes!” she says, laughing and nodding her head. Her frizzy hair bounces; my heart leaps. “Somebody’s got to.”

“Even on Saturdays.”

“Never on Sunday. And you?”

I'm in. I tell her about medical school and she asks if we call a cadaver him or her, or it, and where the mind might be. She even asks me to look at a lump that's been bothering her. I take the ink-stained finger she holds out and gently palpate the swelling. Heberden's node, I tell her. Inflammation of the distal interphalangeal joint. Nothing to worry about. Tylenol if it bothers.

She nods. I don't let go.

She agrees to dinner.

I'm in love for sure. I tell Harvey. He tells me studies show Second Year is the worst year to fall in love. What about the Tropical Medicine practical just four days off? If he gets 92 or less, he's firing me.

Hannah—that's her name—picks an Italian restaurant in the East Village, near where she lives, for that first dinner; and the next weekend invites me for stir-fry at her apartment. Soon we're spending Sundays together, reading Ginsberg on the Staten Island Ferry, critiquing walkers in Central Park, listening to baroque music up at the Cloisters. We tell each other our birthdays, former pets' names, worst movies, first memories. Early December, two months after meeting, we climb into bed.

It's a memorable night, all right, though not in the way I was expecting. Almost halfway to being a doctor, with all that implies anatomically and physiologically, not to mention authoritatively, I'm still inexperienced as Adam. I do know about condoms, and have been prepared for a couple of weeks already, but my sexual debut there in that street-lit room on that squeaky single bed is as awkward as it is fast. I immediately collapse into a deep sleep from which I waken periodically to a mixture of delicious satisfaction and dawning apprehension.

Pressed up against her from behind, my right arm draped over her torso and hand cupping her left breast, I have become aware of her heartbeat. From Anatomy and Physical Diagnosis, I know that the cardiac Point of Maximum Intensity lies immediately below the left breast, in the fifth intercostal space, mid-clavicular line. It's where the apex of the heart abuts the chest wall, and where the left ventricular systoles

can be easily palpated between the ribs. Where one can all but touch another's heart.

Only thing is, the rhythmic tap of this heart against the side of my hand is not entirely regular. Every few beats a pause or skip seems to occur. Is this some post-coital delusion of mine, or have I stumbled on my first cardiac pathology? I try to improve my finger position.

Perhaps put off, Hannah removes my hand from her chest and works herself onto her back. She offers me a joint, which I've never tried before, and which I decline, not wanting to confuse the situation further. We lie there in parallel as I listen to her breathing. It seems regular enough, easy. I try to get a glimpse of her neck veins, which I have recently learned become distended in cases of right heart failure, but the light and the angle are not in my favor.

We make love again. She says it's better for her this time. Not "Yes! Yes!" better, but better enough. I'm happy. She lights up. I sleep.

All through Christmas vacation back home in Massillon I think about Hannah. I think about wandering the Village with her, about the hours in the automats sharing cheesecake and coffee while I tell her what I'm learning and she tells me what she's writing, about seeing *The Fantasticks* off Broadway and singing "deep in December it's nice to remember" all the way back to the apartment. I tell my folks, yes, I've met a girl and yes, she's pretty. Well, pretty pretty. Smart as all get out. Dropped out of Bennington to become a cataloguer. At this really famous museum. And she's going to become a writer. Is one I guess. Do I love her? Well, I really like her, that's for sure. Be careful, they say—it is New York.

When I take the bus in from JFK I go directly to Hannah's. It's a quick strip, passionate reunion, and the night is much too short. In the morning before I head uptown, I take her wrist as if to check on her Heberden's node. Same pulse.

In the medical library over the next few days I pore through cardiology textbooks. The arrhythmia sections, though, are way over my head, filled with obscure electrophysiology and cardiograms and allusions to conditions I can't even pronounce. Again Harvey threatens to fire me, and when I final-

ly tell him what's bothering me, he says, "Bail, man. Before it's too late."

It's cold now in the winter city, stinging winds howling through the cross-town canyons. We have to stay inside—diners, museums, her apartment. She reads me stories she's writing, and tells me how original my comments are. "Yes! Yes!" she exclaims, delighting me with her delight.

But is she unwell? As I watch her curled on her bed, sheaf of typewritten papers in her hand, I can't help wondering. Any minute might she slump unconscious, victim of a lethal progression of the arrhythmia I've detected? Should I say something to her about it? Ask her, casually, if she's ever been told

Of course, maybe—probably is more like it—it's nothing. Back in my room I take my own pulse, vicariously hers. A periodic slowing, it seems now. Maybe I'm overreacting. Maybe I'm suffering from a version of medical student syndrome, that insidious condition in which one comes to regard the ordinary as ominous. I decide that to mention my concern to Hannah will only create unnecessary anxiety.

I do call Dr. Winslow Parker's office, though. Dr. Parker is one of the cardiologists on Presbyterian's staff, as well as one of our more approachable physical diagnosis instructors. Over the phone I present the case the way I've heard upperclassmen do it at grand rounds: This is a twenty two year old white single MoMA cataloguer, with no known cardiac history, who presents with a pulse But it's clear within minutes that Dr. Parker would need to actually see Hannah before offering any advice, though he doesn't sound all that concerned. Sinus arrhythmia most likely, he says—pulse variation with the respiratory cycle, more common in females. "Bring her into the office to make sure. Happy to take a look at her for you."

For you? For me? Have I then assumed responsibility for Hannah? Would "bringing her into the office" seal that? Has sleeping with her these past three months so committed me to her that I must spend the rest of my life—her life, at least—tending to a potential cardiac cripple? Would she see it that way?

Things aren't quite the same between us after this. It feels like I've lost another kind of virginity, and a more significant one at that. After reading up on sinus arrhythmia, I work more questions into our conversations. My mother said once I'd been a "blue baby." Had she been one by any chance? Did she ever have pains in joints other than that Heberden one, "growing pains," rheumatic fever or anything? I sometimes get faint in the heat. Of course it's cold now, but did she ever? Faint? Just wondering. Oh, and your family, they're so interesting, Eastern Europe and all. Any of them, I don't know, die young?

I watch her as we climb the three flights to her apartment, looking for evidence of dyspnea on exertion. At bedtime, in the guise of foreplay I check her ankles for edema. I even watch her during sex, though without, I'm sure, the requisite objectivity.

The worst part of my new attitude, though, is that my suspicion of one imperfection has sensitized me to others. Her nose, for instance. It's not particularly attractive. I've known that from the beginning, preferring to think of it as classical, Mediterranean. Her hips are definitely on the wide side, her hair not really as appealing as the long blonde locks of the girls I'd noticed growing up in the heartland. The joy that I've had being with her, sharing her humor and zest for life and for stories, reveling in her Yes! Yes!, all gradually recedes into clinical appraisal. Have I, I wonder, ever truly loved her? Is it just being loved I've loved? And if I haven't truly loved her, does that let me off the hook? Does it permit me to take Harvey's counsel and bail?

It's not fair to exclude her from my dilemma, of course. Whether I have truly loved her or not, I've certainly given her reason to think I do. She loves me, or at least has said so. But does she? Is it my being a medical student, with such a guaranteed future, rather than just the insightful, appealing person she's made me think I am, that has attracted her? Am I her ticket out of the world of catalogues and one-room walk-up apartments?

Harvey cans me. I've gone from bad to worse, as far as he's concerned. Studying alone now, watching my grades drop, I realize that my involvement with Hannah is threatening my

medical future, not to mention my parents' expectations. That alone is reason to break things off. I compose a letter in which I explain my difficulty keeping up with my studies while thinking of her, and my decision, in spite of it breaking my heart, to end our relationship. At least for a while. And speaking of hearts, I add, I thought I'd noticed once a little skip of yours. It's probably nothing but you might want to ask your doctor about it.

I take the subway downtown, walk across to the East Side, climb the stairs, and quietly slip the letter under her door.

Toward the end of my senior year, returning from the clinic one afternoon I find in my mailbox a small, flat package addressed in a familiar hand. "Dear Curtis," the enclosed letter begins,

Please consider this note an effort, not to get you back, but only to wish you all success as you embark, as you must be about to, on your medical career. I hope you are well. Balzac and I are, and thought you might like to see this issue of *Wesley Review*. It contains "One too many mornings," which you may remember helping me revise once upon a time.

Fondly, Hannah

Reasonably computer-savvy now in my retirement, I often pass the time browsing the Internet, looking up information about the Sixties, say, that famous decade I took so for granted even as I lived it. Sometimes I think of googling Hannah Hershon. Would that still be her name? Might she be the author of other stories, novels perhaps? Might I be in one, the I I was then, or that she saw? I have kept the letter and literary magazine she sent me. Every once in a while I take them out and read them, though I've never shown them to any one else, including either of my former wives or any of my children. The story is quite a good one, about a couple lost in a city, and her letter tells me, I think, that there was never anything really wrong with her heart. Only with mine.

Susannah Carlson

Killing Methuselah

Marcy Fitzsimons and Donald Shortz discuss my handiwork while I, all but invisible, sweep blood and hair off of the linoleum beside the operating table on the other side of the room.

“I just don’t get it,” Marcy says, in her bright and girlish way. “He should be dead. And what’s stranger, he is still moving his bowels.”

I can’t help it, I snicker, smothering it with a sneeze. They don’t notice.

Marcy pulls a black-and-white rat out of a cage by its tail. It tries to climb up to her hand, falls back, waves its paws. She sets the rat on a tray and tucks its head into a little guillotine. “I wish we could open him up and see what’s going on in there, but he’s too weak at this point. He’d just die and ruin everything.” She flicks a lever and the blade drops. The rat’s legs kick. She wipes her hands on her crisp white coat, leaving bloody streaks. She puts the body and the head into a plastic bowl.

“Does it smell like flowers?” Donald sits at a desk nearby, eating a sandwich.

“Hunh?” *Snick*. Another rat goes into the bowl.

“His shit,” he says, his words muddled by the bread and meatloaf in his mouth. “Poo.”

“It smells awful. Why would you ask?”

“I read a study recently about a yogi in Calcutta who says he hasn’t eaten anything or had a drop to drink in seventy years. He says his shit smells like lotus blossoms.”

“Do you believe everything you read?”

“It’s a scientific study, Marcy.” He stands, brushes off his hands, and takes the bowl of rats to the operating table I just finished cleaning. “Hey, are you going to The Nut House tonight? I heard a bunch of folks are planning to.”

“Yeah, I think so.” *Snick*. “You forgot this one.”

I go to the other side of the room and start wiping up the

blood, polishing the little guillotine with alcohol. It is tiny, sharp, and perfect, like an intricate and dangerous children's toy.

Here at LifeWorks International, I clean cages, scrub floors, polish centrifuges, and fuck with the experiments. It's not like I am messing with a cure for world hunger or cancer or even acne. LifeWorks International is a government contractor—DoD to be exact. I'm not sure what they are trying to discover by irradiating mice, shooting pigs, and starving dogs to death, but they make a lot of money doing it.

Since my most recent escape, and subsequent divorce, I don't have much of a life beyond work and appointments with my shrink. Almost as soon as I left Jeb, the clouds came in. I was unemployed and had left absolutely everything behind in his big house in Los Altos when I made my escape to my mildew-stained apartment in Santa Cruz. One night, when I caught myself wondering what antifreeze really tastes like, I knew I had to get help. Luckily, I got this job not long after, and the insurance covers my appointments, with a fifteen dollar co-pay.

Her name is Hasannah Fortune, which is the reason I chose her, and it is probably the only good thing about her. I've been seeing her for a couple of months. She knows all about my exes, the beatings and beratings, the bruises and the heart-break, but her knowing those things isn't fixing them. Lately she's been pushing me to talk about my childhood. I don't see the point but I try to oblige. I just don't have a lot to say about it. I was smaller, I lived in a house, I went to a school; now I am bigger, I live in a hovel, I go to a job.

The first time I saw her I'd expected to lie on a red leather couch with brass studs to finger as I pondered my tribulations. Even sitting on the ratty arm chair in her waiting room, picking at the stuffing that poked out where too many hands had tensely gripped the arm rests, I pictured Persian rugs and that red leather chaise lounge.

It was not to be.

Ms. Fortune's chambers were sparse and sweltering. An old grey fan on the floor turned its head from side to side, pushing the stagnant air around. Hasannah, herself, sweated in

her damp tee shirt on a rattan armchair. I was motioned to a matching loveseat with tropically upholstered cushions. Sitting comfortably on it was impossible. The cushions were so soft my thighs sank down hard, the rattan frame cutting off circulation in seconds, and it was far too short to lie down. I perched on the edge, resting my weight on my feet so my legs wouldn't fall asleep.

She told me I wasn't crazy. She said I had a "faulty bullshit monitor." I laughed, and she looked at me, curious and stone faced. "There's nothing funny about it, Jane."

I pictured a meter recessed in my head, I pictured her giving it a good whack, and the needle rising, tipping right, toward red. I giggled.

"What is it you're trying not to feel right now, Jane?" she said, leaning toward me.

"I'm trying not to laugh, Ms. Fortune." I choked another giggle. "I'm sorry."

"I can tell that what you need to do is cry, Jane," Ms. Fortune said to me. She stood then, and, oh God, she came across the room toward me, she sat down next to me and she put her arms around me. Good Lord. She pressed my face against her breast and said, "Go ahead. Let it out." I was thinking, "But Dahling, I hardly know you," and trying not to laugh again. But now I was stuck. Now I had to cry OR ELSE. Or else she would go home to her sterile apartment and her well-groomed cats and sit down on the sofa and worry about what a bad shrink she was. Bad, bad shrink.

So, for her sake, I kind of searched around in my head for something sad. Something I could really cry about and mean it. There wasn't much, because it all becomes funny after a few days. Doesn't matter what "it all" is. But there was that September 11th thing. It had been almost a month. I'd just begun to see the humor in it. Okay, so I thought about that. I thought about the couple who jumped from way the hell up there, from forever up there, holding hands; and about the pair of hands, just hands, someone found after, still clasped. The men I had been with would be much more likely to push me out of that window. Any window. So, fine, I cried.

I've gotten really good at crying when she wants me to, and sometimes I'll even make things up so she won't get bored, but I don't tell her about Methuselah. I don't trust Ms. Fortune as far as I can throw her. She was one of five names offered to me to choose from when I called the company EAP. I can't tell her *everything*. She is surely one of *them*.

His name wasn't originally Methuselah, or at least I doubt it. It was probably Jack or Bowser or Clyde or Rover, once upon a time, before he wound up at LifeWorks. He's a beagle, as were his cohorts, all brought in by the same shady dealer, all weighed and measured and judged to be equivalent enough for the study; all starved to death over the course of a few weeks—all but him. Then he wasn't Methuselah, he was Subject 12-X-15TD. But once he outlasted his cohort and proceeded to continue breathing for weeks on end, the researchers granted him that mouthful of a name. They haven't fed him a thing for two months. He is the talk of the facility, and his limp, near-lifeless body is often poked and prodded and shown off for visiting scientists, or reporters, or whatever they are. His picture, one from several weeks ago, when he still looked like a beagle, has been published far and wide, along with excited papers by the researchers in charge of him.

He is my opus. Up until Methuselah I had entertained myself by switching genetically modified mice with normal mice, throwing off the data almost imperceptibly, or so it seemed, because the papers got published and the money rolled in. And frankly those little pranks were harder to pull off beneath the watching eye of the security camera than simply bending down with my back to the camera, reaching through the bars as if to pet his boney head, and feeding him some kibble.

Ms. Fortune tells me I should get in touch with the little girl I once was. I really don't see how anyone can "get in touch" with a long-dead child, or how that is going to help me get up in the morning, or figure out how not to marry men who hurt me, but I figure I might as well try.

I like little places. In a little place you can be sure what's there. You can't get snuck up on. There's a pile

of clothes on my closet floor. I like that. But today I'm behind the piano. I'm eating grapes behind the piano and spitting the seeds on the floor. It feels kind of good, knowing no one will ever find them. I am the only person in the world who sits behind the piano. I stay here and listen to the clock ticking, the refrigerator making refrigerator noises, you know. And I read the names of my dad's books through the crack between the piano and the wall. My dad's walls are made of books. I read the names and wonder what's inside. When I have to pee I run to the bathroom. I run because the minute I get up and start walking I can feel something behind me. I can feel it looking at me, following me, so I run. And I run back, too, because that thing follows me, and then I have to curl up and just suck my thumb for awhile until I feel safe again. No one ever finds me. No one ever even looks.

I lie on my bed that night and close my eyes, looking for the kid: The grimy little urchin with knotted, blondish hair, who sucked her thumb, and preferred hiding to living. The weird little girl who insisted on wearing the same red jacket, indoors and out, season after season, until it just kind of faded off of her, never to be seen again. The kid I was. But I don't see a kid. I see a hole in the ground. A well, maybe, or just a hole. It's dark in there, it's tight and deep and cold. Maybe I catch a glimpse of red, hear a snuffle, hear the distant echo of a sigh.

No. No fucking way am I going in there. No man, no shrink, no nobody can coax me down into that darkness. If the kid wants me, she'll have to crawl on up and find me. Shrinky Dink thinks my tears are important. I can make them happen for her. I don't need to go down there. I don't need to go that far.

"Listen," I say. "I'm not going in there. Nothing is worth that. Let the kid rot. She's been rotting a long time, it's her style. I just won't marry again. I'll buy a vibrator."

"Jane."

"I'll stay single forever, who cares? I'm the only person who has ever made me cum every time anyhow. What do I need a

man for? Why am I seeing you? I mean, thank you and all for helping me realize I don't need them, or you."

"Jane," she says. "Listen. I have an idea. You have a hellish commute."

"I like the roads. But you're right, it's long."

"Okay, let's not give up. Do me a favor, alright?"

"Depends."

"While you're driving to work and back, just let her ride with you. Just let little Jane ride with you. Talk to her."

"What? Out loud? Like a nut?"

"In your head, then. Talk to her."

I picture myself driving with a blow-up Suck-Me-Baby-Jane doll on the passenger seat. I try not to laugh. "OOOH-KAY. Okay, but if this doesn't work I'm just going to have myself sewn shut. Deal?"

It's cold. I curl up in my sleeping bag and drag Bongo in with me. I tie her leash tight around my waist so she can't get out. Her warmth fuels mine. Through the branches, I can see the moon, full and wailing, and a few stars. I've made myself a little den of branches here on Stanford campus, across the street from the high school I'm supposed to attend, though I don't bother with that middle class bullshit. I'm a little scared, but my camp is so small, the size of my sleeping bag, like a cocoon. It comforts me. No cop's gonna find me here. I'll get to the smoking section in the morning, and my friends and I will figure out my next move. Tonight I'm safe. I've got Bongo, and branches scratching softly at the fullness of the moon.

I think of my father's face tomorrow when he tries to wake the me he thinks is me. Shaking what he thinks is my shoulder, and "me" coming apart, piles of pillows and blankets. The look on his face makes me laugh. I put my thumb in my mouth and fall asleep chuckling.

So, fine. I've paid my fifteen bucks. I'll obey Ms. Mindfuck. I am on Page Mill Road, the raunchiest, windingest road I know. I like to speed on that road. I like to go as fast as I can and masturbate and see if I can keep it together. But this day

I am summoning a spirit. I ask the little girl to come. I close my eyes on a tight, uphill curve, and I summon her to join me. I am commuting with the spirits.

I open my eyes and look over, and there's the passenger seat, all covered in papers and crap and stuff I need to throw away, but I see her, too. The wrong her. She's sitting there with her arms crossed, one leg slung over the other, a foot wagging. She is chewing gum and glaring out the windshield. She is tapping a purple fingernail against her upper arm and rolling her blue-lidded eyes.

"I'm sorry?" I say. It's like I misdialed the psychic hotline.

"What?" says she of the bleached and feathered hair. "You got a problem with me? Can we change the station to KSJO PUH-LEASE? What IS this crap you're listening to? Got any Zep?"

She lights a cigarette.

I hate her. Always have.

"Go away," I think, or say.

"Fuck you," she says. "You're stuck with me."

Well, I've really got nothing to say to the little bitch. I drive awhile and listen to her popping her gum. Smoking and chewing gum at the same time—a class act, all right. "Listen," I say. "You were a real bitch when you were me."

"I'm still a bitch, judging from the looks of things." She turns her head and stares out the window. "Let me out," she says to the glass.

"Get out the same way you came," I say. "I wasn't looking for you anyhow."

"Can't," she says.

This is ridiculous. I stop the car and open the passenger side door so She Who Isn't There can get the hell away from me.

"Just going to abandon me by the side of the road?" She sneers. "You're just like your mother."

Oh that's it. That is so very much IT.

I don't know why I'm crying. Mom leaves all the time. But this time I'm crying. My breath hitches up and up and up. It's that kind of crying. Like a twitch under your eye. I can't control it. I put my thumb in my mouth and

my whole body jerks with each gasp. It sounds like I'm trying not to laugh. I hope my mom can't hear me.

She never once looks back as she walks toward the plane.

I suck my thumb. I clutch my Daddy's hand.

I gesture at my imaginary nemesis, waving her out of the car. I slam the door.

As I drive away I can feel her standing there behind me, and this cold kind of wells up within me. A terrible chill that raises the hair on my arms. I know that feeling. The frostbite of utter abandonment. I feel her bewilderment and sorrow as if it is my own, which of course it is. I cry the rest of the way home.

Mom tells me Michael wants to talk to me. He's sitting on the frayed Lay-Z-Boy in the living room, his freckled, red-furred feet propped on the footrest, staring at the TV. Good things never happen when Michael wants to talk to me, but I'm stuck here for two months, and he thinks he's in charge. This time he says I'm not washing my hair right. He takes me to the bathroom to teach me how to bathe.

I have had it up to here with Ms. Fortune and her fantasyland, her conjuring of tears and ghosts—her uncanny ability to make what I used to get a good chuckle out of no longer funny at all. She is trying to turn me into some tragic creature, some humorless victim. Next she'll suggest a support group, Adult Survivors of Childhood, or something like that. If I let her keep at me I'll become one of those preachy shrink junkies who feel so very saved and are, in fact, as dull as Shrinky Dink herself. I'd rather hie me to a nunnery than spend another hour with her.

I call her to tell her so. I am still sniffing from the good cry I'd had driving home. To my chagrin, I get her instead of her answering machine. "Ms. Fortune, I am calling to say I no longer need your services."

"Are you okay? You sound like you've been crying."

"I have. I'm done."

“Oh, you have? Good work, Jane!”

“No. See, I’m done.” I tell her about the teenager. I tell her that was enough.

“Jane,” she says. “You’ve had a genuine breakthrough. Please don’t stop now. Don’t waste that good work.”

This morning I went into my dad’s workroom, behind the garage. I went in to feed Steed and Mrs. Peel, my rats. I closed the door behind me, because it’s hot today. I forgot there’s no doorknob on the inside. I forgot we aren’t allowed to shut that door because we can’t get out again if we do. I can’t believe I forgot, but I did. I’ve been in here a really long time. I’ve been screaming, “HEEEELP!” with my face pressed to the door. “HEEEELP!” I have to really say the “P” hard at the end. If I don’t, it just sounds like I’m screaming, “HELL!” Who comes running when a kid screams, “HELL?” Nobody, that’s who. Except if it’s on the playground and it’s the yard duty coming to take you to the principal and get you in trouble. I have to make sure someone knows I’m in here. I’ve been crying a lot. My face is all sticky with tears and dirt, and my sleeve is wet from wiping my nose. I’m hungry. It’s getting dark out. I’ve been in here screaming, “HEEEEEELP!” since right after breakfast. I remember that because I brought my rats the last bit of my toast. There’s still a little crust in the cage, and I am so hungry I think maybe I will reach in and get it. I could wipe the cedar chips and rat poop off it. Maybe no one will ever notice I am gone. “HEEEELP!” I scream, even though my throat hurts and my voice sounds like it does when I get sick.

“HEEELP ME!”

There’s a big celebration in the LifeWorks cafeteria. I can hear them laughing all the way down the hall. It’s Methuselah’s three month anniversary and the researchers are celebrating with a catered luncheon. I find it amusing that the two main players in all of this are not invited.

Methuselah and I are alone with the mice and rats of Laboratory 15. There’s not much left of him, really. At first glance

you'd think he's been dead for weeks. Just a scrap of brown and white fur at the back of his cage, ribs protruding over the hollow of his belly. But when I walked in, a bit of that fur lifted and thumped weakly on the concrete floor.

I do my usual act for the cameras. I clean some cages, sweep the floor, moving naturally and gradually closer to his cage. I've brought Methuselah a treat today. Meaty Burger. It's this odd, waxy, meat-like substance that comes formed into a patty wrapped in its own plastic wrapper, with a happy poodle printed on it in red. I squat beside his cage and reach my hand through the bars to pet him. His watery eyes look up at me as if I am God, and again that furry bone of a tail thumps. "Poor thing," I say. He licks my hand—one long, slow, dry lick—and his head falls back to the floor, but his eyes still hold mine.

Laughter floats down the hall from the party, and for the first time I find nothing funny about this. I couldn't care less about my job or the Department of Defense, but this scrap of hair worshipping at my feet breaks me. My throat is tight. I feel tears starting to build.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the Meaty Burger. I unwrap it and put a little in my palm. Methuselah laps it up slowly. Even swallowing seems to be agony for him. "I'm sorry," I say, stroking the boney crest of his head. "This is the last time." I shift my position while I feed him his last supper. I want to be sure the camera sees what I am doing. I'm going to cry any second but I refuse to let the tears come in this place.

I leave the wrapper on top of his cage and take off at a dead run. I run down the long hallway, the laughter and clinking of glasses growing louder. I run out the front door. I run down the marble steps, tears now pouring down my face. I'm sobbing. Running, weeping, and sobbing—my breath hitching in my throat in great, spastic gasps.

I know I am going to be in some kind of serious trouble for messing with Methuselah and making fools of the researchers and the DoD. Probably very big trouble. I don't care. They will kill Methuselah, of course. When I think of him, guilt flays me like a scourge. I'd thought he was a joke. Ms. Fortune was right, there is nothing funny about some things. Nothing funny at all.

I find myself in College Terrace, the neighborhood I grew up in. I'm standing against the chain link fence of my old elementary school, kind of holding myself up with my fingers through the links, my chest heaving. The playground is a mass of shrieks and color. I can see the corner where I used to hide from the wind, to read during recess; the jungle gym under which I smoked my first cigarette. It hasn't changed much since I was a kid.

As I turn to leave, I think I see a glimpse of red running toward me. I spin around, but see nothing there but a bunch of kids I don't know.

On a whim I head up Stanford Avenue, taking the route I used to take home from school. It is strange, as if time or existence has become schist. Layer upon layer I can look down through. A multiple exposure I am only one part of, though parts of me shimmer in each brittle, glassy sheet.

I remember being five and forgotten after kindergarten. Mom still lived with us then, but was probably drunk and just forgot I existed. That day I waited between the pyracanthus bushes and my classroom wall, watching a colony of ants moving things around. As dusk fell, and the playground grew so quiet that there was only the occasional shriek of a blackbird and the eerie ping of a deserted tetherball rope against its pole, I knew I had to go home. I started walking, trying to remember the route my mother's car took. I got to a street I thought might be mine, but I wasn't sure. I started up the hill, darkness coming down hard now, and that thing I'd always felt behind me materializing at my back. I was scared enough to cry. So I did.

I saw an old woman, out picking loquats from a mass of trees in front of her house.

"Can you tell me where Amherst Street is?"

"Honey, you're on Amherst Street. Where's your Mama?"

"I think she's at home. I'm trying to get there. It's on Amherst Street. It has a green door."

"Let's go find it," she said.

And she took my hand.

Now, walking up Stanford Avenue, passing the immense weeping willow where I used to hide, and the old culvert

that seemed so big back then, with its concrete pipe, like a cave I could sit in and listen to the cars and voices passing by, I feel someone or something behind me. The old tingle that used to send me running when I was little. But I am too big to hide in the culvert, too old to careen, screaming, up the hill toward the house that is no longer my home.

I don't look back. I put one hand out behind me like a parent crossing a parking lot, and I feel a child's fingers against my palm—small and warm. Fragile as the bones of a bird.

Afia Atakora

Phoenix

You think of her when you're half asleep. A child phantom, she plays at the foot of your bed, a guilt-ridden game of hide-and-seek, she hiding, you seeking. You drag yourself awake just in time to watch her disappear.

You think of her when you touch that balding patch on the top of your head. You feel silly straining in the mirror, trying to catch a glimpse of wisping greys and flaking scalp. She's laughing at you as you apply Rogaine and Just for Men in tandem.

She's with you in the office, when your boss is telling you about the new account. You're not listening, because all you can see is her, bathing in a sun that burns eternal, her stomach brazen, bare and concave thin, her eyes closed behind Lolita heart-shaped shades. Even in the fluorescent-humming claustrophobia of your cubicle, her skin is tanned and warm and alive.

Sometimes her memory occurs where you don't want it. You're taking out the trash, you're putting the kids to bed, you're watching the game. You're making love, your back arched in climax and there she is, just watching you, not smiling, just curious, and then she's gone. You look down and it's your wife that's looking back up at you, beneath your sweat and your strain and she's beautiful, yes, but suddenly, aching plain.

You think of the reporters. Vultures for tragedy, they descended upon your cul-de-sac that sleepy summer so long ago. They pecked at her memory, dissected her flesh down to the bone 'til all that was left was a carcass, the same skeleton that haunts you now.

This is what you didn't tell them:

It was baseball season. You remember because your father sat before the set, all-limbs at the edge of his La-Z-Boy, coaching below his breath to the little men on the screen. The light from the TV cast eerie shadows on his face and when the

umpire yelled strike your father would tug at his full, defiant head of hair. Your mother hid in the kitchen, wrapped herself up in telephone wire, gossiped with her friends.

It was the end of summer. You remember because you can still taste the desperate charcoal flavor of last minute barbecues. School was starting soon and Lydie Carmichael had come back from camp with sunburn and breasts.

She'd left on the longest day of the year and returned in the twilight of waning sun. Suddenly, frighteningly, you were aware of her hips under the white of sundress lace, you were aware of the pink of her lips, of her gums, you were horribly excited by the reality of her pink insides.

Later, when you went to college, state, of course, along with everyone else, you'd try to recreate her. But where Lydie Carmichael existed in hopeful blossoming, college girls were in full, familiar bloom. Lydie's long fawn legs led always in your memory to perpetual possibility. And with her there was never any morning after.

Lydie smoked sometimes. She puckered her lips to blow out smoke in almost rings. You wondered where she'd learned it, you wondered if she'd teach you. She smoked carefully, delicately cradling the cigarette between middle and pointer finger. Not like your older brother who clamped the cigarette between thumb and pointer. Not like your grandmother, the old pro, whose fingers were yellowed and who kept her cigarettes in the fridge.

Sometimes Lydie blew smoke into your face and you'd claw through it, pretending you couldn't see her, pretending she'd disappeared.

You watched yourself on the news over dinner. Your mother called your grandmother and your aunt, made sure they'd be watching your onscreen debut. When you appeared on channel three at five after ten the camera crew's lights made you too pale for the end of summer and your eyes were crossed as you looked down at the microphone. Threatening, it advanced towards you, a black smudge at the edge of the screen. The caption billed you as a neighbor/classmate and when asked what you thought of Lydie Carmichael you answered in a voice too high, even then, to be blamed on puberty, "she was a cool girl."

She *was* a cool girl.

The first time you saw her, really saw her—not as a girl, but as an almost woman whose burgeoning curves looked, in themselves, like hesitant question marks—you were tossing around a football with Charley Berman. Charley was an asthmatic kid with skinny arms, freckled and bruised like a banana. You still run into him sometimes, he’s in your fantasy football league. He still has skinny arms and has a dour, dimple-chinned wife. They have four, freckled, ugly daughters.

The Berman’s lived next door to the Carmichael’s; a stretch of yard ran from one identical ranch house to the next, without pause or hesitation. With no clear delineation the place in between the two houses existed as a no-man’s land, a boundary whose exact location fluctuated with the seasons, so the spot the Carmichael’s shoveled to in the winter was never the same as the place the Berman’s mowed to in the spring.

A tall elm grew wild on this dotted line, tilted just so, from which a hammock swung, connected to another tree deeper in the Carmichael wilderness. The Berman’s lawn was meticulous, green grass clipped tight, but that boundary elm dropped mischievous leaves onto their frenzied perfection.

Charley’s next toss went wild and you ran across two lawns. It landed with grace where Lydie lay. She was reading a book, a heavy, hardcover textbook and she was lying, not across the hammock, but curled up on her side in a ball, a fetus wrapped around Bullfinch’s *Mythology*, a fetus in a womb of netted white.

“Hi there,” she said.

You remember it was the end of summer and the leaves were just beginning their tentative, twirling suicide down onto the Berman’s lawn.

But it was your mother who started the trouble.

“Brian,” she said to your older brother. He lay on the couch watching tiny particles of dust sparkle in a column of light, dead skin and fluff floating through the air. His hair hung dirty and limp over the edge of the couch’s arm.

“Brian, how about you go over to the Carmichael’s and trim those hedges?”

Brian did not answer. Lay on the couch, dead, dirty, limp.

Your mother turned to you instead.

“Go over to the Carmichael’s and trim the hedges,” she did not ask.

And here she leaned in conspiratorially close to you. “It’s awful, really,” she’d said and cupped her hand around her mouth in gossip’s glee, “they say he left her with nothing.”

Mr. Carmichael existed only in whispers. He was a topic that delighted the mothers of the cul-de-sac who, drinking martinis together at noon, hypothesized his disappearance on the arm of one of Lydie’s perky-breasted babysitters.

You think he must have been around once, a tall, sullen looking man, blending in at block parties and in the audience of school plays. But by that particular summer it was only Lydie and her mother in that house with its broken siding and rotting shingles and the grass grew nearly wild with the rumors. Mrs. Berman, who mixed the martinis, insisted that Mrs. Carmichael was a raging alcoholic.

You showed up at the Carmichael’s with garden sheers and a nervous sweat. The doorbell was broken so you had to knock and finally Lydie answered, dressed in one of those too-short summer dresses.

“My mom’s asleep,” she said and, “Let’s go for a walk.”

The sky was blue, to yellow, to red as the sun went down and you walked slow, fighting through a cloud of gnats. As you walked, Lydie told you her favorite stories from her big book of myths. But she told them all wrong so that Greeks cohabited with Romans and Hercules was responsible for the beheading of Medusa. She told you, in delighted gruesome detail, the story of Pandora and her box, but made absolutely no mention of hope.

You made your way out of the cul-de-sac in slow, purposeless strides. At the end of the street lived the first Indian family to move into your neighborhood. As you walked past, Mr. Singh, old and wrinkled, came out. He sat on his lawn, looking prophetic, cross-legged and barefoot, and though he held up a newspaper, the skin on his hands, pulling and puckering like a crumpled brown paper bag, his hot-coal eyes followed you as you passed.

You were headed towards that-goddamn-factory. A spot of contention, if it had had a name once, it was lost forever in fa-

vor of the derision with which it was viewed. What had been manufactured there was of equal mystery. It stood just east of the cul-de-sac, a mountainous monstrosity on the otherwise even landscape of cookie-cutter rooftops. It sprang up one year quite suddenly and despite a series of heated town council meetings, that winter it opened up. The employees were bussed in, men with tired smiles and calloused hands. They were strong and rowdy, nothing like your cowed, cubicle-shaped fathers, who lamented the demise of the neighborhood's property value.

And then just as suddenly as it had appeared, it was abandoned, the mystery gears were stilled and the jovial sound of the lower class was silenced, leaving the factory to exist in a museum-like state, an edifice in freeze frame. The rumor was that their departure had been so abrupt that a sink in the men's room had been left running.

You and Lydie Carmichael came to that-goddamn-factory's grounds. The soaring structure—whose architects had, strangely enough, decided to make the building resemble a church with its one indomitable tower—was made even more ominous by a coil of barbed wire on top of the surrounding chain-link fence. Lydie put her little hand on that big fence, flecks of rust giving way to her touch.

“Have you ever been inside?”

You shook your head, because your mouth felt dumb.

“Me either,” she replied, but she easily pulled on the fence in just the right spot, making a gap at the bottom just tall enough for you to sneak through.

The grounds were of asphalt, long ago dulled by sun and cracked by creeping weeds. You looked around, feeling wonderfully mischievous, before darting for the entrance, a door that Lydie must have known was unlocked.

Just that past spring, Meredith Hellman, a spinster, bespectacled and heavy-set, had gone door-to-door, despite arthritic knees, with a petition citing the abandoned factory as a hazardous abomination. Everyone, your parents included, had signed. At that moment, as you entered its dingy depths, you could see why.

The air was nearly solid with dust and you felt as though it was a pervasive force driving you out, a hand trying to expel

you. But you pushed on and when your eyes acclimated to the lethargic light seeping in through blacked-out windows, you were able to look around.

Below you the ground was a layer of shredded linoleum and jagged shards of glass; the glass was probably from years of errant boys and their vicious stones. The walls and ceiling sagged dangerously with water damage. That first room must have been some old patrol station, you surmised, because on top of a tilted desk was a large monitor, gutted and strangely hollow. The stories about the workers' sudden exodus must have been true, because behind the desk was a display of sixty or seventy keys, hanging from hooks, aged and tarnished.

Lydie was drawn to them. Her lighter flared suddenly to life and she approached to study them the way an explorer might lean in to read hieroglyphics on a cave wall. You walked around the desk to join her.

She looked up at you and said something like, "we have all these keys. We can go anywhere." Or maybe she didn't. Maybe you only think she did or wish that she did, that she had some sense of all the prospect of her youth. Maybe she didn't say anything, but sighed a little, puffing out a breath of vulnerability.

And so, of course, you had to lean in and kiss her. Smashing your lips into hers, you went through the machinations you'd seen your older brother employ on his own girlfriends. It was stop-and-start and strange and, because you'd only ever practiced on the back of your hand, you were distracted by the feeling of someone else's teeth against your tongue. You pulled away quick to examine the shocked face of Lydie Carmichael, and then with a confidence you were glad at least one of you possessed, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed you properly and quite thoroughly. You were hot then cold in sudden bursts and her hip bones jutted out in precocious reply to your nervous, searching finger tips. Beside you those besmirched keys jingled their approval, moved by some force or energy you'd created.

You'd spend the next years of your life hoping to recreate the exact sensations you felt that day, but eventually you'd come to realize that that kiss in the factory with Lydie Carmichael was not your first time but your last. Each time you

thought about it, it was reborn, that feeling, that kiss, burning, all types of infinite, in your flesh.

School started suddenly, like waking abruptly from sleep, and that summer existed as a pleasant dream the memories of which were present in a warm haze devoid of detail. You remember it was a school night when you heard the sirens.

The cul-de-sac rose with a renewed energy, everyone peeking out of doors or standing on their lawns and porches, wrapped up in jackets and sweaters against the night's sudden chill. The ambulance and fire trucks drove past your street in single file, too slow you thought, too much like a funeral procession. But you went along as the inhabitants of the cul-de-sac moved as one, moth and light, to watch that-goddamn-factory burn down. The blaze seethed for three straight hours, a cackling, howling spectacle, a funeral pyre that made your street seem bright as day. The heat of it reminded you how far away summer really was. The smoke hung in the air for days afterwards; the ash scattered and settled, a layer of it on the rooftops like early snow.

The news rippled through the town the next morning with the predictable undulations of a slow wave, and on their murmuring lips you heard her name. Lydie Carmichael, they said, she was inside. She was inside and she didn't make it out.

It was then that the reporters invaded. With a sickening glee they descended upon housewives, schoolgirls, pool boys, pumping each neighbor, classmate, concerned citizen for every last drop of tragedy. And the cul-de-sac delighted in their hot lights and huge cameras, the epicenter of a quiet town basking in fifteen minutes of fame.

Every night at ten o' clock you tuned in and slowly, surely, the story unfolded and you nursed, as long as you could, your denial. It was Dan Bennett who had reported the fire. A stocky blonde boy who lived across town, he'd appear on the screen every night, and teary-eyed reveal how Lydie had brought him to the factory, how one of her cigarettes had started a fire that had spread too quick. Baby blue eyes would peek through bowl-cut blonde hair and plead with the camera, as he'd explain how he'd escaped through a boarded up window and ran for help.

"But I was too late," he'd say and one fat tear would roll

down his cheek as if his mother had told him that this was the exact moment when it should.

You went to the factory once before they finally tore it down. It looked sunken, defeated. A makeshift memorial of flowers and teddy bears surrounded what remained, but that riot of bright colors looked garish next to the black soot and ash. An enormous photo of Lydie hung on the fence, a portrait, probably clipped from the yearbook. It was the same one they'd used in the papers, with the headline, "thirteen-year-old girl dead in factory fire."

She smiled out at you, her head tilted at an uncomfortable angle, her skin pale, her hair not the right shade, not at least, the way you remembered it. And her pores were made of pixels, so that everyone lost and making an illegal U-turn in the cul-de-sac could get a glimpse of her and stretch thin her tragedy 'til there was none of it left for you. You screamed at her picture—awful, terrible things that you don't remember now, or remember too well and were glad no one was around to hear.

You think of her when you catch the scent of smoke.

And if you could gather up that smoke that has descended in all the corners of your life, you'd form the girl you knew, the one who'd been disappeared, distorted by a collection of other people's incomplete memories. And you'd hold her, if you could, but of course you cannot. And her smoke would not be grey but that youthful, purity pink. And her smoke would not smell like the noxious threat of burning wood and chemicals—the cul-de-sac nearly declared a mini Chernobyl, a little disaster—no, her smoke would have the back of the throat insistency of tobacco and would taste just as cloyingly hot and wantonly strange as a kiss that sets itself on fire and is bold enough to go on, to burn and burn and burn.

Mackenzie E. Smith

Mines

Esmé could tell that her mother had dressed herself that morning. She had on a fitted, leopard-print tee-shirt under a pink cardigan that said “Hello, Sexy!” in sparkly block letters across one shoulder—both new additions to her wardrobe since moving to Bishop Spencer Place, an assisted living “community,” six months ago. Although Esmé was 31 years old, she still felt a fresh pang of teenage embarrassment at being connected by blood, by habit, by love to her mother. The familiar mix of pity, followed by guilt, jounced through her gut. As Esmé walked closer she realized that her mother’s ensemble was finished off with grey sweatpants and purple Crocs. *Dear God*, she thought.

“Hey, Ma,” Esmé said as she navigated the minefield of wheelchairs, walkers, and oxygen tanks that covered the common room. She plopped down on an overstuffed sofa. All of Bishop Spencer’s furniture looked like it had come from a Holiday Inn Express; the art was cheap, but functional, and the carpets were the color of lentil soup—a color that hid stains well.

“Ma,” Esmé repeated and put a hand on her mother’s shoulder.

“Esmé?” her mother asked. “Shouldn’t you be at work?” The fabric of pity and guilt in Esmé’s gut unraveled a bit.

“No, Ma. It’s Saturday.” Her mother gave her a blank stare. “Saturday, Ma. Saturday.” She smiled, but it felt forced. “No kids equals no teacher. I’m off.” Her mother’s gaze had wandered over to a woman in a wheelchair to Esmé’s right. The woman had on a yellow nightgown and slippers even though it was two in the afternoon. A TV remote sat in her lap, but her back was turned from the common room’s TV.

“God damn Velma Mosher. What the hell is she wearing?”

“Ma, you’re being loud,” Esmé hissed. “She might hear you.”

“She can’t hear her own thoughts anymore, let alone what anyone else has to say.”

“Well fine, but somebody else might hear,” Esmé said.

“Oh, who gives a shit?” she threw up her hands, causing the “Hello, Sexy!” on her cardigan to ripple as if caught in an unseen current.

“Mamma, I’m here to drive you over to Manor Care today, remember? You’re moving today.”

“Good. This place is awful. Everyone here is old and insane.” She had a point. “Where’s Jacob?” she added. Esmé felt the warp and weft of worry pull at her again.

“Mrs. Hurst?” A woman with a clipboard appeared next to Esmé. This seemed to be a quality shared by all nurses at assisted living facilities: the uncanny ability to materialize—*poof*—out of nowhere.

“Yes?” Esmé asked. The nurse seemed soft and out of focus like the cartoon rhino pattern on her scrubs.

“We just need you to fill out a transfer form with some contact information and then we’ll be all finished on our end, and you and Doris can be on your way.” Esmé took the clipboard and began writing. “We sure will miss you, Doris,” the nurse said cheerfully.

“Why am I leaving? Am I getting the boot for bad behavior?” It was hard to tell if she was joking or not. This wasn’t a product of her age or disease; it had always been difficult for Esmé to understand her mother’s intentions.

“No, Doris. Remember, Medicaid is no longer covering your single room here and we’re full-up on doubles, so you’re moving to another home where they’ve got plenty of double rooms.” Doris was watching an elderly man pad barefoot across the thin carpet.

“No shoes! What is the world coming to?” Doris asked, ignoring the nurse.

“This, coming from the woman who spent three months living at a nudist colony, just to ‘get the story,’” Esmé said.

“Well yes, but I wouldn’t go out in public without shoes and socks. It’s just rude!” Doris said. The nurse laughed in a way that sounded genuine to Esmé. She turned her attention to the transfer form. Name: Esmé Hurst. She scanned the rest of the form for the question she dreaded: Marital Status. Single, Married, Divorced, Widowed. There it was, always the last option as if the person making the form had either wanted

to avoid it or had added it as an afterthought. *I guess there are people who are widows*, the form seemed to say. Esmé finished the rest of the form before finally returning to marital status. She circled *Widowed* and quickly handed the form back to the smiling nurse.

“And you’re sure you want to drive Doris all the way over to Manor Care? We can still arrange a shuttle, if that’d be easier,” the nurse said.

“No, it’s no trouble,” she said. In truth, Esmé felt guilty about how rare her visits had become. She felt she owed the drive to her mother. Esmé grabbed her mother’s only bag—it seemed that only the old, the insane and the young are free from the piles of stuff that give shape to most people’s days—and walked over to the elevator with her. They got in and Doris stuck her tongue out before the doors began to close. Esmé looked across the room at the faces in the common room. Only Velma Mosher turned her head to look in their direction as the doors slid shut.

“**P**ut on your seatbelt, Ma,” Esmé said. There it was: that raw edge, that exhaustion in her voice that only her mother could induce.

“How’d you get so demanding?” Doris asked.

“How? My mother taught me. Now put on your seatbelt.” Already the trip seemed like a bad idea. Why did she think that one forty-five-minute drive across Kansas City would make up for months of missed visits, missed conversations, missed *life* with her mother? She let silence prickle between them as she put the car in gear.

Her mother wasn’t bothered by the silence, a sure sign that she wasn’t herself today. She began rummaging through her purse. “Where the hell are my cigarettes?”

“Mom, you don’t smoke anymore,” Esmé said. They were on I-435, barreling away from Missouri and toward Kansas, toward a new home, if you could call it that.

“Why the hell not?” Doris asked.

“They don’t allow smoking at Bishop Spencer.” Her mother looked at her like she was a foreign movie without subtitles—something confusing and lacking any real meaning. “It causes cancer, Ma. You know that.”

“Oh, life causes cancer,” her mother said and made a face before returning to the task of sifting through her purse. Esmé thought of her mother’s first few weeks at Bishop Spencer six months ago. She had seemed so much like herself that she’d felt cruel leaving her there. But the truth was that Esmé could no longer care for her mother. She couldn’t take her mother putting the dish soap in the oven, trash in the freezer or finding her outside in the garden, digging up weeds in her underwear. She thought she could handle her mother’s Alzheimer’s—*the most common form of dementia* the doctor had told her, as if this somehow made it bearable—but she couldn’t. Just couldn’t.

“Where’s Jacob?” Doris asked. Esmé gripped the steering wheel tighter and watched as the car flew by a sign that said, LEAVING KANSAS? COME AGAIN! They were on the bare stretch of highway between Kansas City, Missouri and the suburbs of Kansas City, Kansas. “Are you two fighting again?” Doris asked. How, *how* could she not remember?

“Mom, Jake is gone, remember?” Esmé said, repeating the lines she had practiced and had said to her mother many times, many times. She searched her mother’s face for recognition. Nothing. Maybe she should just let it go today. No.

“Mamma, Jake was killed during his last deployment. His Humvee hit an IED in Kirkuk.” She had learned to get right to the point. *Forming new memories is difficult for an Alzheimer’s patient*, the doctor had said. *Be patient and repeat yourself.*

“How long ago did this happen?” Doris asked. Her fingers were stretched out over her purse as if she were waiting for nail polish to dry. Her lips began to quiver with what could be anger or anguish. Esmé could never tell.

“Five and a half months ago,” Esmé said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were at the funeral.” *Don’t blame; just repeat the facts and move on*, the doctor had urged. What terrible, terrible advice.

Doris slumped over in her seat, tears beginning to run down her face. “I’m sorry,” she wailed.

“Mamma, what are you sorry for?” Esmé asked. She had let the speedometer slip to 50 MPH; a Ford F-150, looming over

her tiny Honda, honked as it passed.

“My Depends,” Doris said. “I—” she began and then stopped.

“Oh. It’s okay,” Esmé said. She thought of the smiling nurse back at Bishop Spencer. What did she say to grown men and women who wet their diapers, their “Depends”?

Esmé took the next exit, which was at the edge of a new subdivision. The houses were all large oatmeal-colored boxes with windows too few and too small for their sizes. A new gas station stood next to a construction site. Sod blanketed the few spaces of ground not covered in new, milky concrete. Although a sign hadn’t gone up yet, the new building on the site looked like it would become a Taco Bell.

The gas station was large and sprawling, like everything in the suburbs, but Esmé doubted they’d have adult diapers. The girl behind the counter had on huge headphones and an oversized KU hoodie. The place was empty and she sat on a stool behind the counter with her feet up. Esmé thought it was strange that the gas station wasn’t busy on a Saturday afternoon.

“I’m sorry, do you have Depends?” Esmé asked.

“What?” the girl asked loudly, not removing her headphones.

“Depends,” Esmé said. “Adult diapers,” she added.

“Oh. Probably,” Headphones said. “If we have ’em they’ll be next to the tampons and stuff. Aisle five.” Esmé glanced out the gas station windows. Her mother sat in the car gazing out at something that Esmé couldn’t see.

Sure enough, they had Depends. Esmé brought them up to the counter. Headphones bagged the diapers and ran Esmé’s credit card, all while bobbing her head in affirmation to the music. She tapped Esmé’s card on the counter while she waited for it to go through.

“What kinda name is Esmé?” Headphones asked, mispronouncing it and looking down at Esmé’s credit card. She maintained a look of calculated boredom, her eyes rolling over Esmé like she was a carton of Thai takeout left in the fridge too long. Esmé knew the look well: she had perfected it in high school and wore it deep into her twenties during most interactions with her mother. “es-MAY,” she corrected her. “It’s French, but my mother chose it because of a J.D. Sa-

linger story.” Headphones nodded, still disinterested. *Hadn’t she asked the question in the first place?* Esmé thought.

“The dude who wrote *The Catcher in the Rye*?” Headphones asked. Esmé’s receipt dangled from the credit card machine now, but Headphones kept tapping Esmé’s card to the unheard beat of the music.

“Yeah, the story’s called “For Esmé—with Love and Squallor.”

“Gotcha,” Headphones said.

“Have you read it?” Esmé asked. She didn’t usually ask.

“Nope.”

“Well, the little girl in it—Esmé—is smart and precocious and loves stories, and that’s what my mother wanted me to be like, I guess.” She had never said this to anyone, but knew it was the truth.

“Oh. Here ya go.” Headphones slid Esmé’s card, the receipt and bag across the counter.

“Thanks,” Esmé said.

“No problem,” Headphones said.

Esmé helped her mother into the bathroom, which had grey tiled walls and floors and a sign on the back of the door that said “We take pride in our clean restrooms. Please tell a team member if this restroom needs attention.” Esmé had a hard time imagining Headphones on any sort of team. The floor was wet from a recent mopping, but Doris kicked off her Crocs and stood in her socked feet while Esmé wrestled with the Depends packaging. Esmé pulled off her mother’s sweatpants and wet Depends easily, but putting the new Depends on was challenging. Her mother’s fuzzy socks kept getting caught in the leg holes of the diapers.

“Ma, can you sit on the toilet?” Esmé asked.

“I don’t need to use the toilet,” Doris said.

“Mom, I’m not joking. Let’s just get these on.” Doris sat on the toilet and Esmé carefully raised one foot, then the other before asking her mother to stand.

“You’re such a beautiful woman, Esmé,” her mother said as Esmé pulled the sweats up over the Depends. “Beautiful, and smart too.” She hadn’t felt like either of those things in a very long time. She had been dumb enough to marry her high school sweetheart. Dumb enough to keep loving him when it

wasn't working anymore, even when they both wanted out. Dumb enough to stay, too smart to face the truth. But now she had no choice. *Don't blame; just repeat the facts and move on*, the doctor's words were etched in her memory. *Forming new memories is difficult for an Alzheimer's patient*. It's difficult for all of us, Esmé now thought. It's hard on everybody.

Back in the car, Esmé threw a package of Camel Lights onto her mother's lap. "I got these for you," she said.

"Aw, I was just looking for my cigarettes!" her mother said. She scraped the inside of her purse again and found a lighter. Esmé wondered how she still had one. Her mother lit a cigarette and cracked the window like her old self. She took a drag and let the highway wind take the ashes. The rest of the ride passed in silence. Esmé imagined her mother trying—and failing—to make a new memory, a memory of this drive, of her son-in-law's death in a hot, far-off place.

The drive to Manor Care in Overland Park was long, and Esmé felt a little lost, even though she knew the way. She had driven by Manor Care before, but had never been inside, which made her feel guilty. When her mother's medical benefits changed and Esmé needed to find her a new place, she Googled "nursing homes" and called the first one that popped up. She was sure this made her a terrible daughter.

The driveway to the entrance of Manor Care snaked up through a wooded area. Esmé was surprised when the car reached a gate. A little speaker buzzed and a woman's voice said, "Hello. What can we do for you today?" This reminded Esmé of driving onto military posts with Jacob. *Name. ID. Purpose*. Once, when she and Jacob were living off post, she had gone for a drive after one of their fights and ended up at the entrance of the post. When the MP at the gate asked Esmé the purpose of her visit, she told him she had just needed a drive. He stared at her like she was a flipped car, wheels still spinning. "The gym," she said finally. "I'm going to the gym." Satisfied, he made a note on his clipboard and waved her through.

Esmé wasn't sure if she should push a button or something, so she just spoke out to the speaker; its two buttons, one red and one green, over horizontal pieces of paneling looked like a little face. "This is Esmé Hurst. I'm here to drop off my

mother, Doris. Doris Edwards.” Esmé still didn’t know if she wanted to take her maiden name back. Her mother had told her not to change it in the first place. “It’ll just be a pain in the ass to change if you get divorced,” her mother had told her shortly before she and Jacob were married. At the time, this had made Esmé mad—her mother hadn’t even married Esmé’s dad—but now she thought that her mother was just looking out for her in the only way she knew how.

When they finally reached Manor Care, Doris had a hard time getting out of the car. A nurse appeared out of nowhere. *Ta-dah!* Seeing the concern on Esmé’s face, the nurse reassured her: “She’s probably just tired from the long trip.” Her mother turned to wave at Esmé, a smile on her face and a cigarette in her hand.

“It’s always so wonderful to see you, Esmé,” Doris said. “I love you.” The nurse began to push the wheelchair inside; Esmé followed, but then stopped. Suddenly she didn’t want to keep going.

“I love you too, Ma.” Esmé called after her mother and started walking. “I’m coming in to see your new place, remember?” She bent down and gave her mother a kiss on the cheek. She smelled like cigarettes and Suave hairspray.

“You’ll have to put out your cigarette before we get inside,” the nurse said cheerfully. Esmé thought she could be a sister of the nurse at Bishop Spencer. “There’s no smoking here.” Doris made a face and threw her cigarette on the ground. Esmé trailed behind and picked up the cigarette. The nurse either didn’t see the scowl on Doris’ face or pretended not to notice. Two automatic doors flew open like they were revealing the grand prize on a game show. “Here’s your new home,” the nurse said and leaned forward to gauge Doris’ reaction.

“This looks like the same God damn place.”

“Please, Mom,” Esmé hissed.

“Oh, don’t *please* mom me. This place looks like a hotel that no one would be caught dead in, and you know it.” The common room of Manor Care did look eerily similar to Bishop Spencer. The carpet was the same soupy color and there was even a poor reproduction of Monet’s *The Water-Lily Pond* hanging over the TV. The air-conditioning was cranked up. It was a thick August afternoon outside, but inside it felt like

a walk-in fridge.

“Oh, the Monet was hanging in the dining room at Bishop Spencer, not the common room,” Esmé said.

“Same thing!” her mother yelled.

“Well, it’s always good to have something familiar around,” the nurse interjected. “Let me go grab her paperwork, then I’ll give you two a quick tour and leave you to settle into your new room.” She patted Doris on the shoulder and left, her feet padding silently across the carpet.

“Mom, I left my wallet in the car; I’ll be right back,” Esmé said.

“Don’t leave,” her mother said softly.

“I’ll be two seconds. I’ve just got to grab my wallet. The nurse will want a copy of my ID.”

“No, don’t leave me *here*,” her mother said. Her hands were buried in her purse and she rubbed the soles of her Crocs together.

“Mom, I—I,” Esmé started. She looked into her mother’s eyes. They hadn’t changed the way the rest of her had. Her eyes were just the same as they’d always been—slate grey, like a wet city sidewalk. “I’ll be right back. Just two seconds.” Esmé turned and walked quickly toward the entrance. She felt herself break into a run as she neared the doors, almost crashing into a man with a walker, its tips covered in tennis balls.

“Esmé. Esmé!” her mother called after her. She could still hear her mother calling her name as she reached the automatic doors. The doors opened with a whoosh and closed behind her with a swoosh, her mother’s cries suddenly gone. The air outside was thick and quiet, and it swallowed her whole.

Sabra Waldfogel

Yemaya

Captain Ulysses Quitman, born in New York, raised in New England, a seafarer all his life, sat in the cabin of his latest ship and tried to figure the profit when he sold his cargo. The numbers were confounded by the deaths, each death a loss: a child, \$500; a grown woman, \$1,000; a grown man, \$1,200. The ship's doctor told him that the captives were packed so tightly that he could expect ten deaths a day, perhaps more. A tight-packed slaver needed to hurry. Otherwise there would be no profit at all.

There was a knock on the door. It was Doctor Pereira. Jacob Pereira, known as Jack in the flash dens where he had gambled away his fortune, had been a rakehell and even in his diminished circumstances, was still a bit of a dandy. His people were Israelites, first from Portugal, then from Amsterdam, then from London. They had been physicians for centuries. His eyes were of a blue startling in a man descended from Portuguese Jews.

"How many today?" Quitman asked.

"Ten," Pereira said. "Dysentery and typhus, which don't respect anyone. If your men get sick aboveboard, they'll die, too."

"Can we stop it?" Quitman asked. He meant the deaths below.

Pereira shrugged. "I don't know."

On this ship, Quitman was careful not to breathe deeply. A whaler hardly had a pleasant odor—the great beasts were rendered for their oil on board ship—but nothing had prepared him for the smell of the shit, piss, puke, and blood of hundreds of captives on a slaver, scores of whom were dying. He'd been told that other ships could smell the stench of a slaver on the open water when it was miles away, and now he believed it was true.

Early the next morning, Pereira descended into the cargo hold to count the dead. He steeled himself against the smell. Only ladies held vinaigrettes to their noses, and the strongest vinaigrette would be no match for this stink of shit mingled with vomit and blood.

The cargo hold was scarcely tall enough for a man to stand upright, even a man of middling height, as Pereira was. It was dark. Since the sea had been rough the night before, the portholes were closed, and the heat was suffocating. Pereira wiped his face as he descended the stairs. The smell was overpowering. It made his eyes water, and he gagged if he breathed too deeply.

The slaves were tightly packed on two levels, one set on the floor, the other on a wooden platform about three feet above. There was scarcely room to sit upright. The human cargo lay flat, one's head at another's feet, to press as many slaves as possible into the space, women on one side of the hull, men on the other. The women were not chained, since some of them had children to nurse and tend to. The men were manacled, the ankle of one chained to the hand of the other. In the first weeks of the voyage, the slaves had cried out and cursed, and the hold was a babble of African din. Now they were so weak, and so despondent, that they lay quietly, moaning if they had the strength.

Since the slaves could not get up, they had to relieve themselves where they lay. Pereira had learned to gauge the health of the cargo by the nature of the filth on the platform and the floor. Pure shit was a good sign. Shit mixed with blood was a sign of the flux that accompanied the dysentery that was so often fatal. Today, the floor was slippery with shit that was slick with mucus and red with blood.

On the women's side, he saw a dead woman lying on the floor. Between her legs, in a pool of blood, was a newborn infant, also dead. He bent to take a look. The dead woman was dreadfully emaciated—delivered of the child, her ribs were as prominent as a skeleton's—and her skin had turned the color of ash.

He had delivered babies, and the sight disturbed him. He had learned that some of the captives spoke Portuguese. He had a rusty version of the Portuguese-Hebrew dialect

his grandmother had spoken to him when he was a boy. He asked, "Does anyone know when she died?"

To his surprise, one of the women answered. Her Portuguese was African-sounding, but he could understand it. "In the middle of the night."

She was young. Her cheeks were sunken, but her face was round. Before she was captured, she must have been pretty. He asked, "How do you know Portuguese?"

She turned to look at him, her face haggard with misery. She said, "My father was a trader and he traded with the Portuguese. In Whydah."

He touched her arm. "What is your name?" he asked.

She turned away. He repeated, "What is your name?"

In a tear-choked voice, she whispered, "Abeni."

He breathed too deep and gagged so badly that he thought he would vomit and add to the filth on the floor. He controlled himself and rose. The dead woman and the dead child needed to be cast overboard. That was two. He moved quickly along the walkway between the two halves of the ship, looking for the dead. He counted twelve. Aside from the woman, all were dead of the flux.

When he ascended the stairs and smelled the odor of the sea, it was better than the finest French perfume. He sat on the deck, his eyes watering, his gut sick, trying to compose himself for his report to Captain Quitman.

The captain sat at the table that served as a desk, his ledger open, his inkwell and quill ready for the news. His hair had come loose from its queue, and his eyes looked bruised from lack of sleep. He looked up at Pereira and said, "How many?"

Pereira told him.

Quitman asked, "How many are sick?"

"I didn't count the sick."

Quitman said, "We need to throw the sick overboard."

"It won't stop the contagion."

Quitman said flatly, "I don't care about the contagion. I ain't insured for them if they die of the flux. I'm insured if they drown."

Pereira said, "I'm a poor excuse for a physician and a poor excuse for a man. But I won't murder the living."

Quitman said, "You have a tender conscience for a man

aboard a slaver.”

Pereira shook his head. He had signed on to escape imprisonment for debt. As a penniless man, without family or friends to pay for his release, he would have gone into the deepest and darkest place in Newgate Prison, to be starved and beaten and chained to the floor. He said, “You’ll have to throw me overboard first, if you’re going to drown people who are still alive.”

Abeni lay flat on her back. The woman to her right was too weak to move, and her waste made a sludge that now coated Abeni’s skin and caked in her hair. Abeni didn’t know her name, and couldn’t speak to her, even if she wanted to. She was Fula, and she knew neither Yoruba, nor Portuguese, nor Arabic.

The woman to her left had gone mad. She sobbed quietly for everyone who was now dead to her. She was asleep now, too exhausted to cry any more.

Abeni stared at the rough timber of the platform above her. If she closed her eyes she would remember. How the Fon bandits overpowered them, two merchants and their families traveling from Oyo to Whydah. They had killed her father and her uncle. Before they killed her mother and her aunt they raped them. They wanted Ayotunde, her betrothed. They took her, too. On the march to Whydah they yoked Ayotunde to another man, and chained her to Ayotunde. At night they took her away and raped her as well. How they sold them both, she and Ayotunde, to the red-faced men who put them on this ship.

Was Ayotunde still alive? She had no way to know. Ayotunde, beloved younger son, whose name meant “joy has returned.” Ayotunde as he was, his face bright, his skin gleaming, his laughter easy. Her beloved, and her intended. Their families planned to announce their betrothal when they arrived in Whydah, and to celebrate the wedding when they returned home.

She had become so thin that she could feel the pressure of the platform on the bones of her buttocks and her shoulders. She tried to move. People who lay flat developed sores, and if the sores were bad enough, the movement of the ship ate

through their flesh, exposing the bone. They died, but they suffered agony first.

Twice a day, the red-faced men came downstairs to give them food to eat: yams, and beans mashed to a paste, and rice. She had been in such despair, the first week, that she had not wanted to eat. She saw what the red-faced men did to people who stopped eating. They opened their jaws and forced the food down their throats, and if they continued to refuse, they touched hot coals to their lips.

Every day, people died. Abeni thought that those who died were more fortunate than those who lived. Where were they going? What would happen when they arrived? She closed her eyes, even though remembering tormented her. If she died she would never see Ayotunde again.

Why had the red-faced man asked for her name? What use was a name to a slave, soon to be a corpse? She tried to turn her head. She wept.

Captain Quitman, who slept badly at night, put his head down on his desk after Pereira left, pressing his cheek to the ledger. When he woke, neck stiff, eyes bleared, he was aware that someone else was in his cabin. She sat on the table, her bosom at his eye level in that cramped space, which roused him and shamed him. She filled the room with a briny odor, not at all unpleasant, strong enough to drown out the stench of the hold. She was brown of skin, to his eye a comely color on a table or chair, but not on a human body. Her face was covered with the delicate, even, vertical scars that were considered a mark of beauty among the Yoruba. Her hair, cropped very close to her head, was the finest black wool. Her eyes were large and heavy-lidded, the irises so dark that they melted into the pupil in a uniform black. Her lips were brown, tinged with pink, and very full. Her breasts, which he could see so plainly, were round, high on her torso, and firm, like the breasts of a figurehead on a ship's prow. She had the navel and the hips of a woman, but where her sex would be, she had a single thick limb, covered in a moist hide, a darker brown than her skin, and where her feet would be, she had two great fins. They put Quitman in mind of the tail of a shark.

“Who are you?” he asked.

She spoke in a language he had never heard before, but he understood her perfectly. She said, “My name is Yemaya. I’m the mother of the ocean. I protect all women who are mothers, and women who will be mothers. I protect their children, who swim in the sea of the womb, and who have tails and gills before they are born.”

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Set my captives free.”

He said, “I’ll be ruined. I can’t.”

“Set my captives free,” she repeated.

“If I don’t?”

She smiled. Her teeth were very white in her dark brown face. They were a woman’s teeth, but they made him think again of the shark, whose teeth could tear a man to death. “You’ll see,” she said, and as suddenly as she had come, she disappeared, leaving the briny smell behind her.

By mid-afternoon, the sky began to darken, and the sea, which was dark blue in the sunlight, had turned as dark as the sky. The wind came up, and the waves began to curl and crest. The ship bobbed through them like a cork from a bottle. Aboveboard, the sailors felt uneasy, casting their gaze at the sky. Below, in the cargo hold, the captives groaned in pain as every movement of the ship tugged on their manacles and rubbed their raw flesh.

By evening, rain began to fall, gentle at first, then stinging, then lacerating for those on the deck. The wind increased its velocity and began to howl, shaking the masts and tearing at the sails. The rain pounded into every crevice on the ship. The waves grew taller and taller, until they towered over the gunwales and washed onto the deck. The men on deck held to the rigging with all their might, fearing they would be swept overboard with each new wave.

Captain Quitman stood on deck, unable to see his own hand before his face in the pounding rain. It was useless to try to guide the ship. The wind took the tiller, and the waves turned the rudder. As the sailors held on for their lives, as the captives lay in terror below, the ship made its own way, far from the course that Captain Quitman had charted for their voyage.

Below, Abeni felt the ship heave up and down, and like everyone below, she could hear the bellow of the wind and the roar of the water as it rushed over the deck. The portholes were closed, against the storm, and the air was hot and foul. Everyone, even the weakest and sickest, began to cry out, a babble of African tongues, no one language clear in the din of fear and plea and prayer. Her eyes open, fixed on the platform above her, Abeni thought, We will die here. All of us.

Even though the portholes were shut, a breeze began to blow. The hold began to fill with a new smell. A strong, fresh smell of brine, like the sea on a fair day. The smell overpowered the stench of the hold. For the first time in weeks, Abeni dared to take a deep breath.

Above the din came a voice. Not the voice of a red-faced man. A woman's voice, deep and rich, speaking in a language Abeni had never heard before, but one she understood perfectly. "Oh, my children," she said, her voice full of sadness. "My poor children. You called to me, and I came to you."

Around her, people were stirring. The madwoman to her left sat up, blinking. The sick turned their heads, hoping to hear better.

"I've come to set you free," she said, and on the men's side, everyone could hear the sound of iron manacles snapping open and chains breaking. The men rubbed their necks and ankles and wrists in astonishment, crying a little with the pain of their raw flesh. They began to sit up.

On the women's side, those who were strong enough, like Abeni, sat up. They saw her, as she twined herself around a timber in the middle of the hold: the beautiful face, with the scars of a queen; the great breasts of a mother, to suckle children; the great tail with the fins that could cleave the sea.

"Yemaya!" someone cried out.

She smiled. How white her teeth were in her dark face! She said, "Don't fear, my children. I'll keep you safe in the storm, and I'll protect you." She began to flick her tail, getting ready to swim away.

Someone cried out, "Stay with us!"

Water poured from above, drenching everyone. Yemaya smiled again. "I'll be with you," she said, and she rode the deluge and disappeared.

The storm remained fierce through the night. The men, freed of their manacles, stood upright. The women, newly hopeful, rose from the tightly packed floor and descended from the tightly packed platform. Those who could stand stood in the aisle between the two halves of the hold. They grasped the timbers as the ship madly rode the waves. They murmured among themselves. Abeni, upright for the first time in a long time, felt dizzy. The ship pitched and yawed. But she was no longer afraid. She was curious.

In the hold, the captives never knew whether it was day or night. But they could hear that the wind abated, and that the rain slowed, and they could feel the waves diminish. And they heard the sound of the crash, then the sound of timber splitting asunder. The ship came to a halt. Daylight streamed in through the great gash in the hull, and a great gust of cold air followed.

They had run aground on a shallow. The shore was close by. If you could walk, close enough to walk to.

The captives stumbled onto the sand. The water was very shallow, but it was cold. Abeni had never felt water so cold. She helped the madwoman, who had not wept once since the storm began, to walk to shore. They supported each other, shivering, surrounded by a crowd of people, all of them walking slowly on their sore, bruised, wasted limbs, towards dry land.

The beach was fine white sand that felt good on the soles of the feet. Set back from the shore were tall trees, narrow at the top and wide at the bottom. The air smelled of brine, and fish, and something sharp and resinous. Gray and white birds flew above, cawing. Where was this place? Abeni wondered. She had never known the air could be so cold.

In the crowd she saw Ayotunde. He was filthy and emaciated, as she was, and he had a great collar of raw flesh around his neck from the pressure of the manacle. Tears rose to her eyes to know that he was still alive. "Ayotunde," she called out, extending her hands to him.

He stared at her with flat eyes. He said, "They defiled you."

Still holding out her arms, she said, "They defiled all of us."

He shook his head and turned away.

Abeni walked back into the water and let the waves clean

away all of the filth of the ship. She let the water wash over her, despite the sting of the salt in the places on her shoulders and her buttocks that had been chafed raw. After a long time in Yemaya's embrace, her hair and her body were clean again.

As she stood, shaking the water from her hair, she saw Ayotunde beside her, letting the waves wash over him. She waited until he stood and wiped the salt from his face. She held out her hand. He took it, and they both began to weep, giving Yemaya the tribute of the salt of their tears. They embraced each other, weeping, letting Yemaya's ocean caress them and comfort them, until they were ready to walk to shore together.

Jack Pereira and Ulysses Quitman sat together on the beach. Quitman, his hair wild, his clothes torn, his flesh bleeding, stared unseeing at the horizon.

Pereira, sore from bruises and shaking with cold, saw an apparition rise from the waves, brown as the captives were, with the face and bosom of a woman and the tail of a fish. She held out her arms to the shivering people on the beach. He listened as she spoke. Yoruba, Ibo, Fon, Fula: all understood her, as did Pereira. She told the captives that she loved them, that she would cherish them as a mother cherishes her children, and that they would be safe. She looked directly at Pereira, with her great heavy-lidded eyes and her bosom that roused every man who saw it. She said to him, "Help me to protect them and keep them safe."

He said, "Yes. I will."

She beckoned to Quitman, who was still staring at the horizon. He rose and walked into the water, past the wreck of his ship, the waves coming to his knees, then his navel, then his chest, then his neck, and finally over his head, the waves washing over him to cover him, without even a bubble to show that he was still alive. Yemaya smiled. She dove into the water, flicking her great shark's tail, and disappeared into the sea.

Lainey Bolen Burdge

Paper Thin

The nursing home reeked of urine, latex, and despair. It seemed to hover in the air, swirling around us like an early morning fog. A janitor tried to cover the smell with pine-scented cleaner, but it didn't help. I held my grandmother's hand as we marched down the stark hallway, and though I was fourteen years old, I was not embarrassed.

Right away, I hated the name "nursing home." I wanted everyone to be honest with me and call it what it was: It was where you went to die. The whole idea of living out your final years with total strangers was depressing. Why couldn't these saggy, old people's families take care of them? I didn't ask my grandmother this question because I was afraid that I already knew the answer: nobody wanted to take care of them. And I couldn't say I blamed them, these families who had lives to live that didn't include changing bedpans (or worse, diapers!) and spoon-feeding toothless patients. My great-grandmother, the one who lived and died there, was no exception. She was, in a sense, cast away from our family, her problems deemed too severe to be handled by my grandmother, her only child.

My own mother, who'd had me three weeks before her high school graduation, died in a car accident when I was two years old. Other than a few hazy memories, she left me with nothing, and when she died, my grandparents took me in. (My father—and I was told this much later, as an adult—was the kind of man who'd "run from trouble.") That's what happened when he found out my mother was pregnant. Though we had his contact information, my grandmother refused to even consider letting him hear from or see me. Not that he wanted to. (He'd sent a few cards through the years, with sentiments such as "Hope you had a great bday" or "Take care and enjoy the summer.") From the day she took me in, my grandmother decided that I would have as normal a life as possible, with school and friends and swim lessons. She,

along with my grandfather, had done a solid job, making my childhood years full and happy. But I knew in my heart that raising me, unexpectedly becoming my parent, had changed her, made her stoic. I saw her cry exactly three times in my life, and each time afterward she was embarrassed. She would apologize, quickly regain composure, and scurry away quickly to find something else to do. She told me she loved me frequently, but it was perfunctory and came across as almost accusatory. I loved her back, though it was complicated. Because she was both my mother and my grandmother, I never really got to have either.

Walking down the nursing home hallway, my grandmother's heels clicked-clacked on the gray-flecked tile and I sang along in my head, the rhythm of her shoes keeping time to Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance With Somebody." This was one of my quirky habits, finding songs that fit the rhythms around me. (Once I had a Huey Lewis song playing on repeat in my mind for two weeks. It was maddening.)

"Here we are." My grandmother stopped abruptly outside of Room 116, and the song in my head came to a screeching halt, as if a record needle was suddenly and carelessly lifted. Party over. I peered inside and saw Nan, my great-grandmother, sitting on a recliner that was probably once blue, her head slumped down, a thin, stretchy line of saliva hanging from her mouth. I sensed my grandmother's disdain in the way her voice became sharp.

"Oh, Mother," she dropped my hand and rushed to wipe the offending spit from her mother's mouth and lap. I was both terrified and fascinated at the sight of her, like unexpectedly stumbling upon the maggot-filled cat carcass on the sidewalk. I was repulsed but couldn't look away. My stomach turned.

"Can't they put a bib on her or something?" My question was serious and well-intentioned, although it probably did not sound that way.

"Allison, really!" My grandmother turned her head toward me. "That is ridiculous. Nan's not a baby."

She was not a baby, but she couldn't speak or walk, and I was pretty sure she was wearing a diaper. So a bib sort of made sense to me considering the big picture. I envisioned it:

soft, white terrycloth with “World’s Best Great-Grandmother” stitched in hot-pink thread. I kept this thought to myself. Her room was bleak, white walls with white tile. I guessed it was meant to look sterile, but the effect was utter hopelessness. Perhaps a nice light blue paint or a crisp linen curtain would have cheered the place up a bit. The cheap, seventies-style dresser was adorned with pictures of our family—there was one picture in particular that always got my attention. In it, I stood erect, wearing Nan’s long, flowing wedding gown, which was permanently suspended in the breeze. A crown of white azaleas sat loosely on top of my head. The curly tendrils of Nan’s cucumber plants were spread out near my feet, which were bare and tanned.

My thoughts turned to three summers before, the summer the picture with the cucumber was taken, the summer I turned eleven. I would be starting middle school that August, and I’d become quite the irritating, giggly, dramatic, know-it-all preteen. My grandparents were taking a cruise to the Bahamas and decided to drop me off at Nan’s house, which was on the way to the port in Charleston.

I had vented all of this the night before over the phone to Stacey McMaster. She was the most popular girl in our grade and I spent countless hours daydreaming of ways to impress her. At the same time, I secretly hated her. Looking back, I think I hated her because I wanted to *be* her, but never would come close with my frizzy, mousy brown hair and my skinny legs. Frankly, I was shocked that she was even paying attention to me, as I had nothing to offer her that would promote her social status, which was, of course, every middle schooler’s main concern. (She realized this as well, though surprisingly, it took her almost a full month. I was demoted to mere acquaintance upon returning to school in August.)

I found the fact that my grandparents wanted to spend time alone “totally gross and weird,” as I had told Stacey the night before on the phone. She pretended to listen, but I am pretty sure she was concentrating on fixing her bangs. I heard the soft *whoosh* of the aerosol spray can. “Aw, sweetie,” she’d said, “that’s funny.” But it wasn’t. I wasn’t joking, and I knew that someone my own age who called me “sweetie” would never take me seriously. Something had happened that

year among all of us kids. Something shifted in our understanding of ourselves, each other, the world. The change was subtle at first, like a breeze that carries the faint smell of a familiar perfume. But it ignited something in us, something profound and as old as the ocean, causing us to look at each other in a new way, part fear and part fascination. Suddenly, all that mattered was to matter. And here I was, trapped in my grandparents' car, on my way to spend two weeks of my precious summer with an old lady. I stared at the back of my grandmother's head, loathing her coiffed chestnut brown bob (fresh from the beauty salon) just because it belonged to her, and grinding my teeth in passive-aggressive contempt. How I wished my eyes could shoot bullets.

My grandmother, from the front seat, reminded me for the thirty-sixth time, "Allie, puh-lease remember to help Nan out with the dogs. She says she can handle them, but I know for a fact that Sugar got out last week and was gone for two days because she forgot to close the gate."

I'd overheard my grandmother's hushed conversations with my grandfather about the declining state of Nan's mind. It had been happening for years, slowly and subtly, ever since my great-grandfather died when I was eight, but Nan insisted it was normal, just another depressing gift of growing older. She liked to joke about it. "Hell," I'd heard Nan say to my grandmother on the phone, my hand pressed firmly against the mouthpiece so they wouldn't know I was listening, "maybe one day I'll forget how old I am."

Helping Nan remember was not my grandmother's only request. For weeks leading up to the trip, she'd have a new reminder for each day: "Puh-lease remember to clean up after yourself, scrub underneath your fingernails, wash your pajamas every other day, make your bed, not pick your toenails, blah, blah, blah." It was obvious that my grandmother's primary concern was showing Nan she'd done a good job of raising me. Up until then, I had only spent a few sporadic days with Nan, mostly holidays and all when I was in primary school, but from my mother's list of rules, I deduced she had inevitably morphed into a prissy, decrepit old lady whose idea of a fun afternoon was polishing her tea set and practicing her posture. Wasn't that what happened when you grew old?

When I arrived, stretching and yawning from my catnap in the backseat of the station wagon, I saw a slight, but sturdy woman standing in the front yard, her arms outstretched as if she were hugging the sunlight. Her hair, pulled in a low bun, was the color of a new moon, gloriously white. I thought she looked magical, like a good witch.

What I discovered about Nan that week was that she didn't own a tea set (actually, she'd given it to my grandmother on her wedding day), and her posture was perfect thanks to the two hours a day she spent playing her piano. I'd sit at her feet and watch, starstruck, as she lost herself in something rolling and deep. She let me go for long walks by myself through her neighbor's property, which had the feel of an enchanted forest. The only instructions I got were, "Just come back when it starts to get dark. Have fun."

We cooked supper every night with fresh zucchini, squash, and tomatoes from the giant planters she kept on her porch. Everything about her was beautifully wild and seductive. I was fascinated by the way she sat with her girlfriends on the front porch, rocking back and forth, drinking sweet wine and laughing loudly when one of them made an irreverent joke about men. I'd stifle a giggle quietly from the wicker sofa where I was pretending to read. "Oh, Allie, just act like you didn't hear that," she'd say. But she was laughing when she said it. I fell in love with that woman. She was so alive, so much more alive than my grandmother, who insisted on pantyhose and hair clips and slips underneath everything. My grandmother was only fifty-four at the time, but she may as well have been ninety-four for all the life she'd missed out on every day. I wondered how these two women were related, and what happened to my grandmother to make her so tightly wound. It was as if she were someone else's daughter. She was so full of rules and Nan, by contrast, was so full of freedom. It emanated from her, and I wanted to catch it and take it home in one of the Mason jars she used to pickle okra. When I stood in her driveway two weeks later, teary-eyed and already nostalgic for her, Nan held me close and whispered, "You are so special, my love. We are kindred spirits, you and I. Don't forget who you are." Don't forget.

I cried for the entire week after I left Nan's house. I should

have been agonizing over a boy who didn't like me or not making the cheerleading squad, but here I was, an awkward preteen, locked away in my room, pining for my great-grandmother. I remembered the way she made me feel: honest, normal, full of joy. She was just that special.

Barely three years later, I stood in the room with Nan, my beloved great-grandmother, waiting for my grandmother to say something to break the eerie silence. Finally, she did. "Mother, you look so pretty! I *love* what the girls have done with your hair. And that nail polish is *perfect* for your skin tone!" I knew for a fact that Nan hated nail polish and she would have died if she knew they had curled her hair. (Shouldn't her own daughter know this?) She gushed over Nan. I'd been there every Sunday afternoon for a month, and each time it was the same. She rushed about, talking to Nan as if she expected a response. And then she said it:

"Allie, go give Nan a hug and a kiss." My stomach turned again, sharper this time.

"Uh, I gotta go to the bathroom." This was my go-to excuse, and it bought me at least five minutes. I experimented with all of the cheap, powdery soaps and lotions lined up on the sink, but I could only stall for so long. I even poured more Pine-sol in the toilet and gave it a quick scrub with the brush I found in the corner. Somehow this made me feel better, more in control.

Tossing the damp, brown paper towels into the trashcan, I took a deep breath and pushed the door open. My mother was gone. Nan's empty stare was fixed on the wall just above my head. I wanted to make a run for it, but worried that any sudden movement would get her attention and her glassy eyes would find and paralyze me. It wasn't that I was afraid of Nan; I was afraid of what had taken over her mind and body. What kind of parasite was it? Where did it come from? Was it contagious? It drained the color from her hair, her skin, her eyes. It stole everything that made her who she was. She stared and stared, yet saw nothing. Her eyes were useless globes; they may as well have been gumballs. I stood, frozen, the air heavy and tense with my fear. From down the hall, I heard the muffled click-clack of my mother's heels. They became louder and sharper as she approached the room. *Hurry,*

hurry, hurry, I thought, with each footstep.

“I just can’t believe they let these flowers get so dried out. Honestly, for what I’m paying them . . .” She was mumbling and holding a crystal vase full of white daisies, their petals thin and papery, reminding me of the skin on the back of her hands. She, too, was getting older. Placing the vase on the thick concrete windowsill, she spoke without looking at me. “Allie, you really should give your Nan a hug and kiss.”

It did not occur to me to lie. “I need some water,” I said, and headed toward the door. My grandmother swiveled around caught me by the arm. She pulled me to her, nails pressed slightly into my skin, so lightly that I might have imagined it, until I was just a few inches from her mouth.

“Go . . . give . . . your Nan . . . a hug . . . and kiss.” Each word stung. I saw her jaw slightly clenched and I knew that I was defeated. Her face and her grip on my arm softened simultaneously. “She loves you so much,” my grandmother said quietly, her voice sad with remembering.

For months, I’d had nightmares about that moment. In them, my eleven-year-old self sat on Nan’s lap as she slowly turned her head towards me. Then, laughter, wild and demonic, erupted from her mouth. It was not Nan; rather, it was the monster inside of her that had taken over, trying to get me too. It looked at me from behind her eyes and mocked me for my own mortality. In my dream, I tried to jump up, but noticed that I was literally glued to her lap. So I sat there, frozen, until I woke up sweating, a strange tingling feeling in my feet. I knew that in reality, this was impossible, that Nan hadn’t uttered a sound in over a year, but the dream was so real that I woke up smelling Pine-Sol.

I swallowed hard and inhaled shakily, terrified to touch her. Her fingers, bony and twig-like, lie useless on her lap. But I could picture the demon inside reaching slowly for my throat, morphing Nan’s vacant expression into a chilling smile.

My grandmother was studying me with her arms folded over her chest, which meant I had no choice. Inching towards Nan, my breath became short and ragged. She thought I was being defiant, that I was embarrassed by Nan, to have to touch her skin and hold her hand. I hovered next to Nan as if I were squatting over a toilet in a public restroom. Any mo-

ment, might snap its head up and start the low howl just like in my nightmare.

“Allie, sweetie, are you okay?” My grandmother questioned. She looked genuinely concerned. I didn’t want her to know that I was afraid. That I was afraid because I didn’t know Nan anymore. That I was afraid because the last time she spoke to me, she called me “Susan,” her younger sister who died from typhoid fever as a child. I used to live for these moments, for the hugs and the conversations, but that was before her eyes began losing their color. They used to be the exact color of a robin’s egg. Now, they reminded me of cold steel.

I realized I was holding my breath. Hot, burning tears welled up in my eyes and I tried to choke them back. Squeezing my eyes shut, I pecked Nan’s cheek at lightning speed. Humiliated, I sprang from her lap, full of shame and adrenaline. I exhaled loudly.

“I’m fine,” I lied, hiding my trembling hands behind my back.

Nan died on a Friday. Just like that, the monster won. Or maybe Nan won. I will never know for sure. On Saturday, practically and efficiently, we cleaned out her room. As we packed her gowns and sweaters into plastic bins, I felt relieved that she is gone. *She has to be somewhere*, I thought, *though I can’t imagine where*. I pictured her with outstretched arms, walking through her neighbor’s enchanted forest.

“Let’s put these sweaters in that yellow container,” my grandmother told me for the third time, and I obeyed. She must have had a hundred sweaters. It seemed that old people are always cold. My grandmother spoke. “Allie, do you remember her? I mean, do you *really* remember what Nan was like?”

“Yes. I can still feel her arms around me, hugging me tight. I miss her hugs.” We were both quiet for a few seconds. “And remember those blueberry bushes in her yard? She taught me how to tell when they are the perfect ripeness. She used to let me eat them until I was sick.” These things were true, but mostly I said them to make Nan feel better. I could sense sadness engulfing her like a tidal wave.

I watched her pick up an emerald green scarf from the pile of sweaters and hold it to her face. She breathed in the left-

over scent of Nan, and I felt awkward, like watching lovers kiss goodbye for the last time.

“This was her favorite.” She smiled as she said it and her eyes looked lonely.

We worked quickly and within an hour, her closet was empty. I halfway expected to see boxes containing Nan’s memories stacked against the back wall of the closet. I imagined them labeled in chronological order according to how they were stolen from her: *Important Dates*, *Names of Family Members*, *What I Did This Morning*, *Talking*, *Walking*, and finally, *Swallowing Food*.

I couldn’t understand where it all went. How could someone’s very spirit just disappear? In my physical science class that year, I learned that energy, spirit, or whatever you want to call it, changes shape and form, but is not destroyed; it is merely transformed. So if this was true, what shape had Nan’s smile taken? Where had her laugh gone? I was desperate for something tangible, something I could see or touch that looked or felt like what was once Nan’s glory. Maybe I could see her in the brilliant colors of the painted bunting that stopped at our bird feeder every afternoon around five-thirty or smell her in the balmy air after a long rain or taste her sweetness in the ripe tomatoes that I vowed to grow in her honor. This made me mad at God, who seemed to keep assigning beauty and love and joy and then taking it back, as if there was only so much to go around. Why couldn’t God make more? As far as I was concerned, there should have been enough for everyone. I think Nan deserved more. The world needed more of her. I needed more of her.

“Now, where did I put my purse?” my grandmother asked again, forgetting that she hung it from the hook on the back of the door. I pointed to the door, and her face twisted into a grimace of frustration. “Oh, right. Can you hand it to me, Allie?”

I don’t know if it was my imagination or if my grandmother’s hands really were shaking. Tired and deflated, she collapsed into the dull gray-blue recliner and closed her eyes as I set her purse on the floor at her feet. Her breathing became heavy and even, and I wondered if she had fallen asleep. She opened her eyes and looked at me, but said nothing. Something passed between us. I couldn’t help but notice that her

eyes looked different. My heart sank in my chest as I realized what was happening.

This was my first real taste of fear. It seized me in an instant, like a hawk snatching its prey in sharp, gnarled talons. The sudden understanding that we were all dying, slowly rotting, was terrifying, yet oddly comforting to something deep within me, mysterious and very far away. I pictured myself fifty or sixty years later in the worn recliner, dripping with drool and snot, as my own daughter wiped my face tenderly, the same vacant stare from my eyes. Somehow I knew that this understanding would change me forever. We left the room.

“Bye now,” said a young, pretty nurse, with the cheerful enthusiasm of someone whose shift is almost over. “Y’all take care.” How easy it is to be happy when you are young and pretty. I can still picture her heart-shaped face, a small scar above her top lip.

Walking down the hallway towards the door, I grabbed my grandmother’s hand. She pulled me close to her and I leaned into the soft, familiar curve of her body. There was no song playing in my head, only the dull hum of the air conditioning unit and the faint, hypnotizing buzz of florescent lighting.

Erin Rodoni

Crossing the Street in Hanoi

I find Robin up to his chin in a flooded gully. His blinking eyes look large, bovine, reminding me of the water buffalo we often see wallowing the marshy rice paddies. “What are you doing?” I ask. “The mosquitos,” he answers, “they’re attracted to wet skin. Once I got in I couldn’t get out.” I check a log for leeches before lowering myself down to wait for our guide. The water looks tempting, cool and green, lapping at Robin’s sparse blonde goatee, but I know anything could be lurking down there. Our guide has already lifted numerous innocent logs and leaves to show us the snakes and spiders that dwell beneath. But after six hours in this heat this nature walk feels more like a death march and I long for the flat dusty beach near the hotel. I sigh as I imagine cooling my feet in those litter-thick waves that had looked so unappealing this morning when, at Robin’s enthusiastic insistence, we signed up for the jungle tour.

I first met Robin a few weeks back when he strode into the lobby of my hostel in Hanoi. He extended his thumb like a hitchhiker to the general assembly of dreadlocked girls in Thai fisherman pants and couples decked out head-to-toe in waterproof REI and asked in his casual surfer boy drawl “Which way ya headed?”

Hanoi was the first stop in Vietnam for both Robin and me. Everyone else had already come up from the south, crossing the Cambodian border and making their way to Ho Chi Minh City on a slow boat up the Mekong. I had flown in from Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand where I had just finished a yoga retreat. Robin had flown in straight from LA. He wasn’t exactly the exotic lover I’d imagined myself hooking up with on this journey, but there was something about the cocky way he tossed his shaggy, sun-bleached hair . . . Besides, he was the first cute guy I’d seen up close in weeks. So I slipped up to my room while Robin was busy swapping traveling stories

with some crusty guys who'd just been to India and smelled like patchouli. I brushed my hair, curled my lashes, and threw on a push-up bra. I knew I had his attention when I returned to the lobby, draped myself casually across a chair and felt his eyes explore my breasts and long dark hair. It wasn't long before he told me, with his trademark arrogant grin, that I should join up with him if I wanted to see the "real" Hanoi.

In Hanoi the streets are scaled with lichen and when it rains they become shallow streams. Algae lifts from between the cobblestones and feathers your toes, slicking your flip-flops from your feet. Robin was delighted, tromping through puddles like a kid, never afraid to fall on his ass in front of speeding mopeds. He taught me how to cross the French-built boulevards that seemed to stretch for miles without any sign of crosswalk or traffic light. "Follow the little old ladies," he said, "they know how to do it." I watched these tiny women step gently into the constant current of traffic and disappear. Thousands of bicycles and mopeds seemed to turn and weave in unison like a school of minnows, occasionally channeling between and around clumsy tour buses.

Robin and I stepped off the curb behind a woman half my size balancing a huge basket of dragon fruit on her head. "The trick is to just keep moving," he said, "never slow down or speed up, don't try to avoid the traffic and the traffic will avoid you." A few steps from the curb I found myself enveloped in motion, a cacophony of horns and engines. Robin gripped my hand, urging me forward. The woman we followed kept her head bowed, serene as if she were walking along the tide line at a beach. I tried to ignore the mopeds that scattered mud and wind against my thighs, the baskets of clucking chickens that swept by inches from cheeks. I just watched my wet sandals, listened to the smack of each step against my heel. I inhaled with one smack, exhaled with the next, and when I finally noticed we'd reached the other side Robin was still holding my hand. We looked at each other, giddy with the small miracle of our survival.

I wasn't supposed to be "getting involved," as my mom called it, with anyone on this trip. I was supposed to be breaking "my unhealthy cycle of serial monogamy" and "getting in touch with myself," again my mother's words. She offered me

such insights into my own character often, usually some sort of fusion of pop psychology and new age mystical rhetoric. She was the one who organized and paid for my yoga retreat. She “gave” it to me as a twenty-fifth birthday present, though I understood there would be a severe escalation in attempts to get me into therapy if I didn’t go. “I don’t think you’ve been single for more than a week since you were fourteen,” she told me. “You’re twenty-five years old now. Do you even know who you are when you’re alone? I know I don’t.”

After two weeks of staring blankly into my journal and attempting to force my inflexible muscles into all manner of pretzelesque shapes, I began to think my mother was right about me.

It wasn’t until I arrived in Chiang Mai that I discovered it was an all-female retreat and it was being held in a monastery for Buddhist nuns. “Very sneaky,” I thought to myself, “but there’s a whole city out there just teeming with hot European backpackers.”

Orientation quickly doused those fantasies. This retreat was all about isolation and discipline. The only off-monastery privileges were trips to visit other monasteries and religious sites. I could have left, I mean there were no guards or anything, but I figured maybe this really would be good for me, maybe I would actually experience that joy of singleness my friends were always professing to enjoy after every breakup. How wonderful it felt to have the bed all to themselves, to wake up and make themselves a leisurely breakfast of whole grain waffles and fresh-squeezed OJ. “Sure,” I always thought, “it’s nice to have the apartment to yourself for a day or two, but really, who makes gourmet breakfasts for one? How sad is that?” But now that I was alone here in Chiang Mai I figured in a few years I’d be married and have children, then I’d never be alone again, so I might as well give being single a try, maybe I really was missing out on something.

I ended the retreat with a pulled hamstring, a journal full of methodical lists on the pros and cons of getting back together with Jimmy, my most recent ex, and a scattering of random New Age sounding phrases I’d heard some of the other girls throwing around, like “I really felt my root chakra opening when I was doing downward dog this morning” and

“I’m trying to align myself with the universal energy flow.” But I didn’t want to go home without at least one exotic tale of romance to regale my friends with. I called my mom on the last day and told her I was planning to stick around in Southeast Asia for a while. She was so proud of me for having the “self-discipline” to make it through the whole retreat, and even prouder when I tried out some of my New Age lingo on her (“Yeah mom, it was a totally awakening experience, I feel so free and like, awake”), that she agreed to pay for the rest of my trip.

I decided to go to Vietnam because I had dated a half-Vietnamese guy a few years back and he was always telling me how beautiful it was. Besides, I loved the spring rolls. But Hanoi wasn’t like Chiang Mai; the tourists were much more serious. I guess it was hard not to be when kids with missing limbs tried to sell you pirated DVD’s every five minutes. I spent the first few days wandering the same couple of blocks and eating at the same restaurant around the corner with the English menu. They didn’t even have any spring rolls.

Then Robin showed up. He took me to all the dingiest restaurants in Hanoi, where the tables were overturned buckets and the only chairs were your own heels. He ordered all manner of internal organs I’d never even heard of. And I ate them all, whether stewed in fiery broths, deep fried or nearly raw, even though Jimmy had been a vegetarian so I hadn’t eaten meat for almost two years. Robin always paid and though I knew the food cost next to nothing, I began to notice him handing out thickish folds of US bills to everyone who served us: the cooks, their wives, their kids, their kid’s friends. He did it subtly, like you would to a *maître d’* at a fancy hotel, but once I caught a glimpse of a twenty. I began to notice the premeditated quality to his scruffy clothes, the way the holes in his jeans looked a little too perfectly asymmetrical, the cuffs frayed in all the right places. How he never seemed to wear the same thing twice, though I’d been rotating the same five sweaty tank tops and sarongs since I’d arrived. I began to realize Robin might be travelling like a backpacker, but he definitely had money. And since he was a few years younger than me and had grown up in Orange County, I was pretty sure he’d always had money

He knew enough Vietnamese to question the locals about their favorite places, and he always slipped them some bills in exchange for their recommendations. Every night he crawled into my bed, babbling excitedly about another ruin, waterfall, or festival he'd heard about that we just had to check out. "That guy I talked to at dinner said only Vietnamese people know about it. It's not even in *Lonely Planet*." Those were the magic words for Robin. Anything not in *Lonely Planet* had to be good. Inevitably, after travelling for hours in crowded buses because Robin would never agree to take one of the air-conditioned minivans reserved for tourists, we would arrive at some colorful festival or natural wonder cheapened by tacky souvenir stands, already crowded with Teva-clad backpackers and food hawkers offering nothing but Doritos and Coca Cola.

Cat Ba island was no exception. Robin and I were both quiet on the deck of the creaking wooden ferry as it weaved between the hundreds of tiny islands jutting from Ha Long Bay. I was mesmerized by the narrow stone fingers reaching from the glinting waves, the scraps of jungle that sat atop them like green thimbles. Every now and then we'd come upon the floating villages I'd read about. Fishermen and their families lived in tiny shacks built on rafts made of plastic bottles and rotting wood. One raft was leashed to another until a small community was formed. I watched children chase each other, leaping from raft to raft, women cooking the evening meal on butane burners, the blue flames bobbing in the long shadows cast by the pushpin islands. I knew what I was looking at was poverty, but I didn't feel pity, only wonder. "Imagine growing up like this," I whispered to Robin, "Imagine if this was your whole world." Robin wasn't even looking, he was glaring at a particularly loud group of English girls arguing about which island *The Beach* was filmed on. "Listen to those morons," he fumed, "they don't even know the difference between Vietnam and Thailand. They probably don't even know what country they're in."

We arrived in Cat Ba town at sunset and were immediately surrounded by hawkers from competing seafood restaurants, each trying to convince us of the superiority and freshness of their fare. We made our way to the only hotel along with

the group of English girls and all the other tourists. I thought Robin would be annoyed, but he was too excited about the adventures he had planned for the next day. After all, we hadn't travelled all this way to see Cat Ba Town. We came here on the recommendation of the toothless old man who seems to squat perpetually in the doorway of Robin's favorite pho place. We came here seeking an isolated village in the jungly interior of the island where we were hoping to find the best sweet and sour catfish stew in Vietnam. But when we met our guide at sunrise and were joined moments later by a middle-age German couple, a wiry looking Italian and the group of English girls in nearly identical waterproof Khakis and windbreakers, I knew Robin was in for another disappointment.

Our guide emerges from the jungle trailed by the rest of his now sweat-soaked, mud-caked entourage. He nimbly slides down the slick bank into the gully like a skier, followed by the English girls who inch down single file on their butts. He doesn't look happy. "I told you, no going ahead," he reprimands in a soft voice without making eye contact, "You could get lost. You could hurt yourself." "Sorry man," Robin yells from the water, "I can't help it, I'm a fast walker." Our guide just shrugs, hoists his bag of baguettes and bananas onto his head and strides into the neck-deep flood water. "Come on," he urges over his shoulder, "This is the only way."

A few hours later, we emerge from the jungle, arms and legs red with mosquito bites and small trails of blood left by leeches frantically torn from our skin. A narrow valley slowly opens before us, steep slopes giving way to saturated green rice paddies and a scattering of bamboo cottages. Our guide leads us to an open-air hut at the center of the village where a small, hunched woman is ladling something from a simmering cauldron into chipped mismatched bowls. I watch Robin reverently approach, palms up as if about to receive a communion wafer. I watch the steam hit his stunned face as the woman ladles a generous portion of boiling water into his bowl to saturate the waiting block of powdered broth and instant noodles, while a little boy hands out warm, dusty bottles of coke.

We are given an hour to eat our lunch and explore the vil-

lage. After attempting to rouse several elderly men from their hammocks by waving American dollars under their noses and jabbering something about catfish, Robin retreats to the shade to sulk and gnaw a stale power bar. I don't bother to console him. I sit on my heels and slurp down the noodles. Then I wander the rice paddies, nursing the syrupy coke, letting it enliven my sweat-laced, aching limbs. White oxen seem to float like lilies in the rippling green tapestry of fields, and faces beneath conical hats lift from their work to smile as I pass. I decide this has been the best meal of my trip, maybe even my life.

When I return to the restaurant hut, the soup woman gestures to a hammock stretched between two palms. I smile gratefully as I settle into the gentle rocking. I feel the ropes against the ridges of my spine, the heavy sun weighing my muscles into relaxed submission like a thick quilt. It reminds me of one of the guided meditations we used to do in Chiang Mai. I can hear the slow breathy voice of the yoga instructor telling me to imagine that each chakra is a door, to imagine each door opening and then step through it. In Chiang Mai I usually fell asleep, but now instead of visualizing chakras I'm seeing the men I've been with. The boys and men I have been opening like doors to new worlds, new identities for as long as I can remember. Men who have introduced me to Ethiopian food, pot, bluegrass, trout fishing. Men who have taken me to visit parents in South Dakota, Vermont, Mexico, Hawaii. Men I have left one after the other, doors slammed behind me when after a few months or a few years I realized they hadn't led me to wherever I was trying to get to.

I feel suddenly ashamed of myself for getting caught up in Robin's quest for the "real" Vietnam. This country doesn't owe us its treasures or its secrets. Whatever Robin and I are seeking, it isn't going to be found at the bottom of any authentic local stew, or in the eyes of unknown people in a village untouched by tourism. If this place is willing to pause for a moment, like a skittish deer, and let us run our hands along the surface of its beauty, then who are we to ask for more.

Robin doesn't say much on the ferry back to the mainland. I guess I don't either. Back at the hostel in Hanoi we retreat to our separate rooms. It's a humid night. There was no rain

this afternoon and I can feel the atmosphere's unshed pressure waiting above the rooftops, poised to crush us with the weight of downpour any minute. I peel off my sweaty clothes, flip on the ceiling fan and open the journal my mom gave me for the retreat, intending to write about my experience on Cat Ba Island. Just then there's a knock at the door. I wrap a towel around me and open it to Robin with his huge, bumper-sticker-covered backpack strapped to his shoulders. "I'm heading south," he says, "Well first I'm gonna crash at the Intercontinental for a couple days, get some R&R, but anyway I just wanted to see if I left any clothes in here."

"Did I miss something?" I ask, "You're just leaving, just like that?"

"Look," he mumbles, looking at the floor, "we had some fun together, but you're just not adventurous enough for me. I saw how happy you were just lounging in a hammock today, admiring the scenery like all the other tourists. You'd be better off signing up with a tour group or something; they'll make sure you see everything you're supposed to."

No one's ever broken up with me before. I'm too stunned to speak, so I sit on the bed while he collects some random socks and underwear, gives me a quick peck on the cheek and is gone. I pick up the journal again, but I can't think of anything to write, so I put it down. The room seems suddenly very dingy, very bare. I imagine Robin's room at the Intercontinental—the whirlpool bath, the satin sheets, the air conditioning—and I can't believe I let him get away.

I wake up the next morning resolved to track down Robin and prove to him that I'm a serious traveler, not a tourist. I decide to pack up all my stuff and bring it with me, that way I won't have to trek all the way back across town when Robin invites me to stay with him.

The morning bustle is in full swing. Makeshift market stalls spill from the sidewalks into the streets, bursting with piles of lychee, durian, papaya or half-butchered ducks dangling by their feet. It occurs to me that I could really impress Robin if I found us some new, totally authentic restaurant to eat at. I put away my Lonely Planet map and allow myself to weave into the labyrinth of narrow alleyways that branch from the main roads in every direction.

It is dark and damp on the back streets. I jump over puddles and mushy piles of rotting fruit. Some of the alleys are so narrow my backpack grazes the moss on the walls. Through open doorways I see families squatting on concrete floors, but nothing resembling a restaurant. I'm about to turn around when I pass a man standing over a large cauldron surrounded by several of the overturned buckets I recognize as tables. He looks up from his work with a toothless smile and beckons me inside.

Suddenly a force from behind slams my face against the grease-stained wall. I feel a hand squeezing my neck, my backpack being wrenched from my shoulders. I stagger backwards and wheel around to find the restaurant empty, the cauldron still bubbling away.

I run through the alleys, calling out for help, but no one will meet my eyes. Eventually I find myself back in the market. I think about going to the police, but realize I have no idea where to find them. I have no cellphone, no cash, no passport. My only hope is to find Robin.

I have to plead with the doorman to let me into the lobby of the Intercontinental. He seems suspicious of my muddy sarong and dirty cheeks, but he eventually relents when I explain I'm the girlfriend of a guest. I guess he's used to even the scruffiest looking foreigners still having more money in their pockets than he makes in a month. I slip into a bathroom to clean myself up and then settle into a plush ornate sofa to wait for Robin.

After about an hour the elevator doors open to reveal Robin arm in arm with a gorgeous Vietnamese woman in a stylish black cocktail dress. I cover my face with my magazine and watch her slinky hips as they make their way into the bar. I feel burning tears gathering behind my eyes. I know I'll never be able to bring myself to ask Robin for help now, but I continue to sit there anyway, totally paralyzed.

"Are you alright Miss? I couldn't help but notice you've been crying." I look up into the face of a middle-age, vaguely European-looking man in a perfectly tailored business suit. He lowers himself onto the sofa beside me and offers me a Kleenex. He speaks English with a crisp international accent. Something about the line of his jaw makes him look hand-

some in a powerful sort of way. I tell him everything, about Robin, the robbery, my complete and utter helplessness. As I talk he inches closer and puts his hand on my knee. He leans in as he whispers “I think I may be able to help you, if you’ll let me.” As the implication of his words sinks I can’t help thinking, “Well, this certainly isn’t a situation your average tourist would find themselves in.” A shiver of excitement laced with revulsion rifles through me.

His room is just as opulent as the lobby. The huge mahogany bed draped in sleek red sheets hulks in the center. “Please,” he tells me courteously, “feel free to use my bath. Take your time.”

Adrenaline is jangling my nerves far too much to enjoy the whirlpool tub, so I shower instead. I examine my body in the steamed-up mirror. I’ve lost some weight so there’s a slightly girlish quality to my breasts and hips. “He’ll probably like that,” I think, “Pervert.” I look at my naked body and tell myself it doesn’t matter, he’s not bad looking; it’s just like a one-night stand. Plenty of girls my age have them now and then, and at least I’ll get something more out of it than an awkward goodbye kiss the next morning and promises of a phone call that never comes.

He’s already naked when I step out of the bathroom, a little thick around the middle, but not too bad. I take a deep breath and let my robe slip from my shoulders.

Afterward, as he rolls over into sleep, he tells me the money’s on the table if I want to leave, but I’m more than welcome to sleep here if I have nowhere else to go. I lie rigid on the bed until I hear him snoring, then I quickly dress and count the money. \$1000. More than enough to get me to Ho Chi Minh where I can go to the embassy for a new passport and catch my flight home. I sit on the couch clutching the money and shivering until the first hint of light appears in the sky and it’s safe enough to walk to the train station.

On the southbound train, as I watch the morning sun ignite the gnats that hover above the flooded rice paddies, I realize I’m in no hurry to rush back home to the safety of Jimmy, or my mother. I look into the unreadable eyes of my ghost-like reflection superimposed upon the landscape and decide to get off the train in Hue, the next stop on the southbound

tourist trail.

I run into Robin a few days after arriving in Hue. I'm weaving on a rented bicycle through the billowing crowds on a tree-lined boulevard when I see him careening toward me on a belching yellow moped.

He skids to a stop, spraying mud from last night's rain onto several unfortunate pedestrians. I balance my bike against my hip and we face each other as the traffic parts around us. I can't think of anything to say. I don't feel like bringing up the Intercontinental or the Vietnamese woman, who I'm now pretty sure was a prostitute. And I certainly don't intend to tell him about my recent experience in *that* area, even though it would probably impress the psycho. "So what do you think of Hue?" I ask eventually.

"Not much," he answers irritably, "Did you go to the DMZ? They make you stay on this paved trail the whole time and they hardly let you explore the tunnels at all."

"Isn't that because there are still unexploded land mines all over that area?" I ask.

"Whatever," he shrugs, "it was still lame. Anyway, I'm heading to Cambodia now. I met this Australian guy who says it's still like totally undiscovered, as long as you don't go to Angkor Wat. He says you can buy your way into anything down there, you can pay guys to take you into the jungle and just like leave you there, you know? Listen," he sighs as if he's about to make some huge concession, "you can come with me if you want, I mean if you're finally bored of this shit."

I take in his handsome, boyish face, his cocky smile, his reckless, helmetless head. He still looks like a door about to open on an adventure. For a moment I'm tempted to drop my rusty bike and jump on the back of his moped, let his wildness and speed sweep me away from the solitary meal that awaits me tonight, and tomorrow morning, from the days ahead in which only I will decide which museum or temple to visit and what I will think of them. I feel I'm discovering myself like a character in a difficult novel that you can't really get into for the first couple chapters, but suddenly some passage, something the character thinks or does draws you in and you have to know what happens next. For the first time in

my life I really want to know what I will do.

“I hope Cambodia is everything you want it to be,” I say as I straddle my bike. I hear Robin rev his moped behind me; hear him peel away across the rain-slick stones. It’s afternoon and the schools are letting out. Girls in lilac Ao Dais spill into the streets. They glide toward me giggling on their bikes, long black hair streaming behind them. I close my eyes as the soft wind of their passage buffets my skin like petals. Suddenly there’s a fracture in the current of the traffic, a whirlpool gathering behind me. I turn to see a young boy splayed beside his crumpled bike, blood in his hair and his elbow bent at an inhuman angle. I see Robin gunning his moped, attempting to flee the scene but the crowd is laying down their bikes and mopeds, the crowd is pointing their fingers, closing in around him. He reaches into his pockets and pulls out American dollars, scattering them like scraps to a pack of growling dogs. But the crowd tramples the bills like dead leaves as they move toward him. I hear the sirens getting closer as I plant my feet to my pedals and rejoin the current.

Tim Weed

The Afternoon Client

Point of pride: I always clean the boat between clients. Before anything else. Before gassing up or using the john or going to get a Coke and a sandwich and my daily dose of heartbreak from the college girls who work in the marina. So as soon as my morning client drives off in his Jeep—ninety percent of my clients drive Jeep Wranglers rented from the same island agency—I lower a bucket on a halyard for seawater. I splash it over the deck and sluice the blood out through the scupper holes. I rinse the rods with the freshwater hose from the dock, inspect the leaders for tooth frays, and stow the tackle box in the stainless steel cabinet beneath the wind-screen.

A man drives up in a shiny black Land Rover. He rolls down the window and a few notes of Hotel California spill out before he turns off the stereo and calls out across the dock: “You Zimmerman?”

I nod. “What can I do for you?”

He parks the Rover and gets out. He’s wearing expensive shoes and a yellow polo shirt. His black hair is slicked back with product and he has a lantern-jawed face some might consider handsome. “I’m Jay Clawson, your afternoon client.”

“You’re more than an hour early,” I observe. “I have to get lunch and put gas in the boat.”

He looks at his watch, a stainless steel TAG Heuer on a sleek hairy wrist. “I called the marina. They told me you were in, and I was hoping we could go early. I’m supposed to tee off at four.”

I stare at him. His voice is smooth but edgy, like someone used to giving orders over the phone. Mechanical trouble with the boat, I could say. Unlikely to catch fish anyway, sunny weather like this.

“Totally appreciate it,” he says, opening the hatch of the Rover and taking out a red gym bag. He steps onto the dock and stands beside the boat.

“All right,” I say gloomily, reaching up to take the gym bag. He comes aboard. I start the engine, untie the bowline, and motor around the dock to the gas tank.

“What are we after today?” he calls out over the noise of the engine. He’s donned a pair of aviator glasses and stands next to me, too close, behind the windscreen.

“This time of year we’re looking at bluefish, mostly. Maybe a rogue striper or two if we get lucky.”

He raises his eyebrows behind the glasses. Perhaps he was thinking bonito, or marlin, or, who knows, a great white shark? I can tell it’s going to be a long afternoon. My stomach is empty, and I feel a bit lightheaded.

The blues are running. I can smell them in the air, and long wavering slicks of fish oil reflect the sun on the water beyond the red and green buoys marking the entrance to the harbor. This morning we anchored over a slick and caught two dozen of the big carnivores, razor teeth snapping as I held them down on the blood-spattered deck with my bare feet and whacked them with a truncheon to extinguish their primitive little lights. Not that he deserves it, but this guy is probably in for a superb afternoon of fishing.

It takes about twenty minutes to get to the spot I have in mind, a submerged bar that boils up a small, productive rip. I cut the engine and lower the anchor slowly to avoid frightening away any stripers. I hand the client a blunt rod with a chartreuse bomber attached. It’s the same lure my morning client used, to excellent effect, a four-inch plastic teardrop scored by the teeth of countless marauding blues. I prefer fly-fishing myself, and stripers to blues, but a man’s got to make a living.

Clawson holds up the rod and squints doubtfully at the bomber. “It’s pretty scratched up. Can’t you give me a new one?”

“Those tooth marks are from this morning,” I explain. “It means the fish find this particular lure desirable.”

He hands back the rod. “I’d prefer a new one. Call me superstitious.”

I hold my tongue, unclipping a rod with an unused lure and passing it to him. “If the fish are here, we’re sitting right on top of them. You shouldn’t have to cast far.”

“From the platform?”

“From anywhere you like.”

The client climbs up to the platform. He doesn't have sea legs; his re-balancings are jerky and awkward. He looks to be in decent physical shape but it's artificial, a city-bred fitness gained from the weight room and the treadmill. I feel sorry for him, because it's pretty clear that he'll never truly appreciate the ocean the way one should, in all its fierce changeable beauty, its awesome biding power. On the other hand, I can tell he's fished before. He knows the basics of casting a spinning rod, though he puts more muscle into it than he needs to.

“Reel it faster,” I suggest.

“Pardon?” Clawson stops casting and stares down from his perch on the platform. It's as if I've said something surprising.

“Just letting you know, you need to reel in a little faster for bluefish. They won't notice the lure as much if it's not splashing around on the surface.”

He casts again, and doesn't adjust his retrieval speed. Suit yourself, I think, glancing at my watch.

After a few more casts Clawson comes down from the platform and hands me the rod. “I need to piss.”

“Aim it off the stern,” I suggest. “And hold onto the rail—it's getting rougher out here, and I wouldn't want you to fall in.”

He starts aft, ignoring my advice to hold the rail. The tide is at full ebb and the rip is a compact standing torrent of whitecaps tugging on the anchor. A gusty southwest wind has picked up, and the water around the rip is choppy, unsettled.

The client stumbles and catches himself on the rail. I can't suppress a derisive snort. He hears it or senses it above the wind and the roar of the rip, and shoots me a look over his shoulder. I smile innocently and give him an encouraging nod. He stands at the stern without touching the rail. With his feet spread wide for balance, he makes an adjustment and starts pissing across the wind.

“How long you been doing this?” he asks on his way back to the platform.

“Pretty long while,” I reply.

“What'd you do before?”

“This and that. Wasting time, mostly.” He holds out his hand for the rod and I give it to him.

“I would have guessed you were new to it,” he says.

A surge of anger clamps my throat. “What makes you say so?”

“You don’t seem entirely comfortable. With people, I mean.”

I feel my ears redden and for a moment I can’t think of anything to say. I watch him climb the ladder to the platform. It’s an unsteady place to stand, especially without a life preserver. These are dangerous waters. A sudden tilt of the boat in the choppy swells; an abrupt shift in the wind, or if I were to rev the engine suddenly, causing the bow to jerk on the anchor chain—these currents are trickier than they look. If you’re not a strong swimmer, a rip like this one can suck you under before you know it.

There isn’t much conversation after that, which suits me. The client keeps casting, but he’s still reeling it in too slowly to attract any attention from the blues. After awhile, out of boredom, I cast the rod with the chewed-up bomber. Seconds after I start skipping the plug along the choppy surface, a big tail splash erupts behind it. I pull up to set the hook; the rod bends and the reel drag whines as the fish runs for deeper water. The client stops casting and watches glumly from the platform. From the way it’s fighting—intermittent and forceful, like a Rottweiler tugging on a stick—I can tell it’s not a bluefish, but a big striper instead. This is unexpected. Stripers don’t often follow lures on the surface, especially with so many blues in the water.

Striped bass are my favorite fish. They correspond to bluefish approximately as an eagle does to a buzzard. Their intelligence and selectivity make them difficult to catch at the best of times, but especially midsummer. They’re prized by restaurant chefs up and down the east coast for their firm buttery flesh, which is perfect for grilling, but I prefer to release them. An old girlfriend once accused me of loving stripers more than people. She was joking, but the funny thing is that as the years have gone by I’ve come to realize she wasn’t too far off the mark. Sometimes when I have no clients I drive to a certain sheltered beach I know of, and I wade out to a sandbar and cast a nine-weight fly rod. Each time I bring in

one of these dignified predators I feel a visceral link to the wild essence of the sea. Their life force flows like an electrical current into my hands, and it fills me with an enduring sense of peace. It gives me solace to imagine them cruising beneath the troubled surface, patrolling their realm in groups of three or four, fast green shadows flying over the eel grass.

Once I've fought the fish into the boat I cradle it gently in the clear water of the holding tank. It's a big one, probably forty-two or forty-three inches from nose to tail. It rests under the water with its gills flaring, luminous, tranquil, like a platinum missile with five black stripes running along its muscular fuselage.

"I hope you're not thinking of letting that go," the client says from the platform.

"Actually, I am."

"Look. I've been fishing all afternoon, and I haven't had a nibble. Seems like it would be nice to bring something back to show for my trouble. Would you mind if I kept it?"

I let out my breath and stare down at the striper. "If you would reel in your line just a bit faster, like I told you, I can pretty much guarantee you'd bring in a bluefish."

"Who's paying for this trip, anyway, I forget. You or me?"

I look up. Some time in the last hour he's put on a long-billed fishing cap, like the one Hemingway used to wear, and his eyes are hidden behind the aviators. But the corners of his mouth are compressed in a sour little smile that reminds me of my second grade teacher, Mrs. Bergeron.

"You're paying," I say calmly. "But I'm pretty sure you didn't catch this fish."

"No, that's correct," he conceded. "But you did. And your time is costing me a lot of money, isn't it?"

The fish awaits its destiny, fins and tail fluttering patiently to and fro as I grip it lightly in the cold seawater. The customer's always right. That's the first thing you learn when you try to make a living in the service business.

I lift the noble creature out of its native medium and set it dripping on the deck. It senses the end and panics, flopping vigorously and throwing itself around until I manage to wrestle it under control and press my knee onto the cool scales of its side to keep it down. I pick up the truncheon, hesitate for a

second, then bring it down hard on the golden skull. Its body quivers along its entire length. The broad, slightly forked tail comes up and slaps the deck three times. Clenching my teeth, I whack the beautiful fish twice more to be sure it's dead. Then I pick it up and drop it in the holding tank. Blood fumes from its gills, staining the brine a shameful pink.

I wipe my hands with a rag and walk back to the pilot's chair. I've killed hundreds of fish, maybe thousands, but habit doesn't necessarily make it easier. And I don't like to kill stripers. Especially when it's against my better judgment, and for the purposes of impressing the golf buddies of a man like Jay Clawson.

Just then something strikes me hard on the forehead. Through a blinding red haze of pain it dawns on me that I've been hit by the client's bomber. He's on the platform with his back to me, calmly reeling in his line.

"Be more careful, dude," I say, rubbing my forehead. There's already a good-sized egg rising where the lead-core plug hit.

He doesn't hear me, or pretends not to. When the bomber is a foot from the end of the rod he whips it back and flings it out. This time it sails true and lands just short of the rip. I try again, raising my voice over the roar and slap of the ocean so there can be no question about whether or not he hears me.

"Hey, Clawson. You hit me with your plug on that last cast. Watch what the hell you're doing, okay?"

He stops mid-reel. His shoulders rise and fall, a long sigh. Then he puts the rod down on the gently rolling platform and turns to face me.

"Pick up that rod and finish reeling it in," I say. "Don't leave it there unless you want to replace it when it falls off."

He glances down at the rod and then back at me. "I'm docking half your fee."

"You're *what*?"

"On your website you claim to be an experienced guide. I haven't caught a single fish, and you've made no effort to help me. It's ridiculous. Now you're resorting to verbal abuse. I'll pay you half the stated fee, and if you have a problem with that you can call my lawyer."

I let out my breath. Just then the line catches and my four hundred dollar spinning rig rolls off the platform and disap-

pears into the sea with a gentle splash. The rest of the world recedes. It's just the two of us on my rocking boat, with the island a low green haze in the distance across the bright shimmer of dancing water. I can hear the roar of the rip but it seems far away, nearly drowned out by the ringing in my ears.

Like me, the coasties and most of the sheriff's deputies live out here year-round. They know very well that terrible and unexpected things can happen at sea. The ocean is a hungry and capricious mistress; there's no use spending too much time or effort questioning her appetites. And of course, no one will ever suspect foul play. Because what motive could there possibly be?

I radio for a cutter and a helicopter, but none of us can find Clawson. We search until the tide slackens, and after that there's really no point. If he ever does come to the surface it's likely to be pretty far from where he went under. By the time I point the boat back to the marina, it's nearly dusk. The rip has subsided to a gentle riffle, like a country trout stream in the middle of the green Atlantic.

Rick Kast

Of Wolves and Men

He couldn't recall when they had begun to argue. Her tone was different too. It had been getting more strident, more agitated. Not like Rose, not like her at all. Not his little girl, his Rosie. All of this came to mind, not for the first time, as she spun her chair around toward him to note, "Oh, Raymond, that is just such nonsense." It was one of those rockers that rolled about like a barrel with the least nudge of a toe and even a slight woman like Rose could make it go around like a top. But he'd never noticed her doing it until recently, or using its kinetic spin to emphasize her annoyance with him. What they were arguing about was, of all things, whether they had been arguing more lately. He had noted that he thought perhaps they were.

"I think we're not arguing any more or less than we used to," she responded. "Maybe you're just beginning to hear me."

"I can't imagine what you're talking about."

"I mean usually you just go on talking, talk right over me."

"Rose, I do no such thing. I'll have you know that I've been told I'm a very good listener."

"Probably by people who don't listen themselves and so don't notice that you don't either because they're too busy telling you what a good listener you are."

That was the kind of thing she was saying now, the kind of thing she'd never said before. He remembered when she'd told him how smart and observant he was, how witty. For years she had smiled as he spoke, often slightly nodding, sometimes quietly laughing. Now she was telling him he just talked over her and didn't listen. What had happened to her? Now, after nearly forty years, what had happened to her?

"Listen, I'll replant the daffodil bulbs."

"What?"

"You know, in the front bed. You said I planted them in a perfectly straight line and that wasn't what you wanted. You wanted a natural look. Remember, you told me when I was

halfway through and I said I couldn't change it then."

"Oh, Raymond, don't worry about the bulbs, really."

"Well, I just thought—"

"I'm sorry but I think I'll go on to bed," she said, closing her eyes for a moment. "I seem to be developing a headache."

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, no . . ."

He sat down across from her chair and watched it continue to rock back and forth until it was finally still. Maybe it was just him. He was a little worried about himself. He'd been having strange dreams. There were wolves in them. What kind of normal, healthy man dreams about wolves in this day and age? He'd never even seen a wolf. And he'd never been particularly imaginative. All those years ago in school nothing had filled him with greater apprehension than to be told by the teacher that the assignment was to write a story. And he had never dreamed, at least that he could remember, until recently. He was proud of the fact that he didn't dream. He wasn't a dreamer, he was a doer. Then he'd not only started having dreams, there had been wolves in them, wolves lurking in the shadows, ominous wolves. He'd started having the dreams at about the same time he and Rose had started arguing. He'd not thought about that before but it was true.

He went upstairs to find her in bed reading a magazine. With the blankets pulled up under her armpits, and the warm glow of the bedside lamp illuminating her blond hair, she looked serene and calm, as if the scene of but moments before hadn't occurred. Still, her look as she peered at him over the top of the magazine said otherwise. He knew he needed to say something.

"Should you be reading if you have a headache?" he asked.

"I'm just going to read for a minute before I turn out the light. It helps me get to sleep."

Of course he knew this, knew that she always read before she went to sleep. Why had he even said anything about it? Then it came to him what he'd meant to ask her earlier.

"So how's Sue doing after her rhinoplasty?"

She looked at him as if he'd just danced into the room in a straw boater twirling a cane.

"Her what?"

“You know, her nose job.”

“Sue Sargent?”

“Yes, I don’t believe we know any other Sue. At least I don’t.”

“Sue Sargent hasn’t had a nose job, Raymond. Wherever do you get such ideas?”

“It was a good one. The differences are subtle. The plastic surgeons these days are very, very good. But there’s no question Sue’s nose has become less aquiline and gentler in its contours and slope. You can tell her I approve.”

“I will be quite happy to tell Sue that you approve of her nose, if that’s important to you. But she may ask why you have suddenly become so interested in it.”

“Rose, it’s all right. People have plastic surgery all the time these days. Sue doesn’t need to be embarrassed.”

She put aside her magazine with some emphasis.

“Raymond, listen to me: Sue Sargent hasn’t had a nose job. Between book group and bridge I see her every week or two and she hasn’t had a bandaged nose or any other evidence of surgery. Her nose looks exactly as it has always looked. It’s not a big nose, not a small nose, not a pointy nose, not a grotesque or ugly nose, it’s just a nose. It’s not a nose anybody in their right mind would do anything with. It’s a perfectly fine nose. It’s the same nose it has always been. Besides, you know Sue. If she’d had a nose job, she’d tell everyone. She talks about everything. We must have heard about her knee replacement a hundred times at bridge.”

Rose loved hyperbole. He doubted they’d even played bridge a hundred times, even though the club was old. Eighty-five maybe.

“Whatever you say, Rose.”

Her hands tightened atop the bedclothes.

“Raymond, would you do me a favor?”

“Of course, dear.”

“Would you please leave me alone for a little while? My headache seems to have gotten much worse.”

“I’m sorry. Can I get you anything?”

“I told you no. I just need some rest.”

Later, when he came to bed, the wolves were there again. When he awoke they were gone. Sometimes he could close his eyes again and there they would be, sometimes not. They

would have darted behind the trees of his mind, drifted to the edges of visibility in his imagination. They were menacing, of course. But, more than that, they were somehow otherworldly. When you thought about it, things you could see only when not looking would have to be that way, wouldn't they?

Raymond watched as Rose picked up a knife that was next to the cutting board and began to cut cubes of cheese to be melted in the dish she was preparing for dinner.

"You shouldn't use that knife," he said.

They had a cheese knife, but it was not out and this one was. As she always did, she noted the utility of her choice. But with a more testy tone than usual, he thought. And as he always did, he noted that her use of this particular knife to cut cheese was wrong. She paused, holding the knife and looking at it, then put it down and took the cheese knife from the drawer. He nodded approvingly as he put a glass into the dishwasher. She watched him linger over the open dishwasher. She knew what would happen next. He would move every plate and glass that she'd placed there since breakfast, rearranging everything by size and shape until the interior would be a vision of order and symmetry. After all these years she still shook her head.

By the time dinner was ready he'd placed their dinner plates on the table in the dining room even though they would be serving themselves from the stove and the plates were in the cabinet directly adjacent to the stove. This was as invariable as the sun rising in the east, as was her trek across to the dining room table to bring the plates back to the stove to serve. "If you set the table, you have to put on the plates," he'd used to say, long ago when saying such things was novel. And she'd said . . . well, you know what she'd said.

It had been nearly three years since the man had stood at the front of the room behind a lectern. A small group of people sat at tables, empty plates before them, some looking directly at him, others twisted about in their chairs to face in his direction. There was the sound of stoneware cups of coffee being placed into saucers, and of idle conversation drifting off into the distant corners of the room. The man

at the lectern had short gray hair about the color of his suit, and wore a red tie with a blue-and-white regimental stripe that stood out against the snow-white expanse of his shirt. He held the sides of the lectern with firm wide hands as if it were weightless and would float away if he loosened his grip.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “as you know, we are gathered here tonight to honor Raymond on his retirement. As actuaries we know retirement is the expected outcome for working people who live long enough, but I’m confident that Ray not only knew that he was going to retire, he knew the hour and the minute when he would do it.” There was a murmuring of laughter. “And,” the speaker continued, “knew it *in utero*.” Gales of laughter at that. “We’ve all worked with Raymond and know he’s that certain about things. We all know what we do is not as precise as we’d wish. Informed by minute analysis, honed by every mathematical and statistical tool we know how to bring to bear, but still imprecise.” Pause. “Unless Ray does it.” More laughter. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m here to tell you I’ve never worked with anyone who is better at what he does than Ray. The accuracy of what he does just amazes me. I really think that if Ray were to conclude through the application of his analytic actuarial tools that you wouldn’t die, you would be immortal. Ray, please come up and say a few words.”

Rose watched as Raymond approached the lectern. In his powder-blue shirt and paisley bow tie and tweed jacket he looked far too young to be retiring. He was, he had assured her that morning, but there were things he wanted to do. More woodworking in his shop. Refinishing the tables in their basement family room that he’d gotten last year at an auction. Indexing his collection of CDs. All of that was true. But she knew that fundamentally he wanted to be home with her, to do the things in the garden that she herself seemed no longer able to do. She just got so tired. And the sun bothered her so. What was wrong with her? He would be helpful, she told herself, almost obsessively, he *would*. She smiled as Raymond looked down at his index cards. Unplanned remarks just weren’t in his nature.

Raymond had found the book where it lay open on a table in the den. Since he'd retired there was more time to walk about the house, see things. It was a book on autoimmune disorders. Rose had always been an adventurous reader, but he'd never noticed her reading anything quite so esoteric. It traced every disease it covered back as far into history as it was known, or was even suspected to have been known. It was opened to a section on lupus. "Lupus is a malignant ulcer quickly consuming the neather parts; and it is very hungry like unto a wolfe." This cheerful sentiment was attributed to Barrough, *Meth. Physick* (1590). The poor dear, he thought. No wonder she'd seemed depressed and irritable lately if this was the best thing she could find at the library. He'd have to get her some good mysteries.

Raymond sat at the dining room table beneath the dimmed glow of the chandelier and watched the flames at the tips of the candles in the candelabras bob and dance. In the background Bach's *Goldberg Variations* were playing on the stereo. They were being performed on the harpsichord, of course. He had expressed his opinion more than once that it was simply wrong to play the *Goldbergs* on the piano. Subtlety was lost and Bach's nuanced structure of sound became clamorous and wrong. And all of the repeats were being observed. Bach knew what he was doing, knew how to create splendid order, thick complexity organized with the highest precision, and at what length to do it. Who were we to shorten it or play it on the wrong instrument? No, this was the way it was meant to be, he thought, looking contentedly at the silver service on the sideboard he had polished that morning to a burnished gleam.

Rose was at the opposite end of the table. Between them on one side was a young man with the pale complexion and blue eyes and thin lips of Rose. Plates had been cleared and coffee served. A young woman emerged from the kitchen with a cake topped with burning candles. The center candle was a large numerical 50 shaped from wax. It was surrounded by 18 additional candles. The young woman placed the cake before Raymond and began singing happy birthday, in which she was joined by Rose and then nearly inaudibly by the young

man. Raymond looked vaguely embarrassed. “Blow out the candles, Dad,” the young woman said. “We know you’ve got enough wind.”

He managed a sheepish smile, then demonstrated that he did indeed have enough wind.

“Peter,” the young woman said, in an assured tone, “get the champagne.”

Peter rose from his chair and set off to the kitchen as she cut the cake into servings that looked so precisely equal that they could have been placed in scales and achieved perfect balance. Raymond watched with an almost imperceptible nod.

“Anne,” said Rose as Peter poured the champagne, “it’s so good to see you. I wish you weren’t so far away.”

This was at least the third time Rose had said this since Anne had been back on the east coast from Seattle where she worked in a CPA firm. Anne was not one to let such things go unnoted. “Mom, that’s at least the third time you’ve said that,” she said.

Rose didn’t believe that it was but also didn’t understand why, even if it was, it was a big deal. Didn’t Anne want to be missed, to feel loved?

Peter concluded his sommelier duties and sat back down. He lived out of town too but only a hundred miles up the interstate in the state capital. Always in the shadow of his older sister, his self-esteem had never quite recovered from a low LSAT score and he worked in a Barnes and Noble there.

Raymond rose at the head of the table, natty and trim in his cranberry cardigan and tattersall Oxford cloth shirt. He raised high his champagne glass.

“I’d like to propose a toast to my wonderful family.”

“Why, Dad,” said Anne, “how sweet.”

Peter donned a smile that looked vaguely unnatural but not insincere.

They clinked their glasses together and drank. Then they sat down and quietly began eating their identical servings of cake.

Rose was thinking, as she seemed always to be now, should she have told him sooner? Would things have been easier

if she had? Of course, she'd known she'd have to tell him, that she couldn't just keep quiet about it, that doing that wouldn't be fair or considerate. She knew that she would be hurt and feel demeaned if he withheld similar information from her. Still, she couldn't bring herself to say anything. Perhaps because she couldn't quite believe it herself. Or perhaps because she knew so precisely how he would react. He would deny it, of course. And as much as she wanted him to be right, the last thing she wanted was an argument about it. Did he know better than the doctors? He would most certainly think so. Then one day he abruptly said, in one of those wholly unpredictable moments of insight into her carefully concealed moods that he occasionally had, "You have seemed depressed lately."

She said, no, she didn't think so. Then she began to cry.

He sat up in bed. The wolves had been there again. He knew now where they came from and the thought sent a chill through him. Were they there in the dark, he thought half asleep, there in the pitch black of the bedroom, in the utter stillness? No, surely not. He couldn't forget their eyes, their cold luminous eyes. Everything was black. There were no eyes. Yet he still felt as if something was watching him, something unknowable and forbidding. He shivered, slipped back down beneath the blankets, curled into a ball. Reaching out beneath the covers he touched Rose where she was breathing quietly in sleep and sighed.

"You have a disease known as lupus," the doctor was saying. "We don't know much about what causes this condition, and at this time there is no known cure. It is an autoimmune disorder. In one form it affects only the skin, exhibiting the symptoms you have experienced for some time: rash, fatigue, aching joints, sensitivity to sunlight. In the other more serious form, so-called systemic lupus erythematosus, these symptoms are accompanied by the body creating antibodies that actually attack the patient's own tissue."

He paused, and as the pause became increasingly oppressive she knew.

"What can I do?"

"Treat the symptoms. We will put you on a regime of non-

steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. Daily cortisone treatments. You may need dialysis if it doesn't go into remission." He paused, seeming to be looking for something reassuring to say. "Many patients live long, perfectly normal lives with lupus."

"Can you be sure? About the diagnosis, I mean."

"We're pretty confident. As you know, we've been working on it for a while. Lupus erythematosus is not easy to spot. It's a process of elimination. But I think we're right. We've done every test we know how to do."

He seemed so proud of his diagnostic prowess that he lost sight of the fact that what she wanted to hear was every possible reason for doubt. After a moment he suddenly looked embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She took the drugs and the cortisone. The symptoms receded. Life went on. As she'd known he would, Raymond simply *knew* that the diagnosis was wrong. For all of their bravado doctors were still largely working in the dark, making educated guesses. Medical technology had advanced greatly but the fundamentals of diagnosis were still riddled with human error. Doctors lacked the analytic tools of actuaries. He argued her doctor into submission. It wasn't lupus. It was just fatigue, the natural consequences of aging, perhaps even some of it was psychosomatic. All of that was possible, the doctor had to admit. Possible became probable. Probable became fact. Still, on the doctor's advice, she kept up the cortisone treatments. He didn't object. He knew that a placebo could have a desirable effect, could give her peace of mind.

And so it went until that night when he turned off the lights and went up the stairs as he had done so many times before and found her sitting up in bed without a book or a magazine, just sitting there staring blankly before her.

"I thought you'd be asleep," he said.

"I think I'd better make an appointment with Doctor Sands."

He saw the fear in her eyes. He went to her and she rested her head on his chest and he hugged her. She shook slightly, as if she were crying, but made no sound. He closed his eyes and they were there, the wolves, more vivid than ever. For a

moment he felt all the strength go out of him.

Anne sat to his right in the front row of the packed church, Peter on his left. The minister was speaking very movingly about Rose. He had not gone to church—waste of time, he thought, riddled with superstition and closed to rational analysis—but Rose had. The minister had known her well. Flowers were everywhere. She had loved flowers. Even when they were planted in perfectly straight rows.

He said quietly to Anne, “You know, at the end she said we argued all the time.”

“That’s normal. You were under a lot of stress.”

“We were happy,” he said, the phrase floating off into the air and seeming almost a question.

Anne took his hand and pressed it.

“Of course you were.”

Her eyes held his firmly. To his other side Peter blew his nose. They *were* happy. At least he’d thought so. But some of the things he knew, thought he knew, he wasn’t so sure about anymore. He’d been wrong about the diagnosis. What else had he been wrong about? He looked back over their life together, seeking reassurance. Random bits of routine cluttered his mind as if they were the signposts of their marriage: their fixing dinners together, listening to music, reading newspaper articles to each other at the breakfast table. Those small, recurrent things had been the essence of their life together. Not the arguments at the end. But had the arguments always been there waiting beneath the surface, simmering frustrations that she’d kept in check, the wolves that were always lurking in the shadows? This thought left him feeling dizzy and light-headed, as if he’d stagger and fall if he hadn’t been seated. He looked down, closed his eyes, then looked back over his shoulder. There, about halfway back in the church, he saw Sue Sargent. He watched as she turned her head toward her husband Walter, as if she were about to say something. As the minister continued his funeral homily, the sun suddenly shone through the stained glass window to capture the perfection of her surgically altered nose. He shifted his gaze back to the front of the church as the minister concluded and the organist began to play. It was Bach, the splendid order of Bach.

Andy Jameson

Tail

Kat admitted to Dave after the ultrasound that she had come from bad stock.

“What does that mean?”

“Degenerates, incompetents, criminals, downright evil some of them. That’s my family tree. A devil’s fork. Except my mother.”

“We should call her then,” Dave said. We should also call the Colonel and Llewellyn, he thought. What would they think of this mess? Only it wasn’t really a mess.

They were in Dave’s antique Corolla. The blank white face of the Women’s Hospital receded into miniature in the rear-view mirror.

Kat didn’t speak. She smoothed the globe of her stomach, one of her new habits. Sometimes it felt reassuring, she admitted, like a pulsing emblem of accomplishment, or of golden potential. Other moments it was like the acknowledgement of a deformity, especially when she could feel the imprint of little feet or little ass, foothills popping out of her side and then receding. “She’s a kicker this one,” Kat said.

“Full of life,” said Dave. Even so, he felt a vague uncertainty as he glanced over at the graceful slope of her belly. He could still hear the tom-tom of his little girl’s amplified heartbeat, the throbbing insistency and concreteness of it all.

“A rebel, full of lip,” she replied. “We can’t call my mother, okay? We can’t call anyone.”

Kat had not met Dave’s parents yet. Colonel Brickley and his wife Llewellyn had retired to Long Beach, Mississippi, but that was right before Katrina swamped the whole town. A complete loss the Colonel determined, and they decided to get out. They lived in their RV for a few months at a park in Shreveport before the Colonel made the decidedly un-Colonel-like decision to light out for the territories. For seven months now Dave had hardly been in touch with them except for an occasional phone call out of the blue. To his great annoyance,

they refused to buy a cell phone, even for emergencies. I'm a pretty resourceful SOB, the Colonel would say. Things usually work themselves out, was Llewellyn's response.

"Things usually work themselves out," Dave murmured to himself.

"Pardon?" Kat said.

He looked over at her face, partially hidden by her crow-black hair and awash in the pearly light of the coming sunset. "You're an unexpected surprise," he said, "everything about you."

What's the dossier? Where is she from? Who are her people? Who *is* she? The Colonel would ask. I don't exactly know, Dave thought, but I don't care.

"**W**hy are you crying?" Kat said that first night they would spend together. This was at a dive Dave retreated to as a form of self-flagellation when he was feeling particularly miserable. It was appropriately called Nowhere Bar.

"Just the smoke. I have sensitive eyes."

"Guess I'm quitting," she said.

"Don't do that on account of me. Keep your filthy habit by all means." An ironic smile twisted his lips and he turned to look at her face. He was prepared for a chunky sorority girl wearing the usual uniform—cowboy boots and a too short baby doll dress; dangly earrings and heavy makeup just beginning to smear in the heat of a Georgia night—and was almost desperate enough to see where this was going. Instead, he found a townie, her pale, oval face lambent in the bar's dimness, almost as though all the light had been drawn into her.

"Well, it's settled. I'm quitting." Kat stubbed her cigarette on the lacquered bar top and watched the ashes smolder. "We can't have you crying all the time," she said, as if she knew right then how easy it would be.

When Dave was a freshman in college, he had had a scare. The girl he was dating told him that she had missed her period, that she just knew she was pregnant. At eighteen, he had not thought about such a possibility. Some girl he barely

knew and his life could be dissolving irrevocably into hers.

It was late, they were on the phone, and Dave could tell she—Cassie, was that her name?—was on the verge of hysterics. Just stay there, he told her and walked over to her dorm. He knew this was not something to be dealt with on the phone.

The campus was hushed, dead still after a weekend of debauchery. They walked out past the library, the empty fountain filled with leaves. Their breath entwined and she took his hand and pressed her nails hard into his palm, so hard he gritted his teeth. He was trying to imagine casting in his lot with this girl. They stopped at Roper's Field where the ROTC marched. Then, magically, he found the words were in him, so noble and reassuring. He told her that it was amazing that they could have made a child, but they both knew this was the wrong time. If she was pregnant, well okay, they would figure something out, but maybe she wasn't. They just had to take it one step at a time.

She felt better after that, cried a little, then wanted to give him a hand job. He wasn't really in the mood. He was already dissociating himself. When he found out the next week that she had made up the whole thing, had needed, she said, to be sure of his commitment, Dave didn't feel betrayed or angry, just relieved. After that, he kept his relationships at a distance, always a far second to school; he spent most of his time in the labs doing simulations, working on his professors' projects. There was an impregnable logic to that work, the lines of code as real as mortar and concrete. He believed at the time he was building a fortress he could live in forever.

Now, he saw his little speech as terribly stupid and naïve. They would deal with it? A girl who turned out to be a complete psycho? But Kat wasn't anything like Cassie, Dave told himself every time he thought about it. She was a completely different person.

Dave realized, though, even after almost six months living together, that he still knew nothing about Kat. She told stories which only hinted at her past, that gave glimpses, but were really just obfuscations, smoke screens. The truth was buried in them somewhere. He couldn't ask for it. He wasn't

even sure if he wanted to.

When she was a girl, Kat said, she was afraid that whenever she got the hiccups she might not ever stop, she might just spend the rest of her life a freak like those people in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. She remembered a picture of a man who had been hiccupping continuously for thirty years. He looked so unhappy he might blow his brains out at any minute. “I was a nervous child, I guess.”

“Where were you born?”

“Far away.” As though she were some disinherited princess. Or a witch in disguise. Wasn’t that how fairy tales went? She was smiling, Dave knew, but he could not see her face. He had seen this smile—it was like her true self was peering at him from a high window and he turned and there was only a motion, a gentle rustle, this ghost of a smile. Dave wondered exactly what it was he was seeing. “What are you afraid of?” she said.

Dave had to think a second. “What? Right now?”

“Just anything. In general.”

“Oh, then dying.”

“That’s too easy. Everyone’s afraid of dying.”

“Okay, of dying and no one caring. Like a stone dropping in the ocean. No ripples, no evidence I was here—just gone. I guess I’m afraid of disappearing. Of not having anyone who truly loved me. Who would gnash their teeth and wail. A little pathetic, right?”

“Not really. Me, I’m afraid of roaches. The way their little legs tickle your skin, it’s the grossest feeling. The way they crunch under your foot and still those legs, you can see them pedaling the air.” She shivered, and Dave hugged her. “If you could live your life over, go back in time and do things over, what would you fix?” Kat said.

“Oh lots of things. There were girls I never had the courage to talk to. I wouldn’t have stopped playing the violin in second grade.”

“You might not have even met me,” she said. “But that’s okay. Go on.”

“Well, you know, little things like saying something embarrassing. Having a better comeback when Deke Harder said I looked like the picture of Neanderthal man on the wall

of Mrs. Frazee's biology class. I played my worst game ever against Riverside in the state semis. I'd like another shot at that one. Just stuff like that."

"You're so normal," she said. "So perfectly normal."

"This is good," he replied, a little hurt in her assessment.

"Yes, absolutely. You are beautifully normal."

It was July and the only air-conditioning unit in the apartment was in the kitchen; it strained and wheezed but never seemed to do much good unless you stood right up against it as Dave sometimes found Kat doing when he came in from the computer lab at the library. This was his only paycheck at the moment—\$212 a week, a little more than \$800 a month. It would be better in the fall when his assistantship kicked back in, but only a little. Of course, Kat didn't have health insurance at her part-time waitressing gig. Despite his reluctance to ask, inspired by many years of the Colonel's speeches about self-reliance, he would have to broach the subject next time the call came. The question remained—would he say why he needed the money?

Dave wondered too if they should go ahead and get married, just take a trip down to the courthouse. So many times at night as they bantered and played, the words had been about to spill out: Why don't we make this proper? Let's do it. But something held him back, and Kat wasn't hinting around, either. She was decidedly closed-mouthed about marriage, seemed in fact to have a pretty negative opinion of the institution. "The first step on the road to unhappiness," she'd said once as they were talking about one of the other grad students who was engaged and had invited them to a party. They were looking at the picture of the couple on the invitation. "See how nervous they look?" Kat said. "They already regret it."

Spudd was their pet name for the baby because they couldn't decide on a real name.

"Not my mom's," Dave said, "though I'm sure she'd be pleased. Too hard to spell. What about yours?"

"My mom?" Kat hesitated. She had a look in her eyes, a frosting over. "You won't like it," she said finally.

“Come on. Maybe I will.”

“Okay, but I’m telling you that you won’t. It’s Elvira.”

“Oh, yeah.” Dave paused, trying to be politic. “That’s interesting, but I mean, I would always be thinking of that chick with the boobs. You know, the vampire?”

“Yeah, I know.”

So Kat took to sitting on the couch in the afternoons reading a baby names book as Dave worked on his dissertation. She would lob a name out occasionally, but none seemed to meet his approval.

“Caitlyn? Eunice? Wendy? Constance? Esther? Prunella?”

“You’re not even trying,” he said, shooting them down like clay pigeons.

“What about Hadley, then? That was Hemingway’s first wife’s name. The one he really loved.”

“Not enough, apparently.”

“He didn’t know what was good for him. Nora?”

Dave leaned back in his chair for a moment. He didn’t hate it. “Put that one on file for future consideration. You know if it was a boy this would be easy. We’d name him after the Colonel—Donald.”

Kat did not seem very interested in what ifs.

“Don’t you want to know the middle name?” Dave continued.

“Knock yourself out.”

“My mom’s maiden name was Brooke.”

Kat flicked her eyes up from her name book and began to smile. “So, Donald Brooke Brickley?”

“That’s right. But we’d call him Donnie.”

Kat spent her days at the university pool while Dave was working. Admission was cheap—just a dollar with Dave’s student card—and she would languidly float, her expanding belly making her buoyant. She told him that she devoured Orange Push-ups and Nutty Buddies and didn’t feel guilty at all.

Once, Dave went with her because it was inter-cession. No students were around to fuck up their computers or forget their passwords, so he had the day to himself. They walked to the pool, which was only a half mile down a steep hill from the apartment. “You can carry me back,” Kat said. “You think

I'm kidding.”

They passed by bungalows that had been trashed by years of careless undergrads. From their vantage point, they could see Legion Pool, a gleaming blue as a robin's egg. Again, Dave was on the verge of asking Kat to marry him. He could feel his daughter in his arms, giggling and excited.

At the pool, they walked by a tawny woman wearing a white terry cloth hat who surveyed them coolly. Kat whispered that last week the woman had asked when she was due and Kat had replied, “Oh, I'm just fat.”

“That was kind of mean,” Dave said.

“Served her right. She thought I was part of her little club of professors' wives.”

Dave almost said, “You might be one too someday,” but didn't. Instead they found a shady corner, applied sunscreen to each other's backs. For a while they were quite happy, fooling around, playing silly games. Dave held his breath, circled around Kat and nipped at her legs like a minnow. He tried to do a back flip off the diving board and ended up with water up his nose. They didn't even see the yellow busses pulling into the parking lot, or the odd assembly making its way in.

Kat first noticed the pale girl with ginger hair; she would have been pretty but her eyes were a little too far apart, and her mouth was curled into what seemed like a leering grin. She swam for Kat and grabbed hold of her. The child was wearing swimmy. Kat realized, though, now that they were face to face, she wasn't a child at all—she had to be at least fourteen. “Push,” the girl slurred. “Push. Push.” Suddenly, they were surrounded. A porcine black woman shaped like a Russian nesting doll waddled by and then dove and came up spewing water all over them. Another man wore a life jacket and paddled ineffectively with his diminutive, atrophied legs. Dave noticed that he had a splotchy mustache; he could have been thirty or more.

The ginger-haired girl gripped Kat tighter, repeating, “Push, Push, Push.” It felt like bedlam. Dave saw the panic dawning in Kat's face, her revulsion and fear.

“Get her,” Kat said. “Get her off me.”

Just then a teenager in a red one-piece appeared. “Come here, Jaycie,” she said. “I've got you. I'll push you.” Jaycie let

go of Kat. “Sorry,” the teenager called as she began to swim away with Jaycie now gripping her neck. “They just get so excited.”

The afternoon was shot. “Let’s go back home,” Dave suggested. Kat nodded, her face blank now. As they gathered their towels, two boys walked by. They had golden tans and the long wavy hair that seemed to be the new style. Dave heard one say, “God I hate it when these freaks show up.”

Later that night, they lay in bed with sweaty sheets tangled around their feet. The disaster at the pool seemed long forgotten and Dave was relieved.

“Would you love me . . .” Kat said and paused. This was a game she sometimes played. Would you love me, she always began. Would you love me if a shark bit off my leg? Would you love me if I had cancer and lost all my hair? Would you love me if I had green skin like the Wicked Witch of the West? Tonight it was: “Would you love me if I had a tail?”

“You don’t. I can verify that.” He slapped her ass, ran his index finger slowly up her arching spine. Her body was a hair trigger under his touch. It made him feel powerful.

“No fooling around,” she said, shifting away from him, “until you answer.”

“So you have a tail, and I don’t know it.”

“Yes, we’ve been chaste, proper lovers—it’s our wedding night. You have swept me up over the threshold of some motel room with blue shag carpet and a neon sign with the last letter burnt out so it says ‘Mote.’ You are fumbling with my garter, trying to unhook it. You are licking my thigh.”

“I can do that right now.”

She held up her hand. Wait. “That’s when I say, ‘Dave, there’s something important I have to tell you. It might be shocking. It might scare you.’ How are you feeling right then? What are you thinking?”

“With a preface like that, how am I supposed to feel? Why couldn’t you have told me about this—whatever this shocking thing is, the tail presumably—before we get married?”

“Maybe I’m scared you’ll just run off. You’ll see me as tainted.”

“A tail, then?”

“A tail and not a nice fluffy cat tail. It’s a scaly horny toad

tail.”

Dave pretended to think. “That’s not so bad. There’s always surgery.”

“You’re terrible,” she said, nipping his chin.

The Colonel called. They were in Miami, or rather an RV park near Homewood, but they had driven into the city a few times and weren’t impressed. “I swear,” the Colonel said, “you could walk from one end of that town to the other without hearing a word of English. This isn’t the US of A as far as I can tell.”

“I bet the food’s good,” Dave said.

“Yeah, we found a Brazilian place we like. Got a buffet. We’re thinking about going to Miami Beach tomorrow.”

“That might not be your scene.”

“What, because of the gays? At least they’ll speak American. And I’ll tell you what: I’ve never had a problem with a lesbian. They make good soldiers.”

Dave could think of no good way to broach the subjects that were on his mind. He kept up the chit chat, tried to ignore his father’s more outrageous comments and find some subtle way to steer the conversation around to the real issue at hand. Finally, after ten minutes, it turned out the Volvo was acting up. “German engineering, my ass,” the Colonel said. Kat sat down on the leather couch, which was unusual because she did not find it very comfortable in the heat. She fanned herself with a magazine and tried to look like she wasn’t listening in.

“That sucks,” Dave said as casually as he could manage. “I’ve had to have some work done recently on the Corolla. Couldn’t run forever.”

“Oh yeah, what was wrong?”

“Transmission. It was pricy. I’m kind of tapped.”

After they had worked out the terms of the loan (the Colonel would never simply give him the money), Dave felt how easy it would be to sow the seeds of a future conversation. *I met a girl. We’re going out. I could be onto something.* But he was beginning to feel that Kat was his secret—that he was going to hold onto her this way as long as he could. She looked at him now as he hung up his phone. Her gray, cloudy eyes remained on him.

Three weeks later, they were in the hospital. After a particularly grueling contraction, Kat said, “I think this was a mistake. I don’t know if I can do this.”

“It’s a little late now,” Dave said. “Spud is coming into the station whether you like it or not.” They still hadn’t picked out a name.

“I’ll be a horrible mother. She’ll write a scathing memoir.”

“No.”

“You’ll hate my body. It’ll be lumpy. You’ll sign up for internet dating sites and trawl for women all night long while I’m stuck home breast-feeding. And what if she won’t latch? That’s what the lactation consultant said, that sometime they won’t latch. It’s like a sign right away that you were not meant to be a mother.”

Dave could do nothing but give her another ice chip. “Hey,” he said. “Did you notice that there’s a whirlpool in the bathroom? Wish I’d brought my bathing suit.”

“Where’s the fucking anesthesiologist?” Kat said. Dave went to look for him. It turned out they had misunderstood about the epidural—they thought that all they had to do was send the word, but the nurse had meant they needed to put in a request, that the anesthesiologist could be scheduled to come in an hour. Dave went back to break the news.

“Remember: pain is just weakness leaving the body. At least that’s what the Colonel believes.”

“What do you know about pain?” Kat snarled. Another contraction took hold of her.

Dave smoothed her drenched brow and tucked a wisp of dewy hair behind her ears. He thought about how unprepared they were. They had found a crib at a yard sale, but just the other day he read an article that said all cribs made before 1990 were probably death traps. A few friends got together and bought diapers and onesies, as well as dresses with frogs and butterflies on them. At the party, Dave held a munchkin dress up against his chest, as if it were for him. *Ooo, so cute* and someone snapped a picture. That was it. They had very little else, not even a stroller. No money. No space. His hopeful words came back to him. We’ll deal with it. That had been his mantra—the same thing he’d told Cassie when he was eighteen. The Colonel was talking in his ear now. *Son, how*

stupid are you? There are some things you think through. There are some decisions, you don't just spit and let the wind carry you in whatever direction it chooses.

After it was all over, Dave was elated. He needed to talk with someone, to spread the news. However, he still had no way to get in touch with the Colonel and Llewellyn. And that would be a long conversation, probably not joyous.

Kat was looking exhausted, barely there. The nurses had just wheeled her over from the recovery room.

"Honey," Dave said. "I really want us to call your mom. She'd like to know."

Kat stirred, and suddenly her eyes were like those of a spooked animal. She was trapped, the maw of something terrible had her, and she let out a long groan. "We can't," she said.

"I don't understand. Of all you family, you said your mom . . ."

"It's impossible."

"Why is it impossible? Stop being so obscure for once."

Kat looked at him, a cold stare. "Because she's dead."

"What—you never told me. Why?"

"There is no why," Kat said. "The son of a bitch killed her."

At that moment, some woman in a peach pantsuit came in with a clipboard full of forms to sign. Kat was sobbing.

"Is this a bad time?" the woman said, as if this scene was a typical occurrence.

"Maybe so," Dave said.

"Okey-dokey, not a problem. We have a lot to go over, but it can wait. One thing, though. Have you settled on a name?"

"No," Dave said. "I guess we haven't."

This was more unusual and the woman gave them a critical glance before turning to leave.

Kat was crying now, a flood, an unclenching of grief. "You have no idea what you're getting yourself into," she said. "I wouldn't blame you . . ."

Another nurse—one more of the succession of nosy strangers they were now surrounded by—poked her head in, gauged the climate and stood half-way outside of the door. "Hey ya'll, I'm Tammie. I've got this shift. Does Daddy want to give the first bath, because they're waiting."

Kat motioned her head toward Tammie. "You should go

on,” she said.

“But I want to talk about this,” Dave said.

“We can’t. Go see your daughter.”

Dave gave in and let himself be led by Tammie down the hall. There were, he noticed, arrows running along the center of the floor. They were leading away from the room.

“Isn’t this so exciting?” Tammie said.

In the glaring lights there were no shadows. This was a tableau of sorts, thought Dave: father and child. He should have been happy.

She was slippery, terrifyingly delicate. A nurse in taupe scrubs was giving him helpful advice, but he wasn’t really listening. Dave was concentrating on his daughter’s face, yellowish as though swabbed with mercurochrome. This was from a touch of jaundice, the doctor explained. “Why is she that color?” Kat had asked. “Is something wrong with her?” Dave could hear the rising panic in her voice. Nothing unusual, the doctor said. She’s was just about perfect otherwise.

Dave supported her head with his palm. The hair was dark as Kat’s, dark as loam, or a deep hole you could fall into. Her eyes were creases and he couldn’t determine the color yet. She yawned, and then looked up at him. Blue, a stunning blue.

“So sweet,” the nurse said. “What’s her name?”

“Elle,” Dave said, surprising himself.

After the bath, he walked down to the atrium to get a cup of coffee. A few people sat at tables staring blankly around them. This was the place for introspection, the quiet limbo before your life starts unraveling again. Dave found a machine, plunked in some quarters. He held the Styrofoam cup to his nose, felt the lick of steam. He walked out the front entrance, through the revolving doors.

An old man was sitting on a bench, smoking; a green oxygen tank on wheels was beside him. Dave nodded and then stepped out of the potential blast zone. For a few minutes, they shared a view of the setting August sun, mottled purple and orange as it slipped below the staggered line of pines bordering the highway. Embers of light caught in the branches, briefly making a row of Christmas trees all bedecked, bedaz-

zling.

“Purdy,” the old man said.

“Yeah,” Dave said. “Hey. Who gave you that cigarette?”

“I got ways,” the old man said and tried to laugh. What came out was a series of strangled inhalations, as though he was trying to suck air through cheesecloth. “You’re crying,” the old man observed after he caught his wind.

“No, just the smoke.” Dave paused. Inside the hospital, he knew, were people hanging by a thread. There were families just trying to hold it together. There were babies crying.

“Ah, hell.” The old man flicked the smoldering butt out past the curb, wheeled back toward the revolving door. “They’re all in there waiting for me to die. Seems like they half wish it upon me.” He was at a loss for a moment. “You coming back in?”

Thea Johnson

Baby Doll

When she met him in arraignments for the first time, Lawrence wore a long, blond wig, styled straight with just a hint of volume at the bottom. He wore red, red lipstick that brought out the deep coffee color of his skin. He had in blue contacts that seemed to bulge out from atop his eyes. He wore tight bell-bottomed jeans with Sketchers sneakers and a matching jean jacket over a yellow tank top. He kept the jacket closed, even in the deadening heat inside the courthouse that night. He spoke in a low, soft voice. It had been almost too soft to hear over the din of activity in the pens. She kept asking him to speak up, but he could muster no more than a whisper.

Lawrence had been charged with robbery in the first degree for what was a fairly brilliant scheme. He would pick up johns for sex along the far end of Canal Street towards the entrance to the Holland Tunnel. From there, he would bring the johns to perhaps the last per-hour, down-on-its-luck motel that still existed below Washington Heights. Once they had their pants off, Lawrence would pull out an unloaded handgun, push the men up against the wall and cuff them with a set of pink handcuffs he picked up from a sex shop. He would then announce that he was an undercover cop, displaying to each face smushed against the wall a real New York Police Department badge that Lawrence had secured from a friend who knew how to get things like real New York Police Department badges. His demand was money in exchange for letting his victims go without arrest. The men, and there were a lot of them, were happy to pay up. They were almost all white, straight men with families in the suburbs. They came to the city to indulge in whatever it was they saw online that got them hot. None were eager to make their predilections known.

Lawrence's MO worked for a while. Jennifer wondered how many men actually believed that Lawrence with his pink

handcuffs and melting voice was really a cop and how many accepted the stick-up as an accepted risk of their behavior. But, finally, a trickle of men reported the tall, thin black man in a blond wig pretending to be a police officer to the actual police, and, one night in June of the previous year, Lawrence was busted when he tried his routine on an undercover cop. Because he used a gun, albeit an unloaded one, he was charged with the B felony of robbery in the first degree. He faced 8 1/3 to 25 years in prison.

The bail had been set high at arraignment. \$50,000 bond or \$20,000 cash bail. That meant someone would have to come up with a lot of money for Lawrence to spend the pendency of the case out of jail. Jennifer was shocked when she got an e-mail notification that Lawrence's bail had been paid within hours of his arraignment. There were no indications that Lawrence could make that kind of bail. He had no real income, no steady place to live, and no family to speak of. When she asked Lawrence once in passing who put up the money, he smiled and said only "a friend."

Over the course of the year, Jennifer was able to wrangle out of the Assistant District Attorney assigned to Lawrence's case the best offer she thought they'd get. 3 1/2 to 7 years on a plea to robbery in the second degree. At this point, the victims were piling up. Once the story made the news, men began to crawl out of the woodwork, telling their own tales of a sex tryst gone wrong. Jennifer, single all these years in New York City, despaired at the number of married men who sought out the company of a tranny hooker on Canal Street. Better not to be married, she thought to herself every time she heard the nasal sound of the ADA's crow, informing her voice mailbox that another man had come forward. By the ADA's current count there were eight men willing to testify. Jennifer's investigator was able to find five of them and, although not eager to take the stand, all of them said they would. That would mean that after a trial, Lawrence would likely get consecutive time for each robbery, which could bump his sentence up, in the worst case, to the equivalent of life in jail.

Under the circumstances, the offer was miraculous. Jennifer suspected that the ADA knew that as the trial approached the willingness of her witnesses would wane. These men

wouldn't be afforded any of the usual protections for victims. The New York Post, more gossip rag than newspaper, had already had a field day with its headlines. "Fluff Cuffs for Bankers on the Sly" read the headline on the day after Lawrence was arrested. It ran above a series of photos of the men and accompanied an article that named each and what they did for a living. Teacher! Rabbi! Investment banker! The job titles were much more titillating than the sex. A trial would make matters worse for this group. It would lay bare things they wanted to keep quiet and it would only take cross-examination of the first witness for the others to realize it. And so, the offer was made.

Jennifer knew that after a client was able to pay bail and get sprung from jail, convincing him to walk back into jail could be a bitter and ugly affair. The act had a name, "stepping in," which sounds graceful, but is actually a wrenching experience involving a defendant cleaning out his pockets, hugging his family goodbye and turning around to greet his new constant companion—handcuffs. No one wants to return to prison, even when it's the only option. But Lawrence was no fool. He knew what he was getting and he agreed to accept it. He was prepared to "step in," even after over a year out of jail since his arrest.

Today was Lawrence's sentencing day, and Jennifer sat reviewing his file, when a man approached and stood over her. She looked up. It was Lawrence, but not Lawrence. The blond wig was gone. So too the lipstick. Now he had his hair closely shaven. His skin was without the usual glistening sheen of glitter. Instead she saw small pockmarks in his cheeks that she had never noticed before. He was wearing jeans, hanging low like so many of the men in the courtroom they were about to enter. He kept on his puffy, red jacket, again despite the heat. The only thing she recognized were the blue contacts bulging out of his eyes. She was so surprised by his transformation that she was already standing to greet him before she noticed the stroller.

Inside the stroller was a tiny baby, sleeping quietly. She had on a soft white headband with lace trim and miniature gold earrings in her round puffy ears. Jennifer began to panic. A baby? What the fuck was this? She sat back down. He sat

down next to her on the bench and parked the stroller in front of both of them.

“Hi Jennifer. How are you?” he whispered.

“I’m fine.” She paused, trying to figure out what to say, “I have to admit. I’m a bit confused. Is this your baby?”

“This is Sunshine. My friend was supposed to come pick her up today, but he didn’t show up in time and I didn’t want to be late. I know today is very important.” Lawrence lifted the child out of the stroller slowly. He cradled the baby’s head, putting his palm around the underside of the skull.

“Lawrence, you never mentioned you had a child. I had no idea. I’m not sure what we’re going to do now. You’re about to walk into jail.” Her voice was pitched.

“Jennifer,”—Lawrence’s voice was now as small as a mouse. Jennifer leaned in.—“it’s a reborn doll.”

“It’s a what?”

“Sunshine is a reborn doll.”

Jennifer looked at the baby. It looked exactly like, well, a baby. Rosy, pudgy cheeks. Wisps of dark hair curled around her tiny head.

“It’s a doll? Lawrence, are you saying this is a doll?”

Lawrence nodded.

“I don’t get it.”

“They’re very special dolls. Not even dolls, really. They are babies, crafted with care. It’s, sort of, like, I don’t know exactly. It’s sort of like a community. People who care for their reborns. I really don’t think of her as a doll at all.”

Jennifer reached out and touched the baby’s hand. The stiff, cold fingers remained unmoving.

“Wow, that’s incredible. That’s really incredible. She looks just like a real baby.”

“She’s my daughter. That’s how I treat her. My friend couldn’t come to get her this morning, so I didn’t know what else to do but bring her to court. All I need is for you to take her back to your office and my friend, Malcolm, will pick her up and take care of her while I’m away.”

Jennifer thought to protest, but didn’t dare as she watched Lawrence sitting there trying to quiet Sunshine on his chest. He was rubbing the doll’s back softly and rocking it up and down as he kissed the crown of its head.

“She looks just like a real baby.” Jennifer repeated as Lawrence rocked his lifeless charge.

“I know. She’s beautiful.”

“Ok. I’ll take Sunshine to my office. Do you have Malcolm’s phone number?”

Holding the doll with one hand, Lawrence used the other to slip a sheet of paper out of his pocket and passed it to Jennifer. It already had Malcolm’s cell number scrawled out in pink pen. “Ok, I’ll call him when I get back to the office. I promise.”

“Thank you,” Lawrence said as he rocked Sunshine gently back and forth against his body, holding Sunshine the way Jennifer had seen her mother hold her baby brother when he started whimpering. A tight hug and slow rock.

“You’ve already pleaded guilty, so today is quite simple. The case is on for sentence. The judge will sentence you to the agreed-upon sentence of 3 1/2 to 7 years. You’ll be eligible for parole in . . .”

“It’s ok. I got it. We’ve gone through it a thousand times. Everything is in order and I’m prepared to go in. Thank you for taking care of Sunshine. She doesn’t deserve this.”

Lawrence placed the baby back into the stroller delicately, just as Court Officer Jameson walked out of the Part. Jameson was a black woman who had worked in Part 32 since Jennifer had arrived at the public defender’s office. She was short. So short she looked like a child dressed as a court officer for Halloween. But she had a voice that boomed out of her chest. And if you walked into the well without permission, or tried to touch your client without permission or basically did anything without explicit permission from the judge or the clerk or Jameson, she’d crank her voice to top volume and release the simple phrase—“Excuse me, counselor!”—and that was all it took to stop anyone in his or her tracks.

Jameson peered down at Sunshine with a smile she reserved for only those defendants Jameson thought were “behaving right.” Jameson was always telling defendants to “behave right,” to “get it together,” to “act like a man.”

“Oh what a beautiful little baby! You take care of this baby. She looks pretty as a little peach,” she said, putting her hands on her hips in a motherly way and leaning back at the waist.

Jennifer and Lawrence turned their faces up towards her, smiling. Jennifer's smile contained just a note of hesitation. "She's daddy's little girl," Lawrence said, the register of his voice dropping to a bass, rather than his typical soprano.

"I'm sure she is! God bless you for being a responsible father," the officer nodded, approving of the lace headband on the healthy, chubby baby. "God bless you for taking care of your baby. That's what I like to see." The officer was still nodding to herself happily as she walked to the elevator. Lawrence was behaving right.

"Are you ready to go in to the courtroom?" Jennifer asked. "As I'll ever be."

Jennifer stood up and walked to the door of the courtroom, holding it open to allow Lawrence to enter with the stroller. Lawrence took his usual seat on the far right of the courtroom, next to the aisle. Jennifer approached the rail that separated the audience from the inside of the "well" and signed up the case to be called before the judge. She took a seat in the front row and pulled out her *People* magazine. She was halfway through an article when the clerk called the case.

"Calendar Number 15. Lawrence Jones. On for Sentence."

Jennifer entered the well and held the chain-link gate open for Lawrence. Lawrence pushed the stroller just up to the entrance of the well and left it outside of the wall in the audience portion of the courtroom. As he began to enter, a court officer shrieked at him—"Get your child! Don't leave your child unattended!"

With some hesitation, Lawrence walked out to retrieve the stroller and pushed it into the well with him. He placed it next to the defendant's table to his left. Jennifer stood to his right.

"The Public Defender's Office of New York County by Jennifer Miller on behalf of Lawrence Jones."

Judge Wang looked up from the laptop sitting before him. He was a slight man and even in a billowy black robe he looked small. The screen of the laptop almost blocked out his face—a small face too, on which he wore trendy 1920s-style glasses with thick tortoise-shell frames. His very black hair was slicked back with gel. It was thick, but the gel weighed it down so much that there was only a hint of volume. Wang

was a graduate of Yale Law School and a former associate at Skadden Arps, the ultra-prestigious New York law firm. Every syllable he uttered made clear that he had no idea how he ended up presiding over the dregs of society in Manhattan criminal court. Jennifer suspected that somewhere along the way, a friend of a friend of the mayor had floated Wang's name for a judgeship and, overcome with the flattery of it all, Wang hadn't bothered to figure out what he'd actually be doing every day. He never yelled or screamed or shook his fists, as so many other judges in the courthouse did, but he also never showed a moment's interest in the lives of the people who sat before him, seeking his judgment.

Judge Wang sat up straight in his chair, pulling himself towards the desk. Now he was peering down from above the laptop. Everyone was silent. Jennifer didn't know whether to address the very realistic looking doll in the room or not. The Judge looked at her, and she half smiled.

"Ms. Miller, I assume you and your client know this case is on for sentence today. Never mind that I don't like when people bring their children to court, but it seems particularly ill advised when a defendant has agreed to step in to jail as part of his sentence."

"I agree . . ." Jennifer began.

The Judge put his finger up to stop her and continued, "I am utterly perplexed as to how anyone could think this is a good idea. Do you have any plans for where this child will go if your client goes in today? Is he aware he is about to start of a very long sentence?"

"Judge, may I approach the bench?"

"No you may not. I want an explanation on the record as to what's happening here."

Jennifer hesitated. "Judge, the baby is actually a doll. I will be taking the doll, along with any possessions Mr. Jones gives me for safekeeping back to my office until a friend of his can retrieve the items. Mr. Jones understands his sentence and he is prepared to step in today. We can proceed to sentence at this point."

Jennifer could hear the rumblings of recognition come over the court officers and audience as they realized the adorable tot in the stroller was a doll. Jennifer looked over at Law-

rence, who stared heroically into the air in front of him.

Judge Wang continued to look confused. “Ms. Miller, you’re telling me that’s a doll?”

“Yes.”

“Bring it to me.”

The court officers were laughing. The one officer standing in front of Lawrence looked at the two officers behind the defendant’s desk and held his finger up to his head, turning it frantically to make it clear that he thought Lawrence was crazy. “Can you believe that, man? Can you fucking believe that?” he whispered.

The Sergeant was already retrieving Sunshine from the stroller for the Judge. He picked her up roughly by one arm, delivering her to the judge with a toss. Jennifer could see Lawrence wince.

The Judge held the doll up, examining her at every angle. “Well, this is amazing. I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s like a real baby. I mean, this thing looks exactly like a real baby.” He flipped Sunshine upside down. Lawrence almost came out of his chair.

“Please, stop!” Lawrence’s face broke into mangled sadness; he reached his hands forward for his child. Two officers were on him in a moment, putting their hands on his shoulders and pushing him towards the seat. “Sit down right now!” one yelled.

The audience was delighted with the spectacle, a diversion from their own horror stories playing out in the courtroom that day.

“Judge, I think we’ve had enough of this. Can we please just get to Mr. Jones’s sentencing?”

“Not just yet Ms. Miller. I’m fascinated by this. Mr. Jones—how much did this doll cost? I want to know. You can’t simply get this in a store. I have children and I have never seen anything like this.”

“It’s not for children,” Lawrence offered.

“It’s not for children? Then who’s it for?”

“She’s my baby. I treat her like I would treat my daughter. That’s my daughter you have up there with you.”

“How much did it cost?” the judge said, returning to his questioning.

Lawrence looked at the judge for the first time. “Five thousand dollars.”

The crowd gasped and then broke into a buzz of whispers. Jennifer heard the court officer behind her clap his hands together. “You’ve got to be fucking kiddin’ me.” He leaned over and put his hands on the back of Lawrence’s seat. Lawrence shifted his body forward. “You have got to be fucking kidding me,” the court officer said as his body shadowed Lawrence, sitting quietly in the chair.

“I suppose robbery is lucrative, Mr. Jones. \$5,000 for a doll. I can hardly imagine it.” The Judge held Sunshine around the waist with both hands, examining her every freckle.

“She’s not a doll.”

Jennifer put a hand on Lawrence’s shoulder. At this, the Court Officer lifted his hands from the back of the chair and took a step away, crossing his arms in front of him. Jennifer could feel Lawrence’s muscles tight and solid under his shirt. He looked up at her, and the area around the contacts filled with water, giving the impression that the contacts would slip off at any moment. She squeezed his shoulder. His gaze returned to the desk, where his sentencing papers sat unsigned.

“Mr. Jones is ready to be sentenced, Judge. You can imagine how painful this process is for him, and he’d like to get it over with. I’m sure you can understand—“

“What I can understand is that Mr. Jones chose to rob a series of vulnerable targets with a gun, while pretending to be a New York City police officer. What I understand is that he then used that money to buy a five-thousand-dollar doll. This painful process, as you call it, is a creation of Mr. Jones’ own doing. I understand that perfectly. Take this doll back and pass me the paperwork.” Judge Wang tossed Sunshine to the clerk sitting below him, who passed her to a court officer, who eventually passed her back to Jennifer, who put her back in her stroller. Lawrence watched her journey through his floating contacts and rested his eyes on the table when Sunshine was safely back in her stroller.

The Judge resumed the sentencing process. He read his script, the one Jennifer had heard a hundred times in this courtroom. And Lawrence dutifully recited his lines. He knew when to say yes, when to say he understood what rights

he had and what rights he was giving up. He knew when to thank the court and when to sign the forms, the forms that forced him to relinquish his right of appeal, the forms that bound him to pay \$350 in court costs. Unlike so many of her clients, Lawrence never looked at Jennifer once to make sure he was doing it correctly. Lawrence had been sentenced to prison before.

When it was over, Lawrence was told to stand and he was cuffed from behind. Jennifer followed him, pushing the stroller, through the door on the left side of the courtroom and into the narrow hallway that connected the courtroom to the prison cells in the back. The court officer told Lawrence to sit while he processed the paperwork that would transfer Lawrence to the custody of the Department of Corrections.

For a moment, Lawrence and Jennifer were alone.

“Could you put her on my lap?”

Jennifer lifted Sunshine from her stroller and leaned her curled, fragile shell against Lawrence’s chest. She used his coat to couch her against Lawrence’s body. She took a file out of her bag and went to stand in the far corner of the hallway, which was no more than a few feet from Lawrence. She stood looking into the white peelings underneath yellow paint in the corner and flipped the pages in the file.

Behind her she heard a butter-soft whisper.

“Hush little baby don’t say a word. Mama’s going buy you a mocking bird. And if that mocking bird don’t sing . . .”

The voice got so low that Jennifer could only hear the whisper brushing against her ear. She looked at the ground.

And then the metal door slammed back and open. Jennifer turned around and gave a startled look to the officer as he re-entered the tiny space. He looked at the scene before him and rolled his eyes. “He’s going back. He’ll be on the four p.m. bus to Rikers. Take the doll.”

Jennifer lifted Sunshine from Lawrence’s lap. His tears were gone. As he stood, his full height became apparent; his chest went out and his shoulders broadened. The officer pointed Lawrence towards the door to the cells, and as Lawrence walked his gait transformed. One leg went down, as the other stayed straight. It was the “pimp walk” adopted by so many young men entering courtrooms throughout the build-

ing. His pants fell down a bit, resting on the lower part of his hips. Jennifer stood there holding Sunshine as Lawrence went through the metal door.

Jennifer put Sunshine in her stroller. She pushed her out of the hallway connecting the prison cells and the courtroom. She pushed her through the courtroom well, opening the chain gate with one hand and pushing the stroller with the other. She pushed her out of the courtroom and out of the building past the line of men and women waiting to go through the metal detectors. She pushed her up Centre Street and wove the stroller around the Department of Corrections van that parked its rear end against the courthouse, waiting for the next group of souls to take to Rikers Island. She pushed Sunshine, resting peacefully, the seven blocks to her office. And then she carried the stroller up two flights of steps until they reached the corner, windowless office next to the mailboxes.

She started to call Malcolm, but hung up before she finished dialing the number. She looked at Sunshine and then picked her up. She felt her weight. She moved her fingers over Sunshine's small arms and hands and fingernails. She put Sunshine against her chest and leaned her head back, closing her eyes, and rocking her chair on its springs back and forth. And then she fell asleep.

Charles Alden

Holy Orders

Father McKelvey woke up with a hard-on. He stretched and then lay still, his hands folded across his belly, savoring the moment. There had been a time when this would have been an occasion for alarm, a test to avoid the temptation to satisfy himself. How many times had he battled fiercely with prayer, to not think of the young mothers kneeling for communion, to not think of the magazines confiscated from the student lockers? That was all past. The priest closed his eyes and thanked the Lord for this momentary kindness.

Neil McKelvey, O.F.M., shaved in the dark to avoid having the reflection in the mirror preen itself. Old Monsignor Duffy at the seminary had labored to knock the vanity out of the young men in formation. “Boys, there are grandparents who are soon going to be calling you Father,” he said. “When they look at you they want to see the robe and not a movie poster. It is children who should be seen and not heard. Better for a priest to be heard and not seen.”

Neil had become used to being told he didn't look like a priest. When he first entered the seminary, his uncles and cousins hedged their congratulations to his proud mother. They looked at the wave in his auburn hair, the cleft in his strong chin, and his liquid brown eyes—bedroom eyes, Aunt Miriam called them—and wondered among themselves, was something wrong with him? “If I looked liked him back then, I'd be out getting all the tail I could,” said Uncle Clarence. Thirty years later, the women of the Legion of Mary folding the altar linens shook their heads the same way and giggled at the mention of Father What-a-Waste. For his part Neil joked wryly about his brown Franciscan robes and what must people think of a man wearing a dress. He didn't say there were times it was a blessing to be wearing a shapeless robe that concealed what was going on underneath it.

The friary was one side of a brick duplex six blocks from the church, far enough away that suddenly repentant sinners

could not find their door for drunken midnight confessions. Brother Bernard sat across from Neil over breakfast toast and coffee in the silent pre-dawn moment before the birds and traffic stirred. Bernard was a cartoonist's model for the jolly friar—his robe hanging tentlike over an expansive stomach, his bald head ringed by a black tonsure, every other sentence punctuated by a chuckle. All he needed was birds and squirrels landing on his shoulders and he could be a statue for the brothers of the Order of Francis, Minor. But this morning he wasn't laughing. "Leno had another priest joke last night," he said. "And it wasn't even a funny joke. All he had to do was say altar boys, and the audience started laughing. When is all this going to end?"

Neil sighed and shook his head. He was the pastor; he was the person who was supposed to have an answer ready for every occasion. He looked across the table at his ordained brother and had nothing for him. Bernard was not one who followed headlines. Bernard was happiest in the garden, he was the one fluent in Spanish, the one who managed the choir. His smile was a constant fixture—until now. Neil was grateful for the company of Brother Bernard. The six months Bernard had been away in rehab had been hell. It had taken courage for Bernard to stand up in front of the congregation and tell them he was taking a retreat to deal with his use of alcohol. One of the occupational hazards.

Reflexively Neil recited some of the lessons they knew by heart, that the followers of Christ would be reviled, how the Master Himself had been mocked and spat upon, that their mission was not for themselves but to serve for the greater glory. "Seek not to be consoled but to console. Seek not to be understood, but to understand," he recalled the prayer of St. Francis. Neil glanced over at Bernard's closed eyes and his fleshy jowls rippling as he nodded, his hands pressed together beneath his chin. If only I had as much faith in my own words, he thought.

The moment of contemplation was broken by the cell phone vibrating at Neil's waist. All the transition moments of life—baptisms, weddings, the last moments in the hospital, funerals—needed a priest standing by. Life was a blur of daily Mass and Sunday services, extra ones in Spanish now, confessions

and counseling, the school with a million-dollar salary to handle, and always the pager on his belt at the ready whenever one of the flock encountered a moment of crisis—be it a traffic accident or a request to bless candles. For the next fifteen hours he would have a steady stream of faces in front of his, all seeking comfort or forgiveness, donations or advice, or an opportunity to trip him up. A raft of overnight emails waited in the trailer that passed for a parish office behind the church, and the secretary would have noons and evenings filled with speaking engagements and committee meetings. Today it was the downtown bankers.

There were fifty-seven Baptist churches in High Point, a couple dozen other Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Pentecostal churches, plus two synagogues. And one Catholic chapel, a stucco box built to seat two hundred and now serving a parish of six times as many. Together the United Ministries of the Central Piedmont sponsored a homeless shelter, a soup kitchen, a food pantry, and, secretly, a clinic for migrant field hands. All the things that served people who weren't likely to be bank customers. And so it fell to the outsider from up north to give the pitch for the annual pledge drive. For this occasion Neil had changed from his chocolate Franciscan robes to civilian garb, a polo shirt and slacks. Catholics were rare enough in the Carolinas as it was, there was no point in being seen as a freak show. The men dabbing at their lobster bisque and looking at their napkins weren't listening, and Father McKelvey wasn't listening to himself either. He stopped and looked around and the smattering of hand clapping lasted only a couple of seconds. A bald man with tufts of white hair above his ears and a Masonic ring on his pinky stood up.

"Reverend," he said. "With all respect. We read the news here, we see the stories from Boston, Chicago. Altar boys. Children. You know what I'm talking about. You folks run a school here. Now don't get me wrong, I'm sure you fellows are just fine. But some folks here aren't so, ah, open-minded as us here. People wonder, you know."

There it was again. Neil felt suddenly tired. He walked through his recitation once more. Nobody was more devastated by these revelations than the good clergy, the vast

majority. There was no trust they held more precious than protecting the students at Sacred Heart. His voice rose. All these stories coming out had happened twenty or more years ago. Now there were safeguards, now there was psychological screening before men were retained in training. His face was flushed and he could hear his voice starting to crack.

The businessmen looked at their watches and hurried back to their offices. The pledge forms remained untouched by the doorway. Neil's hands were shaking as he eased the Corolla onto the freeway from the downtown exit. This had not been the plan. This could have been a moment for grace, and he had failed it. There was a message about forgiveness and reconciliation that could be made, but these men were not prepared to hear it. Neither am I, he thought. He and his brother friars had signed petitions asking for the resignation of bishops. The weak and disturbed men who went through the seminary fifty years ago, who emerged as adults without ever maturing, those he could forgive. But not the people who kept them on, who shuffled them from church to church to cover a scandal. Better to close their eyes than endure bad publicity. It was intolerable!

Neil realized with a start that he was gripping his steering wheel hard and driving over the speed limit. He drew a breath and slowed into the right lane. What was he thinking? He would need to confess this presumption. This very afternoon he would be teaching that judgment comes from God and not from man, that to be forgiven we must ourselves first forgive. How to explain these concepts to second-graders?

First Communion would be on Mother's Day in May, and Mrs. Horner had drilled her class all year memorizing the Seven Sacraments. Before they could join the banquet at the Lord's Table, they needed to learn how to say their first confession. For the final hour of school Mrs. Horner marched her class into the chapel. The children walked down the aisle in double file with their hands held palms together, thumbs crossed, fingertips pointed up to heaven like little steeples. Father McKelvey sat on the steps at the foot of the altar so that he would be even with the twenty-four pairs of eyes peering back from the front rows of pews. In the back two other pairs of eyes looked on, mothers from the Parent's Council. Orders

from the bishop—no adult was to be left unobserved in the presence of children on church grounds.

The second-graders were always his favorites. Old enough to be inquisitive, but still too young to be cynical or sarcastic, they clambered around him at the playground and giggled at his toes protruding from his sandals when he made classroom visits. Today was supposed to be solemn and serious, but Neil could never maintain that air for long with this group. Everyone called him Father, he thought, a man who never would be a father. Had he chosen a different road, had he given up the calling in favor of Barb Nolan, he might be a grandfather now. Instead every year he was now like a great-uncle to twenty times as many.

Neil grinned and scanned the fidgeting crowd in front of him. The most important thing was to relieve any fears. Such a contrast with his own boyhood, where the first glimpses of a priest had been the back of a forbidding figure facing an altar and chanting in Latin. His classmates had lived in terror of the nuns robed chin to toe in black veils, and they in turn were in dread that Father might criticize them. Neil had not been the only one to wet his pants the first time he was led to the darkened confessional booth.

“Of course you can always pray by yourself,” he said. “But when you really want to say something to God, you come here to God’s house. And when you talk to me in confession, you really are talking to God. Mrs. Horner told you, the priest is just like a telephone, relaying the message. We don’t tell you that you are bad, we don’t judge you, and we know that God always is ready to forgive you, no matter what. We might give you some advice about how to get along, but we never never can tell anybody else what you say. We all have to make a solemn promise.”

“What if we can’t think of anything we did wrong?”

Neil stroked his chin and looked over the top of his glasses. “From what I’ve heard, that is not going to be a problem for this group.” The children giggled and tumbled out of the pews when they heard the dismissal bell from the schoolyard. Mrs. Horner stayed behind and handed him a folder filled with sheets of construction paper covered with crayon.

For half an hour Neil sat with Bernard over plates of ravi-

oli the Legion of Mary had dropped off. Leftovers from their monthly meeting the night before. Neil would have liked a glass of Beaujolais, but in solidarity with Bernard he sipped ice water. Tonight Bernard would be leading a rosary during a visitation at the Hispanic funeral home and it was Neil's turn for hospital visits after the monthly meeting of the finance committee. And now the vibrating pager announced the widow DiCastro was calling with some distress.

It was after nine o'clock when Father McKelvey rang the doorbell at the DiCastro mansion. The cotton hosiery business had been kind to the immigrant's son, and Angelo had been one of the founding members of the parish. This mission of consolation might also touch on the subject of a fitting memorial. The folks on the building committee already had some ideas.

"Fa—ther Mc—Kel—vey," a woman's voice sang out his name to the tune of Eleanor Rigby. The door swung open wide and Monica DiCastro presented her cheek for a peck. She gestured and ushered the priest into the candlelit living room. Her black hair was swept up on the sides, framed by her diamond earrings. After six months the bereaved widow had grown tired of black dresses and black lace headscarves and tonight she was wearing a turquoise gown with a daring front.

"May I get you anything? Coffee, tea? Maybe a glass of wine?" She swayed slightly as she gestured with the glass in her hand.

Father McKelvey noticed the bottle of Chardonnay was only a quarter full and held up his palms. Good thing she didn't offer Scotch. He sat at one end of the overstuffed sofa, across from the recliner that still bore Angelo's heavy impression. "How have you been, Monica? You said you were feeling distressed. Your sister and parents are all well?"

Monica sat at the other end of the sofa. "I am bearing up as well as I can, I guess. It all still feels like such a shock." She had been practicing the sigh and resolved half-smile for five months and waited for the expression of condolence. Father McKelvey said nothing. Monica DiCastro was still in her early forties, a quarter century younger than her late husband. Angelo had had a triple bypass before he married Monica. It

couldn't have been that much of a shock.

Monica said her family was fine, Angelo's kids from before were fine, everything was fine. Fine, really. As if she expected someone to suggest otherwise. It was time to get on with life. Yes, she knew that. But only. But only.

"Father Mc— . . . oh, please, we don't need to be so formal. Neil." She let his name hang in the air. "It gets so lonely sometimes. Surely you of all people can understand that. How one can feel so isolated, so alone. I try to imagine how it is for you. The late nights, no family. That isn't right, it's so cruel."

Neil gave a short laugh. "If you could only see. I am so surrounded by people, there isn't a moment even to think about being lonely."

"But that's different. People come to you because of your kindness, your understanding. They come to you because they want something. They want you to perform their ceremonies or fix their lives. People want to be around you because they think it will make them holy. They all want to take. How many people come to you because they want to give?"

"And why did you call me?"

Monica DiCastro looked up and smiled. She had moved to the middle of the sofa and turned to face him. "Oh, you got me there. Yes, I confess, I wanted the company. I wanted a friend. But I thought, you might need a friend too. Am I right, Neil?"

"Thank you, I know you are being kind. There are so many people here who have been kind. We feel like we have friends everywhere we turn. Is it what you call Southern hospitality?"

"Oh Neil. There are acquaintances, and there are friends. Don't you tire of people seeing you as a symbol, as someone they have to act differently around? You aren't just some machine for people to dial up blessings. You are a man too. A living man, with emotions and feelings. You need someone to appreciate that too."

Now she was sitting right next to him. Another button on her gown was unfastened, and the topaz pendant on her necklace swayed in front of the deep cleft. Neil had been sitting with his hands on his knees, and half rising, she took his hands in hers. She brought her face within a foot of his, and

her voice turned husky.

“Yes, you are a real man. A handsome man too. Has anyone ever told you that?” She gave his fingers a squeeze. “It’s okay to be human. We have all this talk about love. What does that mean? Isn’t that the great commandment? Why should you not express it?”

There she was, directly in front of him, looking into his eyes. Her lips were parted, he could smell her hair. She drew her shoulders together, opening her neckline even more. There was a glimpse of ripe pears hanging from the branch, with a topaz pendant nestled between them. Monica drew their joined hands closer to herself.

Father McKelvey stood up slowly and Monica followed, reaching her mouth upward. He had seen this before. Women offering to dance at cocktail parties, giving a fellowship hug at parish council meetings or even leaving Sunday mass, and adding a little extra to see if there was a reaction. The trick was how to exit gracefully without a sermon or an argument. He held his elbows locked at his side, placed one of her hands over the other, and held them between his, above and below.

“Monica.” He held her eyes for a moment. “Look at you. You’re positively smashing. It’s good you’re getting back into life. I have no doubt that before long people are going to be beating your door down. If I were in a different business you might see my flaws more easily. The woman who thinks I’m Mr. Right would find my first name is Always.” He waited for her to smile, then he squeezed her hands again and released them. “Here, I’ve been keeping you up too late. I really must let you rest now.” That was the way. Don’t judge or preach, no blame, no lessons. Later when she was alone she could give herself the lecture and feel foolish.

He drove back to the friary slowly, the scent of Monica Di-Castro’s hair still fresh. He found himself humming the refrain from Eleanor Rigby. All the lonely people. Where do they come from? Could Monica be right? How many priests did he know who had left the calling for that more tangible comfort? How many people besides his brothers could talk to him as a person, swear or laugh or flirt, without worrying about being inappropriate in his presence? Or without thinking he was a pervert or a eunuch? All the lonely people.

Where do they all belong?

It was past eleven when he returned to the unlit friary. He could hear Bernard snoring from his room next to the kitchen. Another eighteen-hour day. Maybe he would have a glass of milk before he went to sleep. He flipped on the light above the sink and tiptoed over to the refrigerator. There, like a proud grandparent, Bernard had taped one of the sheets of construction paper from the folder. On the left was a crowd of little stick figures, each with a name underneath in crayon. Figures mounted on triangles with feet sticking out the bottom were girls, two stick lines with feet were boys. From them a line wandered shakily to a large figure in the center, a lopsided head with black circles for glasses and an expanse of brown scribbles overlapping the borders of a robe. Two stick arms held a telephone beside each ear of the oversized head. One was connected to the shaky line to the children, the other to a line that wandered to the upper corner of the page, to a cloud bordered and shaded by every color in the crayon box. Yellow sunbeams radiated out of the cloud and a bird shape filled with white, clearly drawn by an adult hand, glided under the cloud. At the bottom of the page, below the sandals splaying out from underneath the brown robe, was the crayoned name Father Kneel.

Julie Zuckerman

Birthday Bash

Three weeks before turning sixty, Molly Gerstler strode into Ace of Bass and came out an hour later with a sparkling new electric guitar. The Gibson Les Paul, in skyburst blue, was a gift to herself, something she'd wanted ever since her music teacher had introduced her to classic compositions for the electric. The arrangements for Bach and Paganini, with their clean plucked lines, sounded wonderfully modern. She fended off suggestions for a big party—now that she had her guitar, her only request was to spend her birthday weekend at home in the Berkshires. “Just quiet, intimate family time,” she explained to her husband Jeremiah and the kids, both of whom promised to come up from New York for the occasion. “No parties, no surprises, no fireworks.”

“Quiet she wants,” Jeremiah said, turning his face upward to converse with the ceiling as if she wasn't right there in the same room. “Yet she brings home an electric guitar!” His tone was playful but she felt the need to remind him: the hobby was a natural step in her musical progression, following a lifetime of teaching piano and several years of playing classic guitar.

“I know, I know!” he said, cutting her off. “You don't have to explain it to me. I'm happy for you, sweetheart. Really. Use it in good health.”

“Thank you. I am.” She didn't tell him that the first few times she'd taken the guitar out of its case she felt giddy, like a child unwrapping a fancy present with bows and curlicue ribbons. But also the opposite: strapping on the Les Paul allowed her to strip off the Molly that was the family's always-dependable, domestic core, and turned her into someone more edgy.

“Are you sure you don't want to just go away somewhere to celebrate?” They didn't have to do anything ambitious, Jeremiah said, a weekend in NYC with a show or two; a B&B on the Cape. Wouldn't she prefer that to hosting and cooking for

the whole family?

“It’s not hosting when it’s our own kids and grandchildren,” she insisted. The whole family was only five people: Hannah and her husband and their two small children, and Stuart, who, at twenty-seven, had yet to settle down. “I’ll have everything I want right here.” She was eager to play for Stu, who’d sounded excited about her purchase. *Mom, you rock!* “Stu says he’s going to dust off his drum set and we’ll have a jam session.”

“Terrific. I can’t wait. Maybe he wants to dust off his resume.” Jeremiah took it as a personal affront that their college-educated son was working as a bartender in Greenwich Village and seemed devoid of any inner drive or ambition. They shared an unspoken hope that Stuart would find a wife or a girlfriend to serve as a positive influence and help him grow up.

“I’m talking about doing something nice with him—making music—and you have to bring everything back to your frustrations.” Her husband couldn’t—or wouldn’t—stop himself from making remarks that oozed with disappointment, no matter how many times she told him not to. She worried that Jeremiah and Stuart would be incapable of refraining from arguing for an entire weekend. Every time, she ended up as the referee.

“Alright, alright,” Jeremiah said, throwing up his hands in mock surrender. “Sorry. Go form a rock band for all I care. Go jam or jim to your heart’s content. Just remind me to get some earplugs.”

She sighed. Such a grouch, her husband could be, though even after four decades together there were still times when she wasn’t sure if he was kidding or just being grumpy. Now he came over from behind and drew her towards him, his arms resting lightly on her stomach. “I’m just teasing, you know that! I think it’s sexy that my wife is taking up the electric guitar.”

He tried to nuzzle her neck and make hubba-hubba noises, but she swatted him away and unclasped his hands.

“Just don’t take up with Luis!” he said. He loved to rib her about her thirty-something guitar teacher, who wore tight black jeans and resembled a young Desi Arnaz Jr. *Luis is just*

trying to get in your pants! Somehow these comments were meant to be taken as a compliment. *I want to sleep with you, so why wouldn't he?*

"Well, he is awfully cute. I just might!"

He froze, alarm on his face, until she rolled her eyes. "Oh, really now, Jeremiah! You're such a kiddie yourself, you can't even see that I can be too, when I want to."

She laughed, leaving him standing there with his mouth open and feeling just a little bit mean as she headed for the practice room. Long ago they'd converted the detached garage into her studio, where she'd taught local youngsters to play the piano for over a quarter of a century. And now she, too, was a student again, practicing power chords and experimenting with how tightly to hold the fret board on the Les Paul. She was having fun with it, delighted with how easy it was for her aging fingers to achieve the resonance and complex overtones she'd hoped for. Even her barre chords sounded punchy and alive. She was sixteen again. A rock star every time she picked up the instrument.

The first twinges of regret came when Jeremiah unloaded the groceries a few days before the birthday weekend. The piles of raw ingredients stared up at Molly like a long, dreary to-do list. Why had she chosen dishes that required so much *potchkying*? Though baking and cooking were her second and third loves, the preparations would not allow much time to practice her music.

"I'm not complaining, of course," said Jeremiah, as he caught Molly's halfhearted expression. "I love your veal and risotto and those peanut butter chocolate thingies, but maybe it's too much?"

"Nope, I'm fine." She swallowed a sigh, unable to admit to Jeremiah that perhaps he was right. She'd made the elaborate menu, so she had no one to blame but herself. She tied on her apron, telling herself she'd feel better once her fingers began chopping and mixing and the aromas from her oven filled the kitchen. "I'll get it all done."

"Well, you're predictable, that's for sure," Jeremiah said, with a faint grin. "Too stubborn to admit maybe I was right." He put his hand on her shoulder. "We could just put all this

stuff in the freezer and tell the kids not to come.”

She was tempted to say yes, but instead said: “Don’t be silly.”

“Can I help with something? You know. Be your right-hand man, what’s the culinary term for that?”

“Sous chef,” she answered, smiling, her mood starting to lighten. She would tamp down her frazzled feeling. “That’s sweet of you, thanks. But, no.” Jeremiah had two left hands in the kitchen. He could make himself a scrambled egg and put up water to boil, but that was the extent of his cooking abilities. “You can be the taster, how about that?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“We’ll have a nice weekend, won’t we?” she asked. She shut her eyes and pictured her instruments: a Steinway Baby Grand, a Taylor acoustic guitar, and the Gibson Les Paul, with its gleaming finish, the shade of crystal blue water at a Bermuda beach. They weren’t going anywhere, she told herself.

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll be on my best behavior.”

She nodded, shooed him away, and put on her favorite Yo-Yo Ma recording. If she couldn’t practice, at least she could listen while she cooked.

Molly was bushed by the time Hannah and Tom arrived on Friday afternoon, but seeing her grandchildren brought out a deep, innate joy. Two-and-a-half-year-old Ben was still asleep but five-year-old Pamela ran up and started chattering about the tea party she would like to have with Molly. She swept Pam into her arms and onto her lap, swaddling her with kisses. She told her granddaughter that she still had too much to do to get dinner ready, but that they could have the tea party tomorrow. And perhaps, she added, they could hold the tea party in the music studio and she would entertain them with songs on the piano and maybe even on her new guitar.

Pam wrinkled her nose, not excited by the prospect, but then ran off to play. Hannah deposited Ben on the family room couch, refusing to put a towel down underneath him, though he’d only been toilet-trained for a month. “It’s fine, Mom. He *never* has accidents when he’s just napping,” she said.

Molly frowned but didn't feel like arguing.

Jeremiah checked his watch every five minutes. "Why can't Stu ever get here when he says he will?"

She could tell by the scowl that his mood was cantankerous. She wished Jeremiah had some hobby that she could send him off to do. Something to calm him down and smooth out his rough edges, just as practicing music did for her.

When Stuart's car pulled into the driveway, he was not alone. A heavily made-up girl emerged from the front seat, wearing a black T-shirt, black mini-skirt, and black boots.

"Who, in god's name, is that?" she asked Hannah and Jeremiah. "Did you know he was bringing a friend?" They both shook their heads, no. This was so like Stu, she thought, not to mention he was bringing someone. She didn't like to pry, never wanted to be one of those mothers who would say in a false voice, *Anyone special in your life these days, dear*, but inside, a small candle of resentment ignited. Was this Stuart's idea of a surprise? Hadn't she made it clear that she wanted this weekend to be just the family?

She marched outside, letting the screen door slam behind her.

"Hi!" Stuart pecked her on the cheek. "This is Tess."

The girl looked to be no more than twenty, and she extended her hand to shake Molly's. Even her nail polish was black. Good god.

"Hello," Molly said, taking Tess's hand and smiling wanly. She darted her eyes to her son. "Stuart's told us all about you." Tess seemed to catch the haughtiness in Molly's voice, and she looked back and forth from mother to son.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I should have told you she was coming. But I wasn't sure she could make it until yesterday. Hey, and it's kind of like, 'Surprise!'" Stuart said.

"That it is." Molly agreed.

He shrugged, carefree, unaware of her attempt to ask him, telepathically, if Tess was a girlfriend, a friend, or just someone he was babysitting for the weekend.

"Well, come on inside." She could hear the ice in her tone and wondered if Stuart noticed. Molly felt like throwing a temper tantrum right there on the driveway. This is not what I wanted! Who is this trampy-looking girl and why did you

bring her home, Stuart? She turned back towards the house without offering to carry any of their bags. "I've got stuff on the stove. You'll excuse me, Tess. Stuart will show you to the guest room. I guess the kids will have to go in the same room as Hannah and Tom."

She strode back to the house, only to find her grandson wailing. Hannah was peeling off his wet clothes and running a bath. Her son-in-law offered to wipe down the couch with soap and water, but Molly insisted that he call the Ethan Allen furniture hotline, which, at 6:05 on a Friday evening, was closed for the weekend.

The howling from the bathroom continued and Molly chided herself for forgetting to keep her expectations in check. She should try to remember how stretched she often felt by family gatherings. Of course she wanted everyone together, but it didn't mean that her nerves didn't fray.

At dinner, Molly was irritable. Why was Hannah so stubborn? Why hadn't Stuart told her about Tess in advance? Common courtesy, she kept thinking, though she was having difficulty displaying some common courtesy of her own. It was as if the words coming out of her mouth were not hers but had been placed there by a ventriloquist, someone else controlling her jaw. Trying to get her to relax, Jeremiah poured copious glasses of red wine. Molly drank hers as if she'd just emerged from a two-day hike in the desert. *So, how did you two meet? Oh, not at your bar, Stuart, at a club? Do you frequent clubs often, Tess? How old are you, dear? Oh, really. And, let me see, that makes you, what, a junior in college? Entering junior?* She expected Tess to say, no, I'm not in college, but instead the girl told her she was studying at Barnard.

A thin layer of mistrust fell away from Molly, and she said, "Isn't that funny, I also went to Barnard!" After a pause, she added, "Of course, in my day, they didn't let us girls dress like that."

"Women."

"Excuse me?"

"We're women, not girls," Tess said.

"Oh, right."

Tess gave tight, one-word answers, as if she was afraid that any extra verbiage would become an arrow that would find its way to Molly's bow. What a dull girl. Molly was going to need some more wine to make it through the meal.

When she brought out the main course, both Tess and Stuart held up their hands to stop her from serving them. "I guess I should have told you," her son said. "I don't eat veal anymore. Tess doesn't either. It's not humane, the way they treat the animals."

She frowned and rolled her eyes. "More for us, then," she said, letting the serving spoon make a loud scraping noise as she placed a helping on Jeremiah's plate.

Now Jeremiah piped in, asking Tess if she'd taken poli sci classes (no), if she knew his colleagues Professor Della-Caprisi (no) and Professor Weinbrenner at Columbia (no), what was she majoring (chemistry), what was she planning to do after graduation, and so on.

"Med school, I hope," she said simply, and went on chewing her food.

"Very nice!" cried Jeremiah. "Excellent!" He clapped his hands in that same son-of-a-gun style he'd become fond of. A quick glance at her husband and Molly could tell that he didn't seem bothered by this girl's appearance or age in the least. She could read his mind: he was hoping Tess would exert some positive influence on Stuart. She polished off her second glass of wine and poured herself a third, aware, but uncaring, of the alarmed looks being passed between her daughter and her husband.

Molly peppered Tess with more questions. *How did you get interested in medicine? Is one of your parents a doctor? Really, a beautician? Does she own her own salon? No? And your father? Oh dear, that's terrible. And you've got no contact with him whatsoever? That's quite an accomplishment for your mother, sending you to Barnard on a beautician's salary, and a single parent, no less.*

"Mom!" She felt someone kicking her under the table and looked up to see Hannah scowling at her. Hannah's tone was sharp, warning.

"I meant it as a compliment to Tess's mother!"

Tess's skin tone turned a dark shade of purple and she

seemed to shrink a bit.

Stuart jumped in, eager to sway the subject. “Ma—here’s the coolest thing: Tess is an awesome bass player.

“Is that right? So you thought . . .” she trailed off.

“So I was telling her about you, and she was telling me how much she wanted to get out of the City for the weekend, so I figured, hey, might as well bring her, right? She brought her guitar with her. And we can all jam together.”

Molly raised her eyebrows, her mouth twisting into a pucker as she considered this new piece of information. But just because the girl was a musician didn’t mean Molly had to like her. “So—you’re not . . . together?” Her confusion gave way to a slow relief, but then she saw her son exchange a look with Tess.

“You’re right,” she said quickly. “It’s none of my business.” Stuart inhaled and took hold of Tess’s hand, glaring at his mother defiantly, and Molly knew that whatever their relationship might be, they were certainly sleeping together. She felt nauseous. “But wait, Tess, have you told your mother about Stuart? And she doesn’t have a problem that he’s twenty-seven?”

Stuart’s fork fell to his plate with a clang. “Jesus Christ, Ma! Enough, already! We’re adults! What’s the matter with you?”

“I was very clear, Stuart.” Molly was unused to fighting with her son, and later she would blame what she said next on the wine, on the state of her emotional turmoil. “I really just wanted this to be an intimate weekend with the family. No offense, dear.”

Stuart was on his feet, fuming. “C’mon,” he said to Tess. “Let’s go.” The girl was trying, Molly could see, to hold her head up high, to decide how to best react. Her jaw set, Tess followed Stuart without a word; Molly guessed she was about to cry.

Jeremiah tried to intervene. “Don’t mind her,” he called to Tess. “She’s just a little wound up . . .”

But the screen door slammed before Jeremiah could finish his sentence. “Happy fucking birthday, Ma!”

“Stuart!” Molly cried. “Wait!” But she couldn’t bring herself to get up from the table. Jeremiah went after them. For a few moments Molly sat transfixed, numb, as if someone was

blowing up a balloon in her chest cavity. She didn't know anything about medicine but she imagined a thousand little synapses going off in her brain. Pop, pop, pop, pop, the sound of irrevocable shattering.

A sinking, desperate feeling came over her, though she also felt strangely detached from the outburst. She could hear Jeremiah speaking to Stuart on the driveway. Now here was a role reversal, she thought, almost amused. I've been the mean, bitchy one and Jeremiah has to apologize for *my* behavior. *What the fuck*, her son was yelling.

Hannah's voice reconnected her to the scene. "Mom! You can't treat people like that! I don't care how much she looks like a witch!"

"Vampire, I was thinking." But she was in no mood to be reprimanded by her daughter. Molly got up, stacked a few plates and sulked into the kitchen. She was furious at herself for losing control. Furious at Stuart for bringing this girl home. Even furious at Jeremiah for taking the girl's side. All of a sudden Molly felt a strong sense of *déjà vu*, and her hands flew to cover her face in a panic. The ventriloquist in her mouth was her mother! She saw it now with horrifying clarity. Sarah Kellman had never made Jeremiah feel welcome in the family. Growing up, Molly had not noticed anything unusual, but once she met Jeremiah, a new side of her mother had been revealed. The snobby side, the one that seemed to care only about social stature, expensive dinners and *appearances*. But even as the epiphany passed, Molly knew it was no excuse; she'd have to own up, sooner or later, to the fact that she'd been terribly rude to this girl.

Hannah came into the kitchen to check on her. "You can't treat people like that, Ma!" she said again.

"I don't know what came over me."

"You were so passive-aggressive. No, actually just aggressive."

"Thanks Han, you're really making me feel better."

"Is something bothering you? Is it too much for you to have all of us up here at the same time?"

"No! I mean, I don't know. He just threw me for a loop when he brought her home, unannounced. Plus, she's half his age!

"And how old were you when you met Dad? Hmm? Nine-

teen, right? And he was twenty-five?”

“That was different. We were both serious about our studies, our future, our careers. We were both more mature than Stuart is today.”

Hannah rolled her eyes. “Whatever, Ma. It’s not that different. You should really apologize. To her and to Stu.”

Molly’s sinking feeling deepened. What had she been trying to prove? She wanted to climb under the covers and stay in bed for a long time, but with Hannah standing sentinel, she forced herself to contend with the situation.

Jeremiah had not come back inside yet, nor had she heard a car driving off. Perhaps Stuart and Tess were still outside. They were in the car, she saw, talking to Jeremiah through the window, but the ignition was off. Molly held her head high and stepped outside. Stuart started the car when he saw her. Molly motioned for him to wait, and though her voice was stiff and the words bitter, she forced them out. “I want to apologize for my behavior. I’m sorry, Tess. If I’d known you were coming I would have been a bit more prepared. I guess I just . . . I hope we can start over.”

Stuart glared ahead, refusing to look at her.

“Will you come back inside? Please?”

“No. We’re leaving.” He shifted the car into reverse and started backing out of the driveway.

She nodded. Behind the angry look in Stuart’s eyes she could still see his shock, the pain she’d caused. She wanted to crumple herself up into a little ball and stay that way. For as long as she could remember, *she* had been the one to protect her son from Jeremiah’s disappointment and sarcastic vitriol. “He’ll be back,” Jeremiah said. “Not sure about Tess, though.”

“Did they take their stuff?” she asked. She hadn’t heard them bring down a suitcase, but perhaps she’d missed it.

“I think so. They didn’t have much. Couple backpacks. A guitar.”

“I don’t know what came over me. Maybe I’m having a breakdown.”

He chortled. “Not my Molly.” He put his arm around her and started walking her back into the house. She marveled at the fact that Jeremiah had such a blind spot when it came to her faults. He was never as forgiving or patient with anyone

else, except maybe Hannah. But faults she had. Starting with the way she'd just treated Tess. Now she started to fret. What if Stuart and this girl actually stayed together? Tess, her future daughter-in-law. It was unlikely—who in their right mind would stick around after such treatment? Molly had driven her away. If Stuart stayed away too, she'd only have herself to blame. She began babbling to Jeremiah, worries spilling out.

“Mol. Mol! Stop it. They'll be fine. He's not going to disown you over this. Everyone snaps some times. Even you.”

Tears sprung to her eyes. Molly Gerstler didn't snap. Some stable domestic core, she was.

Against the darkening sky Jeremiah was smiling. He seemed to be finding the whole thing amusing.

“I see you're enjoying this,” she accused.

“No, not enjoying. Well, maybe a little. Maybe now Stuart will see that I'm not always the bad guy. He called you 'unhinged.' Ha! Usually that's what he calls me.” Jeremiah's smile turned into a broad grin. “So, you're in good company.”

“Great.” She did not feel like being in anyone's company. “I think I need to be alone for a bit. I'm going to the music room, okay?”

“Okay, Bon Jovi.”

“He'll be back, right?” She'd wiped the tears from her eyes but the knot in her stomach remained.

“Stop worrying. I've said much worse to him—and vice versa, I might add—and we haven't turned our backs on each other yet. He's a good kid at heart. I know that.”

She nodded and parted ways with her husband. Maybe that was their problem; that they both still looked at Stuart as a kid. Someone who'd never grown up. Or maybe that, too, was only in her mind, and she needed to acknowledge his waning dependence.

Molly let herself into the music room and stood inside for a few seconds, trying to block out her troubled thoughts. Which instrument to play? She looked at her acoustic guitar, sitting lonely in the corner. She'd neglected it these last few weeks, in her attempt to become more proficient in the electric. What had she been trying to prove with this new hobby? That she was still young and carefree and cool? What a joke! Tomorrow she'd be sixty. Back in the house she had two grandchil-

dren. Stuart was no longer a baby or even a boy, but a young man who had to be left to make his own decisions, his own mistakes.

The piano beckoned. In Molly's mind, there was nothing more soothing than Chopin, and she sat down to play *Nocturne in C-sharp Minor*. Her fingers flowed over the keyboard. Despite the wine, the complicated trills gave her no trouble at all. She played another Chopin and tried to put the ruined weekend out of her thoughts.

She felt calmer, but still restive. She stood and stretched, running her hands over the piano in apology before strapping on the Les Paul. She knew her Chopin would not sound nearly as good on the electric; she needed to keep working on her chromatic exercises and the left-handed fingering to get it right. She no longer felt like a rock star, but damn it, she was determined. A woman her age could still improve at the guitar, and hopefully at life.

Tomorrow she'd do the tea party with her granddaughter. If Stu didn't return, she'd find out where he was and apologize again for her adolescent behavior. She didn't want to be sixty going on sixteen. The couch against the back wall of the music room had never looked as comfortable, and Molly lay down to rest, falling into a deep sleep.

Jeremiah came in just past midnight, nudging her awake. "The kids are back," he said. "Thought you'd want to know."

He squeezed her hand and led her back to the house. "Happy birthday," he whispered. "Welcome to the sixties."

Kathryn Shaver

The Fourth Monkey

Sometimes in the night, I used to dream that my father was looking for the son he had never seen. He would just pop up on the porch and I would come to the door to meet this man I had never met. When I would wake, I always realized it was only my dream and that I did not even know what my father looked like.

In my village in Vietnam, it was said that if you dream a dream enough times, it will happen. So I waited for many years, but my father never came. I tried to make myself heartless about him and I kept doing what I had to do with my life. I told myself not to be sad, for now I live in America, where people can have whatever they can dream if they work for it. Today I have a beautiful wife and two smart daughters. We live in a fine house with four bedrooms. And I am the boss of myself, owner of two nail parlors with luxury pedicure chairs and private waxing rooms. But still, I do not know my father.

Nearly twenty years ago, about seven years after the war was ended, the US government came back to Vietnam to clean up their mess and to pick up whatever was left, meaning mostly a lot of kids like me who had American fathers. We were the leftovers: some in orphanages, some on the streets, and some hidden with relatives. I lived with my grandmother, Ba. Once every few years, my mother brought my sister, four years younger, to Ba's village to visit us. It was never a good visit, for Ba was still angry with my mother for giving me to an orphanage when I was two months old. Vietnamese people hold large prejudice about American serviceman and Vietnamese woman. My grandmother would say that my mother had disgraced herself by being with my American father, but again a hundred times more when she abandoned me. So Ba came to get me and took me to live with her and my uncle. Ba's friends treated me politely, but even as far back as I can remember, other children taunted me, stuck out their tongues, made faces, and called me "mix." When I was a little

older, I had two close friends who never mentioned me being the son of an American soldier, but the other kids pushed and shoved me. Ba had taught me to stay quiet, to walk away from their taunts. Mostly, I did. But there were some kids who thought they were tough because their fathers were important or were gangsters, and they would lay their hands on me. Then I fought back. Even though no one ever taught me kung fu or how to fight, I would nearly always win. Then their parents would come after my family. So Ba tried to keep me always inside. It was a chain around my neck.

When I was fourteen years old, my mother began to visit a lot. She came every few weeks and would sit with Ba and my uncle, talking, talking, talking, because she wanted to go to the United States and I was her ticket. Ba told me I should be angry at my mother. But I was not. I was happy because now my family had the chance to be together. The US government accepted me for being a mix, the first time it was ever a good thing; and along with me could come my mother and any brother or sister who had not finished high school. I was no longer dust under my mother's feet. I was gold.

I started tenth grade when we got to Kentucky. I spoke not one word of English, took ESL with my sister and the other kids like me for one hour each day. My mother found work as a seamstress in a factory. With food stamps, it was good enough to hang on and we were not as poor as we had been in Vietnam.

One day, after we had been in America for nearly a year, I came from school to find a large envelope hanging on the door of our small apartment. It was addressed to me: Le Tuan, though I am called Tom Lee now, because no one in my high school could understand Tuan or Le. Inside was a letter and a photograph of a man I could hardly see, a woman about his age, and two young girls. I am sorry I did not keep the letter, but I remember every word. It said he was on military business in Fort Knox and he was passing by . . . we lived only a half hour from there . . . and he was sorry that nobody was home. "I guess you are in school," the letter said. "See you later. Dick" Then he signed his full name, Richard H. Singer, Command Sergeant Major, United States Army. But there was no address or phone number.

When I showed the packet to my mother, she said nothing. But she looked a long time at the photograph. Every day after the letter, I returned from school, hoping to find my father on the porch, like in my dream. My mother and my sister didn't care; it made no difference to them. But my father was in my heart now. I hoped he would come back to look for me, but after a year, I decided he was a cheap-ass American. So I threw the letter into the garbage. Vietnamese, we come from nothing. But when we have something, we share it. American men think only about themselves. My father, I realized, was one of them. So I kept doing what I had to do with my life.

After high school, I went to technical school to learn machine shop. My English was still difficult. I understood only fifty percent. But I studied hard, didn't hang out like the other boys, and I finished the two-year program in one-and-a-half years. The last few months, my teacher got me a job. It was only grinding, not real machine work. It wasn't my fault that I got in an argument with the redneck supervisor; he was trying to piss off on me. When I told the teacher, he got me a different job. I didn't like working for supervisors, so even after school was finished for more than a year, my teacher helped me to get a government loan to open my own business. I was just married to a beautiful Vietnamese girl who had come with her family to Kentucky a few years before. I wanted a machine shop, but together, with both of us working in the business, we could get a loan to open our first nail parlor. After only a few years, we opened another on the other side of town, and now, after ten years of hard work, we hope to open a third one.

This is the first time in my life I can feel really good about myself. I have money. I have a smart and hard-working Vietnamese wife, Molly, and two beautiful daughters. I have reached the age of thirty. At last, I feel confident. Waiting for such long years, I have dreamed my dream many times. And maybe what they meant in Ba's village is that if you dream enough, it is you who will make it happen. Fourteen years have passed since my father left his picture on my door and I am thinking that if he doesn't look for me, then I will look for him.

I ask my sister Ngan, who lives with my mother still, if she

will help me look for my father. She lost her job so she has nothing to do, and she doesn't like working in the nail parlors. Very clever, Ngan, and she finds on the Internet seventeen addresses for a man with the same name as my father. Two of them are in Fort Stewart, Georgia, where there is a military base for the US Army. I had to spend thirty bucks, but I am happy to know the places where he might live. Less than one dollar for each year of my life.

My girls are in school now and my wife can run the shops, so I decide I will go to Fort Stewart to see if I can find him. Still, I think many times: should I go? I have been saying no to myself because I was afraid he would think I wanted money or support. With a house and a business and a family, with these things in my hands, I can look for him.

In February, I drive to Fort Stewart. My sister is in the car, knitting all the way to pass the time. We find the first address and I go to ring the bell. The man who answers the door does not know anyone by the name of Richard H. Singer and closes the door in my face. When I walk back to the car, I do not look at Ngan. It is getting dark and cold, late in the afternoon, and we have been driving since early morning. But I must find my father while there is still a little light. We go to the other address. I am not sure he will live in this house either. I sit in the car, saying nothing. Ngan, too, is quiet. She is still knitting, and the only sound is the soft click of her needles, one against the other. We have had no food since breakfast, before we left Kentucky, and I know Ngan is hungry and tired. So I go quickly to knock at the door, but I don't expect to find my father there.

A light comes on, a yellow bulb that illuminates the small porch. The man who opens the door doesn't look like how I remember the picture at all, not anything like what I expected. But I know it is my father, because when you see it, you know it. And I can see he has the same feeling about me.

"I'm Tom," I say. I do not smile. I am just surprised.

He looks at me, as if he wants to find himself in my face. We stand and stare at each other, saying nothing, on opposite sides of the screen door. He looks terrible. He is very pale, with only a few tufts of hair, like bent wire, on his head. But I can see the line of his hair, where it was, and mine is the

same, though it is darker.

“I just came out from chemo,” are the first words my father says to me.

I don’t know what to say, so I don’t say anything. I want him to ask me to come inside, but he doesn’t. He moves with difficulty toward the interior of the house, a few steps, looks around a corner, then returns. “I must go back to bed. I am very weak.”

I nod.

“Where are you staying?” he asks.

“In a hotel,” I say. He asks which hotel but I don’t know how to answer him. It was nearly dark and I was afraid I couldn’t find the address, so I searched for him before I found a hotel. When I don’t answer, he asks for my phone number. I am glad I have a cell phone.

“I’ll call you tomorrow morning, eight o’clock. We’ll go have a cup of coffee.”

The next morning, I open my eyes and I am just happy. It’s about time. Face to face with my father is all I can think about. For me, the sun is shining, even though I can’t see outside the thick curtains of the motel window. My father calls at precisely eight. We agree to meet at a gas station near his house. I leave my sister with her pillow and her yarn.

My father takes me to Angelo’s, a coffee shop that he says he likes. He orders eggs and bacon and whole wheat toast and grits and coffee, then orders the same for me, without asking what I want. The waitress looks at him, then at me, then back at him. I am sure that she knows he is my father. Even though he is thin and his skin is gray, we look like father and son. Even though I look Vietnamese in my color and the shape of my eyes, we look like father and son. And even though we have never seen each other, we look like father and son.

My father explains to me that he does not have much time, because he has an appointment with the doctor. But we have one hour, he tells me. I don’t say anything. I just want to look at my father and hear his voice and feel him near me. I want to concentrate on this moment I have waited so long to have.

“I’m doing chemo,” he says. “Doesn’t look good. Maybe six months.” And then he tells me about his illness. While he is talking, he twists a ring on the finger of his right hand. I

think that maybe it is loose because he has lost weight. Or maybe he twists it because he is nervous.

“Father, I am sorry to hear you are sick,” I say.

“Call me Dick,” he says.

But I cannot. I will always call him Father because it is a respectful title.

He tells me then, as he would tell me many times later, about my mother. In Vietnam, in 1966 and 1967, my father delivered gas and bombs from one place to another, sometimes hiding them. When he wasn't working, it didn't matter much what he did. But at 2100 hours, the gate was locked and all soldiers were supposed to be on the base. The way he told it, he was in love. So he sneaked out every night, jumped over the fence and ran to my mother's village where he would stay until dawn. They locked him up a lot, he said. But still, he ran to my mother every night. Then one day, they called his number, told him to pack, and sent him back to the United States. He didn't have the chance to even say goodbye. A few years later, the military returned him to Vietnam because he knew where to find the bombs and the gas. He said he came to look for my mom, but her village had been destroyed and everything had changed. He couldn't find her.

Before we part, he tells me that he feels sorry that he left me back there and that he didn't mean to do that. He explains that now he has a wife and two daughters who are a few years younger than I am, and that he has two grandchildren. Then he says he must go, for me to return home and wait two weeks. His wife and daughters do not know about me and he will tell them, but it will be difficult.

I go back to the motel to pick up Ngan and we drive back to Kentucky. Even though it is raining, I feel the sun is shining.

Two weeks later, on Saturday, his older daughter phones me. “This is your sister, Katie,” she says to me when I answer. She is really happy. She tells me she heard the story late last night and could hardly wait until this morning to call me. Every week after, on Saturday, my father and Katie call me. Sometimes Karla, the younger daughter, says hello. But not the wife. Her name is Joy, which I think is curious, because she has no joy.

Every year until now, I have taken my family to Florida for

vacation, in spring when my girls have Easter break and in late summer before school starts again. Now, instead, we go to the beach in Georgia for three days, then spend two days at a motel close to Fort Stewart to visit my father. And we go more often now, four times in a year. One day after we are there more than a year of visits, my father says the time has come to stay in his house. I say no, but he really wants me to come, I can feel this, so I agree. Joy will not be happy, but I know she doesn't have a choice.

When we get there, my father has fixed up his garage like a house. There are two small bedrooms and a bathroom. He made it just for me. My wife and my girls and I sleep there, and come inside the main house with my father and his wife when we are awake. Joy does not try to hide her misery. Her mouth turns down at the corners and she does not look at any of us, not even at my beautiful little daughters.

My father is so happy I am there that he has a party to introduce me as his son. He invites his friends and neighbors for beer and bar-b-cue. I am happy, too. And Molly and my girls go to the mall with Katie to buy new outfits for the party.

On Saturday, when my father's friends begin to arrive, Joy stays alone in the kitchen, making her arms across her chest, like she has pain. She says not one word, even with all those people there. When all the guests have left, she walks back and forth, back and forth. Finally, she asks me, "What do you want?"

"To know my father," I say. I can see in her eyes that she does not believe me. I look to my father and he does not know what to do. I don't want him to have a hard time. So I decide to make everybody happy and go home two days early. We drive all night to get back to Kentucky.

After that, I forget about visiting my father, though we still have telephone calls every week. He begins another round of chemo, and he has diabetes, too, so the doctors take his leg. My father tells me that he has not even one year left. He is now two years past how long he said he would live the first time I met him, so I think maybe he lasts for me. One Saturday, he tells me the time has come for him to make it to Kentucky to see me just one more time before he dies. He says that without daily medical care he can die at any moment,

but he is coming anyway.

My wife and I are opening our third nail parlor. As the ones before, we do all the interior construction ourselves to save money. My father says he wants to lend a hand. He cannot stand for more than a few minutes, but he helps us choose the paint colors and even paints some of the trim while he sits in a chair. He is very happy here and I realize, now that he is away from Joy, he is a man who likes to laugh and to make jokes. He shows me every day about three monkeys who see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil, and he puts his hands over his eyes, then his ears, then his mouth. In my father's story there are four monkeys. He puts his hands over his crotch for the fourth monkey and laughs. I wonder, but do not ask, if he is thinking about my mother and me, if that is why he is laughing.

One day while he is with us, my mom comes to our house to see him. They sit in the kitchen at the table, but do not have many words to say. Later, she tells me she doesn't care about him, but she is happy she did her part. What part, I ask her. And she tells me that when we first arrived in the US, she wrote to an American friend from wartime to ask for help to locate my father so he would know his son. I think really that she wanted my father to help us, but she did not say that. The friend would not tell my father's address, but said to write a letter and that he would send it. Now I know that is how my father found me fifteen years ago, when he left the envelope on our door. I am sad my mother did not tell me this until I found him. Parents and children in Vietnam aren't open for each other, they don't share the past. My father, I am glad he is American. Now that I have met him, he tries to share himself with me. But still, I do not know him.

In the evenings, he and I sit on the porch on the swing. It is getting cold outside, so the girls stay inside. This gives us a chance to talk like fathers and sons. But mostly, we don't say anything. We pass the time sitting next to each other, listening to the squeak of the swing and feeling the gentle rocking. On one of these nights, he asks me if there is anything I need from him.

"I don't need anything," I answer.

"No, really, I want to help you. What do you need from me?"

“Nothing,” I say. I decide my father is making this offer not for me, but to make himself feel good. As much as I want to please him, I deny him that. I don’t want his money. But I am thinking: who doesn’t like more money?

He takes the ring off his right hand and he puts it in my hand. The ring is gold and heavy, flat across the top. Stamped into it is a black striped shield, like the patch on a military shirt. Above and below the shield are bars with the words US ARMY and CSM. In the center of the ring is a small diamond, which does not sparkle. I look hard at the ring, then at his face.

“I don’t want the ring,” I say.

“I want you to have it.” My father looks at me with eyes that pierce mine. “It’s a very important ring. When you get to the rank of Command Sergeant Major, you get this ring. I am proud to wear it. And I want my son to have it.”

I put the ring on my finger. But only because he insists.

He leaves our house after nearly two whole weeks, and I feel good because my father made it to see his son’s success. Everything for me is solved, and my life is more open. Even so, as soon as he leaves, I take the ring off my finger and put it into a small wood box, intricately carved in Vietnam, that has a lock with a key. I put the box on the dresser in our bedroom, and hide the key under the lamp, but I don’t like to look at it every day, so after a few weeks, I bury the box in a drawer under some sweaters.

Only two months later, Katie calls to say he is unconscious. My daughters and Molly have already gone to bed, but I wake them and get them in the car, and we drive all night to see him. We get to the hospital at nine in the morning and we stay all day there. Joy does not speak to us, but Katie and Karla come in the afternoon and we go with Katie to the hospital cafeteria for something to eat. When we come back to his room, my father still only sleeps, having half-closed eyes, so we drive all night back to Kentucky so the girls can go to school the next day.

A week later, he is gone. When Katie calls, we pack up the car again and Molly and my girls and Ngan and I go for the last time to Fort Stewart. My father will have a military funeral in a new cemetery. I look at my wife and my sister and

my girls, who are now eight and eleven, and am surprised that they are all crying. But I am brave. I am not going to drop any tears.

At the funeral, we stand together as a family, but apart from the others who are there. When the soldiers drop the coffin into the ground, I lose something and my tears do not stop. If you hold something inside you for so long—thirty-three years I held it—and you can let it out for people to share, then you feel release. I am free.

When the funeral is ended, Katie comes to me and hugs me. “My brother,” she says, and promises to call me soon. Joy and Karla, standing together, do not even look at me.

I have only gladness that I was able to spend three years in trying to know my father. I think sometimes that if I did not go there when I did, he would have died very soon. I tell myself that he lived long with his cancer only to have time with me, his son.

I still dream about him sometimes. He pops up on my porch, holding his hand in the air to show his ring. When I wake, I get out of bed and get the key to unlock the little wood box to be sure the ring is still there. I think there is something secret about it and I try to figure out what it is. But I haven’t discovered it yet.

Chip Houser

The Goatherd of Naxos

I'm sitting against the flaking bole of a laurel tree, cooling down after hiking up the mountain, when a little man drops from the canopy above. I yell something—I'm not sure what—and scramble away, around the trunk. He lands on bandy legs and follows, chattering and waving his little hands, lurching like he's cramped from perching in the tree. I'm not sure if I should laugh or run. He doesn't look dangerous and he seems glad to see me, but I have no idea what he's saying. He's probably speaking Greek—he looks Greek, a green-eyed fellow in well-worn farmer's garb. I pick up two words: "Zeus," the god and the name of the mountain we're halfway up; and another word, a jumble of discordant consonants and soft vowels, something like "Kithonius." I guess that's his name.

Kithonius's clothes are charmingly oversized—his pants in particular are so baggy he's double-tied a rope around his waist and, though he's rolled the legs up, the cuffs pool on the ground, shrouding his feet. Mirrored sunglasses nestle in the tangle above his tanned brow, their broad, curved surfaces reflecting the shifting leaves.

I say, "Why were you in a tree?"

He pauses mid-chatter, head tipped, then picks back up. He looks like a farmer, but the ground is too rocky for crops. Maybe those are his goats in the field above the tree. I point at them and he nods and that's good enough for me. Goatherd it is. When I pull the camera from my pocket he bobs his head and shrugs.

Kithonius waves his hands around, pointing from me to the mountain, skipping sideways like he's dancing. It makes me laugh, and soon we're bantering back and forth amicably, the meaning of our words lost other than the shared tone of enthusiasm. Our hands and eyes do the real talking; we understand each other well enough. He knows I'm hiking up to see the Grotto of Zeus, where Zeus was raised in secrecy because his dad had a thing for eating his children. His spar-

ling eyes and occasional wink suggest he also knows about the Pagan rituals that have been performed there for thousands of years.

Kithonius is hopping and pointing now, wagging his hand for me to follow. Beyond the tree, a stream meanders past the goats. He leads me to the stream where I drink cupped handfuls of cool water. He bends at the waist and sweeps a cluster of grapes from deep in a swirling eddy. The motion is fluid and dramatic, the practiced manner of a magician. I get a great shot, the water a glittering arc, his eyes on the grapes, his mouth crooked with laughter.

“Chrysoprasos!” he says, or something like that, holding out the grapes. They look delicious, ice cold and dripping, glistening like translucent green pebbles.

“Efharisto,” I say. Thanks, the only Greek word I know. The grapes are cold, and heavier than I thought they’d be. When I pluck one and eat it, Kithonius shakes his head. He points up the valley, leaning in so I follow his finger to a shadowy crag in the distance. He smells like goat. He shuffles and hitches, pumping his arms, as if he’s hiking. He pantomimes the hot sun, fingers spread wide, and sweat, fingers running down his face, popping phantom grapes into his mouth, his bright eyes sparkling.

“Save them for the grotto?” I say.

Laughing and babbling, he shoos me off.

A dozen marble-eyed goats watch me cross their field, heads turning, bells tinkling discordantly. They’re wandering around the remains of a small fire. A pair of boots sit by the fire, and what look like blankets or maybe clothes. I imagine Kithonius sitting around the fire at night, eating a simple meal, surrounded by darkness and the soft clank of bells. It would be strange and fun to camp here with him, sharing food and the fire, miming conversations. It’s a fine thought, and I realize how far removed I feel from the summer island-hopping party scene—which is why I came to Naxos.

Like most backpackers, I came to Greece to get drunk and laid. Both happened, one with greater frequency than the other, but neither was particularly satisfying once I met Selena.

I was working on Corfu at this pensione, Hotel Dionysus, and she arrived as part of the usual morning throng, scores of backpackers pouring onto the dock from the overnight ferry from Brindisi. Patrick and I usually worked the ferries—it was easier for us to fill the van with backpackers because we spoke English. We were also useless around the hotel until we sobered up around lunch.

“It’s a great place,” I was saying to a group of six or eight when she walked up. It was hard to miss her, tall and pale and redheaded. I couldn’t see her backpack. “Cheap, too. Breakfast and dinner and shower are included, it’s full of other backpackers, and it has a private beach.”

The group shuffled off to see what else was available, and she came forward, followed by a handful of guys. One of them had her pack. She didn’t look at the pictures in my three ring binder like everyone else, she just watched me as I gave my pitch. Her eyes were green, unblinking, and highly distracting.

“Looks good,” she said when I was done. She smiled and the corner of her mouth drew back into her cheek and made a spectacularly deep and inviting crease.

“Really?”

“I’m Selena.”

“Hey. I’m Cliff.”

“Where’s your van?”

I didn’t even have to sell her? Pretty girls meant more people, mostly guys, wanted to stay at the Dionysus, and the owners paid us for each person we brought. I pointed to the van, which ended up so packed we had to strap luggage to the roof and leave the sliding door open so people could breathe.

The narrow stone path rises from the far end of the field and runs a few hundred yards before petering out into a dusty footpath. From there it snakes up the valley, twisting between a series of knitted hills. I meander through dense layers of shrubs and wildflowers, here and there passing outcroppings of grayish-white rock that jut like ancient, cracked molars. A lizard flashes between them like the brief lick of an iridescent tongue.

Soon I’m not on a path at all. The trees grow gnarled and

hunched the higher I climb, the vegetation hunkering close to the inhospitable rock, until only the sparsest grasses grow. The sun is brutal; I'm soaked through with sweat. The grapes tempt me, still cool in my hand. I wait, dreaming of hungry nymphs. The idea strikes me as so pathetic I laugh out loud. Sure, and maybe one of them will be Selena.

I angle across a shifting scree slope, small avalanches clattering down into the valley each time I slip. Up here, nothing grows except mint-colored lichen, splashed like great loose goutts of bird droppings across the weathered rock. I keep moving, anticipating the shady grotto, a dip in its icy waters, and the sweetness of the grapes.

“There’s a party on the beach, you should come,” Selena said. Watching her dance and drink at dinner, it wasn’t one to miss.

“Fuck yeah,” Patrick said, arms loaded with clinking glasses. “We’ll be down after we clean up.” I thought Selena was talking to me, but Patrick was like that, and fun to party with.

It took us an hour to clean the dining hall—there was a lot to clean up after the ouzo shots, table dancing, and plate-breaking, all part of the Hotel Dionysus experience. It was entertaining to watch, the same rituals of alcohol and flirting enacted by a rotating cast of backpackers, but it took forever to clean up after.

Patrick and I headed to the beach, passing a bottle back and forth. He was drunk before dinner.

“I fucking love this place,” he said, legs and shoulders shifting awkwardly as he stood on a low wall peeing. He tucked himself back in his trunks and dropped down onto the wall, holding his hand out for the bottle. I wanted to keep going, I caught vague waves of noise: singing and dancing. I handed him the bottle and looked for firelight along the beach below.

“I’m coming back next summer. Fuck no!” he belched. This was Patrick’s fourth summer working at Hotel Dionysus. He shook a finger and declared, “No, I’m not even fucking leaving.” He was a few years older than me, or looked like it. I don’t know if he went to college, or what he did stateside between summers. I assumed he drank. He’d mentioned growing up on the east coast—

I heard a whisking sound, like sweeping broken bits of plates in the dining hall, and when I looked over he was gone. I heard a muffled crunch and glass shattering. It took me a moment to process what just happened. I ran along the wall, scrambled down the embankment. Patrick was crawling out of some bushes, laughing. Bits of glass glittered on the rock. He smelled like puke.

“Fuck, dude,” he said, looking up at me. His mouth and chin were bloody, and his shirt was torn at the shoulder. I helped him stand. “I think I fell off the wall.”

“Are you okay?” He’d cut his lip, bit through it maybe. Otherwise he looked fine.

“I’m fucking immortal,” he said, raising his fists. “Thanks to the Greek god of Awesomeness, Ouzo.”

“Can you walk?”

“Think so.” He swayed slightly. “Yeah. Let’s party. Party on the beach! Wait, where’s the booze?”

He’d definitely thrown up, I could smell it on his breath.

“We drank it.”

“No way, man. We gotta get more.” He started back up the hill, and I followed him. Of course we never made it to the beach. I barely managed to get him back to his room.

The grotto isn’t the idyllic setting I’d imagined. A heavy gate blocks the entrance to a small, dark cave, crude iron destroying what little charm the so-called grotto may once have held. Tucked in a cloudy plastic sleeve wired to a bar is a wrinkled notice on Hellenic Ministry of Culture letterhead. Neatly typed in a dozen languages, including English, is:

SITE CLOSED FOR INVESTIGATION

No moss grows on romantically crumbling statues, no fern-rimmed pool fed by a waterfall beckons. Nothing to suggest Zeus or nymphs or even water, and I’m hot and thirsty. This isn’t a grotto, it’s a miserable little cave, narrowing as it retreats down into the dark. I hiked all day for this? I kick the gate and it shudders, echoing deep into the cave. A constant, cool breeze blows from the depths. I lean my head against the gate and close my eyes. At least I have the grapes. I look

around for a shady spot to sit and eat them, but there's nothing but rock this high up.

When I look back, the gate is open. I realize there's no chain or lock, just the sign. Kithonius must have known it wasn't locked, but I wish he'd have saved me the hike by miming how ugly the place was.

Twenty steps down the throat of the cave it's too dark to see. I didn't bring a flashlight because grottos are supposed to be sun-dappled places, not dark holes. But my camera flash is strong enough and I navigate along fairly well. Smoke lingers on the breeze. Soon I reach a cavern so large my flash barely reaches the far walls. It's not a grotto, but it is a space fit for a god. The cool silence reminds me of a cathedral. A long, flat slab sits in the middle of the cavern, in its center a pile of dead coals and ash. It looks like the kind of place where Pagan rituals—sacrifices, dances, orgies—would be performed. The floor around the slab is difficult to navigate in the dark, rough and rocky. I imagine the rocks are the accumulated bones of centuries of sacrifices. I hope my battery holds out.

On Santorini a week ago, I camped in the low scrub fringing a black sand beach, and woke in the middle of the night to a group dancing on the beach, torchlight throwing wild shadows. I walked toward the party, looking for Selena, who I'd told earlier I wouldn't make the party. I was so hung over I hardly left my tent. I must have looked like hell, but she was cool about it. She'd been wandering among the tents, inviting everyone to the midnight bonfire. I watched her move off, long limbs sliding between shivering fabric walls. I felt like death, but she was still devastating.

People writhed in the firelight, but Selena wasn't among them. Given the male majority and the general absence of clothing, I lost interest quickly. I was glad I hadn't joined them. Walking the beach the next morning, I couldn't find any sign of the fire—the coals were the same dark gray as the sand, and were probably washed away in the tide. Other campers, stuffing their tents and sleeping bags, said Selena left for another island. The hung-over faithful clustered around coffee pots, abuzz with strategic speculation. Most were heading to Ios, others planned a preemptive move to

Mykonos. Worn out from weeks of partying and tired of the Selena marathon, I chose the more distant and supposedly quieter Naxos.

I pluck a grape and toss it up, trying to catch it in my mouth. I miss, the grape bouncing off my cheek and away, lost among the rocks. I wonder what lucky denizen will come across it, and if it will find it tasty. I catch the second one: bliss. It's tartness radiates through my jaw. I eat slowly in the cool darkness. I'm half dozing, thinking about Pagan rituals, when a goat bleats. The sharp clack of hooves and the muffled clank of a single bell echo in the cavern. I call out to it but my voice echoes harshly and I hear the goat's scrabbling retreat. I sweep my hand across the raised stone, panicked when I don't feel my camera, imagining trying to find my way without it. I realize it's in my pocket as the sound of hooves grows distant. The flash reveals a small opening across the chamber I hadn't noticed before. The low battery light indicator is on; I can't follow the goat, I'd never find my way back if the battery died. So I eat grapes, hoping if I ignore it the goat will come back, but it doesn't. I feel bad leaving it here, but there's no sense in both of us getting lost. I use the last of the camera battery to find my way back, whistling as I go in case the little goat decides to follow. I leave the gate propped open.

On the hike down, I watch for the goatherd. His boots and blankets and goats are all gone from his camp site, and he's not napping up in his tree. I drink from the stream and douse my head in the icy water before the long hike down to Naxos Town.

Under a vine-covered trellis in a courtyard nestled among the jumble of white buildings and twisting staircases of the hillside town, I eat a plate of steaming seafood and brightly colored vegetables. The sun turns the whitewashed walls from soft blue to burning orange to fading violet. I sit unnoticed amid the evening bustle, passing the time before the overnight ferry to Ios writing cheeky half-truths on the blank side of 1-hour photo prints. Even a hot hike to a lame cave sounds like an exotic adventure when you're in your kitchen trying to figure out what to make for dinner, look-

ing at a picture of a smiling Goatherd holding grapes by a mountain stream. I'd even managed a couple of goats in the background. Despite the charming picture, I'm ready to leave Naxos, feeling like I wasted my last day here hiking to that miserable cave. In the postcards, I call it a grotto. I'm excited to reach Ios—with any luck, I'll run into some of the other backpackers I've seen around the islands, maybe even Selena.

An elderly man pauses at my table, a heavy knuckled hand resting on the edge. I look up. He's scanning for a table but the taverna is full. Once tall, likely a northern European, time has bent his back into a majestic hump. His parchment-like skin is dappled with brown spots, his head crowned by wispy remnants of hair.

I motion to the open chair.

"You would not mind if I join you?" he says. I wonder where he's from—if English is his native tongue, his words are either accented by a land I've never visited or tainted by his years away from it.

"Not at all," I say, sweeping up my postcards.

He settles in with a series of groans and mutterings.

"I am Doctor Jørg Bergsen."

His grip is remarkably strong for such a frail-looking man.

"Cliff."

The waitress arrives, treating him with familiarity and respect. They chat and laugh, speaking Greek. He holds her hand briefly in his own arthritic claw, shaking it affectionately.

"May I offer you another drink?"

When the drinks arrive, we toast. His glass shakes slightly as he raises it. It tinkles, and I realize his drink has ice in it. The waitress must like him, then, or he's a regular—ice isn't usually on offer at restaurants I can afford.

"Did you take that picture?" Bergsen asks.

I nod. "Up on Mount Zeus earlier today."

"Clever fellow." He spins his glass, loose-wristed, and the ice cubes clink.

"He was taking a nap in a tree and scared the crap out of me. Those are his goats behind him, I didn't notice them when I took the picture. He was nice—he gave me those grapes."

He looks over, mottled brow creasing. A line of bare bulbs

strung between the buildings pops on.

“What about you,” I say, “what brings you here?”

“My wife.”

“She from here?”

“No,” he says, in a way that suggests she might be buried here. “Did you talk to the goatherd?”

“He was speaking Greek, so it was mostly gestures.”

“What did he look like?”

I describe him as best I remember—bow legs and oversized clothes, curly hair, green eyes, and his comic pantomime.

“This man—”

“Kithonius.”

“That is not his name.”

“You know him?”

“Yes, I believe I do. He was not a goatherd.”

“How do you know?”

“I have tried to catch him for fifty years.”

“What? I mean—do you work for the Ministry of Culture or something?”

“Those idiots,” he says, flapping his hand, “can’t even keep the gate locked.”

“So you’re looking for Kithonius—”

“As I said, his name is not Kithonius.” Bergsen says. “He was saying ‘chthonios’—Greek for ‘under the earth.’ It is a dangerous word. It also refers to the underworld, and the spirits that inhabit it.”

“Sure, that makes sense. He kept pointing to the grotto.”

“No.” Bergsen sips his drink. The ice makes that sound again. I don’t know what to say, so I drink, too.

“Cliff, this is probably hard for you to believe, but he was not a goatherd. That was Pan.”

“Pan? The satyr?”

Bergsen keeps his eyes on me as he takes another sip.

“Come on, he was a goatherd. Pan has horns and hairy legs and a big—”

“He has chosen you to join his dance.”

Bergsen leans forward and says, “His sunglasses covered his horns.”

“Of course,” I say. “And his baggy pants covered his hooves.”

“You are mocking me, but it is true.”

I'm about to tell him he's crazy but he sees it coming.

"I was a tourist here many years ago as a newlywed," he says. "Your goatherd carried off my wife. She was—is—a wonderful woman. Smart and charming. And a beauty. Red hair, pale skin, eyes that sparkle when she looks at me."

"What happened?"

"I am not sure. I woke alone one morning. I thought she was up early, walking the beach perhaps. In those days, you could rent a house for nothing and have the beach to yourself. I found the embers of a fire on the beach, her silk dress caught in a shrub nearby."

"That's fucked up," I say, which animates his eyebrows. "Sorry. You never saw her again?"

Bergsen shakes his head.

"I'm sorry," I say, because it's weird and sad and I don't know what else to say.

"I've spent my life trying to find him, to join his dance and be with her again."

"Join his dance?"

"He won't have me." Bergsen finishes his drink, the loose skin on his neck stretching as he tips his head back, the brittle clink of ice cubes against his upper lip. Goat bells, that's what they sound like. "But he is coming for you."

"He could have just waited for me at the tree. Why would he come for me?"

"You are far from home, no one knows exactly where you are, maybe not even that you're in Greece. When you are eventually missed, it will be difficult to determine where and when you disappeared."

"So Kith—you're saying he wants to kidnap me?"

"Yes. One night he will draw you to a remote place—the grotto, a field, a beach. There will be people there, drinking and laughing, dancing around a fire. Eventually, the dancers follow him from the fire into the darkness."

Leaves rustle on the trellis, as if applauding Bergsen's madness.

"Um, okay," I say. "What happens then?"

"Chthonios."

"The underworld?"

He nods.

“I don’t want to go there, I might miss my ferry,” I say. What a character. “I’ve got to go—thanks for the drink, it was fun chatting.”

Bergsen stands with me, his hips and knees popping under sagging pants. “I enjoyed meeting you, Cliff. Be careful.”

I weave through the tables, glancing back as I pull on my backpack. Bergsen is sitting there, watching me. I hurry out of the courtyard into the labyrinth of stairs and passages that lead to the docks. What a strange old man. I get lost in the warren, so I just keep heading down stairs and under archways, past glossy azure doors. When I hear a series of baritone rumbles, the ferry’s engine cycling as it maneuvers into its slip, I take the steps two and three at a time, my backpack rubberbanding. I don’t want to miss the ferry.

The ferry rises thirty feet above me, its rust-speckled flank bowing outward, erasing and redrawing the stars with the chipped paint of its tubular guardrails as it gently sways on the water.

A throng of backpackers waits behind a rope as cars load and unload. I look around for backpackers I’ve met before, but don’t see anyone. I’m annoyed with myself for wanting to see Selena. When the porter drops the rope a mad rush surges onto the ferry. The sounds of the shoe stampede blend, a chaos of echoes, as we charge up the stairs.

Deck space is limited, and shelter from the wind is a priority to avoid a cold and miserable night. I find a spot behind a tarpaulined lifeboat. Half an hour out of port it’s already chilly and everyone’s settled in, shapeless under layers of wrinkled clothing. I watch the other passengers, their impromptu picnics, soothed by the cacophony of chatting and laughter.

I haven’t been asleep for long when I hear the music. It’s not loud, but it’s magnetic. Although I’m cold, despite being fully dressed inside my sleeping bag, I unzip and navigate toward the music, passing through islands of sleeping bags and backpacks, their straps in the air like the legs of dead beetles. No one stirs. I walk to the rail, the ocean surging blackly below. The music is coming from the front of the ship, up on the

forecastle. A red glow rises there, cut by flickering shadows.

I walk toward the music and see a tall man ahead, standing by the rail. He's looking up at the stars and hasn't noticed me. I stop when I recognize him.

"Bergsen?"

He didn't hear me. As I step toward him, a soft hand runs along my arm.

"Hey you."

It's Selena. Her skin is cool and perfect in the moonlight. She's wearing the same loose dress from Santorini.

"Bergsen—"

"Don't worry about him," she says, pulling me gently. "Come with me."

I find myself moving across the deck. Atop a narrow ship's ladder a fire burns in a broad metal brazier in the middle of the steel deck. The chairs are pushed against the rails. Several dozen people dance around the fire, chanting, casting twisted shadows across the deck. They are beautiful, naked and silent. The satyr is a blur of rhythmic gyrations among them, head and elbows rolling. The music comes from a small row of pipes he's playing. I recognize a lanky Dutchman I stood next to in the packed aisle on the train from Napflion to Athens. I haven't seen him on the islands, and despite his height missed him in the ferry queue. His eyes gleam behind his miniscule lenses as he dances, his taut movements on the train replaced with a loose, puppet-like fluidity.

I'm only half aware that I'm walking toward the fire now, my steps already in rhythm with the song. I look over at Selena.

"I missed you on the beach," she says, her hand slipping from mine. She lifts her dress over her head in a single, smooth motion. Her body is a glory of pale swells and clefts, radiant and inviting. She stands unmoving, statuesque, as I undress quickly and without grace. The metal deck is cold on my bare feet; I can feel the engine thrumming. Selena slides her hand back into mine, a warm, fluid promise. Together we join the dance, rising and falling with the others, a circular tide, undulating, beholden to the flames.

Contributor Notes

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Chris Belden is the author of the novels *Shriver* (2013) and *Carry-on* (2012), both published by Rain Mountain Press, and of the story collection *The Floating Lady of Lake Tawaba*, winner of the Fairfield/New Rivers Book Prize (2014, New Rivers Press). He received his MFA from and has taught writing at Fairfield University, as well as at less traditional venues, including, currently, a maximum security prison. Author photo by Marion Ettlinger.



Daniel C. Bryant, a Maine physician, is delighted to have his work appear again in *Sixfold*. His stories have previously appeared in *Nimrod*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Hospital Drive*, *Madison Review*, and *Crab Orchard Review*, and the first chapter of his (so far unpublished) novel *May We Waken One by One* was published in *Silk Road*.



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Susannah Carlson's poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in a number of literary journals, including *Sequoia*, the *SFSU Review*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Red River Review*, and *Quiet Lightning*. Susannah lives in Sunnyvale, California, even though she can't afford to.



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Chip Houser's stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Kansas City Voices*, *Spark: A Creative Anthology*, and *Gemini Magazine*. He's currently in the MFA in Creative Writing Program at the University of Missouri, St. Louis. He continues to work in architecture and interior design when he's not reading, writing, or spending time with his wife and their herd of smallish four-leggeds.



Andy Jameson has worked a variety of jobs: bookstore clerk, construction worker, delivery driver, mover, and the person who rolls up rugs in a rug factory. He currently lives in bucolic Greenwood, South Carolina, with his wife Misty and teaches writing at Lander University. His stories have appeared in many literary magazines, including *Harpur Palate* and *The Chaffin Journal*, with one forthcoming in *Blue Lake Review*.



Thea Johnson is a writer and lawyer living in California. She is currently a fellow at Stanford Law School, where she writes on issues of criminal justice. Her non-fiction work has appeared in *The World Policy Journal*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, and *Moment Magazine*. This is her first published short story.



Rick Kast lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, with his wife Cary and miscellaneous quadrupeds. His three children are grown and have fled in various directions, one as far as Japan. Rick is a lawyer and works in the General Counsel's Office at the University of Virginia. He graduated from UVA in an earlier era with a degree in English. He enjoys writing fiction in his spare time.



Naima Lynch has been writing stories for as long as she could hold a pen. She grew up in Monterey, California where she cultivated a love for morning fog, coffee shops, and paperback copies of Flannery O'Connor's short stories. As a grown-up, she lived and worked throughout the Middle East, primarily in Yemen, Afghanistan, and Dubai. It was in these vivid countries where she learned to seek the stillness at the heart of chaos—and to try to write about it. She holds a Master's Degree in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Chicago, and has written extensively on politics and culture of the region. Prior to that she studied Anthropology and Religious Studies at the University of North Florida. She is currently residing in Sydney, Australia, where she is working on a series of polaroid-inspired paintings, a collection of short stories, and an unruly spate of long naps.



Erin Rodoni is a recovering nomad and new mom. She is the recipient of a 2013 Intro Journals Award in Poetry from the Association of Writing Programs. Her poems have appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Verse Wisconsin*, *Word Riot*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Antiphon*, *Serving House Journal*, and others. She holds an MFA in poetry from San Diego State University. *Crossing the Street in Hanoi* is her first published short story.



Kathryn Shaver, a Kentucky native, spent several decades at the helm of the advertising agency she founded, then developed an international consulting practice in former Communist bloc countries. After retiring from the business community, she completed an MFA in Fiction from Spalding University. Her first published story was awarded Inkwell Journal's 2008 Fiction Prize. Since then, more than a dozen of her stories have appeared in anthologies and literary publications.



John Shortino's stories and essays have appeared in *Barrelhouse*, *The Collagist*, and *Opium*. He lives in Pittsburgh.



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Sabra Waldfogel grew up in Minneapolis. She studied history at Harvard University and received her PhD in American History from the University of Minnesota. She has worked as a technical writer and has written about historic architecture for *Old House Journal* and *Arts and Crafts Homes*. She has just finished a novel, *Slave and Sister*, about a Jewish slaveowner in Georgia who owns her sister, and how the Civil War transforms their relationship.



Tim Weed is a lecturer in the MFA Creative Writing program at Western Connecticut State University and a featured expert for National Geographic in Cuba, Spain, and Patagonia. His fiction has appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Gulf Coast*, and other literary journals, and his nonfiction has appeared in *The Morning News*, *Backcountry*, *Writer's Chronicle*, and elsewhere. Tim's first novel comes out in Spring 2014. Read more at www.tim-weed.net

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Julie Zuckerman hails from Connecticut but moved to Israel eighteen years ago, where she works in high-tech marketing and lives with her husband and four children. Her stories have appeared in *New Orphic Review*, *descant*, *34thParallel*, *The MacGuffin*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *The Dalhousie Review*, and *American Athenaeum*, among others. “Birthday Bash” is part of a story collection she hopes to publish. When she’s not working or writing, she can be found running, biking, or baking.

