SIXFOLD

FICTION WINTER 2014

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Michelle Ross

Cinema Verité

"Just a little chemo," my mother said. She'd called from the interstate as she crossed the Arizona state line from New Mexico. She was going to be in the hospital for a while and wanted me to keep Jaspers. In the most recent photograph I'd seen of her, my mother sat on a boulder, her knees pressed together in the manner of a child posing for a school portrait; the dog sat perched on her lap. My mother had sunglasses pushed back into her thinning tobacco-colored hair, the dog a bandana around its neck. They both wore sugar-skull grins that made you inadvertently check your own face in the mirror to make sure it didn't reveal some defect of character you strained to suppress.

She didn't cross just one state line to put me in this fix—she crossed four. She would've crossed five if she'd taken the shorter route through the Texas Panhandle, but she said, "You'd have to sever my legs and arms before you'd manage to drag me into *that* state." And no doubt she still wouldn't have gone without a fight. She would've wielded a knife between her teeth like Prince Randian in Tod Browning's *Freaks*.

"Sorry to hear that, Mom, I really am, but I can't keep your dog," I said.

I hadn't seen my mother in over a dozen years, not since I was a senior in college. I flew out to spend spring break with her where she'd been working in Portland. The trip had been a whimsy, a gamble. I had no reason to expect it to go well, but foolishly, fantastically, I'd imagined something cinematic: a pan of us trolling downtown streets arm-in-arm, a medium shot of us people-watching at a café, a close-up of lattés blooming foam. Too many film studies courses will do that to you. I longed for cinematic details though that sort of life couldn't possibly spawn from my family's gene pool. Or really I just longed for what my friends seemed to take for granted—a mother who called from time to time to inquire about courses and dating prospects and the food in my dorm refrigerator, who was something more than a name I had to

produce to apply for a credit card.

In reality, the only coffee my mother drank was instant from a rectangular canister. She worked every day of my visit, each morning offering me cereal paired with a ten-dollar bill. She had me drop her off at the nursing home so that I could sight-see during the days. On my third brunch visit that week to the vegan restaurant down the street from her apartment, one of the waiters asked me out. Such was my self-loathing that I accompanied him to a strip club (my idea), then gave him a blow job (his idea) in the back seat of my mother's car.

Crushed, I returned to school and moped about the snow-lined campus. Graduation weekend, I told everyone my mother had won a trip to Antarctica in a sweepstakes. Then I made a decision. No more expectations concerning my mother. No more delusions. I wouldn't cut her off entirely, but I wouldn't offer anything or expect anything.

"The cat will have a conniption fit," I said now.

"So put Jaspers outside. He'll be okay outside."

I reminded her that this was the desert, that he'd be lucky to last a day outside what with the heat and the scorpions and rattlesnakes.

"You don't know Jaspers. He's tough like me. He'll survive." This wasn't cancer patient rhetoric. My mother had long postured as some kind of vigilante hero rescuing herself from the daily onslaught of shit slung in her direction. When she started working as a nurse a few years after my sister Natalie started kindergarten, every evening from then on was graced by war stories about people—patients, nurses, doctors, the kitchen lady—who tried unsuccessfully to cut my mother down. She reminded us that she tolerated none of it. "I stick up for myself," she said. And her eyes were so wide and her gestures so spastic during the retelling that I half-expected her head to spin all the way around or a spring to pop out from somewhere—that her body might self-destruct like a robot on the fritz.

"What about Natalie?" I asked now.

Natalie was the ongoing recipient of my mother's care packages and checks though she was past thirty. When cornered, Natalie pontificated about her volunteer work to save the sea turtles, but it was clear to everyone, perhaps even

our mother, that most of her time was devoted to marathon Bacchanalian beach parties.

Ft. Lauderdale was probably half the distance from Tennessee.

She said, "I don't want her to know about this. Your sister's sensitive." She was silent for a moment. "He's got nowhere else to go, Fran. If you won't take him for me, I'm going to have to leave him at a shelter. They'd put him to sleep. I love that dog to death. It would kill me."

The last time my mother re-entered my life, it was via a box with three wrapped gifts, their respective tags reading "Happy Birthday 2003," "Merry Christmas 2003," and "Happy Birthday 2004." Soon after, she called to ask if I'd steal some photo albums and a gadget called the Spa Master from my father's house. The time before that was when Greg and I got married. She sent a voucher for one night in a hotel in St. Louis (a sweepstakes winning no doubt), a silver heart-shaped plaque reading "George and Fran, October 2000," (which Greg hung above our toilet in an effort to cheer me up), and a brief note explaining that she'd rather be a knife thrower's apprentice than be in the same room as my father and his sisters, but that she loved me more than I would ever know and would I pester my father about a piece of furniture that was rightfully hers?

This time the request for a favor came without gifts, it seemed.

It was August, and the desert summer heat pummeled every living thing into drunken submission, so perhaps that's why I eventually agreed to meet my mother in a Denny's parking lot (she didn't ask to come to the house, and I didn't offer). Also, I was intrigued by her proclaimed devotion to this dog. I wanted to call her bluff. I was certain she wouldn't be back for him, and I thought that proving myself right could be satisfying in some way.

When I arrived, my business-as-usual mother popped the trunk and unloaded a lot more than Jaspers onto me. There were gifts after all. She'd brought along aerobics videos, eight boxes of Girl Scout cookies (half of them opened), a bona fide longhorn skull, cake decorating supplies, an unopened

disco globe, and a suitcase full of Jaspers' possessions: leopard-print bed, canned food, kibble, treats, ear medicine, toothbrush and toothpaste, claw clippers, and a dozen or so candy-colored rubber mammals, all with great big smiling mouths. They looked like novelty sex toys.

"Just some stuff I was getting rid of and thought you might like," she explained as she piled it all onto the asphalt between our cars. If I didn't take her junk, it would sit there until someone else did or else a Denny's employee was tasked with the job of disposing of it.

What I said was, "I'm not brushing that dog's teeth."

"That's okay. I've only done it a couple times myself. I brought everything he owns, just in case."

"Just in case what?" She had dark circles under her eyes, but that wasn't new, nor was the way she mostly avoided eye contact and took every opportunity to crack her neck. What was new, at least since I'd last seen her, was the extra padding around her middle—fifteen pounds worth probably.

Without blinking, she said, "I thought maybe you brushed that cat's teeth, that maybe you might know how to do it. I really should brush his teeth. He just hates it so much, and I don't know what I'm doing."

"If you don't come back for him, I'm not keeping him," I said.

She shook her head. Then she reached in and lifted the dog from where he lay on the driver's seat, no doubt still warm from my mother's body. She pressed him to her chest, scratched his neck, and rubbed noses with him. He whimpered, and she cooed. When she did look at me, she looked pained. She said, "I don't know why you'd say something like that."

"Now you take care of yourself, boy," she said to the dog. "Mama loves you."

"I'll be in touch," she said to me as she placed the dog into my arms as gently and carefully as if handing me an organ from her own body.

On the drive home, I turned the volume on the radio up higher than I had in years. To muffle the dog's cries, I told myself.

A few weeks later a man named Clayton Stanley called at half past four in the morning on a Saturday to inform me he'd broken up with my mother.

The night before, I'd watched Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, so I watched Greg carefully that morning as he put on his running shoes and then circled the bedroom five times searching for his eyeglasses. If he'd found them any sooner, I might have been suspicious. This was typical Greg though, even his getting up ridiculously early in the summer to run before there was the desert sun to reckon with. He kissed me and then he was gone, closing the door as gently as he would have if I'd still been asleep. When he first told me he loved me so many years earlier, I'd told him he was joking, this after we'd been sleeping together for three months. The stricken look on his face when I said it was what made me believe him.

Clayton Stanley said he would have broken up with my mother even if she hadn't gotten cancer.

"Good to know," I said.

"Your mother's funny and charming, but she's not easy to be with. She's like a big ball of tangled strands of Christmas lights. Strands that don't go together. You know, like different colors and different shapes. And ornaments and hooks. A heck of a lot of hooks actually. It's more than I'm prepared to handle right now."

"That metaphor is very helpful. Thank you."

Clayton said, "Well, would *you* want to be in a relationship with a person like that?"

Jaspers barked from the guest bedroom. I didn't care what my mother said about it; that pitiful little thing would have been a rattlesnake meal in no time, assuming the heat didn't get him first. Clive, our cat, rose from his place by my feet and buried his face into my neck like a lover.

"I get it," I said. "I suppose that if I could just as easily break up with my mother, I'd do it too."

"I thought you should check on her. This break-up could be hard for her. Her time is limited, you know."

I didn't know the least little thing about it, I told him. I asked how he got my number.

He told me I was her emergency contact. In her personnel

file. They'd worked together. She quit.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised to learn my mother had listed me as her emergency contact. She did drive across five states to leave her dog with me. But I was bewildered, my mind blown. Why should I come to my mother's rescue in the case of an emergency?

But after hanging up the phone, I felt something else—how alone my mother must have been in the world if I was the best she could do for an emergency contact and for saving her beloved dog from euthanasia. Lying there clammy with exhaustion, I felt as though my gut were a sack full of stones and my bones made of air.

First thing Natalie said was, "Cancer! But she's going to be all right, right?"

"Do you think everyone who gets cancer ends up all right?" I said.

"God, you always know what to say," I heard between earfuls of wind.

"That's right," I said. "That's why I called. Since you're the sensitive one, I figured you'd want to travel to Tennessee to look in on her."

She couldn't, she said and slewed off a list of reasons, finishing with "And I'd be a big sobbing mess. I'd just upset her."

Laughter like the howls of coyotes echoed in the background. A petulant male voice shouted, "Hurry up, Nat!"

Then, "You're the oldest," she said matter-of-factly.

I didn't ask for clarification, but I got it anyway. "The oldest takes care of the parents when they get old." Not a hint of maliciousness in her voice. She could have been explaining something mundane like it was the job of a stem to hold a plant upright.

"Mom's not old," was all I said.

After hanging up the phone, I abandoned the pasta salad I'd been making for dinner and left Greg, who was out rock climbing, a note that I was going to the cinema. I didn't bother to look up what was playing or when, just drove over and bought a ticket to the next film showing. The month's Second Saturdays Horror Classics feature was George Romero's

Night of the Living Dead.

I was forty minutes early, but the theater was empty, so I sat in the gloaming and waited as strangers slowly trickled in. I could hear people's individual breaths, the intimate sounds of their lips pressing against plastic cups and their fingers searching pockets and purses. Sitting in the dark with a handful of strangers, I half expected someone to lay a hand on my leg or bite my ear. It felt like a one-night stand, like anything could happen.

Then the movie started, and I sucked the chocolate off Junior Mints as I watched the small band of survivors in the boarded-up farmhouse perish one by one. Tom and Judy, the teenage couple, got themselves blown up when Tom spilled gasoline near the truck that Judy was pinned inside of, her jacket caught. Harry and Helen Cooper were devoured by their daughter, Karen, whom they'd foolishly brought into the farmhouse despite that she'd been bit. Barbra was devoured by her brother. And Ben, the only one of the group to survive the night, was shot in the morning by a very human redneck who barely glimpsed him before mistaking him for a monster.

I took the most decadent shower of my life, stood beneath the spray of hot water for fifteen minutes maybe before Greg's knock on the glass door startled me. He was naked and grinning.

I gave him a discouraging look.

He stepped into the shower and wrapped his arms around me. He said, "It's incredibly kind of you to drive all the way out there to check on her. You don't have to do it."

"There isn't anybody else."

"Like I said, incredibly kind."

"I don't feel kind. I feel the opposite of kind."

He lifted my chin up. "You're nothing like her."

"I dreamt last night that she'd committed suicide."

Greg kissed me. "Babe, I'm sorry."

"I haven't told you the half of it. I was relieved, I mean seriously, deeply relieved. I saw myself at her funeral in a black skirt that ended in stiff ruffles and when Natalie said to me that I was unfeeling, I said to her, 'Death is just a part of life.' And then I ate a shrimp cocktail."

"You can't be held responsible for your dreams. Everybody dreams crazy shit."

I didn't tell him then how much like a Jean-Luc Godard film my dream had been. Stark black-and-white with jump cuts, collages, and asynchronicity. I could sketch that ruffled skirt in detail, as well as the shot of the three shrimp hooked over the rim of a martini glass framed by an arched doorway looking onto my mother's coffin. I didn't tell him how exquisitely beautiful the dream had been. I didn't tell him how disappointed I'd felt when I woke and it was all over.

My mother's apartment building had bars on the windows, and the peeling forest green doors were swollen from humidity. The porches looked out on the parking lot that surrounded the building on all sides. And on my mother's side of the building, there was the additional fascination of a feed store across the street with all its pick-up trucks and stiff bricks of hay. On her porch was where I found my mother—kicking back on a fold-out chair, a glass of iced tea sweating in her hand.

Jaspers was out of the car, between the thin metal bars of the porch railing, and onto my mother's lap before I could shut the car door. My mother smiled in spite of herself. She held the dog up to get a good look at him.

"You didn't tell me you were coming," she said. "I can't take Jaspers back right now. It's not possible."

"It's just a visit," I said.

"You drove twenty-plus hours so he could visit?"

"There is the whole chemo/cancer thing. And you don't answer your phone. And your coworker called me."

She looked at me briefly, then back at the dog.

"Well, I've changed my mind." She cracked her neck.

"About what?"

"About chemo. Pathetic odds. I'm more likely to win a million dollars from a nickel slot machine."

"So what *are* you going to do?" I asked.

"Dig for diamonds."

At first I thought it was a joke. Talk about dismal odds. But then she disappeared into the apartment and returned with a pamphlet for Arkansas's Crater of Diamonds State

Park, which boasts a 37-acre mine field where about 700 diminutive diamonds are discovered each year.

"Until you die?" I said. If I'd thought about it more, I might have worded it differently. Might have.

"Yes, I'm going to dig myself a grave." She grinned.

This was a woman who'd spent her weekends when I was a girl trolling the beach looking like an extra from the cantina scene in *Star Wars* with her metal detector extending from one arm like a strange proboscis, a shovel in her other hand, and earphones that made her ears over into the compound eyes of a fly. In the evenings, she'd addressed post card after post card to enter every sweepstakes imaginable.

That's probably when I should have asked her how long she'd been told to expect or, heck, where in her body the cancer was. I couldn't tell from looking at her. Other than the extra weight, no visible part of her was misshapen. Nothing fluttered or murmured. She didn't hold herself any differently or rub away at a fixed region the way pregnant women do the foreign growths inside their bodies. But I didn't ask. I didn't want to know. Asking questions can get a person into trouble. You often get a good deal more than you bargain for, and I was on the hook enough as it was.

What I asked was when she planned to leave.

"You might as well give me a ride now since you're here," she said. "It's on your way back."

After she'd quit her job, she'd sold her car. She'd been planning this for a while, no doubt—bit by bit, getting rid of everything that wasn't practical to take with her to Murfreesboro, including Clayton Stanley. She'd probably never planned on chemo in the first place. It was a ruse to get me to take Jaspers in—more effective than saying, I'm going to run off to a pit in Arkansas to treasure hunt until I die. It turned out I was sort of right about her abandoning the dog, but I was wrong about it giving me some satisfaction. She hadn't planned on telling me any of this. She would have disappeared into thin air if Clayton hadn't called and I hadn't driven out there pronto.

All that was left to do was pack her clothing. So that's what I did while she walked Jaspers. None of it was folded in

its current state—wadded in drawers, flung over the door frame of the closet. The abundant wrinkles made folding seem pointless. Still, I folded each piece as if each fold were a punch on my responsibilities-toward-my-dying-mother punch card, which, once filled, would earn me absolution from the nuisances of guilt and regret. I folded five pairs of elastic-waistband polyester slacks, more or less identical except for the colors; six blouses, a hodgepodge of pastels and neutrals, similarly plain and awkward like an aspiring sewer's first projects; four faded T-shirts; two cotton night gowns and a robe, all ankle-length; a single beige bra; an assortment of ankle socks; and a stack of beige cotton briefs. They weren't clothes that would catch someone's eye on a rack. They didn't look exactly comfortable either. They were cheap, there was that, but if frugality was all there was to it, she could have done better at a thrift store. What they revealed was someone who didn't think about clothing except to register that it was necessary to wear some if you didn't want to get arrested.

I loaded the canvas suitcase, as well as a pile of bedding and several cardboard boxes I found in the kitchen—toiletries, snack foods (mostly cheese crackers and caramel popcorn), and digging supplies—into the trunk of my car. As I closed the trunk, a voice called out from a neighboring porch sliding glass door. "LuAnn, you taking off already?"

My mother had come around the corner of the building, the dog strolling beside her on his leash. "My daughter showed up. She's going to give me a ride."

"I know you weren't going to leave without saying goodbye," the voice hollered, and out into the sunlight pouring onto the porch stepped a transsexual in a tangerine silk robe. She was tall and angular, and she touched her smooth scalp as though she hadn't intended for anyone to see it in its naked state. She'd sacrificed vanity to say farewell to my mother, who laughed in response.

"Oh, you're so funny," my mother said. I didn't see what was so funny, but the woman returned my mother's laugh and threw her arms up in the air.

"Woman, get over here and give me a proper hug goodbye."

My mother laughed again, but when the woman grasped her firmly by the shoulder blades, she quieted and hugged her

back. I mean my mother gripped her like a lost child returned.

My mother was *not* a hugger; she was a patter. And I remembered her complaining to us when I was a kid about a transsexual at the nursing home she'd worked at, how she'd used the women's restroom. *I have no problem with any of it but the bathroom part. I just can't relax if I know there's a penis in the next stall.*

Suddenly I wanted to back out. I wanted to get into my car and drive all the way home, leaving my mother to take the bus. I didn't want to be alone with her. Breathing in lungfulls of particles that had traveled in and out of the mucus-lined passages of my mother's body seemed far too intimate.

Driving the four hours to Murfreesboro with my mother as passenger was like tending to a pigeon that had flown in through the window. She squawked and squirmed for several minutes as she situated herself. Once settled, she gnashed caramel popcorn and rubbed the dog so fiercely I worried he might bite her. She stared straight ahead at the road. She remained in the car when I stopped for gas, declined my suggestion that she stretch her legs or take advantage of the restroom.

Arriving in Murfreesboro was a relief, and then it wasn't. The cabin my mother planned to spend her remaining days in was rustic to say the least. The only running water was a spigot outside the building. Toilets and showers were communal and located down the street. The beds were wooden platforms on which you could set up a sleeping bag or some blankets. It was equipped with a single outlet, but no light, no fan. Forget about a refrigerator.

She unpacked her suitcase and her boxes onto one of the four wooden platforms, arranged everything in neat little rows that I would bet didn't last more than 24 hours. She talked aloud to herself about where each item should go.

I excused myself to go to the restroom down the street. There I splashed cold water onto my face. In the worn mirror I could see how much I looked like her. Same creases under the eyes, same crooked mouth. If I'd felt like smiling, I would have seen her smiling back at me. Although normally I thought cosmetic surgery was for cyborgs and people utterly lacking

in self-worth, at that moment, I kind of got it. Why should anyone be doomed every day to stare back at the features of the people who conceived them?

When I returned to the cabin, I said, "Mom, this place." What? It stinks? You shouldn't die here? And if not, where? My house?

"I don't need much."

"What about food? What if it gets very hot? Summer isn't over yet. What if you get very sick?"

"I'm already sick."

"You know what I mean."

"I won't suffer," she said. She sounded fierce and practiced as though she'd repeated these words to herself. "That's why I'm here. No hospitals. No treatments. I'll be out before I can count to ten. As for food, there's a cafeteria at the Visitor's Center. And you can take me to the store to buy a fan if it makes you feel better."

If it makes me feel better? Was this judgment? Or was she simply assuaging me? I decided I didn't care either way. A fan *would* make me feel better.

Despite her protests, I insisted on purchasing the fan, as well as every kind of snack imaginable and cases of water and a whole lot else. I went on a shopping spree. I bought her a lamp, a solar-powered lantern for trips to the bathroom in the dark, a battery-powered radio and three packages of batteries. I pestered her to pick out some books and magazines. And did she want a portable DVD player and movies? And heck, how about some art supplies? Might she want to take up water color or pastels? And gum? Did she need chewing gum?

Now my mother was the one who was worried.

"This isn't like you," she said.

I surprised myself by throwing my arms around her right then and there in the check-out line. My mother felt like limp celery in my arms, but I squeezed her anyway. I squeezed her until she said she couldn't breathe. When I let go, she dug around in her purse, muttering about something she couldn't find. I looked away too so that she wouldn't see the pain in my eyes.

I knew then that I had no intention of staying the night. I was spending money like the apocalypse was upon us because

it kind of was. I was going to leave my mother to die alone in a rustic-as-rustic-gets cabin in Arkansas. I was trying to buy some kind of absolution though I knew that not even buying her the moon would be enough.

But I was *not* Karen Cooper rising from the dead and doing her mother Helen off with a masonry trowel, then feasting upon her flesh. I was Helen Cooper revised. I was walking out and driving away. I was saving myself.

When we returned to the cabin, we had two hours before the park closed, so after unloading the car for the second time that day and giving Jaspers some treats and a brief jaunt outside the cabin, we headed to the park with my mother's diamond digging supplies in tow.

As the sun grew heavier, my mother poured dirt onto her sifting screen, shook it back and forth, fingered the pieces remaining, dumped, and repeated. I knelt down with her despite how uncomfortable the grit would be on my legs and arms and in my shoes as I drove later that evening—getting as far away from her as possible before stopping to rest for the night.

Then I watched her make her way over to the washing station, a long shot that included a panoramic view of the grapefruit-pink sunset and the people scattered about digging and sifting through thirty-seven acres of dirt for the two minuscule diamonds odds predicted would be discovered that day. Then a medium-shot of her standing among a small crowd of earnest diamond hunters washing and agitating their screens together. Then an iris-in that narrowed further and further until all I could see was my mother's head tilted back in a wild laugh, an image that would break anybody's heart.

Laura M. Rocha

Young & Golden

I was not always Zelda Fitzgerald, lunatic wife of the famed scribe, F. Scott Fitzgerald. Once, I was young and golden and boys wrote my name in the sky, fresh-faced flyboys buzzing our house in their prop planes until my father, The Judge, came out to shake his fist at the heavens. I existed in my own right. I was separate and I was whole. I remind myself of this when the nonsense words go clanging in the next room, when the medicine cart's wheels rattle in the hall, when that damned static hisses in my head, making me feel as though there is no escape from the torments of this world.

I have been at Highland Hospital here in Asheville, North Carolina, for nearly four years. Before that I lived with my mother in Montgomery. Before that I was at the Phipps Clinic at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. And before that I was a different person, a bright star on the black canvas of life. I'm sure I don't have to explain to you—but I will—how sometimes the brightest of stars flare up and burn too hot, and that is what happened to me. That is how I lost myself and ended up here.

I have ways of coping with the pain that accompanies my illness, exercises meant to keep me "grounded." Honestly, I don't know who *wants* to be grounded, but I know I've got to play along, because otherwise all that unfulfilled desire might just burst right through my skin. Calisthenics, horseback riding, and hiking the rocky hills around the clinic are the doctors' ideas of soothing and appropriate activities. Painting, dancing, writing, and remembering are mine.

Scott has never liked my creative pursuits, and Scott, man of words, has a way of putting things that makes people agree. On his orders, writing was forbidden for a time, dancing strictly off limits, painting to be done only after all other options were exhausted. I suppose that's to be expected when one paints pictures of people aflame. It's the remembering the doctors have never been able to stand, though, and it's the remembering they can't stop, though they do try.

"Dwelling on the past will only cause a regression, Mrs. Fitzgerald. You can't change the past. No one can. So, there is no point to reliving it. We like for our patients to move forward. Why don't you go for another walk instead?"

Still, it's my favorite refuge and my last rebellion, the memories of who I was and who I might've been. When the glare is at its unbearable brightest, I think of Montgomery, summer coming on, full and fragrant like hothouse flowers, and I go, quick as I can, to the big white house on Pleasant Avenue. I don't stop until I smell the pear trees, their perfumed air on my skin like a sigh. Then I listen until Grandmother Sayre calls: "Zelda! Come now! Your mama's ready for you."

My heart races my feet down the stairs, and it's a miracle. My bones do not ache; my skin does not burn. I am fifteen years old, and no one outside of Alabama knows my name yet. I have not been to New York City or danced in public fountains; I have not lodged in luxurious hotel rooms or given birth to a fat, pink child. I have not considered extramarital affairs or contemplated suicide. It's wonderful—so wonderful—to be perched on the edge of everything again. It feels like when you lie awake all of Christmas Eve, your body sizzling in anticipation of the next morning, your mind bubbling with the thought of all the riches about to come your way.

On the first floor, I twist my skirt around to face front, smooth my hair, and hurry after my grandmother, so close I nearly step on her hem. For all her supposed ailments, Grandmother Sayre is moving fast today. She always moves fast on Mama's good days. No one knows how long the spells of lucidity will last, and it's best to keep moving, cramming days, weeks, months of meaning into a tiny pocket of time.

At the bedroom door, Grandmother Sayre raps once and pushes on in. The room is stuffy, the windows shut. The pungent smell of wilted lilacs spills from a blue porcelain vase on the dresser, but underneath, there is still, always, the odor of disinfectant and disease. Mama's bent over the black Singer like a cat curled around a heater, spinning the wheel as she feeds a luminous pink satin to the hungry needle. She's not in her dirty old dressing gown but in a starched blouse and skirt, her hair pinned up off her neck. She's humming.

"Mama!" My voice is too big for this space, and Grandmother

Sayre's head swivels, quick as a spool on its spindle. I smile at her, pretending not to understand her reproach.

Mama rises. "The dress is almost done. You ready for the recital, Baby?" Her cheeks flush like fruit, pinpricks of perspiration on her brow. I have the urge to demonstrate a pirouette, a skill I've perfected in the days since we last talked. I so want Mama to come to the Follies and see me dance my first lead, but I know better than to bring that up again. Though I manage to hold my words inside, the rebellious things attempt to escape through my feet. They make me hop once and land in a deep plié, my knees bent at perfect angles. Grandmother Sayre, a Confederate War widow to her core, frowns at this display of frivolity, but Mama, my one true ally in all the world, responds with a mock solemn bow.

My eldest sister Marjorie once told me our mother wanted to be an actress when she was a girl. "She had a part in a play directed by Georgiana Barrymore but turned it down to marry The Judge." Hearing this had made me love Mama all the more, and I'd felt a savage disappointment that she would abandon herself for our dour-faced father. I can tell you this: I lived with The Judge for twenty years, and Anthony D. Sayre, Esq., though a fortress of a man, was no reason to turn your back on your dreams. It was like trading caviar for a very dependable ham sandwich and pretending to enjoy it all the same.

"Zelda," snaps Grandmother Sayre.

"It's alright, Mother Sayre. Baby's got her head in the clouds. It's my fault for spoiling her." Mama crosses the room, skirt rustling, and digs her long fingers into my curls as though I am still a little girl. She cannot see my hidden strength.

I imagine I can hold my mama down. Keep her from wandering off to that place with the dark caverns where the sloshing of lonely waters whispers her name. I've seen that place in my nightmares, the place where my brother Daniel died so many years before, and Lord knows I don't want Mama to go back there. How awful to keep searching for something—someone—you will just never find.

Grandmother Sayre clears her throat, and Mama pulls away. How I wish that old woman would go back to Tuskegee and leave us alone!

Mama's hands flash like white birds as she helps me into the skirt and slips the bodice over my shoulders. The measuring tape flicks in and out through her fingers, shoulder to waistline, waistline to ankle, around the ribs. The process ends too quickly. The pieces of my new dress are stripped from my skin, and I'm pushed toward the door. I break away, though, and bolt back to Mama, already returned to the sewing machine, two pins between her teeth. I take hold of my mama from behind and squeeze. She gasps, the pins dropping onto the metal of the sewing machine stand with soft clicks that create fissures in my heart.

"I'm gonna dance," I say, "and dance and dance. No one in this town has ever seen such dancin'. I feel the music now, in my bones. It makes my skin itch likes it's on fire! Isn't that wonderful?"

There's a tap on my shoulder, and I turn to see a hard smile affixed to Grandmother's face, probably the same smile she gave "those blood-thirsty Yankees" when they marched through Alabama. I give Mama one quick kiss on her head and scurry from the room. That familiar glow is kindling inside. Someday I will be away from my family's restraint and my town's expectations. I will go to a place where big things happen. I can be someone else. I can be myself. The thought of this freedom terrifies and thrills me in equal measure.

My brother, Daniel, died before I was born. My family never did like to talk about loss, not unless it was in lecture form, but I know he fell from a rock into Blackbird Creek, his small, bare feet slipping on the slick moss. He struck his head on the way down. The exact methodology of his death—of any death come to that—is a mystery to me. He drowned. He broke his neck. He punctured a lung. I've imagined him, my own personal ghost, dying a dozen different ways. It doesn't matter how it happened. What matters is that when he came out of the water, when they dragged him out of the water, he was dead.

When the constable came to tell Mama, she went into her room and closed the door. She didn't come out for more than three weeks. The Judge tried consoling her. Grandmother Sayre tried rebuking her. The doctor tried reasoning with

her. There was still my sister, Marjorie, now an only child.

"Minnie," he said, "You are still a mother." She needed to "buck up, be strong, and soldier forth," all those phrases with which people attempt to patch one together when they are not in possession of actual, helpful advice. Still, Mama remained in her room.

What did she do in there? I've often wondered, particularly during the periods of my own isolation. Did she stare at the wall? Read books? Sob uncontrollably? Did she lose herself in a waking sleep, chasing after another dissipated dream?

Nearly a month after my brother died, Mama emerged. She was someone different, bright as a soap bubble, doting to a fault. Seven years, three more children, and everyone believed she'd moved on. She fooled them. I think it's because they wanted to be fools. Recovery from the loss of a part of oneself cannot be measured in time.

Then one afternoon, my very pregnant mother slipped beneath her blankets, refusing once more to bathe or eat or get out of bed. There was no mania to this madness, no screaming or ranting, no railing against God and man. There was only Mama, alone, and so sad she could not bear to exist in a world that had let her boy die. Like a swelling Southern summer, her grief had to rise to an unbearable crescendo before it could recede again, and it was when her internal sorrow was at its loudest, during the summer of 1900, that I, Zelda Sayre, sixth and final child, was born, my mama's longing wrapped in a gilded package.

We run the streets of Montgomery the way other children run in their backyards. Every rock has been skipped, every tree climbed, every flower smelled. We know everything there is to know about one another. We know sweet Sara Mayfield prefers gardenias to roses and peanuts make little Charley Stockton swell up like a balloon. We know handsome Lee Callaway writes poetry and wild Zelda Sayre never has a serious word to say. Montgomery, where everything is as it should be and nothing ever changes. We love our drowsy town, every day long and lingering as a summer sun, but some of us wonder what it would be like to shake off that haze and come alive.

It's The Great War that shifts Montgomery from sleepy burg to patriotic hub, reigniting a pulse that hasn't been felt since the Confederacy. There are training camps outside of town, would-be soldiers pouring from the rails to fill them, boys teeming with bravado and hope and the stirrings of patriotism. There are new ice cream parlors and soda fountains dotting Sycamore Drive, and dances held once a week or more, handsome young men in smart, high-collared uniforms, looking for a girl who knows how to move. These are the boys who take to hanging around my tin-roofed porch in the firefly-lit evenings, who offer glowing brass insignia as a sign of their adoration, who skim the clouds over Pleasant Avenue in their planes, raising the stakes in a game none of them will win. None save one.

The night I meet Scott, I'm asked to perform a solo from The Dance of the Hours at the country club. Initially I demur. It's been three years since I became the belle of the Montgomery ball and I've grown tired of dancing on the same stage for the same people, but at the last minute, my feet get to tingling and I change my mind, consenting to perform.

At the club, I am nervous, though I don't know why. My friend Sara asks that I save her a soldier or two tonight. Backstage, the younger girls wish me luck, their eyes wet with admiration. The thick green curtain is raised. At the first swell of strings, the first trill of bells, my anxiety melts into the floor and I am carried away, transported by the way my body responds to the music.

This is Francis Scott Fitzgerald's first image of me: a radiant blur of gold and plum, long, cream-colored arms and legs, grace and heat. This is my introduction to him: a striking, confident Northerner in uniform, his rigid jaw and mouth at odds with his limpid green eyes. He meets me at the edge of the stage, pushing another suitor aside to inquire if all Southern girls can dance that way.

"If so, I think I've spent my life in the wrong part of the country," he says.

"You don't know the half of it," I respond.

He brings me a drink, something cold and sweet, and leads me outside where we sit on a concrete bench and listen to the cicadas sing. He's from Minnesota, a land I imagine to be

made wholly of ice. He hopes to be sent overseas soon so he won't miss all the excitement, but he's been keeping himself busy writing a novel in the officers' training camp. He works on it every Saturday afternoon and all day on Sundays. He wants to be a writer.

"I want to be a dancer," I tell him. Then I tell him about Sara and Genie and Roberta and Charley and Lee and Bill, just everyone I can think of, and I tell him about the house on Pleasant Avenue, how I adore peach pie and can't stand to wait for anything at all, and how wonderful Montgomery is, especially in the summer when the warm air is just ripe for napping on a porch swing.

"I've never met a girl with so damned much to say," he says amiably, and I see it in his eyes, a world beyond the South. I can tell from the way he goes on about himself that he is just as spoiled as me, just as sure he knows exactly where he is going. He will spend the rest of our life together assuring me he can get there with no one other. I rarely believe him, but that's another story.

"*The Romantic Egotist*?" I don't like the title of Scott's novel, but I haven't read it yet, so I'm hesitant to tell him. It's new to me, this concern that I've missed something, some revelatory outpouring of this man's soul. Scott has been to Princeton after all. Just a few months before, I couldn't wait to be done with school, but now I feel the need to prove myself, to show I'm more than a pretty, small town belle.

Scott grasps my hand, his delicate fingers sliding between mine. "It's the perfect title. The main character—his name is Amory—his ambitions ruin love for him, and . . . oh, you'll have to read it. I'll send a chapter when I get back to barracks. This book is going to change literature. I'm speaking for our whole generation. Just wait. You'll see."

"So I've heard." I lean into him. He smells of linen and pencil lead. He smells of promise, something cleaner than even the pear trees just the other side of the yard. He strokes my hair, his fingers trailing along my spine in a way that makes me think of desserts covered in whipped cream.

Though Scott has met my parents on several occasions, tonight was the first time he'd been invited to stay for supper.

Upon hearing of our guest, The Judge had begun to act even more put upon than usual, and this rankled me so that I was forced to mention more than twice how my family had better eat faster so I could get on to my next date. In response, The Judge's square face expanded to the approximate shape and shade of a rutabaga. Pushed to his limits, he grasped the wooden handle of his steak knife and rose, the backs of his knees knocking his chair into the wall. He advanced upon me, and I, delighted to have extracted even the slightest emotion from one of Alabama's esteemed judiciary, hurried around the opposite side of the table, laughing like mad. My siblings continued on with the meal, as they are apt to do when things get out of hand. Mama inquired of Scott if he'd like another glass of iced sweet tea. After a couple laps around the table, both The Judge and I resumed our seats and finished the roast on our plates.

"Not that I want to turn talk away from my literary prowess, but is your family always like that?" says Scott.

I sit up. The porch swing rocks with agitation, its rusty old chains croaking like the bullfrog camped in the farthest, dampest corner of the yard. "Like what?"

Scott raises an eyebrow and glances at the lighted windows. He needn't worry. The Judge is snoring upstairs, our dinner-time squabble long forgotten. It's only Mama behind those lace curtains, pretending to cross-stitch while she keeps an eye on the mantle clock. She's having a good spell, worried about nothing more than whether I've remembered to put on my stockings.

"Oh, that." I snuggle back against Scott. "No, they're not always like that. Only when they dislike someone do they try so very hard to be themselves."

Scott sighs. "I would think they liked me very much. It takes such a great effort to be oneself, don't you think?"

"Scott Fitzgerald," I say, "I think I might love you."

Scott never promises riches or fame, though it's clear that is what he craves. My tastes are different from his. I'm already a star, remember? What I yearn for is a place where my heart won't feel so restless, where I won't fall like Sleeping Beauty into a lull from which I might never wake. I want a

bigger stage, one without all those familiar faces before me, and Scott is that stage. He sees something he needs in me, too, that spark a pile of kindling needs to burn. We are engaged to be married that fall.

Within a year, everything has been turned on its head. The war is over; Scott's book is soundly rejected, his confidence shattered. In spite of my misgivings, I break our engagement. It isn't the money, though I know that's what people whisper when I pass. It's the loss of something inexplicable, the loss of something I never had but can't bear to live without. Scott has changed.

He writes to me from New York where he's taken a copywriting job he hates, but his letters are terse, the life bled out of them. Still I hold them close, a sheaf of papers tucked into a flowered hatbox under my bed. Though I've got beaux from Auburn to Georgia Tech, I cannot stand to toss those bits of Scott in the trash. I try my best to recover myself, but it's too late. I have changed, too.

"He's unstable," says Mama. "A writer? Baby, you would've lived hand to mouth if you'd married him. You'll find a nice Southern boy soon enough. You can't let an imaginary future rub out a real one."

Can she see the irony of this condemnation? I can never bring myself to comment on it for fear my mama honestly doesn't know how we are the same, how there are two sides to us, two broken sides, and we cannot rest until we've put them back together and are whole.

In its third incarnation, *The Romantic Egotist* becomes *This Side of Paradise*, all the pieces falling into place. Four days after receiving his acceptance letter from Scribner's, Scott appears on our porch. His fair hair is parted down the middle and slicked back. His light eyes are luminous once again. He is a beacon, calling me. I take his warm hand and step out of the white house, into the world.

"Morning, Mrs. Fitzgerald." In an instant, Montgomery is gone, a syrupy alto drawing me back to the world where the floors smell not of pears but of bleach. It's Joyce, my favorite nurse, if you can have a favorite in a place like

this. When I was younger, people said they were going to "take a cure" or "convalesce." Now I'm just considered insane. *The World's First Flapper in a Nut House*. Now there's a title.

Sometimes I ask the nurse on duty to put in a call to Scott in California. She always squints when I ask about my husband, and I am plagued by the old terror that I'm being blamed for something beyond my control. Can't they see everything is beyond my control? People have tried to say I held Scott back, postulating on how great he might've been without me. Isn't that just the way? Always it's been, since Eve gave Adam that apple. As if Adam had no choice in the matter. As if there never was anything special and pure and true between us. Ha. Now I'm sounding like another writer we know, and Lord, I wouldn't want that.

Without me, Scott might've been more. Without me, Scott might've been less. Don't you think, has it ever occurred to you, that without me, Scott might've been nothing at all? He has his faults, you know. I don't like to dwell on such things because he is my stage, so big and full of promise, but without a star, the stage remains dark. Just remember that. Just remember: I am Rosalind. I am Gloria. I am Nicole Diver. I am Daisy Buchanan, damn it. I am every girl he ever wrote, and if he's going to portray me in so uncharitable a light, the least he can do is acknowledge my place in this, his art. This is what I tell myself when the static is not too loud.

To Joyce, the nurse, I say, "Can you just get him on the phone already?"

She's fiddling with the medicine cart, locking and unlocking its little metal doors. "Mmmm?" she says without looking up.

Then I remember: I can't call Scott because he's dead. A heart attack in his mistress's apartment. On my good nights, I dream of gouging that woman's eyes out with a tiny fork like the ones Scott and I used to eat shrimp cocktail in Paris. He's been gone seven years, hasn't he? Time is slippery, mercurial, hot, silver liquid staining my hands. There is never enough time but then all these years have passed so quickly. How is that possible? How does life go on at such a pace?

"Mrs. Fitzgerald?" Joyce, always interrupting. "Your pills, ma'am. Meds before breakfast, remember?"

My fingers itch to knock those wretched pills from their

metal tray. I don't want them now because I am thinking. My reflection, aged and whitewashed, blinks out from the nurse's horn-rimmed glasses. My mouth is pinched, and my glowing golden hair is replaced by a mop of drab brown. It is all wrong—all wrong!—and I want to rip it out, every strand. I would do it, too, but for the thought of the pain in the tender scalp beneath. And it's the pain that pulls me back, reins me in. So, I take their pills. I swallow them and trace their path, down and down and down, inside myself I go.

Shawn Miklaucic

Crepe Myrtle

"You can't kill a crepe myrtle."

The sunglasses and sandals suggested Jimmy Buffet, but the scars on his hands and arms confirmed the tree-trimming specialist found on Angie's List. The four crepe myrtles in Dave Foster's new yard were way overgrown, and he was worried the homeowners' association was going to give him grief soon. He'd never had to deal with an HOA when he lived out in the country, so he was unsure what to expect. He was unsure about a lot of things since Sally had died the previous year, and now he was wondering what kind of guy shows up to give a tree-trimming estimate wearing sandals.

Foster had moved into the house last June with his two boys about a year after the car accident. He'd been promoted to manage the Home Depot in Ballantyne, and figured it was best to sell the three acres they had in Waxhaw to be closer to the job and further from the memories. Fresh start for the boys. More time to spend with them, less money on upkeep. The previous owner had done a nice job cleaning up the inside, but it was clear the guy never did a day's serious yard work in his life. Sprinkler system was broken, hedges overgrown, and red dirt patches had invaded the heavily shaded back yard. March had come and gone and it was time to deal with the trees.

"You can cut one of these crepe myrtles off a foot from the ground and they'll just grow back. Everyone worries about over-pruning them. 'Crepe Murder,' they call it. But you couldn't kill one of these suckers if you tried."

Some of the big trees were getting dangerously close to the roof. One good storm could cost him half his yearly bonus in repairs. And the crepe myrtles next to the driveway needed tending, and especially the one in the corner of the back that the dogs lazed under. He liked that it was full and the branches were hanging down over the dogs as they lay there. But you weren't supposed to let them get that overgrown.

"One of them elms in back is already dead. We need to set it

back a good bit from the roof line." He scratched out numbers on his clipboard for a minute.

"Eight hundred should take care of all of it."

Eight hundred? Foster knew it would take him a whole day and a half to do what needed to be done by himself, and he'd have to bring the gear from work. He'd never trimmed a crepe myrtle, and had read in the paper about people getting fined by the city for cutting them back wrong. Having the trees done right now would keep the HOA off his back for a bit, until he had time to clean things up properly himself.

Foster thought he might be able to talk him down, but didn't see the point. "When can you come?"

They scheduled it for the following Thursday. He'd be at work and the boys at school.

William and Jon were doing well, considering. He found himself watching them, trying to gauge normal. Normal sadness? Normal remembering? Normal forgetting? When they played with the dogs, two boxers they'd gotten from a rescue, he'd watch them and wonder. What was okay? They both seemed to be adjusting to the new schools. William had just started middle school, so things were new for most of the kids anyway. Jon was only in 4th grade, though, and the move to a new school had been a little harder on him.

Foster worried about the dogs. During the walk around the house to inspect the trees, he could hear the dogs barking inside. The female, Bella, they'd gotten as a puppy, and she was only seven weeks old when they brought her home. White from nose to tail, half deaf, age spots popping up under her fur. That one was fine. But the male, Vern, had come to them at about eighteen months old and from dicey circumstances. Sally had wanted to wait, but Foster said it would be fine. He'd taken to Bella alright, but the changes over the last year had been hard on him. Since Sally died, Vern had gotten really protective and a little high strung. Went fool crazy when people came to the door, barking and growling, or even when kids walked by on the sidewalk. Vern almost got past Foster when he answered the door for some religious guy wanting to discuss his soul. Foster had seen one neighborhood kid taunting him from over the back fence once and scared the socks off him by yelling at him through the window. Vern had

gotten used to being in a big old house in the country with no one else around, and then they got the puppy, and two years later his wife passed, and now the move to a subdivision close to a good school and his new job. Vern hadn't adjusted well.

On the following Thursday, the day the work crew was supposed to cut the trees, he returned home at 3:30 to find the dogs in a state. Vern was running around in circles, wild-eyed. Couch cushions were on the floor, one shredded. He let them out back to the fenced yard and walked around the house, checking the tree work. He hadn't considered how upset they'd be having guys with chainsaws in the yard all afternoon. Vern was running back and forth along the fence, as if trying to find someone.

After he was satisfied that the work on the trees had been done to his satisfaction, he let Vern and Bella back in and went to the kitchen. Sally had been militant about meals, even though she worked in an insurance office nine to five. Everybody had to sit down to a set table for dinner. Foster had made a good many concessions over the last nine months to make things work—kids making themselves breakfast and buying at school instead of bringing the neatly packed lunches Sally would make for them. She'd put notes inside, reminding them to eat the veggies first. So he made sure they sat down for a real meal each night, even though he wasn't much of a cook. Tonight was steak fajitas, and he began awkwardly slicing green peppers and throwing them in hot oil to soften.

The dogs knew the boys were coming when they heard the bus round the corner. Bella would run around and find a ball, or a rawhide, or even a sock, and bring it to the front door. She always tried to give you things. Vern would just pace up and down the stairs in the front hallway, trying to get a look out the window, then trying to listen at the door.

He spent a lot of time later trying to piece together what he heard next. As he turned down the heat to start seasoning the meat, the front door banged as it was thrown open. Then Vern snarling and his claws scrabbling on the hardwood in the front hallway, as if trying to find purchase to leap or flee. He heard William give a muted warning to Jon: "Hey, the door . . . ." The boys were on playing terms with the kids in the neighborhood, but you wouldn't really call them friends.

They'd only been there nine months, and they had never brought anyone home with them. But that day, Jon had struck up a conversation on the bus with another fourth grade kid about some zombie video game they were obsessed with and Jon had invited him over to play together.

The next thing he heard was the kid's wail, but he had already been moving into the hallway. What he saw as he rounded the corner: the front door wide open, and Vern on top of the boy about ten feet out into the yard, jaws latched on to his forearm as the boy tried to protect his face. Vern's head was tugging violently left and right, as if trying to sever the child's arm rather than dig into it. Foster lunged forward, tackling the dog, which seemed to spook it out of its frenzy and it let go of the boy. He grabbed it by the collar, threw it through the door back into the house, and yelled at the boys to crate the dogs, slamming the door shut.

He'd worried that Vern might scare a kid, and maybe, if provoked, bite one. But he had no idea. Deep, red holes and skin hanging in chunks. The kid would need a lot of stitches for sure, and maybe have permanent damage. He stifled profanity as he looked into the kid's eyes. "Where's your house? Can you walk?"

With an eerie calmness the kid was staring at the blood mixed in sickly swirls with Vern's saliva, and he seemed unable to look up at Foster and away from the holes and hanging flesh, as if looking away would make them worse than they already were.

He half-carried the kid home. The boy's mother came to the door, saw the arm, said "oh my god, oh my god." After about five seconds, though, she was all over it. Got Foster's name and cell number quickly while grabbing keys and wallet. Foster helped get the kid into the back seat of her SUV. His name was Daniel, and when Foster touched his shoulder and said, "You're going to be fine. You just need to make sure you help your mom out, okay?" the boy grinned a little. The woman had wrapped a clean dishtowel around the mangled forearm, and not being able to see it anymore had helped the boy regain his composure. He watched her pull out of the driveway and glance at him in the rearview mirror as she pulled away, her jaw tightly set and hands too tight at 10 and

2 on the steering wheel.

As he walked back to his house, the extent of how screwed he was came over him. New folks in the neighborhood, big white boxer that idiots mistook for a pit bull two times in three, and the other dog viciously attacks a kid. There was no use in trying to explain the dog was basically good, loved the boys, was just thrown by the work crew and the new house and was over-protective. He'd been around boxers all his life and never seen anything like it. No use, though.

He walked in through the garage to find Jon curled up on the floor with Bella. She was panting from the excitement, but happy as he stroked her side. Vern was in his crate, but the door was open, and William was stretched out on the floor in front with his hand on Vern's front paws. Foster started to let loose on Jon. "How many damn times have I told you to . . ." he started yelling, but when he saw Jon's face he stopped. Kid would end up feeling bad enough, probably, and the damage was done.

"I thought I told you to crate them?"

"They ain't gonna do nothing to us, dad."

"Well, put them in anyway. We need to get ready for dinner and we may be getting visitors." They crated the dogs and Jon began asking questions as they set the table for dinner. How was Daniel? Did his mom take care of things? Foster had to explain that Daniel's mom was taking him to the hospital. He could see Jon's surprise. Jon thought this was going to be a Band-Aid and icepack kind of thing, but he hadn't really gotten a look at that arm.

About an hour later Foster's cell rang—Animal Control had been called, was filling out a report, needed to stop by and check the dog's records. The woman who came was driving a white police van that was littered with files, two laptops, a bulky GPS system. She did not look like a cop. Her name was Davonda.

Davonda explained that after she'd verified current rabies shots and licensing, she'd fill out a report. Since there were no other incidents on file for this particular family or dog, there was leeway. They were required to keep him under lock-down quarantine for two weeks—no contact with other humans or dogs other than the family. Always had to be on a tight lead

when outside the house, even to pee in the back yard. This was, he took it, to make sure the dog didn't develop any symptoms that might suggest something communicable. Once the fourteen days were up, Vern'd be clear and everything would go back to as it was. Except if he ever had a problem again.

Kids always worry too much or too little. Jon picked too little—he acted like everything was back to normal and nothing had happened. Started talking about having Daniel over to play the video game that weekend, like the kid's parents were ever going to let him near Foster's house again. William, two years older, opted for anxiety. Nothing vocal, but you could see him looking at Vern differently, as if he was memorizing his brindle pattern. He became very thorough in his care of the dogs—water bowl always full, giving them treats. Foster began to wonder whether he should worry more or less.

He stopped by Daniel's home the following day after work, checking on the boy and offering to pay the hospital costs. His mom, Debbie, was gracious. The bites had been deep and the lacerations had required a lot of stiches. But it didn't look like they had done any permanent damage to the muscles. He'd have some nasty scars to brag on. Foster left his contact info and work phone and pressed Debbie to forward him the hospital bill when it came. She said she would.

The letter came three days into the quarantine. Angie Nesbitt, Secretary of the Quail Ridge Homeowners Association, inquired on behalf of the officers of the association as to the exact facts of the "situation" that had occurred "on or about March 28th." There was "concern" about the possibility of an animal that posed "possible liability risks" for the HOA. Angie had clearly considered law school at some point.

Foster sat in his recliner in the living room and both dogs came to sit next to him. He scratched Vern behind the ears. "You really did it, didn't you?" Vern leaned into his hand. He had one picture of Sally up on the mantle above the gas fireplace, the newest one he could find of her when unpacking. He wanted the boys to remember her face the way it was right before the accident. He imagined the long conversation he and Sally would have about what to do now. He'd mostly let her talk it out, him nodding and agreeing or shaking his head

as she would weigh options. But he couldn't come up with a solid version of what she would say they should do now. She'd say, "I told you so," in various ways. He scratched Vern's neck a little harder.

The next day he decided to call the woman from the rescue they'd gotten Vern from. Bernice. She had a thing for Vern, more so it seemed than all the other rescues she was trying to get placed. Vern had been 65 pounds when she got to him, and was tipping 75 now and not an ounce of fat on him. Someone had left him tied up in a backyard for a long time when they found him, and Bernice had nursed him back to vibrant health. She was so happy to place him with a family with kids and a big place for him to run.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Foster. The rescue can't take a dog back once there has been a confirmed incident." Everybody was calling it an *incident*. "We'd be liable if anything ever happened again. But you can keep him, right? Once he clears the quarantine? He'll be fine." She sounded like she desperately wanted this to be true, but from experience wasn't so sure.

Between the time he put down the phone and the time he walked into the kitchen to start dinner, the whole thing seemed a done deal. He couldn't give the dog back. And he couldn't keep him. He could, legally, but the HOA would give him hell and he'd be responsible for anything that might happen. That wasn't even really the issue, although it helped. Basically, having seen what Vern was capable of, he realized he could never be sure it wouldn't happen again. He looked over the breakfast bar at Vern, who was lying next to the chair listening intently for the sound of food hitting the floor. With Sally gone, the dogs were alone all day more often. They didn't get enough exercise, Jon and William were too young to manage them effectively, and all it would take was one more stupid door left open and some kid might get more than a few scars.

The bus rounded the corner, the dogs did their dances, the boys burst through the front door, stowed backpacks, and starting setting the table for dinner. They told him about their days while he made a salad and reheated some chicken he'd grilled over the weekend. What did they learn at school today? "Nuthin'." Then he'd patiently walk them through the

day and get the real scoop. Math: how to compute surface area. Social Studies: Continental Congress. Lunch: You can't swallow a whole piece of bread in under a minute without drinking something to wash it down. "It's really true," Jon said seriously.

The two weeks went by in a sort of regimented slow motion. Every day he went to work and didn't think about it, then he came home as early as he could to let the dogs out and wait for the boys. Taking Vern out on a lead was a pain—Vern wasn't used to being leashed and it threw off his urinary routine. The boys seemed to forget about the whole thing, assuming it was all over at the end of the quarantine. He'd sit in his chair and stare at Vern and turn the thing over and over in his head, trying to find a solution where there wasn't one. At 11, the boys having long since gone to bed, he'd head up to his own bedroom. The dogs usually slept on the floor next to Foster's bed—he'd fought long and hard with Sally to keep them off it—but he started letting them sleep with him as he watched Sports Center before dozing off.

He had an idea, he told Jon and William over Friday night pizza at the end of the two weeks. A high school buddy lived about an hour from them out in the country. He'd called him and worked it all out. He lived on a big farm he'd inherited from his father and had a lot of space, and he was willing to take Vern. Jon was visibly shocked at the thought of Vern going away; the 'incident' was ancient history now. But William seemed to understand, consciously or unconsciously, what the only other alternative was, and so he listened to the plan with slow, steady nods.

Foster was not a man to dwell on a decision once it was made. He'd made his. He felt, as he had with the boys after Sally died, that it was important to face the thing head on, to do so quickly, with determination, and then move on. He told the boys to enjoy playing with the dogs over the weekend. Vern didn't need to be on a leash anymore, so they could throw a ball for him in the back yard. Jon and William did so dutifully at first, but then went to play basketball in the cul de sac around the corner when they heard neighborhood kids playing there.

Foster went to check on the dogs. Buds had started to sprout

on the crepe myrtles. It was like time lapse photography. You almost thought you could see them grow, springing out in all directions from limbs that had been sawed straight off. Jimmy was right: you couldn't kill one of those things if you tried. The one in the corner of the back yard seemed to be growing back fastest, despite the lack of sun. Foster sat on the back deck and stared at Vern lying quietly under the crepe myrtle's truncated health.

Monday morning Foster walked the boys to the bus after they said goodbye to Vern. It was important, Foster believed, to be up front and clear in such situations. He had wanted them to see Sally in an open casket after the accident, despite the lacerations on her face that had been muted but not hidden by the mortician's hand. He thought back on the ER doc in scrubs, walking up to him and the boys in the waiting room and clearly and straightforwardly saying that his wife had died, that the injuries were too severe, that they had done everything they could. At the time, he hardly heard what she was saying, but in the weeks following he had recalled her words and the no-nonsense way she had said them and felt grateful. She had died, not "passed away" or "gone." Vern had viciously attacked a child, not had an "incident." He had always felt being straight with people and true with the words you use to describe things was the best policy. So they were red-eyed and quiet as they stepped on the bus. He walked slowly back to the house, comparing the state of neighbors' lawns and landscaping with his own.

Vern and Bella greeted him at the door as if he'd been gone all day. He let Bella out back for a few minutes to do her business, and then crated her, afraid she'd get antsy when left totally alone for the first time. Vern he loaded into his truck and began the drive south.

Danny Vogel had played baseball with Foster in high school. They hadn't talked that much over the years, but Danny had come in to Foster's old store from before the move one day and they'd struck up a long conversation about the good old days. They'd dated the same girl on and off, but without rancor or rivalry. When Foster had thrown in a few attachments for free with the Weber Genesis grill Danny was eyeing, they parted on pretty good terms. That's why Foster had thought

to call him.

Danny's place was a few acres a little outside Rock Hill in South Carolina. He hadn't done anything much with it since his dad died—his current job entailed some kind of Internet advertising deal that Foster had not really understood when he explained it while checking out the Weber. When he cut the engine on the gravel in front of Danny's house, he sat quietly for a few minutes, rubbing that place under Vern's collar where he liked it so much. He imagined Vern running up the steps to the dusty porch and scratching at the screen door to be let in. He imagined him chasing rabbits through the brush down the hill towards an almost dry creek bed. He could picture him splayed out on a couch he'd never seen but tried hard to imagine in Danny's living room, watching SportsCenter with his new friend.

Danny came out the front door after a bit and waved as he came down the steps. "Hey, Dave. Good to see you again." Foster got out of the truck and they shook hands. "You want a beer or something?" "No, no, thanks, I've gotta get back pretty soon. I know this is weird and out of the blue, but I'm in a hard place with the dog and the kids." Danny nodded, looking sideways at Vern. Foster had explained the whole thing to him on the phone, and he seemed a little wary as Foster let Vern out the passenger door. "He won't hurt you," Foster started to say reflexively, then stopped. "I think he's fine. Really. Just need a few minutes of your time."

Foster wasn't good at this kind of thing. Vern made it easy by taking to Danny, leaning in as Danny slowly put the back of his hand down for Vern to smell. After a minute, Danny was scratching under Vern's collar and saying the stupid things people learn to say to dogs when they are kids and can't unlearn as adults.

"You sure you want to do this? He seems nice enough." Foster nodded to both questions and took out his phone. "Just hang with him for a second while I get a few photos for the boys." Foster took pictures of the house, the hill leading down to the creek, the big field on the other side. He ended with a few pictures of Danny rubbing Vern's ears. "Let me get a few more with just Vern running around. Then I'll get on the road." He took an old, crusty tennis ball from the door cup

holder and threw it down the hill. Boxers aren't much in the fetching department. Working dogs. But he had begun rolling a tennis ball around Bella the day she came home, and Vern had taken to chasing it as much as boxers will. Vern seemed to be feeling the space and the fine spring day and took off after the ball, bringing it back up the hill dutifully but half-heartedly. Foster took a few more pictures.

"Alright, Danny. Thanks again for this. I didn't know who else to ask. Kinda weird, I know. Tell you what—can you get me that beer for the road?" Danny seemed happy to oblige and moved back up the steps to the porch. "Coming right up," he said as the screen door closed behind him.

Foster looked at Vern standing in front of him, the ball dropped at his feet. He picked up the ball, walked around to the passenger door, set the ball on the seat and patted his leg, signaling Vern to get in. The dog jumped up and sat up in the passenger seat, tongue hanging after his brief run and the growing heat of the day.

Foster took the beer and shook Danny's hand again. Danny coughed a little. "Seriously, Foster. He doesn't seem like a danger. I can take him if you want." "You got any kids around here?" Danny nodded. "Twins live in that house you passed on the way up. Knepshields up over the hill just had a baby in January to go with the other squirt they got." Foster looked off into the distance as if he could see the kids playing as they spoke. Danny caught on. "I could keep him inside most of the time. Or I could get a dog house, tie him up in back?" Foster didn't want to go on with this line of thought. He'd played it over and over in his head like a puzzle that you knew the answer to at some point but just couldn't remember it. It never fit together or added up right. It would take one stupid mistake, one unlucky accident. The image of wet, angry wounds on the kid's arm in his memory closed the deal. He patted Danny on the arm, got behind the wheel, and circled the truck around heading down the gravel.

The woman behind the counter at the vet's office tried not to ask too many questions while he waited. Finally a young woman came and showed him and Vern back into one of the examining rooms. After a few minutes, one of the vets in the practice he hadn't seen before came in. "You sure you want

to do this?" Foster paused for a long time, thinking how to succinctly explain the puzzle and its lack of a solution, but it was hard. He finally just said, "Gotta be done." And they proceeded.

The assistant came back in when it was done, handed him a brochure. You could have your dog cremated and the ashes mixed with wild flower seeds and fertilizer or something like that. They'd send you this nice little packet that was the remains of your dog and you could plant it in your back yard with your kids and flowers would bloom. Foster shook his head. He wrapped Vern in the blanket he had brought in from the truck and carried him out, laying him carefully in the bed. His lax, brindle bulk was difficult to support. He seemed heavier, Foster thought.

At home, he grabbed the beer Danny had given him and went in the house. He put it in the fridge, let Bella out of her crate and into the back yard. In the garage, he pulled a shovel down from the wall and went back into the yard, Bella running back and forth along the fence, then to him, then back to the fence. He picked a spot he could see from the deck in the far back corner, as close as he could get to the base of the crepe myrtle without having to shovel through its roots. The spot was already devoid of grass from the lack of light and the dogs. He looked back at Bella and the truck, then began digging. The ground was hard, red, rocky clay, resisting him mightily. It took him a good hour to dig a hole deep enough, and then he decided it wasn't deep enough and dug some more. He had trouble seeing through the tears. The bark at the base of the crepe myrtle looked like crepe paper, flimsy and peeling. He wondered if that was where the name came from. Bella got bored of chasing the dirt after the first twenty minutes and laid down to watch the rest.

By 2:00, the hole was filled and Vern was buried. He spent a long time packing the dirt back down. He kept stopping, then patting it some more, evening it out. It occurred to him that Bella might damn well start digging it all up again when she was out there by herself, but she wasn't the digger Vern was, and he had gone deep.

When he had finished tamping the dirt down, he had an idea. He went to the garage and got a half full bag of grass

seed he had been spreading in a futile attempt to recover the lawn. He spread the seed around the grave and the tree, then put some small metal fencing around it to keep Bella and the kids away from it. Maybe the grass would take now that he'd dug up the earth. At least it would keep Bella from digging, and he wouldn't have to explain why the earth was all dug up in the one spot to the boys. He hosed some water on the seeded grave.

It was almost 3:00. Kids would be home soon enough. Once you commit to a lie, he thought, it inevitably begins to grow and make itself a part of you. He'd have to show them the pictures of Vern's new home, and his new owner, and make up crap about what a good guy Danny would be in taking care of him. And put them off when they wanted to go visit. At least the seeding would hold off having to lie about the grave itself. They were young and would get caught up in other things. The lie would do what such lies were meant to do. You just had to commit to it, like you would the truth, and move forward.

He went to the fridge and grabbed the beer from Danny and a cup full of ice. He walked out to the deck and sat down wearily in his favorite chair. In a few months, when the heat of the summer was greatest and the rest of the flowers and plants and grass in the neighborhood were wilting and fighting against the North Carolina heat, the crepe myrtles would begin their violent bloom. He felt a little panic, as he had several times over the past week, that he was making, had made, the wrong decision. But as every time before, an alternative would not come, the circle would not be squared, the puzzle would not yield. For the next half hour he sat there, staring at the grave and the tree over it. A little moan that sounded somewhat like the dog's name escaped his lips.

After a bit, he looked at the time and cleared his throat to assure it wouldn't catch when he greeted the boys. He rubbed the ice on the back of his neck. Bella sat next to him and panted. He gave her a piece of ice and waited for the sound of the bus.

Kim Drew Wright

The Long Road

The rainy season had carpeted the Zambian flood plain with opportunistic cattle, and the one road to Mongu bisected it like an American football touchdown line. What Billie wanted most in his life was waiting for him at the end of that road, but the fifty-nine miles might as well have been edged with every college linebacker, for as easy as it was going to be for him to reach his goal. A beat-up sedan rusted brown came barreling by him, spewing gravel on his bare legs, then slowed down.

"Hey Billie! Coming to school today?" A dark boy with white teeth yelled out the driver's side window, arm hanging out and slapping the door for emphasis.

"Nah, man. He's got too many house chores to do," the boy in the passenger seat replied.

Laughter and dust from the only car in town choked the lone boy walking, as it sped off toward the low-slung cement block building the village called school. The weight of the two plastic jugs of water he carried on his shoulders gave him a backache but he gritted his teeth and kept walking, determined to keep his balance. His father expected those jugs before breakfast.

Billie grunted as he dropped the containers beside his family's mud hut alongside the road, the only road from his village of Senanga to the capital city of Western Providence, Mongu. Travelers were few; luckily for them it was the start of the dry season and the likelihood of getting bogged down in mud was low, but they'd have to watch for the pocked out areas that dotted this stretch, like the spots on the leopards in Kafue National Park.

Mizanda came around the back of the hut and acknowledged his son with a low grunt. "Only two jugs? You'll have to fetch more at noontime."

"Da, I have school. It's review for the English testing," Billie said. When his father did not respond, he added, "It's important, Da."

"Water isn't?"

"Da, please. Can it wait till suppertime? I'll get twice as much then."

"What's more important, to respect your father's wishes or your English review?"

Billie looked down at the black soil, cracked dry at his father's feet. "I'll get it now, Da," he said, as he turned to start the trek back to the handprint water tower that had been there since he was born. The squat tower sat in a field beside the Zambezi River, marked with foreign hands in red, white, and blue paint. He reached up and placed his palm against the blue one marked *Billie* in another's print, mirroring it like a twin.

He wondered again about the Billie on the water tower. His mom never spoke of him and his father never talked of anything but how many chores needed to get done with a sick wife and only one son. He walked fast to get to school, but he was still late. Students crammed the dusty room, ranging in age from five to Billie and his colleagues, who were the oldest at fifteen. Now it was time for them to either get funding from the mission for American college or figure out a way to scrape by in this community.

Their teacher, Mr. Thomas, clapped his hands to get everyone's attention.

"For those of you going to Mongu for your college testing, there's been a problem with the mission director driving here tomorrow."

Billie looked up quickly as Mr. Thomas continued, "Clive has offered to drive you boys to the testing center. You still need to meet here at 2 p.m. tomorrow."

Billie turned to look at Clive, the boy whose family owned the only car in Senanga. He was grinning back at Billie, who closed his eyes and clutched his hand over his stomach.

The day passed quickly, concentrating on reviewing for the test that could get him in a real university. If he did badly on that test it really didn't matter what Clive and his cronies did to him. He'd be stuck on the endless loop to fetch water for the remainder of his life, like a noose that tightened but never snapped. When Mr. Thomas tapped his fingers on the paper Billie was hunched over, he looked up questioningly.

"Yes, sir?"

"Go home, Billie. You can't cram any more into your head today. Go sleep on it."

"Yes, sir."

The hut was darkening with the evening sky. A long shadow fell across the floor as he stood in the open doorway. His mom was lying on her pallet in the center of the circular room. Her complexion was darker than Billie's, yet he noticed how pale she had become since the last dry season. She struggled with a smile as her son entered the one-room hut, reaching out her hand for him to grasp.

"My boy," she said in her soft voice and he wondered, if she hadn't been sick for so long, if her voice would be different, if she would be different.

"Mama."

She closed her eyes and for a moment he thought she may slip away, but she just stretched her smile and whispered, "Love you, boy."

They sat for a few minutes. When the silence started asking questions he spoke the most persistent one, "Mama, why did you name me after the man named Billie on the handprint tower?"

Her breath came slow and even and he thought perhaps she had drifted off to sleep but then she spoke, and when she spoke her voice sounded like the one he imagined earlier she might have without her sickness, "We have to have hope."

It wasn't exactly the answer he was searching for, but it was a more concrete answer to that question than she had ever given, and so he sat in contemplation while he rubbed her hand in his two that had grown larger than hers.

"And, I love you, boy."

"I love you too, Mama."

The next morning Billie made three trips to the handprint tower, ensuring his parents would have plenty of water until his return the next day from Mongu. He tended the fire pit, mashed the maize meal and added it to boil for the nashima paste that would last several meals. He roasted some tubers in peanut powder and cayenne pepper for chinaka, his father's favorite dish. He swept out the dirt floor in the hut and yard.

Finally, it was time to walk to the school for the long ride

to the testing center. His mother had fallen asleep on her pallet and he kissed her gently on her forehead, something she would not have allowed had she been awake, even though the missionaries had said this would not contaminate Billie with her illness.

"So you are off then." Mizanda appeared beside the entrance to the hut, as if summoned by Billie's illicit touch.

Billie looked at the dusty feet of his father. "Yes, sir."

"Testing won't get your mother's meals made."

His father stared at Billie like he could pin him to the spot with his glare. The rattle of Clive's car passing by on the way to the schoolyard jolted Billie into his first step past his father. "I have to go, Da."

His father didn't answer as Billie stepped past him and started jogging down the road toward town, fearful that he would call him back and forbid him to go, even when he was far enough away that the river drowned out all other noise. He could see his colleagues gathering around Clive's car, with him still in the driver's seat, like a king on the village's only throne.

"There he is. The *boy* we've been waiting for." Clive made the word boy a slur.

"Ok, boys. Listen, it's about a three-hour drive to Mongu. Most of the major washouts have been patched up but the ruts can still get pretty deep. Take your time. You should get there in plenty of time for a decent night sleep at the mission before the testing tomorrow morning." Mr. Thomas gave each of the boys a hearty pat on the shoulder for good luck, except Clive who never got out of the car.

"Yah, yah. Boys, let's get in and get on with it then," he yelled from the driver's seat.

They finished a hasty good-bye and scrambled into the vehicle. Shadrick claimed his regular spot beside Clive. Melo and Sonkwe pushed each other over the bench seat in the back, making room for Billie who slid in last. They shot out of the schoolyard with a stuttering clutch, waving to the children that ran behind them through the yard and down the main road until they passed the last hut. Clive pushed his foot to the metal floorboard, causing the car to lurch forward with a burst of speed not unlike the cheetahs that sometimes

attacked the stragglers of the cattle herds that moved in for the grasses that sprouted after the wet season.

"Hey, house boy, you think you're gonna do better on the testing than me," Clive asked, staring at Billie in the cracked rearview mirror. "You think you're going to college?"

Shadrick chorused, "Yah, you think you're going to America? Your Poppa has too many house chores for you to do. Maybe you should buy a dress in Mongu to wear while you carry water and mash corn meal." Shadrick laughed and punched Clive on the shoulder. Melo chuckled softly into his hand in the back seat while Sonkwe sat with eyes wide, looking back and forth between the front seat and Billie sitting beside him.

Billie looked out the side window at the dusty road beside the Zambezi River, the only landscape he, and his father before him, had ever known. He wished he could bottle up the boys' words and throw them out the window, into the waiting rush of the river, have them ride its current all the way down to Victoria Falls where they would shatter apart as they descended into Mosi-oa-Tunya, *the smoke that thunders*, forming new phrases, new meanings.

"You know what I think, Shadrick," Clive said, still staring at Billie. "I think Billie *boy* here doesn't understand that he's not as smart as he thinks he is."

"Melo, who's got the car," Clive asked, switching his glare to Melo.

"You do, Clive." Melo stole a contrite sideways glance at Billie.

"That's right. I knew you were a smart one, Melo. Maybe you'll make it to college with me and Shadrick."

"How about you, Sonkwe? You starting to feel a little crowded back there?" Clive stomped on the brake pedal and skidded to a stop so suddenly, Shadrick's head made a dull thudding noise on the dash and Sonkwe half fell into the front seat.

"Hey, Sonkwe, I know it's crammed back there but you have to stay in the back," Clive said, as he shoved the other boy back roughly.

"Out." Clive motioned to the door with a swift jerk of his head, looking at Billie.

"But Clive, it's like fifty-four more miles to Mongu,"

Shadrick said, laughing nervously.

"Well, somebody's getting out of the car. Use your brain, Shadrick. How many scholarships you think they give to Senanga boys?" He looked at each of them in turn. "Any of you want to take house boy's place and walk to Mongu?" They cast their eyes to their laps. Billie grabbed his small sack that contained a clean shirt, small cake of soap, bit of nashima, and a dog-eared toothbrush.

"No man, you'll be leaving that." Clive's voice had gone low and dangerous. Billie recognized it as the voice he reserved for private meetings behind the school building, when Billie would leave with bruises under faded cotton. His face burned as he dropped the sack and stood back from the car.

"Sonkwe, make yourself useful and shut the door," Clive said. Sonkwe looked at the door handle as he pulled it shut.

"Hey, Billie! Why don't you just swim to America? The ocean's that way." Clive pointed out the window as he jolted off, leaving Billie in a cloud of dust and misery.

He looked to his left and saw the five miles back to his village. He looked to his right and saw the fifty-four miles to Mongu. Behind him was the Zambezi River, diminished from the overabundance of a month ago, shrunken back to a tamed flow. In front of him was the vast plain of grasses, which were starting their annual drying up, mirroring the Zambezi. He looked down at his two feet. Fifty-four miles. Could he make it in time for the testing tomorrow morning at 7 a.m.? The weight of his father pulled at him to turn back and walk the easy distance to his hut and his familial responsibilities, as he turned in the direction of Mongu.

All that afternoon he jogged. When he got thirsty he drank from the banks of the river, watching for crocodiles and giving the hippopotamuses a wide berth. He scanned the horizon for big cats, having grown up with horror stories about predator attacks on humans. Yet, still he jogged until he had to walk. The treetops carried the sun when he reached the marker post that told him he had thirty-five more miles to Mongu. Billie's legs ached, but he pushed on another hour in dusk.

When the dark overcame him he allowed himself a rest and stretched out on the gravel road. He didn't dare leave the road

now, as he couldn't be assured that he would be able to find his way back to it in the black. The growl of a big cat startled him awake. He got up and started walking, the crunch of gravel under tennis shoes the only indicator that he was staying on his path. Animal sounds punctuated the darkness: hippos trumpeting, hyenas cackling, grass owls screeching, leopards growling. At one point, he thought he heard his father calling him back all the many miles to his village. By dawn, with the rising sun, Billie saw another milepost in the distance. He had ten more miles to walk. He sunk to his knees and sobbed, his hands trembling as they rubbed his weary face. *We have to have hope.* His mother's voice, carried on a warm wind, brushed his ear. He groaned and gingerly stood, walked to the riverbank to splash cool water on his face and arms, reviving himself enough to continue his journey.

The sun was above the collection of buildings that sprung up from the road when he finally reached Mongu. Every part of his body cried, but he didn't have the energy to weep. He knew the testing center from Mr. Thomas's descriptions and he walked in. Clive, Shadrick, Melo and Sonkwe sat in the first row with a few other boys their age behind them. They looked clean, rested, fed, and surprised.

Billie turned his focus on the administrator who walked from the front of the room to the door where Billie stood.

"Yes?"

"I'm here for the testing. My name is on the list."

The administrator's eyes had a familiar glint as he said, "You want to take the test? That'll be twenty-five thousand Kwacha."

"The testing has already been paid by the mission."

"Oh, you're right. But the pencil to take the test will be twenty-five thousand Kwacha."

Billie searched the desks of his comrades, ignoring Clive's sniggering from his seat. There were three pencils in front of Clive, freshly sharpened. The others had two and when Melo went to reach one of his out to Billie, Clive shot him a murderous glance and gave a minute shake of his head. Melo placed the pencil carefully back.

Billie abruptly turned and walked outside. His mind raced in circles. How was he going to take that test? He had to

take that test. Should he go to the mission and ask for more money? The mission was across the city and he needed to be taking the test now. It was a timed test and he was already late. His glance frantically scanned the street, taking in the pedestrians and vendors hawking their wares: dried fish, tubers, hats, cheap sunglasses.

He looked down at his dusty fatigued body. He had nothing to sell. Except, maybe his tennis shoes, which were already third-hand when he got them; but they were still, even with his long journey, better than most of the home-made shoes many people wore. He quickly bent and pulled them off, waving them in the air and frantically calling for a buyer. Twenty-five thousand Kwacha was expensive for a pencil. Twenty-five thousand Kwacha was cheap for a pair of shoes.

A woman with a shrewd look snatched them up and didn't even bother to haggle with Billie over the price, scurrying off with her bundle clutched to her chest as if he might run after her and grab them back.

Billie handed the money to the administrator and took his pencil and test. The next three hours Billie answered test questions like he was singing, like he was God and knew everything without struggle. He created mountains and valleys and aircraft with his answers. Clive could no longer torture him. His mother was no longer ill. His father understood.

When he finished the last question and looked up from the test, he saw that although he was the last one to start, he was the first one to finish. He turned the paper in to the administrator, who leveled him with an astonished gaze, and walked out of the building and back to the road. He looked to his left and saw the cluster of buildings that was Mongu. He looked to his right and saw the long devastating stretch of road to his village. He looked down at his bare feet, swollen and blistered from his horrendous night.

The weighty pull of the buildings called to him to seek solace in their shade, as he started his long walk back to the village. He shrugged the weight off and continued. He knew he could make it. His journey was going to be longer than many people's he knew, but the distance didn't bother him anymore.

When a rusted brown sedan sputtered up to him, he did not slow down.

"Hey man, get in the car," Clive shouted.

Billie kept walking, looking at the horizon.

"Don't be stupid man, get in the car," Shadrick said.

Billie kept walking, looking at the horizon.

"I said get in the car," Clive bit out.

Billie stopped. He looked at Clive and the others in their forced vanity and said, "I would rather walk the road with the cheetahs than get in a car with a snake."

"It's a long way man," Clive said, but he couldn't hide the quiet sound of admiration in his tone, or maybe, Billie thought, his ears were just hearing sharper than they had the day before.

Mark Sutz

Permaville

Technically, it isn't a city. Thus, officially, Lukasz isn't the mayor though it says this on his business card.

The lights are on, the TVs gurgle all day, pools are skimmed, doorbells can even chime (but haven't been used once since they were installed)—no phones ring, no cars cruise by the artificial lawns (though a few stock vintage models dot the driveways), no papers are delivered and no conversations bounce off the walls of these hollow houses.

A-frames bump up against ranch houses; split-levels nestle in between duplexes and double-wide trailers; underground houses are thumbprints between brownstones and mini-mock mansions. The whole area looks like an unfocused model railroader's diorama magnified to working size and sealed up forever. The only things missing are models of ladies in frozen hellos or crossing guards stuck in a perpetual wave to a group of still children in a stationary gallop across the safe, clean, idealized suburban street.

Permaville is only a city in name, like Speaker City or Mattress Metropolis or Bagel Town. But unlike those businesses, Permaville is an establishment that relies on our ability to navigate maps. It has a fluid topography. An air and sense about it. After all, it is the premier realistic cemetery in the entire United States. Its target demographic are people who aren't comfortable with standard eternal rest six feet under Bermuda grass lawns kept neat by men on riding mowers, men listening to salsa on earbuds, men rolling casually over the bones of the dead.

Resplendent with inertia, Permaville is the perfect end to an American life.

Lukasz favored tracksuits with multicolored piping. Today, he is stuffed into a black Adidas number with a neon green line running up the legs and sleeves. He is drinking an Arnold Palmer under the July sun and mopping his brow with a blue paisley bandana. He whistles with no rhythm while

dangling his tired 50-year-old feet in the pool of the facsimile motor hotel recognizable on washed-out vintage postcards as a Howard Johnson's.

Lukasz pulled the cell phone out and dialed his mother—for the first time in months—deep in the heart of rural Poland on a phone that delivered a crackly and intermittent connection.

"Mama. Mama, what's wrong? Can you hear Lukasz?" he said after trying the weekly Saturday call for the fifth time, only woolly static on the other end, then stuffed the phone into a zipper pocket in his track jacket when the line cut out again and cursed modern technology.

The plan had always been to return to Poland after the charges were far enough in the past to be forgotten or forgiven, but one month in Chicago turned into one year traveling the country slipped into three decades of living in Arizona after his car broke down in Sun City just outside of a smorgasbord advertising All You Can Eat for Five George Washingtons. Lukasz wandered into the restaurant that summer day in 1976 gut-hungry and filthy from fiddling with the engine of his ocean-blue, windowless, shag-rugged Ford Econoline van. He walked from the arid parking lot, swooshed through sliding twin glass doors and into the restaurant lobby. His glasses fogged over with the humidity of steamed meats.

He filled his plates with an array of textures and colors—pinks and greens, muddy lumps and gooey hills—with which he was unfamiliar, and settled into the groupeat being undertaken by a hundred gray heads around him. The chatter in the hall was punctuated with unembarrassed belches, wives' admonitions to get the food off ties and, in one transformative moment, a spat in Polish about why the husband thought it fully within the bounds of decency to stuff his coat pockets with dinner rolls for late night snacks and why the wife thought she should have married the other man so long ago.

Lukasz walked over to the couple's table and sat down. He pulled out a roll he'd stuffed into his own coat pocket, flashed a crazy, endearing smile and said in Polish, "Only crazy people wear coats in the summer—crazy like foxes." They spoke for

hours, until they were the last people in the restaurant and, by the end of the conversation, Lukasz had gotten himself a job with the old man, an old world framer and builder whose proper heir to these skills was a son who, when the wife mentioned him, elicited only the husband's snort. That would be the last time Lukasz ever heard about him.

Bicentennial fever was rampant on every sandwich board that summer. Patriotism was the currency and Lukasz spent it with the dexterity of a founding father. Like dominoes, Lukasz knocked over the major prizes of red-blooded America within six months of stuffing the roll into his pocket. In rapid succession: finished the bottomless meal with the old man and wife; moved into their spare bedroom with crisp, thin sheets on the twin mattress; slid into apprenticeship with the old man (who was an unsung craftsman of tenth-scale historical dioramas); joined the local Pulaski outpost after the old man one night brought home a fist-sized pierogi that Lukasz ate with tears of umami recognition; courted the granddaughter of the woman who crafted that pierogi (during which he presented himself for a three-month period as a flawless catch); caught the granddaughter, Aga, and married her in the same Pulaski outpost that would provide Permaville with many of its clients over the ensuing thirty years.

For eighteen months, Lukasz apprenticed so intensely with the old man that the work Lukasz did became indistinguishable from his. Every inch of the dioramas they worked on was greeted by the clients (universities, museums, shut-ins with obsessions about forgotten historical events) with audible intakes of breath and impressed hmms from pursed lips. Lukasz became particularly proficient at creating facades in the same materials as the original—big red bricks were shrunken by painstaking chipping away, mini-wooden beams were whittled from actual planks; windows even were cut from original panes.

The old woman came into his room one night and told Lukasz she knew her husband was going to soon die. He felt as if in Lukasz he'd found the perfect successor and could finally

let go. She told Lukasz the old man had only one condition for handing to Lukasz his business: design and build the old man a mausoleum that was a facsimile of his boyhood home in Poland. The old woman showed Lukasz a picture of a familiar squat abode and Lukasz was sure he could reproduce it.

The old woman told Lukasz they had a plot on which the mausoleum could be built. Lukasz fabricated it in the workshop and soon it became clear to him and the old man that it had grown too big for the plot of land he had purchased. And also the mausoleum would have to house not only him but his wife.

"Well, where are we supposed to put it?" Lukasz asked.

The old man swept his hand around grandly. "Much desert land out there. We'll drive."

With the car pointed north, they headed forward and drove a century or ten back in time into desert spiked every half-mile with signposts advertising "100 Acres-10 Thousand" (The mid-'70s were the best time to buy land in Phoenix as the next 30 years would funnel millions of people into this seasonless, culturally void block on the American quilt). The old man stopped at one of these signs below a mountain that looked like a moon feature, said "Yes" and by the time he died three months later (and his wife a week after), Lukasz was the proud owner of a knobby 100-acre section of desert whose only developers for millennia had been ants and snakes and critters who knew how unforgiving the desert could be and didn't bother with building structures when they died. Thousands of carcasses from dozens of species were perfectly content to decompose and disappear only with the attention of the sun and earth.

With each house Lukasz built for his clients to be buried in, he took photos and sent them to his mother with notes such as—"*Mama, Now living in the room up there on the right, with the white planter box.*" "*This is the house of a prominent local professor.*" "*I am happy and will send you another picture when I go to my next job.*" "*I am fortunate to see so much of America, paint so many of its beautiful houses. Your boy, Lukasz.*"

And so it went week after month after year. But the pictures he sent his mother were just his clients' cemetery projects. He'd convinced his mother that he made his living as an itinerant housepainter and what was not to believe? Each picture he sent did have a coat of paint that still looked wet. He kept his mother in the dark about the reality of his situation only to keep her safe and to give her plausible deniability as to his whereabouts. The last thing he heard—and which his dreams revisited every night—from the blindfolded man's voice was, "We will find you. Like we found them before the war. Be grateful your mother doesn't know where you hid it. Otherwise, she'd already be dead."

Every four or six months when Lukasz called her, he would ask, "Have they forgotten yet?" and she would sigh. "No, my son. But maybe God does not want them to forget. And maybe you should be thankful. Your name falls off their tongues like a legend."

The delivery drivers always lingered at Permaville. They quizzed Lukasz as to the contents of the incoming boxes the size of pool tables but light enough to carry on their own. They especially loved that Lukasz had gotten the idea to turn his standard office into a working diner. He filled it with all the bad coffee and gum-snapping waitresses he remembered at Stuckeys during his early years thumbing across this country in which he wanted to sink and emerge from the other side a person who'd been granted a clean slate.

Since the old man had died 30 years before, Lukasz had almost 50 more spots built out, a little architectural theme park, and many more purchased, at some stage of construction, mostly planned for couples. One of the spots was, sadly, for an entire family, most of whom died on the same day. The woman had lost her husband and four children when the home they shared in the Midwest vanished into a freak sinkhole while she was away on a business trip. On the emergency flight home, she'd read a tiny blurb about Permaville in a culture magazine someone left in the seat pocket. From the moment she landed, her energies and money went into the plot. The woman became so involved

in the building process that she ended up moving to Phoenix and visiting the workshop every day to guide Lukasz and his builders on the detail of each room. Hers was the only mausoleum that was built in partial working order—one bathroom with full plumbing—as her deep pockets allowed Permaville to survive some lean times.

Lukasz had also nearly finished the diner during the building of this woman's mausoleum and as she spent more time overseeing the construction of her family's final resting place she would inhabit one of the booths in the diner that overlooked her house. One day she proposed to Lukasz that she stay and come to work for him in any capacity he saw fit. She told him that if he didn't accept the offer, Lukasz would soon find her suicided on the real front lawn of her fake house and have to deal with the oddity of a death occurring at a cemetery.

So, Lukasz, after his wife gave him a hesitant, spouse's consent, hired her on the spot and she moved—with no warning to Lukasz—into the replica of her master bedroom on the same day. He then paid a team under the table to plumb a toilet and sink and sneakily wire the whole house so it could be dimly lit. Within a few years, her wounds scarred over a bit and she moved into a small set of staff apartments Lukasz built on the premises, where he also lived. He accepted her presence as a cosmic reminder that tragedy wasn't the domain only of the wicked. It could befall even those who wouldn't so much as wield a flyswatter.

Lukasz's wife soon tired of him investing his time and energy into dead people, so she took a lead from the stories he told her of how he disappeared from the reach of people he'd angered: in the middle of the night, she took her pregnant self to somewhere they had winters, because she said she wanted to kiss a man in front of a fireplace while it was cold outside.

Lukasz began receiving postcards from cities he'd never been—Butte, Montana; Pierre, South Dakota; Ketchum, Idaho. But soon they stopped.

He built more mausoleums. Stopped advertising because people came to him. Developed a waiting list so he knew he'd be busy till the day he died.

Then, almost ten years to the day Aga disappeared,

she returned and, practically mid-sentence, finished the conversation they'd been having a decade before.

"I needed to feel the snow on my feet."

As he looked at her, two little hands wrapped around Aga's belly from behind.

"This is Petra," she said and tugged at the little hands until she showed her head to Lukasz and presented a gap-toothed smile that Lukasz recognized from looking in the mirror every day. The mouth was his. The eyes, his mother's. The face, in total, a hint, finally, to his real father.

In one instant, Lukasz knew why he'd been shunned as a boy by everyone but his mother.

He picked up Petra.

"You descend from great royalty, my dear," he said. "Now you get to be ruler of your own city."

Vincent Paul Vanneman

Aurora Borealis

Aurora spits one tooth and then another into the hand in front of her. She tongues the slot where the teeth used to be, where only unplugged wires hang to remind her of empty space. Knowing that a piece of her is gone trumps the pain, even when she touches the twin dimples in her arm where her mouth hit upon impact.

"A soft curve can be a good thing." The man holding the teeth rolls them around in his hand like they're dice he's making sure aren't loaded. "If it'd been tighter I might be holding arms and legs right now. I've seen it happen more than once." His lips barely show between a matted tangle of beard when he speaks. He rubs his hands on his vest that is already shellacked with something like oil. Somehow he kept his bike upright even though she flew off the back.

A car slows coming around the corner, shoots them with its high beams, seems to pause momentarily and proceeds down the road.

"All things considered it ain't so bad." He clenches the teeth in his palm and shakes them. "I had a brother who lost his whole set on a curb outside Reno about ten years back."

"What happened to him?" She tries to harden her voice, to pinch it into something tough but she knows it comes out as little more than a whimper.

"We got to calling him Joker after that. Like Jack Nicholson in the Batman movie that'd just come out? Funny thing is, the bastard never smiled. Maybe he did once, but it didn't happen much." He kneels, uncurls her fingers and drops the teeth back into her hand. She knows he won't apologize. Even though they're a hundred miles past the Badlands and even further from familiar earshot, this man does not issue apologies.

In the single glare of his motorcycle headlight behind him, Aurora can see the man now; his ruddy skin beaten by wind, his bloated forearms hieroglyphic with smeared tattoos. After the troopers outside the BP rest stop threatened to arrest her

for hitchhiking, it didn't matter who picked her up really. She almost ran to hug the biker when he slowed to her and introduced himself as Muddy. Maybe that's what he's waiting as they face each other in the light of his chopper.

Something is crusted over his boots and jeans. Maybe that's where his name stemmed from. Aurora feels silly for humming *Hoochie Coochie Man* when she gripped his back and inhaled the entrenched rot of his jacket.

"Nothing broke, is it?" He says.

"I don't think so," she manages to say.

He reaches his hand down. A tattoo says *Mary* in the webbing between his thumb and forefinger. She grips his leather bracelets as he effortlessly hoists her up. "Boy you'd know it if something was broke. I've broken just about everything."

Here she is. Here is Aurora, going out west on her own.

Aurora still carries the same dog-eared, sun-toasted copy of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* that she bought at Goodwill for a quarter back in high school. She would follow Sissy Henkshaw out west or wherever to become a cowgirl or whatever. It didn't take a whole lot more for her to leave, at least nothing that she would tell anyone.

A couple years later she is washing her mouth at a Waffle House. She uses iodine he had given her for the cuts on her arms. They aren't so bad but her mouth hurts. It keeps leaking blood. It is caked between the beads of a necklace she had wrapped around her wrist. She kept it after a Mardi Gras party at The Shady Pines Trailer Park where she had been living as a reminder of why she left. She thinks about throwing it away but cleans it the best she can instead.

"I know you got some beer in here," she hears Muddy say from beyond the door. "What about some whiskey for my little friend then. You can see she's in sorts."

"We do not," a woman responds to him. "You're not getting liquored in here. She doesn't even look the proper age."

Aurora runs the water. She's not sure what she's expecting but when she turns it off, all she can hear is the clatter of dishes from the kitchen. Blood hangs in a film in the back of her throat. It tastes as if it's been there for days. She can

relish the pain. She sucks on it, gives it breadth. She imagines making a necklace from the teeth. Maybe she would give it to Muddy.

There is a knock at the door. It's time to go. Aurora rinses her face.

On the way out, she hears someone mutter something about road trash blowing in. Nobody else says anything as they leave.

The closest place Muddy finds for a drink is some sort of gambling parlor tucked into a strip-mall where people push nickels into slots and peck fingers at glowing buttons. He has bought a pair of whiskies. Aurora is hesitant to drink hers but worries more about his reaction if she doesn't.

They're sitting beneath a Keno monitor and Muddy sighs. He then raises his voice to say that gambling is a waste of time and money loud enough so that an overweight man approaching the bar can hear him and be persuaded to sit down again.

"They had a bar back at that place," Muddy says. "I saw those two rednecks at the end of the counter sucking them down." He seems stuck on this. A bit of the liquor spills over his chin when he takes a drink.

The whiskey burns her throat but it singes her gums. Each exposed nerves vibrates in throngs of pain. She sets her palms against the bar and braces herself.

Muddy raises a fresh shot. "You've taken this better than the toughest lady I could imagine," he says.

Aurora tries to smiles but sucks her gums and tongues the empty space.

"The more of 'em you suck down, the easier it's going to be. I promise you that." He turns his forearms over on the bar, and glares to the bartender who pours a fresh shot. "They got no right pushing us down the road at that joint. Don't ever let someone put you down like that."

There is something Aurora should say here, something charming or affable but she can't think of anything appropriate. Instead, she thanks him and takes down another shot. This one goes down easier.

"You get tossed off my chopper and thank me for it. How's

that?"

"Nobody helped me out much before, I guess."

"That's why I had a club years back. I had some good brothers too. Thick, thin and al that shit in-between. All of it goes away."

Aurora lifts her bag from the floor and sets it on the bar. "I had a brother but I didn't talk to him much. He had some other shit going on. My mom had him real young." She removes an envelope from her bag and from it, on eggshell paper, her birth certificate. "I'm pretty confident they won't miss me a whole lot. Only thing to keep record of who I am is in this bag."

Muddy takes the piece of paper from her and seems to study it. "This only means something if you want it to," he says.

"I really don't care about it. It doesn't mean anything." She takes the piece of paper back, holds a lighter underneath it and, once a flame fans up, she drops it into an ashtray.

"Some things don't burn away girlie. They just don't," Muddy says. "They hang on."

The bar closes at midnight but the bartender shuts down the machines and the televisions early and the place goes quiet. This is easier than asking the drunken biker and the underage girl to leave.

"Can we get something for the road there chief?" Muddy leaves a twenty on the bar and empties the ashtray into his palm. He seems surprised when the man returns moments later with change and a bottle of Jim Beam.

"You'll be moving on then?" It sounds more like a plea from the bartender than a question.

"We'll be out of here when we're ready," Aurora says and begins to rise and lead Muddy out of the bar.

After Muddy starts the bike, he dumps the ashes from his hand onto the ground. Aurora is hitched tighter to him now. She will not be thrown again.

Along the highway, Aurora can make out elk, their eyes small pricks of light just beyond the wire fences off the road. After only a few miles, he downshifts, slows the bike and moves off to the shoulder.

Aurora considers removing herself from the bike and

running before he stops completely. Scenarios begin to compute. There is nothing else out here but the elk and the hills out there that press up against the moon like bodies slumped over.

Dirt kicks up under the bike but, with certain grace, he maneuvers it off the road. When they have almost reached the hills, he pumps the clutch again and lets it idle before dismounting.

Crickets snap in the burrs once he has shut the engine off, leaving its light on.

"What are we doing?" Aurora holds her bag close while Muddy moves outside the small tunnel of light.

From what she can see, he seems to cover his eyes from the light. "What do you mean?"

Aurora is certain she will never see the road again. She thinks of the things she has packed: two pairs of underwear, an old sweatshirt with holes she burrowed out with her thumbs, a notebook for writing down her thoughts, some photos she'd torn from magazines of places he was sure she'd now never see. The bottle of whiskey is in there too. She takes that by its throat, unsure whether to remove it or not. What would happen of her is this is the last place she ever sees? At least she had made it this far.

"Will you pass me the whiskey, girlie?" Muddy calls out. She can make out his bulk out there moving around like one of the elk in the bramble.

As he moves back into the light, Aurora can see the red mud crusted on his boots and jeans. She does not blame this man for what he does. It's in his nature, she assumes. Just like the accident; these things happen.

He takes the bottle from her and steps away again, out of the light, leaving only the tinny motor of a swarm of flies. "How'd you get your name?" He says.

"Which one?"

"The one you told me," Muddy says.

"I read about it in *National Geographic* in high school: The Aurora Borealis." An unexpected confidence washes through her as she says this.

"You mean you never seen it?"

She allows silence to answer that for her.

Muddy crosses through the light again and sets down the bottle down on a rock. He then reaches into the waistband of his jeans and removes something else, something metal and sets that down with the bottle.

Piss falls to the earth like he is using some sort of drill. She tries not to watch as he finishes and adjusts himself. As she looks away she can hear only the soft clomp of his boots on the earth and the whiskey sloshing up the sides of the bottle

"You know, I've seen it once," he says even though she is looking away.

Aurora opens her eyes to see the bottle sitting on the ground before her.

"You go up far enough north about now you can see 'em too. That's how I did: on a ride up into Canada we did before the law was touchy about such things. It's like liquid electricity. It was something else, girlie. You chose a good thing to call yourself by." Leather and joints creak and snap as he lowers himself to the ground. His gun sits across the clearing from him. He seems to pay it no mind at all. He just sits with his legs crossed, waiting for her to pass the bottle back to him.

"How did you get your name?" She sees a child sitting before her, now as he belches and excuses himself.

"Oh that's no thing. Just came from a night of drinking. I guess I took some pills too. Came too wet and muddy as a dog. Name stuck as names do."

Aurora tries to take another drink before passing the bottle but plugs the bottle with her lips. "What are we doing here?"

"I just wanted to sit and have a drink. Not much more to it. Can't really just hang by the road and do that. I didn't want to get too far out of that town we went through a bit back either." Muddy lies down on his back and stares to the sky. "Now why don't you go on up there and check out those Northern Lights?"

"I don't have much money," Aurora says. "I got enough to get me to California and that's about all." If she lies down, in the shadow, she could mistake Muddy's body for one of those hills. "I want to see as much as I can though."

"Isn't that the point though? To see as much as you can?"

"That's what I want to do," Aurora says.

Aurora stands and stretches her arms to the sky. She brings

him the bottle of whiskey and almost crosses the clearing for the gun but stops short.

"Go on, hold it," Muddy says. "You're out here on your own, you damn sure can handle a pistol."

Aurora takes it in her hands and holds it like a porcelain urn although it's much heavier than she might have imagined.

"Takes a bit of getting used to," Muddy says. "Good thing to have if you're the nomadic kind. Sometimes it's something you need."

As Muddy finishes most of the bottle over the next hour he tells her of jail in Tulsa and San Antonio. He tells her he was married once but his wife disappeared to Mexico. He tells of her of crisscrossing the country, most of which he's forgotten because he never stays anywhere for too long anymore. He tells her of a place just like this where he sucked Rattlesnake venom from a brother's leg.

Aurora listens, devours all of it and files it away so she might tell it again later.

By the time they've gone through the whole bottle, Aurora no longer cares about the space between her teeth or the wounds in her gums. She only cares about moving, about staying in motion. It doesn't bother her either when Muddy slips the gun back into his belt, sits down on the chopper and slaps the leather seat behind him. She just grabs her bag, hops on and a moment later they're gliding back onto the highway the same direction they'd come from.

Tiny pinches of bug and debris snap at Aurora's bare ankles so she learns to use Muddy's body as a shield. She leans into the curves, hunkers down, allows the steel to pulse beneath her like a living thing. The cool air whips her air back and her shirt billows up but she has her bag secured, locked into herself so she will not lose it.

It could be an hour but probably not. Aurora has gotten so comfortable that she thinks she might be able to sleep with her face resting on Muddy's back like that. The road has a calming effect and her body meets it reflexively so that it takes a moment to realize they are slowing, downshifting and pulling over.

Aurora smells the canola oil like the air has been fluffed with corn starch and slapped onto a griddle. There is the

sign, the waxy yellow box letters high enough so she could see them from far down the highway had she been looking.

Muddy pulls the bike over to the side of the building where the wall is brick instead of glass. He dismounts and extends his hand like he is asking for a dance. “Now, how about that drink?” He says.

Even though Aurora can sense the weight of the situation in some piece of her, she still feels her legs moving, one after the other, light and airy as foam, into the restaurant behind him.

Before the woman can reach for the phone, Muddy holds up his gun so that she, the cook and the three customers can plainly see it. It must be the same woman from before. She does not seem afraid but expectant. She must be what holds this place together.

“Just go on slurping down that grease and you’ll do just fine,” Muddy says. “Me and the lady just came back to have our rightful drink.”

The woman rubs her palms on her apron. She doesn’t move again until Muddy specifies what they will be drinking.

Muddy leans forward like he might share a secret with her. “Now, of course you know that I’ll be taking all the money you got in that register.” He leans back and quixotically inhales nearly a whole bottle of beer before drinking his shot. “My mom worked in a shithole like this so you keep those tips if you got any.” He points to the beer cooler with his gun and motions for another.

Aurora keeps turning toward the window but Muddy doesn’t seem worried. He is intent on staying to finish another beer. Unsure of how to speak or what to say, “Aurora removes the book from her back and flips through its pages. Nothing registers even though she recognizes each page, sentence and word but she needs to harness her attention to something.

“That book must be something else,” Muddy says. “Looks like it’s seen some weather.” He leans over, props up the book with his thumb so that he can see its cover and nods like he might recognize it. “You need some new books to read.” He slams a fist on the counter like this is a declaration of war.

“I like old things,” she says. “Old things have more meaning.”

The restaurant is still. No cups rise to lips. No forks clink

onto plates.

The two sip their drinks in quiet until Muddy speaks again. "Things used to have meaning all right," he says. He eyes his glass of whiskey with vague skepticism before drinking it down. His attention sparks when he now notices the money on the counter and he mashes it into a misshapen wad before stuffing it into the inside of his vest. "Time to go, Girlie."

Aurora almost falls over when she follows his cue to stand. Every piece of her seems to be going in a separate direction. She sees that Muddy still has the gun out, backing out of the place, opening the door behind him and holding the door for her as she scatters outside.

He might say something, might offer something more than a wave of his hand to, once again, hop on the back. She knows there isn't another option. The only choice is to leave with him again. And so she boards the heaving bike, grips his chest and, once again, they are gone.

It might be an hour later. It might be more. Aurora has been expecting the police, or something, to stop them but they have continued the push down empty road. It is just outside a town, just a thorny rim of lights speckling out there, that Muddy stops the bike. He nods off to the hills, to the right, where the first hint of morning is seeping over the hills in a bruised incandescence. "You're going to go off in this town up here and get a Greyhound or something to take you up north there to see those lights," Muddy says. He reaches into his vest and hands over the money from the diner. "It ain't all that much but it will give you enough padding so you can do whatever you need to do."

Aurora takes the money and holds it in front of her. It might not be much, only two hundred or so, but it's more than she's ever held before. Unsure of what to do, she reaches into her pocket, takes her two teeth and gives them one more shake in her fist before handing them over.

Muddy laughs and pushes them away. "Those are you. You keep all parts of you," he says. "You want to give me something, why don't you hand over that book you think so much of?"

Of course she can get another copy anywhere. But this copy she knows. It is familiar. But right now, it doesn't have any

value at all for her. Without more thought, she hands it over.

"Even better," Muddy said. "Something to keep me stimulated." He nods toward the town. "Think you can hitch your way in?" He sighs. "I got a bad feeling about the law if I head in there."

Aurora could walk. It could have only been a couple miles. But maybe, she considers sticking out her thumb.

"You shouldn't have any trouble," he says, kicking the bike alive again as dust sifts up his jeans. "You'll be okay."

For a moment, as the bike shudders, Aurora wonders if she will ever see him again but then he raises his hand, a wave goodbye, and that is it. He is gone.

Her legs feel sturdy. The morning is coming on. Today she will hitch north because that is what she had promised to do. Today she will go and realize her name.

Jyotsna Sreenivasan

Revolution

Neel was 13 and his sister, Anita, was ten, when their parents split up. On a chilly day in March, his mother picked him up after his astronomy club meeting and told him. As he sat in the front seat listening to her, Neel tried to keep his mind on the fact that he, his mother, the car, and the freeway were, at that moment, traveling through space at 30 kilometers per second on their journey around the sun.

In the months before the divorce was final, when Dad had moved out and was living on the other side of Newark in an unfurnished efficiency apartment which contained almost nothing but a bean-bag chair and empty Chinese food take-out boxes, Neel asked his parents many times why they were getting divorced.

His father, T. Gopalakrishnan, would rub his small pot belly slowly and say, in his thick Indian accent, rolling his R's and enunciating each consonant strongly, "Your mother has decided she does not want to be married to me anymore."

His mother, Linda, would toss her long brown hair over her shoulder and say, "Your father isn't interested in working on our marriage."

Neel tried to point out to each parent that, apparently, things could work out if they simply admitted to each other that they wanted to stay married. They'd shake their heads and look at him searchingly. "No, Neel," they'd say. "It won't work. I'm sorry."

He was baffled by the ways of adults. One day, while he and Anita were sitting on the floor of the basement rec room playing Monopoly, he asked, "How can two people get a divorce without ever having a fight?"

Anita moved her piece, the horse, past "Go" and counted $200 onto her pile of money. "They fought all the time."

"When?"

"They fought every day. Didn't you hear them?"

Neel thought about this. He remembered a chilliness in the air during dinners sometimes. He remembered his parents

closing their bedroom door and having muffled conversations. He remembered wanting to retreat to his room more often than usual.

"What did they fight about?" he asked.

"Mom said Dad was spoiled and expected to be treated like a prince. She said she wasn't a subservient Indian wife. Dad said he only wanted a hot meal and a clean house when he came home and that Mom was the spoiled one. He said she wanted to be waited on hand and foot. Mom said all she wanted was for Dad to pay attention. She said he didn't even know which days the trash was picked up. She said he never remembered her birthday or their anniversary. Mom said they needed marriage counseling and Dad said he'd never set foot in a counselor's office. He said there was nothing wrong with him. It's your turn, Neel."

"How did you hear all that?"

"My room is next to theirs. I could hear everything."

Neel was astonished that Anita could remember all this. He didn't see how these minor misunderstandings could lead to something as momentous as ripping apart the only life he'd ever known. He thought his parents were hiding something from him.

One day, he stormed home from school. "Is he having an affair?" he demanded of his mother. His voice cracked, both from emotion and from his enlarging voice box.

"Who?" she asked. She was sitting at the kitchen table, which had been, since Dad moved out, piled high with papers which Neel and Anita were never to touch, and which never went away. "These are important financial documents," his mother would say. "We need these for the divorce." The table in the dining room was, as usual, covered with potted plants—it was the sunniest room in the house. So they'd been eating their dinners on the sofa in the family room.

"Dad," Neel said. He was standing with his jacket and shoes still on, when normally the rule at their house had been to take shoes off as soon as you walked in the door. That was an Indian habit, and his father liked to point out that taking one's shoes off was a way to make a distinction between the stress of work and school, and the comforts of home.

Now that Dad wasn't around, Neel noticed that even his

mother was clomping around the entire house in her sneakers.

"Of course not," Mom said, looking back at the papers in front of her. "Where did you get that idea?"

"Josh Benmer at school said Dad must be having an affair. That's why his cousin's parents got a divorce and they wouldn't tell his cousin the truth for a long time."

Mom shook her head. "It's nothing like that. We are telling you the truth."

"I don't get it."

"Sit down." She pushed aside a pile of papers, took hold of his hand across the table, and looked him in the eye. He knew they were now going to have a serious, adult conversation.

"When Gopi and I got married," she said in a measured tone, "we were so young. We were still in college. He was working on his PhD and I was a nursing student. We had no idea what we were getting into. Our backgrounds were so different. He's from Bangalore, which as you know is a huge city. I'm a small-town girl from Michigan."

Neel had heard this story many times. His parents had met when Dad started tutoring Mom in chemistry. "But you fell in love," he pointed out.

"At least we thought it was love. It may have been nothing more than loneliness."

"What d'you mean?"

"Maybe I shouldn't be telling you all this. College was such a big place for me. I hardly knew anyone. I missed my boyfriend from high school. We'd broken up when he decided to go into the Air Force, and I went off to nursing school. One day, during our tutoring session, I started crying. Gopi invited me up to the graduate student dorm and made dinner for me. I still remember it. He made a curry with nine kinds of vegetables. I was impressed that he knew how to cook a meal from scratch, and that he used so many vegetables. The boys I'd gone to high school with could barely make themselves a hot dog." She laughed. "Gopi was so different than other boys I knew. He spoke with an accent. He was so quiet and courteous. I thought he was really exotic." Mom rubbed Neel's fingers and smiled at her memories.

"Why are you getting a divorce?" Neel repeated.

Her smile faded. "Do you know why we got married so young?"

"Because you loved each other."

"Because I got pregnant."

Neel's hand flinched away from his mother's, but she had a tight warm grip on his fingers. His eyes rested on a document that said "Statement of Assets" across the top.

"Is this too much for you to know?" she asked.

He mumbled something and shrugged.

"I thought I might as well tell you, since you seem so upset about the whole thing. We knew our families wouldn't be happy about our marriage so we just went to the Justice of the Peace and then told everyone about it later."

Neel's forehead began to furrow. "But I wasn't born until—" He wondered if, somehow, his parents had lied to him about his birth date to make things appear more normal.

"Oh!" she laughs. "It wasn't you. I ended up having a miscarriage. That's the ironic part. If we'd waited even another month, we probably never would have gotten married at all."

Neel wasn't entirely sure what a miscarriage was—whether it was an accidental event or a deliberate action. "Did you think about getting a divorce then?" he asked.

"No. We both come from families where no one ever gets divorced."

"Then why get one now?"

She let go of his hand. "I'm older now. I don't want to keep waiting and hoping things will get better."

"What things?"

"Your father—" She licked her lips. She shook her head. "No. I can't tell you all this. Your father's a good man. I want you to remember that, Neel. OK?" She patted his hand and gave him a tight smile. The serious, adult talk was over.

During the process of the divorce, Neel grew taller than his dad. By the time everything was final, he was thin and lanky, bent like a willow tree in the wind.

The summer before his ninth-grade year, he and Anita moved with their mother to Centerton, Michigan, a small town about two hours southwest of Ann Arbor. Centerton was where his mother had grown up and where Neel's Grandma Mary and Grandpa Paul still lived.

"This is the first divorce our family has ever known,"

Grandma Mary said. Neel, his sister, and his mother were sitting around her blue speckled Formica kitchen table, the night they arrived. They were staying with Grandma Mary and Grandpa Paul until they found a place to live. The kitchen was small and old and smelled of roast beef and bacon. They sat companionably in the darkness, except for the light from the stove. Moonlight streamed through the lace curtains, making a pattern of lacy light and shadows on the table. Anita traced the light circles with her finger. Grandma placed a long white cigarette between her lips and flicked her lighter, which flared brilliantly in the dimness.

"I didn't think anything good would come of marrying a foreigner." Grandma tapped her cigarette into an empty coffee mug. She had sold all her ashtrays at a garage sale some years ago, intending to quit smoking, so now she had to use whatever was handy for an ashtray.

"Mom," Linda said sternly.

"They're old enough to hear this."

"He's their *father,*" Linda said. "*They're* the good that came out of the marriage."

Neel stood up abruptly and pushed open the back screen door. It slammed closed behind him. He stepped away from the house, away from the troublesome conversation inside. The air was warm, and the moon above was so bright and large—it seemed close enough to touch. He remembered looking through the telescope during astronomy club one night, and seeing with startling clearness the ring-shaped craters on the gray surface of the moon. Those craters were up there now, although he couldn't see them.

In Centerton, Neel and Anita were just about the only dusky-skinned people around. Not that anyone was prejudiced or anything. Adults went out of their way to be friendly to them. A few weeks after they arrived, at the beginning of ninth grade, Neel's home-room teacher, Ms. Pierce, put her hand on his arm as he was getting ready to go to his first-period biology class. "Neel, what is your background?" she asked.

Neel shook his hair out of his eyes and said, "Pardon?"

"Your ethnic background," said Ms. Pierce. She was a young, slim woman with her hair in a ponytail, and a wide smile.

"Oh. Um, I'm half-Indian."

"How interesting!" She clasped her hands and bounced on her toes. "I'm part native myself. What tribe?"

He shook his head. "No. I mean, my dad's from India."

"I'm sorry, I misunderstood. That's fascinating. You might want to talk with Mr. Cartig. He'd like more diversity on the staff of the school newspaper. I'm sure you'd bring an unusual perspective."

Neel thought it might be fun to be on the school newspaper staff. There was no astronomy club at this school. But he didn't know how he could bring an "unusual perspective" to the paper. In New Jersey, there were so many kids with two Indian parents that he and Anita were viewed as hardly Indian at all.

In the spring of Neel's ninth-grade year, soon after his fifteenth birthday, Dad announced that he was going to take Neel and Anita to India over the summer. "We have not gone since you were eleven, Neel, and Anita was only eight," Dad pointed out.

Anita, on the extension upstairs in Mom's bedroom, wailed, "You said I could go to horse camp this summer!"

"Yes, yes," Dad said. "We will go to India at a different time from your horse camp."

"I don't want to go to India!" Anita wailed.

"Don't be such a baby," Neel said.

"You will have fun in India," Dad said.

"No, I won't." Anita sniffled.

"Yes, you will. Tell her, Neel. She will have fun, right?"

"Sure," Neel said. He didn't really want to go to India either, but he also didn't want to cause trouble.

Neel's mom was much more excited about the trip. "What a wonderful opportunity for the two of you!" she gushed when she heard about the plans.

"I'm not going," Anita said.

Mom bought several books about India for Neel and Anita: about Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian independence movement, about Indian holidays and festivals, about Indian geography. Mom even rented the movie *Gandhi*. Neel liked the character of Gandhi. He seemed kind and wise at the same time. Anita refused to look at any of the books, and

wouldn't even watch the movie.

Neel told Mr. Cartig, the school newspaper advisor, that he was going to India over the summer. Neel was a "junior writer" on the school newspaper. Mr. Cartig's eyes lit up. "The land of Gandhi!" he declared. "You're a lucky kid, Neel, to have a personal connection with that man. He's perhaps the greatest leader since Jesus."

A personal connection to Gandhi. The greatest leader since Jesus. All day after he talked with Mr. Cartig, Neel wondered if this could be true. He had never been particularly proud of his Indian heritage. He hadn't been ashamed of it either. He just hadn't thought much about it. Now Mr. Cartig suggested there might be more to his family than he realized. That night, he told Dad what Mr. Cartig said.

Dad laughed. "Maybe Gandhi was the greatest leader since Jesus. But unfortunately, our family has no personal connection with him. Gandhi's family was from Gujarat. That's a completely different part of the country than where I grew up."

Neel felt hot with embarrassment at his father's laughter. "I'm sure Mr. Cartig didn't mean a personal connection as in, *related* or anything," he emphasized dramatically. "He just meant, you know, the same country and all."

"Same country. Yes. OK, so are you ready for our trip?"

The next day, Neel told Mr. Cartig that his family had no personal connection with Gandhi. "He's from a completely different part of the country than my family," Neel informed Mr. Cartig, proud that he knew something about his own heritage.

Mr. Cartig said, "But your family must have been involved with the Indian independence movement. That was going on all over the country."

Neel nodded. He had never thought of that. When Dad called that evening Neel asked casually, "Were you involved in the Indian independence movement?"

Dad laughed harder and longer than before. Finally he said, "I wasn't even born when India got independence!"

Neel cursed his own stupidity. How could he not have known? After he got off the phone, he looked in his book again and found out that India won independence in 1947.

Dad was born in 1958. So it was Neel's *grandfather* who must have been part of the independence movement.

At Mr. Cartig's suggestion, Neel decided to interview his grandfather on this trip. It would be a real coup for a sophomore to have a feature article printed in the school newspaper. He packed a voice recorder and notebook in his suitcase.

In the end, Anita refused to come along, and Mom reluctantly agreed that she could spend time with Dad in New Jersey before the trip, but would come back to Michigan when Neel and Dad left for India.

"How are you, young man? I remember when you were only so high."

"He has grown tall! Do you remember us from your last trip to India?"

Neel's head was still spinning from the long plane ride and then the hair-raising taxi-ride from the Bangalore airport. He and his dad stood in the entrance hallway of Dad's childhood home at three o'clock in the morning. Neel shifted his weight from one foot to the other and hung his head. Sriram Uncle clapped him on the back and Sunita Auntie pinched his cheek. He tossed his hair out of his face and tried to mumble something polite to his relatives.

Ahead of them on the wall was the garlanded black-and-white portrait of his grandmother, who died when Neel was a small boy. He didn't remember her. To the right of the photo was the shiny wooden door leading to his grandfather's room. Neel felt like a journalist on a foreign assignment, scoping out the scene. He'd put up with the discomforts of his assignment for the reward of seeing his words in print.

Over the next week, Neel tried to figure out how to arrange to interview his grandfather. Tata was a large, bulky man with a gigantic square head hanging from his frame. He reminded Neel of a bison. He wore a white dhoti wrapped around his legs (it looked like a long skirt to Neel), an undershirt, and a thin white towel neatly folded and draped over one shoulder.

Several times a day Tata walked majestically around the house, his hands behind his back, as though leading a procession. Every so often, as he passed Neel perched on a

sofa reading old *Reader's Digest* magazines (the only reading material he found in the house), Tata barked out a question. "What is the square root of 1,369?" "What is the name of the largest volcano in the world?" After each question he glared at Neel for a few seconds. As Neel floundered for an answer, Tata made a rumbling sound in his throat. Neel was never sure if this was a chuckle or a cough. Then Tata put out a massive thick-veined hand and dropped a piece of foil-wrapped candy into Neel's lap. Neel remembered that Tata liked to produce chocolate or caramel chewy candies at random moments and watch his grandchildren squeal with delight. Neel was too old for that kind of behavior now.

How was Neel supposed to interview a man like that? Besides his frightening looks and manner, there was his inviolable schedule, for which Sunita Auntie made elaborate accommodations. Tata must have hot coffee the minute he woke up, so Auntie was constantly on the alert for that event. After coffee, Tata took his bath, and Auntie mixed his bath water in the bucket to the exact temperature, placed a stool in a particular spot on the granite bathroom floor, and made sure Tata's soap and shaving equipment were within easy reach. After bathing, Tata did a long pooja in the pooja room, for which Auntie provided fresh jasmine garlands, fruits, and cotton wicks dipped in ghee. After pooja, a full meal (rice, rasam, sambar, cooked vegetables, pickle, yogurt). Then, a walk to the post office or a store to do a few errands. Then a thorough reading of two or three newspapers. Then a nap, and afterwards, tea and snacks. It went on like this all day.

One afternoon, Neel asked his father about interviewing Tata. Dad shook his head and said, "Not now. Later." Even though it was afternoon, Dad had just bathed and shaved and was getting dressed in a white embroidered Indian shirt. Neel wasn't sure what was up. Dad had done this once before—gotten dressed up and then disappeared for a few hours.

After Dad left, Neel found Sunita Auntie in the kitchen. She was making tea. It took a few tries before she understood what he wanted. His American accent was difficult for her, and she continued pouring and mixing as he talked. But when he mentioned the words "publish an article," she stopped her work and looked at him. "You want to interview your Tata

for an article in your school newspaper?" she asked. "Yes, we must arrange for that." She immediately walked into the living room, where Tata was opening the mail and waiting for his tea.

That very day, after tea, Tata and Neel retired to Tata's bedroom. Tata sat in a rattan chair with his hands gripping the arms of the chair, as though bracing himself for the work ahead. Neel sat on the bed and placed his voice recorder on the desk next to Tata. He pushed the "record" button, opened his notebook, cleared his throat, and said, "I want to know what you did for India's independence."

"What?" Tata shouted.

Neel repeated his question louder.

"What *I* did? I did nothing." Tata sat back and looked satisfied at having dispatched the first question so quickly.

Neel didn't know what to say to this. Tata must have misunderstood the question. To buy a few minutes, Neel peered at the voice recorder. The red numbers kept counting the seconds relentlessly, recording nothing but the silence in the air.

Neel cleared his throat again and asked, slowly and loudly, "I mean, how did you help out when India was trying to get independence?"

"I did not help out," Tata boomed again. "Our state was not under British rule. We had a Maharaja. Don't you know anything? What do they teach you in school over there in America?"

Neel's face flushed. He couldn't think of anything else to ask. His whole interview was demolished almost before it had begun. Why did none of his books mention this fact about the Maharaja?

"What else?" Tata shouted. "Speak up."

"So . . ." Neel thought quickly, "the Maharaja was independent of the British government?" The question came out with a squeak at the end.

"No, of course not. Nothing was independent of the British. The Maharajas ruled only with British consent."

"Then why didn't anyone in this state do anything for independence?"

"Oh, many people did things. There were all sorts of

marches and speeches. That sort of thing."

Neel was confused by his grandfather's responses. Tata shifted his weight impatiently and his chair creaked. Neel hurried to think of a question. "Did you like the British?" he asked.

"The British modernized India," Tata proclaimed. "Our railways were built by the British. Do you know India's railway system employs more people than any other institution in the world?"

"So . . . do you think the British should have stayed in India?" Neel didn't want to think his grandfather was a British sympathizer, but after all, if it was true, it might result in an interesting article anyway.

Tata rumbled loudly and slammed a fist onto the desk, causing the voice recorder to fall onto the hard ground. "Of course not. What kind of question is that? Nobody wants to be colonized. You must know America was a British colony at one time. You people didn't like it any better. Don't you know about the American revolution?"

Neel picked up the recorder. The numbers continued to tick off the seconds. He set it on the table again.

"The British looted this country!" Tata continued. "You know they took our cotton to England, had it made into cloth there, and then brought it here and forced us to buy it!"

Neel knew. He read it in one of his books. He felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe the interview wasn't dead yet. "Did you burn British-made cloth?" He had read about the huge bonfires Indians made out of British clothes and toys.

Tata shook his massive head. "No, no. I did no such thing."

"Why not?" Neel's frustration was rising. "Didn't you want freedom for India?"

"Of course. Why do you go on asking the same question over and over again?"

"Because I don't understand. Why didn't you help out? Was it dangerous to help?"

"It was not so dangerous. You must remember, the British were not Nazis. They jailed people who were public about their support of independence. If you went about in homespun clothes and attended rallies and made a fuss, they might jail you. In your own home you could burn as many British

clothes as you wanted. They would not bother you."

"So why didn't you?"

Tata slammed his fist on the table again. The recorder fell again and Neel let it stay on the floor. "I told you already," Tata boomed. "Our state was under the Maharaja. There was no need for me to do anything. Gandhi had so many people helping him. What good would it have done for me to burn a few clothes? Hmm?"

Tata's logic seemed water-tight. Neel could think of nothing else to ask. But he wanted an article. He tried one last time. "What have you done that you are most proud of?"

"Hm? Proud? No, I am not a proud man. 'Pride goeth before the fall.' Who said that?" He glared at Neel for an instant, and then continued. "I am a modest man. I mind my own business. I don't get involved in anything and everything that is going on around me. That is how I have always lived my life."

Tata stood up, turned his back on Neel, and proceeded to re-tuck his dhoti. Then he stalked out of the room. The interview was obviously over.

Neel rescued the recorder from the floor, turned it off, gathered his things and climbed up the stairs to the bedroom he and his father shared. He hurled his recorder and notebook on the bed. They didn't even bounce, the mattress was so thin. Then he hauled his suitcase out from under the bed, scooped up the recorder and notebook, threw them in there, and shoved the suitcase back under the bed. He sat down on the bed. He stood up again. Shaking his head, he dragged the suitcase out again. Squatting on the floor, he turned on the recorder, pressed the "erase" button and held it until the number flipped to zero. He threw it all back into his suitcase, zipped it closed, and pushed it far under the bed once more. He flung himself face-down on the hard bed.

Just before dinner, Dad turned on the light in the bedroom. Neel woke up and squinted at him. Dad was smiling broadly.

Neel rubbed his eyes. "What's going on, Dad?"

"It's all settled! I will be married soon."

"What?" Neel sat up cross-legged on the bed.

"I have been corresponding with one woman for some months. Her name is Madhupushpa. We had our horoscopes matched by an astrologer, and now I have met her twice." Dad was walking around the room, waving his arms. "She is a widow with one daughter. You will meet her tomorrow. We are invited there for lunch and you must be on your best behavior. You must try to eat everything she serves you. Understand?" Dad didn't wait for an answer, but continued talking breathlessly. "We will be married in a few days at the temple near her house. Just a simple wedding, since it is a second marriage for both of us. I have decided to do things the Indian way this time. When you have Indian blood, you must do things the Indian way."

His father caught sight of himself in a mirror on the steel clothing cabinet. He stopped in front of his image, smoothed his hand over his mostly bald head, and smiled at himself.

Neel leaped off the bed and lunged at his father, grabbing handfuls of the white embroidered shirt. He towered over his father. "Why didn't you tell me?" he screamed. "Why didn't you tell me you were getting married?"

His father took several steps to regain his balance and grasped Neel's wrists. "Neel, stop it," Dad said, pushing him down on the bed. "I am surprised at you. You have always been a good boy. Now you are behaving like Anita. I did not know myself I was going to get married until this afternoon. How could I have told you any sooner?" Neel lunged up again, and Dad pushed him back down again.

"Why didn't you tell me you were writing letters?" Neel screamed from his position on the bed. Dad's hands pressed onto his shoulders, keeping him down. Dad was short but strong. "This whole trip was so you could get married, wasn't it?"

"I did not want to upset you, Neel," Dad said in a calm, even voice. "The divorce has been hard on you. I know that. I did not want to tell you something that might not happen. I thought it would be best if I waited until everything was final. You are still a child. You do not need to be burdened with knowing about your father's marriage plans."

"You burdened me with the divorce!" Neel screamed.

Dad took his hands away and stepped back. "Yes," he sighed.

"We did. We could not help it. I'm sorry, Neel."

Dad slowly began removing his shirt and pants. He folded his clothes and wrapped a dhoti around his legs. He slipped on an old plaid shirt. As he dressed Dad said, "My marriage will make no difference in your life. I will still call you every evening. You will still come to visit me during your school vacations. Now, Madhupushpa Auntie will be able to make a more comfortable home for you, with home-cooked food and all. You will like it."

Neel slumped on the bed. Dad's marriage would make no difference in his life. That was the problem. He wanted there to be a difference—a good difference—in his life. "I think you will like Madhupushpa." Dad patted Neel on the back. "Come down with me and have dinner."

Neel shook his head. "I'm not hungry." He lay back on the bed. Dad walked out of the room, leaving the door open and the light on.

Outside, a peacock screamed and autorickshas sputtered. Neel stared up at the ceiling, trying to create pictures out of the random cracks spider-webbing across the white paint. Maybe he was too good. He should throw a tantrum now, refuse to meet this lady, Madhu-whatever, insist that Dad take him back home immediately. That's what Anita would do.

Neel became aware of heavy footsteps in the hall. Dad must be coming back. Neel closed his eyes. He didn't want to interact with Dad.

Something rumbled. Neel opened his eyes to see Tata standing in the door. He'd never known Tata to come upstairs before.

"You are not hungry?" Tata demanded.

Neel sat up. He didn't want Tata to think he was disrespectful. "Not really," he said.

"Our food does not agree with you." Tata sat down on the bed beside Neel. He rubbed his hands on the towel slung over his shoulder, and grumbled softly in his throat. Neel wasn't sure what to say or do.

"Your father is getting remarried," Tata observed.

"Yeah."

"I do not understand the ways of the modern world. Divorce

is very difficult for the youngsters." Tata said the word "dievorce."

"I don't understand it either," Neel said.

Tata put out a massive fist. Neel wasn't sure what to do. Was Tata trying to give him a fist-bump? Then Neel realized—he was about to drop a piece of candy.

But before Neel could open his palm to accept the gift, Tata withdrew his fist to his lap and rubbed it with his other hand. "You are growing up," he growled.

Neel nodded stupidly.

"You are very studious," Tata declared. "You will go far in life."

"Thank you," Neel said, his voice crackling.

Tata kept massaging his fist and rumbling, as though he wished to say more. Then, he abruptly stood up and lumbered out of the room. At the doorway he said, without turning around, "You come down and ask Sunita Auntie to make you something else for dinner. She will not mind. It is not good to go to bed hungry."

"Thank you," Neel said again.

As Tata's footsteps thudding downstairs, Neel felt a lump in his throat, and his eyes stung. He swiped at them furiously. What could he do? His only reason for coming on this trip had been shattered. If he refused to meet this woman, that wouldn't prevent Dad from marrying her. The only thing to be done was to endure the rest of this trip, and then go back home and try to forget he was half-Indian.

A small gray lizard scampered lightning-quick across the wall opposite. Then it backed up and turned, as though looking at him. Neel clapped, and the creature shot into a crack behind the bookcase. At least he had the power to scare a small animal.

The lizard poked its head out. Neel lay down on the bed, hands behind his head, feet still on the floor, watching the tiny reptile zipper along the wall. He thought about clapping again, but decided to let the lizard be.

He, and the lizard, and his father, and his grandfather were all co-passengers on this planet, speeding along at 30 kilometers per second around the sun. His mother, his sister, his teachers—even Madhupushpa—everyone was on this

journey with him. And the entire solar system was revolving around the center of the galaxy, which was in turn moving through space.

Neel closed his eyes and imagined himself into a very, very tiny speck in black space. He contracted himself into a smaller and smaller dot, until he almost didn't even exist. Then he thrust this dot into orbit, faster and faster. He was a miniscule amount of matter, flying through space at an unimaginable velocity. He knew this was actually true—yet he couldn't feel a thing.

Richard Herring

Royals

"That's what I'm saying," the Duchess told a girlfriend on the phone. "Right. We won the freaking lottery." She held a burning Marlboro in the 'V' of her two longest fingers, straight above her elbow on the arm of the sofa. With the windows propped open, smoke from the living room blew straight across me and my peanut butter sandwich at the kitchen table. I just had time for a quick bite before work. "No, only two known winning tickets, and we have to call the office up at the state capitol. No one's answering the phone up there today, of course, but we call tomorrow, get an appointment, and roll up there to claim the money," she fielded more questions from the other end of the line. "Oh, I don't know. One minute, I lean toward taking the annual payments, but then the next, I just don't know. Duke says he wants his money now. All up front."

The screen door to the front porch swung open. Duke was out there smoking in the aluminum swing when he heard her call his name. He's a burly man with features like the Neanderthals on that history show I like to watch, and always looks angry or frustrated with his immediate surroundings. He came in hunched over, waving his arms across each other in front of him, like a referee signaling an incomplete pass.

"I don't know," Duchess was saying, "half of eleven million. Minus taxes, they say. Whatever that will be." Duke emphatically mouthed the words, "no, no, no" and made a gesture for her to hang up.

"Hey, gotta go," Duchess wound it down, "Check online later. You'll see what I'm talking about. Yeah."

"We don't need to tell everybody our business," Duke blustered, and he reached to bounce his index finger against her knee as he spoke. "I thought I told you that."

"How you gonna not tell those close to you about it?" she asked. "Can you answer me that?"

"Just keep your damn pie-hole shut. That's how," was Duke's advice.

"Now look here, 'kay?" she figured an angle to play. "Just let me take a picture of the ticket with my phone. Put it up on Facebook and that way, only my friends can see it." The Duke decided years ago he'd be dead before he ever needed to know anything about computers, and wasn't sure he liked this idea. Then, he figured that picture might be a good excuse not to pull the ticket out of his wallet anytime anyone wanted to see.

"Alright, but it'll be a picture of me holding it. In these hands. Ain't nobody touching this ticket but me," Duke concluded. "Me and a certified official of the state lottery." I had to get going. I worry about being late. "Say Jason, listen," he called after me, "do us a solid and keep this to yourself, will ya? Not everyone needs to know."

It was a slow day at Copy Shoppe with everyone staying home for the Labor Day weekend. Mister Greer said he should have closed up the place, took a day off, too. Wouldn't have the chance, he said, after all the snowbirds arrived. The only thing out of the ordinary was the Post-it note to call our family lawyer, Mister Bellamy, before I left work that day.

"Nope, decided not to fight the crowds and stayed home," he told me. "Too hot to get out on the lake anyway." He said he'd be at his home office for the rest of the day. "I'd like to have you and your sister come by to discuss a little matter that's come up."

"Can't make it, babe," the Duchess replied when I called home and asked her to meet me there. "Got a mani and a pedi scheduled, and an appointment to meet with the travel agent." Her next few lines boiled out of the phone with words like cruise ship, Caymans, and Cozumel bubbling to the top. "You go on without me, Jason honey. You can fill me in on all the details later." I could hear the hard drag and long exhale in the ear piece. "And tell old man Greer he'll have to hire someone else to take my shifts at his fine commercial enterprise from now on. Too many other commitments at this time." I don't know who she thought she was fooling with that last part. Mister Greer fired her last week for sassing customers and cut a final check. I saw him put it in her hand.

Mister Bellamy was more like family than a family lawyer. He knew my Dad in high school, got drafted about the same time, but was deployed to where he didn't get eaten up with the Agent Orange. He took a law degree when he left the service and came back to handle small town legal issues in the place where he grew up. He was like a superhero in a business suit, with a briefcase full of magic wands. When Mama went and got herself killed without leaving a will, he took on this probate thing for us. We didn't know how we would pay for his services, but he told us not to worry about that. "Pro bono," is what he called it. That's the kind of family treatment I'm talking about.

I've known him and been to his house ever since I was a little kid. That's probably why I'm comfortable enough talking to him so I don't hardly stutter, more than just a little bit, and when I do he has a way of easing the conversation right on through it.

"Where's your sister?" was the first thing he asked. We were sitting inside the screened porch just outside the room he used as his home office. There were papers on the wicker end table under the cool crystal pyramid paperweight I remember from long ago.

"Not coming," I told him straight away, "Kimberly and Duke are wo-wer-work," the words hung, "work-ing. On something big."

"Duke who?" Bellamy arched his eyebrows.

"Bub-Billy," I explained, "my in-law brother."

"Oh, yeah," the old man still had a young laugh, "I think I remember that now."

Not long after Dad was institutionalized, my sister's personality disorder started to get out of hand. Not like it hadn't been trouble way before that. Her moods swung so bad from peak to valley, it was hard for her and Billy to be in that apartment together for any length of time. Sometimes, it was "he threw me out," and she ended up under blankets on the sofa in our narrow living room for days. Mama used to check under there every now and then to see if she was hungry, or still breathing.

Other times, she "had it up to here" and was leaving that

selfish son of a female dog for good. There she'd be, talking on her phone, playing some farm animal game on the laptop, smoking cigarettes, propped up on the sofa with pillows snatched from Mama's bed. It didn't matter. Either way, she sucked all the air and space from the living room and it was lost to anyone else. I sure missed watching my shows. With Dad living permanent in the VA hospital, there was a big void in the order-giving department and Kimberly sure took that opportunity to step up her game. Mama would serve her meals in the living room, run her errands, and because of her constant, demanding nature, took to calling her "Duchess."

Then one day, I remember it like it's happening right before my eyes, here comes Billy with a wilted bouquet from Winn-Dixie. He drops down on one of those tree trunk knees right there in front of the sofa and tells Kimberly he's sorry and has to get her back. I'm sitting at the kitchen table with Mama, pushing my coffee cup back and forth over a cigarette burn in the Formica, while the whole thing plays out on the other side of the open archway. Duchess throws her arm around his neck and pulls him to her. Swollen, fluttering eyelids seem to spray a salty mist in the empty space around their heads. Both are saying how sorry they are between sobs. She grunts out a low moan, "Tell me we'll never spend another day apart."

"Oh," he says, shoulder blades bucking up and down with the emotion of the moment, "you know it baby. You're my ever thing."

"Well," Mama looks up across the table and says to me, "Sound the trumpets. I guess the Duke has arrived." She could always find a silver lining to mention. "I'm just grateful she could find someone of her own kind."

"So, they're Royals, eh?" Mister Bellamy asked through his wide smile. His housekeeper had served us glasses of the best iced tea. It tasted like peaches.

"Act like it. Ac-act like they think they are," was my opinion.

"Or more like a royal pain," was part of a joke he was making. "A royal pain in the . . ."

"Rear end," I said for him and nodded. Mama always told me there were good words to use and those better left unsaid. Now that she's gone, that's one way I serve her memory.

"Yeah," Mister B. said, "I guess so. And, as it happens, it's Duke who brings us together today." Then he went on to tell about, what he called, "the situation." Downtown on the previous Friday, when he entered the conference room for a two o'clock with a man named Sullivan, he was surprised to see who was sitting across the table.

Back when Duke tried to hire him for his car injury law suit, Bellamy declined. Told him he might best be served seeking representation elsewhere. He advised that the courts were in "response mode" to a rash of cases made public over the last few years.

"Just take a look through the high number cable channels," the attorney directed. "There are shows debunking fraud suits broadcast several times a week."

"I know," the Duke told him. "After that old bag clipped me in the intersection, that's where I got the idea."

Within the year, he was back in Mister Bellamy's office to present a retainer on behalf of the Duchess and me, as second generation survivors of Agent Orange victims. He didn't care who it was got sued; Monsanto, Dow, the Veteran's Administration, but my stutter and learning disabilities, along with my sister's mental illness provided clear evidence of resulting birth defects.

"We deserved to get paid behind all that," Duke told him. Mister Bellamy ended that meeting telling Billy he would not be representing him, then or in the future. But Duke had the nerve to come back on that Friday, sitting across the conference table, with a copy of a last will and testament naming my sister as executor of Mama's estate.

"Been going through Marilyn's things," he told the attorney, "this is what we come across."

"You found this by itself?" Mister Bellamy wanted to know.

"There were some photos, mementos, things like that." Duke avoided eye contact to a point where Mister Bellamy wondered if insects were flying around the room.

"I meant the original," Bellamy told him. "I'll keep this with the other records. Keep looking, though. The original document will be a big help in finalizing the files."

Mister Greer said he was sorry he had to fire Kimberly, but in this business, you couldn't afford to run off customers. She had one of those days last week when she was the brightest, most competent person in this world, and anyone who didn't appreciate that was either ungrateful or not smart enough to understand. I guess that's about the one thing Duke and her had in common, only he was like that each and every day. The Duchess informed the lady, who wanted formal invitations for her daughter's 16th birthday party, that her personal design looked "unprofessional." She told the delivery company owner, who wanted boxes of invoice pads printed up, his whole process was "stupid." It didn't help that Duke would come with her on her shifts, sometimes, stand in front of the shop smoking or, worse yet, come around to hunker down at the desk behind the counter and monkey with the equipment. When the boss told the Duchess that he had to let her go, she told him he could go and, well, have sexual intercourse with himself for all she cared. The good news was, Mister Greer said he would rather not go through training anyone else for the job and, if I wanted to pick up her hours, I could work up to 39 and ½ hours a week. I sure needed the money to put toward the house note.

Last month, Duchess said they were "coming up a little bit light this time, but we'll get this thing straightened out. Duke and I are realigning our budget categories." Near as I could see, those categories were vodka, cigarettes, fast food, lotto tickets, and two liter soda bottles. There wasn't much left to chip in toward the mortgage.

They would argue over finances. It wasn't like a secret or anything. Come to find out, what Duke meant by "getting her back" was, being two months behind on apartment rent, he would now be making their love nest into our tight four room, one bath home. Mama let it slip about coming home to find them pulling my stuff out while I was at work so they could move into my bedroom. When she told them that "wasn't happening," Duke came back with a borrowed nail gun to shoot wood strips to the floor and ceiling. He stapled up an old sheet and shower curtain from the linen closet to screen off a large rectangle in the living room as private space. That set up the disturbing nightly silhouette shows and, because

they never thought to tone it down, their natural speaking voices left little doubt about whatever nonsense bristled between them.

It got louder after Mama died. They wasted no time moving into her bedroom, across the narrow hallway from mine, making themselves at home behind those thin walls. From then on, without a choice, I was a silent witness to all their plans.

"I thought you said we could move down there," she spoke in that baby talk voice which, when talking finances, takes on its own kind of creepy. "That's where you said you always wanted to go. Make the big bucks and start a new life." I'd already heard parts of this many times. Duke said he had a standing offer from a cousin who tapped into that NAFTA money and set up a trucking company way down south.

"I told you to stop saying that," Duke boomed back. "It's not in Texas," he explained one more time, "It's Noo-wave-o Laredo." I could hear him pacing while he talked. "It's not even the states. I can't work down there." His tone resonated with the sad, unfairness behind it all. "You know me, baby. I'm just proud to be an American." Bed springs grated and the frame squeaked when he plopped down. "Then there's the heat, Arthur-itus getting to my knee . . ."

"It would just be nice, a regular paycheck, some benefits," her volume was softer, as if pressed against his shoulder. "If Mama had just carried some life insurance, we wouldn't be in this mess right now."

"Insurance don't pay for no suicide, anyway," he countered. The springs squeaked again with sudden movement.

"But she was self-medicating, trying to get better," Duchess almost squealed.

"Don't matter how much she took of that Zoloft or Prozac you gave up on," Duke spoke more slowly and tried to sound wise. "You're in the middle of a city block. Step out in front of a moving city bus, people say that's your plan."

I'm not sure Billy ever made the connection back when Mama started referring to him as "Duke." He was a big John Wayne fan though and went right with it, to where he started to introduce himself that way. He came up with money

for a personalized license plate, "1Duke-O" was the closest thing not already taken, and mounted it on the Lumina when he got it running.

"We're going to Disneyworld," I heard him shouting at the phone when I chained my bike to the front porch steps. The weeds were so tall in the front yard, the little bird bath Mama was so proud of looked like a puddle in a salt marsh. Maybe she felt like that was all she could control, but she kept it real neat and nice. With Duke not working, the agreement was for him to push the mower around the small square of grass as needed. I knew right then I would have to say something to him about it, and that made me feel like throwing up.

"Isn't that what they always say? When you win the Super Bowl, or World Series, Wheel of Fortune? Well, that's where we're going, goddam, after we drive . . ." I pulled open the screen door. "Nerd Alert," he called out at me, "Na-Na-Na-Nerd!" He pointed a finger with his free hand at arm's length. "After we drive up to the lottery commission office on Wednesday," he continued. "You're looking at her Facebook page? Yep, there it is." On the coffee table, the picture of the lottery ticket on the laptop screen clearly showed just the winning numbers, bordered by Duke's fat, sausage fingers, above and below. "I don't know, man," he was saying as I went in to the bathroom. Open a night club, maybe a Lamborghini dealership. I know, right? Just have to give it some careful . . ." The spray from the showerhead drowned him out.

The speech therapist from the county, when I was in high school, said it was a good idea to adopt what she called a "bridge strategy" in responding to conversation. Whenever a response was required, pause, think, begin with a word like, "Well," and slide from there into what you need to say. By the time I left high school, my stutter left, too. People stopped looking at me like I was stupid or retarded or something. About the time our house started to fill up with craziness, seemed like it came back strong. So, when I came out of the bathroom and Duke was off the phone, I went back to that old strategy.

"Well," I began, and it hung for a moment too long, "wa-weeds are all in the gra-grass, and . . ."

"Hell, don't ya think I can see that?" He was sitting in the

kitchen, eating a fried pie and tapping down a new pack of cigarettes against the table top. “But, when I was trying to fix the mower, the old spark plug broke half in two.” He pointed toward the pieces set on the window sill. “So, you and your simple ass need to carry them down to O’Reilly’s. See if you can get a new one like it to fit in that old piece of crap out there.” I picked a used plastic bag off the top of the trash, dropped in the broken parts, and zipped the seal. “Hey, don’t worry about it,” Duke barked through the food in his mouth. “After Wednesday, I’ll send a crew of Ma-Ma-Mum-Mexicans over to cut the whole damn yard.”

“Well,” I started, then decided to go on out the back door instead. I don’t think Duke cared too much how Mama’s house looked. More than once, he called it names like “cardboard cracker box” with a few cuss words mixed in. I cared. It was the only house I remembered living in.

The day before, toward the end of my visit at Mister Bellamy’s place, the conversation turned serious. He told me he had wanted to talk to me and my sister together, but maybe I could “shed some light.”

“Do you know what this is, Jason?” He handed me a piece of paper and I shook my head, no. “Have you ever seen this document before?” I said no to that, too. “This is a copy,” he explained, “Actually, a copy of other copied text.” He turned it to where we both had a good look. “These parts are copied and pasted from different, incompatible in this state by the way, will and testament templates available online. This is a scan of your mother’s signature, inserted into one of the documents compiled here.” He held the paper up for the light from the window to show through. “This is an inserted scan of notary seal, and the design for this stamp was discontinued in the late ’90s.”

“So, wh- what does this all mean?”

“Oh, perhaps fraud, criminal intent, officially submitted last week to an officer of the court. By your brother-in-law.” He raised his eyebrows and let that notion float in the space between us. “Then yesterday morning, we get this message on the office recorder.” He pressed a number on his phone, paused, touched the screen a few times, and handed it to me.

"Listen."

"Hey, Mister Bellamy. Looked all through this stuff for the original and we give up. You can just chuck that copy I brought you." It was the Duke's voice, somewhat more gravelly than usual, like he needed to cough something up. "It don't make any difference now, anyway."

"I will need to look into some things," Mister Bellamy told me, rubbing one hand over the other, as if massaging something held within. "Come back by here on your way home from work on Friday. I'll let you know what I find out."

A couple of times I thought maybe I should feel bad about my part in the whole mess but, truth be told, I don't. It's not like I did anything on purpose. I had gone over to the Quik Chek that Sunday morning, like always, picked up the paper for the food coupons and TV Weekly, a tall coffee, and one of the promotional tickets from the stack they print and set out to advertise Saturday night's winning lotto numbers. I don't have the money to play much, but it's fun to look and see if any of my lucky numbers got picked.

When I got home, I put the slip right there on the end table and dropped the paper in Dad's old Barcalounger. There's a good cross breeze through the house with the windows open. Near as I can figure, that little slip of paper blew off to the floor or under the edge of the sofa where Duke stashed his plastic pints of vodka, wallet, keys and such from the time he moved in. You look on those fake lotto tickets, and right there in two places, the fine print says "non-redeemable" and "replica." But Duke had a bad need for reading glasses and a murky memory.

"You don't remember where you bought the ticket?" I heard Duchess ask him sometime during those few wild days that changed everything.

"Naw, I don't remember where or when, but hey, I play every time," he reasoned, "I sure don't remember not buying one, either."

So, when he reached under the sofa feeling for a bottle or loose change, found that slip and checked it against the numbers in the morning paper, I'm sure he believed his long overdue ship just came in. From that point on, he didn't let

anyone touch the ticket, or even look at it, unless he clutched it firmly in both hands, raised to eye level for them to see.

The Duchess wanted to rent a limo for the ride up to the state capitol, but the deposit charge exceeded remaining limits on any credit card either one of them had. They weren't comfortable counting on the Lumina to make it, with the odometer showing 97,000 hard miles, so they did a one-week lease on a compact import. I heard them rattling in the kitchen Wednesday morning a couple hours before I had to get up. Car doors slammed and they were gone before dawn.

"A fly on the wall . . .," Mister Bellamy asked, "or in the back seat on the drive home? Wouldn't you?"

"Nn—No sir. Well," I took a sip of iced tea and started again, "I can honestly say I wouldn't." The conversation on the porch Friday afternoon started with Mister B asking me to tell him everything I knew about the situation, and he would do the same. I didn't think I had much to tell, but that's what I did.

When I got home from work Wednesday evening, the lease car was back, parked in the front yard. Inside, it seemed like no was one home. The door to Mama's room was closed. I was about to open the door and peek in when I heard them shuffling around in there. It stayed quiet. I can't remember another time when those two were in the same place for so long without hollering something at each other. I was lying on my bed when I heard Duke go for cigarettes and my sister get on the phone.

"They wanted to see photo ID and social before anything else," Duchess told the friend on the other end of the line. I heard what I could because she spoke quietly, for her, in a voice from our childhood. I used to call it the "far away, fairytale pretend" voice, where she talks about real life events as if they didn't, couldn't ever, happen that way. "We were greeted at the front desk and they walked us right in," she explained. "I tell you what; it was all very tense in that office when Duke pulled the wallet out, unfolded the ticket, and handed it across the desk," she took a long, dramatic pause. "Before he touched it, the Deputy Commissioner asked if we had signed the back. Duke said 'ohyouknowit, yessir.' The official looked from the ticket, to Duke, to me, then back to

the slip of paper in his hands before asking the photographers to leave the room."

She went on to tell how they didn't speak to each other for thirty minutes or more on the way home, but when the yelling started they couldn't stop. She told him she couldn't stand another minute in the car with anyone that stupid, so he pulled into the next rest stop to let her out. She said no, he was the one should be getting out. So he did. She slid over to the driver's side and drove two exits down the highway before spotting the state trooper. That reminded her she never got her license renewed so she turned around and went back. "Yep, there he was, catching a smoke, drinking a Fanta, staring at a map on the wall outside the men's room."

I explained to Mister Bellamy, "We could hear Duke coming through the squeaky screen door, and I guess she hung up." I told him I was tired and fell asleep until it was time to get up for work. When I got home that evening, the house was open and odd things were missing; towels, pillows, table lamps, and most of the canned goods from the pantry. In Mama's old room, the dresser drawers were open and all their clothes were gone. To me," I said to Mister B. "it looked like they left in a hurry."

"Well Jason that could very well be. Within two hours after my associates' visit to your house yesterday afternoon, your sister emailed my office a forwarding address. It was a business address," he flipped through his notes, "in Mexico, I believe."

Mister Bellamy did so many favors for so many people, I guess it was easy to call some in. So, on short notice, he sent a colleague with official looking credentials as a fraud investigator, and an off duty police detective, who told Duke he was there to gather notes on "peripheral legal matters." As they reported to Mister Bellamy, they thought their visit made a profound impression. "I suppose they were royally impressed," is how he said it.

"There are some loose ends to tie together," he continued, "but disposition of your mother's final affairs should be relatively uncomplicated." He turned his laptop so I could see the screen. His binder was open between us. "There is, was, a modest saving account, which your sister has regularly

depleted over the last eight months." He looked up at me over his reading glasses. "Haven't checked for withdrawals in the last twenty-four hours. House payments are current, in the twenty-eighth year of a thirty-year mortgage. The largest single asset is a savings bond that matures in five months, large enough to amortize the mortgage balance. If that's what you want to do. When that time gets close, come see me. We'll discuss your best interests."

The fiasco blew up out of nowhere, then in no time, that's where it blew back. Riding my bike from Mister Bellamy's place, I felt way better than I had in a long time. It wasn't like I just won the lottery or anything but, even if I had, I'd be doing the same thing. I would stop by the auto parts store on my way home. I had two pieces of broken spark plug in the bag in my pocket, and enough money to buy a new one.

Rafal Redlinski

Are you an alcoholic? A self-test

"How many beers have you had?" Haley asked again.

I could tell she was flustered. A familiar, faint blue vein ran diagonally across one side of her forehead, just under her hairline. She sprawled across the small black futon as if she could soften the interrogation by pretending to watch an episode of Chopped playing in the background.

I shut the fridge door slowly. "Some of those cans are from yesterday."

She sat upright. "I just don't get why you need to be fucked up before we fuck."

"I don't."

"But you always are."

It was true and I wished I had a reason other than that I really enjoyed it. Even afterwards, I'd crave a beer. I'd pee then grab a fresh can and drink it standing, one hand supporting my weight against the cool glass of the floor-to-ceiling window. Naked, I'd stare at the city lights and inhale the smoke drifting from the bed.

"You always smoke afterwards," I said.

"That's different."

"How?"

"It just is. I can't explain it, but it is."

I fell face-first onto the twin bed, half-expecting to make her laugh. She stayed silent, and in these moments I didn't know how to read her. Sometimes she was a bleached-blond, hundred-pound pit bull.

"Listen, I found this test."

"Oh boy." I looked to the slightly whiter space above the futon, a permanent clean shadow left by a trophy display. It lay hidden now, a beautiful homemade cabinet made of dark brown walnut with a shelf for trophies and a rack of wooden antlers—my undergrad school's mascot was a stag—projecting from the top, perfect for hanging medals along the carved-in ridges.

"I found this test online, and it's supposed to figure out if

you have a drinking problem."

"I can't."

"Why's that?"

"I'm twenty-five."

"Question one: when drinking with other people, do you try to have a few extra drinks when other people don't know about it? I'm going to mark that as a yes."

"No."

"No? You drank a whole beer while I was in the bathroom."

"Yeah, but you're not even drinking. So technically, I'm not drinking with other people."

She sat on my lap, and I barely felt the soft pressure of her featherweight frame. I kissed her, and she ran a hand through my beard.

"Rob, I'm not saying this is a big deal. I'm just curious, that's all."

"Okay."

"Can we just run through a couple questions?"

"Yeah."

"But Rob, you have to be honest with me, okay?"

"Yeah." I tried for slightly annoyed, but it came out soft and high, an unsure squawk.

Are you in a hurry to get your first drink of the day?

"Do you have any other questions?" This was a hint that the conversation was ending, but the guy across from my desk was not having it.

"I'm just really stressed about this second paper," he said. He was a nontraditional student, a lofty way of saying someone fucked up the first half of his life and made it up by asking too many questions in class and calling me *Professor* instead of just Rob.

"Mhm, stress. Yep, it can be stressful." I tried to check the clock on the other side of the shared office, but his fat shoulders blocked my view. The light outside had softened into a shade of blood orange.

I steered my chair toward the side of my desk, pausing to shuffle with the mess inside the leather bag at my feet—another signal to him.

"The citation stuff is kind of confusing. The last time I was in school we used—"

"Oh, you know what? APA, MLA, FAA, NWA, you can use whatever you want because—" I put a hand to one side of my mouth and whispered this last part "—I heard the teaching assistant for this class is a lazy asshole and doesn't care."

He wasn't satisfied. I wanted to grab a handful of his plaid shirt and drag him out with me. I had to be home soon because—and this is something no one told me before I moved downtown—every grocery, liquor store, or newsstand closed by 8 pm.

I stood and shifted backward toward the door in a kind of passive aggressive moonwalk. Still, he didn't move, and I knew we were locked in a battle of wills. Office hours were up, but I couldn't bear to kick him out. I reached the door and traced my fingers against the dulled brass doorknob before opening it, hoping he'd relent and stand up. He didn't.

I really did feel bad about leaving without him.

I sprinted out and caught the next bus downtown. While on board, I gripped the aluminum pole so tightly that sweat from my hand dripped in beads down the reflective surface. The driver grunted when I finally got off, like he was relieved I was gone.

I ran, ignoring intersection stoplights, crisscrossing through dwindling tourist groups and homeless mobs—the only people who stayed in this shell of a neighborhood past five. It was all in vain because even from a block away I could see the liquor store was dark and empty. I walked to the door anyway and tugged at the steel handle, hoping that someone inside might make an exception for their best customer.

No one came. I paced outside the door and thought about hopping onto a train, going from station to station in search of a nearby bar. But I wasn't looking to socialize or drink heavily. What I craved—the nagging feeling that dug into my back along with the ache caused by schlepping a bag filled with graded SOC 101 midterms—was to sit back in a chair and drink beer out of a glass, a perfect Budweiser moment that would justify the day, hush the suspicion that I too was fucking up the first half of my life.

"They're closed, kid," a man said.

I had zoned out, leaning forehead-first against the building. When I saw how close he was I jumped back, and not just because he was homeless.

"I know" I said, sounding angrier than I had intended.

He could have passed for a normal guy, but new and old sweat stains overlapped in a film on his shirt, like layers of sediment an archeologist could trace back to months ago when this guy probably found it. "Shit man, just letting you know." He walked away. A torn case of Bud Ice dangled from his left hand, and his forearm was tensed from the strain.

"Hold up." He didn't slow down, so I ran in front of him and shuffled backward in an uncomfortable harmony with his steps. "Need some cash?"

"Wouldn't turn it down."

He stopped, and I was glad because I had almost walked ass-first into a busy street. "Let me buy that case off you."

He raised it to eye level and squinted. "Jesus man, if you wanted to bum a beer you could've just asked." He set the case down, opened two cans, and handed one to me.

We drank under the awning of some unused commercial property, a former payday loans place with a peeling poster of the company's cartoon fox mascot glued to a far wall. The beer was warm and stale-tasting, like old, sour rice.

"Mm, crisp. It's got a real orange note," I said.

"Get ya drunk, I suppose."

The next silence was so long and painful that I began to sweat, and he said something just to let me off the hook.

"You a student?"

"Kind of." I put the can to my mouth to stall for time. "What do you do?" I asked and then sucked some air through my teeth as if I could draw the question back.

He chuckled, the noise sounding more like a light cough. "Land surveyor."

I killed the rest of my beer and dropped the can; the hollow tin sound carried far beyond where we stood. Even though the sun had set and the street lamps' weak glow lit only half his worn face, he was clearly glaring at me, so I took the can to a nearby bin. When I returned he was sitting cross-legged, back against the building's wall. I guess I thought it would've been rude to walk away so I took a seat next to him, and he

handed me another beer.

We drank and talked for a while. I couldn't hear a lot of what he was saying because he spoke quickly and his voice was distorted like a bad phone connection. So, I did most of the talking.

By beer eight, he knew the salient details of my life story, although I mostly glossed over work and school. I felt compelled to relay my track history: the medals, the meets, and the synthetic rubber path, so hot in the summer it imprinted a checkered pattern on the backs of stretched-out legs. I talked about how the track was both hard and soft and how after eight years of devoting your life to something it could just end.

"You get hurt?" he asked.

"No, nothing like that," I said.

He grunted and said something like, "that's good."

"It's just that I always had my thing. And then this path that I had—" I started to tear up but I coughed through it. "Goddamn, I was in the low elevens for the hundred meter, and I could do longer stuff, too."

He stood. I thought he was finding a dark place to pee, but he said he was taking off.

"Going where?" I asked.

"See my lady."

"Your lady?" Even with a buzz, I could tell my surprise was impolite.

"Got places to be."

I pulled out a twenty dollar bill. "Let's just finish the case."

He took it but meandered away. "Got places to be."

For the second time that night I ran after him, only now I knew him well enough to grab his shoulder. "Come on, dude."

He snapped back, shrugging my hand off and slapping my arm away with a surprising power. "The fuck is wrong with you, kid? You a fag or something?"

I just stood there, reeling, feeling something like whiplash. He moved from me again, still slow and calm.

"You just ruined a perfectly pleasant evening with that!"

He didn't turn around.

Once the shock wore off, I laughed at the strangeness of the situation. But the laughter trailed away, and I hoped

he'd come back. A late summer breeze dried out my sweaty, matted hair and I poured the half-empty hand-warmed beer into the street.

Have you ever had a DWI (driving while intoxicated) or DUI (driving under the influence of alcohol) violation, or any other legal problem related to your drinking?

She moved through the street, weaving through traffic as if she had it all planned out. Eventually, we stood a few shoulder lengths apart at opposite ends of the Plexiglas-walled bus bench.

She was pale, with pierced eyebrows, short bleached hair, and a cigarette in her mouth; she was the type of girl who would look ridiculous if she weren't smoking. I caught myself looking at her a few times, which confused me because everything about her was asymmetrical, and she was skinny to the point of suspicion. Her calves were like taffy stretched out too thin, robbed of all tensile strength, about to snap. But for a second I thought about how good she'd look without the pea green puffy coat, how it would feel to lift her entire weight onto a bed without straining.

The bus' double doors whooshed open, and the warm air from inside came out in a gust strong enough to flip some hair over my eyes. She walked in first, and I followed her all the way back and took the seat next to hers. I felt this heat, like settling into a starting block; my heart rate slowed so much that every beat felt twice as important.

Two weeks later I saw her at a bar near campus. I was out with the other teaching assistants for the first time, and while they messed with a flashy *Wheel of Shots* mounted at the far end of the bar, I hunched over a pint glass.

It took me a moment to recognize her. She ordered a drink and did not sound like I expected. Her voice was clean, musical. The way she said *grenadine* sent a chill through my body.

"Hi," I said.

She smiled but didn't respond.

"I like your hair."

"Oh, boy," she said, laughing through it.

"What?"

"I should teach you how to flirt."

I thought she was joking, but when the bartender returned she led me to a corner table and planted her elbows like she was getting down to some serious business. "Do you know how often women get compliments? It's boring."

"So an insult then?"

"Anything interesting: insult, declarative statement."

"I own two Jet Skis."

"See, but now I know you're lying."

"How?"

She traced her index finger along the length of my forehead then tapped twice like she was checking for a hollow sound. "Eyebrows are nature's polygraph. This end creeps up, and I know you're insincere."

"Yeah, but that human lie detector stuff is mostly bullshit."

"Mostly."

"Fine, my father owns two Jet Skis."

"Take me now."

We talked for a while and she was fun and funny and I didn't even mind the clumsy pauses in conversation. It sounds weird, but every few moments I'd notice something new, or look at her in a different way, and she changed in front of my eyes, shifting from punk-bus-stop-girl to Haley.

Eventually she grabbed my wrist and led me to my officemates. I introduced her, and she worked the room like a pro, joking around and telling stories and being interested in everyone else's stories. Once in a while she brushed her hand against my shoulder as a reminder that she wasn't forgetting about me.

"You have nice shoulders," she said.

Sprinter's shoulders, I wanted to say. Then I'd recite a line about actually being built for long distance, but something about her muffled the instinct.

"You have nice everything," I said instead.

"Terrible, really bad stuff. I have taught you nothing."

"There's a lot of other stuff I'm terrible at."

She smiled wide, and this time I was leading, away from the group and into a cramped single-bathroom. The overhead lamp was too bright, so she flipped the switch off and enough

light came in through the door's cracks for us to see. We kissed. Our teeth bumped together, and I could feel that we both smiled.

I cupped my hands under her butt and lifted her onto the sink's edge, and she struggled with the clasp on her jeans before sliding the waist down to her knees. I went down on her. I didn't really have a game plan but I did something right because I heard the sound of tearing paper and saw her clutching half a crumpled note, a flyer for a band called Snarl Marx she had ripped of the wall.

Someone knocked at the door. We ignored it, but the knocking grew louder, and the flimsy door shifted inward with every blow. She clutched my face with hands ten degrees cooler than my own skin and jumped down from the sink. She pressed her back against the door, and I knelt and continued, periodically looking up to see if the door was caving in from the barrage of pounding. It stayed intact, and Haley came just as the knocking stopped. I stood and unbuckled my belt, but she stopped me.

"I'm not doing *that* in a bathroom."

"I did."

"Yeah, pretty impressed." She kissed my neck and picked up the torn flier on which she scribbled an address with a tube of maroon lipstick she produced from a back pocket.

"You have a smartphone, right?"

"Yeah, but why don't we just—"

"We should leave separately."

I backed up a step, and she probably thought I was hurt.

"You work with those guys, right? You should stay for a while so they don't tell stories about that weird time you disappeared."

She left first, and I stayed in the bathroom for a bit, bouncing with unabashed happiness.

I paid my tab, said goodbye to my coworkers and mapped the short walk to Haley's house. Outside, I skipped through a strip of bars and veered off into a residential area filled with rundown homes for hipster students and working poor, the kind of neighborhood that seamlessly combined skinny jeans and gun violence. I was near Haley's home, but the skipping loosened something inside me and I had to pee.

I sidled next to a small red-bricked house, but an automatic light went off and I couldn't perform under the spotlight. I picked out two tall shrubs in another yard and fit perfectly between them, my shoulders just grazing the unbending branches.

Before the lights or the sirens, I noticed the unmistakable sound of a car in idle, a sneaky hum which I heard in the same way a gazelle can sense a lion's breathing. I stopped midstream, zipped up, and walked slowly into the backyard.

An engine revved. I ran. The lights were so bright the small fenced-in backyard lit up in a red and blue glow. The noise was a physical force, a wind at my back pushing me forward through the backyard, over the fence, through more yards, through the street, aimlessly forward until I was sprinting so quickly that my ankle locked mid-stride and my right foot came down weird. I tripped and stumbled to the ground.

That's how the cop found me. The car ambled forward with the lights still going. I raised my hands instinctively, though I felt ridiculous and eventually brought them down. He got out and squatted down, heels up, bouncing his weight up and down, hands pressed against the sides of his legs. "Had a bit of a tumble there, sport?" He patted my head and stood straight, knees clicking as he rose. "You should stretch next time." He smelled like cigarettes.

I remained at ground level for a while and felt something more than embarrassment. My muscles were strained to near immobility, and I couldn't look directly at the crumpled yellow paperwork he handed to me. There were drying stains on my jeans and I still kind of had to pee, and the worst part was I started crying and couldn't stop. It didn't make sense because I had gotten tickets before, but this time it was like shame and loss and a feeling like walking through thick, slowing fog.

I made it to her place, though. She opened the door in a big white T-shirt, and had a faint crease on one side of her face. I thought she'd be mad about how late I was, but she smiled and led me to her bedroom, and we lay there with her chest pressed against my back. We didn't have sex, but she brushed her cool hand against my forearm for most of the night, soothing the strain that had settled in my stomach.

Do you drink heavily when you are disappointed, under pressure or have had a quarrel with someone?

I don't remember the exact setup to the fight, but for a couple weeks Haley paid special attention to the trophy case. She'd run her hand against the dark grain and sigh whenever she thought I wasn't watching. She bumped into it so often I figured she was doing it on purpose.

"It's just kind of bizarre," she said one night, unhooking a bronze medal.

"That's my favorite one, Dekalb, spring of 2007. It was one of those weirdly cold days in April, but my lungs held up alright."

"This is what I mean." She placed it back onto an antler.

"You just have to be aware of your lung function at—"

"Last night you got drunk and slurred through the Northern Conference invite story, twice." She stood straighter. Up to this point it felt playful, like maybe we'd get real close together and she'd bite at my neck and we'd fall to the floor. "And you can't go a day without comparing something to the feeling of settling into a starting block."

"You wouldn't understand."

"I played volleyball."

"Volleyball? Not the same."

"Fine, I could talk about the crazy commission I made last month. What if I only talked about graduating summa cum laude? My perfect attendance award from grade school?"

"Track was a part of my life, Haley."

"Was! Was! Sometimes it's like you can't even enjoy the shit going on around you because you're too busy jerking off to the mental image of your body squeezed into a unitard."

I had been slipping in and out of a nervous smile, but for this I conjured the most ill-tempered stare I could muster. "It's a fucking speedsuit."

What killed me was she didn't storm out. She composed herself and took what felt like an hour to put on a jacket before leaving in silence.

I started drinking right away. It was a cliché, I know, but I yanked a full case from the fridge and drank it cross-legged on the floor while I watched freight trucks take up all the

space on the highway across from my building. Past that, a few dozen lanterns lit the trail around a poorly placed public park; the lights looked like a loose formation of ground-level stars.

Twelve beers deep, my face was pressed against the glass and I couldn't look away from the newly beautiful spots of light, their intensity rising and falling and breaking out into striations as it became harder to focus on one point.

I charged into a closet and tore down coat hangers and piles of clothes in search of my high school box. I found it under a pile of sweatshirts and raised it in victory before carefully unpacking the contents on the surface of my bed. Inside, an immaculately folded baby blue speedsuit called to me.

I pulled off my shirt, tugging so hard I could hear fabric rip. Getting my pants off was a challenge too. I almost fell a second time, but soon I was wearing the tight, elesatane uniform, struggling with a pair of narrow track spikes.

I barely made it out of my building. The track shoes' hard tips slid against the slick marble floors of the lobby. I had better luck with the concrete outside, and I ran as soon as I hit sidewalk. One city block, then a long crosswalk, through a field of grass, and I was on a pathway encircling a manmade lake. The first half-lap was hard; I was out of breath and my stomach felt like it was caving in, but I fell into a rhythmic stride and the pain dissolved. My body numbed to sensation, and I focused on wading through darkness toward the next light, perfectly following the path lain out for me.

I lost track of the completed laps and stumbled forward from exhaustion, walking toward the slick-looking body of water in the center of the park. The ground softened and sloped downward, and all I could think about was the cooling black water soothing the dry-hot itch caused by friction between the fabric of my uniform and skin.

I fell to my knees and crawled forward, wading through rough woodchips all the way into cold, shallow water. I went into the deeper end, and my breath hurried along with the effort it took to keep my body afloat.

It was weirdly calming for a while until it became so dark that I didn't know which direction I had come from. My stomach cramped, and it became harder and harder to kick

my legs. Even through the numbing gloss of twelve beers, I felt real fear, a choking panic that slowed my progress back toward land. Soon, I was barely swimming, more clawing at the water, pleading with it until I could hold out no longer. And that's when I reached the edge.

I crawled out and lay on the craggy ground for an hour, throwing up in between deep, joyful breaths.

The next morning, I woke in my apartment and instinctively turned to the window. In daylight, the park looked open and plain, and the pond was tiny, so unimpressive and harmless that the wave of embarrassment made me forget about the ache in my body and the stale-sour taste in my mouth. I ripped the trophy case off the wall.

"Three no's in a row. Looks like you're in the clear." Haley walked to the television and hushed the outrageous yelling of the Iron Chef Chairman. "I guess that wasn't very scientific."

I gripped the can in my hand and saw how absurd it was that I had been drinking during the quiz. "Yeah, kinda silly."

She came out of the kitchen with a fresh garbage bag, peeled two clinging sides, and flipped it up and back down in a plastic bravura that filled it with air for a moment until it relaxed and hung flaccid from her hand. "I'm a little disappointed. I could have been one of those noble, supportive wives of an alcoholic, a real Florence Nightingale type." She zigzagged across the room, plucking cans from side tables and tossing them into the bag. "For some reason, in this fantasy we're sitting around in a circle talking about childhood traumas. You'd have a blanket wrapped around your shoulders, and I'd make brownies for the whole group."

"Really?"

"Yeah, or cookies or some kind of nut bar."

I walked to her and took her hands as she reached for another can, guiding them down so that we both held the ends of the thin plastic material. "No, I mean, if you actually thought I was an alcoholic."

"I don't really. I just—I guess I'm paranoid about anything being between us."

"But if you did."

The direction of her stare darted around like she was looking for something new in my face. “God, Rob, if you think you really need help. I mean, I was making light of things, but if you really—”

“What? No.” I left her for a moment to retrieve the half-full beer. She followed me to the kitchen, and I poured it into the sink, rotating the can so the amber stream undulated with the movement of my wrist. “See?”

“Yeah, okay, but there’s like twenty more in the fridge. You gonna pour those out?”

“That’s not the point.”

“It’s not?”

“What you said before, about cupcakes.”

“Well, brownies, or cookies, or nut—”

“You would do that, for real?”

“Sure.” Her eyebrows stayed level, and the way she said it was important, not aloof or jokey, but sincere and warm and clear, like she believed it herself, like she pictured herself over a cluttered kitchen counter, straining to stir a bowl of batter that had seized up, while I’m laying around like a useless shit—yes, I’m wrapped in an itchy wool blanket—and she’s looking at me and thinking *Yeah, he’s a useless piece of shit* and *Yeah, he is one public urination ticket away from becoming a sex offender, and he almost drowned in a koi pond, but Goddamnit, I’m here to stay*, and even though I’m still useless and I’m off the path and that means—fuck, I lost it—lost the thought.

But at the time, the thought was so clear I went into the main room and lifted the garbage bag by the bottom end. Partly-crushed cans spilled out into a pile on the carpet.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

I went to the closet and rummaged through boxes, rounding up every high school and college artifact I could find: trophies, medals, and an antler I snapped off the case just before Haley put a hand on my shoulder.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“You’re my track now.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

I tried and failed to stifle a loud burp. “Trust me, it’s profound.”

She followed me to the waste chute in the hallway but kept her hand pressed against its metallic hatch. “Don’t.”

We stood outside my building’s front entrance. I set the bag down and we pulled medals by the handful, some of their blue ribbons looping around our fingers in a desperate last cling. We awarded them to passing strangers. Haley gave out a “world’s most confusing facial hair” medal to a man wearing a big white fedora; I handed an honorable mention to a kid with a shiny black pompadour and just-pubescent mustache. Most people laughed and accepted the gifts; it’s amazing how willing people are to accept a prize they didn’t earn. The most remarkable thing was that the streets were crowded. The normally barren downtown was filled with families walking alongside young couples and excitable teenagers. It was beautiful that night, like that perfect moment just before you’re too drunk, when you feel a blissful disregard for the hangover to come.

I saved a smaller, heavier medal made of concentrated bronze for last. I bestowed that honor upon a tall homeless man who came lumbering toward us. He drank out of a 42-ounce can of Heineken Light, and Haley gave him the “healthier choices” award. He wore it proudly and offered us each a sip of his cold beer.

Paul Pedroza

Motion Without Meaning

1. Morning

He always waits until the city begins to glow with the sun's first golden rays before he opens the door, honoring again his ages-old unofficial opening hour that changes with the seasons, a bit earlier in the summer, a bit later in the winter. He's learned to like it that way over the years, even during the cold months when the biting wind penetrates his thin clothes. He knows that he needs a new winter coat, but he can't take to the idea of abandoning the one that his dead wife bought him so many years ago, even if he allowed it a permanent spot in his now cavernous bedroom closet because he could never bring himself to get rid of it, even for charity. When once it was a vibrant forest green, now it's almost gray and much of the fabric has been worn shiny. Today, it's so chilly that his space heaters aren't penetrating the cold of his grocery, and he longs for the warmer days that never disappear for long.

Given his vision issues, it's getting tough for Martinez to know the exact moment when he should open for business, but being stuck in a niche amongst the buildings downtown has always made it difficult anyway. Despite not having an official opening hour, he hates to be late, and for good reason since many of his older clients count on him to be prompt so that they can get their daily errands out of the way. He calls them his clients because it always makes their transactions seem important, like he's providing a necessary service to a city in need. He fumbles through his apron for his keys and drops them, his heart beating so heavily that he envisions himself having a heart attack right in front of his register- death bound imagery, like high definition movies detailing the various ways he'll die, something that's become an obsession over the last few years and haunts him all day long. He picks up his keys and unlocks the double deadbolt, which is a comfort and necessity that he splurged on after the last time he was burglarized, and though it hasn't happened since, he still fears it vaguely. A gust of bitter cold wind brings

tears to his eyes as he opens the door, and the crowd he'd expected materializes into a single elderly woman, bundled up and complaining that Martinez has made her wait. She pushes past him, and he laments having to wait to clean out the fruit stands that still sit outside of his store though the practice, he knows, has been out of fashion forever thanks to the supermarkets. He feels an undeniable urge to clean them though it'll be a couple of months yet before he can use them again. It brings him joy when people ask when they'll be full of fruit and vegetables again, those days when the sun will shine with renewed strength and they'll all have long talks about nothing special again. He regrets opening already and letting this woman make him wait to clean them out, especially given her complaint about him opening late. How can one open late when one opens at various minutes of the hour every day? At any rate, the bins . . . There was a windstorm last night, and he's sure that they're full of dust and small bits of trash, how hard is it for the city to keep downtown clean? They should at least try . . .

The woman has disappeared into the store, and Martinez feels ashamed because he's forgotten to turn on the rear lights. "How can I shop in the dark, Viejo Martinez?" He doesn't recognize her, and he lets the abuse go because he's afraid of losing a paying customer. Que lástima, he thinks, I used to get so much respect and now . . .

He heads behind the counter and flips the switches, and the lights dazzle his eyes. He blinks and blinks and listens as the woman criticizes his stock. She must be new to the area because I haven't changed a damn thing in years, he thinks. He likes it that way, and people seem to like it, too—a dependable variety, nothing fancy. Who can afford fancy? The day fancy comes to Martinez's Grocery is the day everyone abandons Martinez's Grocery because fancy doesn't come cheap. Martinez stands behind his counter, afraid to takes his eyes off the woman, but not for fear that she'll steal though older women have been known to do it, but because he's afraid she'll find him inattentive. He follows her movements, judges the way she picks up items and decides against them though always in her favor. Maybe I need to look into new items, new tastes or trends, he thinks. Maybe.

From across the room, she asks for fresh sweet potatoes, but he's out temporarily. Frustrated, she decides to bring up her scant items and check out. After all these years, he still takes notes by hand on yellow notepads, on pages grainy with sweat. He notes the items and enters them into the old register, and he must manually enter the tax, which changes every so often though it's not a chore keeping up. She buys a batch of long green chiles, tomatoes, onions, cilantro, bread that Martinez hopes is still fresh, and a packet of oregano. He laments the lack of meat in her purchase, which is a bigger money item, and fights an urge to suggest this. Not with this woman, he thinks. She collects her bag and leaves the store, and sighing his relief, Martinez follows the woman out and starts to clean his bins.

The first burglary happened long ago, when Martinez and his wife still enjoyed life together, before cancer took her away. It took him by surprise, the crime, though he wasn't sure why. His store has always been downtown, and downtown has always hinted an element of danger. The people are friendly, but these friendly folk disappear with the sunset, and who know what sort of element controls the streets then? He had no alarm system, no means of protecting his store except for deadbolt locks on the front and back doors. The lock on the back door was so shoddy that police said taking a crowbar to it was like a cold knife passing through a warm belly. When he came in for work that morning, the scratches on the door frame and chunks of wood on the floor disheartened him, and it took a while for Martinez to feel comfortable running his business again.

That first burglary was for the money. They took nothing else, and it made sense to everyone except Martinez. Sure money was tighter those days, he reasoned, but if that was the case, why not take some food instead? Committing a crime for food makes more sense to him than doing so for money, but all he could focus on was need, and when no one agreed no matter how much he argued, he decided to focus on his own need. He bought stronger locks and had a dummy camera installed in the alley, and posted signs warning would-be burglars about a security system that doesn't

exist. For weeks, all he'd talk about with his regulars was the crime and how the desperate man that committed it didn't have the sense to take food instead of money. Sympathetic customers offered non-committal agreements, astonished by his insistence. Eventually, he stopped talking about it.

The next burglary didn't happen for years, thankfully, and Martinez found he could be comfortable in his store again. Martinez had no choice but to invest in a small safe that he kept in the office next to the leaky toilet he reluctantly allowed customers to use. This burglary didn't bother him nearly as much, but the experience gained from the first didn't account for the sense of calm he felt as he dealt with tightening security. When he came in that morning, noticing how the burglar or burglars had broken out a window in the back door, ignoring or unconcerned about the dummy camera, he'd decided to install a full steel replacement. He walked through the store, going through the motions because he cynically believed that all the thief had wanted was his cash, when he noticed that the inventory of small factory produced and cellophane wrapped cakes near the register was undeniably smaller. He smiled, although the unhealthy tastes of the criminal cannot be condoned, at the least they thought about taking something to fill their bellies or those, hopefully, of their children. When he told customers the good news, they questioned why he could be happy about his loss, and he said that it showed a certain amount of need, and that made him feel a little more comfortable. Since he's no fool, he had the steel door installed and bought a new dummy camera, one with an ominous blinking red light that warmed his heart every morning, a stutter-beacon in the early morning gloom.

After wiping out the bins, Martinez takes his usual break and pulls a small stool out from underneath, painted to look exactly like them. His knees pop as he crouches. It takes longer as time goes by for his body to cooperate, but soon he's sighing and sitting fairly comfortably. He watches the city wake. It's one of his greatest loves, to watch the city emerge from darkness and revive itself, the business of others going on monotonously, a devotion to finishing the small things and hopefully transforming them all into something meaningful.

The trucks and vans from the post office along the way rev their engines and head out, loaded with bills and circulars and good and bad news. The viejitas are out, scamming for sales before any of the clothing and trinket shops are even open, they huddle in small groups sharing tips on discounts and new inventories. The café down the way, Buzz, is already open for business and has already attracted the career crowd, the movers, the shakers, the kids with their computers, the students with thick books sitting outside despite the cold, the books they hardly even read. Martinez had tried to compete by advertising by word of mouth his aguas frescas, but he learned quickly enough that they can't trump a cup of overpriced coffee these days and gave up. He thought seriously for a while about making coffee himself, but he doesn't know the first thing about the trend, and so now he just watches the café and tries to figure it all out. Nothing he comes up with tells him very much, and so he figures he should just make room for the both of them on the block. Buzz isn't really stepping on his toes, after all.

He sits for a while, growing ever more impatient with himself, idle hands and all. He'll usually sit long enough to spot the old homeless man, what's his name? He struggles for a moment, staring into the brightest part of the street as if that'll jog his memory, and then he finds it: Peter. He waits until Peter just barely turns the corner, and then he stands up and tries to head inside quickly, often resulting in a head rush and dimmed vision, and he's got to understand some day that this just isn't what he ought to be doing. He just wants a peek at the decrepit man, the man who entertains him sometimes with his wild stories and conspiracies, the way he hates the hustle and bustle, but Martinez knows he won't be in today since his grocery isn't the place to be in the cold months. During winter, Peter sweeps the sidewalk in front of Buzz like the boss asked him to for cups of hot coffee and stale pastries. As he sweeps he often tosses a bit of dust onto the shoes of the students, their receipts for the dirty looks that they offer Peter.

Back inside, he's followed by a couple of customers, and after attending to their needs, he decides he'll get started on the canned goods inventory, which will eat up the rest of

his morning. From there, he'll watch the clock and dread the moment when he must lock up and head back to his lonely house.

2. Night

By the time he arrives home the house is shrouded in darkness, and he regrets going off to work without leaving a lamp on. He opens the door and drops the keys on the counter by the kitchen sink, frantically reaching for the light switch. After a cursory check through each room for intruders, he decides to make dinner. He still hasn't gotten used to cooking for one, so his measurements are off, either too little of this or too much of that, his recipes leave leftovers that he'll never touch, and the food will be wasted because neighbors refuse to take it anymore. Tonight, he'll eat canned ravioli because he doesn't have the energy to cook a proper meal. After dinner, there's never anything to do but stare at the television for a few hours until he can go to bed at a decent hour. He was brought up to believe that it's wrong to go to bed too early.

He hates to watch TV because sitting still for hours makes him feel useless and useless always leads to restless, but because of his arthritis he can't build anything anymore, and other hobbies never appealed to him. So he sits in his chair and watches program after program. Aside from the ten o'clock news, which is the last show he watches before bed, he loves to watch *Jeopardy!* He's considered closing a half-hour earlier so that he could watch it as it airs, but the loss of business and the sense of responsibility towards clients settle the issue, so instead he sets his VCR to record and uses the same tape over and over. Once it reaches the end of the reel, he'll watch every episode again before rewinding and starting all over again, and that night is his favorite night at home. After reliving those great contests, he goes to sleep with a smile on his face.

Tonight's *Jeopardy!* is the second to last to fill the tape, and he laments that today can't be tomorrow, though the thought chills him. The passage of time depresses Martinez, and he chews his still lukewarm ravioli without tasting it. He washes his dishes and sets them to dry beside the sink, watching as

the desert breeze kicks up dust in his barren yard.

The routine continues: he eases into his chair with a deep sigh, and before he turns on the television, he looks around at each of his wife's trinkets and vases, making a full circuit from right to left: the ceramic cat climbing a barrel and watching coyly over its shoulder, the faux-porcelain shy girl turned away from her faux-porcelain young suitor, the rugged wooden cross bearing the load of a gold-plated Christ, the plates boasting stylized names of cities around the world and tidbits of their respective cultures, the green tinted vases empty of flowers. Once he feels he's spent enough time with each, he turns the set on and settles in. He can hardly stand looking at the few pictures of the happy couple scattered about the living room.

Shivering, he pulls back the blankets of his bed and climbs in. Fearing his next heating bill, he never turns the thermostat up higher than sixty. Instead, he piles on as many old blankets onto the same mattress he's slept on for decades, as many as he can tolerate before he sweats too much, and it's more luxurious than sleeping with the heater on anyway since the hot air dries out his sinuses. He pulls his blankets up to his chin and welcomes the inevitable hour spent thinking about his wife before he can finally drift into sleep. When the burglaries happened and Martinez spoke about his wish that food be taken instead of money, she called him crazy. She called him crazy in private and in front of friends, but she also offered ideas on how to secure the store, and she was always the one who knew just what had to be stocked and what needed to be pulled, according to tastes. She was the grocery's public face, the one that people could open up to about concerns or just shoot the breeze and attract new clients. When she was alive and healthy enough to come in, the store thrived, but ever since it's been a struggle, and so he always wonders if she wasn't right about the whole burglary issue. All he wanted to know was that the people who felt the need to steal from him were doing it out of dire need and not selfishness. He tries, like every night, to push business out of his mind and focus instead on his wife, the feel of her hair, the narrow wrists that always amazed him with their

strength, the round and small shoulders, the feel of her body that long ago was programmed into his memory, and as fresh as if she could be lying right next to him this very moment, curled together in each other's warmth against the cold winter night.

3. Beyond

The phone's ringing rips him from sleep, and he waits a moment as his heart pounds off-rhythm in his chest, the pause from one to the next like falling from a great dizzying height. He doesn't recognize the ringing as such for a moment, then his sleep finally clears from his head, and he sits up. He reaches for the receiver. It's 3:28, and he shouldn't be awake for another hour.

"Bueno . . ." He listens to the grim, low voice on the other end of the line, asking him if his name is Martinez and whether he owns the grocery downtown. When the details are sorted out, the dispatcher informs Martinez that his store has been burglarized and he'll have to come down and deal with the report. "Is my . . . my money okay?"

"Everything has been recovered, but you need to deal with the damage done to the store. They got the guy. He's sitting in a cruiser outside of the coffee shop as we speak. Listen, you can talk to Officer Warren when you arrive." The dispatcher hangs up, and Martinez gets out of bed and stands for a minute in the cold air, hoping it'll wake him up completely. He dresses quickly, listening to see whether the heavy pounding of his heart will produce sound. He grabs his keys and locks the door behind him.

The lights of two cruisers light up the block, and Martinez hopes it doesn't attract too much attention, though like always, downtown is deserted. The only ones out and about are the day laborers that cross the Santa Fe Bridge from Juárez looking for work and officers. Most of the criminals, Martinez assumes, have gone home to bed. He parks in the alley and rushes to the street, passing the darkened Buzz Café where the chairs and tables have been chained together, and he runs into Officer Warren who's chatting with another officer. At the approach of Martinez, he stops talking and regards him warily. When introductions are made, Warren

hands over a clipboard with his notes.

"Caught him coming out, in the alley back there," Warren says. "He busted through that steel door of yours. Impressive stuff." He clears his throat when he sees the way Martinez looks at him. "Anyway, he got into that little safe of yours. Might want to invest in something stronger. Also, he got into the register. Not a good idea to leave money in there."

Warren watches as Martinez skims the report. Nothing much to add to what Warren has told him, except the name of the man now sitting in the cruiser. "Did he take anything else?"

Warren slowly shakes his head. "No, everything else in there is safe. Not a lot of small, valuable things worth taking, you know?" he chuckles. "Anyway, criminals know what they want and focus on it. Listen, we just wanted to get you down here to secure the premises and to give you a copy of the report—"

Martinez pushes past Warren and unlocks the front door of his grocery. Warren follows, holding out a copy of the report. "Listen, did he try and steal food from me?"

"Mr. Martinez, as I've said, all he wanted was money and—"

"But if he needs money, why wouldn't he take food with him? It makes sense, que no? Then he doesn't have to go out and buy food for himself, and maybe he has a family." Martinez grabs paper bags from the counter and begins filling one with fruit, cereal, and both white and wheat bread. Finished with that one, he opens another by flicking his wrists, and to this he adds a couple of half gallons of milk and eggs on top. Warren follows him as he moves through the store, frowning at the way the cartons soak through the bag and asking him what he's doing. "If that man has a family to feed, then I'm going to help him feed them." He grabs both bags, but before he can head out the door, Warren stops him.

"Mr. Martinez, are you seriously about to take two bags of groceries out to the man who just burglarized your store?"

"I . . . If he needs it, then I'd like to help." He doesn't appreciate a strange man standing in front of him, preventing him from using his own door.

"But he's a criminal. He stole from you and damaged your property."

"But if he needs food, we should give it to him."

"That's—Listen I don't mean to be disrespectful, Mr. Martinez, but that sounds kind of crazy to me." Martinez, who's focused upon his front door the entire time, finally looks Warren in the eyes. He looks over, and then he places the bags down upon the counter and sighs. Warren apologizes for his choice of words.

Martinez waves his hand. "No, no, joven. My wife—she said the same thing when it happened before. Before she died, she said I was crazy to care, that giving them food would be like letting them steal from me twice. I never saw it her way, like a lot of things. But when she was alive, joven, this store meant something more to this community. *I* meant something more, and now look at it. I don't even know what to do with it, and here I am trying to give food away." He drops his hands in defeat, his eyes teary. Warren nods and looks away. When he hears Martinez sob, he asks how long he's been in business.

"I've been in the grocery business all my working life, since I was twelve years old. I've owned this store for over forty-four years now. This very store, in the same location," he sighs. "Used to be the place to come, now it attracts drunks and the homeless more than anyone else." Warren, clearly uncomfortable, hands over Martinez's copy of the police report and says that they'll take the burglar off for booking now. Before he can finish wishing Martinez a good day, Martinez asks whether he can see the man they've arrested.

"I don't know," Warren says. "Not too common for proprietors to want to see the guys that steal from them," but he relents when he see the look on Martinez's face. "Just mind your manners. In fact, I'd prefer that you wouldn't say anything at all." They walk out of the grocery, and Warren adds, "Might be good for you to get a look at him so if he ever comes back, you'll recognize him."

The lights have been turned off, and the cruisers sit in the gloom of the still dark morning. The lampposts on this block are scant, which probably accounts for why Martinez's Grocery is targeted every so often. They approach the cruiser sitting just outside of Buzz, and from the distance, Martinez can see the way the man inside hunches down with his chin tucked against his chest. Warren stops Martinez a few feet

away, opens the door and tells the man not to say a thing and keep his eyes on the street ahead. He beckons Martinez, who slowly approaches the open backseat of the cruiser. He looks in and sees a man just outside of childhood, his head shaved, nicks in his eyebrows, a tattoo of a crucifix set in the sun on his neck. Martinez leans down and introduces himself, much to the irritation of Warren. The handcuffed man doesn't return the favor and keeps his eyes on the street ahead like Warren asked him to do.

"Listen, joven, I have only a couple of things to ask you." When the man doesn't answer, Martinez continues. "Do you have a family?"

The man doesn't answer immediately, and yet Martinez remains at his side, waiting patiently. Finally, quietly, "I . . . I have a boy." He shakes his head when Martinez asks whether he's married.

"Did you steal from me out of need, a need to feed your son?" The man says nothing, has shut down, will refuse to answer any more questions, it seems. Warren gently grabs Martinez's shoulder and informs him that it's time for the man to head to the jail. "Please, just answer the question." He struggles against the increasing strength of Warren. "I need to know if I could've helped." The man finally turns to look Martinez in the eye, unblinking and scowling, "Leave me alone, you crazy viejo. Go back inside your fucking store, and leave me the hell alone." Warren scolds the man for his disrespect before shutting the door. He signals to the waiting officer, and the cruiser disappears into the gloom. Warren pats Martinez's shoulder and asks if there's anything else he can do for him. Martinez shakes his head, his eyes trained on the street ahead.

"Listen, you're not crazy," Warren says. "I misspoke earlier."

Martinez waves him off. "No, no, it's okay. You don't have to apologize. Listen, you can go and work now. It's a bit early than every day, but I'm going to get ready to open." Warren nods and tells him to take care of the door as soon as possible and maybe look into a real security system. Even though he can't afford it, Martinez thinks that maybe his wife was right again, and the time is right to invest in one. He opens the front door and doesn't move again until it's closed behind him. He locks

it and turns on the lights, prepares to finish the inventory he left over from the day before. The young man had called him crazy, as did Warren and his wife. Maybe they were right . . . or maybe for them, he was crazy, but if being sane meant that he had to doubt everyone and everything and be suspicious, well . . . Maybe crazy wasn't too bad. Besides, he thought as he arranged the cans of fruit cocktail that would be on sale for the coming week since they were getting close to their sell-by date, he didn't feel crazy. Thinking about that kid, the son that would be waiting that night for his dad to come home, probably unaware of where he's been, that didn't feel crazy. It's a crazy world that doesn't think about him. When he finishes with inventory, he finds the two bags still sitting next to his register, and he returns the items to their proper shelves. The sun isn't out yet, but the sky between the buildings downtown is a rich, deep azure, and Martinez decides that today the grocery will open even earlier than before. Maybe a good idea would be to put out some hot chocolate or atole, for free, since it's such a cold day. He'll stock his shelves, greet his clients whether cheerful or cranky it doesn't matter, and if he can he'll look into that security system before the day is through. In the meantime, he thinks that maybe it's time to look into products like healthier bread, homemade salads, expensive beers, or maybe it's time to make some tortas from scratch and put out a table or two so the people can eat them out in the fresh air. He grabs one of his old register record books and turns it to a fresh page. Before the first customer, the woman from the day before who's pleasantly surprised to find it open already and makes a comment about Martinez finally getting his act together, Martinez has the page full of ideas and plans, and all he can picture is his wife making her rounds after everything changes, the way her eyes light up, proud of her crazy old man.

Jessica Walker

Dinner at the Twicketts

It was time for the Twicketts to move again. Tiffany struggled to cram the last grocery sacks of clothing into the Mustang. Her landlord screamed and her husband Gregory smiled, hands in pockets, leaning against the entry of the Tudor-style rental home. She kept her head down as she slammed the trunk shut and slinked around to the passenger seat.

Gregory peeled himself from the archway and breezed by the landlord's bespittled face, pausing to sniff a tulip as he sauntered to the car. Tiffany cringed. She knew those tulips had no more odor than a glass of tap water. She busied herself, fixing her thin, black hair into a bun. The sun seared through her eyes to the back folds of her brain, amplifying the throb in her head. It was too bright a day for the circumstances. Gregory paused to stretch, gave his hair a tousle and settled into the driver's seat.

As they sailed down the driveway, Gregory waved at the landlord, who chased the car shaking his fist.

They headed out of Westchester, driving several minutes in silence beneath the spring-green canopy of trees before Tiffany broached the obvious.

"What happened with the landlord?"

"I cancelled the rent check," Gregory said. "He was playing games, trying to raise the rent and not addressing the mold issue."

"But I heard him say something about a bounced check. And eviction."

"That is utterly absurd," Gregory snorted. "He's a con artist trying to hustle me for money because of my family name."

Tiffany nodded and brought the tips of her thin fingers to her temples. She did not have the energy to argue. Gregory was a descendant of steel magnate Gregory Twickett II, the patriarch of a dynasty that had once claimed great wealth and status. But while the name still opened doors, the fortune had dwindled, diminished by bad investments and familial infighting. Gregory had his trust—a considerable sum for

the average couple—doled out in quarterly installments. But Gregory spent as he pleased, when he pleased with no regard for his debts. There never seemed to be enough money to cover their costs. When things went sideways, Gregory blamed the other guy, and the Twicketts moved on.

Each time they decamped, Gregory had a plan. And the current escape hatch had given Tiffany new hope. They were headed to the Twickett family's lakeside cottage, deeded to Gregory a few weeks earlier in a transaction at his Uncle Lester's deathbed that ended with a slew of angry Twicketts alleging chicanery.

"So tell me about this town," she said, as Gregory careened around the snarls of highway traffic, eliciting honks and obscene hand gestures.

"Newell, Maine has a population of one thousand," Gregory said. He reached over to pat her knee. "You're going to love it. The other summer people are our kind of folk. And the locals are old-fashioned. Honest. Hardworking."

Tiffany considered voicing her hopes that this town would be different, that things would finally be stable. She had begun to dread days like today, when her whole life had to be uprooted. She thought about confronting Gregory about his finances. But he claimed money was his domain. And she had her own faults that she would prefer that he not point out.

They zoomed northward, through Connecticut and Massachusetts only stopping for gas. As usual, around five o'clock Tiffany's head began to clear, and the last of her pessimism drained away. They crossed the New Hampshire border and Gregory took an exit.

"State liquor store," he announced, pointing to a large sign above the treeline. "We can load up. There's no sales tax in New Hampshire."

Tiffany brightened and hurried into the store. As she opened the plate glass door, long fingers of cool air pulled her inside. She grabbed a buggy, her bony knuckles in a white-clench against the plastic handle, and paused a moment to take in the rows and rows of bottles—amber, green, blue, clear, each one neck-full with liquids as varied the spectrum of the rainbow. She thought of bottles stacked vertically top-

to-bottom—a breakable measure of time, from college to marriage to now. She thought of bottles laid horizontally—a measure of distance from Florida, to Westchester and beyond. Each bottle contained sips of happiness and catharsis, friends made and lost, times remembered and forgotten.

She found the deal she wanted, eight dollars for a magnum bottle of plonk, loaded a dozen bottles into her cart and went to find Gregory.

"Great deals," she said.

Gregory smiled.

"I thought you'd like it."

They packed the boxes in the Mustang, and continued. Soon they were on a state highway that curved through forests and farmland. Tiffany sang along with the radio, tossed her sunglasses off, threw her bare feet on the dashboard and massaged Gregory's neck with her left hand. She was over this morning's unpleasantness. Gregory always managed to come out on top. She had yet to see them get into trouble that he could not get them out of.

They reached Newell as sunlight began to fade. The roads were pocked with potholes, and glittered with mica. The town had nothing resembling a suburb or a shopping mall. But there was a golf course, a church and a small diner.

"Hard to be anonymous here," Tiffany remarked.

"Why would we want to be?" Gregory said. "I want to whole town to know the Twicketts have arrived!"

Tiffany didn't reply. True, they had a clean slate in this town, but she was used to a larger pool of people. In their past communities, if they scandalized one set, if a few other people saw a little too much, the Twicketts had easily slipped into another circle. Newell appeared to be too small for that. They turned down a side road. Tiffany saw the glimmer of water through the trees. Finally, they pulled up to a large wrought iron gate with "Loons Nest" spelled across it.

"Did I tell you the name of the place? We can always change it if you want."

"Nope, it seems about right," Tiffany said.

Gregory jumped out, unlocked the gate and propped it open

The Loons Nest was a two-story lodge made of thick hewn logs with a small guest cabin. Twenty yards in front of the

house was a dock that extended out into the rippling crystal of the lake.

Gregory parked the car and looked over at Tiffany with a smile.

"Did I do alright?" he asked.

"My God, Gregory! I love it."

Tiffany sprang out of the car, and charged up to the entrance. The grounds were untended, littered with fallen branches and unruly growth. Gregory unlocked the door of the house and they found themselves in a great room, anchored by a massive fieldstone fireplace with a moose head mounted above it. A chandelier made of deer antlers was suspended from the ceiling.

Tiffany flicked the light switch.

"No electricity yet," Gregory explained. "Tonight it's flashlights and candles."

"Sounds fun! Like camping!"

As twilight slipped into to darkness, they grabbed the essentials out of the car, toiletries, food and a couple bottles of wine. Tiffany pulled a corkscrew out of her makeup bag and opened a bottle with a thwack that resonated in the stillness. The wine glugged into a coffee mug.

"To Maine, the way life should be," she toasted, recalling the state motto.

She brought the cup to her lips and swallowed. Every neuron in her brain began to crackle with happiness. Visions of a prosperous future swirled. Ideas formed in her brain and came to her lips with rapidity.

"You know, Gregory, we can really fix this place up. It just needs some cleaning and landscaping and a few personal touches! I've always wanted to try gardening!"

"And when we're done fixing up the house, we'll have a dinner party," Gregory said. "The whole town will be talking about dinner at the Twicketts."

Tiffany snuggled into the crook of Gregory's arm. The last she remembered, all was well.

She awoke her first morning in Newell, alone in an unfamiliar bed with a familiar ache in her head, and the same unmoored feeling that followed her nights of drinking. She tried to remember how much she had had. She couldn't.

She would have to check the empty bottles later.

Gregory shuffled into the room in his boxers, cradling his right arm.

"You were something last night," he said, shaking his head.

Something good or bad, she wondered? She scrutinized his face for any tells, and stayed silent.

"Those fingernails of yours are sharp. Look what you did."

He shoved his right arm in front of her. Four parallel scratches screamed red down Gregory's muscular forearm. Tiffany ransacked her memory. She flashed on a fragmented moment—darkness, confusion, the cool of the crisp sheets, a seemingly disembodied arm coming toward her, a clench in her stomach.

"I just wasn't in the mood," she said.

"You seemed into it to me. Then all of the sudden . . . this." He gestured to his scabbed arm.

"I wasn't in the mood last night," she said, patting the sheet beside her. "But I am now."

Gregory collapsed into bed. In these mornings, with her mind a soupy haze, her heart bleeding with confused repentance, and her body a great grey ache, she loved him most. Her rough edges rounded, her nerves unraveled into a single string.

Afterwards, Gregory turned to her and brushed her hair away from her face.

"You smell like a barroom floor. Maybe dial it back a bit."

It was as close as he would come to broaching the topic. It was a close as she would let him come.

"I was just stressed with having to leave Westchester so unexpectedly," she said, trying to direct her breath away from him. "I'm feeling much more relaxed now."

Gregory rested for a few minutes and got out of bed.

Tiffany lay naked in the tangled sheets, twisting her wedding ring and trying to will her pain to a level that would allow sleep. After a restless hour, she succeeded. When she awoke, it was lunchtime and the power was on. She put on yesterday's clothes, shielded her eyes with sunglasses and padded down the stairs. Gregory was outside talking to a tall, grizzled man in dirty jeans with a sharp nose and a long face fringed by a wild mass of gray hair. The two men shook hands

and Gregory came inside.

"Good morning, gorgeous," he said. His forearm was covered in a bandage. "That was Alan. He worked for Uncle Lester. He's gonna live in our guest house and work in exchange for rent."

Tiffany twitched inside. Gregory was always striking barter-deals that went south. More often than not, they involved him trying to get a man Friday on staff, a servant much like his family had in his youth. Somehow, in ways she never fully understood, the terms would get twisted, and rancor would ensue. But she couldn't express disapproval. Not after what happened last night. And Gregory looked so gleeful, like a little boy.

"Mmmm," she said, as she went through a bag of groceries until she found a ginger ale. Soda and tea were her daytime diet, her stomach usually too delicate for food until the evening hours.

Gregory dove into fixing up the property and networking with the locals and summer people. Each day Alan would arise at seven o'clock and work until three, pausing only for puffs on a pot pipe, which he insisted was medicinal and related to injuries he suffered in combat.

Tiffany was uncomfortable with a stranger so closely in her orbit. She would peek out the window to see Gregory sitting in an Adirondack chair, coffee in hand, newspaper in lap, barking orders. Sometimes Alan would see her through the window, and pause to stare at her. She would turn away. If she passed him, she would give a hurried wave and keep moving.

She began to garden on the property. Late afternoon, just as her aches and nausea began to ebb, she would go outside to weed and plant. One day, she was knees down, butt-up in the dirt planting a small flowering herb called Pennyroyal, when she inhaled the scent of the garage where her father had worked—motor oil, Marlboro Reds and body odor. She lifted her head and saw Alan towering above.

"You should wear gloves with Pennyroyal," he said.

"Why?" She leapt up and brushed the dirt off her knees. Up close, his face looked dry and cracked like a drought-stricken creek-bed.

"It's poisonous. Especially if you're pregnant. Women used

to use it to take care of accidents."

"No worries, no baby here," Tiffany said, patting her flat stomach. "I'm not a kid-type of person."

Tiffany blushed. She was revealing too much, for no reason, to a wrong person. She was never good at social interaction without a drink in her hand. She was either too aloof, or too forward. Too self-conscious, or completely lacking awareness to her own appearance. She had hardly left the house since moving to town, allowing Gregory to handle anything that involved dealing with people.

She held herself at the elbows and giggled.

"A young gal like you doesn't want a baby?" Alan said. "A kid's a good thing. Keeps your eye on the future."

Tiffany unclasped her elbows, put her hands on her hips and tried to affect an authoritative posture.

"Thanks for the advice," she said. "I will be sure to come to you will all my herb-related questions from here on out."

"Anytime," Alan said. "And be careful with that pennyroyal. Kids, or no kids, I hate to see a nice lady like you poisoning herself."

From then on, Alan seemed to pop up with only the scent of his Marlboros as warning, never failing to advise Tiffany on her gardening. She would brush him off as politely as possible, but began to ask Gregory about him, learning that his was one of seven children, a local who only left courtesy of the Marines to go to Parris Island, then Vietnam. He had never married, and had two grown children by two women. He was the county horseshoe champion and could field dress a moose in record time.

"You just don't get good, salt-of-the-earth like him in this day and age," Gregory said over pot roast one evening. "An odd duck. Like a lot of locals, he has no curiosity about the world beyond Newell. Did I tell you he named his kids Sharry and Larry? And they both live right here. Never left the state."

Gregory chuckled and shook his head. Tiffany sipped her wine, listened to the loons, and wondered what would have happened if she had never left her hometown. She never would have met Gregory at a friend-of-a-friend's wedding. He never would have proposed with a diamond worth more than her parents' home. Gregory and her father never would have

fought over a five-hundred-dollar loan. Her father would have kept calling her every Saturday night, just before professional wrestling. She would have been there when her father died, not in a floppy hat on a boat in the Hamptons.

The loons kept calling out the only song they knew—three notes—high, low, then middle. It was strange and sad and so damn annoying. Tiffany wondered why the loons never seemed to change their tune, if they had any idea that their calls were so unnerving and tiresome.

That summer, on the rare occasions when Tiffany ventured into public, she scanned the faces for who might be Alan's children. One afternoon, she went to the diner alone, sat at the counter and pretended to eat a plate of chop suey as she studied the other patrons for Alan's traits. She lit on two women she thought could be Alan's daughter—each with his hookish nose, each with the rough, reddened skin of the locals. She eavesdropped long enough to rule out one—her father was dining with her. She homed in on the other, who was alone. She thought she overheard the waitress calling her Sharry. Or was it Mary? Or Terri?

She studied the woman's plate. She was also eating chop suey. A commonality. A classic entry to conversation. Tiffany planned her approach.

"May I order a class of wine?" she asked the woman behind the counter.

"No liquor license here," the server said curtly.

Tiffany looked at the clock. It was almost noon. She must seem like a lush. She paid her bill and drove home, gripping the steering wheel so hard her fingernails ground into the skin of her palms.

She wondered what kind of children Alan had raised. They never seemed to visit. No one was looking out for him. She began asking Gregory about the comfort of his mattress, his health, and his nutrition. Was he lonely out there in the guest cottage by himself?

August signaled the final days of summer. The night before the dinner party, the Loons Nest was restored to its glory. Tiffany spent the day prepping food, shining silverware and dusting baseboards. Gregory went into town for last minute supplies. As the day inched toward twilight, she sat on the

porch admiring the grounds. Her gardening accounted for some of the improvements, but most of the progress was thanks to Alan's hard work. She looked over at his cabin. Alan should come to the dinner party, she thought. If anyone deserved a night of merriment, it was him.

She walked over to the guest house on the mulched path, admiring the rhododendrons she had planted along the way. Alan was sitting on the porch, his boots kicked up on the rail, smoking weed, fiddling with a fishing lure, drinking a can of Mountain Dew.

"Hey," Tiffany said. "I wanted you to know you are welcome at our party tomorrow."

Alan looked up, and gave her a tired stare. A light wind wisped by, dragging Tiffany's thin curtain of hair in front of her face and waving the edges of her skirt.

"Thanks for the invitation," Alan said, returning his attention to the fishing lure.

Tiffany was surprised at his shortness. But she could never read these taciturn New Englanders, they always seemed gruff to her. She wished him goodnight and made her way back home. When Gregory returned, she told him about her invitation.

"You meant well," he said. "But that's inappropriate. He's a worker, I'm his employer. There are boundaries."

"It's not a normal employee relationship. He lives here. He's put a lot of work into this place. It's wrong not to invite him."

"What is your deal with this guy?" Gregory asked. "You're always asking me about him, talking about him, wanting me to treat him like a goddamn child. Alan understands the situation here. He's lucky to have a roof over his head, which I provide, and food to eat, which I also provide."

Tiffany tamped down her anger, directed it inward. She hated it when Gregory acted as if he earned the position in life that he had inherited. Nothing separated him from Alan other than a long, thin bloodline.

"So what should I do?" she said. "Disinvite him?"

"No need. Alan won't come. He knows his place," Gregory said, changing the topic to who had RSVP-ed.

Not knowing her place was the accusation Tiffany's father made in their final argument. He said she had social-climbed

too high, that the air up there was too rarified for her blue-collar lungs, that nothing good could come of the life she was living. The memory hurt. But she knew her father was wrong. He didn't understand how her life worked, why she needed Gregory.

She pushed her glass of wine away. She was monitoring her intake. She wanted a clear head for the party tomorrow. And she had been doing better. The weekly bottle count seemed to be getting lower. That night, she and Gregory went to bed early and happy, awaking in the same state in the morning.

A few hours before the dinner party, Tiffany threw on a dress—dark red in case of spills—and applied a light touch of makeup. One hour until the party, she had her first glass of wine from a bottle of cabernet, which she stashed in her bedroom, in case any of the party-goers kept count of her consumption.

At six o'clock guests began to arrive for dinner at the Twicketts. Tiffany was surprised to find herself relishing her role as hostess. It was a built-in excuse to flit at the first sign of discomfort. There was always a drink to be freshened, a bottle to cork, beer to retrieve from the refrigerator. Being with new people wasn't as bad as she remembered.

"Your son is at Harvard? An econ major? Gregory, isn't your cousin Trevor in the economics department?" she said, motioning Gregory over to their neighbor, a banker from Boston

"You went to Choate? So did Thomas," she said pulling together a local judge and a New York attorney.

She had shifted from solid to liquid—a fluid rush of hospitality, kindness and interconnection. Between her successful encounters she would reward herself with trips to the bedroom for swills of wine. On the outside, she was on her second glass. But including her bedroom stash it was up to five? Six? Seven? Who cared?

But what about Alan? Two hours into the party and still no Alan. She sat on her bed, stared at the lipstick print on the rim of her glass, her angular knees a near blur behind the object of her focus. She began to feel the burn of offense. How impolite. He could have just said no. He could have come to the door at any time today with any excuse. How could he

ignore her? Maybe something was wrong. Maybe he was sick. Or embarrassed to come to their hoity-toity affair. She would go over, and let him know he was welcome.

Clutching her wine, she slipped through the party-goers, who were lost in drinks and conversation. A group stood on the front porch, listening for the wide-ranging notes of the loons' cry. She slapped together a small plate of appetizers. Dinner was coming soon. Alan still had time to make the main event.

She exited the back door and made her way down the path to Alan's cabin. His lights were on. She stepped through the yard, sipping her wine, marveling at her ability to walk so straight. An outsider would never guess how much she had to drink. Between her impeccable diction and her surefootedness, she felt as good as sober.

She got to Alan's and saw him on the porch, smoking weed, fiddling with a fishing lure, his feet propped on the railing and a crushed Mountain Dew can beneath his chair.

"I brought you some food," she said.

"Sorry, what? I can't understand you."

"I got you food, silly." She held up the plate. A cocktail shrimp fell onto the path, becoming encrusted with dirt as it rolled away.

"Oh, thanks," Alan said. He didn't lift his gaze from the lure.

"It's almost time for dinner."

"Thank you. But I've already eaten."

"Why? I invited you yesterday. You should have waited." Tiffany was crestfallen. "Is it something Gregory said? Did he tell you not to come? He can be such a snob."

Alan laid aside the fishing lure. He looked at her.

"I am not coming tonight for the same reason I never come when you invite me."

"What do you mean?" Tiffany said. "I've never invited you before."

"Ever since I've moved in here you've been coming over, drunk as a skunk, asking me to dinner, to sit on the dock and listen the loons, to watch professional wrestling on cable. I'm saying no tonight like I always say no. I appreciate the gesture, but I am staying here."

A burn grew in Tiffany's chest, crept up her esophagus.

"You ingrate. You liar. I will tell my husband to fire you in the morning."

"I've heard that before too," said Alan. "But he never says a word. You'll forget this by morning. You always do. You seem like a real sweet lady. But you got a real bad drinking problem."

"Don't tell me what my problems are. My life is great," she hissed. "The worst day of my life is better than the best moment of your pathetic life."

Tiffany threw the food on the porch and ran with her sloshing glass of wine toward the house. She veered off the path, tripped on a root and came crashing down into a clump of rhododendron. Branches snapped and scratched her arms as wine splashed across her dress. She lay on her belly in the sandy dirt.

Tiffany propped her torso up with her left elbow and began writing in the soil with her index finger.

"Fire Alan. He's rude. Stop drinking. Maybe."

That should take care of things, she thought. She just had to remember to come out here and check in the morning. She closed her eyes.

In the home, laughter and glass tinkled. Dinner was being served. She scratched a mosquito bite on her upper thigh. She could use some repellent. And another glass of wine. And the food smelled so good. But it was such a long walk. And she was so tired. Her mind could not make her body move. She would stay here. Gregory would know what to do. He always knew how to make the bad things better. He always had an escape hatch, another plan, a way to get out of one life, into another.

As the loons hooted the only notes they knew, as Gregory began to serve their new friends and neighbors, she had one last thought.

Everything was completely wrong. And everything was exactly as it should be.

She collapsed, her face hit the dirt. Her body rolled across the sloped ground toward the dark lake smearing the messages she had scrawled to herself in the earth.

Rik Barberi

What Ever Happens Next

Simms had made a deal with his mother. He'd be free for the remainder of the day—half his day was already shot—once he picked three more baskets of tomatoes. At least the end was in sight. He'd helped her all morning with the canning. Wash, cut out bad spots, slice, cook, stuff in jars, boiling water bath. Twenty-four quarts were finished and cooling. And now, just one basket to go. He reached down and grabbed a tomato that, by the way his fingers sank into it, he knew was rotten underneath. Only one thing to do with a rotten tomato. *Splat* against the shed.

"*Simmons Perry!*" his mother scolded from an open window.

It was a little embarrassing that she didn't need to elaborate. Then again, the satisfying sound of rotten tomato against wood was worth the mild reprimand. He had aimed at a knot in the siding. It was now leaking rotten tomato juice.

"Shall we make that *four* baskets?" she asked.

"No mother," he said with an irritated sigh that was wasted, she being out of earshot.

When the third basket was filled, he brought them all up to the back porch. His mother asked where he was planning to fish.

"Along the Huygens Kill." Too late, he realized his mistake.

"*No*. It's not safe."

Two weeks before, Bart Hinkle, a boy in his class, had been fishing alone on the stream, when he was grabbed from behind, blindfolded and assaulted. They didn't say in the paper how his clothes had been half ripped off. His mother probably didn't know everything he'd heard and he only half-believed it himself, because why would anyone do *that*?

He said, "Maybe for a girl . . ."

"No," she insisted. "You need to know there are bad people in the world who will do awful things." She paused, looked away, and then continued. "Apparently, there is at least one in Cooper's Mill. Your father said he would talk to you about it."

That sounded like a question. Rather than reply that his father hadn't said anything, he told her Ronnie was going with him.

"I'm not so sure that makes it safe, but I suppose your father would think so. Just be careful."

Good. They were done with the whole subject. On the phone, Ronnie said he'd be at least an hour late meeting at the stream, which Simms chose not to tell his mother.

The current of the Huygens Kill drew ripples around Simms' ankles. He wiggled his feet to confuse it and disrupt the ripples. When his jean cuffs slipped into the water he rolled them up with his left hand, holding the fishing pole with his right. The branches of an old walnut tree reached out above him. Its leaves held a hint of yellow that would soon crowd out the green. It was hot for early September. He pulled off his tee shirt and threw it on the ground. The caw-caw of crows was all he heard above the sound of water falling over a small ledge ten feet downstream. Next to him was a hatful of walnuts, still in their green husks. He tossed a stick upstream and tried to hit it with walnuts before it disappeared in the rapids below the ledge. His target practice didn't exactly draw the fish to his hook, but they'd had their chance for what must be an hour now. He threw in another stick and began to reel in.

A sting on his stomach. He knew it was a mosquito before he saw it. He tensed up his stomach muscles to keep it from pulling out. When its tail turned a grayish red, he swatted it, splattering the skin with his own blood. He drew a design with it to scare his mother with later. A noise behind caused him to turn. It was getting on time for Ronnie to show up, but Simms didn't see anyone. Probably a squirrel dropping walnuts. He began to reel in again.

Darkness. A bag over his head. He pushed it up with his two hands and yelled, "Ron . . ." The bag was pulled tight with a rope between his teeth that stifled his scream. This wasn't Ronnie. The taste of corn. *A feedbag.* When he was pulled up and had his arm twisted behind his back, he knew it was a grown-up. He went from angry to scared. He was pushed frontways against a tree. Probably the walnut. If he could

break loose and reach the water, he might escape. He got one hand free, but the attacker caught him and mashed his face into the bark. Feed dust filled his eyes. His hands were pulled around the tree and tied together on the other side. When his pants were pulled down, Simms kicked backwards at the assailant. It didn't seem to matter. The man pressed against Simms and drove at him, attempting to force his way in. Simms squeezed himself shut and concentrated on freeing his hands, trying not to think of what was coming. The man's hands strained to pull him apart. More thrusting. Then a new pain. A burning.

"No. No. No," Simms cried, but barely loud enough for the squirrels to hear.

A dull thud behind him. Everything ceased. The attacker backed off. Another thud. Simms stopped kicking and was working to free his hands when the rope in his mouth loosened and the sack was pulled off. He spit out the dust and squinted in the sunlight. He could barely see, but knew it was Ronnie now trying to free his hands. The rope came lose. He rubbed his eyes and, through the mix of tears and dust, saw a man sprawled motionless on the ground, pants to his ankles. An old fence post lay next to him.

"Ronnie," Simms said, pulling up his pants. "Is he dead?"

"I don't know," Ronnie said. "Grab your stuff and let's get out of here."

When Ronnie's mother, Violet, got her new job in bookkeeping at the mill, it meant she could buy a house. He was glad when she agreed to move to Cooper's Mill, where she would be closer to work, he closer to school, and she wouldn't have to drive him to Uncle Jeter's every day to meet the school bus. The only reason they could afford the house was its state of general disrepair. It wasn't falling down, but it needed work here and there. There was painting to do inside and out. The porch steps tilted. Some windows required glazing. In agreeing to buy it, she had made it clear that Ronnie would be doing some of the work. Today, she wanted him to fix the chicken house roof that had blown off in a recent big wind, but he wanted to go to his Uncle Jeter's. So he was sitting there thumbing through *Sports Illustrated*

for the tenth time.

"You being fourteen, I know you don't want *me* to help you fix it," his mother said from the kitchen. "Call up Simms."

"He won't want to."

"You two have a fight?"

"No."

"I saw his mother at the Grand Union."

How do mothers keep running into each other?

"Trudy says Simms has taken to moping around all day and night. Not himself. Came home with a scarred-up face."

"He tried to jump a barbed wire fence on his bike."

"Simms is smarter than that."

"Not always, he ain't."

"Isn't," she corrected him. "Keep whatever happened to yourself then. I'm only your mother. But call Simms and get that roof done or you'll have to answer to some soggy hens. Tell him I'll pay him. You two can mope together."

He didn't say anything.

"Whatever happened, at least he didn't get worked over like that Zack Porter."

"Who *cares* about him?" Ronnie said, and got up to go somewhere he couldn't hear his mother.

"*I* care," she called to him on his way out. "And I'd care a whole lot more if it happened to you."

Ronnie found the claw hammer in the garage and went out to the chicken house. Some of the old tin had blown off. What was left of the roof was bent and twisted like a curtain in a breeze. Good a reason as any to get rid of the dumb cluckers and go to the Grand Union for your eggs. He got the stepladder and climbed up, testing the boards to see if they'd support him. It looked like he'd be able to get the old roof off on his own.

Someone had found Zack Porter lying on the ground along the Huygens Kill. So it said in the Taconic County Times. He wasn't dead, but he wasn't himself and they didn't know if he ever would be.

Most of the rusty nails pulled out. The others broke off. He hammered what remained into the roof boards and threw the old tin down on the ground. It felt good to be working. Doing something. Here came Simms across the lawn on his bike.

"Your mom called me," Simms said with a shrug. He held up the hammer he'd brought with him. "Said you needed some supervision." He didn't say his own mother had overheard the phone conversation and kicked him out of the house.

Ronnie had already decided he couldn't get the new tin up alone without bending a crease in it. Mohawk Lumber had delivered the three-foot wide panels in a neat pile. They each grabbed a panel at an end. Ronnie took his end up the ladder first. He walked up the roof boards while Simms followed him up the ladder, careful not to bend the tin. They squared up the overhang and nailed through the first panel with galvanized roofing nails.

In the middle of nailing it, Ronnie stopped and asked, "You see the paper?"

"Yeah."

"You know Zack Porter?"

Simms looked to be sure Mrs. Cassidy wasn't around. "Not exactly. I can't believe they think he's another victim like Bart Hinkle. The Porter farm's on the Dutchtown Road. I might have seen him in town once or twice. The paper only told half the story."

"We tell the other half, I'm in big trouble."

"We're not telling," Simms said.

Ronnie nodded. "Still, I hope he gets better."

"Yeah. But I'm glad you were there."

"Just wish I'd been there sooner."

Simms said, "I don't want to talk about it any more," and started hammering again. "Ever."

Ronnie did want to, but they finished the roof without mentioning it again.

Ronnie's living with his Uncle Jeter last year had been great, but his mother made him come back after her boy friend Al was out of the picture. Actually, Ronnie had been glad to live at home again. It's not that he was a neatness fanatic, but Uncle Jeter didn't care about any kind of order. Maybe that's why his girl friend never came to his place. At first, Ronnie enjoyed not having to put things away. Then he started losing stuff like schoolbooks and clothes. The few times his mother came to clean up his room, it set the rest of his uncle's house

in obvious contrast. He realized she shouldn't have to do that. When she offered to drive him to his uncle's on mornings when the weather was bad to meet the Cooper's Mill school bus, he didn't put up a fuss about moving back. That was the one thing he insisted on—he didn't want to go back to school in Tilberg. He could tell his mother was happy about the friends he'd made in Cooper's Mill—especially Simms. Having his mother call his Tilberg friends losers had always annoyed him. But he'd known she was right.

Now that they lived in Cooper's Mill, he didn't see Uncle Jeter so much, but he still bicycled up there sometimes after football practice. By then, his uncle was usually inside having a beer and reading the paper.

"They still haven't caught the guy who messed up Zack Porter," his uncle said one day.

Ronnie grunted and said, "You know him, Uncle Jeter?"

"Some. A bear of a man. Did him a brake job once."

"What was he like?"

"About like anyone, except one man warned me against doing work for him, 'cause he could get ugly. I never saw it. They say he's toned down now, after getting conked. A ball bat—or fence post—can work wonders."

Ronnie didn't laugh. "He married?"

Uncle Jeter looked over his newspaper. "What makes you so all-fire interested?"

Ronnie realized he was being too curious. "I don't know."

"Nah. He never married. And who'd marry him now?"

Ronnie said it was time for him to go. Ever since he and Simms had fixed the chicken house roof—some two months ago now—it seemed like it was best to be doing something—anything. Just sitting around, he couldn't keep his mind off that day on the Huygens Kill. But if he was *doing* something—even football practice—he could think about that.

There was a lot of downhill from Uncle Jeter's to his house on the edge of town. He always coasted as much as possible. His felt his eyes wanting to close. At night, he'd get to sleep alright like he always had. Then, sometime in the middle of the night he'd wake up and lay there thinking, replaying it again and again. He should have aimed for the ribs, not the head. But would that have stopped Zack Porter? What if he'd

just screamed? Would Zack have run off? Or wouldn't he have gone after both of them, big as he was, and pounded on them until they were changed forever like *he* was now? Why should he even be worrying about some creepy pervert? If people knew the truth about Zack Porter they'd say he got what he had coming. Still, look at him. He's about half a man now.

Ronnie figured if he were Simms *he* wouldn't want anyone to know he'd been queered either. Or maybe Zack Porter only got in part way. He didn't know and he wasn't going to ask. Just tell me when it's all going to leave me alone.

Simms was shooting baskets in his backyard when a car pulled in the driveway. Strange cars at the house made him nervous. It could be about Zack Porter. He was relieved to see it was his father, who owned the Ford agency in Henrytown and sometimes came home in a different car. He'd probably want to talk, but Simms wasn't in the mood. He didn't want to talk to anyone. He barely made it through a school day.

He stepped aside to let his father back into the garage. He couldn't go frontways like everyone else. He said he got out faster in the morning that way. Simms' next shot was a swisher from the corner.

"Just like your old man," his father said when he got out of the car.

Simms managed a smile.

"You know I'm disappointed you didn't go out for football. I hope you'll give basketball a shot."

"I'm three inches short of six feet," Simms said.

"We're talking Taconic County, not New York City."

Simms put up another shot. It bounced around and dropped through. "We'll see."

His father put his briefcase in his left hand and dribbled the ball out past where the foul line would be. He gave it a good arc, but it bounced off the rim. He stretched his arms inside his suit. "It must be these tight clothes. I'll go change."

His father hadn't shot baskets with him since he was ten and just getting so he could reach the rim regularly. They were worried about him these last couple of weeks. "You talked all summer with Ronnie, Oatey and Foss about going out for football," his mother said. "Instead you come home

from school and mope." Her favorite new word. Actually, he kind of liked moping. He didn't want to be around all those guys, crashing into each other—on the field with all the pads on, or in the locker room with nothing on. He didn't even take a shower after gym class now. Just got dressed while the others were in the shower room. "Girls won't come within ten feet, you smelling like you ran two marathons," Foss Baldwin had said last week. "Not that they ever did." What girl would want him now anyway?

In his mind, Simms knew he was being stupid. He was the same person he'd been before that day on the Huygens Kill. That's what his mind told him. But that's not what he felt. Zack Porter pushing at him was the worst anyone had ever done to him. He'd been in a couple fights he could take some blame for. Crashing his bike, he could take the blame for. But he'd never done anything to Zack Porter and look what the son-of-a-bitch had done to him.

He rolled the basketball into the garage and got on his bike to ride to Hoyt's Sunoco, yelling to his father through the kitchen window that his front tire needed air.

Even though he was only a freshman, Ronnie got a few minutes of playing time at halfback in the Dutchtown game. Football was turning out okay. Too bad Simms hadn't tried out. Ronnie had caught a ton of his perfect spirals in pickup games.

Ronnie had never been crazy about school, and he definitely wasn't a book-learner, but, along with after-school practice, it kept him going all day. It wasn't until after supper that he'd run out of distractions—mind occupiers. Even watching TV, his thoughts would wander. He took to discussing the shows with his mother. She liked that.

Football turned out to be a magnet for girls. That's the only explanation Ronnie had for Maureen Kelly's showing up near his locker every morning. He'd actually already noticed her practicing with the cheerleaders next to the football field. Where else did you get to see so much leg?

He usually sat with Simms at lunch. At least they weren't steering clear of each other any more. Sometimes Foss and Oatey joined them. Maureen had started sitting at the same

table with a couple of her friends. The girls would talk about other kids. Simms wanted to hear about football, even though he wasn't playing. Ronnie often said he wished Simms were on the team—Foss and Oatey Duncan agreed—and he should at least start *thinking* about coming out next year. Simms went to all the games. Sometimes he sat next to Mrs. Cassidy in the stands. She thought Ronnie wasn't happy at school and asked Simms about him. He said Ronnie liked school as well as he could. He didn't mention Maureen. That was Ronnie's business.

On the Monday before Thanksgiving, Ronnie and Simms had the lunch table to themselves until Maureen came over with a friend, Cheryl, and sat down. Ronnie and Simms were both acquainted with Cheryl. Maureen took the chair next to Ronnie. Sometimes it bothered him that she always assumed she was entitled to sit next to him. They had never said they were going steady or anything. Other times, he liked that she wanted to sit with him.

Maureen said, "Me and Cheryl wondered if you two wanted to go roller skating in Henrytown during vacation. My mom said she could drive us if we go Friday."

Ronnie didn't really want to go and he didn't think Simms would either. He turned to Simms, letting him answer.

"We're going with your uncle on Friday," Simms said, forgetting to include even a trace of regret.

"Oh, right," Ronnie said. "My uncle's taking us up to Carneytown."

The two girls looked disappointed.

"What for?" Maureen asked, annoyed.

"He knows where to find old bottles and tools and stuff," Ronnie said.

"Who cares about Carney trash?" There was scorn in her voice.

"I do," Ronnie said. "I've got some Carney blood."

"Yeah?" Maureen said. She picked up her things and stood up. "Maybe that explains a lot. Maybe that's why you're so friendly with Simms." Cheryl stood up too. Maureen said, "Maybe you're more than just *friends*."

"What?" Simms said.

Ronnie leapt to his feet and kicked Maureen's chair out of

the way. She jumped back. He would have started swinging if Maureen weren't a girl. "You just said the dumbest thing in the world."

"My old man dragged me all over these hills when I was a youngster," Uncle Jeter told Ronnie and Simms as he pushed on through the mountain laurel. It was a strain to hear his words over the chafing of their coats against the branches. The scrub was as thick as walking crossways through a full-grown field of corn. Here in November, at least it was cool, so they didn't sweat over the effort. They finally burst out onto an old road with no tire tracks on its covering of dead leaves. Uncle Jeter said it used to be the way to come until a few years ago when some city people bought the land it crossed and closed it off. It was fifty years since anyone had lived in Carneytown.

The walking was easy now. Some low spots were wet where rain had washed out the road and formed a bank on each side. Uncle Jeter pointed out a grove of apple trees where there had been a home place. Simms saw a few apples hanging from the branches.

"This whole hillside was bare at the turn of the century," Uncle Jeter said and spit. He chewed tobacco when he wasn't smoking.

Ronnie and Simms both remembered the photographs of treeless hillsides from their local history class.

"Yonder's a charcoal mound." Uncle Jeter pointed. It was a mound of dirt covered with fallen leaves and sprouting briars. He said they stacked a huge pile of logs and covered it with dirt before they lit it. It smoldered for days until it was all turned to charcoal, which they used in the iron industry over the mountain in Connecticut.

"So when the trees were gone they had to leave?" Simms wondered.

"That's about right," Uncle Jeter answered. "Some held out. The old man was born up here, but he moved off."

The road dwindled out and seemed to end. They went uphill through some browned-off ferns touched by the frost and came out on a ledge with a western view. The Catskill Mountains formed the horizon. Below them Route 22 snaked

through a long valley of farms. Ronnie pointed out the Lyons Mountain fire tower, which was in Dutchtown.

Simms located the Lutheran Church in Cooper's Mill. Only the steeple was visible. He wondered if it would be blocked off in summer when trees had their leaves.

They continued on through the woods until they came to a pit surrounded by stones. The walls had caved in. It appeared to be a cellar.

"Never been through this one," Uncle Jeter said as he jumped down in and began turning stones over.

Simms and Ronnie followed him. Ronnie found a rusted-out pot with only the handle and rim remaining. Simms came up with a half-rotted leather harness. The leather wasn't all there, but they dug around and found a lot of buckles and other hardware.

"That looks like part of an ox yoke," Uncle Jeter said, picking up an axe head. "I'm beginning to think this was a barn."

They also found a glass canning jar with the bail almost rusted off and a stainless steel pail, probably for milking a cow. That filled Uncle Jeter's backpack. Simms told him he could have the harness. Ronnie offered to carry the pail.

On their way out they sat on the ledge again and watched the sky over the Catskills turn pink.

Uncle Jeter said, "Clouds can darken a day, but they sure light up a sunset."

"You still own property up here?" Simms asked.

Uncle Jeter shook his head, kind of disgusted. "None of the old Carneys do." He said people had moved off when the work dried up, thinking they still owned it. Then, over the years, the iron company heirs somehow paid back taxes for all the parcels and took over the land. Three families now owned the whole mountain.

"The old man hated the Baldwins, Everetts and Sedgewicks," he said. "Died hating anyone with that name."

"Can't blame him," Simms said.

"You ever hire a lawyer?" Ronnie asked. "I might've inherited a piece of it too."

"A piece of what? A fraction of a half-acre? There's not even a road. At least they don't mind anyone walking in."

"I'd be bitching at them," Ronnie said. "It's not right."

"A lot of things ain't right," his uncle said. "You can bitch and bitch all you want and pretty soon you turn into one."

A few days later, Simms rode into Tilberg with Ronnie and his uncle, who needed a bag of chicken feed. He sent Simms and Ronnie to the other side of the store for some chain saw oil. Ronnie found the right type and gave Simms a couple to carry. A loud crash came from the end of the aisle. Cans of oil rolled across the floor. Simms remembered passing a pyramid of them stacked up. He walked toward the cans that now littered the floor and picked one up that was rolling towards him. A man kneeled down to gather up the rest.

Another man in overalls standing nearby snickered and said, "You gonna buy all that oil Zack?"

"Wr . . . wrong oil," was the answer. He went on retrieving the cans.

Zack. Simms felt Ronnie tense next to him.

"That's the bastard," Ronnie said in a low voice and started forward. He was glad when Simms caught his arm, because he didn't know exactly what he'd do. Simms put the cans Ronnie had given him on a shelf and placed the one he had picked up next to the cans that remained standing. One by one he began to help restack the others.

"Th . . . th . . . thank you," Zack said. He was even bigger than Ronnie remembered.

"Looks like you got a friend," the man in overalls said, walking away.

Zack handed Simms more cans to stack up. Simms worked without speaking, too nervous about what to say. Ronnie helped too—silently. When they were done, they all stood looking at their work.

"Even better than what it was," Simms said.

"Want my card?" Zack asked, reaching into his pocket.

Simms backed away when Zack touched his arm.

"I . . . I . . . give it t . . . to everyone," Zack said.

Simms took it. "Zack Porter, farmer," was all that it read. No address or phone number.

Zack held out his hand.

Simms hesitated, then took it. "Simms Perry," he said. "Student."

"Mr. Perry sells Ford. Best trucks."

Simms nodded.

Zack held out a card to Ronnie, who took it and shook his hand. "Ronnie Cassidy, student too."

"Th . . . that's good. Study what?" he asked them both.

Simms looked at Ronnie and shrugged, "What ever happens next."

Matthew Shoen

Special Meats

The grey-haired pastor and his Wesleyan flock were blocking the road to Special Meats, so I called my boss to let him know I'd be late.

Glen swore up and down when I told him about the roadblock. He'd only just called the cops, so I was stuck until the pastor was coaxed back into his rabbit hole of a church. I turned off my car and reclined the seat.

Outside they were chanting "The only genes God wants tampered with are blue jeans!" over and over again.

I mouthed along out of boredom, and watched the protesters shuffle up and down the road. Most were holding a sign in one hand and a cane in the other. To my surprise, I saw a few people with Downs Syndrome marching along. They were young too which was uncommon. Most people were pruning genetic warts like Downs Syndrome out of their offspring. The mentally handicapped were a rare sight in 2031.

The people with Downs Syndrome were all wearing shirts that said *I'm Worthwhile Too!* It was sad. They're parents had probably been too poor to afford any genetic pruning procedures and too stubborn to abort them. With all the control people had over the development of their babies the mentally handicapped were dying out, along with the programs established to help them. My Aunt Jenifer had Downs Syndrome, so did my cousin Greg. They lived pretty well, but they'd both been hired to work in a paper mill years ago, back when there were more people like them. The people helping their parents and grandparents block the road, I doubted any of them had a job and nobody would hire them. Society was waiting for them to go extinct.

Finally, the cops cleared the road. As I drove past them, a pissed grandmother spit all over my windshield and flipped me an arthritic, crooked, middle finger. I thought about how I would phrase the encounter for Alyssa, play it up for laughs. We needed to laugh more.

When I got to work, the queue was already pretty backed

up and a few guys from the early morning shift were standing outside impatiently waiting for us to come and relieve them. I parked and popped my wedding ring into the cup holder of my 2025 Honda Gemini. I always took it off to keep blood from rusting the metal band.

"Fucking finally, don't worry Joel, just take your time. It's not as if I have a home to go to," Tom said between puffs on his cigarette.

"I just want to walk slowly so I can take my time and admire you," I said, sauntering up to Tom.

"You're just too sexy Tom," I reached around for his ass.

"Cut it out you friggen homo," he said, jumping back like I'd made a pass at him in the boys' locker room. Tom was too easy to fuck with. He played tough, but the moment you acted gay his walls collapsed.

I didn't torment him too badly though. He'd agreed to take one of my shifts so Alyssa and I could go camping by Lake Champlain. Our hours were terribly mismatched. Whenever she had a day off from the hospital the smells that came home with me made her nauseous. I never complained though when she came from Burlington with the undeniable smell of antiseptic and blood on her clothes.

I spoke to Glen for a few minutes after punching in and got my work assignment. I was processing gemods into the facility. I put on my bloody work apron and parted with Glen at the door which led to the rendering floor of the Special Meats Slaughterhouse. We were one of only two places in Vermont licensed to process genetically modified cattle. Glen went deeper into the facility, while I headed to the loading docks.

We had a few tractor trailers already lined up and marked with the farms they'd come from. Inside the trailers, I could hear the quiet lowing of the gemod cows. The first trucker was pacing by his rig and packing a lip of Skoal. When he saw me the man practically ran over, eager to get his load processed. He was probably getting paid per delivery.

"Sorry, traffic issues. How many you got," I said.

"It's a full truck, twelve heifers, about 36,000 pounds of meat. I have another couple runs to make today so let's hurry up man."

"Christ, your boss raise enough gemods?"

"He's getting government dinero; some place in Africa or Asia is having a famine so we're shipping the cube steak over there as part of a relief effort."

"You guys sure make a killing with government cube don't you?"

"I don't, but the boss gets one greedy fucking look in his eye whenever the check comes from Washington. Pretty sure he rubs his dick on it before taking it to the bank," laughed the trucker as he unbolted the trailer and swung open the doors.

Immediately, the earthy stink of gemods waiting to be processed struck my nostrils. Even though the animals came to us in square iron crates which looked like huge toy blocks, their smell permeated the trailer. The cows had been inside for the last portion of their lives. The genetic modification process caused them to produce more muscle mass which made the creatures too heavy for their legs. They couldn't walk at all because their stubby nubs were covered under a ton of prime cut beef. The shit and piss was cleaned out to keep sores from developing all over their backsides, but still, you couldn't wash the stink out of a gemod, and it was ten times the smell of a cow.

Covering my mouth, I grabbed the first cage. They were laid two across, and went to the back of the rig. Ball bearings lined the bottom of each container allowing them to be shoved around. I grabbed the handles and pulled while the trucker yanked the ramps out of his trailer bed. Inside there was a moo and I patted the metal box.

"Easy there girl. Not much longer," I huffed, as I pushed the gemod inside the slaughterhouse. I put a finger through the hole used for air flow and scratched the gemod's head. My touch elicited another quiet moo from the creature which twisted towards me.

"Take it easy," I said as I grabbed the cattle gun, pressed it to the hole, and shot a steel rod through the gemod's skull. As my right arm jolted back from the recoil I jabbed a pithing rod into the hole with my free hand, swishing it through the brains to make sure the gemod had died. Finally, I grabbed a knife, slid my hand into a hole by the gemod's throat, and sliced the arteries and veins, letting a torrent of hot blood

escape, beginning the drainage process. Finished, I sent the crate down the line to be processed watching it disappear behind the cloudy plastic flaps which separated the killing room from the rendering floor.

I killed cows for hours. One at a time, I brought them from the trucks, killed them, and sent the bodies on to be gutted, butchered, frozen, and packaged into cube steak. When the cows died they made an oof sound as the air left their lungs. It sounded like someone getting punched in the gut. I had been at Special Meats for two years and it was eerier to kill the gemod cows than other modified animals. Other things twitched, you could feel the life leaving them. Watching made you feel bad, but at least you knew. Cows didn't have room to twitch. You had to listen, because you never saw the end, just the crate with its vacant black holes. Sometimes, the bones of their legs snapped as they slumped but that was all. Oof, then maybe a wet crunch. Those were the only signs. It seemed so pathetic. Such gigantic animals and all they could muster were those tiny sounds to let you know the job had been done right.

Still, this was one of my favorite jobs inside Special Meats. It was fairly clean. Sure, my arms were left caked with blood, but that was all. The days when I was tasked with rendering beef were awful. A normal cow is hoisted on a conveyor belt to be gutted and quartered. Gemods are too heavy for that. Cleaning out all four stomachs, the intestines, everything inedible means crawling inside the container and pulling everything out by hand. Rendering meant blood caked beneath my fingernails, inside my ears, up my nose, between the toes, and anywhere else it could dry. The butcher's apron could only keep so much out. I kept a bunch of plastic bags in my car for rendering days. Two bags were for my shirt, pants, and socks. I'd sit on another couple bags and drive home in my soaking underwear as blood pooled beneath my nuts. On those days, my evenings were spent showering for an hour while the clothes took two tumbles in the washer.

Still, the check cleared and Alyssa and I were able to live comfortably. Keeping that in mind, I could kill gemods five days a week without any trouble.

After I said my goodbyes and harassed a few more people

in the parking lot, I started the short drive back home to Shelburne. The angry sons and daughters of god weren't there to harass me which I appreciated. I was hungry and didn't much desire a half-hour delay being preached the sinfulness of my job, or how I was going to Hell. If the infinitely wise God didn't want us tampering with our genetics, then he should've made us too dumb to figure out what we were made of. Alyssa always laughed at the old zealots. These were the same people who were eager to have all sorts of invasive surgeries to kill their cancers. They'd deny food to the starving, but used Medicare to ensure their lives continued uninterrupted. The hypocrisy was laughable.

I got home around six-thirty and put three chicken breasts in the oven. They weren't gemod poultry. I made sure of that. Cows were just bred bigger, but chickens were pumped full of hormones so they'd mature from chick to adult in a week. Someone had also found a way to change chicken genetics so they were born featherless to cut out plucking. The cows I could handle, but the ugly naked chickens were fucking freaky. I shelled out for the more expensive free range birds.

Tom said he liked the gemod chickens because all the hormones made his wife's tits bump from C cup to D. I never pointed out to the stupid bastard what that could mean to his little five year old girl. It would make a good joke in three years when he was sweating and crying at buying her a training bra before he'd taken off her training wheels.

Alyssa got home at seven just as I was sprinkling the last bit of seasoning on the breasts, and pouring a glass of water for each of us. She tossed her keys on the kitchen countertop and sat down heavily. She was still in her scrubs; her brown hair tied back in a tight ponytail. Each finger was stained with iodine and it dotted her forearms like patches of jaundice.

"Long day?" I asked, planting a kiss on her lips.

"Be happy you shoot cows all day," she said, nipping my bottom lip.

"What happened?"

"We had a birth today and when Dr. Regosin gave the woman her baby she and the husband just flipped shit. Apparently, they wanted their child to have black hair and it looked kinda pale blonde instead. I was so pissed, the poor baby was crying

and they were just yelling about the money they'd spent."

"Christ, that's awful."

"I mean, they calmed down after a few minutes and the woman held her baby, but stuff like that just leaves a bad taste in my mouth, how do people like that get to have kids."

"Obviously by having more money to throw around than a dumb cow killer and a nurse," I said, wrapping my hands around her shoulders and rolling my thumbs up and down.

Alyssa sighed contently and leaned forward so I could do her whole back.

"I didn't say you were getting a back rub."

"You started one, now finish it."

I worked over her upper back for a few minutes rubbing down the shoulder blades and across Alyssa's spine. Her scrubs came off, and I started to work up from her tailbone. Alyssa's shirt bunched against my wrists as I slipped my fingers beneath her bra. Her breathing was getting ragged so I pulled my hands around and cupped her breasts, kneading them.

"You are the worst masseuse," she purred, "Just when my back starts to feel better you always start groping me."

I gave Alyssa's boobs a firm squeeze, "You sure you want me giving you a back massage?"

She pulled my hands out of her shirt and turned in her seat so I was looking straight at her. Then she kissed me.

"Should I go grab a condom?" I asked, and she pulled away. I knew I shouldn't have mentioned the rubber; I should've just gone and grabbed it.

"You know how I feel," Alyssa began.

"I do, but you could've changed your mind, seen a cute baby," I replied.

Alyssa rolled her eyes, "I don't want to go through it again Joel, I can't."

I sighed. We fought about medical stuff a lot now. We had already tried to have a baby and even gotten pregnant. A screening had revealed the fetus had Downs Syndrome and we aborted it. Ever since, Alyssa had been firm about using condoms whenever we had sex. Terminating the pregnancy had been hard on both of us, but I was ready to give it another shot. She held back though.

"I can't change my DNA Alyssa. We both want children. We can adopt or do it naturally, but I'm seriously tired of feeling like my genes are defective."

"I never said they were defective."

"Then why are we using condoms again? We own a home and have jobs. Let's just try again and see what happens."

"What do we do if the next baby has Downs Syndrome too?"

"Maybe we could have it? I mean it might just have a mild case like Greg."

"I'm not putting a child through that. You know how hard it is for Greg so don't try to sugarcoat what our child's life would be like with Downs Syndrome."

"I still think it's worth trying. I'm ready to be a father."

An awkward silence followed before she reached out and grabbed my shoulders. I could smell iodine on her skin.

"Can I show you something?"

"Sure."

Quickly, she walked out to her car and returned with pamphlets in her hands. They looked like the ones put in convenience stores to attract tourists.

Alyssa took a deep breath. It was her convincing breath, her calm down and talk rationally breath, her say the wrong thing Joel and you're not having sex for a week breath. I closed my mouth and opened my ears.

"They've been doing this thing at the hospital for parents who want to prevent diseases, but don't want to do the designer baby process. They mix your DNA, take all the good traits from your sperm, strip out all that bad ones, and just add in DNA chains from anonymous donors where the breaks occur. I've seen the babies. They're all healthy Joel," she said, handing me a pamphlet.

I opened it up and stared at a man, his wife, and their baby. Below there was a lesbian and a gay couple with the same family dynamic. A Healthy Family Can Be Yours! was written at the bottom. I flipped the page and there were more facts and blurbs. Donors gave their sperm to banks. Then a machine spun them to pieces and the fragmented DNA got inserted into the broken sequences of the father's good genes, just like Alyssa had said. There were pictures of the donors, grinning white men, black guys, an Asian. I smiled, realizing

they'd gotten in a pamphlet for beating off into a cup.

"What do you think?" asked Alyssa, mistaking my smile for curiosity. She leaned in and put her head on my shoulder like she was reading along even though I knew she'd already read the whole thing at least three times.

"So they'd mash my sperm up with the sperm of a bunch of men and make some perfection cocktail out of it?" I asked, setting the pamphlet aside.

"It would be just like artificial insemination," she said. "I just want the healthiest baby possible. This is good science."

"It feels like it's taking away part of me Alyssa. You get to have all of you in the baby. I'm going be all mixed up with men I don't even know? Shit, I think I would feel better if you got a surrogate. At least then it would be a whole person."

"I want you to be a part of this, you are my husband. I want your baby Joel."

"Then let's just have sex and see what happens. There are a million things that could go wrong. What if the donor sperm combines with mine and just produces a heart defect, or cystic fibrosis. There's always going to be a risk, no matter how hard you try to minimalize it."

"I can't have another abortion. I just can't do that to myself. Sorry I'm fucking selfish. I'd already named the baby Nicholas Sophia since I didn't know if it was a boy or girl yet. I had to let my baby die, and you can't even try to tell me you know what it felt like. You didn't have the baby vacuumed out of you like a piece of trash! I'm not short-changing a child when there's a better, safer option, and I'm not going to get another abortion Joel."

And then she cried. They weren't crazy uncontrollable sobs like the ones which shook me when my dad died; they were angry tears. It was her anger at me for resisting and my sperm for holding flaws. They were her anger at the sheer randomness of natural genetics which had given our fetus Downs Syndrome and forced her to feel it aborted.

They did look happy, all those families. I knew that poor Aunt Jenifer and Greg were a real burden to their families even though they both had jobs. I loved Alyssa and wanted to have a kid with her. She was right though, I wouldn't feel the loss of another baby the same way she would. The baby

she wanted though, it would be a composite of Alyssa, myself, and some assholes who'd jerked off for twenty bucks. It felt wrong.

"I'll think about the procedure," I said.

"Really, you're sure?"

"No! I'm not, but I know this shit bothers you, so let's look into it," I grumbled.

The tears were gone and her lips were on mine. We had sex on top of the pamphlets. I couldn't look at those pictures; see those men with their shit-eating grins. One of them could be co-dad with me.

I left early the next morning, chasing the night away as I ate a bowl of raisin bran. I was out the door when the first elongated yawn came from our bedroom.

Things were quiet on the drive in. Not even a single Methodist, Baptist, Evangelical, or Roman Catholic was out protesting. It was almost annoying. I could've used a roadblock. I was ready to be a dad, had been ready almost as soon as Alyssa and I had married. The abortion had derailed everything. Yet now, there was this solution and all I could feel was how much I didn't want what she'd so wholeheartedly embraced. I felt like I was watching *my* baby die. Maybe I would've accepted some anonymous sperm donor, but dozens? Christ, whose baby would she be having? Would there be a doctor to come in and say the baby was 64% mine? 81%, 39%? A healthy baby was all that mattered, that's what my dad had always said. It was true; all you wanted was a healthy baby. The percent shouldn't matter. But dad had known we were 100% his children.

I slammed on the breaks. I'd come into the parking lot too fast and nearly took out a stop sign with my turn.

"Nice driving, Joel," cracked Tom, sucking on his cigarette.

"Here give me a puff," I said ignoring his weak jab at my parking.

"I didn't think you smoked," he said, offering me a drag.

I had maybe ten minutes before my shift started. I prayed Glen would keep me away from the rendering floor. I wanted something mindless so I could think without being elbow deep in guts. I prayed for packaging and vacuum sealing beef,

or killing gemods.

Tom gave me weird looks as I puffed away thinking about Alyssa and those damn pamphlets. After all the years of torment I'd dished out he was afraid to ask if I was alright. I didn't want to talk though, just think. Tom was a good guy, but I didn't want his advice. He was my coworker, not my buddy. He stood around, flopping around for something to say until I flicked the cigarette butt on the blacktop and went to work.

Mercifully, Glen assigned me to work with a trainee offloading and killing gemods. For two hours I pressed the steel tube to the opening, hit the button and listened as they slumped against the metal of their cubical cells. I let the trainee cover himself in blood slitting throats. My thoughts took me nowhere though, and I fell into a rhythm of feeling shitty and killing cows.

Just before noon, I pressed the cattle-gun to the crate and clicked the trigger. The rod shot out and a groan of pain shook the crate. I froze. This was a new sound, a pained sound, full of life.

"Shit," I muttered.

Some jackass, some idiot farmhand, had put the gemod in wrong. The head wasn't facing the hole. I hadn't hit the brain. The rod had gone through someplace else.

I ran into Glen's office. He kept a pry bar and hammer in there to open up the crates. I found the two foot bar and cobalt steel hammer pretty quick and ran back to the animal which was throwing its weight around clumsily. The new guy was standing with the next gemod which was aggravated listening to the wounded animal.

"Move," I grunted, picking up the cattle-gun and shooting the second gemod before it could get too stressed out.

"Get that thing out of here," I said, thrusting the pithe and a knife into the trainee's hand.

The guy, stood dumb for a minute so I shoved him to get him moving down the line.

With the new kid gone, I sunk the bar into the container's side and gave it a few good cracks. Heaving and shoving I popped the side off, jumping out of the way as it crashed onto the corrugated metal floor.

Inside was a normal looking gemod, about five feet tall and shaped like its square container. I'd shot the poor animal through the side, just below the spine and it groaned in pain as I approached. Blood seeped from the wound I'd inflicted. The poor animal had been shoved in sideways. I could just see the edge of its dopey eyes and there was no way I could reach around the body to put a rod through its brain.

"Easy girl, easy," I muttered, petting the animal which shivered at my touch. I grabbed a haunch and tried to shift the thing around, but it was too heavy to turn.

"Fuck," I said, grabbing the cattle-gun and stretching towards the head even though I knew I couldn't reach. With the crowbar I started to work at the other side, closer to the gemod's face. I got the crate open and grabbed the cattle-gun.

I looked into its eyes then. They were set too far apart like every gemod. Its tongue was hanging out, making it look even dumber. The neck muscles were too thick to allow much range of movement, but it still twisted away when I stuck the gun between its eyes. I don't know why I was hesitating. This was a gemod. It couldn't breed; it couldn't even fucking walk. They were raised to die, that's all they were good for. This creature would provide twice the meat that a normal heifer or bull could. It was good science.

I put my other hand up and rubbed the stupid squat muzzle of the gemod. It turned its head and mooed quietly like a normal cow. I pulled the trigger and a little blood spattered my lips. The cow's head slumped and I grabbed the two remaining sides of the crate and shoved the dead animal through to be processed. The trainee had my pithe and knife. He could mash the brains and slash the cow's throat. I just couldn't.

My shift ended without any other troubles. All the other crates had been handled properly, and I killed a couple dozen more gemods before the bell rang. On the drive home I passed a truck carting more animals to be processed by the night shift. A smiling cow was emblazoned on the trailer.

The animals weren't good for anything other than to die and feed people. That gemod, it wasn't even good for itself. It hadn't lived, just grown. I thought about the pamphlet. I wasn't any good to Alyssa either. I would serve my purpose

as the main template of our baby, and she would get exactly what she wanted. She could shop around for whatever sperm satisfied her desires. My own testicles weren't my own anymore. They would be purified, scrubbed of all their imperfections, and then polished with another man's seed. The sequences that had made dad die of liver failure, the code that gave Greg his Downs Syndrome, all gone. My DNA wasn't good enough anymore.

I got home and put dinner on the table. It was leftover chicken from the night before. Alyssa came home and I sat her down. My fingernails were still edged with blood while her arms were spotted with iodine. We both carried a unique, repellent odor. Still, I held tightly to her hands and told her I didn't care if we adopted or used a single sperm donor, but I couldn't stomach letting my baby be pruned and clipped until it fit our parameters for a perfect child.

I wanted the flaws, even if they were relics of an uncertain way of living. Every day Alyssa birthed the products of good science, and every day I killed them. I am stupid for wanting to fight progress, for wanting my baby to be born in mortal danger from its own genetic code, but I can't live with the alternative.

Nicholas MacDonnell

The Long Way Home

There were seven in the beginning. Hiding in the tall grass beyond the barbwire, they waited. The cry of the whistle, the moan of the tracks. Those sounds meant one thing. It was time. The train started to move, but still they waited. The station had guards, men without remorse, men whose only safeguard from having to catch the train themselves was their infliction of violence on captured stowaways. No, without tickets, there was only one way to board. As the engine passed beyond the border of the fence, someone yelled out. It was time to catch the train.

Jose broke cover from his spot in the weeds and began to sprint. His sneakers were two sizes too big and were falling apart. As the soles of his ratty Nikes slapped the gravel-lined tracks, he tried to ignore the pain he felt against his blistered feet. He had to run if he was going to make it. If he missed, it could cost him his life.

Hector went first. He was twenty, eight years older than Jose, and he sprinted clear of the crowd in only ten strides. Hector claimed he played futbol until he got expelled from school, but Jose did not believe him. Someone who had gone to school would have never needed to catch La Bestia. Even if he lied, Hector made the jump like a real athlete, catching the top rail cleanly. He was halfway up the car before anyone else even made it to the tracks.

Jose watched as two men he did not know reached the rail car and leapt. Both caught hold of the railing, but neither with as much confidence as Hector. The train was picking up speed. As Jose ran in labored strides, he knew his time was shrinking. He pushed past two older men and his friend Jesus. To catch the train, Jose could only think of himself.

Sprinting alongside the tracks, as rocks kicked loose and the ground shook from the weight of the tremendous freight cars, the handholds seemed impossibly high. The Coyote had assured them that children as young as eight had made the jump, but for a moment Jose imagined himself being thrown

underneath the severing wheels of the train. He would not have been the first.

But he had to try. There was nothing behind him, nothing but rail guards chasing down stragglers. Years on the street. Foraging from dumpsters. The death of a young gangbanger. Bitter endings to an untold story. La Bestia was a cruel mistress, but she was the only hope he had.

Jose drew even with the railing and said a prayer to Santa Maria before jumping. As he flew through the air he closed his eyes and reached with all his hope. His body slapped against the side of the car, nothing but bone and sinew, but his hand caught hold of the railing. Jose opened his eyes and pulled himself to safety as the train lumbered on.

When he reached the roof of the car he looked back for Jesus. The two older men he had sprinted past had abandoned their efforts, veering from the track for the cover of the jungle. Jesus had also missed his opportunity, but he was not running. As the railway guards descended upon him he looked up at Jose and smiled. Their clubs rained down upon Jesus's brown hair before Jose could scream. After that, there were only four.

After three days the rooftop of La Bestia had grown into a miniature city. Every village passed, every bend in the track where the train slowed enough to give someone the chance to risk everything, their numbers had multiplied. When Jose first made it up to the roof of the cars, he had been able to walk from one side of the train to the other. Now, overcrowded and full, he held onto his spot with Hector and the rest of their small gang. If the train took on any more passengers, he would need people to stand for him.

The bright sun shone down on Jose and his fellow riders, a blessing from above. The night before had been frigid. Jose had clasped his hands tightly against his brown skin, shaking in the wash of cool night air. The sun was such a relief that he found himself grinning from ear to ear. He was on La Bestia. His life could only go forward.

Looking through his plastic rucksack, Jose did a quick inventory of his dwindling supplies. In Vera Cruz he would have the chance to resupply, but that was still one more day

of travel. If he carried any more with him he knew he could have Hector trade for food, but as it was, he would part with nothing he held.

A half-liter of water. Some plantain chips. Spoiled rice that a dog would not eat. Necessities for life that Jose could not forgo. Besides those things, his bag held very little.

Jose ran his hand along his mother's rosary beads, the only physical proof he had left from the woman who had brought him into the world. They were worn smooth; wooden totems that carried the weight of the world. They never made things better for Jose, but when he held them, looking up at the stars, he could pray that his mother was looking back at him. The beads had not saved her, but for Jose, he knew they couldn't hurt.

Besides the rosary beads, Jose carried one more item in his bag. It was his most cherished possession, one he knew he could trade for better food whenever he wanted, but it was the one thing he would keep as his own. It was a baseball cap, but not just any cap. It was a New York Yankees cap!

Even a gutter rat knew about the Yankees. Jose had gotten it nine months before from an aide worker stationed in his village. An American, some gringo with blue eyes and teeth so white they sparkled, not silver or rotted like most men his age. He had seen Jose sifting through the garbage behind a food co-op, and instead of throwing rocks at him or turning him over to the police, he had stopped and spoken to him like he was a real person. He knew Spanish, but he spoke in such a clean way that Jose had to concentrate to understand.

The gringo did not have much to say, but when he asked Jose if he had any family, he unintentionally entered a world far removed from his own, a world that pierced him to his core. Jose had noticed the ball cap immediately, but when the gringo removed the hat and offered it to Jose, he was so shocked he lost all words.

"Take it. It doesn't really fit me. Besides, someone who smiles so big for the Yankees deserves this hat more than me."

Remembering that day, Jose ran his hand over the clean seams and the grey and white lettering. The gringo was back in America, a land so rich that you could give away a hat without blinking an eye. La Bestia was taking him there, and

Jose dreamed that soon he too would have enough hats to share with all the street rats in the world.

The next day, as the train rolled into Vera Cruz, La Bestia became a hive of excitement. Las Patronas, the female saints, would be waiting for the passing migrants. The exodus of La Bestia had started as all great movements do, slow and unnoticed, but as the northward migration of desperate way seekers blanketed the roofs of rail cars, some people were compelled to do more then look away. Early passages had countless scores of pilgrims to starvation and dehydration. Since then, Las Patronas had done what they could.

Hector had convinced Jose to let him hold him out over the edge of the train car to get a better vantage. Shacks and roofless concrete building marked the edge of town, and Jose wondered how the saints of Vera Cruz could afford to help people like him. Vera Cruz looked exactly like the place he had left behind, but Hector promised they would come.

Leaning out as Hector held onto his shirt, Jose peered ahead. La Bestia was almost half a mile long, but although their car was near the middle, he could see nothing past the overgrown embankments and potholed streets. A cry emanating from the front of the train was the first signal that something was happening. Hector shook Jose's shirt, demanding information, but Jose shrieked for fear of being let go.

When Hector jerked him back onto the car, Jose was shaking so bad he had lost the excitement over Las Patronas. The cries of anticipation from fellow riders grew louder and louder, but Jose did not move. Only when Hector punched him in the arm did he realize that if he wanted to resupply his meager food bank he needed to spring into action. Turning back towards the city, Jose saw crowds of women.

The saints of Las Patronas were dressed in white, with matching red scarves adorning their heads. Some had small children tucked besides their flowing dresses while others stood alone, their children long gone into the cold and lonely world.

The train slowed as it passed through town, and as it did, the women of Vera Cruz took out their sacks of mercy.

Bags of rice and beans, bottles of water, and other items of compassion were thrown without recompense. Each bag that flew through the air elicited a cry of joy from the riders. Jose felt his fellow passengers push and jostle for position, reaching out for the bags of food and water.

Jose stood at the edge of the crowd, but his position on the brink of the rooftop gave him little comfort. Pushing with his backside as hard as he could, he dug his heels in and looked out at the crowd. Although he was tall for his age, most of the riders surrounding him were full-grown men. The other children, the ones who rode with families or the ones like Jose who rode alone, relented and prayed that their fellow passengers would be merciful and share their bounty. Hector had told Jose that it was three more days to the border, and Jose had learned enough from life to understand that relying on the mercy of others was not only foolish, it was dangerous. He had to catch one of the bags of food.

The noise from the front of the train was fading. Jose looked out and saw that the crowd was thinning. In desperation, each bag that was thrown, each sack of rice that sailed through the air, was fought over with increasing savagery. Jose saw Hector elbow an old man in the face, breaking his nose as he captured his third bag. He did not know if he could be that ruthless, but Jose knew he needed to act.

Letting the crowd push him to the very edge of the car, Jose tried to lock eyes with one of the women. Between the edge of the train and where he stood was a fraction of an inch, but Jose knew that his only chance was to catch a bag thrown lower, one thrown where only someone as young and agile as him could catch the life saving gift. He looked twenty yards ahead of his car and saw a lone woman standing clear of the crowd. She held only one bag of supplies, but as she looked up at the pilgrims, Jose saw tears in her eyes. No children stood beside her, and although he could not be certain, Jose doubted any child ever had. The woman locked eyes with Jose, and as he nodded his head and pleaded for mercy, she held her bag aloft. With his right arm, Jose reached back and grabbed onto a stranger. Using the man as an anchor, he leaned out over the edge. The woman waited until his car was right beside her before throwing her bag.

Jose felt the crowd behind him heave and buck, but the woman threw her bag with purpose. His hand clasped down on the mesh sack, and he pulled himself back from the edge. Jose had just enough time to look back before being swallowed into the crowd, but when he did, the woman who had saved him was gone.

Two days later, tragedy struck. North of Vera Cruz, one day shy of the border, the train crossed into the great Sonoran desert. The merciless sun blazed down upon the exposed riders. Jose and most of the other young men had taken off their shirts and tied them around their heads, but that provided little comfort. People became disoriented, and the metal roof got so hot it drew blisters. Elderly riders collapsed, and a still descended over the riders. It was only a matter of time until something happened.

Jose was trying to close his eyes, his head pounding from the heat, when he heard the scream. Two cars down, a young couple down began shouting in frantic tones. Exhausted from the heat, no one stirred to investigate, but everyone looked up. As the frantic plaints became clear, it was obvious what had happened.

A child. How old, Jose would never discover. Hector had gambled with members of their posse about when someone would fall, when an elderly rider would collapse to never rise again, but no one had counted on the first death aboard La Bestia to be a child. Later, Jose learned that it had been a little girl, the couple's only child. They had boarded shortly after Vera Cruz, and despite being well supplied, the desert had proved an unmerciful host. While her parents had rested, covering their heads and praying for respite, a mirage on the horizon had caught the little girls eye. America was the mirage they all sought, but lost in the delusion of heat, the child grew tired of waiting. She stepped between two railcars without a peep, never quite reaching what it was she sought. By the time her parents realized she was gone, there was anyone could do.

There was a final cry as the last car passed over the girl's remains. It was a disturbing image, but with Hector laughing and describing what he imagined, Jose struggled to clear his

mind. He prayed that it had been fast. Mercy only goes so far, but a quick death was not too much to ask.

Riders began abandoning the train the day La Bestia was due to reach the border. At the final station, guards would once more examine the train and all its contents. La Bestia had done her job in getting them there. Now, it was time for each of them to do the rest.

Jose and his gang did not want to exit the train too early, stranding themselves unnecessarily before attempting a crossing. Instead, they waited until they could see Juarez city limits. As he had done one week earlier, Hector led by example. Climbing down the railings, he leapt to the graveled embankment. Hector hit the ground running, but even in the height of youth, the train's speed was too great. He tucked and rolled three times before stopping. Everyone looked back to see if he was hurt, but as Hector rose, white dirt shedding from his shoulders, Jose realized that it was going to take much more then a fall to touch Hector.

Jose decided to go second, not wanting to lose courage. Following Hector's example, he lowered himself to the last railing and pushed away with all his might. Jose's feet never touched the ground, but as he hit the ground, he knew that he had cleared the tracks. By the time he was back on his feet Hector had caught up with him, laughing at his fall.

They continued along the tracks, catching up with one rider after another as they walked. Eventually the train got so far ahead of their small group that Jose could no longer see it. La Bestia was no more. It had carried him across a continent, and had left him without a thought. He was about to ask Hector what the plan was for crossing when they saw a lone figure lying beside the track.

Jose could hear the man's screams long before reaching him. When they were closer, he saw that it was a stranger, a man he had never before seen. The man was writhing in pain, and as Jose jostled for position, he saw the man's leg. Something had gone wrong in his jump, and he saw the man's bone piercing through his shin. The wound was gruesome, and the man's pants were stained crimson red. Between the cries and the smell of the blood, Jose wanted to wretch.

The man begged for help, but as the seconds slipped by, Jose started to realize the truth. With no one else coming behind them, there was nothing they could do. Jose asked if they should leave water, but Hector scolded him, saying if he wanted to leave his own supplies behind he could be the fool. As the man started to realize his sentence, he lashed out, cursing those who would leave him.

And one by one they did. The group marched on, but Jose lagged behind, hoping for some way to save the day. When he was the only one left, the injured man cursed him as well, telling him to leave him to die. Jose did not want to abandon him, but with so few chances, he knew he had none to spare. Jose ran to catch up with his gang, never turning back. There was nothing behind him. There couldn't be.

Skirting Juarez city limits, the gang discussed what they planned on doing in America. Every one was older then Jose, and many of the young men had family and jobs waiting for them. They talked about places called Denver, Garden City, Tucson. Those names were just blank spaces on the map for Jose. For him, America was a singular idea, a place so much better than where he came from that it did not matter where he ended up. His hopes and dreams had centered on reaching America. They never went further.

As the last rays of the setting sun abandoned them to the dust and the sagebrush, everyone began talking about the crossing. None of the young men had enough money for a Coyote, but they did have plans about where they would enter. Hector had an uncle who had written him with instructions, and so he took the lead in planning. The crossing was fifteen miles north of the city, a forgotten point of the world where only desperate souls would venture. The hike was seventy-five miles through barren desert. As Hector described the journey, the group fell silent, weighing whether they had enough supplies or fortitude to survive the passage.

One by one the young men made their decision. They had not come so far to turn back now, and if they had survived La Bestia, then another seventy-five miles would be nothing. Jose was thrilled that he would be making the crossing with his new brothers, but as he got ready to follow the group,

Hector told him he needed to wait.

Jose was confused by Hector's direction, but when he stopped, the rest of their friends backed off to give them space. Jose asked why they were delaying, but Hector could only shake his head.

"This is where your journey ends little brother. We need as much water as we can carry, and you are only going to slow us down."

Too late, Jose realized what the others had known for days. Hector had protected him, made him feel like he had a friend, but he had only done those things so that Jose would carry goods for him. A mule. Less than a mule. His purpose served, it was time to be discarded.

Jose felt hot tears brim in his eyes, but he could not give up hope. He begged Hector to take him, saying he wouldn't even notice he was there, but Hector had made up his mind. He told Jose to give him his rucksack, but as he reached for the bag, Jose jerked it from his hands.

Hector did not like Jose's show of defiance, especially in front of his new gang. He asked only once more before punching Jose in the stomach, knocking him to the ground. Jose held onto his bag as tightly as he could, but eventually Hector's strength was too great. He lost hold of his bag, crying in the dust as he did.

Hector rifled through Jose's meager possessions, not wanting to dally before abandoning him. He threw him his mother's rosary beads and a bag of rice. When Jose saw Hector pull out the Yankee cap, his heart broke in two.

"Turn yourself in. This is a bad place for a kid. They will find you a job or ship you back, but at least you will be alive. I'm sorry. It has to be done."

Hector turned his back as he jogged to catch up to his friends. In the evening twilight, Jose could make out the white lettering of the Yankee cap. The hat highlighted Hector's silhouette as he departed, abandoning Jose for the land of hope and dreams. Jose was crushed. Everything he had and everything he wanted gone in an instant. He continued to watch as Hector drifted into the night. After a minute, it all faded to dark.

After two days in Juarez, Jose wished for nothing more than a swift end to his miserable life. He wandered in circles, but the further he traveled, the more lost he became. So close to his dream, Jose knew he might as well have been on the moon.

Hector had told him to turn himself in, but as Jose wandered the dirty, mangled streets, he saw children as young as him and younger, wandering the same helpless tracts. Juarez was full of children like him. There was nowhere to go, no one to take him in. Jose had traded one slum for another, one shortened life for the same.

As he tried to decide what to do next, Jose could not help but notice the pulse of traffic flowing through the city. Like magnetism, cars and people were pulled north. Jose knew the border was close, closer than it had ever been, but he had no money, and he had no plan. If he was to go to the border, he knew he had only one course of action.

Jose was not special. He was not the first brave child to cross the wilderness. La Bestia was an artery, a main vein for refugees flowing unchecked into the Promised Land. He had seen fifteen boys before him attempt the journey, and had seen half as many returned after turning themselves in. Crossing the footbridge and begging for mercy from border guards was a method that had become as popular as any other. Jose knew it would result in food and a place to stay, but for how long he did not know. Half of the young men who had taken that gamble had been returned home. But that was only half.

It took two days to cross the city. Jose ran out of food, drank water from alleyway spigots, and was chased by a gang of boys half his age. But he never faltered, because the closer he got, the more hope he felt that he might be one of the lucky ones. It was late afternoon when he finally made his way to the crossing, the setting sun reflecting off of the Rio Grande in waves of yellow and orange. Jose could see America, but he was still a world away.

A line of cars snaked back for nearly a mile as Jose walked along the crowded sidewalks. Beggars, shades of human beings, clung to vehicles whenever anyone opened up their window to try and help just one person. Jose saw a man with

no legs being drug behind a minivan, clinging to the bumper and crying as he screamed for food. Centered in humanity's weigh station, even though he was alone and only twelve years old, no one batted an eye.

As Jose made his way to the footbridge, signs in English and Spanish marked with ominous red lettering covered nearly every patch of earth. Jose could not read, but as the numbers of hopeful souls around him dwindled, he felt confident of the message.

A pair of drunken Americans stumbled before him, passports in their tainted hands. One of them looked back at Jose, but when he spoke in slurred words, Jose could give no reply. The American shrugged his shoulders before turning back to his friend.

Jose waited until the American's had crossed before taking his turn. The sun had dipped below the horizon, and the evening lights of the El Paso skyline began to kick on in waves of yellow and white. Jose fixed his gaze upon the tallest building he had ever seen as he began to walk. He did not look in front of him, only up at the unending sky. Closer and closer to the guards at the end of the footbridge, Jose ignored their calls. He focused only on the sound of his feet on the metal bridge and on the lights shining out, showing him the way. When he made it to the soldiers in their thick, bulletproof vests, Jose fell to his knees and begged for mercy.

Two days in, Jose tried to temper his hope. The guards on the bridge had known little Spanish, but Jose had been able to tell them enough to get them to take him into custody. A translator at the detention center had taken his name and his age. When he finished the questionnaire, he was given a change of clothing and the best meal he had even eaten.

The center was full of children. Although all of the occupants spoke Spanish, there was little dialogue among the hopeful prisoners. People banded together, keeping their circles tight. Since not everyone was going to get in, it was best to increase your odds.

Jose tried to start conversations with other boys, but besides their similar backgrounds, there was little to talk about. The only thing anyone wanted to discuss was what

happened next. That was a difficult topic, because anytime guards came and escorted out a waiting soul, the captive never returned.

One week later, after the cycle of life had begun to wear on itself, guards finally called upon Jose. Every morning he had showered, combed his hair, and brushed his teeth as clean as he could, believing that good impressions and wanting something bad enough would convince whoever he needed to let him stay in America. When the guard came to get him, Jose was ready to plea his case and enter his new home. He walked past the other immigrants, beaming as he pictured his new home.

The room Jose was taken to resembled the same one he had been questioned in on arrival. Jose waited until he was asked to take a seat, but sat down gladly as he prepared for what came next.

After fifteen minutes, an older woman Jose had not seen before came in with a slim folder. She dismissed the guard, and then greeted him in perfect Spanish. Her accent was so slight that Jose asked her if she was from outside the country, but the woman told him that she was not. She then looked at Jose with a glance he had seen before.

"Jose, I am here to inform you that your deportation papers have been processed and approved by a local judge. After our meeting, you will be placed on a bus, taken to the border, and turned over to Mexican authorities. Since you do not have a passport you will be processed and returned to your country of origin. I regret to inform you of this, but unfortunately, there is nothing we can offer you at this time."

Crushed, the deathblow sank. The slow cut digs deepest, and as Jose sat back in the chair, he was too broken to cry. The woman in front of him only looked at him for a moment before closing her folder. When she did, she motioned for the guard to reenter the room.

Jose was too defeated to act. He could have run, but where would he have gone. He had traveled across a continent, had risked everything to come to America, and was now being dismissed without regard.

The woman stood and made her way to the door, but as the guard came and placed his hand upon Jose's shoulder,

she stopped. Whether it was the years of denial or eons of ending dreams, whatever it was that broke through her shell, something caused the woman to turn. She looked back at Jose for a moment, considering what had led him to her.

"When you go home, what will you do? Will you stay with your family? You must know there is nothing better here."

Jose had given up, but as he listened to the woman's words, he considered her question. It only took him a moment to answer. It was the answer he had held his entire life.

"I have no family. I have no home. There is not one person in the entire world that loves me. Where I come from, I am less than an animal. You ask what I will do? What would you do?"

"What would you?"

ML Roberts

How You Won't Go Back

The first time you leave home—say you're eighteen and go to college no more than a day's drive from anyone you've ever known—you believe everything will be the same when you return. Your father will still work at the local plant, hunt deer every November, play poker Wednesday nights in the back of the union hall, wash both his truck and your mother's car every Saturday the weather allows. Your mother will set the table just the way she always has: you, the older brother, on your father's left; your left-handed brother to your father's right—their elbows in constant conflict. Your mother's baked beans will always have three strips of bacon fanning out across the top of their caramelized surface. There will be homemade dessert on the countertop. Dinner rules will never change. No arguing or under-table kicking. No belching or farting. Be on time or call to say you won't—and have a good reason. Always ask to be excused. Carry your plate to the kitchen.

The first trip home—say it was supposed to be Christmas break but you were homesick and used a month's spending money to get a bus ticket for Thanksgiving—proves you're right. Your room is as you left it. You can still lie at the foot of your bed and watch the moon travel across the sky. Your sheets smell like your mother's homemade lavender sachet—not like the ones on your dorm bed you wash every other week—at best—while you read unassigned novels in the Laundromat. Your clock radio is still set for 8:30. Your dog snuggles at your feet the way he has since you were twelve. If you're not up by ten o'clock, someone will throw open your door, call you something worse than a sleepy head, and the smell of sausage frying and real-brewed coffee will get you up like nothing else can.

A few days later you are throwing clothes in your bag while wiping tears from your cheeks and vowing to come back here to live in something less than four years. No matter what. Maybe with summer school, even sooner. You catch the last bus back to school on Sunday evening, lingering with your

dad on the loading platform until there's no choice, not caring whether you get a seat to yourself. You depart the bus some hours later with not only a stiff neck, but with hands and feet so cold you wonder if they'll ever be warm again.

Two weeks later your dad surprises you by sending a round-trip plane ticket for holiday break. The return ticket is for late January. Your insides surprise you. They're unsettled. You had been considering a ski trip you've been invited on by a dorm buddy. His family has a condo north of Saratoga Springs. They go there every New Year's and stay at least a month. Your dad's note says he can hardly wait to watch bowl games with you. The Rose Parade. Like old times. You tell your buddy you're sorry. Maybe next time. You fail to mention you've only downhilled once before. For a weekend. A senior trip. Maybe his is a world you really don't know and aren't sure you can handle. Besides, you've not gotten around to discussing the cost. All of a sudden, you feel tremendous relief.

By finals' week you are caught up in the excitement of the holidays. Before leaving you buy gifts with your school's insignia for your mother, dad, brother and even Aunt Sherene. Have them wrapped at the campus bookstore. Arrange them in a shopping bag you'll carry on the plane. Imagine your entrance into the airport: your parents and brother waiting at the gate—smiling—tears in your mother's eyes. Your dad will hug you the way he did before you boarded the bus. Your brother will talk a mile a minute about the high school's basketball tournament. He'll have bought you tickets as a Christmas present. You'll call high school friends and it'll be like old times: afternoon pool at Joe's bar; cards and beer late into the night at whatever kitchen will have you; a holiday dance in the school gym (dates optional). And, most of this will happen just as you imagine it. So much for Thomas Wolfe's predictions, thank you very much English Lit 103.

But by mid-January your mother wants to know what's bothering you. She notes you seem unusually cranky—"edgy" is the word she uses. Says you sleep too much. Why don't you make a date with that girl who used to call you last year? You make yourself smile as you tell her everything is fine. Give her a big hug to prove to both of you that you're right. You watch

slalom races until your dad comes home. He gets himself a beer; brings you a soda without asking; settles into the chair you were sitting in until a few minutes before; searches for an NBA offering without saying a word. You start to object to what feels like an outright disregard for your feelings, but think better of it. Instead, you start counting the days 'til it's time to go back to school, sometimes use it as part of an exercise to put you to sleep. You count backwards: 17, 15, 14, 12, 9 . . . . Wonder if your ticket can be changed without incurring a fine. Without hurt feelings at home. Decide to check it out.

You call an old girlfriend—say the one your mother mentioned. She's home from school as well. From one of the Seven Sisters. You can't remember which one and you've not thought about her in months. The girlfriend you *don't* call broke your heart and married your best friend. You and the once-best friend haven't spoken since June.

You and "Seven Sisters" plan a date. You arrive at her parents' door 7:00 sharp, as agreed. She's ready at 7:20. Previews started at 7:15. You pay her way. She expects it. Spend more money on popcorn and soda than the movie costs. She fails to acknowledge this rather significant fact. Or thank you. The two of you sit in your dad's truck out in front of her house until the pauses in conversation are longer than the conversation, itself. She's wearing a gold locket on a heavy chain. When she thinks you're not looking, she fingers it and smiles to herself. You don't ask. You'll not call her again, even though you say you will.

Three days before you leave, the weather—which has been one long and dull shower of rain and snow all mixed together—finally breaks. One-on-one with your brother, then some guys from down the street, does your tensed-up shoulders a load of good—not to mention your ego: the guys are three years younger and you run them in the ground. Your mother smiles relief when you come home soaking wet and smelling of sweat. You finish filling out the application for summer work with the local Parks & Rec that's been lying on your desk since before you came home. Yes, the old hometown is looking pretty good again.

But, on the day to leave, you're up at 5:30 a.m. for an eleven

o'clock flight. The sky is pitch dark. No moon to brighten it. You're packed by seven. Read the newspaper through twice. Your mother bakes ginger snaps for you to take with you. There was a time when they were your favorite, but these days you'd much rather have plain old chocolate chip. You decide to keep that tidbit to yourself. You insist on going to the airport a full two hours before the flight. It is a fifteen-minute drive. Your parents stay until the assigned seat number is called. You jump up immediately, relieved that your seat is one of the first to be called.

By spring of your junior year, you know what you want to be: a marine biologist or, maybe, an oceanographer or, perhaps, you'll join the merchant marines or Green Peace. The application for the GREs is taken care of and the date of the exam is circled in red on your wall calendar. You've spent months gathering college catalogues all along the west coast. Mail is sent directly to your parents' address while you work all summer on a fishing boat off the coast of Maine. Twice a month, your mother puts all the catalogues in an envelope and mails them to general delivery, care of whatever village you're near—say Calais or Machias or maybe Boothbay Harbor. She complains you're choosing a life that's too complicated, but you know she's relieved to have a reason to keep track of your whereabouts. In the little spare time there is, you reread Jacques Cousteau's biography, imagine yourself a member of his research team. Check to see if his programs are still active—even in his absence.

When finally you have the opportunity to spend a couple weeks at home, your dad complains he never sees you. Your mother's smile dims a little more each day. By now, you know her tears can be counted on hours before each leaving. You say you're sorry it's not possible to stay longer. Promise next visit will be different. Then stay out until 4:00 a.m. the last two nights at home. Sleep in 'til noon.

Before returning home for Thanksgiving break, you purchase a roundtrip plane ticket for Miami, where your soon-to-be-alma mater is playing in the Orange Bowl. The two game tickets that took eight hours of standing in line to

get your hands on are now in safekeeping with a pretty premed major from Baltimore who has added both Stanford and UCLA to her shortlist in lieu of Johns Hopkins. You've added San Diego and San Louis Obispo to yours. Guilt sets in. These were the very tickets that years ago you'd hope to buy for your dad if, ever, State made it big.

Miss Someday-to-be-a-Doctor celebrates the high season—or did she say low?—in Fort Lauderdale, at her retired grandparents' winter home every year. No exceptions. Her family has sent word at least a half-dozen times since October that everyone can hardly wait to meet you and would have you stay nowhere else but with them for as long as you're in Florida. Of course, you and their future "doctordaughter" can have the guesthouse to yourselves. It goes without saying, though they're saying it repeatedly. You figure a minimum of five days with your parents is necessary to avoid hard feelings. Imagine how proud your dad will be when he invites his union buddies to gather 'round his TV during the big game in hopes of getting a glimpse of you in the crowd. As you go over how you'll tell him that you are cutting the customary holiday visit short, you are in your apartment bedroom and looking into the small wooden-framed mirror over the dresser. All you can mange is a weak, self-pacifying smile. You hope he doesn't ask what the pretty premed's last name is or what her father does for a living—as he doesn't (the family made its fortune in WW II sugar—probably black market), or whether he belongs to the Knights of Columbus like every man in both your mother's and father's families do. (On further consideration, perhaps it'd be better not to mention the premed student.)

GRE scores arrive the same day finals end. You rush to your apartment—having moved from the dorm long ago—to have privacy while opening the half-glued, half-perforated edges of the envelope. Before one side is torn away, you decide it's better to wait until you're on the plane going home for the holidays. On the plane you decide to wait to open the envelope at dinner so your parents can share what is fully expected to be the key milestone that propels your future into motion. After all, it's the future all of them have wanted for you. Right? Right.

The scene at the airport is like all the ones before. Your dad stands at the window near the gate with your mother behind and slightly to his left. She waves the moment she sees you and he nods ever so slightly before throwing his arms around you with the strongest bear hug he's capable of delivering. Your brother, who still lives at home and attends the local community college while working swing shift at the plant, is waiting at the baggage entrance with the family's car running. He talks you through the entire drive home as though you're new to your own hometown. Points out the pool hall. Gives directions to the new running track behind the community college. Says he's made plans for you—just as he always has—and it's at the moment he mentions the area high school basketball tournament you know you should have prepared these dear persons—the ones you've loved more than anyone else in the world until a few short weeks ago—for the changes you've made for their and your holidays. Instead, you smile meekly and make noncommittal grunts under your breath and figure you'll think clearer once past a good long nap in your old room. You spend the afternoon nursing a headache with aspirin, ice and a pillow over your head.

At dinner—say it's one of those cornbread, beans and kale offerings that are never served to company—you are surprised to see five plates set. Your mother motions you toward the usual seat as your brother ushers in a small, brown-haired girl who looks to be no more than seventeen and who bears some resemblance to a pigtailed and freckled kid who used to hang around the neighborhood. Her name escapes you. You note she knows where to sit without being directed. Then, you notice her stomach is disproportionately large for the rest of her body. Your father uncharacteristically cups his hands for prayer as he lowers himself into his chair. You flinch in surprise and glance toward your mother, who has lowered her head while tears stream down her cheeks. Yet again. You tell yourself you're starting to reimprint the image of her as though she sits on the other side of a rain-soaked windowpane. Immediately your stomach aches. Cynicism, you've heard, eventually settles in one's bowels. You feel your sphincter valves involuntarily tighten.

"Oh, dear Lord in heaven," your father begins, "thank you

for giving our parish Father Patrick, who has so dutifully carried out your wishes by blessing the marriage of our son Daniel and his lovely bride-to-be Jeannene, the wedding mass to be held on the twenty-ninth of December, this year of our Lord, the first Saturday . . . Bless . . . our firstborn . . . who will carry out his duties as his brother's . . . ."

You do the math. Count the number of days from Christmas to the first Saturday. One day before the Orange Bowl. Four days shaved from Florida sun. From a guest house for two. From the beginning of *your* future. They could have warned you! And then you become aware of your brother's eyes staring at you. Of his reddened face searching for some sign of *your* recognition. Of your mother's disappearance from the table. At that moment Jeannene is only a blur, an amorphous mass whose shape will sharpen and change the configuration of this family. *Your* family. Forever. You try your hardest to give your brother what you believe he wants. What you would need were you in his place. Yet, your voice is hollow with congratulations. Your handshake a poor substitute for an embrace.

In your room you peel back the thin address sheet that conceals the GRE scores that determine your future that now feels to belong only to you. They're high. High enough to get serious attention from a Berkeley or a Stanford or even a MIT, if that's what one wanted. You feel as if you have crossed a line. Perhaps it is a line only you can discern, that is only perceptible to those who *do* cross over it, who are *not* left behind. And the persons around the table? Have you left them? Are you irretrievably gone from the lives they live here? Are they even remotely aware?

As you dial Area Code 954, you wonder whether you're allowed to make long distance calls from home without asking permission. The question has never come up in the almost-four years you've been away. You decide not to ask. The woman who answers the phone has a voice that could just as easily be from Boston as it is from a southern beach. This fact—your impression—is comforting, oddly. She recognizes your voice without your identifying yourself. Tells you they are ever so anxious for you to join their festivities. That they want you present for the maiden voyage of their new boat.

That there's still time to plan an announcement party. At least an informal one. Could your parents come down as well? You tell her you'll ask them. You know you won't.

You pour out your guts to the pretty pre-med student soon-to-be-fiancée whose existence you plan not to reveal to anyone who'll attend your brother's wedding. You tell her now is not the time. That it wouldn't be fair to your brother. That you must stay for the wedding. And, of course, she says she understands, but in her next uttering she offers to leave the sun, to come to the gray skies of the Northeast, to stand for your brother and his bride, to use her presence as a way to introduce herself as a concerned member of the family. You feel your shoulders tighten and your voice strain to maintain its current tone. Tell her you hear your mother calling. You'll call her right back. These words constitute the first lie you've knowingly told her.

And there you are. Feeling shaky and off-balance. Straddling these two disparate worlds—incompatible as they are. And it is then that you realize neither holds your future.

Bill Harper

Eastside Story

On the eastside of Los Angeles, City of Angels, *Los Estados Unidos,* Juan Mendoza bought a house and prayed to the Blessed Virgin that his family would be accepted. He was a successful man, owner of Mendoza Produce and The Mendoza Trucking Company, but he was fearful that he would find a place for his *niños* in a world of landscaped yards, swimming pools and cookie-cutter houses. This was east of East L.A. This was a promised land called the suburbs where children played in the middle of leafy streets and block parties included everyone who loved the opportunities this great nation would provide. It was the 1960s and anything was possible . . .

One afternoon, during the summer I turned seven, a football game broke out in my backyard. Both the Mendoza brothers, Jack and John, plus the sisters Muriel and Anna were there. Jack was the quickest halfback in the neighborhood. With more coordination than any of us kids, he made walking look like something most people should practice. Nobody invited them, they just came over. We had long passes skimming the lower branches of the trees, great catches at the 50-yard line, or what my family called the sprinkler, and high-pitched screams my older brothers found exciting.

Anna was cool and feral and the youngest of her clan. Her small white teeth fell out of her smile, and the fierceness of her brothers' protection said it all. She had brown arms and loped around like an antelope and couldn't have cared less that there were rules to the game. Her brother John was the quarterback with his big hands and warrior face. He could toss a spiral to Jack who'd take it in stride or float a softy to Anna who would've had better luck catching a butterfly. Muriel played center. My brother Bart liked touching her, pushing her back, while my other brother Blaine preferred rushing John, chasing something only he could see. And then there was Jack, my new friend at school, juking me out of my

shorts as he crashed into the camellia bushes for a touchdown.

I heard the garage door lift, the car drive in, and my dad walked out on the playing field. He was a regular Joe, never owned a briefcase, wore his hair in a crew cut and regretted that he'd voted for Goldwater. I doubt he'd ever seen so many Mexicans in one place before. He threw down his coat, sprinted right just as Jack made his cut, and intercepted John's pass at the azalea and turned it up field for a touchdown.

I was ecstatic. The Harringtons had just beaten the mighty Mendozas. I watched as they filed out through the gate, laughing a whole lot, but I had to think they were wondering about that ringer who crashed the game at the very last second. Anna turned back and waved to me with her tiny hand, or maybe she was just grasping at the wind.

John had big hands and a warrior face and would be the first to discover guns, though my brother Blaine wasn't far behind. Later when John ran with *Los Rio Vatos,* he was well-known in the neighborhoods for his fearlessness when challenged. The Mendozas lived a block down the street from our house and every Fourth of July while my family played with sparklers and Piccolo Petes and Smokey Joes, they commandeered a traffic island in front of their house and launched sky rockets into the night sky and mildly threatened their nearest neighbors with an artillery barrage of firecrackers, cherry bombs and M-80s.

I remember Bart and Blaine laughing and tossing their sparklers as they ran off down the street when the first explosions boomed overhead. I took off in pursuit, but my mother grabbed me by the arm and said, "Not for you, Cy." I was the youngest and her good intentions were that I should be protected from the world beyond the gate where little boys grow up. Hazy smoke hung over the street intermittingly lit by the flaring rockets launched by the Mendozas, and later I would wonder if my brother Blaine saw such sights on a grander scale before he died in a jungle in Vietnam. Phosphorous flashes illuminated a wild scene of gypsy kids and drunken adults and the silhouettes of my two brothers as they disappeared into the divide between the Mendoza's home and ours.

Who would've guessed that Jack would remain a small little boy in a small little boy's body. When we were both seven, I was an awkward, spindly kid and Jack was lean and muscled and the quickest halfback in the neighborhood. Later, as all of us grew, Jack topped out at about five feet four, almost as if he were trapped in that little boy's body while the rest of us grew out of ours. As his prestige in sports faded due to his diminutive size, Jack began to withdraw and found that his true talent lay in stunting all growth indiscriminately, forsaking schoolwork, social interaction or any form of productivity. By the time we entered high school—which Jack rarely attended—he had a *cholo* look, with baggy chinos and a shirt buttoned up to the neck. I'd see him around, standing on street corners with guys I didn't know, and when he saw me he'd just flick his cigarette ash and give me a chin nod, but no words were ever spoken.

Of course, the Mendoza family and mine would become forever intertwined because Bart and Muriel were sweethearts. Both were serious about school and life in general and found something in each other that elevated their union above the insecurities and growing pains so typical of their peers. They were sweethearts in junior high. They were sweethearts in high school. When they attended L.A. State, they drove to school together everyday and eventually married after their junior years when Muriel became pregnant. My oldest brother Bart would become a high school geometry teacher and a much-admired varsity football coach at a school on the farthest edges of the San Gabriel Valley. He had discovered profound similarities shared by tangents, co-tangents, isosceles triangles and the various offenses and defenses he designed for the boys he was nurturing in the classroom and on the field. Muriel taught Spanish to privileged white girls at an exclusive Catholic school, and had she not become a Harrington would have had the only Mexican surname among the students and faculty.

Naturally, my childhood infatuation with Anna was doomed before I even reached puberty because both families simply knew that Bart and Muriel would last forever. It was an unspoken rule that we could be playmates, certainly friends, but the reality was that Anna would someday become my

sister-in-law, and I suspected my parents had subconsciously decided that one Mexican in the family was enough.

My brother Blaine died in a jungle in Vietnam, and I think that John with his big hands and warrior face was partially responsible because he called Blaine a *gabacho* and a wannabe and wouldn't let him cruise with *Los Rio Vatos*. John drove a metal-flake blue '57 Chevy that rumbled a warning every time he came down our street. It was a low-rider for show out on the boulevard, and Blaine thought it was the coolest thing going seeing as he'd be taking turns behind the wheel of the family station wagon once he got his driver's license.

John was tough and dangerous and lived in a world where a lingering stare or misconstrued words were grounds for reprisal. He was quiet and shy and never had a reputation as a bully or someone who was looking to pick a fight. Everyone knew this, but they also knew that John wasn't afraid to let the fight come to him. Blaine found this exciting.

I remember sitting at the dinner table one night and my mother asking Blaine what he wanted for Christmas.

"A gun."

"Your father has never owned a gun in his life."

"He was in the army."

"And I haven't touched one since," said my dad. "Besides, I've never been hunting. Don't know the first thing about it."

"John has one. He showed it to me."

My dad gave my mom a look and said, "What the Mendozas do is none of our business. Stay away from John."

"They aren't hunters," said Bart.

"There won't be any guns in this house," said my mom as Blaine pushed the peas around on his plate.

Anna was a grade behind me, and by the time she entered high school I rarely saw her. I ached to belong to a social strata that always seemed to elude me because I lived beyond the boundaries of its geographical realm. These were the kids who lived by the country club, north of a main artery that delineated the size of your house and the quality of your clothes. The boys wore button-down shirts and loafers and

the girls wore sweaters revealing their proudly emerging breasts. Some of the girls had long, straight hair like folk singers, but most wore it up and stiff and for many years I was confused by the subtle erotic differences between perfume and hairspray. Fortunately, I was college material so all the right kids knew me because I shared their classrooms and could hold my own playing sports. Anna was neither a gifted student nor an aspiring social climber, and she all but disappeared into a student population that resembled a caste system allowing few opportunities for upward mobility. I would see her walking home from school with girls I didn't know and sometimes she'd wave, or maybe she was just grasping at the wind.

Arturo Galindo was the first boy at our high school to have long hair and wear wire-rimmed glasses. During our junior year he started an after-school *Chicano* Studies club supervised by a young history teacher named Maria Lopez. They studied the works of Mexican artists and poets, followed the struggles of the farm workers and had heated discussions about a mythical land named *Atzlán*. Studious as he was, Arturo's ticket to college would undoubtedly be football because he was a rugged linebacker already being recruited by a number of major universities. He was so good our varsity football coach even changed the rules for him. Back then, all the football players wore buzz cuts and when Arturo refused to cut his hair claiming that it was part of his warrior heritage from the blood of the Indians that inhabited his family tree, the head coach capitulated fearing that he'd lose the best linebacker in the league and maybe all of Southern California. Arturo might very well have become a big-time football star one day had he not suffered from a broken heart and a wound to his right foot that caused him to limp for the rest of his life.

Arturo lived in a mini *barrio* with Mexican markets, taco stands and lawnmower repair shops defining the borders. His cousins Hector and Salvador were the de facto rulers of the neighborhood because they were the toughest guys in the notorious *La Sangra*. In that part of town, no one sold dope without *La Sangra's* permission. When fights broke out

among the locals, *La Sangra* settled them, meting out harsh punishment for the perpetrators. Their respect was total, but no one confused them with peacemakers.

Though Hector and Salvador ruled the neighborhood, they never pressured their cousin to join them. Arturo was one of their own and his status as a football player, a scholar and an activist made them proud, and they watched over him with a fierce loyalty that could only be described as a love for something they could never aspire to themselves.

I had no idea that Arturo Galindo and Anna Mendoza even knew each other until the day the squad cars and the ambulance screamed down our street and pulled up in front of the Mendoza house. Seeing all the activity, I ran down the street, and because the front door was wide open, walked right in to find Anna hysterical with tears while Arturo held her in his big linebacker arms. I was wild with fear that something might have happened to my brother Bart because he spent almost as much time in the Mendoza home as he did in ours, so I rushed past them and down the hall to the back bedroom. One of the cops grabbed me, but not before I saw Jack lying on the floor with a bloody syringe still stuck in his vein and his lips and chin covered in vomit and spit.

When the cop led me out, Arturo looked at me with moist eyes and patted Anna's heaving back as he said, "Go home, Cy, this is no place for you." Later that night I thought how strange it was to see Arturo Galindo, whose bad-ass cousins Hector and Salvador ran with *La Sangra*—the sworn enemies of John Mendoza and *Los Rio Vatos*—comforting Anna who neither looked at me nor acknowledged my presence. I thought about how grief can distort your face and squeeze out the tears but couldn't mask the beautiful girl Anna had become. And I thought about Jack, who at one time had been the quickest halfback in the neighborhood, who had so much coordination he made walking look like something most people should practice, and how the only one he could never outrun was himself.

The social undercurrents of our school were changing with the times, though they often went unnoticed until certain events brought them into focus. Anna Mendoza would be the

beneficiary of one such event. Every year each of the classes would nominate a girl to the court of the Spring Fling and one of these girls would be elected queen. Of course, this wasn't exactly a model of democracy because the disenfranchised kids wouldn't participate and the most popular girls were always nominated and eventually won. Our student body was approximately one-third Mexican, and though Anna was demure and uninvolved in most school activities, the Mexican students easily recognized her uncommon beauty and, with the power of an underground movement, successfully nominated her to represent her class. You didn't have to be a genius in political science to guess what happened. The usual suspects split the popular vote, while Anna won handily among the Mexican students and those who thought it was time someone from outside the most elite circles deserved to win.

Anna was simply radiant in a white dress that perfectly complemented her brown shoulders and thin neck and lush black hair, yet seemed slightly embarrassed by all the attention and the weight of the crown on her head. Her date was Arturo Galindo, who beamed at the sight of Anna's coronation, but seemed absurdly out of place wearing a ruffled shirt with a string tie, a western-cut jacket that might have belonged to his father and trousers that covered the tops of his pointy-toed boots. My self absorption was such that I completely missed the significance of Arturo and assumed that Anna had been hard pressed to find an escort to a school function she normally wouldn't have attended.

When the dancing started and all the kids were changing partners, I saw Anna standing alone next to the bandstand swaying to the music of a slow song.

"Will you dance with me?"

Without answering she took my hand and led me out onto the floor and, because it was a slow dance, reached her arm up around my neck and laid the side of her face on my chest, my chin resting against the top of her head. I noticed that got the attention of some of the kids, but that old confusion about perfume and hairspray kicked in and we glided around like no one else was there. When the music ended she smiled at me and said, "I knew you would be the first one, Cy." I

was puzzled by her comment and almost asked her what she meant, but that's when Tom Berriman cut in and said, "May I dance with the queen?"

As I watched Tom Berriman take his turn with her, and then a whole lot of other guys I called friends, it seemed perfectly natural that a boy with Tom's easy social grace would welcome the outsider queen to her new place within the hierarchy. And I also spotted Arturo Galindo, standing alone at the edge of the dance floor, silent, steadfast in his odd western getup, waiting like a chauffeur for the queen of the ball.

The same summer that Jack overdosed and a Marine came to our house to tell my mother that her son had died in a jungle in Vietnam, Tom Berriman became a part of my crowd, or, to put it more accurately, allowed me to become a part of his. Tom was well-liked because he genuinely seemed to like everyone in return. From the time he entered high school he was a natural politician, stopping to shake hands with all the guys, smiling at all the girls regardless of their plainness or beauty, and making small talk with the kids he barely even knew.

I'd had classes with Tom and knew him well enough, but he lived on the posh side of town and our paths rarely crossed outside of school. So it came as a slight surprise that summer when he started calling me up and inviting me to the beach with him and some of his buddies. Soon I found myself going to pool parties in lushly landscaped backyards and necking in the back seat of cars with a popular girl named Jan Dexter. It seemed odd that Tom liked to hang out at our modest house when he lived in a giant white colonial that vaguely resembled Mount Vernon, but that was just Tom, comfortable with anyone, his friendship genuine and as easy to grasp as a handshake. Or so I thought.

Like all schools, ours had numerous cliques and their boundaries were often defined by social clubs that weren't really fraternities or sororities, but in many ways operated as such. The boys clubs were loosely formed and contributed little to campus life or one's social standing. The girls clubs

were a whole other deal entirely. When a freshman girl pledged a club her social rank was clearly established and would remain her calling card from that moment on. The Pipers had long been the elite social club and destinies were fulfilled by a birthright of popularity, beauty, wealthy parents and various intangibles that only the members were privy to and understood.

Anna Mendoza had never been affiliated with any club for the simple reasons that she was an outsider and a Mexican. But a sea change had occurred by virtue of Anna's becoming queen of the Spring Fling, and The Pipers weren't about to let this rising star get snatched up by a rival club intent on competing with them. One evening while parked in front of the Dexter house, Jan pulled my hands from beneath her sweater and said, "We're going to ask Anna to join The Pipers."

"Come again?"

"The girls want to make Anna Mendoza a Piper."

I shook my head. "That's nonsense. She'd never do it."

"It would be good for us, show we're inclusive and stand for something."

"C'mon, Jan, are you all so conceited that you expect someone you've shunned to suddenly see you as a benefactor?"

"That's why they wanted me to ask you."

"I'm not getting into this."

"You know her better than any of us do."

"I think that's the point."

"It was Tom Berriman's idea."

I laughed and said, "Get off it. Tom Berriman couldn't give a shit who belongs to The Pipers," but as soon as I'd said it I knew I was wrong.

The day we buried Blaine was blazing hot and the smog made your eyes and lungs burn. The Mendozas and other friends and neighbors came over after the funeral and my mother served sandwiches and icy pitchers of lemonade and sweating cans of beer, and my father drank enough to keep his demons at bay at least for a few hours. As this sad little gathering wound down, Anna took me by the arm and said, "I've been asked to join The Pipers when school starts in the fall."

"Oh that's just swell."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"My brother just died."

"So did mine," said Anna. "There's enough grief to go around, Cy."

I looked into her dark eyes and I could see tiny fissures of hope and damage that I'd never noticed before. "I'm sorry. What are you going to do?"

"I'm not going to be sad anymore."

"I meant The Pipers."

"I told them I'd be honored."

The very next day Tom Berriman showed up at my house to pay his respect and offer condolences for our loss. Later Tom and I shot baskets in the driveway, but after a while he simply stopped and bounced the ball to me and said, "Let's go over to Anna's house and see if she's home."

I had seen this coming, but still it tore at my heart to forfeit my privileged position in Anna's life to a new crowd of kids who would only try to change her to fit their needs. And yet, Tom was a kind and decent fellow and it pleased me that he saw the tender sweetness and natural beauty of Anna just as I had back when she was a little girl, so I tossed the basketball over the fence and into the backyard and said, "Why not?"

As summer was ending and the football team reported to camp, Arturo Galindo came to practice with a heavy heart and a wildness in his eyes. Already known for his considerable skill as a linebacker, his tackles against the first-string offense were unusually vicious so the coaches advised him to hold back a little, fearing he would injure his own teammates. But Arturo seemed incapable of containing his anger and when fights broke out on the practice field the coaches withheld him from the scrimmages and told him to save it for the games. On Friday nights Arturo roamed the defensive backfield, recklessly flying into oncoming blockers and runners at full speed and on more than a few occasions knocking them unconscious. Some of the opposing coaches complained that Arturo was a dirty player, but all of it was quickly forgotten when Arturo landed on the first team all-state and received a scholarship offer to play football at UCLA.

That summer, Tom and I had been stopping by the Mendoza home on a regular basis. One day while we were sitting on Anna's front porch drinking sodas, Tom stood up and said, "Cy, we're going for a ride. See you later." By the time school started in the fall, Tom Berriman would be squiring Anna to all the football games and dances and exclusive parties thrown by The Pipers.

While I watched my two friends drive off, John Mendoza's metal-flake blue '57 Chevy rumbled into the driveway. John didn't live at home anymore so I rarely saw him, and when I did he usually just nodded my way and went about his business. This time he got out of his car, watched Tom make the turn at the end of the street, and walked over to me.

"Tell your friend he better watch it," he said in a voice that sounded tired and sad.

"You don't like him dating Anna?"

"It's not me he needs to worry about," said John, and then he turned and went into the house.

Tom Berriman and Arturo Galindo came from different worlds and for the most part it wasn't difficult for them to avoid each other. Then, on a Friday night during Christmas break, fate conspired with jealousy to produce a confrontation that no one really wanted. Anna and Jan were preparing for The Piper's annual Christmas party on Saturday night, so Tom and I went to the movies and afterwards drove to Bob's Drive-In, a hangout favored by most of the kids at our school. Everyone went to Bob's because it had an enormous parking lot out back. Some of the kids brought six packs of beer with them and sometimes cans were passed from one window to the next.

Tom drove a convertible Mustang, and because the night was clear and mild, we had the top down as we sat in the lot behind Bob's. There were only two other cars in the lot, and just as we were getting ready to leave a beer can crashed into the back seat of Tom's car.

"What the fuck?" said Tom.

We both looked over at a black and white, lowered Impala with the back door open, and a moment later Arturo Galindo stepped out and leaned up against the side of the car.

Tom stared back and you could tell he was mad, but you could also see that he was thinking that there must be some rational way to handle the situation. A look of resignation passed over his face and he opened his door and said, "I'll be right back."

"Let it go, Tom."

"Stay here. This isn't about you, Cy."

"He's been drinking."

"Arturo's a good guy. I can talk to him." And with that Tom started across the parking lot toward Arturo just as Hector and Salvador Galindo climbed out of the Impala. Tom had his hand extended, as usual thinking that a handshake could solve just about anything, even the festering meanness resulting from a broken heart. Arturo punched him in the face and kicked him in the balls and when Tom hit the pavement Hector stomped him in the kidneys. I burst out of the Mustang and ran toward Tom, but I would be no match for the Galindo brothers that night. Salvador flicked me to the ground, kicked me over onto my back and held me down with his foot. I laid there helplessly listening to Tom's grunts and moans while Arturo and Hector punched and kicked Tom, blood spraying from his nose and lips.

And that's when I heard a familiar rumble and a car pulled into the lot. Salvador stepped away from me, and Arturo and Hector joined him, leaving Tom crumpled on the ground in a pool of piss and blood.

John Mendoza slowly got out of his blue metal-flake '57 Chevy and, as I sat back up on my knees, I could see his warrior face and a shiny black gun in one of his big hands.

But the Galindos didn't back down. "You let your sister be this white boy's *puta*," said Hector.

"*Chinga tu madre*," said John as he slowly raised the gun and pointed it at Hector's face.

Arturo then stepped in front of his cousins and said, "He deserved it, John. Look what the *gabachos* have done to Anna, hanging around with her fancy friends, forgetting who she is. Soon they'll get bored with the poor little Mexican girl."

"Anna can do what she wants. Now get the fuck out of here."

"You're a pussy, John," said Salvador, "you ain't going to shoot nobody."

Arturo stepped in front of his cousins just as John lowered his gun toward the pavement and fired, the bullet hitting Arturo square in the top of his right foot.

Juan Mendoza died in his sleep at the age of ninety-three. He was sitting in his favorite chair where everyday he took his afternoon *siesta*, his head slightly tilted to one side, his hands neatly folded in his lap. It looked as though he'd simply gone to sleep.

Juan had seen his share of tragedy during his life. His son Jack, once the quickest halfback in the neighborhood had died with his arm tied off with a length of rubber tubing and a needle stuck in his vein. His other son John had been incarcerated in state prison for seven years after shooting his future brother-in-law in the right foot. Yet the small suburb Juan had moved his family to back in the 1960s had also provided his children with some brightness and success they might not have found elsewhere. After prison, John went to work for the family business, at first driving trucks and eventually becoming general manager. Now, at forty-seven, John was the president of The Mendoza Produce and Trucking Company. Juan's daughter Muriel had married her childhood sweetheart Bart, and the two of them were respected educators and had presented the old man with the three grandchildren he adored. And his daughter Anna was married to a criminal defense attorney with a big heart that once had been broken, who took on numerous *pro bono* cases for indigents who would otherwise languish within the California penal system.

I always believed that John intended to miss, but missed so badly that he actually shot Arturo Galindo in the right foot. I could see it on John's face and in the sad way he watched the paramedics load Tom Berriman and Arturo Galindo into the ambulance.

At Juan Mendoza's funeral I was standing with Bart and Muriel beneath a giant sycamore, the sun dappling the leaves and the grass with a brightness that made your eyes hurt. When the ceremony ended, John Mendoza and Anna and Arturo Galindo passed me on the way to their car, and I watched as he placed his arms around Anna and Arturo,

cupping their shoulders in his big hands. Arturo moved slowly with his now-familiar limp, and Anna turned to wave, or maybe she was just grasping at the wind.

Terry Engel

Childhood Revisited

Evenings after supper, before TV time, before lights-out, my mother and I walk the streets of her neighborhood. One circuit on the outer block makes 1.1 miles—I clocked it on the odometer back in high school. Back then I ran every day. Six, eight, ten laps—it didn't matter. I was fast and could run forever and I only stopped out of boredom, never because I was tired or in pain or out of breath. My hair flew behind me. My feet weightless. I just felt fast. I don't run anymore because of my back, my knees, my wind. Now, when I move, I feel like a fat man dancing: no rhythm, no grace, arms bent and shuffling from one foot to the other. I am a fat man dancing. Sucks to be me.

I look for my face in the mirror, look for the kid who dreamed of becoming an Olympic marathoner. He's not there. My mental picture of myself stopped aging in my thirties, so I expect something smooth—veinless, unwrinkled skin, thin face, and blonde, thinning hair. Now I look at myself and I wonder whose skin I'm wearing.

After moving back home to my mother's house, she and I fell into a daily routine: Breakfast and the paper, yard work in the mornings, house work in the afternoons, television while waiting for supper. I brought a table saw and other tools for special projects. The rest of the day I've already told you about.

When I was ten years old my family moved into a brand new house in a brand new neighborhood, and my mother has never left it. There were empty lots and new houses going up all over, and woods and fields and ponds where now there are only more houses. I wore that neighborhood like a favorite ball cap. I knew every house on the block, every family, at least by name if not better. Where I used to live, up in Kentucky, where my wife lives now, I only know the names of the neighbors on either side of me, and no one on the street does more than wave or nod when they drive past, if even that.

When we walk, my mother sets a good pace and we don't talk. It's the same way we spend our days together, no talking.

Whatever project we're working on, whether it's trying to get the lawnmower cranked, assembling patio furniture, or cooking supper, she focuses all her attention on the object at hand like she's solving a puzzle. Sometimes she'll start up with a shock, as if waking from a dream, and ask me a question that seems to come out of nowhere. I wonder what random patterns led her there. "That dog Ginger we had," she blurts out, "used to watch television when it was on. You remember? How she'd look at the screen and prick her ears? She even walked away during commercials." And the other day, she said, out of nowhere, "Your grandmother had to go all the way to the Pope for permission to divorce your grandfather." Of course she meant my father's mother, since her family didn't believe in divorce. Other than that, and the obligatory "what do you want for supper," we haven't really talked in a long time. It's much safer.

We pass the Stack brothers old house, which looks naked without the trampoline. Davis's yard was where we played Roughhouse. Davis and I spent hours hiding behind the Patterson's fence to lob water balloons at passing cars and then make a getaway into the woods behind their house. Once, during a backyard campout, Davis and I stole milk from Mr. Clancy's house after the truck made its deliveries. We didn't know he was awake and so when he surprised us on the front porch we ran through backyard shadows while he rode his bicycle and flushed us down the street. We poured the milk in the Harper's swimming pool. Beth Sutter and some of her girl friends used to smoke on her carport when her parents were at work. That was about seventh grade. Virginia Slims. Beth stole them from her mother and she liked to smoke hers down past the word "slim," and she'd knock the ember off the butt and hand it to a boy, tell him, "I'm a virgin." We all snickered at whoever got the butt and wondered if what she said was true. One day in high school about forty boys gathered at Russ White's house to see Scott Paulson fight Wes Sparks because one of them had broken the other's CB antenna off his pickup. I can't remember who did the breaking, but I remember Wes's blood as Scott held him down in a chokehold and methodically punched his face with the other fist.

None of those people are around now. It's been over thirty

years since I left for college, and I haven't thought of any of them ten times since—not even Davis. It's just seeing the neighborhood again brings back memories.

My mother is shrinking on me as she gets old, curling up like a question mark and losing her hearing. She doesn't like to wear her hearing aid. Says it makes everything sound like she's in a drum. When she was in her fifties, her hair was dark and she stood half a foot taller. She was in her prime, while I was still close enough to being a kid that she hadn't yet lost her power over me.

When I came home from college one time—a grown man, I thought—I bought a six pack and set it in the refrigerator to chill. I heard her gasp when she opened the refrigerator. We sat down at the kitchen table where all family business was aired. She cried, asked me over and over what *she* had done wrong that I had turned to drinking. It obviously had to be her fault. I don't remember what made the incident go away. I'm sure I lied to her, promised to never drink beer again. I remember crying a bit too, seeing her cry. I thought I might have to ground myself—surrender my car keys—which always worked in high school, just to get her to let up on the guilt trip. The suspension never lasted more than a day or two. My dad would dangle the keys in front of me and I'd promise to "be good," and he'd go back to work and I'd go on about my business.

That time in college though, it took something out of me. She wouldn't let up. And so I never drank in front of her again. When I came home after that—and later with Cheryl and the kids—I kept an ice chest in the trunk and just slipped out of the house every hour or so.

We walk on in the growing darkness without talking. Air conditioning units and lawn mowers hum, parents call children in from the yard, and cicadas roar in the tall grass of the fields behind the row of houses. The air is still warm after the heat of the day, but cooling now. I'm thinking about television later on. TBS is running Clint Eastwood week, and my favorite movie of all time, *Unforgiven*, starts in a couple of hours.

We stop for a few minutes to chat with Debbie, a woman from my mother's church. I knew her in college and we went

out a few times before I moved away. I can't find the girl I knew in Debbie's face any more than I can find my own face in the mirror. She's gotten old too, with grown children. She tells me how wonderful it is that my work gives me free time in the summer to come home and help my mother with her projects. I let her believe what she wants to believe. I know my mother hasn't told anyone anything different. She probably wants to believe it herself. We say our goodnights and move on. My mother tells me that one of Debbie's kids is going to grad school somewhere. Another one is pregnant somewhere. I pretend to listen.

When we get back to the house I mix a couple of glasses of ice water and we sit on the patio and watch the lightning bugs flicker over the tall grass of the field behind my mother's house. Cattle used to graze back there, but now a new neighborhood is going in, a gated community, my mother tells me. "I bet they won't even look over the fence at us," she says. I don't really know why she cares, but I agree with her and stand up to go inside. She follows me into the living room while I turn on the television and settle in. She stands just behind and off to the side. I can feel her there in her silence.

"Sit down and watch the movie."

After a minute I turn and look at her. She's watching the screen, tapping an envelope against her leg. I think she hasn't heard and repeat the invitation, but she's ready for her shower, she replies. I turn back to the television, but she keeps standing there. When I look back she's staring at the front door, making a decision. Finally she goes to the patio door and slides the bolt home. Then she takes a padlock from a hook on the wall and locks us inside. She goes to the other doors in the house and I listen as she locks them all—the front door, the driveway, and finally the backyard door off the kitchen. The windows are already locked, but she checks them again anyhow. That's how we spent the first week together, putting in padlock hasps on all the doors and windows. One key opens all the locks, and it hangs from a stretchy keychain bracelet she wears, the kind shop girls carry so they can open display cases and cash registers.

"I'll be out in a few minutes," she says, standing beside me, still focusing on the TV. "I've got to wash my hair."

I nod.

"Enjoy your show."

"Okay," I say, and she gives me a pat on the shoulder before leaving. After a few minutes I hear water running through the pipes in the walls.

My mother sounds taller on the telephone.

When Cheryl called her, saying she was done with me, my mother climbed in her car and drove the nine hours to pick me up. She carried my bag out to the car because I was shaking too hard to hold it. She opened the door so I could lie across the back seat and leaned in to get a seat belt across me somehow. She sniffled and cleared her throat all the way back to her house. Every so often she'd dab at her eyes with a tissue. We only stopped for gas and once at a McDonalds for coffee and fries, but I was too sick to eat. At the time, I hadn't had solid food for days. My nutrition came in 5 liter boxes of chardonnay. Some days two or three boxes. My stomach felt like a wetted dishrag dipped in ground glass, then knotted. Sometimes when I opened my eyes I saw my father—twelve years dead—sitting in the passenger seat, talking to her. Once I heard him say, "It's in him and it's got to come out!" Another time I woke to panting and looked up to find my old yellow lab staring at me. His head was draped over the seat back and slobber dripped from his lips. When I reached out to pet him, he growled and I pulled my hand back and closed my eyes. I still remember the way that dog looked the day he ran himself to death chasing a deer in hundred degree heat. Skinny and trembling and wrung out, he staggered out of the woods after I'd hunted and called him for hours. I was still in college then, and I buried him beside a railroad that ran behind the house where I rented a room. I cried for days, drinking all the while.

I don't remember crashing the car into the tree, or walking home fourteen miles bleeding so bad from a gashed forehead that Cheryl screamed when I crawled into bed and woke her. I do remember stealing my son's pickup after Cheryl took away my keys to the other car. It seemed innocent enough: drive down to the liquor store and come right back, slip his keys back in his coat pocket, retreat to the garage where I kept an old TV set and all the old movies I'd recorded on VHS, drink

my wine. I'm pretty sure I swerved to miss a dog, but I took out a mailbox and about thirty yards of somebody's newly-sodded front yard before I got it back on the street. When I got home Tim was waiting for me. He squatted down and pulled a hunk of sod out of the wheel well, ran his finger along the mailbox dent, muttered something under his breath, and drove away. He'd called Cheryl later and told her he wasn't coming back until I checked myself into rehab.

"What about it?" Cheryl asked when she told me. She had come into the garage still wearing her Chili's T-shirt she wore to wait tables, her second job after teaching school all day. When I didn't answer right away she grabbed the wine box out of my hands and threw it on the concrete floor, then she stabbed it with the first sharp thing she could find, a foot long screwdriver. She punctured the box three or four times.

I watched the wine spread across the floor and pool in the corner. I knew where at least two more boxes, maybe three, were hidden.

"We can't afford seven thousand a month." It was a sore point, since I'd lost my job the year before.

"We can't not afford it," she said. "At least you didn't kill anybody this time."

"I missed a dog."

She looked at me then, and whatever she'd felt before—pity, fear, hatred, anger, exasperation, whatever—drained out of her face and left pure contempt. She flipped the screwdriver around so she was holding the blade and swung it like a club. She hit me in the head with the handle. I fell off my stool and felt my head bounce off the concrete. I lay there for what seemed forever, wondering if I would ever move my body again. My head felt heavy, like a jaw full of Novocain.

She stood there long enough to make sure she hadn't killed me. I sat up to vomit.

"Can you hear me?" she asked?

I nodded. I was too sick to look at her.

"Get out."

"What?"

"Take anything you want from the garage and go away. I won't have you around here anymore."

"Take what? A sleeping bag? A crescent wrench?"

"Take whatever it is you're drinking and go live in the woods with a pack of dogs like your grandfather did after your grandmother kicked his ass out. I've got your keys and I'm calling a locksmith right now." She started for the door and then stopped, turned around. She caught her breath and ran her wrist across her eyes, drying them with her sleeve. "One day I'm going to be walking downtown and I'm going to see one of those homeless guys that live under the bridge, and it's going to be you, and I'm going to finally understand how those people end up down there."

"That won't be me."

"It will" she said, tossing the screwdriver on the floor, "and it's going to make me feel guilty." She walked inside and locked me out of the house

A week later, as she was driving home from Chili's, she found me walking the streets in a thunderstorm. I don't remember that either, but I believed her when she told me later. She took me home and gave me dry clothes and tried to feed me, but as they say in AA, I hadn't hit rock bottom yet. That's when she called my mother to come get me.

My mother comes back into the room. She's wearing a light robe and her hair is damp. She glides past me, leaning over and brushing me with an almost inaudible sniff—the world's most reliable breathalyzer, my brother and I used to joke—and settles into the matching recliner. She reaches for the Bible on the table between us and opens it to the marker and begins to read.

On the movie I'm watching, Clint Eastwood plays an aging outlaw, a reformed drinker who once used whiskey to cover a multitude of sins, including "dynamiting the Rock Island railroad, killing innocent women and children." He's pretty pathetic at the beginning of the movie: He can't hit a tin can with a pistol so he brings out a shotgun and blows it off a stump. He's weak and sickly most of the time, wallowing with hogs trying to sort the sick from the whole. The only way to save his family, as he sees it, is to go "on a killing" for money. But when Gene Hackman beats him up, then tortures his best friend to death because Clint killed a "no-good cowboy who cut up a whore," he starts drinking whiskey again and grows

strong. He rides into town in the pouring rain and cleans house. He kills the saloon owner who "decorated" his front porch with the body of the tortured man. He shoots Gene Hackman, and then stands over him with a buffalo rifle, aiming into his face.

"I'll see you in hell, William Munny," Hackman says. Clint aims a little more and says, "I reckon so."

"I don't deserve this," Hackman says.

"Deserve's got nothing to do with it," Clint replies.

Clint kills Deputy Andy and Deputy Clyde and two or three more on his way out of town. Then he rides away into the rain, drunk and righteous.

I can tell my mother doesn't like the movie by the way she rattles the pages of her Bible. When it's over she clicks the television off, saying "That can't have helped much."

I shrug my shoulders and stand and stretch. "I reckon maybe so," I say, doing Clint.

"Go take your bath and get ready for bed," she says, and I'll be in to check on you."

I nod and head for the bathroom, but I just turn on the shower and let it run for a while. When I come out she's in my bedroom and I know she's given it a thorough search, even though there's no way I could have smuggled in anything. We've spent every waking moment together since she brought me home, and I've been under lock and key the rest of the time.

"Tomorrow we've got the yard work," she says. "And then, I'd like you to go to another meeting."

I nod and think about the long day ahead. Days are okay. Even the AA meetings break up the monotony.

My mother reaches up to check the padlocks on the windows one more time. As she does, the bathrobe sleeve falls down her wrist, and I realize she's not wearing the key. I think she realizes it at the same time, but her face gives nothing away. She drops her arms and pulls her sleeve down.

"Well, that's that," she says, sidestepping toward the door. Only I'm between her and her bedroom. I imagine the key laying on the vanity of her bathroom. She pauses because I've not moved to let her past.

"Anything else you need before I go to bed?" she asks. "Did you go to the restroom?"

I shake my head, then nod, but I'm imagining the possibilities. It would be so easy, I think, especially now that I've learned to control myself.

My mother's lips tremble for the briefest moment, but then her face goes hard. "You know I wouldn't treat you like a child unless I loved you."

I start to tell her. I know what she wants to hear. I can tell her that I'll be good, again, that I want to be good again. I am good again. But the look on her face tells me the truth and I don't even bother to tell the lie. Before my eyes, she grows back to her former stature, back like she was before my dad died and she knew what kind of man I really am. I step to one side and let her past.

"You're just doing really good," she says. "You'll get past this thing yet." She takes me by the shoulder and gently pushes me toward my bed and wishes me goodnight, adding, "Don't stay up too late reading." She shuts the door. Not quite a slam, but hard. The padlock clicks and I imagine I hear a sigh of relief.

The room where I spent my childhood and adolescence has gone through so many themes over the years. When I was a kid I had football posters of Bob Griese and Roger Staubach. In the seventies I went through a black-light phase and I stuck candles in wine bottles and melted crayons over them, burned incense in a cement Buddha I bought at the mall, played music on an 8-track tape player, hung beaded curtains and posters that advised me to "Keep on Truckin'" and "Hang in there baby, Friday's coming." My mother learned to search a room through necessity and regular practice, though back then she worried more about pot than she did beer. Once I graduated from college and got married, she lost no time converting my room to a guest room with lacy comforters and pillow shams and potpourri in crystal bowls, just the way it is now. I crawl into bed and adjust the covers, remembering how I used to lay here at night and tune in to AM rock stations that bounced their signals the great distance from Chicago and Cincinnati and imagine my adult life lived far away from this place. Someone passes the house driving fast, and I catch a snatch of music with a heavy thumping base. Truck sounds drift down from the highway. The house grows silent except for the central air turning on and off. I wonder what Cheryl's

doing now, wonder why she hasn't called in over a week to check up on me. My legs twitch and I think about the long hours until daylight and the sleep that probably won't come. I wish I didn't have to be inside my head in this darkness, but I know I will be.

John Mort

The Book Club

On the morning of April 19th Audrey Delacroix claimed her backpack at Inmate Property. She found a ten in a secret compartment, and also her pack of Marlboros, though only two remained. She knew the pack had been unopened twenty-one months before, but where did you lodge your complaint? With the governor?

She assumed they'd give her money at the gate. It was the right thing to do, after what they'd put her through. In all the old movies you got at least $50, but no longer, not in Arkansas. She'd earned almost $400 working in the kitchen, but she'd have to find a bank, and fill out God knew how many forms, before it was hers.

It wasn't fair.

And that Puerto Rican woman at the gate wasn't *human*. No "Good luck, Inmate," or "Don't wanta see *you* again." Looking skyward, the woman droned, "Transportation is available for the newly-released to the point of arrest," which was such a convoluted way of talking that for an instant Audrey didn't understand. When she did, she thought that Arkansas had gone crazy. Her point of arrest had been the police station in Berryville, but why would she return to the county jail? The Salvation Army had offered her a job in Eureka Springs, hardly five miles away. She was a free woman. She'd walk.

Happily, the day was clear and sunny, with wild plums blooming alongside the road, and dogwoods joined like white lace in the understories of the oaks. Hazy green hills stretched as far as she could see, making Audrey feel like she was part of something big and important. She walked briskly at first, the scent of lilacs around the farmhouses filling her with joy, and nostalgia for her childhood with her grandparents.

She grew tired after a mile or so, and stopped to smoke one of her cigarettes. She discovered she had no light, and with a brave shudder, crushed both cigarettes and dropped them into the grass. Nicotine was the gateway drug to just about everything. This was her new life, and she *would not smoke*!

This seemed like a victory, the first of many to come, and her resolve carried her for a while longer. But by the time the Walmart came into view—two miles, still, from the Salvation Army—she was worn out. Her feet were sore and she wanted new shoes, but at least she'd buy something to eat. An apple, perhaps. They never gave you fresh fruit in the prison.

It wasn't her fault. Oh, she couldn't claim to be innocent, but Larry was the one who manufactured meth. The state of Arkansas didn't make any allowances. No such thing as "gradations of guilt"—a phrase some lawyer used, somewhere between jail cells. And then claiming she was a bad mother!

By the front entrance, three women sat at a long table with baked goods and a few early vegetables. They all wore long, pale blue, muslin dresses, with black stockings and black shoes, and thin white hats with cute little chin straps. They seemed so pure that Audrey was ashamed to approach them. Head down, she bought a rough, beautiful loaf of bread, and inside the store, an apple and piece of cheese. She was left with only a little change, but she needed strength to reach the Salvation Army.

She sat in the sun to attack the bread and cheese, but though ravenous, she held back half her plunder. She might need it this evening. She sat with her Walmart bag and backpack beside her, trying to look as though she were awaiting a ride. A girl of six or seven, the age Catelynn would be now, crawled up on the bench.

"Are those new blue jeans?" Audrey asked her.

"My mama bought them."

"They look really, really nice. And you're very pretty with all your blonde hair. What does your mother call you?"

"Faith."

"Such a pretty name." Audrey reached inside her Walmart bag. "Would you like a piece of cheese, Faith?"

The girl held out her hand, but from nowhere a woman rushed up, grabbed the girl, and hurried into the parking lot. Head on her mother's shoulder, the little girl waved goodbye, closing her fingers in a soft fist like Catelynn used to. Audrey couldn't hold it in. She began to cry.

The youngest of the women selling baked goods hurried to Audrey's side. "Are you all right, Sister?"

Audrey hyperventilated, and the young woman stroked her back tentatively. Gasping, Audrey said, "I just got out of prison."

"I know."

"You . . . know?"

"How lonely you seem, for one thing. And your old clothes."

Audrey wore sweat pants with a cigarette hole at one knee, and a purple tee shirt with a Razorbacks logo. She liked the pure young woman, and tried to check her tears.

"It's all right. A lot of us got law trouble."

"Not you nice Amish ladies!"

"We may be plain, but we're not Amish. We're the Book Club."

Audrey sat at the table with the kind ladies, and almost relaxed, though jail-time had put in her head the idea that someone was always watching you. Beth Nunnally, the young woman who'd befriended Audrey, and Laura Abbott, the plump one, both said that they had been in prison. And Laura also had a daughter somewhere in the foster care system. Her eyes were red, as though she herself wasn't far from tears.

Martha, the gray-haired woman, took them in no matter what, Beth said. "We grow all our food. We have a fish pond. One girl shoots deer."

"Men?" Audrey asked.

Beth smiled, and Martha finally spoke. "No men," she said neutrally.

Audrey had to think about that for a moment. Inmates could talk of nothing else, and flirted with even the homeliest guards. But after being married to Larry, Audrey thought the idea of doing without men somewhat daring. You'd only see them at Walmart, as in a zoo. "No men, and you work all day. You read . . . *books?"*

"A book a week," Laura said.

"What about TV?"

Martha almost snarled. "They *spy."*

"Yes, ma'am," Audrey said.

"*Look*," the old woman said, holding out an arm, and Audrey lifted her eyes to the eaves of the building, where a camera had

been mounted. Cameras were everywhere in the prison, even in the shower nozzles, inmates said. The Walmart camera, its red light blinking, pointed directly toward them.

"The TV's just like the Internet," Laura said, though she seemed confused.

"The Internet is *worse,"* Beth put in. "They know who your friends are, and if you say things against the government."

"And cell phones," Laura said, daubing her eyes with a Kleenex, and sniffling. "That's how they find you."

"They say it's for your own protection," Martha said. "But you can't trust them. They spend their days dreaming up enemies. *You're* their enemy."

Audrey stared at the blinking light.

"Martha worked for Homeland Security. She knows everything," Beth said.

"My goodness." Audrey didn't understand what the women were talking about, but at least they were serious women, unlike the flighty types, the bullies, and the sickos in prison. "I want to come with you," she announced.

"What about your parole officer?" Martha asked, her blue eyes suddenly fierce.

"Don't have one. I served every last minute."

"Carrying any electronics? Tablet? Laptop?"

"No."

"DVD player, I-pad, camera?"

"No, ma'am."

"Cell phone?"

"No."

"You're sure," Martha said. "No cell phone. Don't lie to me, Audrey."

Audrey held up her wrist. "Just this old watch."

At the weekly convocation Audrey ate more of the delicious bread, this time with strawberry jam, though she could have had venison and pork, potatoes, even Morel mushrooms. The bread and jam, with mint tea, made her feel like a little girl, nestled by her grandma's woodstove.

Martha spoke. She cautioned how everyone needed to seem meek when in town, so not to arouse suspicion, then dropped into a harangue about electronics and government spies, citing

stories of how the government had hauled away innocent families in New Jersey, and Arizona. Audrey didn't perfectly comprehend, except that the world was monstrously unfair and dangerous, and that she was lucky to have blundered into this safe place.

Where they even had cigarettes. She shared one with Beth as Clubbers gave boring reports on how well the field corn was germinating, the health of calves and goat kids, and projections for the Muscadine crop. Finally, they broke into small groups for book reports. Book reports? Just like in junior high.

Audrey didn't read well, but it wasn't her fault. She grew up with her grandparents, kindly people, though not much for books. She never knew her dad, and her mom jerked her from school to school before she herself went off to prison. Some example! No, Audrey never had the advantages, but she'd got hold of Laura Ingalls Wilder, and read about pioneer life in the fearsome north woods. What Wilder described was pretty much like life at the Book Club, except for the lack of men.

"We work like pioneers, and there are no men!" She didn't mean this as a joke, but everyone laughed. It seemed she'd made a good book report.

Plump Laura Abbot just opened her Bible and read, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Silence followed, rather than discussion. What could you say? Laura wept, and everyone was embarrassed, or maybe contemptuous. Audrey hadn't read any rules, but she sensed you were supposed to be strong in this place, and not cry over a Bible verse.

"Why do we do this?" she asked.

"They've allus done it," Beth said. "Though lotsa folks wanta drop it. Who reads anymore, right? Or you see people out in the world, they read on their phones, and you know we won't be doin' *that*. I believe, back when they started, Martha thought it would be kinda inspirin', and relaxin' for the girls."

"It's both of those," Audrey said. She liked that the books didn't have to be profound, or even sensible. Most women read tattered novels from the Book Club library: Gene Stratton-Porter, Grace Livingston Hill, and Peter B. Kyne. Girlhood trials, Christian example, and adventure stories from a

hundred years ago. People rode around on horses then.

Levelheaded Beth read a romance, *The Beautiful Entrepreneur,* about a smart young businesswoman who was pretty dumb when it came to men. She fell for the handsome, slick guy—like Audrey's own Larry, who, when he was twenty, promised her the moon. Meanwhile, the heroine hardly noticed the shy fellow who set up the business, and whose hard work made it succeed. She didn't appreciate him until almost the end, when the slick guy was revealed as an embezzler. He was a cheater, too, when that flashy, big city woman breezed through town. Finally, the shy fellow won the heart of the businesswoman. Of course, you knew he would on the first page.

"Beth," Audrey said. "Life ain't like that."

Beth's blue eyes flashed. "It's a *fantasy,"* she said.

After the readings, Clubbers gathered around a bonfire, and drank Muscadine wine. Wine? Yes, the Book Club made wine from elderberries and plum-sized Muscadine grapes. After convocation, conversations grew intimate.

Audrey stared into the flames, and once in a while slapped at a mosquito. She lit her third cigarette of the day. If she drank wine, she might as well smoke. Cigarettes soothed her soul. "Were you married, Beth?"

"You could say. Charles was hardly never there, but we had a little boy together, Norman."

"Where's Norman now?"

Beth shrugged. "I had to give up my rights."

"That's so unfair!"

"I wasn't no fit mother, Audrey."

Near midnight, while Audrey and Beth hugged and cried, and drank sweet wine, someone slipped out of the darkness, raked the coals, and threw on more wood. A woman in a long dress, whom Audrey assumed was Sister Martha though she couldn't see clearly, read from an old book. The fire, the dark, and words she didn't comprehend thrust Audrey backward into her vague, sometimes pleasant childhood, when her grandparents took her to prayer meetings. The meetings ended with tearful altar calls, and drunken Audrey cried to Martha's words, too, and would have gone forward had this been a church service, had she been called. Out of the smoke,

women's voices rose, chanting and sobbing. Hers, too.

"Bless you, Sister!" women cried, and now they did come forward, in triumph rather than sorrow, to feed the bonfire with bags of cell phones, DVD players, even TVs. Though her old watch didn't seem like much of an offering, Audrey approached the fire, and was startled to see a long keyboard, still in its box, slowly curling with bluish, poisonous flames. Her tears came from a deeper place, as she remembered how she'd wanted to learn the piano when she was seven. Her mother couldn't afford the lessons.

"A brand-new keyboard!" she said to Beth. "Some little child—my Catelynn—."

"Shh," Beth said, and held out cigarettes, and poured more of the sweet wine.

A diesel generator churned enough power to light the meeting house, and pump water to sinks and toilets. Sister Martha didn't object to electricity, only electronics. Still, you went to bed in the dark, unless you had candles or could find kerosene for a lamp.

Audrey was too weary to care. Being new, she drew the most demanding work, hoeing three-hundred-foot rows of beans and potatoes, and every third day, washing soup kettles in the steamy kitchen behind the cafeteria. Her calves swelled and her feet grew numb, from shuffling across the concrete floor.

But even from her deep sleep, she'd sit up at two in the morning, and see shapes creeping about in the darkness, and hear doors closing softly. Only half-awake, she assumed the women were climbing into one another's beds. She'd witnessed such behavior in prison, and it didn't trouble her, because if you were poor and lonely, love was all you could hope for. Any kind of love. If Beth had asked, Audrey might have said yes.

She dreamed of Larry, who, by the time the police dragged him away, had grown menacing and ugly. She woke again in terror, but then, almost willfully, dreamed of him when he was twenty, and she seventeen. They swam in Lake Taneycomo, and afterwards lay on a blanket, on a high bluff that caught the breezes. She laughed, threw off her bra, while

Larry pretended to be a hound dog, sniffing her toes, licking her. She woke at dawn drenched in sweat, and for a moment looked about for Larry. But only the women were there, most of them snoring, one or two padding about with toothbrushes and combs.

Having proved herself a steady worker, Audrey drew easy duty, a week up at the store. Martha had broken her own rules to deal with the state of Arkansas, jumping through every hoop to make Book Club Muscadine wine legal for public sale. Of course, customers stopped for noodles, jams, bread, eggs, and heirloom tomatoes, but wine was the big draw. Occasionally, one of the more comely sisters climbed in a car with a man, never to return, but Martha allowed that such liaisons were overhead.

Late in the afternoon, the flow of customers dwindled, and it began to rain. Audrey had been reading her book for convocation, *Little Women,* but the store had no electricity, and light faded with the dark skies. She napped, then was startled awake by a man standing across the counter, dripping. He wore a foolish grin, as many men did when they were attracted to you, and Audrey raised her guard. Immediately she dropped it. The man was Howie Biggs, her boyfriend before Larry happened along.

"How are you, Audrey? I ain't seen you in . . . " He met her eyes, and paused. "You're pretty as ever."

She might even have blushed. Anyhow, they were shy. They'd been high school sweethearts, or almost. How long ago? Ten years? Twelve! Howie was a senior, and maybe a little ashamed of her because she'd dropped out, and worked at the Dollar Store. She figured that's why they never had sex, because for a guy like Howie, sex meant commitment. She was cute back then, if she did say so, and could have seduced him if she'd tried. He went on to college in Conway, but she couldn't blame him for the breakup. She started running with that ignorant hillbilly, Larry Delacroix, and *his* wild crowd.

Even in the soft light, Howie didn't look like much, but he was the sort you brought home to Mama. If you had a mama.

Life was so unfair!

"What is this place, Audrey? I saw the sign on the highway, never stopped."

"Kinda hard to explain. It's—it's rare. Bunch a women, Howie."

He grinned. "What you do for entertainment?"

"Read books."

"You ain't tellin' me the truth."

She laughed. She hadn't laughed much lately, and it felt delightful. "You and Suzie doin' all right?"

"Oh, we split up three years ago. I got on with the federal government—"

"Howie! What do you *do?"*

"Secret stuff." He brought a finger to his lips, and rolled his eyes. "Have to kill you, if I told you."

She stroked his wrist. "Howie. Always such a clown."

"I'm kinduva investigator, you might say. It's amazin' what goes on back in these hills."

"Allus has been. Meth, and before that, all the bootleggers.'"

"I heard what happened to Larry. And you, just caught up in the thing, so unfortunate. You had a little girl, didn't you? Know where she is?"

Audrey bit her lip. "I don't."

"Life ain't over, Audrey." Howie brought out a fancy little computer, frowned, made some entries, and finally turned the screen so she could see.

"They're offerin' her up for adoption," he said.

Audrey studied the photograph. Catelynn had grown taller, and they'd cut her hair short. She looked sad, and she'd alway been such a happy little girl!

"Here," Howie said, passing a cell phone over the counter. "You can call her up at that place."

"I cain't take your phone, Howie."

"It's old. Got a few minutes on it, that's all."

The rain had stopped. Sunlight broke through the front windows and spread out on the bare wooden floor. Flies that had gathered on the screen door began to stir.

"We ain't allowed—"

"To talk to your own daughter?" Howie snapped shut the little computer, and walked toward the door. "None a my business, but what kinda place you livin' in, Audrey?"

"Oh, Howie, you don't need to go!"

He opened the screen door, and stood half in sunlight. Flies

took off in every direction. “You take care a yourself, Audrey,” he said.

When she could steal a moment, she stepped down a path in the woods, and punched in the number for the Alexander Treatment Center, but mostly she was out of range. If she turned the phone left or right, sometimes a mechanical voice spat out a menu. Once she reached a live person whom she could swear was that Puerto Rican woman at the prison gate.

“You will need to make an appointment.”

“Is she there? Is Catelynn there?’

“When you arrive, please have available proof of parentage. Visiting hours are nine through five.”

“Lemme me just—”

She lost the connection. She thrashed through the woods, terrified by the hoots and yips around her, but determined. She climbed toward what she thought must be a microwave tower far to the east, but now the phone didn’t work at all. That night she crept out to the Book Club’s barn, and climbed the stairs, and over the hay bales, to the dilapidated cupola. No answer from the Alexander Treatment Center, but she left a message for her old boyfriend. “Howie, I need to see you!”

In several days Howie didn’t answer, and when she tried again, the number he’d given her had gone out of service. Audrey supposed that he’d learned the truth about her, that she’d done time. Then again, he already knew about Larry, and Catelynn.

Why had Howie shown up, just to tell her about Catelynn? He was a nice guy, but why would he care?

She grew tearful as Laura, and couldn’t get through her report on *Little Women*. The women were silent, judgmental somehow, and later she had nightmares. She dreamed Larry came at her with a crowbar, and Catelynn cried out, “Mama! Mama!” Audrey woke, and Beth looked down on her with a face so kind and full of love that Audrey knew she must still be dreaming. She woke again, and heard her child’s voice, crying, “Mama!” from the backpack. She grabbed it and ran out into the darkness, away from her nosy roommates.

She didn’t hear “Mama! Mama!” again, and knew she’d

imagined everything. She'd broken Book Club rules for nothing. She carried the phone for several days more, like a dead baby, and then accidentally dropped it into the sudsy water with her pots. She reached down, all hope gone. Almost happily, she smashed the evil thing with a hammer, and threw it in the trash.

That evening she discovered that someone had ransacked her bunk. She owned nothing worth stealing, but her blankets and sheets had been thrown to the floor, and the contents of her dresser spilled: her two long dresses, her underwear, her stockings. A wave of fear passed through her, as she realized something *was* missing: her one photograph of Catelynn, which she kept in a small brass frame atop the dresser. She sank to the bed. "I've been such a good worker," she wailed. "It's not fair."

Someone in the dormitory had done it. Or several someones. Absurd to think so, but in a way she'd been raped. Of course, she'd been around rough men all her life, and rough women, and knew what rape *was*. No, not rape, but she felt violated. And she realized now that everyone had grown wary of her, averting their eyes when she neared. She jerked her head around wildly. Where was her one friend, Beth?

She stumbled through the next day, and still couldn't sleep. She lay awake until two, then wrapped a blanket around her shoulders, intent on making it to the Salvation Army. Maybe there was no job by now, but she knew they'd take her in.

But she was worn-out in fifty steps, and the night confused her. She didn't know her directions, and heard coyotes. She retreated again into the dark barn, and slept fitfully, reaching out for the pillow she didn't have.

She was an hour late to the kitchen, but no one said anything. She'd forgotten to go out with her hoe, coming to the kitchen like it was truly her job, like she was a robot. Of course, no one would complain if you volunteered for the hardest chore there was.

Why would anyone raid her little corner, and steal her picture? Where was Beth?

She vowed to spend one more night in the barn, and at noon the next day, when everyone was eating, slip out the back way through the woods. The highway was only a mile

away, and someone would give her a ride. Asleep on her feet, she visualized Howie in a flashy, new car. Her hair would blow in the wind. She'd make eyes at him.

Again she woke in the small hours, and looked down from the cupola to see shapes moving about the Book Club's old truck. The women were dressed in dark pants and shirts, rather than powder-blue dresses. She thought one shape resembled Beth, but couldn't be sure. Three women climbed into the cab, and another four into the bed, and the truck moved off slowly, without lights. It seemed like another nightmare, and she fell back on the hay, shivering.

At noon the next day, as women filed in for lunch, she hurried out the back way. Nothing seemed changed. The Book Club tractor churned along, and three women, their bonnets bent low, picked green beans. On the clotheslines thirty powder-blue, muslin dresses fluttered. But she couldn't flee through the woods, because women were digging potatoes at its edge. She'd have to brave the night again. She knew the direction now, and where she could find a flashlight.

She turned her head. A van with tinted windows sped toward her from the highway, fast as firemen or policemen, responding to an emergency. The van stopped abruptly, sat idling for a long moment, until three men wearing suits stepped out, and strode purposefully toward the office.

In moments Martha emerged, staggering down the walk, wearing her blue muslin smock over slacks, and no bonnet. Her straggly, gray hair made her seem impossibly old, a relic, a pioneer who'd wandered into the hills a century before, and now emerged through a portal of time. She seemed confused, like a captured animal. As the side door of the van slid open, the old woman held up her head briefly, and looked over the grounds. Then the men pushed her inside, and Audrey couldn't see anything but the van speeding away, and disappearing down by the store.

She stood frozen. She thought of the day they came in a van for Larry, and how a week later they came for Catelyn, and how she'd sat in that rental house that stank of meth, watching soap operas, smoking cigarettes, until a van came for her, too. When she finished the pots, she washed every dish she could find, and mopped the cement floor, and

cleaned out the grease trap, as though working harder made her more virtuous.

At dusk she tried to reach the woods, but women stood in every path—more women than she recognized. A group of them had gathered by a bonfire, even though convocation was three days away.

Now she saw Beth! She'll tell me what's wrong, Audrey thought, and where they took Martha, and what the women, Beth among them, did in the middle of the night. We'll have this out like friends do. She'll tell me why they rifled my little bedroom, and scared me so. And if they wanted her to leave, well, it wasn't as though she hadn't tried.

Beth wore her full Book Club dress, stockings, and shoes. Slowly, she raised her head under her white bonnet. Her chin straps were untied, and fell forward. "I cain't help you, Audrey," she said, and reached out gently to place something in Audrey's hand.

As Beth drew back, the women began to gather, slowly encircling Audrey in the near-darkness. "What did I do?" she asked. "What did I do?" She lifted one hand to shield her eyes from a sudden, sharp light. She realized that she held a brand-new package of cigarettes. "Thank you," she said, logic deserting her.

And then she whirled in panic, as hands plucked at her dress. She knew she must run. As her blouse ripped, Audrey saw an opening between two of the oldest, and ducked through. Even as she did, a rock struck her head, and she stumbled. More rocks rained down.

"It ain't right. It ain't fair!" Audrey screamed, and then they were upon her.

Paul Luikart

The Edge of the Known World

Mice. We had 'em in spades. In our loft in Bucktown, when Susie and I first got married. City mice, not cute children's book mice. Almost rats, big as scoops of ice cream and quick as an eyeblink. Quiet too. No squeaking. The only sound was the scratching of their teeth on our breadcrumbs and coffee beans. About 10:30 or 11 we'd hear them under the stove or behind the fridge and then soon enough we'd see them skittering along a baseboard or zipping over the counter. Horrible stuff. They navigated by smelling the piss trails from other mice and they dropped their tiny shit grains in every corner of the place. Plumped up with rabies, bubonic plague, hanta virus. Just horrible.

Our loft was small and the mice felt like live-in raiders. Susie's painting stuff took up the corner and most of the plate glass window on the street side and half the wall on the other side—her easel and canvas rolls, stretcher bars, drop cloths, rags and brushes and paint buckets. The buckets were like gaping mouths on the floor—mouths with black and red interiors, and purple and green and blue. They made me think of portals like from a sci fi book, pits you could step into and get whisked away to different places where all was the color and shade of the dried paint lining the bucket you stepped in. But can you imagine? Dropping suddenly into a black world—no lights, no shadows. Voices maybe, but maybe they were just in your head, and no guarantees otherwise that you weren't disastrously alone for all time. I tried to use one of the buckets to trap a mouse but a.) the thing was too fast and b.) Susie hollered at me.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Trying to capture the mouse."

"Not with that."

"Sure. I throw it over top of him, slide a piece of cardboard or something underneath, upend it, voila. A trapped mouse."

"Give me that bucket back."

Susie is a good painter. Back when we had the mice, she

was very into abstract expressionism. I guess you'd say it heavily influenced her. That's why, she told me, she used the buckets instead of more traditional stuff like a palette or oil tubes. She wasn't Pollock-style-slinging paint down yet, chopping it off sticks and paint stirrers and all that. But in nervous little slashes she was scrubbing the paint into the canvas ruining brush after brush after brush. Shoving it into the micro-spaces between the fibers of the raw cotton duck—she'd stopped gesso-ing her canvases. That was cheating, she said, like selling out.

I wonder if Susie even cared we had the mice. She never helped me fight them. The first time we saw one, we were on the sofa, she with her head on my lap and we were watching some German movie where these angels guide people through Berlin but one of the angels falls in love with a circus performer he was supposed to be helping. Columbo was in it too. I don't remember how it ended because about half-way through the movie, a mouse darted into the middle of the floor, sat back on his haunches just for a second, then disappeared into the shadows toward the kitchenette. We both screeched. Then Susie started laughing and I started cussing.

"Cut the damn movie off," I said.

"Why?"

"Why? Because we have mice."

"Just one."

"I'll squash it." I tramped after it, figuring it was going for the trash can.

"Come back to the couch," she called.

"It dies," I said, "Then we're scouring every inch of this place."

The next day I went to Home Depot and loaded up on anti-mouse stuff. I got glue traps and snap traps and poison peanut baits. When I got home, I heaved the fridge away from the wall and laid down some of the snappers baited with peanut butter, plus one of the poison peanut bait stations. I slid a few glue traps under the stove and put the rest at intervals along all the walls. In the bathroom behind the toilet went the final snapper. They're such simple contraptions, a wire and a spring, a copper-colored pad with a dollop of something tasty. But pow! When those little clawed toes touch it, off

with its head. When Susie got home from the art supply place, I showed her what I'd done.

"The poison is an anti-coagulant, the guy told me. They bleed to death internally."

She looked at me. "Well, that's horrific."

"And with the glue traps, they die from, of all things, hypothermia. Can you believe that? You'd have thought starvation."

"I wouldn't have thought anything like that."

"Of course the snap traps just lop their fuzzy little heads right off."

"Don't be sick, Josh," she said to me, but I said, "I'm not being sick. I'm trying to stop us from getting sick. You know they eat shit, right? Like dog shit. They walk in it. Then they come into our house."

"That's rats. This is just a mouse." Susie's voice was sad.

"Mice, Susie, plural."

Susie had a big show open a week and a half after our mouse problem really bloomed. She had it at a little gallery near our loft. Little, but it had hosted a number of well-known artists in the past Susie told me. Her show even got a mention in *Time Out Chicago* and was recommended in the *Reader's* Arts and Culture section. One of the critics called her stuff an abstract expressionist "mini-revival." Her parents came from down by Carbondale and lots of friends and people I didn't know, didn't even recognize. Susie wore this great black dress and black tights and she looked so slender and good. She held a wine glass and every now and then took little sips, perching her lips just so on the rim of the glass before barely tipping it, keeping her bright eyes fixed on whoever she was talking to. There was certainly no shortage of people who wanted to talk to her. She shook hands and hugged and kissed people on the cheek in a constant stream all night long.

About halfway through the show, I was standing and staring at one of her paintings, a big square of color that looked kind of like a sunset to me. She called it "The Edge of the Known World." It had yellow whorls and slams of red and orange and down in one corner the deepest blue, applied in thick blobs over and over again—I remember her explaining to me how she did it—until it captured the light and seemed to hold it

prisoner. I think it was my favorite thing she'd ever painted. Suddenly somebody was standing behind me, standing close, and I turned. It was a middle-aged man, skinny and tall, bespectacled, with a wiry mustache, slicked hair and a bowtie. He had on a seersucker suit and bowling shoes.

"Gorgeous," he muttered.

"Me? Or the painting?" It was a joke. He was actually standing too close.

"Hm?"

"Me or," and then I heard myself and said instead, "My wife did this."

"Your wife?"

"Susie Brooks, the artist."

This seemed to stun him. His head jerked back and a half smile appeared and disappeared on his thin, wet lips. He adjusted his glasses.

"You're married to the artist?"

"I am."

"How fortunate. Her work is absolutely stunning." He reached toward, "The Edge of the Known World," or reached out for it maybe, and traced the path of her brush strokes in the air inches from the surface, flaring his long fingers in tense bursts when they came to a plop or a splatter of color. It looked like he was directing music. "Such movement," he finally said, but not to me. To the painting.

I said, "I'm pretty proud of her."

This man turned and looked at me like I'd called his mother a garbage-eating prostitute. 'Excuse me?' his look said, 'Excuse me?' He forced the faintest of smiles through the skin of his face and turned back to the painting.

"I'm Josh. Brooks. Josh Brooks," I said.

"Where does she work?" he said without looking at me.

"Not far from here, actually."

"I'd very much like to visit her workspace while I'm in town."

"Oh, you're not from Chicago?"

"New York. Chelsea."

"Her work space is our loft. We live there too."

"Of course." The man's hand went to his face, fiddled with his mustache, and then he let out a breath, a kind of sigh. After a couple more seconds, he turned and walked away.

When the show was over, we hit a few bars with her friends, but I didn't see my pal from "The Edge of the Known World." Finally, we hailed a cab, but Susie wanted to walk a little, so I told the cabbie to let us out a block from home. The night was chilly and I threw my sport coat over Susie's shoulders. The clops of our heels on the sidewalk were loud and hollow and my feet were killing me inside my dress shoes. The leather had never been broken in and my feet sweated and swam around in my dark socks. Blisters for sure. I was steering Susie with an arm around her waist. She was telling me in a loud voice how happy she was that so many people had come. We turned a corner toward our building and by then she was talking about modern-day color theory—can you overlay white on white, for example, or black on black—and I said, "Sure, why not?" She gave me a look, the kind where her eyes get thin as razor blades.

I said, "That's just because I believe you can do anything."

"Well. I love you," she said.

"I love you too."

And then we were standing in front of our building.

"By the way, did you talk to a guy from New York tonight?" I said.

"What was his . . . what was his . . . who?" Her hands were on her head, fingers massaging her scalp.

"This guy, this dick actually. He was tall, real thin. Shitty mustache. Looked like he swiped his kicks from the Rock n' Bowl."

"Oh," she laughed, "You must mean everybody. Besides you. And my parents."

We went in. I sat her on the edge of our bed and slipped her shoes off. Her thin feet were damp in her tights. I squeezed her toes, something that always made her sleepy. Then I laid her down and she was asleep before I could kiss her cheek, so I tucked the comforter up around her shoulders, got my Maglite from my nightstand and went to check my mousetraps. None of the snap traps had been sprung. A few of the poison peanuts were gone. But. When I shined my light under the stove, there was one on a glue trap and it was still alive. I could see it kicking, just a fluttering of the tiny muscles in its leg, one of the back ones, the only leg that wasn't on the

trap. From the drawer by the sink, I grabbed a long handled wooden spoon and maneuvered it under the stove, struggling to keep my light on the mouse, until I managed to stick the spoon to the trap and slide it out.

The mouse was gray with a white belly and wide shining eyes, and there were several pieces of shit on the trap like black pieces of rice. When it saw me it struggled so much, these minuscule convulsions, I thought it was going to rip itself out of its limbs and plop onto the floor. Just a mouse body and head then, still alive, wriggling its way back under the stove. I held it up close, shining the light right in its black eyes.

"Fuck you," I whispered and it nearly tore itself in half.

In our little utility closet in the kitchenette, next to the bin of potatoes, I kept a small toolbox. Tape measure, pliers, a hammer and other things. I got the hammer first, but thought that'd make too big of a mess and I didn't feel like scraping mouse brains off the linoleum. Instead, I got a Philips head, holding it by the shank, intending to knock the mouse behind the ears with the hard plastic handle, a quick hit, a broken neck. But with my arm cocked back, screwdriver in hand, I couldn't do it. Not that I didn't want the mouse dead, but I didn't want to have to feel it die. To touch its death.

I could fling it out into the middle of our building's back courtyard. Nature would take its course. The thing would be dead by morning. Maybe a stray cat would find it. Or I fill up a bucket with water and drop it in. Or just put it in the trashcan and close the lid and forget about it while it starved. I wondered if this mouse had eaten any of the poison peanuts. Maybe he was already dying. If he'd gotten ahold of one, actually consumed the whole peanut, it was supposed to take about twenty-four hours. I could slide him, trap and all, right back where he came from, then get him sometime tomorrow, dead, and throw the whole mess out. But how would I know if he ate a peanut or not? If I slid him back, he might just die anyway.

Meanwhile, the thing had started shivering. This was the hypothermia? Since the mouse's eyes were black, I couldn't tell what it was looking at. I could peel it off, I guess. Put on some gloves. How sticky are these traps? Vegetable oil might help.

But right then there was a scurrying by my feet, the scrabble of tiny claws—scritch scritch scratch. I flicked the flashlight beam down. Four of them, then five, maybe six with whips for tails as long as their bodies. Standing up on their hind feet a couple of them, reaching out with their front claws and swatting at the beam. Watchers. I flinched, I'll admit it, heart leaping up to my Adam's apple. They were seeping into my house, one after another after another, like a micro army. I tripped back, losing the flashlight and the glue trap with the mouse, the light banging on the floor and blinking out, leaving me in the dark with that awful brood. I hissed through my teeth and stamped my feet to scare them back and stepped forward in the dark, kicking toward the animals. My foot came down with a quick popping sound on a lump. I groped for the light switch, flipped it on and saw that all of the mice were gone. Disappeared. The glue trap was mouse-side down, my mouse crushed, with little scribbles of red guts on either side of the trap.

When Susie finally got up in the morning, it was all cleaned up. I'd scooped the trap and mouse into a trash bag and then put that bag into another bag and chucked it all into the can in the alley. I poured bleach directly onto the mouse's blood, then filled up the mop bucket with bleach water and did the entire kitchenette floor, spreading it to all the corners and letting it slosh under the fridge and especially under the stove. I'd let it dry then got the Lysol and did it all again, covering up the bleach smell with Mountain Breeze. When that dried, I threw out the mop and bucket. Finally, I got the 409 bottle and sprayed it on all the counters until it puddled, wiping it up and then 409-ing it all again, this time letting it sit and air dry. We kept a tub of disinfectant wipes under the sink, and I used them all up wiping down the fridge and stovetop, and even all the knives in the knife block, the toaster, the coffee maker, and especially the microwave. For that, I got the 409 back out and went over every inch of it, inside and out, on top and underneath, until it was brand-new clean. When I finished the sun was up.

Right there in the kitchenette, I stripped down and threw away everything I was wearing. I realized I'd never changed out of my clothes from Susie's show—I'd cleaned in my dress

clothes. It all went out—tie, button down, slacks, socks and dress shoes. Good riddance to those. They were mottled with pale spots from the bleach anyway. I tiptoed naked to the shower and scrubbed myself for a half hour straight. Susie came into the bathroom while I was toweling off.

"It smells like a chemical factory out there," she said.

"Sorry. I cleaned. After you went to bed, I saw a few more mice."

"It's not like I don't already have a pounding headache." She sat on the toilet with her head in her hands and her hair drooped off her forehead like curtains for her face.

"I'll air it out."

When she came out of the shower, I was on the sofa fooling with the cable remote. She was naked with just a towel in a turban wrapping up her hair.

"I love that you love to be naked." I smiled big.

"Last night, did you say something to me about somebody from New York? I seem to remember you saying something about somebody from New York."

Bowling shoes. "An admirer of yours. Too bad he was a dick."

"They're all dicks." She walked over to her painting stuff and put her hands on her hips. She shifted her weight to one leg, the way she stood when she was thinking seriously, and when she was naked standing that way, it made her ass perk up. Hello, I thought.

"Unfortunately, they're necessary dicks," she said.

"Necessary dicks?"

"Did he say, like, where he was from or anything?"

"Just New York. Wait, Chelsea too."

She turned. "Was he a gallery owner?"

"He didn't say," I said, then, "He said he wanted to see your workspace. Like, come over. To our house."

"What?"

"I guess he wanted to come over."

"Please tell me you took his phone number."

"No," I said, "I told you he was a dick."

"Josh."

"He didn't have the time of day for me."

"Josh. He was probably a gallery owner. In New York."

I looked at her in the sunlight coming into the loft, silver beads of water on her shoulders, her perfectly round breasts, her smooth-skinned stomach—I loved to run the flat of my hand over it—hips, calves, ankles.

"Josh, why didn't you get his number? Or why didn't you bring him over to me? Introduce us?"

"I figured you met him probably."

"Well, maybe. But you do realize I talked to a zillion people last night and I was nervous and tipsy?"

"I know."

She glared at me, crossed her arms over her wet, bare breasts, and said, "I need, *need* to talk to dicks like that. I need it, Josh. Need it."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. So I can have a career? That I've wanted since kindergarten?

"Susie—" I started.

"Do you even care what happens with my career?"

"Of course I care. What does that mean?"

"Hopefully he'll look me up. Hopefully he took a postcard and thinks about the show and sees the website and decides to email me." She turned, saying more, but I couldn't make it out, only the tone, the timbre of her voice.

"You wouldn't have wanted him to come over anyway," I shouted after her, "Mice, remember?"

She said she was going out and after she got dressed she did, but she didn't say to where. I tried to sit, just sit, and watch some TV but I couldn't. I kept thinking about the mouse army from the night before, those tiny marauders from hell, teensy demons sent by the devil to destroy my house. I jumped up and checked my traps, moved the stove and fridge and, seeing nothing for now, scooted them back, washed my hands, and sat back down. Ha. Remember that game Mousetrap? Basically a Rube Goldberg machine for kids. I don't remember exactly how it worked. I remember one of the pieces—It had a lot of pieces. Took forever to set up—was an orange or maybe a red plastic man. I think he was supposed to be a diver. And then this thing that looked like an upturned laundry basket slid down this notched pole and landed on him. Or, no, that was supposed to come down on the mouse. Duh. "Mousetrap." I

can't remember what the mouse looked like though. Green? Blue? Susie's good with kitsch. I'll have to ask her when she gets back.

Contributor Notes

Rik Barberi has published stories in *The Berkshire Review*, *The Country and Abroad*, *Hot Metal Press*, *The Macguffin,* and has finished a novel. All of his writing is set in the fictional Taconic County, located in the Hudson Valley.

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Richard Herring grew up in the suburbs of Washington, DC. He explored a range of blue collar jobs in southern states before taking a different course to a 35-year career in education and a PhD from Texas A&M University. He now lives and writes full time on the Florida Gulf Coast.

Paul Luikart's work has appeared in *Barrelhouse*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Curbside Splendor*, *Hobart*, *Pacifica Literary Review*, *Spartan,* and *WhiskeyPaper,* among others. His MFA is from Seattle Pacific University. He and his family live in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Nicholas MacDonnell is a writer and a teacher living in Denver, Colorado. He has previously been featured in the *Provo Canyon Review* and Akashic Publishing's "Mondays are Murder" series. He is currently finishing his first novel and collection of short stories, many of which are set in his native Colorado.

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John Mort is the author of the novels *Goat Boy of the Ozarks, The Illegal,* and *Soldier in Paradise,* as well as *Dont Mean Nothin: Vietnam War Stories*. He reviews for *Booklist* and the Vietnam Veterans Association. In 2013 he won a Western Writers of America Spur for his short story, "The Hog Whisperer." He's working on a collection of stories to be called *Down Along the Piney*.

Paul Pedroza was born and raised in El Paso, Texas. He received his MFA in Fiction from the University of Illinois. Currently, he teaches in the English Department of New Mexico State University. His work has appeared in *Rattle*, *MAKE: A Chicago Literary Magazine*, *Palabra*, *BorderSenses*, *Confluencia*, *Inquiring Mind Buddhist Magazine*, and the anthologies *Our Lost Border* and *New Border Voices*. His book, *The Dead Will Rise and Save Us*, is forthcoming from Floricanto Press.

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ML Roberts is a retired psychologist living in Milwaukee, WI. For the better part of two decades, she practiced psychotherapy in Boise, ID. Her creative writing has appeared in several journals and anthologies. She is currently an active member of the All Writers' Workshop and Workplace, in Waukesha, WI.

Laura M. Rocha is a graduate of Texas A&M University and the University of Texas School of Law. Her writing has been published in *Writer's Digest*, and she is currently working on a novel. In 2007, she took a hiatus from practicing law to write full-time and has yet to regret the decision. Laura lives in Houston with her supportive husband, her book-obsessed children, and the worst dachshund in the world.

Michelle Ross's fiction has most recently appeared in *The Nervous Breakdown* and *Blue Lake Review*. She has won the Fiction Prize from *Gulf Coast*, as well as the fiction contest for the *Main Street Rag* anthology *Slower Traffic Keep Right*. She has an MFA from Indiana University. She lives with her husband and son in Tucson, Arizona.

Matthew Shoen lives in Lisbon, New York. He recently received a Bachelor's Degree in English and History from St. Lawrence University and will be published later this year by Astrid Press. He enjoys horror video games and movies, Russian literature, and is addicted to watching professional wrestling and Buffalo Sabres hockey games. mattshoen26@gmail.com.

Jyotsna Sreenivasan's novel, *And Laughter Fell from the Sky*, was published in 2012 by HarperCollins. Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous literary magazines and anthologies. She is also the author of novels for children and reference books for high school and college students. She has received grants from the Washington, DC, Commission on the Arts and Humanities, and currently lives in Columbus, Ohio.

Vincent Paul Vanneman I'm not one for writing about myself so I'll just say that I've lived in Portland for the past fifteen or so years, drive a cab to pay the bills, and spend much of my free time writing about characters and struggles I've encountered over the years.

Jessica Walker has been writing fiction since 2011. She was a finalist in the Southwest Review's 2013 Meyerson Contest and the 2014 Thomas Wolfe Award for Short Fiction. She was selected as a contributor for the 2014 Bread Loaf Writers Conference. This is her first published short story.

Kim Drew Wright has work in several journals, including *The Pinch, Boston Literary Magazine, Milo Review,* and an anthology. She graduated from UNC and had an advertising career. She has lived in seven states, but currently resides in Virginia with her three children, two Westies, and husband. A book of linked short stories and a poetry collection are in progress. She writes a newsletter for witty readers and writers: The Real Spiel.