SIXFOLD

FICTION WINTER 2015

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Heather Erin Herbert

Hood

I know how it go. I know how to make the boys want and the men pay. I get what I need, and I don't give them no more than promises because my mama teach me good before she get fucked up.

She teach me how to walk. She teach me how to look over my shoulder, then away, and then a long, slow stare back with half-closed eyes. She teach me what sell, and what sell is my fine ass, tight jeans, and walking away. "Ryder-baby, you got to walk away for a man to be able to chase you," she say. "If you ain't leaving, he can't be following." Well, mama ain't walking now, at least not right, 'cause she's using too much. That make it my turn. I got to walk, 'cause I got to get paid.

I ain't a ho. I don't got a pimp, and I don't sell it or give it away. I'm a girl for mama's supplier, and my job is to make pickups and drops to my boys. It used to be mama's job, but she started taking more, so I leave her enough to get by and then handle the rest. As to how I keep safe, I make sure my boys want me. A boy ain't going to hurt a woman he still wants to dip into. You can't fuck a girl over before you fuck her—life don't work like that.

So I get ready before I drop. I clean up, use some of the brown sugar vanilla shower gel I lift from the CVS four blocks down across Monroe, on account of it's science that boys go sweet on women who smell like cake. Then I do my face, and I keep it soft, with pink lips, pink cheeks, and a lot of mascara so I look wide-eyed and sweet and innocent. That helps with the cops too, because if you don't look like you a ho, you don't get picked up like a ho. If you look like you spend all day sucking men off, someone's gonna want to talk to you about it, or wanna make you do it, and unlike Khadejah who live upstairs, my shade of lipgloss ain't dick, thank you.

Then my hair need to get done. I run out of the stuff I used to use and the new bottles have security tags on them, so I don't even try to straighten it now. Instead I let it be a little curly, a little crazy-wild, and the boys think maybe I'm a little

crazy-wild too, so they go crazy. I'm working it for me. The boys like dark hair on a pale-skin girl, so I thank my mama for being Italian and only fucking white and Hispanic dudes when she was getting up with me.

Clothes, I got a thing. I got jeans that look good, and boots with studs, and then I always wear the same two tops—a thin sweatshirt with a pocket on the stomach where my hands supposed to go, and then my lucky red hoody over the top of that. That one has a hand-pocket too, but there's a hole in it to let me put stuff in the sweatshirt pocket underneath. It's not going to fool a cop or nothing if I get touched up, but it's good if I got to look innocent fast. Apart from looking good for my boys, that's the way I got to play it—looking innocent. Mama say I'm just too damn sweet and too damn pretty to go to jail.

Once I'm ready to go, I got to go down three streets to see mama's boyfriend, Tio. He tells me where to go and for what, and either has me drop or has me pick up. I don't like going to him because he ain't a good boyfriend, and too many time he's wanted to slip me something extra. He thinks it's funny I ain't had it yet, but he says that once I got a boyfriend and get used to a boy, come back to him and see what a real man can do for a girl. I got to work hard to keep him from looking too much, and around him I either keep my hood up, or my hair behind my ears so they look stuck out. I pull my hoody down too, so it cover more of my booty, but with me growing, that hoody don't cover as much as it used to. Either way, once he tell me where I'm going, I'm gone from there like someone lit my ass on fire. Today's no different, except now I got a new drop to make, and it one in a house.

I don't like house drops, because they ain't my boys, and they ain't looking to me. This one is worse, because I'm all the way on one side of the ward across Monroe Avenue, and this house is over past Culver Street and onto the Alphabets. No one want to go to the Alphabet avenues for nothing, because as everyone say, "by the time you walk across Avenue A, there's a damn fine chance that you B Cing yo' sorry ass in the hospital." But I got to be paid, and if I don't drop for Tio, there's a damn fine chance he B Cing my ass somewhere or somehow I don't want it saw.

I start my walk up the hill toward Monroe, then cut the

alley behind Mark's Hots by the dumpsters to come out in front of Munchie's Bar. I make the left there, walk to the end of Monroe and cross the rusty cage bridge by the projects. I like to stand in the middle of the bridge and look at the cars under me on the city loop, and when I'm doing good I find a nice car and get a mouth of spit together in time to nail it. Once when I was a kid I got a convertible that way, and I pray to Jesus that someday I will have that much luck again. Today I get nothing though, so I move over onto Culver Street and keep walking past the old houses.

Culver still has some of my boys, and when I see Andre I give him a look and a show as I go by, rolling my ass as long as he's watching. That's how we do. Halfway down Culver, I make the turn onto Lyell, walking past the blackout titty-bar windows. I got to change my walk here, make it hard with no shake so them men don't reach at me. Men's safe after they been in the back rooms of the clubs, but before then they flat-out animals. I turn the corner onto Dewey and keep going hard on the broke-up sidewalk, past the bodegas, past the shelter, and trying not to jump when the repo-lot dog fly up at the fence.

Then I'm at the edge of the Alphabets, and I got to stand and listen, because I got to make it from Avenue A to Avenue D without nothing happening, and this is one place when a few little letters make a big fucking difference. This time everything quiet though, so I start my walk again, keeping it hard and steady. I walk past Avenue A, past the burnt up cook house that used to be green before it got exploded. A car go by and I try to act like I ain't there, keep my head down so they know I don't see them. Avenue B is quiet, just an old Chevy Caprice Classic backing out with its fanbelt screaming. You know that's someone who just poor, not dangerous, because dangerous people got a quiet car, not a twenty-year old piece of junk. Someone probably shoot that Chevy to shit soon just to shut it up.

Avenue C got some boys on it, but I don't know them and they don't know me, and I don't want them to know me. They start walking my way, so I try to go faster without them seeing that I spooked. If they see me walking away too fast, they gonna chase me. Mama teach me that men ain't gonna chase

you unless you walk away, but that work a bad way too, and I ain't gonna get caught by no boys in the Alphabets. I turn the corner to Avenue D and I'm there. I head up the street as the boys come 'round the corner after me, but when they see me go up the dirt line driveway to number 78, they stop and turn around.

Now that scare the shit outta me. I step off the driveway and across the pine needles to get to the path that go to the front door. On my block, you got to knock on doors to get people to hear you, 'cause ain't no one got a doorbell that ain't busted. But this house got a metal bar door on it in front of the wood door, and I can't do that. I ring the doorbell, and I hear it inside before a dog starts barking. I know it too late to hope ain't nobody there, but I still hold my breath right up 'til the door open.

I know I got the wrong house when that old man look out at me. He look like he somebody grampa, all bald-headed and brown spots, not somebody who waiting on a drop. But he open the metal bar door and say my name, Ryder, and he knowed that Tio sent me, and he tell me to call him Abuelo.

I got to say that when I see it's just this old man, I relax and all that. I'm bigger than him, and taller, and I know I faster. But I ain't all the way relax, because I know he maybe got some big man in the house, or guns, or that dog, and I ain't get to my age living in the ward and don't know that people do more sick shit to girls than I wanna think about. Still, he ask me in, 'cause he say he don't do business at his door, and his house all nice, with carpet, and the furniture got that funny plastic on it that everybody's grandma got to keep it special. I think it look nicer without the plastic, but it make sense with a dog. Dogs is nasty about they mouths and how they spit, and they worse about they other end.

But this Abuelo ain't stopping in that room. Instead, he standing in the door that go to the kitchen, and waving me in. I go in careful, because I think someone else gonna be in there, but it just him and me, and he point at an old table and tell me to sit. I sit down, and he be messing around by the fridge and stuff while I look around and want to know why he ain't just let me make my drop.

I don't usually think back. I don't usually think back to when I was living with my grandma, and how it was then before she gone, but there something about this kitchen, about how it smell, like green Palmolive soap and cigarettes and cabbage, and I get choke up, and look down at the placemat like I care that it got orange and red chickens on it, and little yellow chicks, and it one of those soft ones that all plastic on the top, but foam on the back, like I have for my place at the table when I live with grandma. I try to run my finger over the red chicken like I all interested, and try not to blink 'cause if you blink, you know the tears gonna slide out, and that just asking for pain and trouble. I got enough pain and trouble so I ain't need no more.

When I look up, he looking at me. He look nice, and like he worried, like he know I miss my grandma. So I look back at him and put my cold face on, the one I use when I got to make a house drop, so he know I ain't just some bitch who think he be my Abuelo. He talk to me. "Ryder," he say, "You look hungry. I have some nice cold cuts here, and some soup. Do you want to join me for lunch?"

I'm thinking it's a trap or something, but he start making food, and it like my grandma house. He put out pickles, and my mouth squeezed when I see those little ridgy pickles, sweet butter chips, like I ain't had in years. And he put out mustard, and mayo, all set on the table, and open up soup and put it in a pot to cook on the stove while he get out bowls. He look at me, and tell me to go wash my hands, and say it all old-style, and tell me "the lavatory" is down the hall when I ask where the bathroom at. So I go down where he point, and the bathroom just like the one at my grandma house too, on account of it kinda old, with them black and white tiles and all, but it smell clean, like bleach and soap. I shut the door and peel down my jeans to pee, and there one of them old-fashion ladies who got they dress over a roll of toilet paper on the back of the toilet, and when I wash my hands they soaps shaped like little pink shells, and the towel got lace on the ends of it. That towel so pretty that I ain't sure it for me to use, so I wipe my hands on my jeans instead.

I go back to the kitchen, and Abuelo putting the soup on the table, and it my favorite—chicken with curly noodles. He

tell me to eat while he make the sandwiches, but in a second he done with them, and brung them, and then a glass of milk for me, like I a kid still. And I feel like a kid, and drink my milk, and eat my soup, and I forget this ain't my grandma house and suck one of them curly noodles off the spoon so it twist into my mouth. When I do it he laugh and say, "Ryder, I always eat curly noodle soup that way too, but I was trying to be polite since I had a guest," and then he suck up a noodle too, through his old wrinkle mouth, and start laughing. And I don't know what to do, if I suppose to laugh at him or not, but I can't help it and smile, and he smile back. It make me feel like I somewhere good, like I back home and my grandma gonna come in and tell me to behave like a lady, and like she gonna give me a hug anyway even when I don't. It feel all like Christmas inside me, until I look back at this old man and I know that I'm there to make a drop, not because I belong in this kitchen. And the Christmas turns to sick in my throat and squeezes me so hard my eyes water up and I got to look down and try to pretend like I can swallow food past the hurt in my chest.

"Ryder, tell me about yourself," he say. "You're what, about fourteen, fifteen years old?"

I choke down the sandwich I been chewing, then say I'm thirteen, just turned thirteen two months back.

He shakes he head. "You look like a nice girl, too nice a girl to do this work for Tio. I don't approve. Do you go to school?"

I shrug. I go when I wanna go, most times when I'm wanting the breakfast or lunch they give me, but sometime I go to class for a while. I like to pretend like if I do some school, then I can get a job, a job that all fancy, like how my grandma use to do payroll for the old Country Gentleman hardware store before it close down. She let me sit with her when she work, and if I good, she get me a stick candy when she done.

Abuelo's still talking. "And does Tio protect you? Does he keep you safe from his boys?"

I laugh, because Tio worse than his boys is. "I keep myself safe. Ain't nobody touch me, because they know that ain't how I do. I in it to make money, not make a baby for some broke-ass boy who ain't gonna buy me Pampers and formula when we need it."

He smiled at me. “You’re a smart cookie. So, you’ve never let any boy touch you? I’m very impressed!”

I didn’t like him wantin’ to know if I still got my V or not, but I figure maybe he religious like my grandma and that matter to him. I just nod my head and finish my sandwich.

He stand, and start cleaning up, then come back with a cookie jar like my grandma old one. He open it for me, and I take a brownie. He say, “Yes, I’m very impressed. Too many young women today don’t know their own value—their value before God and man. However, I think you need to get away from Tio, because I know what he’s like, and I imagine you do too. I think you and I need to put our heads together, and come up with a safer way for you to support yourself and your mother. Don’t you agree?”

I ain’t never heard nothing that dumb. There ain’t no safe way for a girl my age to support nobody. She work for someone like Tio, it mostly safe. She a ho, it mostly safe. She get older, she can go someplace like McDonald’s, but everybody know they people don’t get no money unless they work at the register, so they ain’t no good reason to go through life smell all like French fries if they ain’t no money in it. Best you can do is hustle when you can and try to find some boy with money to be the baby-daddy.

He still talking about a good job, and “working with other young ladies your age,” and I half listen, but mostly I paying attention to my second brownie, ’cause chocolate is how I do, but I so warm and full that I get all sleepy, and I just tryin’ to be polite and listen. And I looking at him, but I got that feeling like I got to sleep soon, and I seeing the way he look, with white hair just showing over his ears and nowhere else, and them big earlobes old people got, and I ain’t nothing but tired, and start to put my head down on my arms on his table.

“Ryder, Ryder,” he say, “Ryder, you look sleepy. I have a guest bedroom. You could lie down and have a nap before we complete our business. Would you like that?”

I feel him lift me under my arms some, and I try to stand up, but I so sleepy everything feel soft and far away, and I tip over as he walk me down the hall, go pass the bathroom, and put me in a room with a bed with Mickey Mouse and Tinkerbell and shit on it, and I want to tell him I too old for

that, but he get me lied down and take off my boots, and put the covers over me, and I asleep.

I so asleep I ain't got no idea where I at when I wake up, but my mouth taste like it dead, and my head hurt, and my insides feel all twisting and watery, like I need to go bad. I try to go to the door, but I kinda hit the wall next to it before I can even get my hand onto the knob. I try to turn it, but it ain't moving, and I scared because I ain't sure how I get in that room with the Tinkerbell bed, and so I shake the door some to see if it pop open, but it don't.

I hear footsteps, Abuelo I think, and I realize he strong enough to put me in that bed and that scare me, and it scare me more I hear other footsteps, too.

"Is someone awake?" It Abuelo, and it sound like him, but different too, like he talking to a baby. "Does someone want to come out?"

I tell him I need to go to the bathroom bad, and he laugh, but the door start to open. I look out, and it all bright after the dark room and it hurt, but I see he got another man there, a big man. The other man take my arm and start to pull me out.

"Ryder, Mr. Wolfmann is going to take you to the bathroom. You still look sleepy and we don't want you getting hurt."

I know then this is bullshit, and that I am gonna get hurt no matter what. My ass is still half jacked up on whatever that fucker Abuelo give me, but I know when hurt's coming. That new, big man take my arms and put them behind me, and put them plastic ties that keep new shoes together on my wrists, and he make them tight before he walk me by my arms to the bathroom and shove me in. And I'm all shaking, so scared that I don't even know what I do when I feel the wet running warm down my legs, until the new man look down at it and start talking to the old man, telling him I pissed myself.

Abuelo smile at him, and it a new smile I ain't seen before from him, and it make me sick inside all over again. He say, "Well then, she'll need a shower and new clothing before you take her with you. Why don't you do the honors? Just remember, don't leave too many marks, because she's worth more untouched, without permanent damage, and I want all

the fee for her." And then Abuelo hand the new man a pair of scissors, and I just knowed that was to cut off my clothes, and to cut me if I ain't do what he say. The new man come all the way into the bathroom with me, and all I can do is look up because he so big, until when he shut the door.

"I'll lock it from the outside, Wolfmann," Abuelo say, and we both hear the sound of a chain going into place.

I look at the big man, and he look at me, and he say, "Now, do I have to take those jeans off you nicely, or do I get to cut them off?"

I say he can do it nicely. I say so, because I know they coming off no matter if I say or not, but my legs go crazy anyway and I start locking them together, kicking, and screaming, and he knock me down so my mouth hit the toilet as I fall, and I still try to move away and get all bang up against the toilet as he sit on me and show me the scissors.

"Do you see these big scissors?" he say, flashing them at me. "Do you see these big scissors? Do you see them?" he yelling, pushing me flat with one hand as he hold them up with the other. "Do you see them?" he screaming, shaking me with each word so my head keep bouncing off the floor, and I taste metal from my bust lip and see black inside my head.

I screaming too. I crying, and there snot and blood and spit coming from me as he put he hand on my front and push down again so I ain't able to breathe.

"Do you see these big scissors?" he yell again, and I screaming that I see them, I see them, and I see them, and they all I can see because he holding them so close, and I see them. He slow down shaking me then, and just hold me down, and show them to me closer.

"Say, 'What big scissors you have,'" he say. I choke on my own blood and tears, and then force out the words.

He look down and say, "Good girl."

And then he smile, and press down on me harder as he lean into my face, and then say, "All the better to cut you naked with."

The scissors cut up the front of my red hoody, and I lied on my back with my arms pinned under me, and I cried for my mama like I was a kid, and I cried for my grandma, and I cried more for me when that Wolfmann tell me that my mama

give me to Tio to pay for what she need, and Tio send me to that old Abuelo to get his money, and that what I really drop at that house was me. And that ain't nothing compare to what I cry later when this new man, Wolfmann, take me and move me somewhere else, another city even, I don't know, and what I cry after that when I start my new job with the "other young ladies my age" that that damn Abuelo talk about. And it ain't nothing compare to what I cry when I knowed how long some of them girls was there, and seen more come, and get how Wolfmann treat us once we all broke in for him.

And it ain't nothing at all to what I cry when I know that we only stay there until we is too old for the men that see us, and that where we go next is worse.

But that okay if I cry, because these men, some of them, they like they little girls to cry when they do what they do. They like us to look sweet and innocent, and they like to rip that sweetness away. They like us to look up at them when they do they nasty things on us, and they like to see our tears.

And I look. I look at every goddamn, motherfucking one of these men. I look at them hard. I be sweet to them men who want it all like that, and I cry for them that want me to cry, and I ain't never sure which way hurt me more, being fake sweet or being fake crying when I got real crying inside. But I look. I see all of them men, and I am gonna remember all they asses when I bust out of here. I'm just waitin' for the right time, and then I'm gonna get myself loose from this. All they men that look down at me and watch when I doin' what they make me do, they all say the same thing. All they men that look down say, "What big eyes you got, Ryder."

Each time I think it.

All the better to see you with.

I'm gonna get loose. I know I'm gonna go away from here. I know how to make these men pay. I'm gonna get what I need, and I give you that as a promise, because my mama teach me good. Before she get me fucked up.

Valerie Cumming

Sixteen Days

After the accident, we were told only to remember, above all else, that what had happened wasn't Martha's fault.

At first it wasn't clear that our cousin Lucy was going to die—at least it was not clear to us, to my brother and sister and me. Our mother was a nurse, and every day for two weeks she left us with an elderly neighbor while she drove to Columbus, because, she explained, it would do Lucy good to see a familiar face among those looking after her. At our mother's urging, we went through our closets and shelves looking for old toys or books that could be sent along with her and given to Lucy, to help her pass the hours. "Think about it," my mother pressed us when we hesitated or, as the days wore on and the novelty of Lucy's situation began to wear off, complained. "You can go outside and run and play and swim, but your little cousin cannot." She didn't add, "ever again," and perhaps she should have, because when Lucy's death came sixteen days after her accident it was a terrible shock to us; I had been picturing her sitting up in bed in a frilly pink bathrobe with a cast on her leg, calmly punching out paper dolls while she waited for her small body to heal.

It was Lucy's mother, our aunt Anne, who returned our things to us in the weeks following Lucy's death: stacks of coloring books and board games, construction paper get-well cards, all of them unopened, because, as we understood now, Lucy had never really regained consciousness. "Such sweet children," Aunt Anne said, gathering all of us, including even my older brother, close to her. "She was lucky to have had such thoughtful cousins."

We thanked her, because we were supposed to. We knew well enough how to be polite, how not to correct adults, especially our grieving aunt, even though we knew that she was wrong.

When I was young, I spent a lot of time imagining what it would be like to be Aunt Anne's daughter: not Martha

or Lucy, but myself, with Anne as my mother, Anne who wore long skirts and flimsy blouses while my own real mother yanked her dark hair into a bun every day and complained constantly about her weight. I imagined waking early in the morning and climbing into bed beside her, drifting off again on cool, white sheets. (Whenever I got into bed with my own mother, she complained that I kicked her and ordered me back to my own room.)

It was a mystery, is a mystery to me even now, how my cousin Martha came to be born as she was: thick around the middle but unathletic, with dark, coarse hair that took an hour to comb out after her bath. Sometimes I would ask to touch her arm or leg hair, which was thick as my father's but soft, like I imagined bird feathers would feel. She was kind, though. Even though she was older than all of us, even my brother, she would paint my nails for me sometimes, startling reds and purples that complimented her own dark coloring but on me looked wrong, almost violent, as if my fingertips had been dipped in blood. Once, behind the shed in our parents' yard during a family dinner, she taught my brother how to kiss. She was ten and he was nine, so she had to bend over slightly to do it. The rest of us were allowed to watch, but only from a distance, and afterwards, we practiced on each other, rolling in the grass and laughing until the mosquitoes came out to feed at dusk and our parents called us inside to safety. Three months later, when Lucy was dead and Martha was gone, I thought back often to that night, trying to remember the feel of Lucy's lips on mine, the last time I had ever seen her; but like the mosquitoes and the grass and the laughter of our parents echoing from the house it is all gone now, a memory distant almost from the moment it was made.

It has become tempting, in recent years, to remember Lucy differently from how she really was; or rather, to remember only certain aspects of Lucy's personality while selectively forgetting others. That she was often cruel, that she was spoiled, were traits that, after her death, we never talked about. The way that, if you had a toy or a treat and she wanted it, she would pinch you and try to take it; the way the adults, charmed by her fine blonde hair and blue eyes big as saucers,

would only laugh and shake their heads as if it couldn't be helped, or worse, suggest that you give in*: She's just a baby; be a big girl, why don't you, and share with the baby*. Had she lived to her teenage years and beyond, no doubt, terrorizing her parents the way all children do at that age, she would perhaps not have been remembered quite so fondly; or at any rate, remembered, at least, as a person flawed. But as it is she exists now only in photographs, the washed-out Polaroids of that era, all blue eyes and sunsuits and dimples: before acne, before boys, before big feet or breasts or body odor could tarnish our image of her. We pull out the old, crumbling albums now, we show them to our children, we speak reverentially—*Lucy, who died when she was very young*—and we watch our children gaze at her, seeing her exactly as we did, the way we always will: the unspoiled, unblemished image of childhood, of youthful innocence.

For this, I suppose, we envy her.

Our mother never told us how she spent her hours with Lucy, the details of how exactly she cared for her during her long last days. Was she in a hospital, which seems likely now, or even a hospice? Or is it possible that, despite her medical training, our mother did not go to Columbus to care for Lucy at all?

After my mother's death of a pulmonary embolism at age 63, a note came, one of many such notes but special, because this one was postmarked Texas and came from our cousin Martha, whom we had not seen or heard from since childhood. She wrote that she was saddened to hear of our mother's passing, that she had always looked up to and respected our mother; that she had, in fact, chosen to become a nurse out of reverence to our mother, who had shown her such kindness in the weeks leading up to her younger sister's death. Was it possible, then, that our mother had made the four-hour round trip each day not to nurse Lucy but to keep Martha company, support and love her, even as Martha's own family fell to pieces around her?

We return to the old albums, search the fading photographs for answers. But the faces are, without exception, opaque, posed, smiling. They reveal nothing.

Later, we argued—my brother, my sister, and me—about who told us the story, Lucy's story, if it was our mother or our largely-absent father or Martha herself; more than likely, though, no one told us; we pieced it together, I am certain now, from what we managed in those days to overhear of adult conversations, the adults, in their grief, forgetting what was to be revealed and what kept secret, buried along with Lucy in the tiny metallic-looking silver casket. The story, or what we know of it, goes like this: Martha and a neighbor friend were walking to the swimming pool, six blocks away; when Aunt Anne called to them to take Lucy along, too, they ignored her, not wanting the smaller girl to tag along; Lucy, chasing after them anyway, forgetting to look both ways before crossing a side street, was hit by an oncoming car and killed: not instantly, though damaged beyond repair in a way that led to her inevitable death sixteen days later.

This is the telling of the story as we always understood it, as we accepted it, as we passed it down as a warning to our own children, the story serving either the moral of *Look both ways before you cross the street* or as an admonishment of the older children to look after the younger ones, because *How would you like such a thing to haunt you for the rest of your life?* It is an effective tool; our children get along better than most, the older always taking a guiding hand with the younger siblings and cousins; at reunions we are happy to sit back with a drink in the shade and watch them all play together, in relative peace, the others wondering—I'm sure, as I do—how much of this harmony can be traced to lessons learned by past generations, to Lucy's—or rather, Martha's—legacy?

But in truth there is much we don't know about that day, much that is taken away, added, imagined with each retelling. In my mind, for example, Lucy calls out for her older sister, running down the sidewalk in her bathing suit with her towel flying behind her; Martha resolutely ignores her, tightens her hand on the neighbor girl's arm. Which is to be forgiven; why, in fact, was the child her responsibility to begin with, she little more than a child herself? What household task was my aunt attending to at that moment, what laundry or vacuuming, that kept her from being able to supervise the girl on her own?

I imagine it: the squealing tires, the long moment it must have taken Martha, an eternity really, to force herself to turn around and look.

It is possible, as my brother has always believed, that she did not even hear the little girl calling to her, lost as she was in conversation with her friend, the anonymous neighbor girl. It was possible, too, that both she and Aunt Anne underestimated, fatally, the potential dangers of that road, which had once been a quiet residential street but now, thanks to the development of a shopping complex a few blocks west, had become flooded with traffic. It was perhaps even the roaring of these passing cars, my brother argues, that kept Martha from hearing her younger sister's pleas in the first place.

Possible, yes. But in my mind's eye, I see Martha tightening her grip on the neighbor girl's arm, painted fingernails digging almost painfully into flesh; I hear Lucy's cries just as I have heard them so many times, infinitely it seems, in my own parenthood: the incessant begging of children for attention; for you to look, to help, to tie this, to loosen that, to want, or hurry; to play, or bandage an invisible wound, or fix a broken toy, or soothe away a nightmare. How many times have I myself ignored those small voices, Lucy's voice: feigned sleep, or sent one back to bed with only the most cursory reassuring kiss, or left one to cry a few extra minutes in his crib while I finished a task, or put one on the bus to school despite a low-grade fever because I couldn't bear having them with me in the house all day? It is impossible for me to blame Martha without condemning myself, and human nature in general; still, in my mind's eye, at unexpected and unpredictable moments, I see them there, feel them: the fingernails, digging in.

It would not be fair to say that we hated Lucy, or Martha, any more than it would be fair to say that we loved them; it is true only that we were children thrown together based solely on a vague, shared blood; that we knew them only because our mothers had once, in a black-and-white time long ago, shared a childhood; we pitied them sometimes, and were jealous of them others, and were, the rest of the time, largely

indifferent, in the way that children are always indifferent to something that doesn't immediately concern them.

We were indifferent, too, to the new baby our aunt Anne gave birth to two years after Lucy's death, though our mother made it clear to us that while all new babies are a blessing, this one was particularly so, because she would give our aunt and uncle "new life," as my mother put it. Maybe knowing this about the baby—that she was more wanted than most, maybe even more loved than most, certainly more loved than Martha or any of the rest of us—solidified our indifference into something that bordered on cruelty; when we drove to Columbus to meet the new baby, only days old, and take our turns sitting in our uncle's large easy chair to hold her, our mother fluttering around us, reminding us to support the neck, none of us made the slightest attempt to kiss the baby on her tiny, prunish lips, or even to smile at her. "Will you call her Lucy 2?" my younger sister asked, no doubt thinking of the succession of cats we kept in those days, all invariably named Patches, one right after another; still, there was the hint of cruelty in the question. My mother went pale and reached to remove the baby from my sister's arms, while Aunt Anne, her mouth disappearing in a thin, tense line, informed us that, no, the baby would be called Penelope, which meant—though we had no idea why she wished us to know this—*faithful*.

We shrugged, nodded; the name made no difference to us, any more than the child herself did. We asked if we could go outside to play and our mother said of course we could, but to take Martha with us, Martha whom none of us up to that point, my brother included, had thought to ask about. When we found Martha she was in her room, sitting on her bed, writing in what looked like a diary. She and Lucy had shared a room at the time of Lucy's death, and the bed that had once been Lucy's remained as it had been: the same Holly Hobbie throw pillows and blue gingham spread, the stuffed animals that had been arranged at the foot for as long as we could remember. Martha looked overgrown and ridiculously out of place in such a room; she wore jeans and black lipstick, which gave her a dramatic, almost attractive look, though she was even heavier now than we remembered her. When we asked her to come outside, she surprised us all by shrugging

and standing up to follow. “Anything to get away from that screaming baby,” she said, and we all nodded, though in truth none of us had heard a sound.

Years later, at Penelope’s wedding—she was by then called Penny, though we her family always seemed unable to refer to her by anything but her full name—my brother and sister and I stole outside behind the parish hall after all of the toasts and made one of our own, to Martha, who by then had married a handsome farmhand and was living somewhere in Texas with him and their four children. The children were said to be beautiful, as was the husband, though none of us had ever seen a picture and could not imagine how dowdy Martha had managed it. But we missed her that day, a little; after all, she was our only cousin, because Penelope didn’t count, Penelope who was a decade younger and spoiled even worse than Lucy had been, who spent, we had heard, nearly fifty thousand dollars on a wedding and cried when the roses in the boutonnieres were pale pink rather than peach. “Do you remember,” my brother asked us, “that day after Penelope was born, when we went to visit them in Columbus, when we all got bored and went outside to play?”

My sister said she didn’t. I did, I said, but only in patches.

He told us that he and Martha, teenagers at the time, or almost, had gone around the side of the house to smoke, and she had told him that she was leaving as soon as she could and was never coming back; she’d go to New York or California and be a model or a waitress or a whore, whatever it took to get away. She had to, she told him. Left in that house—*alone in that house*, was how she phrased it, which puzzled my brother—she would die.

My sister and I sipped our gin and tonics, made especially for us by the handsome young bartender who stood at the open bar wearing an ill-fitting tuxedo. The band was playing a Jimi Hendrix song, and everyone inside was laughing and clapping along: Penelope’s dance with her father, the father of the bride. My sister glanced back toward the hall and I knew she was thinking of the handsome bartender. I asked, “What did you say, when she told you all of that?”

He shrugged, swallowing down the rest of his drink. I watched the Adam’s apple bob in his throat. He’d grown

skinnier since his own wedding, the arrival of his own two children. I wondered if he ever thought about that afternoon before Lucy died, kissing Martha back behind the shed, that day before the whole world tilted and collapsed; I wondered if he even remembered it, and if he didn't, if it had ever really happened at all.

"I told her that I thought it would be cruel, to let her parents lose two children." He grinned at us sheepishly, apologetically, in a way I hadn't seen him do in years, since the days of sneaking in past curfew and house parties while our parents were out of town. "She handed me the rest of the cigarette and walked away. And she hasn't spoken a word to me since."

I didn't ask him how often he thought about that day, or how much it still bothered him, the way we never ask each other about our marriages, or our lives, or if we are happy. I only nodded, and looked down into my empty glass, and when I suggested that it might be time to go back inside, to rejoin the party, neither of them disagreed.

At our mother's funeral, we half expected to see her: not at the viewing perhaps, but at the service itself, slipping late into the back, maybe with one or two of her children, who were now themselves nearly grown. But she never came. Penelope, or Penny as she prefers now to be called, read a poem, and I don't remember what it was except that afterwards, as she took her seat, a few people clapped, despite the fact that you are not supposed to do that sort of thing at funerals or inside churches in general.

It was odd, we told each other later, half-drunk at the wake, that she had not come. Had not even sent flowers.

(Just as we had noticed that it was odd, maybe even a little cruel, that out of her own four daughters she had not named even a single one of them Lucy.)

But then, a few days after the service, it arrived in the mail, to our mother's address, though bearing our names: a note, a simple cream-colored card with a silver *M* embossed onto the bottom corner. No photo enclosed, though we had all hoped for one, would have forgiven the implied lack of impropriety for even the briefest glimpse into who she had become.

Such incredible kindness, Martha wrote—her handwriting slant and perfect, the way our elementary school teachers' had been, the way we told ourselves we remembered our aunt Anne's to be—*I've never forgotten it. How she helped me, in those awful long days after Lucy's accident*.

Her kindness.

I don't know which of us saved the note—my brother probably, though after his divorce he has always lived simply, in small bare apartments void of clutter; it's difficult to imagine him exhibiting such sentimentality—but I would like to have it now, to reread it, to run my fingers along the marks Martha made with her pen: the ink now faded, absorbed into the cheap cardstock of the note. It has occurred to me only now, relatively late in life, that those of us who remember Lucy are now few and far between: our parents are dead, and Lucy's; my sister has forgotten, though she claims she hasn't; Penelope, in her honey-blonde middle age, never knew at all. Photos, faded or water damaged, have been spread thinly, passed from relation to relation, sometimes lost; aged albums crumble and separate at the spines; gaps exist where images removed for school projects and family trees have never been replaced. I would like to see Martha's letter now, to hold it in my hand, touch my tongue to the looping whorls of the "*L*." In the way that Lucy has been forgotten so will we all soon be forgotten, and the rest of us even more swiftly, because the rest of us, unlike Lucy, have no dramatic story associated with us, no warning, no moral. There is only a life, simply lived; photographed moments and scraps of notes; moments shared at weddings and funerals until new moments, populated with new characters, come along to replace them.

If we are lucky, there is forgiveness.

And at the end, at the most: kindness.

Audrey Kalman

Before There Was a Benjamin

"Maaaaaamaaaaaa!"

Benjamin's voice streams into Melinda's ear, a pure vibration of pain palpable even from downstairs. She meant only to check on the roasting chicken, only for a moment, but the peace of the kitchen captivated her and she lingered.

"Mama's coming, Ben," she calls from halfway up the stairs. She knows that the scream, as piercing and pained as it is, signifies nothing more dire than frustration. And yes, here he is, just where she left him on the floor of his room, surrounded by Lego bricks. The spire they have been working on has toppled from its base onto the carpet. Benjamin sits helpless before the disaster. He must have pressed too hard trying to add onto the top. Tears smudge his cheeks.

"Maaaamaaa," he says again, more softly.

"Mama's here, honey," Melinda says, and tries not to sigh audibly or let visions of other ten-year-old boys playing with their friends cloud her mind. "We'll make it again. I'll steady it and you can put more bricks on top."

The Lego Disaster leads with wearisome inevitably to the Chicken Disaster. Melinda becomes more absorbed than she imagined would be possible in constructing the delicate blue-red-blue-red-blue tower. Benjamin insists on the precise alternation of colors. Her job becomes picking out and setting aside the single blue and red bricks. Benjamin's fingers work clumsily—singles being the most difficult to manipulate and the most tenuously connected—and the tower collapses twice more before rising successfully.

Only when she opens the door of Benjamin's room and smells burnt rosemary and the choking char of chicken skin does she remember.

"Shit! Shit, shit, shit!" Melinda covers her mouth, but it's too late.

"Shit what, Mama?" Benjamin asks.

"The chicken. Dinner. Burnt to a crisp."

"Can I see?"

"Oh, sure. Let's everybody ogle Mama's mistake."

Benjamin trails her down the stairs into the kitchen, which is anything but a sanctuary now. Smoke creeps from around the oven door. Benjamin's presence lends foreboding to the room's ordinary objects: the knives in their wooden block, the corkscrew beside the wine rack. Melinda would give anything for a glass of wine, but it's barely past three and there's no drinking until six-thirty when Peter gets off work. That's the deal they made. Peter makes the money and carries the health insurance. Melinda cares for Benjamin when he gets home from his program, makes the dinner, and forgoes mid-afternoon glasses of wine. She needs to remain vigilant as long as she's the only adult in the house. Only now she has to figure out something else for dinner because she can see, when she opens the oven door, that the chicken is as ruined as she feared.

Long before there was a Benjamin, Melinda saw a man playing guitar. The man's black hair rippled down his back. A silver and turquoise bracelet flashed on his wrist when he strummed.

Had Melinda believed in either divinity or retribution, she would have thought Benjamin must be divine retribution for—what, exactly? Perhaps for the abandon with which she gave herself to Peter that first night, combing his long hair with trembling fingers, or for their years-long courtship, or the years-long, fitful process of conceiving their only son.

Nobody ever thinks theirs will be the star-child. That's what Tara calls Benjamin. Tara met Benjamin when he was just a baby. He looked up at her from his blue flannel swaddle and gave her the first smile he ever gave anyone. Later, three years old and still pre-verbal, he managed somehow to communicate that he wanted Tara to push him in the stroller. When words finally came, he asked for her, *Auntie Tata*, and Auntie Tata she remained.

Tara was from Peter's life before, a singer with short spiky hair and a winsome overbite. Peter swore up and down, even all these years later, that he'd never slept with her. Melinda tolerated Tara for a long time because she was part of Peter's

life. Then she started to like Tara. Gradually, the triangle realigned. Now the two women are friends, often bemoaning Peter's obtuse male energy. These days, Melinda sees Tara during the day while Peter is at work and doesn't mention Tara to him when he comes home.

She calls Tara to report the Chicken Disaster.

"Oh, sweetie," Tara says. "I'm so sorry. I'll bring you a deli chicken on my way to rehearsal tonight. Peter won't know the difference."

Benjamin grabs Tara's hand the moment she walks in and leads her upstairs to show off the Lego creation. Melinda stays downstairs and pours the wine, which is okay now that there's another adult in the house.

"Ben, do you want to watch your show?" Melinda asks when he comes downstairs with Tara. He jumps and pinwheels his arms, screeching, "My show! My show!"

In the kitchen with her glass of wine, her friend, and the purchased chicken in the scrubbed-out oven, *on low*, Melinda feels for a moment like the mother she once imagined she would be.

"You think I shouldn't let him watch," she says.

Tara stretches her arms overhead with a cat-like languor available only to single, child-free women. "Hey, sweetie, you do what you gotta do. But he's special, that one."

They have some variation of this conversation every time they meet. Tara has always seen beneath the skin of the world. Her eyes, when she looks at Benjamin, seem sharp and coppery, like the colored spikes of her hair.

"You should bring him to a *real* show," Tara says. "I've got some local ones coming up."

"Are you kidding? He couldn't sit still."

"He wouldn't have to. He can dance with everybody else."

Melinda lets the idea rest without responding, but the picture of her excitable son at a Daughters of the Milky Way concert, tossing his hefty body into the swaying crowd, stays with her.

Before there was a Benjamin, according to Tara, there was a swirling colorful energy that danced through the universe, connected with all other energies, loved and loving,

empathic, in-place, at home. Benjamin's troubles began only after he was embodied, only after sperm met egg and created the specific physical manifestation that became *Benjamin* and slipped—nay, struggled—into this world on a frigid December morning a full month before he had been scheduled to arrive.

Melinda recalls those first weeks of Benjamin's life: how startled she was every time she found his Isolette in the NICU and him encased within, sensors monitoring his breath and a tube delivering him food as if he'd been hatched, not birthed. How she sat in a rocking chair beside the Isolette, hooked like a cow to the rhythmically whining breast pump, extracting milk that was fed to him first through the tube and then with an eye dropper and finally from a bottle. How, when the doctors declared him well enough to go home and Peter pushed her in a wheelchair with Benjamin in her arms down to the hospital's entrance she felt an overwhelming desire to stay in the place that had kept her child alive for two weeks, as cold and isolating as it had been, because surely at home her ineptitude would kill him.

Melinda anticipates that Peter will think taking Benjamin to a concert is a terrible idea. She brings it up on a Sunday morning, which didn't used to be a good time to discuss anything since he would be hung over and spaced out till late afternoon. Now, as the manager of the electronics department at Great Gadgets, he has to maintain a schedule. He gets up before Melinda on weekends and takes the first shift with Benjamin, letting his son help make pancakes.

Melinda comes into a kitchen dusted with flour. She presses her palms into her eyes.

"There's coffee," Peter says, partially redeeming himself.

When Benjamin was four and had just said "Dada" for the first time, Peter played his last gig and gave himself a haircut. Melinda remembers watching her husband through the open bathroom door as he gathered up the sheaf of hair and went after it with scissors. He might have needed comforting but even then, only four years into motherhood, she was fresh out of extra cheer. Peter dropped the sheared hair into the bathroom wastebasket and ran his hand through what remained on his head. He'd had to go in for a professional

trim before he interviewed at Great Gadgets.

Melinda sips her coffee and wonders what happened to the Melinda who followed Peter from gig to gig, sleeping in two-star motels or sometimes on the bus. It's obvious if she thinks about it: motherhood happened. And not just garden-variety motherhood but one defined by the revelation of who Benjamin was and what he would demand of her. She acquired expertise she didn't want, insisting on appointments with specialists, arguing with the insurance company, negotiating the public school bureaucracy. She spent hours in plastic chairs outside the principal's office like a naughty child. She maintained a dossier of experts and resources. She experienced the swell of hope accompanying each step forward, the subsequent evaporation of hope, the acceptance that there was no hope.

And the bills, always the bills. The arguments with Peter about whether she should go back to work to help with the cost of Benjamin's program. Running every little bit of her son's life, her husband's life, her own life, scripting, managing, managing, until she wasn't managing at all.

Melinda tries to picture Peter's long hair as she watches him frying pancakes. Probably better it's short; who would want hairs falling in the batter? But imagining her husband as he once was is the only way she can bring herself to talk about the concert. Maybe, if she presents the idea in just the right way, he'll think it's brilliant. Maybe he'll even come with them.

"So, Benjamin has been getting more into music lately," she says. She waits a moment before adding, "We've been listening to some of your songs."

Peter drags the spatula across the pan, no doubt scratching bits of Teflon into their food. "Oh really?"

"And he's been wanting to fool around on the keyboard."

The electric keyboard has sat for years in the corner of the living room. Peter bought it when Benjamin was a year old. He would hold his son on his lap and guide Benjamin's fingers from note to note. As soon as Benjamin could move, he slithered off his father's lap and crawled away.

"Haven't you, honey?" Melinda asks her son, who is forking pancake into his mouth. Then, to Peter, "Tara's playing in a few weeks. I was thinking he might enjoy that."

Peter jiggles the pan. "A concert," he says, as if she had suggested taking their son to a leper colony.

Melinda turns to Benjamin. "Would you like to go to a concert, Ben? And hear *live music*?"

She knows this tactic is unfair, eliciting her son's enthusiasm to override her husband's reservations, but she feels suddenly trapped and spiteful. Who is Peter to tell them what to do when his interactions with Benjamin are limited to Sunday morning pancakes followed by a cartoon marathon?

Tara's idea that became Benjamin's desire has become Melinda's need. She must take Benjamin to this concert.

"Yefff, confert!" Benjamin says enthusiastically through a mouthful of pancake. Peter says nothing, and the possibility that they might all go together evaporates.

Before there was a Benjamin there was a flawed world hurtling toward ruin. Who would want to bring a child into such a world? Peter asked, first in his songs and then directly of Melinda. She had no good answer but the ringing imperative of her biology. Feeling more than thinking, feeling she must*, or else*, Melinda sweet-talked Peter into ditching the birth control, as women have always done who are driven by needs more urgent than their need for love.

Years later, seeking an explanation for Benjamin, she read about Indigos and Crystals and Rainbows on Web sites with names like mystarchild.com and starchildren.net. *Star Children are the hope of humanity.* Melinda went hot, then cold, then hot again with the revelation that forces other than biology might be at work. Knowing what he had the potential to become, how could she *not* have brought Benjamin into this world?

She kept her knowledge hidden from Peter. For all the mind-expanding drugs and body-shattering rock 'n' roll of his youth, Peter had turned into a person who believed only what he could see or touch or hear, only what could be measured. "Charlatans," he snarled when she made an appointment for Benjamin with a holistic nutritionist. If she mentioned an herbal supplement that might improve their son's ability to sit still, Peter said, "Show me the studies." Melinda added *advocate* to the list of roles she had not asked for.

Neither had she asked to be the person standing between two worlds, and yet here she was, an umbilical cord to the universe. She sometimes played a version of the *Would you rather . . . ?* game with herself. Only instead of the absurd dichotomies posed by her teenage friends—would you rather get eaten alive by a lion or pushed out of a plane without a parachute?—she wondered: would she rather have given birth to a son afflicted with cancer? cystic fibrosis? blood that wouldn't clot? Melinda even began contemplating the value of a higher power who would have borne responsibility for Benjamin's condition and could have promised a state of perfect grace.

Melinda uses her imagination, too, to project Benjamin into a future without her, as if anxiety could forestall disaster. Will he ever get a job? Find an apartment? Make friends? Fall in love? She now lives in a future she failed to imagine during that first blessed year with roly-poly Benjamin, when nobody worried that he did not speak because he was not yet expected to and the hope had still been there that he would grow into the boy of her imagining.

Before there was a Benjamin there was the potential energy of a Benjamin: drawn, lifted, poised with promise at the edge of this world.

Melinda decides on a Friday night concert, for no reason other than it means she won't have to see Peter before they leave. When the tickets arrive in the mail, Melinda slits the envelope with a long silver letter opener and slips them under a folder of coupons in the kitchen drawer. She looks forward to going and relishes sneaking around to do it. She tries to recall the last time she and Peter went to a concert but her mind fills with a jumble of images without dates or context.

The concert will end well past Benjamin's bedtime. She tries to get him to take a nap after she picks him up from his program but he won't lie down. She runs through her little bag of survival tricks. Building him a Hot Wheels track buys her a half hour while he races every car in his collection around it. Then he requires her help for an hour picking up the cars he has dumped onto the floor. Each one must be

examined and categorized and aligned on the shelf in an exact but incomprehensible order. These obligations seem less burdensome with the promise of the concert ahead. Melinda hums a song from Tara's latest CD as she lowers an orange Chevy beside a blue Dodge.

At five-thirty, Melinda feeds Benjamin dinner. Her already-knotted stomach won't allow her to eat. Daughters of the Milky Way goes on at nine, after the warm-up band, and the club is an hour's drive from their house. It seems they ought to have plenty of time, but Benjamin dawdles over the chicken nuggets and Melinda begins to worry they will still be home when Peter arrives. She glances at her watch as Benjamin pushes the last of the crumb-crusted bits into a smear of ketchup and then hustles him to the car without even washing his hands.

Melinda plays Tara's CD as they drive. She glimpses Benjamin in the rearview mirror, swaying to the beat.

"We'll see Auntie Tata in a little while, honey," Melinda says. "We might not get to talk to her, though. She'll be up on stage and we'll be watching her."

Benjamin continues bobbing his head as if he's nodding. He needs a haircut—his bangs swish in front of his eyes—and Melinda sighs with the ceaseless effort of keeping her son anchored to this world. She has to cut his hair herself; he can't tolerate sitting in the barber chair or the feeling of the hair-catching apron cinched around his neck. She cuts in dribs and drabs, a snip here while he pushes his toy boats around the bath, a clip there while he drifts to sleep. And now it dawns on her just how stupid she may be to take him to the concert, this child whose tolerance for the unfamiliar can be calibrated in millimeters, who is driven to distraction by the everyday: the elastic of his socks, the label in the collar of his shirt. Melinda can hear Peter's *I told you so.*

But it's too late to turn back. She promised her son a concert, *live music*, and Tara expects them. Melinda clings to the presence of Auntie Tata. Benjamin will be okay because Tara will be there.

It's dark when they arrive and Melinda finds parking in the small lot behind the club. She begins to understand that the evening is unraveling when she cannot coax Benjamin from

the car. She somehow failed to consider his unpredictable propensity to become an immovable object, incapable of being acted upon by any force. She unbuckles his seat belt and stands beside the open car door. The CD is off but Benjamin tilts his head from side to side as if still keeping the beat. Melinda sighs loudly.

"Benjamin. Honey."

She knows from experience that nothing she feels like doing will be effective: cajoling, reasoning, pleading, reprimanding, yelling, or tugging his arm. Reluctantly, she shuts the car door and leans against it. *I can be a star-child too,* she thinks, a being oblivious to the physical world and the constraints of time. If she acts as if she has all the time in the universe, then Benjamin will catch up with her, but it's a tricky game. If he senses her exasperation he will remain rooted to his seat.

The silvery streetlight is too faint to illuminate her watch but she guesses it must be close to nine. She looks up at the stars, which tell her nothing of the passage of time. *Good,* she thinks. *Just as well. Now we can turn around and go home—no harm done.* At that moment Benjamin opens the car door, pressing it outward against Melinda's body.

The battle is not won yet. She holds his hand and they cross the gravel parking lot, slowly, listening to every crunch underfoot. She hears something else as they approach the building: the thump and strum of the warm-up band playing what must be its final number. The journey across the gravel takes them the full length of the song. Then, just as she thinks they are home free, Benjamin stops abruptly at the edge of the parking lot.

Melinda realizes he is transfixed by an arrangement of rocks around the base of a lamp post. What does he see there? The invisible energy of stone, a sprite darting in the shadows? Again Melinda waits. The music ends. She hears a door open nearby and the grind of footsteps. A man materializes in the indigo shadow of the building only a few yards from where Benjamin crouches.

She's afraid for only a moment. Then she begins staring at the man as intently as Benjamin stares at the rocks. He looks a little like Willie Nelson with a craggy face and a

ponytail down his back. He might be an incarnation of Peter twenty years hence.

The man is smoking a joint, something Melinda hasn't done since her early days with Peter. The smell of marijuana transports her instantly the way smells do, back to one of a hundred dim clubs where she sits at the bar waiting for Peter's band to go on. If she looks away from Benjamin it is possible to remember a time before there was a Benjamin, when she was simply *Melinda*, an agent of her own destiny, a container big enough for whatever emotion might pour through her, and not buffeted by the universe speaking through this fucking star-child it sent to test her.

The man approaches and holds out the joint. Benjamin is looking so hard at the rocks that he doesn't notice the man or his offering. Melinda thinks, *Ick—it's got his saliva all over it* and *I have to drive home later* and *I've heard weed is stronger now than it used to be*. These thoughts dissolve as she reaches to accept the joint. She can't see the color of the man's eyes or his hair except that it seems to shine with streaks of silver in the streetlight and shimmers through her tears.

The smoke sears her lungs. She holds it in for a heartbeat, then lets it stream out the side of her mouth before handing the joint to the man and turning back to her son.

"Benjamin, honey," she says. "Auntie Tata's music is going to start soon."

She grabs Benjamin's hand and pulls. He's a lump, as inert and fixed as the rocks he's examining. The man takes a final toke and tosses the joint to the ground, crushes it under his boot. A cowboy boot. All that's missing is the ten-gallon hat, but he has no hat, just his long, beautiful, shining silver hair, which Melinda wants suddenly to touch.

The man's voice shocks her back to the dilemma at hand.

"May I?"

He gestures toward Benjamin.

Now she has been more than stupid; she has been irresponsible. She'll have to explain to Peter not only the bone-headedness of bringing Benjamin here but of smoking pot and standing by while some stranger abducted him.

But a kidnapper would not ask for permission, nor would

he bend down beside Benjamin and stare with him at the rocks as if expecting them to move or speak. She watches the two of them concentrate on the rocks. Their forms make a constellation of shadows.

From inside the club Melinda hears the first twangs of Tara's electric guitar followed by the clash of the high-hat. The melody of the song they have just been hearing on the car's stereo now bleeds through the club wall as Daughters of the Milky Way begins the first set. Tara will be scanning the crowd for them.

Benjamin turns toward the man. She sees his face uplifted in profile. The man spreads his arms and Benjamin moves into his embrace. The man stands with Benjamin wrapped around him like a baby monkey.

Melinda looks up at the sky and sees the actual Milky Way. At that moment, she can almost believe her son came from out there, that he is the star-child she sometimes wishes he were. She can almost believe that before there was a Benjamin there was a Melinda distinct and differentiated, separate but not alone, secure in her own embodiment. She can almost believe in signs and signals, in the thrilling happenstance of a man who might have come to her in a dream but instead comes to her in a gravel parking lot while inside her friend sings about stardust and substantiation.

The man looks at Melinda and nods toward the door of the club.

Benjamin lifts his head from the man's chest.

"Mama, come," he commands, and she does.

Carli Lowe

What We Had in Common

We sit, backs against the concrete wall, eyes averted from the bars. Bea, with her soft hands and baffling vocabulary, is nothing like the rest of us, but that will not save her. The soldiers only care that we are not like them, however different we may be from each other. Bea's only been in a few months. I've been here four times that, but she's already taken to staring at the opposite wall and not answering when she's spoken to. How precious. She was a psychology student before it all started. I think she's cracked. I saw the way they were looking at her this morning. Her sentence will soon be carried out. They take the weakest first. Weakest is the one thing no one has ever called me.

Today Bea is talking. She is telling me about her mother. She speaks with an easy admiration I've never heard my own daughter cast upon anyone. Bea's mother was tall and graceful and defiant. It is, supposedly, the strength of her mother's memory that sustains her. It sounds like her mother may have been a bit too high profile. Probably taken in the early days, and Bea sent to live with wealthy relatives. That's how things usually happen for these elites. They are born with the privilege to choose whether or not to get involved with the problems the rest of us inherit—our only heirlooms. But it doesn't matter. Bea will soon meet the same fate as everyone else. My own daughter doesn't seek protection. She knows she can rely only on herself. No one has ever come to her rescue. I made sure of that. And there's no reason for her to think anyone will now. With any luck she has lived long enough to lie about who she is and what she believes—to deny having any connection to me. She was always too clever for idealism.

I tell Bea not to expect to hear the charges against her. Anyway, none of us are innocent. We've all done something, even if it isn't what they think. And, above all, our most undeniable crime is who we are and what we are not. What could I say in my defense? The floor of the cell has grown

sticky from those who piss themselves at the sound of the firing squad. We all do it.

A woman gave birth yesterday: small-boned Melina, who has been talking trouble since she came to us. She is a real revolutionary. She arrived about the same time as Bea. Yesterday she had been talking about all the great things her child would grow up to be. Mel thought to be allowed to raise her child in prison up to a certain age, and planned to teach her the values of the struggle, or at least be allowed to hold her child close for the first few years of its life, because what kind of monsters would take an infant from a mother's arms? We all nodded. No one contradicted her. It is a blessing to have hope if you can. She was on her feet, fists raised, talking about all the wisdom she would bestow upon a daughter who would go on to change the world in her stead, and the water rushed from between her legs. The rest of us went to her side to help her through as best we could. It was a boy. They let her hold him for a full day before their sense of generosity gave out. She hasn't spoken since they took him away this morning. Hope has a high cost, and only gets you so far.

I am tempted to ask her if it was worth it. If she had known this pain was coming would she have done something to avoid it? Does she feel any regret bringing a baby into the world as it is? I keep thinking about the baby's small hands closed into fists, his skin-and-bones body wrapped in pathetic scraps torn from the best parts of his mother's stained skirt, her screaming through the pain of childbirth, and her screaming through the bars as he was taken away. I can't imagine anything so small can have much hope of changing anything.

Leaning against the wall next to me, Bea is mumbling poetry under her breath. I am using one impossibly long fingernail to scrape the dirt from under the others. It won't be long before they arrive to bring us a meal, and as we are eating they will return to take someone away. This practice, killing one of us while the rest of us eat, would destroy our appetites if they did not keep us so very hungry. The thought of eating makes me feel both elation and nausea. I can't quite make out Bea's words, but I am trying to ignore her anyway. I am running out of dirt to scrape away.

Bea raises her voice. She is talking real shit now—no more poetry. She tells about how, when she was ten years old, she got herself locked out on the rooftop of the university where her parents taught before everything collapsed. She was on a school break, and since her mother and father had to teach classes she was allowed to run around the campus like it was her personal playground. In one building, she found the stairs to the roof. It was the tallest building for miles around and she felt the power of the big sky belonging only to her. "On the rooftop," she tells me, "I was the largest and strongest and wisest person on the earth. I could do anything." She had been standing up there spying on ant people for hours before she tried the door to the stairwell again and realized there was no handle on the outside. She clawed at the stubborn steel. She cut her fingers trying to force them into the space between the door and the frame, and then exhausted herself hammering with her fists and calling for help. Finally she just sat cross-legged staring at her reflection in the burnished surface. She tells me she thought she could see her future as she sat there. As the sun set and left her in darkness, she imagined herself growing old on that rooftop. She would become part of the roof, sinking into the tar beneath her, and the roof would become part of her. She would lose herself. The stars came out one by one, but she only saw them in reflection because the door had become her whole world. She heard an owl call and imagined it was circling above her, hunting. The owl never struck, but by the time the moon was overhead the door opened and her parents were there, wrapping her in their arms. Her mother was shaking.

"Enough," I say. "Please." But she has found her voice and will not be silenced by me.

She was fifteen before she started paying attention to the more important things her mother was making speeches about all across the country, she says. She comes home one night after a party with her friends and passes the doorway to the parlor. It looks like her mother is having yet another gathering of her students from the university. Tweed coats and denim jackets crowd the room. Bea wants to continue up

the stairs unnoticed, being a little dizzy from champagne and hoping to hide it, but her mother spots her and gestures for her to sit down. As she lies with her mother's arm wrapped around her, Bea listens to the ideas being passed back and forth between the great thinkers, about equality and land rights and education and religious freedom. A man sitting in the armchair catches her eye. He looks young enough to be one of her mother's older students. He has dark, curly hair that grows in volume each time he runs his agitated fingers through it, which he does often and absentmindedly. As she listens, Bea is fighting sleep, so warm from the alcohol and her mother's arm around her. Her eyelids droop. She tries to sit up straighter and stay awake. The man is looking at her, and winks. She feels the heat of a blush on her cheeks.

It was dawn before the guests began to show themselves out. The man lingered, talking to Bea's mother. He was a political writer, hoping she would read and comment on his latest book. Bea saw her mother place the manuscript on the mantle, but the man picked it up again and slipped it behind the encyclopedias on the bookshelf. "Emil," the man said, offering his hand to Bea on his way out. It was warm, and he smiled and winked again before leaving.

Bea said goodnight to her mother and pretended to go to bed, but slipped downstairs instead to retrieve the manuscript. She sat on the floor, curled up in the corner where one bookshelf met the wall, and Emil's words brought life back to her champagne deadened senses. He did no more than describe what she could see with her own eyes walking through the city, but through his words she saw it all differently. She felt amazed. She felt angry. She felt guilty and she wanted to act—to show that she wasn't part of the problem.

I have heard this story before, though it is the first time Bea has told it, and I know how it will end. I strain my eyes to look past Bea to the dim hall from which our meal will arrive.

The firing squad has been at it for a while now, though we are still waiting to be fed. Others have been taken to be executed, from other cells in other hallways. We do not know who has been taken, but we hear as each bullet takes a life. Bea turns her back to the bars, facing me, becoming a

silhouette. She continues her story, and I only listen because there is nothing else to hear besides the gunfire.

Bea says she finds out that Emil works for a small office, and she strays from her old routines so as to pass by his office daily. Every day she made up some excuse not to walk home from school with her friends, and passed alone by the newspaper. After a month of this she finally succeeds in having Emil spot her. He seems happy to see her, and invites her to have tea with him in the café on the corner, but she realizes this will be too much of a delay to explain to her mother, so she thanks him and continues on her way.

She continues to walk past the newspaper on her way home each day. Sometimes she sees Emil, but she never stops longer than it takes to exchange a few words. A few months pass before Emil stops her and says he has permission from her mother to invite Bea for tea. Her jaw drops, which makes him laugh freely, but they proceed to the cafe. She tells him she's read his book and was hoping to find some way to help, to make things better. He tells her that learning and reading more and opening her eyes are the most important things to do first. The rest will follow soon enough. She is not persuaded by his stay-in-school speech, however, and continues to press him. By the summer he has secured her an unpaid position running errands for the newspaper.

This is how it happened. In the next few years she starts studying at the university, but in all of her free time she is running errands for the newspaper or drinking tea with Emil. Her mother is invited to travel to make speeches with more frequency, and Bea's father was always one to spend days at a time at the university, often sleeping in his office, so it is Emil who checks in on Bea to see if she needs anything. Not long after that they are always together. They go to rallies. They distribute copies of Emil's books. They stand on the street corners and argue with those yet to be awakened to the cause. He says he wants to marry her, but their plans are interrupted when Bea's father disappears. Bea and her mother and Emil were gathered in the sitting room. They had heard of people disappearing, sometimes taken, sometimes going into hiding, but they couldn't imagine why Bea's introverted, mathematician father would meet this fate. They

found out through a colleague that the soldiers, on what had become routine searches of the university, had discovered compromising papers in his office. “He probably never even knew they were there,” Bea says. “Some student probably left them for him and it never crossed his mind to either read them or to throw them away.”

Emil wanted Bea’s mother to sell the house and let him take them away from the city, but Bea’s mother refused to be intimidated. She left an hour later to make another speech. She made three more speeches just that day, but she added to her usual script, including several accusations against the leaders of the country, calling them cowards and kidnappers. Torn between Emil’s appeals for caution and her mother’s cautions against sacrificing liberty for security, Bea chose her mother over Emil pretty quickly, put everything she had learned at the newspaper to use, and began distributing copies of her mother’s speeches all over the city. She stopped attending classes. She had no time for Emil and his constant pleas that she run away with him.

Bea takes a breath. Who knows, maybe she is considering the life she could have had, somewhere on a quiet mountain road in the forest—a small house with Emil, a few babies, far away from the soldiers and the searches that always provide some reason to take you.

Bea’s mother is arrested. There’s no mystery to this one. Bea and her mother are having dinner at home when the soldiers break down the door and take her away. Bea is left sitting at the dining room table looking at the chair where her mother used to be, two china plates stained by stewed tomatoes, while the soldiers tear up the house finding evidence of her mother’s subversion.

Bea was still sitting at the table hours after the soldiers left, thinking they would return at any moment to take her away too. Emil arrived. He had heard. He wanted to know if now she would finally listen to him. She cursed Emil for suggesting that she would run and hide rather than fighting for the release of her mother and father. Emil told her that her father was surely dead, and her mother would be soon if she was not already. He told her she was too young—too naive. That was the last time they ever spoke.

Then, Bea tells me, she became more determined than ever. She relentlessly sought assignments from all the major organizations. She ran secret messages across the city. She hid people in her home until they could be secreted out of town. She met a new man with a lot of ideas far more dangerous than Emil's. She continued printing her mother's speeches.

"Idiot," I say. "You were just a child. If you had stayed quiet, they might have forgotten about you."

"Maybe," she says. "But I was sure they were coming for me either way, and if they weren't coming for me I took it as proof I wasn't doing enough."

"If only there was so much logic to it," I say. "My own Cece knows when to shut up."

Bea's new boyfriend, Sid, was a bomb maker, she tells me. He was a chemistry genius. The cabinets of his shabby apartment were overflowing with commonplace materials that he knew how to combine for the purposes of death and destruction. She was attracted to how unapologetic he was—to the inarguable impact he was having. He introduces her to others in his circle and soon she has an alias and becomes the editor of their anti-government publications.

It wasn't much longer before the soldiers came for her. One day Sid disappeared, and a few days later it was her turn. Maybe she's right. Maybe they would have arrested her anyway, and at least she did something to hurt them first.

When they came for me, I made the mistake of asking what I had done. I had been so careful to do nothing. The soldiers would not answer me. I soon learned what I had in common with the others. We were poor. We said our prayers, though more out of habit than faith. We took care of our neighbors. Sometimes we had missed paying our taxes because we had to eat. There is only one main road that leads to the city from my home, and so we pass my daughter's school on the way. She is there, out front with her friends. Almost all of them have mothers sitting in the truck with me. The fathers and brothers had been taken long ago. The girls collectively reach out their arms, raise their voices in a wail and run towards us, except my daughter, who lowers her head and goes back inside the school.

They put us all in different cells. The women I was arrested with were not locked in with me, and most of the women I shared a cell with were not interested in talking. I found an empty space along the wall and sat. There was nothing to do but wait and breathe the stale air. Now and then someone felt compelled to tell her story, hoping the rest of us might be able to find where in it she went wrong. We kept track of the days by the light filtering through the doorway at the end of the hall outside the bars. That is how I know that almost a year passes before Bea is dragged in, screaming and biting, swearing revenge. She spends a few days making speeches to us, trying to rouse us to action, and shouting down the hall to where she imagines the soldiers are listening. She loses volume as the hunger and cold set in. Then one day she simply sinks to the floor on the wall beside me, falling silent for the first time. She is like that for many days, but then she starts telling me about her mother.

A soldier arrives with our meal. We seem to have four assigned to us, and he is one of our regulars. He is at least as young as Bea, short and spindly, with shaggy black hair under his cap. He needs a haircut. Before I grew so hungry I could have knocked him over with a sneeze. His black eyes are utterly opaque in the shadows of the hallway. His skin is pale to the point of transparency, as if he sees less daylight than we do, and it is shiny with sweat. I am trying to imagine how I must look to his eyes. To me, he is an overgrown insect. He pushes the tray of bowls, filled with just enough bland mush to keep us alive, under the bars. Then he watches to see that we each take our own share and no one else's. The penalty for stealing is immediate execution. This is identical to the penalty for saying we are hungry, or asking what the charges are against us, or showing disrespect in any way. Bea is frozen next to me. She does not reach for her bowl as the tray passes and the warm wetness on the floor tells me she has pissed herself again. "No hunger strikes," I whisper to her, quoting the rules, the only safe words to say when the soldiers are listening, not that it's anything to me. We're all bound to die eventually. She continues to stare. The soldier has an announcement to make. "As of today we have purged

our country of 12,000. Another 20,000 await us in prison, and more are arrested every day. The future is bright. All hail General Lamb." We salute automatically, with grave devotion. The almost empty tray is being passed back towards the bars and Bea finally reaches out to snatch her share. The soldier sniffs and walks away.

We suck the mush out of the bowls, focused on sending it into our empty stomachs. There are no spoons. Perhaps we should be grateful for bowls—that they don't just feed us out of troughs like animals. Bea is weeping now and won't eat. "Sid used to call me fearless," she says.

My daughter knew things were getting bad long before I was able to understand. She came home one day after school, flushed. There had been soldiers there questioning everyone. "We have to be careful now," she said. "The government suspects everyone, but especially the poor." I told her that maybe if the general left the people to their land, there would be no need to suspect. "You can't talk like that anymore," Cece warned me. "They blame people like us for the country's problems. That's what they're teaching us in school now. We are like a plague, they say." I heard my daughter pleading with me to be careful, to protect myself, and I knew she was right, but I also had a small sense of my duty to tear down a world in which a teacher could tell a child she was a plague.

I tried to keep my head down and behave, but I couldn't rouse myself to false love for the general, and people already knew where my sympathies lay. This was before they had taken the men. My neighbor, Franz, kept stopping me in the market, trying to hand me leaflets. I dropped or burned all of them. I read nothing. I begged him to stop, but he said, "I know you are with us. I know you feel as we do." One night he knocked on my door yelling for me to let him in. Soldiers had been searching his home when he returned from work, and he had turned and run. Now he was seeking shelter with me. I knew he knew I was home, but I blew out my candles and ignored him. When they found him he was still at my door. He wasn't arrested that night though. It wasn't until a few weeks later, and I wasn't to blame.

I did give food away in the market. I admit that. It started because of my neighbor, Ariel. We had both moved into the neighborhood around the same time—me as a young mother, and Ariel as a young bride. We grew close. She helped me with Cece when I had to work, and I kept her company when she was missing the sisters she had left behind. When she had her baby boy she began to rely on me even more. Cece and Nat grew up like siblings.

When the soldiers took her husband away Ariel came to weep at my house and I held her and made tea, and sent Cece to find Nat at school. When Cece came back to tell us the boys had been rounded up too, we all wept together. Without her husband and son Ariel struggled to find money. Her income went to her taxes, so when she was hungry I fed her. She would come by the market and I would fill her basket. After a while we started to hear that there were many women in the same situation. Some of them had joined the movement and some had not, but on a whole they had lost their men, no one would hire them, and the government was looking for any excuse to seize their property. There were a few of us in the market who stopped charging these women for food. It wasn't a movement. We didn't organize. We just knew it was the right thing to do. We also knew enough to do it secretly. I suppose that was a crime—one that put me and my daughter in danger. It seems like a strange thing to regret though—giving food to your hungry neighbors. When Cece found out, she was furious and scared. She said it was exactly the kind of thing the government would use against us. Of course she was right. Cece never speaks when she doesn't know what she is talking about.

Ariel was arrested a few days before me. Maybe they would have taken me on the same day if their truck had not already been full. I don't know whether she is still alive. Sometimes they move prisoners from other cells into ours. Sometimes I look to see if it is her.

The soldier returns. This time he is followed by the other three, and we know it is time. He slides the bars open and two walk into our cell while the other two stay in the doorway. They walk down the narrow aisle flanked by our feet as we

desperately tuck our knees under our chins to make space for them and to make ourselves smaller—to go unnoticed. There is nowhere to look but at their khaki knees. They take a woman from the back corner. One grabs her by each arm and drags her to her feet. Her eyes are wild and she tries to pull away from them, but the soldiers tighten their grip. She cannot believe her time has come. She probably thought that if she stayed quiet this would all end before they got around to her execution. She hadn't been here long enough to stop believing someone would rescue her. I never expected anyone to rescue me, and I am always ready to be taken, not that I'm in any rush. This woman faints before they get her to the door. Her legs sag onto the floor almost to her knees and the soldiers grunt as they pull her arms over their shoulders to keep from dropping her. That's it. In a few minutes we will hear the gunfire. I never knew her name.

I think today is Cece's birthday. It is hard to know for sure. I wish there was something I could do to let her know I'm thinking of her. I wonder if her day will be a happy one.

The morning before I was arrested I had asked her to stay home from school. "They're not teaching you anything," I said. "Why keep going? Stay home and help your mother." Cece got angry. She launched into a speech about small acts of defiance adding up to undeniable proof of treason in the eyes of the government. She said it was that kind of wrong thinking that the soldiers and spies were looking for. She spoke with such conviction it was hard to tell whether or not she had bought into what they were teaching her at school. When I asked she just said, "You don't understand anything," and left. That was the last conversation we had. It would be nice to know how she is spending her birthday.

There is a woman here who swears she loves General Lamb. Her family has been loyal through several generations. She even has a great uncle who fought with him in the war, side by side on the front lines. She doesn't think she belongs here with us. She has always paid her taxes, doesn't read books, and has never tried to help anyone who doesn't share her loyalty to our great leader. Her family gave up their prayers long before she was born. Her only article of faith is that the

general has the country's best interest at heart in all that he does. She sees herself as one of them, and cannot believe they would see her as part of the problem. "Do you think the soldiers will talk to me?" she asks anyone who will listen.

It is time to wash ourselves. On our way out to the yard we drop our clothes at the doorway as instructed and the soldiers wait inside as we step naked into the sunlight. My skin enjoys the light, but my eyes are burning. Bea is crying. Maybe it is too overwhelming for her. She is not the only one. We pass the hose from hand to hand. I am head-to-toe rashes and the soap is strong and searing, but the water is cool in the hot sun. I take deep breaths of air. Bea takes the hose from me when I offer. Mel is just standing nearby, arms limp, with the same expression she has worn since they took her baby. A few of us work together to wash her. We linger as long as possible with the sun, water and fresh air, but just when my eyes might be adjusting to the outside light the soldiers march us back into darkness. We are given new sacks to cover ourselves. We take our seats on the floor of our cell once again.

"Don't you think we could overtake them the next time they take us out like that?" Bea whispers to me. "Or if we all run at them when they open the cell to take someone away? There are only four of them. We are twenty."

"We are weak from hunger," I say. "And there are more soldiers in other hallways who would come running."

"We should try something," Bea says, more to the opposite wall than to me.

"Be patient," says the general-loving woman. "Trust General Lamb's justice. If you are truly innocent, you have nothing to fear."

I close my eyes and think about Cece. Maybe she did learn something at that school. Maybe she was smart enough to avoid the troubles brought by either too much or too little faith in the government. She must be working. She always finds a way to make money and survive and get what she wants. She is quietly washing dishes for a restaurant in the city—some place that allows her to stay in the back, out of sight, for most of the day. She has a friend who brought her flowers for her birthday. When she gets off work she goes to view the

government approved movies. She salutes the soldiers when they pass on the street. She stays in crowded places where no one will look at her too closely. She goes to sleep in a tiny apartment, with no books, without saying her prayers lest anyone should overhear, and she will sleep peacefully until the next day comes, and the day after that, and the day after that.

At meal-time, Bea finishes her mush with too much enthusiasm. I am watching her. She is plotting. The light in the hall is a little brighter than usual. It must be getting close to summer.

"Sid believed that death was preferable to a life subservient," Bea says. "What is more subservient than being a prisoner meekly waiting for someone to bring an end to your life?"

We stack the empty bowls next to the bars, to be removed later. We have licked every drop clean. We resume our places lining the walls. There is more room now than there was before. No one has been brought to us since the last woman was taken. I stretch my legs out in front of me.

Sometimes such an absence is not filled for weeks, but now the soldiers appear in the hall, all four, herding a shadow towards us. The bars slide open and she is shoved inside, falling to her knees. She is tall. She will take up too much room. And she is filthy. Bea is looking at this woman and her face looks broken. There is anger and fear in her eyes.

The woman has not looked at anyone. She is crawling to the empty space at the back of the cell, in the shadow, in the dark. Everyone moves aside and away from her. They are all watching the woman, but I am watching Bea. All of the muscles of her face are contorted. She is breathing in short bursts and her gaze is frozen on the woman. I touch her shoulder to call her attention back to me. She brings her head around, saying "My mother," but other than speaking the words she doesn't seem at all sure what to do. I look from Bea to the woman who is her mother and is now dragging her body into position against the wall. "Rahel," the woman next to her introduces herself, but Bea's mother does not respond. This woman who stood so defiantly against General Lamb, and made so many speeches, has lost her voice or has nothing

more to say. I look back to Bea and whisper, "Go to her," but Bea can only stare, so I go back to watching the opposite wall. It is none of my business.

"Aziza," Bea whispers to me. "Her name is Aziza."

I look at Bea, and then rise to my feet. "Aziza," I say, but the woman does not look towards me. "Aziza!" I try more loudly, and now there is a glimmer of recognition. "Your daughter is here."

Now Aziza is moving in slow motion. Her back unrolls tall and straight against the wall. She is squinting against the shadows created by the dim light ahead. She begins to struggle to her feet. Her whole body is vibrating. Her clothing is loose around her bones. If she was thin and graceful before, she is skeletal and brittle now. She sinks back to the ground and the name comes out in a deep sob, "Bea."

Bea is on her feet and scrambles to the back of the cell where she cradles her mother like a baby. "You're alive," she says over and over. "You're alive. You survived." Just saying it seems like a spell that is giving her strength, but her mother is still sobbing. She does not speak. Not so alive, I think.

I am alive. I have survived. For now.

I am watching Bea and her mother clutch each other and thinking about what this woman must have looked like standing behind a podium, making speeches against our great general. Then I remember the last time I had wanted to cradle my Cece in my lap. It was a long time before, at my stall in the market. There were always small children running around who should have been in school, but their parents could only afford to send them sometimes, and the rest of the time they were helping with the family business or minding younger siblings, but my Cece was always in school. She used her own money, mostly. As soon as she could walk and talk she was hiring herself out, running errands for the neighbors or shining shoes in all her free time. My Cece never played. She always worked. Even once she was in school she found jobs with her teachers, or helped people before and after classes, so she always had enough money for school. It was important to her.

I'm remembering one day when she wasn't at school. That is, she had been at school, but in the late morning I see her

running towards me in the market, one among many barefoot children. Tears are streaming down her face and when she reaches me she buries herself in my skirt, wailing. She must have been seven years old. She never cries, so I'm worried at first, but then I think what could a seven-year-old have to be so serious about? Maybe she hurt her finger. I am in the middle of a sale so I let her cling to my skirts until I'm finished, then pull her off me and ask, "What's the matter?" Her face is a mess. That's when she asks me, "Why don't I have a papa?" You see, this was before they took everyone's papas, and her classmates had been teasing her.

I tell her, "Because you don't need a papa. Papas are for little girls who don't know how to take care of themselves—for mamas who don't know how to care for their little girls, and that's not us. You can tell your friends that."

She looks at me for a long time. Just sits on that stool and stares at me. I have work to do. I make a few more sales, chat with my customers. When I turn around she has gone back to school. I look at all the other people's children, running and screaming around the market, so undisciplined, such smiles on their faces. I feel proud of my Cece.

Bea and Aziza are sitting side-by-side now. Everyone has shuffled to give them space. I sit next to Mel, while she presses the side of her face to the bars and says nothing. At least I have more light. I inspect my toenails. Bea is whispering to Aziza, telling stories about Emil and Sid, reciting poetry, talking without stopping as if to transfer vital energy to her mother. I am trying to remember a story Cece once had to learn for school before her teachers had stopped teaching. It was like a fable, but I don't remember what the lesson was. There was a wise man on a mission for a king, and he had to find a singular object with the power to give a hopeless man hope, and bring a hopeful man to his knees. I remember that in the end it was a ring that the wise man brought to his king, but I don't remember why.

I wonder if Cece has found a way to continue studying in some kind of school or if she only works now. I want to tell Mel about my daughter—to tell her all the stories from Cece's childhood I can still remember, but I don't think Mel would be

able to hear me right now. If I could talk to Cece, I would tell her about her papa. He was not a bad man, and she deserves to know something about him. If she asked me one more time why she never had a papa, I'd tell her he wanted to take care of us, but I wouldn't let him, so she can blame me for that, and maybe she can imagine he was some kind of hero. Maybe that would give her strength, to think her papa was a hero even though her mama couldn't be. I hadn't thought of that before.

Julie Zuckerman

Tough Day for LBJ

Jeremiah Gerstler checks his watch, trying not to rush Molly, but she can't stop fussing with her outfit and hairdo. The cocktail party is supposed to be a relaxed affair—a summer get-together for the political science faculty—but when spouses are invited, it's never informal. With his DC experience, Jeremiah expects a warm welcome from his new colleagues. If someone asks if he's rubbed elbows with LBJ and JFK, he'll nod and say, "Sure, sure. And don't forget Ike! What's he, chopped liver?"

Through the window a cricket chirps at regular intervals, a singular tune he'd never have distinguished in the city, but here in their quiet new Berkshires home it could be the only sound for miles. Their seven-year-old daughter is asleep upstairs. Outside, dusk has given way to a starry night, and Jeremiah feels his patience slipping away. He's been paying for the babysitter to watch *The Red Skelton Hour* for 25 minutes already.

"Mol! You okay in there?" The cocktail feels like the official start to this chapter in their lives; making a good first impression feels like a crucial test. "Let's go!"

She emerges in a black and burgundy ensemble he's never seen before, her belly the size of a small basketball. Her eyes are puffy and raw and she's folding tissues to bring in her handbag. Her complexion looks washed out, no trace of her usual gusto. She's overwrought by the day's news, an FBI report that three bodies, thought to be the missing civil rights workers, have been discovered in a Mississippi dam. Of course every well-meaning person has been troubled by the thing, all the way up to the Attorney General and the President, but Molly is particularly distraught. Or it could be the pregnancy hormones.

"You look terrific. Is that new?" Anything to cheer her up so they can leave. All that crying can't be good for the baby, but he knows enough not to say anything on this sensitive topic—two miscarriages in the last three years. He plants a

kiss on her cheek, salty from a stray tear and waits a beat. "Okay, now? Can we go? Can we put poor Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner out of our minds for a few hours?"

"I'll try," she says, wiping her eyes again and whispering *sorry*. Molly's family vaguely knows the Goodmans from summers in the Adirondacks. She may have babysat once or twice for young Andy and his brothers, though she'd told him she can't recall with certainty. It's not a stretch to imagine that if the voter registration business had been going on a decade ago, when Molly was 22, she'd have wanted to join the efforts. Jeremiah admires the fresh-faced, idealistic Mississippi Summer Project workers but wonders about the sensibility of going deep into Klan territory.

The main thing now was to get to the party and apologize for their tardiness.

In the car, Molly lists the tasks for the week ahead: finding a pediatrician, joining a synagogue, putting the word out that she would be offering private piano lessons.

Jeremiah drums his fingers on the steering wheel.

"You're nervous." Molly reaches over to give his leg a squeeze.

"Me? No! I just don't like being late!" Sure, he's a greenhorn in the world of publishing and tenure battles, not to mention teaching, but with almost a decade of government experience and a Ph.D. from Columbia he ought to be fine.

He flicks the radio on. After a few moments of static, the announcer's voice comes alive, talking about some aggression in the Gulf of Tonkin, the second time this week. "Jesus. Tough day for LBJ." Jeremiah envisages the Sit Room, his former colleagues debating a course of action in Southeast Asia. The President would be leaning forward asking pointed questions while staffers reviewed the dispatches from the *USS Maddox*. LBJ tended to become volatile when forced to make a decision without all the facts, so Bundy will be trying to give him clear and concise information. There will be a response, of that Jeremiah is certain. Two weeks have passed since Jeremiah's last day at the National Security Council, and for the first time he is nostalgic: he misses the meetings in Bundy's damp basement office, the breeze of staffers rushing through narrow corridors with important telexes. Eight years

in DC working for Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson, and boy does he have stories! Nervous to meet a bunch of political scientists? Ha! He's never been more confident, certain his experience will give him instant credibility with these guys.

Chatter echoes from the Daltons' backyard. They follow a lit brick path leading from the driveway past evergreens and sculpted shrubbery until a small crowd comes into view. Bill Dalton, the department chairman, tends bar on a bluestone patio. Dalton is broad-shouldered but not portly, a head of gray hair that curls at the back and gentle eyes that suggest a kind pastor. His wife Marion looks equally clerical, stalwart in her short-sleeved blazer and matching skirt.

"We're so sorry we're late," Molly says to Marion, who motions to the waitress, an older black woman in a white apron, to bring over the tray of hors d'oeuvres.

"Well hello," Bill calls. "You're finally here!"

Jeremiah winces and forces a smile as two dozen pairs of eyes turn towards them. He removes his hand from Molly's back and waves to the group.

"Hello!" Molly's tone is cheerful. "Jeremiah was ready ages ago," she says. "I'm the reason we're late!" She indicates her pregnant stomach. He knows Molly is saying this to make it clear that Jeremiah is punctual, someone dependable, but he wishes she wouldn't make such a show of it.

The women in the crowd nod and coo and immediately gather around Molly while Jeremiah is introduced to his new colleagues. They seem an impressive bunch, with doctorates from Yale, Berkeley, Minnesota and Notre Dame. That the department includes one female professor (Joy McGratten, international relations) and one Negro (Nathaniel Williams, political communications) speaks well of his new institution, he thinks. The faculty members pepper Jeremiah with questions about his experience in Washington. What's the mood been like since the assassination, what's the gossip on the election?

Jeremiah has a lot to say and he might as well admit it: he enjoys the attention. They're gathered around him like he's some kind of superstar. And when has that happened before? Certainly not at the NSC where—if he's honest with himself—he was an assistant to the assistant of the man in

charge and his colleagues never gave enough credence to his position papers. And even after so many years, he never felt like a Washington insider. He'd left in search of a place that he might make his intellectual home. A small university would give him the leeway to dig deeper in his research and the potential to be recognized for it.

Jeremiah swallows the last of his beer and Dalton immediately replaces it with a gin and tonic. He's not a heavy drinker and he should get more food in his system. With perfect timing, a waiter emerges holding an assortment of Melba toasts, deviled eggs and cheese straws. Jeremiah would love to take a few of each but he doesn't want to appear piggish, and selects two. He gives a friendly nod to the waiter, hoping he'll return soon.

The circle disperses into smaller side conversations, and when he finds himself alone for a moment he scopes the scene, trying to keep track of who's who: the colleague wearing a US Navy Veteran pin on his lapel is an expert in European politics. The two standing to the side are engaged in an animated discussion on Khrushchev's reforms but he can't recall their names. Nathaniel Williams mentions working on the Stevenson and Kennedy campaigns as a minority liaison. Someone else is talking about his year at Oxford. He's overwhelmed—Molly is far better at socializing than he is.

A glance at his wife confirms this. The ladies are asking about her due date, other children, and how she's finding the Berkshires so far. "It's so quiet here at night! I'm a city gal, so it's taking some getting used to," he hears her say. In her voice there is no trace of the grief from earlier in the evening. "But yes, all of the cultural things were a big selling point for me . . . A subscription to Tanglewood? We'd love to!"

Jeremiah catches Molly's eye for a moment and winks.

Joy McGratten seeks him out to quiz him on the need for the NSC. "But don't you agree with Kennedy's assessment—that there's no need to have a little state department in the White House?" she asks.

"I don't know about that," he says. "Just look at the Bay of Pigs—State did a terrible job of coordinating the response. So that's why Kennedy gave back some review powers to the NSC."

"Seems like a lot of extra bureaucracy to me," says another colleague who shrugs, downs his whiskey, and then saunters away before Jeremiah can reply.

There is a bit of truth to this assertion, though despite its problems, Jeremiah is proud of his former agency. He can't help making snap judgements about his new colleagues, certain they are appraising him as well. The guy in the corner, a lush. Williams, quiet. McGratten, sharp but something irritating about her laugh. Bill Dalton is paternal, nodding with approval as Jeremiah describes the syllabi he's got planned. His new boss moves through the crowd, refilling drinks and prodding people to the dessert table.

Jeremiah takes a few sugar cookies, passing over the runny Jello mold. He is moving off to the side when he catches someone doing a poor imitation of a Yiddish accent. *Vell, I can't complain: my oldest at Harvard and my youngest at Yale. Better boys, I couldn't ask!*

"What's that all about?" Jeremiah asks.

"Some guy in the math department," comes the response. "Never shuts up about how his boys are his own private victory over Hitler."

His mouth drops open at the sting, but at that moment Bill clinks his fork on a glass. The department head wishes everyone a year of fruitful research, approved grant proposals, committed students and success in publication. He thanks the wives for supporting their men (ignoring McGratten's poor sod of a husband), and welcomes Jeremiah and the other new members of the department.

Jeremiah smiles and nods, though he's a bit pickled from the drinks and his mind is awhirl. *What the heck?* Were they making fun of a European refugee? What lies under the surface never ceases to shake him. It dawns on Jeremiah that there are no Levines or Goldbergs in the political science department, no Rubins or Roths. The word "token" pops into his mind, unbidden.

Marion Dalton emerges from the kitchen with the news that the President will be holding a live press conference soon. Anyone who'd like to watch is invited into the parlor.

"That'll be an announcement about the Gulf of Tonkin," Jeremiah says. "Two attacks in one week. There'll be a

response. Limited. But something."

The party gathers inside, crowding the small television, but there's a delay with the press conference. Side conversations continue, and footage from Mississippi rolls across the screen. How strange that no one's mentioned this news at the party. Because Williams is here? Or are civil rights not something on the minds of his new colleagues?

"Remind me again what you're teaching? I'm sure you said earlier but I haven't gotten everyone's fields sorted out yet," Jeremiah says to Williams, small talk his method to segue into what he wants to ask. Williams is younger than Jeremiah, thin-faced with a pointy goatee and ebony browline glasses.

"I've got one course on mass media and democracy, and another on campaigns, voting and the press." His voice is even, a bit cool and reserved, but not rude.

"Right, right! Political communications. I've got a friend who teaches a course at GW on the tension between a free press and national security decision-making. Fascinating subject. If you'd ever like to develop something similar, I'd be happy to collaborate."

Williams is thoughtful for a second. "Sure." There's a twinge of a southern accent and Jeremiah remembers that Williams is from Alabama.

"So what do you make of all this news today?" Jeremiah motions towards the television. "My wife is pretty broken up over it, and I can't get those boys out of my head either." The three young men on the FBI's missing poster, a black face flanked by two white ones, will be seared on the collective memory of the nation, he's sure.

"Tragic," Williams says, and then after a pause: "but hardly surprising."

Jeremiah creases his brow, astonished at Williams' nonchalance. Before he can reply Williams shakes his head and purses his lips. "I'm not sure you want to hear what I think."

"Sure I do. That's why I asked!" Jeremiah emits a nervous laugh, trying to sound congenial, though Williams' tone puts him on edge. Had he mistakenly assumed a certain sense of solidarity between them, as representatives of two oppressed people? Their rabbi in DC had marched with Dr. King in

Birmingham, and had encouraged the Gerstlers—indeed their entire synagogue—to get out and show their support by attending the March on Washington last August.

"Well, quite frankly this whole media circus makes me a bit sick." The veins on Williams' neck contract as he takes a swallow of beer. His voice rises in disgust.

"But . . ."

Williams cuts him off. "Do you know that in the six weeks the FBI's been searching for those workers, they found nine—NINE!—bodies of black men and boys? Henry Dee, Charles Moore, Herbert Oarsby! A 14-year-old boy. I'd like to know where the outrage is over that. The coverage in the New York *Times?* It's only because *this time* two of them were white."

"Oh!" Jeremiah's eyes widen in surprise; he hadn't heard about the other bodies. "That's terrible." He desperately wants Williams to know that he's on his side. "We've got a friend of the family who went down there with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, filing briefs and affidavits for some of the people getting arrested at the voting rights marches."

"Yeah?"

"He said the whites down there were accusing him and all the other civil rights workers of being agitators. This guy told him—his quote—that before 'all the Jews and Communists from New York' got involved, they'd always had congenial relations with the local Negros."

"Oh sure, centuries of congenial relations." Williams spits the words, his voice bitter. "Don't get me wrong: the volunteers are fine but it's the local Negros who're on the front lines."

"Right." Jeremiah nods. He cups his chin and moves his fist to cover his mouth, lips puckered as he considers what to say next. "I was very impressed with Dr. King's speech last August. He's a great leader for your people."

"You were at the March?" There's a note of curiosity.

Now he'd done it, backed himself into a corner with his own fumbling stupidity. "Well, no, not exactly . . . " This is the last thing Jeremiah wants to admit, after making such a show of it.

Williams gives him a pitying look. "Right."

"I couldn't get off work, but I read the transcripts of the speeches in the paper," he says.

"I was there," Molly says. As if he's waved a magic wand, his wife has appeared at his side. "I'll never forget it."

Williams seems to consider this information with a nod to Molly. In the background, the network broadcasts images of the civil rights workers from different stages of their lives. Andy Goodman as a young boy in a pirate costume. Chaney's baby daughter, born 11 days before her father was murdered. Schwerner's college graduation picture.

Molly blinks back tears and bites her lip. "Oh, it's just awful." She tells Williams of her tenuous babysitting connection to the victim.

"We've got a handful of students down there volunteering right now," Williams says.

"Very good!" Jeremiah says. "And how are they?"

"Shaken up. But determined."

Marion Dalton is listening in earnest to their conversation. She frowns. "Our son wanted to volunteer in Selma last summer, but I told him in no uncertain terms that we wouldn't support it. Too dangerous."

Jeremiah starts—the Daltons struck him as liberal-minded people, though perhaps Marion is employing a mother's caution. Molly puckers her brow, causing his own neck to pulse with tension. Aside from a flicker of irritation in Williams' eyes, his face stays passive, as if he's heard this reasoning a million times.

"Well, I can understand your concern, as a mother," Molly says. "But don't you think the volunteers are doing important work down there?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't understand what's so hard about registering to vote," Marion says.

Oh, for crying out loud. Doesn't the woman know that Negros in the south can lose their jobs—or worse—by registering to vote? Jeremiah turns, expecting Williams to expound upon the threats of violence his people face but he's already spun around and walked away. "Wait!" Williams ignores him and heads out to the garden.

Molly launches into an explanation but Marion is focused on Williams' abrupt departure. "Honestly, I don't know why he needs to be so uppity."

Molly's mouth drops open and Jeremiah feels the prick

of Marion's words. He's been on the receiving end of slurs—rebuffed for jobs due to questions over his "antecedents," denied guest entry to a country club in Bethesda, and what was that business a few minutes ago, making fun of a European refugee? But he's never considered what it would be like to face such ignorance and bigotry everywhere, at every turn.

The TV flashes to Rita Schwerner, the 22-year-old widow, a rebroadcast of her statement from earlier today. She is pencil-thin, a mound of sandy-brown hair piled high on her head, her collared shirtdress belted severely at the waist. At the microphone, she removes oversized sunglasses and looks into the cameras, palpable grief ripples over her gaunt face. Through the White House grapevine, Jeremiah had heard how she'd faced down the President, dismissing LBJ's niceties and demanding he commit federal troops for the search. "Remarkable young woman," Jeremiah says.

"My husband, Michael Schwerner, did not die in vain," says Mrs. Schwerner. "If he and Andrew Goodman had been Negroes, the world would have taken little notice of their deaths. After all, the slaying of a Negro in Mississippi is not news." She repeats the same point Williams made 10 minutes ago. "It is only because my husband and Andrew Goodman were white that the national alarm has been sounded."

Rita Schwerner says she wants her husband to be buried next to James Chaney, but even in death, the State of Mississippi will not allow a white man and a black man to be next to each other. Why this fact should be harder to swallow than all the others Jeremiah doesn't know, but he feels a grinding sense of frustration. Would America ever be free of the scourge of slavery? Something told him no. Erasing hatred from people's hearts was damn near impossible. Ignorance, perhaps. The key was to catch the ignorance before it turned to bigotry and hatred.

At last, the press conference begins and there is quiet in the Daltons' parlor. LBJ is solemn as he assails the torpedo attacks on the high seas. In his familiar Texas twang, the President says the United States will react with force and take all necessary measures against aggression in Southeast Asia. Limited air action against North Vietnamese gunboats was already underway, he said. Now Jeremiah understands

why the press conference was called for such a late hour; the President would have wanted to get word that the operation had started.

When the broadcast is over, side conversations resume. Though it's exactly as Jeremiah predicted, he doesn't feel like standing around and discussing it. Tomorrow, he'll parse through the transcript and try to understand if this constitutes a change in the Johnson doctrine in Southeast Asia.

Williams is in the garden, steering his wife towards the exit, when Jeremiah finds him. "There you are!"

"Yes?"

"You missed the press conference!" Jeremiah realizes he doesn't have the foggiest idea of what to say. He wants to demonstrate some outrage over Marion's narrow-mindedness, or to show that he's not prejudiced himself. "I . . . uh . . . I'm sorry if I said something in there to make you feel uncomfortable." As the words come out he knows it's not a true apology—he doesn't know what he's done wrong, and his phrasing, *sorry . . . if* puts the onus on Williams.

"Sometimes I don't know why I bother. I'm just sick and tired of it all. The lynchings. The government playing around with black lives. Do you really think the people responsible are going to sit in prison, even for a day?"

Again, Jeremiah's taken aback by Williams' tone. He shifts from foot to foot. "Well, if they make some arrests."

"Make arrests?" Williams' voice brims with frustration. "Are you kidding me? Do you know a thing about the way things work down there? The sheriffs ARE the goddam Klan!"

"Yes, but the Feds are on the case."

Williams shakes his head in disgust. "Even if they make arrests, a Mississippi jury's not going to convict anyone. But you know what? It wouldn't happen with a Massachusetts jury either! Northerners think they're so superior to the good ol' boys down south! Please. There's plenty of racism to go around up here."

Williams' wife is tugging on his arm; *let's go*, she seems to be saying.

"But surely here in New England . . ."

"Surely, nothing!" Williams says. "Boston's one of the most

segregated cities in the country! Never mind. There's no way you'd understand. And I don't expect white people to do the battle for us. What I want is for black people to stand up."

"I can understand that," Jeremiah says. A feeble effort.

"Your President in there," Williams says, gesturing towards the parlor. "He doesn't represent me."

"And Goldwater does?" He didn't get it, after all LBJ had accomplished this summer for civil rights. "But he voted against . . . "

Williams opens his mouth as if he's about to come out with more fighting words, to tell Jeremiah that he's no less of an imbecile than Marion. And maybe he isn't. His stomach clenches. Williams shakes his head and takes a step back. His derision turns into an appraisal as if he's not quite sure whether Jeremiah is worth hearing what he thinks. At last he sighs and puts out his hand to shake Jeremiah's. "All right, see you around."

Jeremiah watches Williams and his wife make their retreat, the heels of her shoes slapping against the stone walk. Good god. Jeremiah replays the conversations in his head. Had he touched some nerve or did the man always sound so radical? He's at once offended and intrigued. It is time to find Molly and say their goodbyes.

The room is half full with Jeremiah's new colleagues discussing the press conference. But Jeremiah doesn't jump into the conversation and no one asks his opinion. *Your President,* Williams had called LBJ. But did he represent Jeremiah? Was there any politician in Washington who truly did?

The interaction with Williams has shaken his confidence; he doesn't know why he feels so bothered. Perhaps he'd been searching for an ally and Williams was the other natural outsider, but whatever bond he'd assumed they shared existed in his mind alone. Or his discomfort may be an internal reckoning over his reaction—or lack thereof—to past slights. Was he too quick to squirrel them away, pretend as though they were nothing?

"I think you'll do fine here," Molly says as they're walking out.

"I don't know, honestly." Was a true sense of belonging

attainable? Now that he's met everyone it seems more out of reach, but he reminds himself it is the beginning. The party was not a smashing success but nor was it an abysmal failure. His head pounds. And what to say to the young minds who will fill his classroom, one month from now, when he's still got so much to learn? He's got nothing to offer them. No guidance, no wisdom. Only the world's sorrow and anger, without a recipe for a cure.

He reaches for his wife—Molly is his rock, his grounding. She places his hand on her midriff. "Feel." Their unborn child is kicking.

Martin Conte

Suddenly a Bright Cloud Overshadowed Them

After the burial, my sister June has a flight to catch.

"I need to be on set in five days, and there's so much to do even before that," says June, pulling her wavy brown hair into a sturdy bun and taking her heels off on the way to security.

I nod. I know what she's really saying. Of course, June knows I know, but she says it anyway.

"Could you handle the house? There's a real estate agent I went and saw yesterday." The week she buries our father, she's already selling his home. "We have to move as fast as possible. Just a few days here, Mick, I'll make it up to you, give you an extra percent on the sale or something."

Because I live only one hundred miles from home, and not three thousand, like June, the answer is yes. Because I may be between jobs and subsisting on food stamps and teaching watercolor lessons in assisted-living common rooms, the answer is yes.

"Of course," I say. "I'll put everything in place." She looks back at me, as if unsure of whether I can be trusted, unsure if she should be getting on that plane and flying away. But this isn't the first time, and she didn't seem to care so much last time, even though I was suffocating in the vacuum of our mother's death.

At her terminal, I'm not sure if I should hug June. She's so much older, I really never knew her all that well, except for her towering rage through her high school years. Especially now, when this whole stage-play of grief is supposed to form some common bond between us.

"OK," I say.

"Yep," she responds, then yanks me in from the side for an awkward hug.

"Hey, we can maybe do something for Christmas, right?" June says. "You can come to California, it'll be nice, away from the cold."

"Right," I respond, I think good-naturedly, "like I want to be on the beach on Christmas day." I vaguely remember a card June sent me one Christmas, a watercolor of an RV pulled up on the beach, decked in Christmas lights and with a small palm frond bending under the weight of some baubles. *This reminds me of something you would paint*, she wrote. It didn't exactly seem my style, but I remember it magnetized to the fridge of my apartment for months afterward.

"Well, we'll talk about it," she replies. We won't.

Then, she's disappearing through security, high heels hooked with one finger while she feverishly texts someone, a producer maybe. And I'm still here. I walk to the temporary parking lot, and choke Dad's truck to life in its way: turning it once, then waiting five minutes before trying it again. Don't ask me why, but that's how it works. On the ride back, the sky burns out like a Van Gogh daydream. Dad was probably happy to die in the fall, in these sorts of colors. Although, to be honest, the same could be said for every season. Dad just liked the look of the world, wherever and whenever he was.

It's one of the first frosty nights, when the cold can't be avoided by simply pulling on a sweater. So I go about trying to start a fire in the woodstove in the living room. I was never very good at this, as a kid. Once I get the kindling burning, I check the mudroom for wood. There's about half a cord stacked inside, and through the window, I can see the other cord-and-a-half neatly arranged on the raised bed by the barn, covered with a blue tarp. What a waste. Dad split enough fuel for a winter he'd never see. No doubt June will figure a way to tack it on to the cost of the house. She's a bloodhound for money; I half-wish I had her sense.

After the fire's lit, I settle on the couch with a blanket and pillow. The room is empty, and the fire's furnace-roar dulls to the occasional crack and whisper, so I read aloud from a book of Dylan Thomas poems I find on the coffee table. *Shut, too, in a tower of words, I mark on the horizon walking like the trees the wordy shapes of women.* Outside, it is too dark to tell if the trees are advancing like women. Shishkin's slender birch trees from that big painting in the Tretyakov Gallery drift sensuously across my vision. I fall asleep on the couch, though upstairs there are now three empty bedrooms.

In the morning, the house smells like woodsmoke, and my neck is cricked from laying up against the arm of the couch. The thought of Dad comes second after my neck, then the scramble to push him out. How long will I have to push him out until he stays out for good? A draining woosh of energy, and I am propelled off the couch and into the kitchen. I head for the fridge, open it, and remember June emptying everything into a trash bag. This is her one contribution. Because Dad was dead five days before he was found, and homebound probably a week before that, food spoiled and rotted in the kitchen. She went through without prejudice, knocking whole bunches of rotten grapes and sealed tins of mushroom soup into her yawning bag. The kitchen smelled a little better, though the scent of rot still drifted around the rest of the house, exuding from some other location. June spent the funeral weekend in a hotel by the river, while I stayed in the house, sitting awake all night reading about the rites of *Shiva* online, I don't know why. Dad would hate such a blasphemy, an introduction of the occult into the careful Christian order of his home. The Jesuses—crucifixes, paintings, statues, busts, amulets, badges, blankets, books—all watched me with Dad's silent eyes, waiting for me to slip up. The print by Ocampo, which sits in a small, cheap frame on the little prayer table in the hallway, is especially haunting. I remember passing it when I was young, and thinking the hidden face of Christ—the sunken cheeks, the hazel beard, the sad eyes—were really those of my father's, a confusion that I only now resolve.

The real estate agent is expected in two days, a local woman who runs estate sales, and brings a municipal trash bin along for the 'excess,' as June called the contents of the house. I have the job of sorting through everything and determining what to save and what to leave behind.

"Do you want anything?" I asked June when she first suggested clearing out. She looked up from her tea, and glanced through the doorway into the dim living room, where stacks of Mahler CDs and theological books wrestled with the furniture. She shook her head. Most of her stuff she had already taken, when Mom died: a few well-preserved dolls, her own rambling book collection, and the thousands of

DVDs she had stacked in the closet behind the TV.

I start in the kitchen. Most of the dishes are junk: chipped plates, some burnt wooden spoons, melted plastic tupperware containers with the stain of tomato sauce still smeared in the crevices. The salad spinner makes me stop. Who remembers the salad spinners in their life? And yet, there's Dad, shouting from the sink to June upstairs that it's time to eat, yanking the line of the spinner like the starter on a lawn mower. The spinner's got a heavy duty crack running from the center of the bottom to about halfway up the side. I pour some water in it, and the crack leaks a slow, but steady, dribble. Discard.

I'm about to make my way into the dining room when I see a horse.

It's outside, in the backyard, I can see it through the window above the kitchen sink. I pause, and consider grabbing my shoes sitting next to the couch, but there's not enough time. Involuntarily, the muscles of my neck and shoulders tighten. My right hand twitches open and closed. My feet move towards the door, themselves somehow knowing that if the horse is not investigated immediately, there's a chance it will leave, or perhaps never have been there at all. I cross the room to the porch door. Gently, so as not to frighten the animal, I pull the door open.

The horse is gone. I can hear something, but I don't pursue it, writing it off as a ghost of my imagination. This is not the first time this week I've made this mistake. That first night, didn't Dad come walking down the stairs, asking if I wanted a cup of tea, asking if I needed to be woken up in the morning? Didn't Mom tell me to make sure I left the porch lights on for June when she came home? And now there's a horse. I laugh at myself, standing in the doorway looking out into the dewy morning, but stop quickly. My laughter doesn't sound right in this place, not anymore. Mom was who we laughed with; we laughed over dinner at the odd tales of her childhood in suburbia New York, while Dad gazed at our shiny little faces with an unpaintable expression.

In place of the horse, I see a man, in a baseball cap and holding a drink in one hand, riding a mower in neat squares across the back lawn. I watch long enough to confirm that he isn't also a mirage, but actually the neighbor, the one who

Dad once told me comes with his rum and coke and does yard work. Remembering my own work, I step inside. But I can't get the image of the horse out of me, and listen close for the faint possibility of clopping hooves.

"Michael?"

The voice startles me out of the kitchen stool, where I had been sitting in a stupor for the better part of an hour, lost in a family vacation to Montreal when I was twelve and June had just graduated. Dad pulled us all up to this shrine on the top of a hill, wanted us to climb the steps on our knees, while June made fun of the vest I was wearing, a bright purple affair with about twelve zippered pockets.

"Gay," she whispered into my ear, while we knelt in a pew in the chapel, and I glanced nervously back and forth between Dad's stoic face and the bloody Christ on the crucifix.

The neighbor, empty glass in hand, is standing in the doorway of the kitchen, one thumb hooked in his jeans, leaning from one foot to the other. "Are you Michael?"

"Michael. Yes, yep, that's me." I stand. "Listen, thanks for the mowing. I remember Mom saying something about that years ago, but I didn't know you kept on after she died."

He nods, and clicks the glass against the doorjamb.

"Yes, well, your dad started doing it for a few months, but I knew he wouldn't last too long what with his age, so I just started in one morning. Don't worry about it. I'm Rich, by the way."

There seems to be a line drawn between the inside of the house and the outside, two galaxies brushing up against each other at a black hole, unable to touch, an infinitely thin pane of glass between them. And I am in mine, and he in his.

"Nice to meet you. Anyway, thanks for that. It makes a big difference."

"Well, I was sorry to hear about Ken. He was a good neighbor." The man coughs, in the way men do when they speak together of such intimate things. I feel myself floundering.

"Were you the one who found him?"

The man's face wrinkles. "No. No, sorry, it wasn't me."

"Oh, it's okay. I guess I'm just curious? Or would like to, um, to—" I fizzle.

We both allow a moment of silence, for the man to contemplate the emptiness of his glass and for me to contemplate the redness of my face. Finally, he looks up, speaks suddenly.

"Sure. Listen, you going to sell?"

I nod, but can't unwrap the dark muscles of the house that hold me in place enough to move any closer to the door.

"Well," he says, "it's just, I've got a brother-in-law, he's made all sorts of money down in Virginia. Real estate and that. So, he's looking for a summer getaway, you know."

I see the house for a moment from this man's eyes. The kitchen a wreck, dirt and woodsmoke inches thick on the walls, a buckling roof over a mudroom, and other than that, simple, square rooms with simple, rectangle windows. I shrug.

"Of course. I mean, I didn't think people bought one hundred year old farmhouses for Summer homes."

"Oh, sure. But, me being next door and all, I can do the labor on it cheap. Knock a few walls out, put some new sheetrock up. This place could really turn into something."

Did it need to turn into something? Could it be something else? It had been my mother's project, the house, for the decade she had gotten to enjoy it. Dad hung on for the ride, agreeing to renovations, running back and forth to the hardware store, while Mom chose paint colors, hung drywall, sanded and shaved stair railings to perfect cylinders, all with a calm fortitude, a confidence that, eventually, the job would be finished and the house would be better for it. Of course, it could never be what it had been, because now they're both gone, and soon I'll be gone, too, and the house will be someone else's and something else.

"Did the house always look this junky?" June said to me, when we first had a moment alone, after the police and the hospital and the funeral director.

"Used to look worse, right? Stained ceilings, awful colors, holes in the old horsehair walls."

June nodded, one hand whizzing over her phone while she gazed through me thoughtfully.

"Remember that first night?" I asked. She shook her head. "We didn't have enough time to prep the bedrooms after the

move, so you and I slept in sleeping bags on the floor outside Mom and Dad's room."

She crossed, then uncrossed her legs. Yawned. Stood.

"You're more talkative than I remember, Mick" she said finally, smiling to herself.

He's not in the doorway anymore, the neighbor. Did I say goodbye to him? Did I finish the conversation, or did I just turn away, and lose track of him? I honestly can't remember. It's grief, maybe. It does strange things to you. That's the excuse I'll use this time. You can get away with anything when you've just shoveled dirt over your father's coffin. Hey, your pop's dead, what's expected of you? If I actually felt the grief in the movie-hero way, maybe, I'd do something real crazy.

The second morning, I wake up to my phone buzzing next to my ear, flat on my stomach on the couch, one leg bristling with pins and needles where it hangs to the floor. I grab for the phone, drop it, then balance it on my ear.

"Mick, you there? How's the house look?" It's June. The house looks much as it did before, except the contents of the kitchen cabinets are now on the linoleum floor and there's a pile of dead plants creeping in through the doorway of the mudroom, where I was tossing the indoor pots.

"It looks fine."

"Just make sure it's ready this afternoon, ok? They're going to arrive around two, and I don't want them to have to wait while you shovel a bunch of his shit into your car."

Right. Because Dad's lifetime collection of books and old maps and images of the Madonna and odd musical instruments and notebooks from when we were kids and he tried homeschooling us those few years, that's the shit June's talking about.

"I'll deal with the actual selling and all," she continues. "I just need you on point now. Can you do that for me?"

"I'm not a child, June." I don't usually speak back, but laying in the grave darkness of my dead father's home instills me with an unexpected frankness. There's a pause on the other side of the line.

"Don't be this way, Mick. Not now."

"Of course, June. Don't worry. Don't worry about anything."

I think I say goodbye, but I'm not exactly sure. Suddenly, the phone's on the floor, I'm up, half expecting my mother to walk out somewhere, give me a neatly written list of chores to get done. like she used to on Saturday mornings. But that was twenty years ago, and my mother's been dead five years now.

Upstairs, my old bedroom is pretty much empty of furniture, leaving only traces of me saturated in the walls. Mom kept the rooms neat for when us kids came to visit, filled with all the childhood paraphernalia that kept me nostalgic, but when she died, Dad tossed most of the stuff we didn't claim ourselves, and shoved the leftovers into the closet. June's bedroom is pretty much the same, although a few of her high school photos still remain, taped into the alcove where a window used to be. And stars. Stars that glitter at night from the ceiling. I don't like being in that room at all; I always feel like I'll be in trouble with June. It's her room.

The same for Mom and Dad's room. Well, Dad's room. Well, the master bedroom. This is where they found Dad, propped in a sitting position on the floor, back against the bed, from what the police report had told us. Apparently he spent most of the last week of his life in this room, judging by the chaos surrounding the bed, the books with pages ripped from them, the dresser drawers leaking underwear. There's a pile of jeans and button-down shirts next to the mirror, and socks everywhere. The police report guesses Dad didn't leave the house for close to seven days straight. "Because of the pain in his throat," June supplied as a reason. But he still got dressed each morning.

"Why didn't he let anyone help?" June had asked the air between us at the burial.

"Mom was the only one he let help," I replied quietly, from behind her, unsure if she even wanted an answer. Mom was the only one Dad ever let in really at all. He always kept each of us at a distance, kept us from seeing inside the mysterious pains he carried. Waved June off when she suggested a nurse come visit the house. Burnt in the woodstove the pamphlets for the retirement home I embarrassedly offered him. I think I might have been the only one who got it, this seclusion, this hiding.

The ripped books are mostly religious texts. St. Augustine,

Mother Teresa, Pope John Paul II. The Bible.

So now, deal with me as you please, and command my life breath to be taken from me, that I may go from the face of the earth into dust.

This is from the book of Tobit. Who's Tobit? I flip through the shredded pages. There must be a bunch of unimportant prophets, right? Ones that no one really likes reading from. That no one cares for? But, of course, Dad knew them all, made a point of it to memorize just about every name in his pocket bible. This is perfect for him. I gather the torn pages into a neat pile, and carefully slide the books back on the shelf, next to the photo albums, untouched since my mother meticulously curated them. The ripped pages I will keep, and perhaps make something out of, a papier mache icon of my father, or a collage in memoriam.

I pull the covers back, and find a few urine stains. They blotch the white sheets like some old projected map of the Americas. This was where he lay, I think suddenly. This is evidence, DNA assurance that my father existed in those last days, and that this was, indeed, where he had been. I gather the sheets and blankets, and toss them into the hallway. The smell doesn't wither. It'll take some time, I guess, and rub my hands against my slacks, the same ones I wore to Dad's funeral. I work at the window; it opens with a few hard shoves, and a blast of fresh air swoops in, temporary relief. I place my face close to the mosquito screen, and breathe fully. Straightening up, the fresh air battles with the rotting inside. The smell doesn't even seem to come from the bed, but from the closet. Mom's closet, where Dad left all her clothes and shoes and private binders and papers untouched for the five years since her death. I remember hiding here, the afternoon of her wake, not wanting to face the performance of brave stoicness we were all supposed to give for the neighbors. I climbed in until her dresses were hanging around my shoulders, and closed myself in, for who knows how long. It was Dad who finally pulled the door open.

"Dad," I whispered, clutching my knees to my chest, lungs struggling, as if they were trembling. He regarded me for a moment, then stepped back, looking away through the window.

"Come on down, Michael. Don't be childish. There are people waiting."

Now, I pull open the door.

The cat is inside. The cat is dead. It lies on its side, legs stretched out, one paw almost comically stuck by an exposed claw reaching into one of Mom's shoes. What's the cat's name? I don't even remember. I remember it being alive the last time I visited, about six months ago. Of course it was.

What do you do with a dead cat? A cat this dead, so dead that fur seems to be blowing off of its body and into the dark corners of the closet. I think about calling Animal Control, think about calling the sculpture professor obsessed with roadkill, think about calling June. *June, it's Mick. I've been having weird dreams lately. A horse. I dunno, it's just strange, isn't it? Maybe it's something in the water. Of course it could be. Maybe it's why Dad went, huh? A horse, yeah, a horse. And there's a dead cat, too.* I don't make this phone call.

Instead, I take one of Mom's dresses (I guess it doesn't matter if it gets dirty or not), and wrap the cat in it. Then, using two of the wide, thin photo albums, I pincer and shove the cat onto one, like a bread paddle, and carry the carcass into the hallway, where I leave it on the pile of soiled sheets. Maybe I'll bury it later, maybe not. When we put Dad in the ground, it was our second funeral, and we were under no delusions. Didn't invite anyone, not even a priest.

"Are you sure this is how we should do it?" I asked June beforehand.

"No need to make it more difficult than it already is," she replied. "When's the last time you went to church, anyway?"

"Yeah, but it's Dad, and—"

"He held us hostage with that God shit," June snapped, cheeks burning and arms rising to her chest defensively. We left it at that. Without the priest, without the crying and the sympathetic stares and the flowers tossed into the pit, like at Mom's, I realized it was just a box in the ground. The cat doesn't inspire a change of heart in me.

At last, the smell in Dad's room recedes, ever so slightly. I sit on the bed, beneath the two pieces I painted for my parents in college: for my mother, a portrait, her laughing, head back,

swaying in the folds of her garden, dazzled by sun; for Dad, a landscape, after Turner's welsh mountain.

Suddenly, I hear a voice, speaking from outside. I pull my body off the empty bed, and spy out the window. There's a woman standing in the backyard, close to the porch, next to the nonchalant mass of a horse. So, it wasn't a dream. I look down on woman and horse, glowing like health in the surprisingly warm sun of the afternoon. She's probably in her thirties, and has a pretty, freckled face. The horse is a silty white, like the underside of a wave.

"Hello!" I call down, surprising myself with the strength of my own voice. She looks up, guarding her eyes with a bent hand.

"Oh hi! I didn't know anyone was here! Sorry about this. The neighbor called and told me Bridgette was out again, so I came as fast as I could. Such a pain!"

"Just a second, I'll come down."

"Gotcha."

I nearly step right on the wrapped cat on the landing, but wiggle around it and thunder down the stairwell. I pause long enough to pull a different pair of pants from my duffel bag, and yank off the wretchedly wrinkled slacks. I wade through my own chaos in the kitchen, and step out through the open door, into the light.

The woman waits for me by the stairs, one leg cocked on the bottom step. The sunlight is warm, and the hair on my arms prick appreciatively where it soaks in. I remember this sensation, from growing up, stepping out on a warm afternoon and drinking the sun, an almost ticklish, oddly orgasmic experience. I smile at the woman, and she smiles back.

"You're Mick, then."

"Yes, mam."

"Well," she speaks with the drawl of the place, an accent that digs into each simple word, like the drop of a fly-fishing weight into the water. "My name's Ellie, and this is Bridgette, the troublemaker of my crew."

The horse is there, really there. She's chewing on the riot of weeds falling out over the stone wall of my mother's herb

garden. She looks up when I step onto the porch, but only shakes her head to dislodge a few flies, and continues eating. Her cherry-dark eyes shoot a shudder through my arms, and I lick my dry lips. The sun glances off her muscled back, and white breath rolls from her wide nostrils. Her jaw moves circularly, gnashing the weeds into pulp before swallowing.

"You're real," I murmur to Bridgette, letting her wet nose explore the back of my hand and wrist.

"What's that?" Ellie asks.

Salvador Dali was notorious for including images in the background of his paintings whose purpose was not immediately evident. There, in "The Birth Of Man," sits the cracking egg of the earth, and the man clawing from it. But there, too, the tiny image of two men in pointed caps, discussing some important matters in the distance. As if to remind the viewer that more occurs than that which we care to pay attention to. That we cannot encapsulate all that is happening on our own meager terms. This, perhaps, is what Bridgette is trying to tell me when she snorts, turns, and sets off across my father's long back yard towards the woods at a gallop. As Ellie and I stand in stark relief in the foreground, Bridgette asserts herself as background, begging for the eye to see first what the mind ignores.

Ellie is quicker to recover from surprise than I am.

"Shit, Bridgette, don't!" she cries, and takes off after her, hair streaming out behind,

sturdy boots pounding the earth. I follow, stretching my legs to overtake her. At this point, Bridgette is already at the edge of the woods and, like some last mist disappearing under the sun's heat, she disintegrates into the foliage. Ellie doesn't slow.

"I have a hunch we'll be able to find her in there, the ground's still soft. Bridgette! Bridgette, would you slow down, please?"

I don't have enough breath to reply. We both slow, by some unknown premonition, before the edge of the trees, then dash in.

In the woods, everything is familiar and nothing is known. The trees are all wood and bark and leaf, exactly as I expect them to be. But as the sun-bathed lawn disappears from view behind us, I immediately become disoriented, lost. I haven't

explored these woods since I was a kid. Dad would bring me out here occasionally, and in reverent silence we walked a labyrinth of half-trails, half-remembered wild. He'd pause often, to listen to some bird, to feel the ridged bark of an elder tree. I'd watch him apprehensively, trying to hear angels the way he seemed able to.

Ellie keeps her eyes down, following the deep gouges of Bridgette's hooves. Small branches snap against her outstretched palms, and the bending boughs of the fir trees leave snaking scratch marks along her legs. I fall in behind her, and almost forget what it is we came in for. Am I chasing this woman? Am I following her? What are we looking for?

"Hold," she says, stopping in front of me suddenly, so that I almost barrel into her and have to grasp her shoulders to stop myself. We stop, and the subtle sounds of the forest whoosh in on us, suddenly. The stretching of the tree limbs, the rustle of unknown civilizations beneath the leaf cover. And then, what Ellie stopped for, the unmistakable assertion of a horse clearing her nostrils. We stalk forward, and there, head down, lapping at a puddle as if it had been her destination all along, stands Bridgette.

Ellie waves at me to pause, and goes forward alone, cooing softly to the horse. Bridgette steps forward like an innocent daughter, laying her long chin into the palm of Ellie's hand, which travels slowly up it, tickling the throat, then up the massive stretch of neck to Bridgette's moppy mane. She wraps her fingers into the hair, all the while keeping herself nose to nose with the horse, and slips from her back pocket a tightly coiled lead and halter. Bridgette almost bows in deference as Ellie slips the cords around her snout, then shakes once, and returns to the pleasure of her puddle.

"Well," Ellie laughs, turning to me. "You must remind her of Kenny." She beckons me towards her, and I approach slowly, afraid Bridgette will try to dash off again.

"Why do you think that?" I ask.

Ellie gestures to the ground. The puddle Bridgette is slurping from, I notice now, is the

rut of a four-wheeler track. "Bridgette and I would take your father out along this trail, when he was able. Get him a good ways into the woods, away from the house."

It hurts, suddenly, that little stretch of skin in my abdomen beneath which lay, not the heart, but perhaps some older, more primitive organ that deals more directly with the loss of flesh and blood. Something that has little to do with the emotional centers of the brain, but rather the nerves realizing they've lost a bit of themselves somewhere, and can't locate it. I remember the same place aching all through my mother's last few months. And now, I notice again. Maybe it's just a cramp from the running. But the pain feels too familiar.

"My father went riding?"

"Yep," she responds, wiping a drip of sweat from the bridge of her nose. She nods her head to the summit of Bridgette's back. "Come on, I'll give you a lift back to the house."

My eyes must've gone wide, because Ellie laughs.

"It's no problem," she says, placing a hand on my shoulder and drawing me up alongside the horse's flank. "Here, just grab the mane here, and throw your right leg over. I'll shove you the rest of the way."

I don't have enough time to protest before Ellie's knotting a fistful of Bridgette's mane around my fingers, and I'm suddenly flying into the air, her flexed palms propelling me over Bridgette's back. For a moment, I think I'm going to go clear over to the other side. For a moment, I don't think I've left the ground at all. For a moment, I think I might cry, or vomit. But suddenly, I'm sitting on Bridgette's back, shifting to find some flatness, some part of her that isn't moving in such a terrifyingly alive way beneath me. Ellie swings up behind, wrapping her arms forward around my ribs and squeezing slightly to brace herself. There is a slight shift of Ellie's left hand, a tug on the lead, and suddenly Bridgette is turning in the track, and we're moving.

"You used to do this with my father?" I ask.

"Yep," she says. It sounds like she may want to say more, but she sighs instead, and the three of us rock slowly down the path in silence.

I wonder what my father might've thought, with this young woman's arms clutching him in a way more intimate than my parents had ever been. Was it disconcerting for him? Or comforting? Did it remind him of my mother, or satisfy a desire my mother might not have ever been able

to? Was it a sexual thrill, this woman and, yes, the aliveness of the animal beneath him? I shudder, involuntarily, when I remember the only other time I encountered my father's desires: it was my senior year in high school, and we had just bought a brand new power mac G5 computer. The world wide web was still a strange entity to my parents, and I turned on the screen once to find a photo gallery of nude women. Even then, Dad's stiff nature shown through. He had entered the plain words "beautiful women" into a search engine. I found myself confronted suddenly with the terrible, unuttered but obvious connections between my father's libido and my own existence.

It is a good thing my back is turned to Ellie. I let the tears drown my vision of the path before us. Perhaps by the shaking in my shoulders, Ellie senses my flailing attempt at sorrow.

"We used to come out here once or twice a week," she says quietly, words almost rhythmically timed with Bridgette's steady step. "Kenny and Bridgette took a liking to each other the first time they met, when she first cut loose about a year ago. Like I said, she's a bit of a troublemaker, but when I finally found them, she was eating apples from his hand."

She tells me stories, slowly and carefully, as we move. The trail ahead of us breaks and forks, and I suspect Ellie is leading me on a long route back home, but I don't mind. She tells me mysteries about my father: that he kept a careful bird-watching journal; that for a short time he took up drinking, only to abandon it; that on occasion he cooked a large roast meal, the kind his Irish mother used to cook when he was a child, and invited Ellie, her husband, and the neighbor over for the evening. These things had never been told to me, and I don't imagine to my sister either, on our rare visits. I realize guiltily that most of the time I spent with my father, I spoke only about myself, imagining that the only means of living left to him was vicariously, through my own life: my degree in Art History that he seemed so proud of, my aborted attempt at RISD's grad program, my meager funds disappearing into loan payments and too-expensive cocktails in the city. Ellie tells me a joke that Dad told her three or four times, and I laugh through my tears.

"Most of all, your Dad loved these woods." Ellie drops her

voice to an astonishing echo of my father's uneven murmur. "God and nature, it's all I need. That, and a good Bach prelude playing in the background." She shifts behind me, then rests her cheek gently against the back of my shoulder in an almost sisterly way. "He said he wanted to be buried out here, with these trees."

I bow my head. "We buried him two days ago," I say softly. Ellie's arms seem to stiffen.

"I didn't hear about it, or read an obit in the paper," she says, voice close to my ear. My face burns up.

"No one was invited. We just . . . We just stuck him in the ground."

She doesn't reply.

The path finally emerges from the woods onto the edge of a dirt road I recognize vaguely as the one Mom taught me how to bicycle on. Bridgette quickens her pace in the newfound freedom, and soon, we reach tar, and then the peak of my roof comes into view. Ellie leads Bridgette toward the driveway, but pulls up at the end, turning Bridgette once in the road. An unfamiliar, painfully clean Honda sits in my driveway.

"Expecting company?" Ellie asks, and I shake my head.

As I slip from Ellie's arms and awkwardly drop off Bridgette's back, the driver's side door opens, and a woman steps out. She wears a pressed gray skirt, and a pastel blue button down shirt. She's smiling, and holding a heavy duty clipboard in front of her like a wrapped present.

"Mr. Catton? You're Michael Catton, aren't you?"

"Yes, mam." I say. I hear Ellie drop to the driveway behind me. The woman nods primly.

"Yes, well, I'm Karen Tripp. I'm here to discuss the sale of your father's home? Your sister told you about me?" Each sentence ends like a question. I squint my eyes in her direction, and the clipboard slowly rises to her breast like a shield. I shake my head.

Behind me, Bridgette clicks her hooves against the stones of the driveway. Ellie puts a hand on my shoulder, and squeezes firmly. The apple tree in the front yard catches the wind, and makes itself known. Somewhere from the backyard, by some trick of my mind, I hear my mother's steady hammering as she fixes a clapboard, or drives frames into the wet earth

of her vegetable garden. And, there it is, the murmur that always accompanied her, by her side, and by mine, though I used to never register it: my father, telling her about his day, or singing under his breath a tune I never bothered to learn. My eyes drop back to Ms. Tripp's concerned face, ear turned in my direction, waiting for me to speak. Above us, the sun slips behind the cover of a cloud. But the light doesn't dim or disappear. This is not a moment when the chill picks up and a gray threat of rain can be felt in the air. No, this is a gentle whisper of a cloud, an interlude, and in the moment before I speak, the sun appears above us again.

The Tsarina of Caviar

Abby Sinnott

Vanya Voronova cursed God when she broke the nail of her middle finger: acrylic, painted cherry red and encrusted with fake diamonds. She sat at her lace covered kitchen table, counting out piles of money, savoring the chore. The stiff shuffle of bills, their soft paper corners, the mounting weight of stacked hundreds. That presidential face—pouches of privilege under his chin and beneath his eyes, mouth pursed in a kind of general disapproval—staring up at her as she rubber banded the bills together. What was his name? The only American presidents she could recall were Bush, and of course Gorbachev's friendly rival, Reagan. She peered down at the name beneath the dirty green face. Franklin.

Friday morning, Boris would blast through the back door any minute now. Vanya shoved her broken fingernail into the front pocket of her tight jeans, along with a few Franklins. She hurried from the kitchen into the living room and jostled the small key in the lock of her glass curio cabinet, where her collection of brightly painted *matryoshka* dolls smiled. Vanya unlocked the cabinet, grabbed one of the bigger *matryoshkas*, twisted her open and dumped out the tiny dolls inside of her. She rolled the bills and stuffed them into the *matryoshka's* stomach, now pregnant with three hundred dollars instead of six generations of shrinking dolls.

A moment later, Boris' heavy footsteps, spicy cologne and burning cigarette wafted into the kitchen. "Vanya!" he yelled from the back hall. "Fix me coffee, and egg before we go!"

Vanya twisted around in her chair to face Boris, who now stood leaning against the kitchen counter, tapping his foot expectantly, waiting for Vanya's response. Lately, she was in the habit of ignoring Boris' demands, which he'd then repeat two or three times before she'd acknowledged that he'd spoken. "Eggs? Coffee? Fucking crust of bread?"

"No more coffee. And I don't cook eggs," Vanya said.

"None?"

"None."

The thick heels of Boris' army boots left scuffmarks on the white linoleum floor as he moved to the cupboard and pulled out a bottle of vodka. He grabbed the bottle by its neck, tilting it back and forth. "Barely drop left," he complained, before finishing it off in one swig and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Vanya was staring at her hands splayed out in front of her on the kitchen table, shaking her head at her stunted middle finger, thinking about the twenty dollars it would cost to have it fixed. "Then leave me money to buy your vodka and eggs," she said impassively without looking up at Boris. She pushed herself away from the table, stood up, stretched her arms above her and yawned deeply. She had barely slept the night before. Three times she had woken up, her heart beating as though she had just run up a mountain, a cold film of sweat chilling her body. She had dreamt of a deep marble tub, her naked body submersed in a black bath of caviar. Like soap bubbles, the tiny eggs kept expanding and multiplying, threatening to drown Vanya, who couldn't eat them fast enough. Death by caviar, Vanya now thought and smirked.

"Tired? Why should you be so tired?" Boris was peering into the cold light of the refrigerator. He pushed the door shut with the steel toe of his boot and turned to Vanya, cutting the air with his hand as he spoke. "You sit around here all day, watching soap opera and talking on phone to Russia." He was a short man and the bulging muscles in his chest, arms and thighs made him appear even shorter than he actually was, compact. He worked out at the Russian Community Center every morning and occasionally took steroids when he could buy them from his cousin, Sergei. He denied it but Vanya knew when he was popping the pills by the way he performed, or rather, didn't perform, in bed. His silver blond hair was cut close to his head in a military buzz cut. Light green eyes, the color of sour grapes in the summertime, which Boris rarely blinked for fear of missing something, dominated his otherwise unremarkable pale face. A year before at the Russian Tea House, it had been Boris' unrelenting eyes that convinced Vanya to slide down to the other end of the bar and let him buy her a drink.

Boris wore a uniform of tight black Levi's jeans, black short

sleeve T-shirt purposely shrunken to show off his pecs, black leather jacket and black leather army boots. Around his neck was a gold medallion of Saint Constantine that he had worn since boyhood. In his left ear was a small diamond stud. It was Vanya who had patiently held a sewing needle over the oven's purple and gold gas flame, waiting for the tip to char to black, before jabbing it through the flesh of Boris' earlobe. Unexpectedly, the blood had squirted all over Vanya's face, which had made Boris hoot with laughter and lean in to kiss Vanya sloppily on her blood-stained lips.

Today, beneath his T-shirt, Boris wore an orthopedic corset with suspenders that snapped up his sides. More than once he had pulled his back out and the painkillers, which he crunched between his two front teeth before swallowing without water, waned after a few hours or interfered with his pleasurable, steady vodka buzz. His doctor had convinced him to wear the corset for his bad back. In a couple of hours, after driving to the San Pablo Bay forty miles north of San Francisco, he'd be hauling white sturgeon fish weighing hundreds of pounds into the back of his pick-up. If he and Vanya got lucky, the fish would be pregnant with thousands of eggs, pounds of glistening California caviar. Beluga had gotten so expensive to import that even the Russians were buying the local stuff at fifty dollars an ounce, half of what they'd pay for Beluga.

Boris and his younger brother, Pavlo drove together in the black Ford pick-up as Vanya followed behind, weaving Boris' silver metallic BMW convertible in and out of traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge. She lifted her hand from the steering wheel and pushed the red button on the dashboard. The car's top folded down and the sky opened up, bright and brilliant, as if Vanya were driving into another hemisphere. This was the California blue, the sunshine that she had always imagined, trudging through the frozen, dead streets of Saint Petersburg on her way home from the overcrowded medical clinic where she had made less than 3,000 roubles each month, filing X-rays, answering phones and mostly turning people away.

A year ago, Vanya had come to San Francisco from St. Petersburg in search of the famous white sturgeon that breed in the Bay-Delta. Her father had been a successful sturgeon

angler and connected her with his old friend Aleksandr Prokouriakof, a Russian poacher who had immigrated to San Francisco. As agreed, Vanya dutifully sent a percentage of the caviar money home to her father, who no longer spent weeks away on the Caspian Sea fishing sturgeons and harvesting caviar. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, all sturgeon fishing laws and restrictions were wiped out, putting Vanya's father out of business. Now, the Russian mafia controlled the caviar market. Beluga and Russian sturgeons were nearly extinct, listed as "endangered species" from habitat degradation and commercial fishing. These days, Vanya's father drove government employees and high-class prostitutes around St. Petersburg in a secondhand taxicab.

As she crossed the Golden Gate, Vanya gazed out at the wide expanse of the San Francisco Bay and Marin Headlands, their jagged lines softened by distance. She turned up the radio and rummaged in her purse to find her dark, oversized sunglasses. Ahead of her, Boris and Pavlo's arms hung out opposite windows of the pick-up truck, their wrists encumbered by identical silver chain bracelets, cigarettes dangling between thick fingers. Something hard and hateful rose up in Vanya, a kind of disgust. Here she was in California with Boris, who, despite having come to San Francisco from Moscow with his family five years ago, acted more Russian in his aggressive, closed way than the Russian men she had known back home. She imagined speeding past Boris' truck, without so much as a wave goodbye, following the frothy white coastline all the way down to Los Angeles. She'd make a fortune selling caviar to celebrities and live in perpetual sunshine, shedding all those years of steel cold grayness, the way a snake leaves behind its old skin. Maybe she'd even find her "soul mate," a concept she'd learned only since coming to California. In Russia, no one was that optimistic about love, or anything else for that matter.

After the bridge, Vanya followed Boris along highway 121 for thirty miles until they reached the exit for Tubbs Island. After another two miles, they turned down Parakeet Road; driving slowly, waiting to recognize the narrow unmarked dirt lane shrouded with thick brattle berry bushes. Boris pulled over to the side and parked his truck in a small dirt

turn-around. Vanya swooped in next to him, tasting the dry grit of yellow dust on her tongue. She pushed her sunglasses on top of her head and flipped down the overhead mirror. The wind had destroyed her long, carefully curled hair, the dark red color of Hungarian paprika. She pulled her brush through the snarls and reapplied her lipstick. Her face was attractive in the usual way, though it was her body that stood out. Small breasted and tiny-waisted with wide hips and a big, round apple-shaped ass. Boris always said that an ass like that should be fucked from behind. Grossly out of proportion, the top and bottom halves of Vanya appeared to belong to separate bodies: one extremely petite and the other just as voluptuous. The contrast drove men mad.

Vanya smacked her ruby lips together and smiled at herself in the mirror. Satisfied with her appearance, she stepped out of the car and walked to the passenger side of the pick-up. She leaned her hip against the metal door, now hot from the sun, the warmth seeping through her jeans. "Ready?" Boris asked, holding a silver flask in his right hand. He pointed his finger at Vanya. "Remember, don't talk prices. I handle money. You just stand with mouth shut and smile."

Behind her black sunglasses, Vanya narrowed her eyes at Boris. *Zhopa*. Asshole. "I'm the one who started you in this business." She reached her arm inside the truck and pulled the silver flask from Boris' hand. Before Vanya came along, Boris was frying perogies and slicing tongue behind the counter of his father's Russian deli on Geary Street. When they met at the Russian Tea House, he had just returned from a stint at San Quentin prison for re-selling stolen plasma TVs and car stereos.

Seven weeks later, Boris told Vanya he wanted to marry her. He didn't offer a ring, but he had said it, which was just as good in his book. They were side by side, lying on Vanya's bed, covered in the quilt she had brought from Russia, which her *babushka* had stitched together for her when she was just a girl, made from old curtains and dresses. Back home, nothing went to waste.

Vanya stared at the brown water stains on the ceiling, considering how to respond. "You won't ever have to go back to Russia," Boris promised after another minute of silence.

Vanya had come to San Francisco with a tourist visa that would expire after three months, though even now, a year later, the I.N.S. still hadn't caught up with her. "You know, many women come here and offer me thousands for green card. For you, free of charge." He laughed and rolled over and kissed Vanya between the eyes. They made love and Vanya did all the things Boris always asked her to do without him having to ask.

Now, Boris nudged Pavlo, who was sitting in the driver's seat concentrating on rolling a joint in his lap. "Little brother, you hear that? Vanya wants all the money." Pavlo, who was three years younger and half as smart as Boris, snickered. He lifted the joint to his mouth and licked the side before expertly rolling it closed. While Vanya and Boris went to take care of business, Pavlo was supposed to watch out for any wardens approaching the refuge. He'd pass the time by getting high, listening to the radio, checking his cell phone for messages and watching himself deliver American movie lines in the mirror. Secretly, Pavlo wanted to be a famous Hollywood actor. *Go ahead, make my day*. He sparked the end of the joint, inhaled and winked at Vanya through the sweet smoke. "She's funny this girl of yours, Boris."

"Yeah, true fucking comedian," Boris said. He opened the door and jumped out, spitting on the ground and turning up the collar of his black leather jacket. Vanya spotted the handle of a gun tucked into the side waist of his jeans. "Boris, give me gun to carry in my purse."

Boris reached around and pulled the gun from his pants, wagging it at Vanya as he spoke. "And if I need it? Should I say, 'Excuse me sir, but hold one moment while I ask her for gun?'"

"Boris, what do you need with gun?" Vanya's younger brother had been shot to death two years ago during a riot in Palace Square. Three times in the head so that the casket was closed at the funeral. Even the gilded life-sized statues of angels lining the colonnade outside St. Isaac's cathedral—their palms open and turned upward as if waiting to carry her brother off into the heavens—hadn't been any comfort to her.

"You carry a lot of money, you carry gun," Boris said, tucking

the gun back into his pants. The more money he made, the more paranoid he became, but not enough to trade in his gun for an honest job. Though Boris always said crime was the most honest business there was. “Caviar is more expensive than cocaine. It’s not blue jeans we’re buying and selling.”

“Boris, don’t you mean it’s not stolen TVs and car stereos we’re selling?” Vanya laughed at her own joke.

“Bitch,” Boris muttered, sneering at Vanya before stomping off ahead into the overgrown trail. Vanya followed behind, pushing aside dry leaves and tree branches. For now, she let Boris believe that he was in charge of their caviar operation. At first, she had needed a man like Boris—headstrong, fearless, overly confident, more muscle than mind—to help her establish local buyers. As the old Russian saying goes: The man may be the head, but the woman is the neck.

The heels of her black leather stiletto boots sunk into the soft ground as she walked, some kind of critter rustled fast in the bush beside her. She sped up and a few steps later, the trail opened to the grassy shores of the San Pablo Bay refuge. The bay flat and grey, sparkling like a piece of sheet metal in the sun. A black hawk swooped up into the sky, gliding gracefully in circles without flapping its wings. In the distance, the mountain range, dusty lavender against the hard blue sky, appeared artificial and one-dimensional. Vanya thought of a Hollywood movie set.

Boris stood next to her, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand. He scanned the refuge, looking for game wardens hiding in the shrubs or posing as fisherman. The punishment for buying illegally poached sturgeon from public waters—any that hadn’t been raised and farmed according to strict and expensive government rules—was twenty thousand dollars and three years of jail time. “Aleksandr Prokouriakof!” Boris shouted, waving to an old man sitting on an upside down milk crate at the water’s edge, surrounded by fishing poles and nets, a bright red cooler and transistor radio. The man waved and began to walk slowly towards Boris and Vanya. His right shoulder slouched considerably, on account of a lifetime spent hauling and carrying sturgeons.

“The Tsarina and Tsar of caviar,” Aleksandr laughed, embracing and kissing Boris. He turned to Vanya, who kissed

him on both cheeks, tasting the saltiness of fish and sweat. "And your father, how is he?" Vanya thought of her father returning to their cramped tenth-floor apartment in St. Petersburg after weeks on the Caspian. Exhausted, muscles hardened, beard overgrown. Eyes a deeper shade of blue, as if they had absorbed sea and sky. "As he always says to me, 'Vanya, stop worrying. I'm still alive, aren't I?' " Aleksandr nodded and said, "Well, show me a man who can ask for more."

Boris cleared his throat and looked around impatiently. He leaned in towards Aleksandr, dropping his voice to a coarse whisper. "So, was it good day?" It had been over two months since Aleksandr had captured a sturgeon worth anything, a mature female about to move upstream to lay her eggs.

Aleksandr smiled and slowly reached into the front pocket of his canvas overalls and pulled out a round tin of tobacco. He opened the top, pinched the tobacco between thumb and index finger and tucked a wad under his bottom lip. "We were here when the sun come up. Finally netted three big ones, one hundred pound each easy. They fought us tooth and nail! Jumped five feet out of water. It took my son and two grandsons to haul bitches out of here. You know, game wardens are snooping all around, so we had to move fast. They're in Viktor's garage ten miles from here. He's waiting for you." Aleksandr spit brown onto the ground, barely missing the toe of Vanya's boot.

Boris took his hands out of his pockets and patted Aleksandr on the arm. His face was smiling but his eyes were flat and angling, all business. "Aleksandr, you make my day. So, let's talk money then, shall we?"

Black beady eyes, cylindrical bodies, white rubbery flesh, long hook noses, seven-inch wiry whiskers, over six feet long and one hundred pounds. Living fossils, having evolved more than 250 million years ago, even before the dinosaurs. The three sturgeons were lined up on a black tarp stretched out on Viktor's cement garage floor. Viktor knelt down and carefully made a half-inch incision in each sturgeon's belly, through which a drinking straw was inserted. Boris brought his medallion of Saint Constantine up to his lips and kissed

it for luck before leaning over each fish and gingerly sucking the straw, waiting to taste caviar on his tongue. Vanya and Pavlo stood anxiously behind him, peering over his shoulder. And although Vanya had cursed God earlier that morning, now she prayed to him, begging for prosperity. Only a small percentage of sturgeons bearing eggs produce caviar. Aleksandr had poached almost a dozen in the last three months, though only two had been viable.

It wasn't until the last and smallest sturgeon that Boris hooted and stuck out his tongue, coated with shiny black eggs, and Viktor brought out the vodka and poured shots all around. He raised his glass. "To the pregnant beast." "To Viktor and Aleksandr," Pavlo said. Boris, following the Russian tradition of devoting the third toast to love, set his green eyes on Vanya. "To my sweet Vanya." Vanya smiled without showing her teeth and clinked her glass against his. "To heaps of money," she declared, tilting her head back, the vodka burning and then numbing her throat.

They held their empty glasses out to Viktor for more vodka, watching the fish intently as though she could spring up and escape at any minute. "Look at this ugly bitch!" Boris yelled, opening his arms wide, his cheeks flushed from the vodka. "A face only father could love!" He bent down and kissed the fish on the tip of her nose. Then, as if the new parents of a baby straight from the womb, Boris and Pavlo measured the sturgeon with precision and hugged each other for their good fortune. They'd buy the other two fish at a reduced price and sell the meat for twenty-five dollars a pound to the Russian Tea House.

Vanya sat in an old lawn chair in the middle of the garage, smoking a cigarette, her gaze fixed on the bulge of the sturgeon's belly—swollen with at least 400,000 tiny caviar eggs clumped together on her ovaries. She had been poached just in time, before swimming upstream to lay her eggs, which would then be impossible to collect as they descended into the river and clung to rocks, waiting to be fertilized by a male's sperm. Vanya quickly did the math: a fish this size would yield close to 50 kilos of caviar, plus the money they'd earn from her meaty flesh, and then it would take only a couple of days to make more than fifteen thousand dollars,

selling the illegal black eggs to a few Russian restaurant and storeowners in San Francisco and shipping the rest to her cousin, Fjodor Dolgopolova in Los Angeles, where the real demand was. Vanya had even heard of celebrities and movie producers' wives slathering caviar on their sagging faces. Some enterprising genius had convinced them that the silky black eggs would firm their skin and erase their wrinkles. It was this kind of decadence that made the Americans so despicable and at the same time, appealing.

Boris took a bottle of Baltika beer from the small refrigerator in the corner of the garage that had been installed for storing caviar. He cracked the top with his back molar and took a long swig, before placing his hand on the sturgeon's belly. "She's getting warm already. Pavlo, come, help me move her into trunk of car. The other two we put in back of truck." Pavlo, who was leaning against Boris' truck parked on the other side of the garage, thrust his chin forward in the affirmative. He was shorter than Boris by at least a foot, but just as strong. There was so little fat on his frame that the veins in his arms and legs popped and each muscle was traceable beneath his taut skin. When he walked, he kept his arms fixed closely at his sides, as he had been conditioned to do during his stint in the Russian military.

Once they got back to Boris' place, they'd be awake all night, behind the metal garage door under the glare of fluorescent light bulbs. Drinking vodka and sobering up on cocaine, which Vanya would snort periodically from the tip of her long pinky nail, and replaying the same music tapes of Romislokus and Grazhdanskaya Oborno that she'd brought from home. First, Boris would perform a kind of C-section, slicing the sturgeon's stomach open with a freshly sharpened butcher knife. Vanya would then methodically scrape away the tiny eggs from the sturgeon's ovaries with a sterilized silver kitchen teaspoon before cleaning them and transferring them into airtight jars, which Pavlo would weigh, label and case. And then the fish had to be skinned, its meat divided and packaged.

It took all three men to haul the pregnant sturgeon into the BMW's trunk and the other two into the back of the pick-up. The fish were wrapped individually in black plastic

tarps fastened with rope, so that their concealed bulk eerily resembled that of a corpse.

An hour later, Vanya stood in front of her curio cabinet, rustling the miniature, chintzy key inside its lock. She knew Boris could pick the lock in half a second, or smash his fist right through the glass if he wanted to, but the lock's allusion of safety calmed her nerves when she imagined Boris discovering the missing money and tearing her house apart to find it. She had been skimming from their stash for months, and many of the *matryoshkas* were stuffed with money.

Her collection of dolls—twenty-three in total that she had inherited from her *babushka* who had inherited them from her *babuskha*—was one of the few possessions she had carried from St. Petersburg to San Francisco. Some of the dolls, their painted faces peeling and faded, were signed and dated on the bottom, going back as far as 1898. Vanya had carefully wrapped each *matryoshka* in old newspapers and tucked them into a carry-on suitcase. Five times throughout the eighteen-hour flight she climbed over her neighbor's legs, clicked open the overhead compartment and laid her hands on the suitcase to be sure no one had stolen her dolls.

Now, Vanya quickly packed the *matryoshkas* in a leather duffel bag before leaving the house and heading for Pavlo's, where he and Boris were waiting for her to start on the sturgeons. She took the quickest route down Geary Street towards the ocean. Fog billowing through the sky like smoke, as if the there was a Leningrad wildfire burning in the distance. When she pulled up in front of the house, Boris was firmly planted in the driveway, cross-armed with legs spread, sneering at an unfamiliar man in a grey uniform standing a few feet in front of him.

Vanya paused before cutting the engine. She wanted to keep driving, but knew that would only make her suspicious. She slowly stepped out of the car and walked up the driveway. Pavlo was lying on the driveway on the opposite side of the truck, his face pressed into an oil spot, arms yanked behind his back, wrists handcuffed. Another uniformed man stood above him, his black boot pressed between Pavlo's shoulder blades.

Vanya's heart raced as she approached Boris. She regarded the man standing in front of him with disgust. Tall and lean, fair skin sunburned and freckled with a boyish, unlined face that could only belong to a grown-up American man. She looked at Boris. "What's happening?" Before he could answer, the man spoke up, turning to Vanya. Even his blue eyeballs were spotted with rust-colored freckles. "These men here are part of the wildlife black market. They've been buying and selling illegally poached sturgeon for some time." Vanya gasped and widened her eyes, feigning shock. "That's impossible. Where did you get such information?"

Boris took a step closer to the man. "Fuck you," he snarled. "I spit on you." He spat on the toe of the game warden's boot and stared squarely into his eyes, daring a reaction. Vanya held her breath. For a moment, she thought Boris had scared the warden, who'd quickly apologize for the inconvenience, grab his partner, climb into his unmarked sedan and leave them alone. Though an instant later, the warden's hand moved quickly to his side. Suddenly, a gun aimed at Boris' chest, to the place where his gold medallion of Saint Constantine lay. Vanya took a few steps back and shook her head. *Not in front of me. Not like this.*

"Get against the fucking car," the warden barked. Boris froze, lowering his eyes to the barrel of the gun. Then he lifted his gaze to the warden, smiled wildly and began to laugh, as though genuinely amused at what was happening. He raised his arms out in front of him. "They're empty. Worth nothing. You'll see. We caught them just for fun."

On the other side of the truck, Pavlo screamed and wiggled on the ground like a fish out of water. "Worth nothing, you stupid fucks!" The warden who had been keeping an eye on Pavlo—a short bald man with pockmarked cheeks—dug his boot deeper into his back. Though this only provoked Pavlo, whose insults continued to build in volume and vulgarity. "Shut the fuck up, Pavlo. Stop screaming like little bitch," Boris shouted across the truck. The warden standing in front of Boris snickered. "Now, do you want me to throw you on the ground like your friend over there? Get against the car."

Boris shrugged his shoulders and turned around to face the truck. He seemed to do this in slow motion, or rather,

everything around him froze. The single rivet of sweat dripping down the middle of his face, his hands nervously flexing open and closed at his sides. The American flag he had proudly strung up on the fourth of July snapping in the wind. The glaring red sound of police cars in the distance. It all stopped and Vanya was incapable of seeing anything but Boris, whose bulky body seemed to glow and pulse. He turned his head toward Vanya and mouthed, *Ya lublu tebya*. Normally, Boris only told her he loved her when he was drunk or about to make a lot of money. She opened her mouth to shout back, but nothing came. Something hot and tight contracted beneath her breastbone, though she couldn't call it love.

Suddenly, Boris' body spun around, his right arm leading the motion, raised up in front of him. A gun in his hand. A shot, and then another, though Vanya couldn't tell which direction they'd come from. The metallic, smoky smell of fired bullets and an unbearable sound like a wounded dog. Someone calling Vanya's name again and again. *Boris? Was it Boris?*

She turned and ran back to the BMW, the skinny heels of her stilettos smacking against the pavement. Although she had left the key in the ignition, her shaking hands were incapable of turning it. But then she noticed a splattering of blood on the front of her jeans, the sight of which instantly focused her mind. She started the car and peeled away down the street, her hair flying wildly behind her. As she sped away, another shot and then another, ricocheting inside her head, knocking against Boris' last words to her. *Ya lublu tebya.*

Almost two hundred miles south of San Francisco, following the curve of the coastline down the Pacific Highway, Vanya pulled over to the side of the road. She got out of the car and walked to the edge of the cliff. The wind on her face and she closed her eyes, suddenly transported to the Palace Bridge back home, feeling the swell of the Neva River. Though when she breathed in, her nostrils tingled from the salty ocean air. She opened her eyes. The Pacific exhilarating and daunting in its magnitude, glittering like money. A feeling of warm satisfaction rose inside of her. She thought of

the pregnant sturgeon and the caviar. *All that caviar*. By now, Boris and Pavlo were already in jail. She would think of them behind bars, not dead. Though hadn't Boris always promised he'd kill himself first before going back to prison?

Before getting back into the car, Vanya rapped her fist three times for luck against the trunk. If she drove fast enough, she could make it to her cousin Fjodor Dolgopolova's in Los Angeles in time to salvage the caviar. That was the plan. Fjodor was expecting her. He was the one who had tipped off the game wardens. Vanya waited until the road was completely clear before pulling onto the highway. As she sped up, the sturgeon rolled around and bumped against the hood of the trunk. The sun beat down on her bare shoulders and arms, soon a deeper shade of honey brown, almost hot to the touch.

Slater Welte

A Late Summer Comedy

It's Sunday morning and we're in the kitchen and we're both dressed for church. I am at the table, eating my corn flakes, drinking orange juice and coffee, reading the sports section. I've put a little vodka in my orange juice, but Tom doesn't know that.

He has the refrigerator door open. Did you drink my milk?

No, I didn't drink your milk.

The Cubs lost in extra innings last night on a walk-off home run. Now they're only fourteen games out of first place. They have a doubleheader in New York today. Gardner pitches the opener and his ERA is over six runs a game. That's not good.

Somebody drank my milk.

No, nobody drank your milk.

The Bears are in training camp and there's already an injury bug. Half the starting defensive line is down with knee and ankle sprains, our slot receiver has a tender hamstring, and both cornerbacks are nursing hip problems. Plus Bertram Ahmad is still holding out for a better contract. But Coach Bower says we have a good chance at the playoffs this year. I wish I had what he is smoking. Instead I have a splash of vodka in my orange juice.

Tom shows me his milk bottle.

Somebody did.

No, they didn't.

Look, he says. I made a mark, right here. I made it yesterday, and look, see the difference? Right there. Somebody drank my milk.

There is a mark, a black ballpoint dash about a centimeter long, but the milk looks level. Tom stands over me, his finger tapping the mark. He smells of soap and shampoo. I say, Maybe it evaporated.

It didn't evaporate. Milk doesn't evaporate.

My corn flakes are getting soggy in my bowl. My toast is growing hard. The air conditioning kicks on and makes the rattle and then the hum and then the silence. I feel the air

from the vent on my neck and it feels like something foreign and mechanical.

Everything evaporates.

Tom has his milk and I have my milk. It's been like this for a month now. One day he came home from the grocery store and said this is your milk and this is my milk. The same with cheese and yogurt. And grapes and strawberries. So it isn't just a dairy thing.

Everything is separated in the refrigerator, his side and my side, just another of his strange weird quirks, one among many, though he has gotten really very bizarre lately.

This is the third day in a row that Tom has been talking about somebody drinking his milk and he holds the bottle up and stares at it a long time. I tell him he needs to go ahead and eat, we have church and then brunch with Carl and Hanna, maybe a movie after or going swimming in their pool.

There's somebody else, he says. I know there's somebody else.

There's nobody else.

Yes. Yes, there is.

He puts the milk back on the shelf and closes the refrigerator door.

I wait for him to go upstairs to get his tie and cufflinks before I add a little more vodka to my orange juice. The morning sun outside is white and pale. You can already feel the heat coming up off the sidewalk.

This is something new, the last day or so, him thinking I have a lover, starting Friday night when I came home late from work. He was out on the back patio, nursing a drink, and he said, I do know, I know what you're doing, just tell me who it is.

He said he could smell it. He said it smelled like a dish rag. A wet sock. He wanted me to stand there on the back patio so he could take his time and sniff me all over like I was some dog in heat. That isn't going to happen. He asked where I was going and followed me upstairs and watched me change out of my work clothes. Is it Frank? Is it Bill?

In the car he fiddles with the stereo, turning the dial, settling for a Christ station. They're playing a rock song about Jesus casting the demons into the pigs and the pigs running

off the cliff. It's an up-beat thing with a catchy chorus that sounds a lot like "She's Got a Ticket to Ride." Tom sings along, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

He's wearing an old pair of slacks from before he lost some weight. They look huge on him. The way he sits in the car it makes his crotch bunch up like he has a hard-on. I wish it was a hard-on. I haven't seen an erection for quite a while now. He's been sleeping and dressing in the spare bedroom for the last week or so. And I have no idea why.

I'm wearing a short skirt, too short for church, but all my good clothes are at the cleaners. It's this or jeans, and girls don't wear jeans to First Baptist.

Tell me who he is, he says. Just tell me who he is.

There's nobody.

Is it James? He says. I bet its James.

One day I come home from work and he's home before me and he's taken half his stuff out of our bedroom and put it in the spare bedroom. I ask why. He says I know why. I don't know why.

Last night I hear him talking behind the bedroom door and I wonder if he's on the phone with a lover. It is quite a conversation, almost like an argument. I put my ear against the door and listen and he's saying Yes and No a lot. It would maybe almost be okay if it is a lover, explaining why he's been so odd. Maybe she could teach him some new tricks, stuff he could try out on me. But when I go downstairs for a nightcap I find his phone on the kitchen counter, which means he has been talking to himself, and that isn't good.

This has been a dry summer and most of the yards we pass are turning brown. Some are green green. We are under a water-rationing alert. It is easy to tell who is breaking the rules.

We go by a park and there are hundreds out on the jogging trail, running in the morning sun, the rays causing long shadows. None of them are going to church. We're going to church.

We're going to church because God talked to Tom last year while he was reading the Bible, Ezekiel's rant, and God told him that this was the True Word. Tom has always been religious, but not religious religious, so now we listen to Christian rock,

read CS Lewis, and spend our Sunday mornings in church with a bunch of other people giving thanks for being alive and breathing. It means a lot to him.

I'm neither here nor there on the subject, though this morning I'm definitely not there. I'd much rather be reading the paper and drinking vodka and orange juice and later watching the Cubs on TV, lay on the couch with the air conditioning full blast and take my day of rest. Maybe we could have sex. We could have sex on the couch, in the bed, on the kitchen counter. I don't care where, as long as we have sex. I make a mental note to stop by Walgreens on the way back from church to pick up new batteries for my vibrator. The poor thing is beginning to wear itself out.

But I blame myself. I was the one who told Tom to read Ezekiel, my favorite Bible book, where the deity gets all jealous and schizophrenic and kills everybody on earth, cutting off heads for minor slights and destroying entire cities at the drop of a hat. God at His Old Testament best, petty and volatile, mean and capricious. I thought Tom would get a good laugh out of it. I know I do. But no, God decided to talk to Tom, or Tom decided to talk to God. I'm pretty sure it must be the latter. Otherwise it would mean that God is a devious son of a bitch.

I mean, if God is going to talk to Tom why does it have to be about rules and regulations and going to church and worshiping and ruining my Sundays? I don't mind the odd service now and then, on religious holidays and the bored once a month kind of thing, but every week? And why can't God tell Tom to be nicer, a better husband, a better lover? That would be a good God to me, one I could worship more.

Today's sermon is about the gift of giving, that giving is better than receiving. As if that is news. Reverend Jones stands at the lectern and tells us about her grandmother and how her grandmother did volunteer work with the Girl Scouts. They sold a gazillion cookies. They made stuffed dolls for a women's shelter at Christmas. Something is wrong with her microphone and there is a slight hiss coming through the speakers. It makes everybody uncomfortable. They shift in their pews as if by moving around they will be able to get rid of the hiss.

Giving is better than receiving. Tom has been giving me shit and I have been taking his shit. This is getting old.

We sit next to Carl and Hanna. Carl and Tom work together and Hanna and I are best friends. We church together, we party together, we travel together. I'm not sure I like Carl. He has a roving eye, always looking at my tits and legs, though you can hardly blame him. I do keep fit. Right now Carl is edging his eyes down to see if he can catch a glimpse of my panties. My skirt really is that short. He doesn't know I'm not wearing any panties. All my panties are in the clothes hamper at home. That's my job tonight, doing the laundry. I cross my legs. I don't want to pull a Sharon Stone kind of thing.

Sam, Tom whispers. Is it Sam?

No, I whisper back.

Who then?

Nobody.

Somebody.

I only have a twenty and I'm not going to make change out of the collection plate. I ask Tom if he has any ones. He opens his wallet and stares at his bills.

Somebody, he says, has been at my money.

No, they haven't.

I had seven ones and two tens. Look. Six ones and a five.

I tell him to just put a five in the plate and we'll talk about it later.

Did you steal my money?

No, I didn't steal your money.

Somebody stole my money.

Sometimes I wish we belonged to one of those churches where they talk gibberish and dance around with snakes. I'd like to see our congregation rolling on the floor and speaking in tongues. Tearing their hair, rending their clothes, ripping their bodices. Instead we stand and sing What a Friend We Have in Jesus. It gets a little rough by the middle of the second verse, everyone faltering and going off-key, ending in a long drawn-out mumble.

I catch Tom staring at me like I have farted or something. It's not a good look.

Just tell me, he says.

Tell you what?

I want to forgive you, he says. You need to be forgiven.

He has this judgmental smirk on his face.

So I say, Fuck you.

And of course this happens during the lull between song and prayer, my fuck like a sharp bell echoing up to the cavernous church rafters, followed by the you. Fuck-fuck-fuck you-you-you.

No one handles this well. There are gasps, titters, harrumphs, little kids asking parents what fuck means. Tom glares. The reverend coughs into her hissing microphone.

Except Hanna, my best friend Hanna, she laughs, does the old, You go, girl.

We decide on Jackson's and the restaurant is crowded for Sunday brunch. You have the Baptists here, the Catholics there, the Methodists over in the corner. They sit us in a booth by the window. Children run around. Parents shout at children running around. Sunlight comes through the window, so bright we should probably be wearing sunglasses. I use a menu to shade my eyes. Hanna laughs, doing the same. We all order Bloody Marys.

Carl has on his church blazer and church slacks. Hanna wears her partial schoolmarm outfit. They might as well be in Halloween costumes, considering how they act in real life.

Hanna says, Fuck you, and we all start giggling bad, except Tom.

Tom says God moves in mysterious ways.

Hanna stifles her laughter and asks, Does He?

Time, Tom says, has come to this point.

Has it?

Tom says God has built the universe to reach this moment in time. This is what He planned. We are what He had in mind all along. Tom raises his arm to bring in the restaurant and its customers. We have reached the apex, the culmination, the final chapter.

I can't answer. Hanna rolls her eyes. Carl is Carl.

There is a car wash across the street and there is a line of cars and trucks and SUVs waiting to be washed. The people stay in their vehicles, rolling up their windows and blasting air conditioning to beat the heat.

On the drive from the church the car was like a tomb. Tom had the radio off. He drove like he was in a hurry to get somewhere. I thought a couple of times we were going to get in a wreck.

You said fuck. You said fuck in church.

I'm sorry.

Don't apologize to me. Apologize to God.

Sorry, God.

Say it like you mean it.

Oh, I mean it.

Hey! He reached over and raised up my skirt. You're not wearing any underwear.

Then I got grief for going bare bottomed at church. He thought a dirty pair of panties was better than no panties at all.

I said I didn't think it mattered.

He said of course it mattered. We were in church.

I said I thought we are all naked under the eyes of God.

Not in church.

I think I heard him whisper Bitch under his breath.

The Cubs are on the TV behind the bar. Hernandez takes a third strike on a hanging slider. We're playing in New York and the Mets are already up by half a dozen and it's only the fourth inning. Gardner didn't make it past the second. The Mets. Even the Mets are beating our ass.

We ask for more Bloody Marys when we order our brunch. Hannah and Carl get omelets and I have my sausage and Belgian waffles. Tom orders the steak and eggs plate. Rare, he says. Not medium-rare. Rare. He wants to see blood.

I had my period last week. Not that it mattered. Tom was sleeping in the other bedroom. Thank God I had my period. It was late.

My Bloody Mary needs more vodka. I drink it like it is weak tomato juice, gone in six swallows. Hanna talks about last night, being with James and Mary, having dinner at the new Spanish place downtown on Michigan. She says they went to a bar after and stayed out late. It was so much fun. She says they were sorry we couldn't make it. I say I didn't know. Hanna says she called and Tom said we had plans. We had plans? We sat at home. We ate dinner, a delivered pizza, half

pepperoni and half sausage and mushroom, and Tom pushed my hand away when I tried to take a slice from his side. We watched a movie about an outlaw sheriff saving his reputation. Tom went up to the spare bedroom while I went through two more movies. I remember using my vibrator, and I remember opening the second bottle of wine, but I don't remember Tom telling me that Hanna called to invite us out.

Tom watches me. He tells them I'm not wearing any underwear.

Carl smiles. It's both childish and lecherous.

Let me see, Hanna says. Let me see.

She bends her head under the table and I briefly lift my skirt.

She laughs. You've stopped waxing.

I say I've told her that.

I love it, she says. She says she's thinking about going hairy too, maybe a baby stache, a little Hitler.

Sieg heil, I laugh.

Carl says we should lower our voices. Though I can tell he would love to look under the table too. And I would show him, just for the fun of it, to see the look on his face. Carl's never seen me down below before. I doubt if he'd be disappointed.

Tom's steak is rare enough it could moo. Blood pours out and gets in his toast and scrambled eggs. He tears a biscuit in half and uses it to sop up the stuff.

It's Carl. I know it's Carl. It's been Carl the whole time. I should have known, I should have known.

It. Is. Not. Carl. There. Is. No. One.

I am on my third vodka and tonic and the Mets have walked in a run in the first inning of the second half of the double header. Tom opens the refrigerator and stares inside. He moves things around on the door so the salsa and ketchup and strawberry jam are on one shelf and the mustard and mayonnaise and horseradish are on another. He asks why my cheese is on his side of the refrigerator and his cheese is on my side of the refrigerator. I say I didn't do it. He says somebody did it.

I say he must be crazy if he thinks somebody came in our house just to move cheese around inside our refrigerator. He

says his milk too. He's not sure about his grapes, they don't look the same either. He says his boots upstairs in his closet. The left boot is on the right side of the right boot instead of the normal way around.

His boots in his closet in the spare bedroom.

We've changed into our home clothes, both of us in shorts and T-shirts. I wear my Cubs cap. I reach across him to open the freezer for more ice for my drink. He says I've had sex. I say I haven't had sex. He says he can smell it on me. I say no he doesn't. Not that I didn't think about sex while I was changing my clothes. I got my vibrator out of my bedside table drawer but the poor thing just fumbled around and went rr-rr-rr instead of its steady thump and rrrrrrr. I'd forgotten to stop for batteries.

Are you drinking? Yes, I'm drinking. Why are you drinking?

The Mets bat around in the fifth inning and we're down a dozen. Lopez is still on the mound because we used six pitchers in the first game and there's only two guys left in the bullpen. The announcers start telling old stories about traveling to other cities, anything to fill the time.

You had sex with Carl. When did I have sex with Carl? When you went to the bathroom together. At brunch we did go to the bathroom together. Carl wanted to know what was wrong with Tom. He said people at work were worried about him. He said he and Hanna were worried about him.

I turn off the TV and refresh my drink and grab a towel from the clothes hamper and go outside to the back patio. There is a spot on the patio where I can lie down and none of our neighbors can see me. I take off my shorts and T-shirt and try to position my body so the sun can catch every inch.

Tom watches me from inside. He stands at the sliding glass door like an overweight mannequin in a department store window. Hanna calls and says Tom called her and said Carl and I were sleeping together and she knows we're not sleeping together and she's calling because she's calling and I tell her no we're not sleeping together and she says she knows that.

We have a laugh about the phrase 'sleeping together', as if couples meet for an afternoon nap. Let's meet at the hotel for a quick snooze. I can't wait to spoon with you. Hanna asks if I have and I say No, not yet, but I probably will, though there

are no prospects on the horizon, and I ask if she has and she says she has and she is and I tell her to tell me more and she says there's nothing really to tell, that the guy is better than Carl in the sack and that is all that matters.

The air is so still I can hear the family two doors down. The mother is yelling at the father about something and the kids are screaming for her to stop. On the other side of our back fence Mr. Douglas has his gardening shears out and he's busy trimming his rose bushes. The sun is hot. It's like fire ants on my skin. Maybe I should trim my bush. But not yet. The hair in the middle above the crease has grown into a tiny question mark. I like that. I doubt if Sharon Stone has a question mark. It's probably more of an exclamation point. Hanna wants a little Hitler. Oh, Sieg Heil.

I call my vibrator Misha, because it reminds me of Baryshnikov when it dances. The sun is like fire. I'm about to burst into flames.

Tom comes out, carrying a Bible in his hand, and he sits in the plastic patio chair and leans over me as if he is surveying an ancient map. I ask him if he likes what he sees.

Why are you naked?

Because I want to be. Nobody can see me.

I can see you.

He opens the Bible. He says, The Gospel according to Mark. Mark eleven-twelve. And he begins reading, his voice stilted and pondering, and he pauses now and then to let the words sink in. I don't listen much.

Jesus and his disciples are wondering around and Jesus is hungry and they see a fig tree in the distance and when they get there they see it is all leaves and no fruit.

A fig is a fruit?

That's not important. Listen.

Jesus isn't happy. He's hungry. He curses the tree, saying, May no one ever eat fruit from you again.

That's just mean.

Shut up.

Then Jesus and his disciples head into Jerusalem and go to the temple, where he gets all mad and starts turning over tables and attacking doves and rabbits and other animals.

Just because he's hungry?

Shut up.

Later they are on the road and come across the fig tree again. It has withered. It is dying. Jesus says we must throw ourselves off the cliff and into the ocean.

I say I don't like Fig Newtons. Never have.

Tom says he prays for me not to be damned to hell.

I say maybe the fig tree refers to the tree in the Garden and the Joshua tree and the crucifixion cross and Moses' burning bush. Buddha's tree, Godot's tree.

Tom, I say, Tom, my bush is burning.

He stands up from his chair, his shadow coming over me.

I say I remember how my mother one day was reading Genesis out loud to me and my brother and she said it was a good thing that Adam and Eve never ate from the Tree of Life, because, to paraphrase, unending consumption without adoration is more or less the definition of hell.

That's stuck with me my whole life. Consumption without adoration is hell. It sort of makes me sick to my stomach, even though I'm not sure exactly what it means.

Really. What the fuck does that mean?

I ask about the chair, why he has it in his hands over his head.

Veronica Thorson

Thieves

"Is anyone looking?"

"No. Go for it. Now!" she hissed at me.

Earlier that day, an oppressively hot August day in the summer of 1993, my maternal aunt and I had conspired to steal rollerblades from a sporting goods store at the Las Caras mall. The plan, regrettably, involved the aid of my unwitting baby cousin and her expedient baby stroller. Although the perversity of using an innocent baby to commit a theft certainly pierced my conscience, I had eased into the role of cool criminal nevertheless, for it was a simple role and straightforward, as undemanding as AP Biology, my favorite subject in high school. Back then, I imagined myself a biologist or a physician someday, maybe even a brain surgeon.

I scanned the aisle up and down and drew a deep breath, attempting to collect my nerves, before grabbing one of the rollerblades and stuffing it into the bottom compartment of Chubette's stroller. I then grabbed the second rollerblade from the box and took one more look down the aisle before reuniting it with its partner. In that moment, though I had been a virgin to theft, intuition sizzled its way through my synapses and radiated through my skin. The instinct, perhaps a residual trait persisting deep within a double helix on the X chromosome I had inherited from my mother, was primitive. I casually pushed the empty box toward the back of the shelf, where it wouldn't be discovered until we were long gone. A few minutes earlier, pretending to try on the rollerblades, I had removed the tissue paper from the box and stored it inside another one to prevent the noise of crumpling paper when the time came to snatch them. All this I had done while sitting on the floor, and from that lower vantage point I scrutinized the stroller to make sure the rollerblades were well hidden. My baby cousin's blanket, yellow with green turtles, discreetly concealed a hundred dollars' worth of merchandise. I looked up at my aunt.

"Let's go," she said.

Fleeing the scene, I worried we would never reach the exit; the thoroughly lit sporting goods store appeared to span acres. On the way in, it had seemed more like a cubicle with five salespeople for every square foot and nowhere to hide from their unblinking eyes, but the store had mutated into a maze during the theft, the aisles into partitions, and now there were landmines and booby traps to navigate through. As we slowly traversed the acres of commercial carpeting to the distant store exit, Aunt Luz pushed the stroller while I walked beside her, nonchalantly, despite the slightly nauseating sensation of adrenaline surging through my body. Chubette stared at all the colorful objects passing through her line of vision: orange basketballs, red and blue softball bats, brown baseball mitts, lime-green tennis balls crammed inside clear plastic cylinders. Maybe she squealed as we stepped over the threshold. Perhaps I laughed in relief. Two things I remember clearly, though two decades separate me from that day: the rollerblades were a women's size nine, and a feeling not unlike euphoria instantly washed over me. The air outside, though dry and hot, abounded with good oxygen, and the parking lot, gray and bleak with cracking pavement, was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. The feeling soon passed, however, and then I couldn't escape fast enough. I felt the urge to break into a full sprint toward the car, jump in, and speed away before potential witnesses could memorize my license plate. But Luz was pushing Chubette's stroller as if sauntering through a botanical garden, and we continued to walk, taking our time, two thieves and a baby.

I was sixteen back then. I still watched cartoons. That summer, however, especially that day, the crumbs of naiveté I had managed to preserve up to that point disappeared for good, like the genetic drift of an ill-fated trait. I spent the first part of summer practicing for my driver's license road test. My mom had been thrifty, or cheap, as I perceived it back then, and had squirreled away enough money to buy me a well-used, cockroach-brown 1980 Buick Skylark. "You deserve this, mija," she'd said. "Not every mom can say her kid is a straight-A student." I named the car Minerva Mariquita de Guadalupe and self-consciously introduced her to my closest friends. When I cruised all over Las Caras

with the windows rolled down because Minerva lacked air conditioning, I didn't care that I lived in a boring, backward town with no action. I made my own action. Nor did I mind that I drove the most obnoxious car around. Minerva took me places I never imagined I could go. The remainder of the summer, a few weeks during August, I devoted to my aunt and our little excursions—"shopping trips" we called them.

When we finally reached Minerva, I envisioned myself rocketing away straight to the hospital, where the ER staff could tend to my impending apoplexy (strokes were common in my family), but there wasn't time for such trivial matters. Aunt Luz and I had a busy schedule that day. Inside the car, she puffed on a cigarette while I drove. I hated that she smoked with Chubette in the back seat, but I would never tell her so. My aunt was an old-school chola, a female Mexican thug, or at least she had claimed that title in her youth. A teardrop tattoo punctuated the delicate skin below her right eye, and that's probably the only tear she ever cried.

"So where does this friend of yours live?"

"By the park on Calle del Norte," I said.

"Oh yeah, me and Joe used to get drunk at that park. One time we got busted sniffing glue, and your mom had to pick us up at the pig station."

"Well, it's around there," I said, hoping to choke off the possibility of further elaboration on her exhausting war stories. Perhaps I was feeling the backlash of what we had just done, or maybe it was simply the afternoon heat making me cranky. Most likely it was the way she kept looking at her watch every few minutes, which never portended well, or the urgent look in her embittered brown eyes.

"Your mom always came through for me, Susie."

I turned up the radio in answer. Through the rearview mirror, I could see my Chubber trying to sing along with her made-up words. I turned up the radio another few notches and started singing, too: "Sweet Little Lies" by Fleetwood Mac. I knew the lyrics of all their songs, thanks to my mom and her album collection, and I preferred listening to her favorite band rather than my aunt's inadvertent indictments of her enablement.

"Go to Raul's first since it's on the way," Luz snapped at

me, interrupting our performance with her curt demand. "I'll sell him the phone, and then we'll drop off the rollerblades at your friend's and get her money."

"Okay," I said, grateful the hint had registered and that she wasn't expounding on the good old days, which never sounded all that good to me, even when it was my mom who was telling me about them. Neither of them ever seemed to waste an opportunity to reminisce about the past.

Like earlier that summer, when my mom—only on her fourth Bud Light—sat on the front steps with me, snacking on chips and salsa and watching the new neighbors attach skirting to their trailer. Our conversations rarely broached difficult topics, for our survival required the avoidance of pain in any of its forms, and a habit of flight over fight had been protected, perfected, and passed on in tightly curled strands of DNA through many generations of our family tree. Nevertheless, maybe because she was only sixteen when she gave birth to me, or perhaps because her buzz was starting to kick in, my mom decided to warn me about getting pregnant now that I had a boyfriend.

"Wait until you're older, mija. Please," she said. "You know I love mijo like a son, but the two of you are still too young."

"I know, Mom. Don't worry."

"I want you to get on the pill, okay? I'll take you." She averted her eyes when she said it, and I simply nodded, too stunned to protest or even contemplate whether doing so would be in my best interest.

"I don't know how I would've done it without your Aunt Luz," she continued dispassionately, as if she'd just been discussing the salsa's lack of heat. "When your dad left, I couldn't afford daycare, but you know me, Susie. I *had* to work. No way would I let us go on welfare. Luz didn't care that I couldn't pay her."

"I know, Mom. You've told me."

"She loved taking care of you. It was like you were hers. She'd put your hair in pigtails with little ribbons. She showed you off to all her little girlfriends." My mom failed to mention, of course, that Luz's "little girlfriends" were street-smart cholas.

"Kind of like me with Annette."

"Yeah, like that, except you were a little older. But she loved you just as much as you love Chubette. That's for sure."

My mom held on so tightly to the tiny scraps of reality that that didn't hurt, remembering the good times and extolling the virtues of Luz before she became a heroin addict. The stories she told and the photographs she preserved, fossils of a life no longer extant, are the only proof my aunt wasn't born with a needle full of dope attached to her belly button instead of an umbilical cord. I never discounted my mom's recollections of her sister, but I harbored other memories, like the day I first began to suspect my aunt was sick in ways I couldn't quite name.

I was nine years old, and I remember that summer vividly because it was the year I began playing softball. I remember the day with brutal clarity because, unlike my aunt, I possessed no heroin nepenthe. My mother and I had just returned from one of my games. I had hit a homerun, my first, and felt like Ryne Sandberg. Luz had been waiting for us on the front steps of our singlewide trailer, sitting with her head in her hands, as if exhausted, but I was pulsating with energy, and I wanted to tell her all about my game, play by play.

"I hit a homer, Aunt Luz! Everyone saw me! It was the—" I stopped talking when she lifted her head. She looked like a cartoon cat that had just been drenched by a bucket of water, large eyes drooping, hair soaked. She'd been sweating profusely, more than what her body required to maintain equilibrium in the summer heat, and tendrils of clear snot snaked down from her nostrils.

"Luz," my mom said. "You look awful. What's wrong? Are you *sick*?" We both stared at my aunt, waiting for an answer.

"I just need a place to crash tonight, Sis. Are you gonna help me or what?"

My mom consented and didn't press further. When she told Luz to help herself to my room, my aunt immediately locked herself away, but she moved slowly, as if each step sent minuscule cracks shooting up through her legs.

I slept with my mom in her room, next to the only bathroom in our trailer, so I heard Luz pacing back and forth to the toilet all night. Around 3:00 a.m., I woke to the sound of a

loud crash followed by shrill voices, my mom yelling at my aunt in Spanish, my aunt screaming angrily. Groggily, I lifted myself from the soft sheets and padded down the hall to see what was going on. In my small room, which measured no more than seven by nine feet, the smell of vomit permeated the air. Orange vomit saturated my bed sheets, drenched the floor, and dripped down from the walls. My little bookshelf had been knocked over, its various items strewn on the floor in a puddle of orange liquid, and next to that chaos stood Luz, soaking wet and shaking, shivering cold in the middle of summer. I didn't understand why my mom was yelling at Aunt Luz for throwing up in my room and wondered what had happened to my bookshelf. The vomit looked and smelled disgusting, but it could be cleaned up. I'd thrown up on my bed before.

My mom finally noticed me standing at the door when I asked what was wrong with my aunt.

"Go back to my room now, Susana Maria," she said with a quaking voice. "Y cierra la puerta. I'm not going to tell you again."

The next morning, I discovered that Luz had vanished with the last vestiges of night, and apparently so had my softball-team fundraiser money that I'd been collecting in the cookie jar. My room had been scrubbed clean, the sheets replaced and every item put back in its place. When I confronted my mom about the missing cash, she apologized and said that she'd lent it to Luz. I believed her, of course—I was nine years old—and I exonerated my aunt. Until the next time it happened. Until I figured out that my aunt would raid the church collection plate, literally, or rob the children's charity fund jar from Circle K to keep from getting sick.

Before stealing the rollerblades that day, Luz had asked me to drive her to Montgomery Ward. "I just have to get something real quick. I'll be right back," she said, slamming my door, a sound like a paper cut. Chubette and I waited in the car, which felt like an oven by noontime in Las Caras, and not even a slight breeze was blowing through the windows. I sang nursery songs to my cousin, and the time passed soon enough. When I spotted Luz returning to the car, her

form looked conspicuously bulky. I hadn't suspected she was going in *there* to steal, even though I knew the day would be devoted to theft—it was my friend, after all, who wanted the rollerblades for cheap. As soon as she was in the car, Luz pulled out a beautiful brown suede leather jacket from the front of her pants and offered it to me. Even though it was August and winter thoughts were far from my mind, the stores were beginning to stock their shelves with autumn apparel. I often looked at such items with lust, knowing I could never have them, knowing that I'd never be one of those kids with a soft sweater or $100 shoes.

"Think of this as gas money," she said.

"That's more than a day's worth of gas."

"Well, mija, you're my only niece, and I'm proud of you. I just want to give you something, okay?"

My family seemed perpetually compelled to let me know they were proud of me. Always, they were proud. And for what? Because through some aleatory inheritance of good genes I was able to ace all my classes without much effort? I wanted them to be proud of me because I did something extraordinary, not because I got lucky with some brain cells, and yet hard work repulsed me. Like my aunt, I wanted what was easy and comfortable. Luz had known that I'd been coveting a leather jacket for two years. Never mind that it was stolen. The fact was that my mom worked her butt off waiting tables at a mediocre restaurant in a crappy town just to put an aluminum roof over my head and buy me a car (ugly as it was), and though I wasn't ashamed to grow up in a trailer park, or so I told myself, I knew there were just certain things in life I would never have—like a leather jacket—until I was on my own, after college and med school. But all of a sudden, doors opened for me because I saw what I could have if I just decided to take it. If I wanted, I could wear Nike shoes instead of Pro Wings from K-Mart, GUESS Jeans instead of Gitanos. My thoughts began to move fast like a reel on a fishing pole, my greed pulling in the line, and the big fish at the end of the hook was an image of myself in designer clothing, a vision of Minerva with a booming stereo, my bedroom with a cordless phone. Like I said before, I wasn't exactly ashamed of my trailer-trash status—I never even had a concept of class until

seventh grade—but I resented it nonetheless.

So I was moved by her gesture. Despite the dirtiness of it, I accepted my aunt's gift, a token of her manipulation. When I drove her all over town from store to store that day, I thought of the leather jacket I'd be wearing in October. And now, of course, I understand the jacket was a bribe rather than a gift. A mere half hour after receiving it, I agreed to help my aunt steal the rollerblades.

So we drove around all morning and afternoon that Friday, and after studying my aunt and learning her methods and tricks, taking mental notes like the quick student I had always been, I was prepared to be her juvenile accomplice. We had fared rather well at the sporting goods store, and I felt proud for maintaining my composure during the entire episode, as if I had achieved some feat through great effort. I hadn't felt calm or composed before or during the theft, but I had taken my fear and used it to control my hands as they stole. There was something about that feeling—the flipping of my stomach, the churning of its bile, the heat in my palms—that begged for repetition. In fact, that particular act of theft on a Friday in August spawned future shoplifting conquests with my friends, who would soon become my eager students, and I surmised that it was the beginning of a nascent vocation and the beginning of something else, too, some new feeling that felt like infatuation. The sweat ready to condense on hot skin, held back by sheer will; the heart on the verge of contracting into itself yet beating on in fear; the imminent threat of discovery, its appalling thrill: these are the compulsions of a thief, and I was hooked after one dose.

After we gathered the money from our sales that day, Luz split the loot with me three ways, two thirds for herself and one for me. And that's when we went on the real mission, of course. All day she had been anxious, fixated on one desire, one fear circling her thoughts. One motivational mantra kept her panic at bay: she needed to score before she got sick. My aunt didn't steal because she liked the thought of herself in a leather jacket. She stole for drugs. Obviously.

Again Chubette and I waited in the car. The heat of the day was just beginning to abate, and I settled into my

seat, admiring my well-earned exhaustion and noting my surroundings. A high wooden fence, gray and weathered, hid the dealer's house from view. Strangers weren't allowed inside the dealer's house. Strangers weren't allowed *near* the dealer's house. I had parked around the corner so that my aunt could venture alone. Dogs yapped and growled from the direction of the gate, but Luz wasn't afraid of the dogs. I'm pretty sure nothing scared her—except maybe the bite of withdrawal.

Looking at my baby cousin in the back seat, I couldn't help but adore her ridiculously cute round face. Annette had these impossibly pink, chubby cheeks (hence her nickname). The daughter of a black man, lost in a big city on a binge somewhere, and a Hispanic mother, lost, Chubette had bronze skin, black hair that curled into miniature ringlets, and stunning large brown eyes that drank up the world and emitted the potential of new life. Though my aunt's face would never surrender its round shape, Luz hadn't been chubby for years, instead donning the typical guise of a junkie, bruised crescent moons beneath the eyes, animated solely by need, concave cheeks. Her skin looked doughy, the pores enlarged, sad green veins subsisting through her gray pallor. Annette, ever since the first day she had burst into the world with a full head of hair, had acquired the envious position of my favorite cousin—even as her mother continued to lose rank in my appraisal—and I felt responsible for her somehow. A transient spark of guilt briefly lit up the front part of my brain, the prefrontal cortex, as I would later learn, which controls impulses, but that tiny needle prick of remorse didn't motivate me. Like a brain receptor glutted by overstimulation, my compunction was inactive.

Sitting in the car outside the dealer's house that day in a vacant and brown, lifeless part of town, I wondered whether Annette's life would atrophy as her mother's had, like a shriveled, desiccated, defunct receptor—the way anyone's life, whether by chance or by choice, can degenerate. In biology class, I had learned that generations of families inherit the same traits—pigmentation, physical similarities, the propensity for certain diseases and addictions—and I wondered whether somewhere in me there was a switch

waiting to be flipped, converting me into an insatiable heroin addict like my aunt or a functional alcoholic like my mother.

When you're sixteen, you're curious about so many things. I had wanted to know what sex felt like, so I lost my virginity to my boyfriend a few months earlier. It was easy to see why people liked it so much. Sex. I wanted to know what was so great about heroin, too, but I wasn't about to find *that* out for myself. Instead, at Peter Piper Pizza one day during the earlier part of summer, I asked my aunt about it while waiting for pizza in a booth near the game room, where Chubber could gaze at the colorful ball pit and listen to the simple melodies of the arcade. I had tried to win her a stuffed piggy with my last five bucks while waiting for the pizza but ended up empty handed. When the pizza arrived, I fed my baby cousin a slice. Her little baby mouth opened for more and more, and I realized with delight that we both really loved our pizza. As usual, Luz just sat there with a bitter smirk on her face. She never had an appetite. For food. Which got me thinking about what else heroin does to the body. What's it like when your cells are flooded with drugs? Biology was good for intellectual knowledge, but it couldn't tell you what anything really feels like.

"What does it feel like?" I had asked rather suddenly.

Luz just sat there, her eyes vacantly converging toward a window, where a woman sat drinking a pitcher of beer by herself, but I knew my aunt wasn't watching her.

"Aunt Luz?"

"Huh? Yeah?"

"What does it feel like? Heroin."

She thought about it for two seconds. "Like heaven," she said, and it looked like maybe she had just found it there in Peter Piper Pizza. Her expression changed from vacuous to enraptured. "Your body feels so warm, like you're taking a bath in melted chocolate." My aunt nursed the biggest sweet tooth, appetite or no, a side effect of opiate addiction.

"Is it kind of like when you're drunk? Like you can do anything?"

"It's like being numb, but you can feel this warmness in your body, and you feel like you can just sit there and feel and

not feel forever. Like if someone was kicking you, beating the crap out of you, you wouldn't even care."

"So your body could be injured, but you wouldn't feel it? Or you wouldn't care? Because the reason the body senses pain is to protect itself. Like when you touch a hot pan or something, the nerve endings send signals to the brain, and the brain causes the hand to instinctively move away. There's a reason for pain, you know."

"Look," she said. "You asked. I told you. I don't need no freaking lecture. What the hell do you know about pain anyway? You with your precious car, your precious mother, your good grades."

Needless to say, we didn't speak for the rest of lunch. I drove her and Annette home in silence. I had pissed her off, and there were no words that could mend our little rift the way heroin could make the pain of an injury obsolete. I knew she wouldn't bother me to take her anywhere again until the next time there was no one else to ask. I'd nurtured a lot of resentment toward Luz for what seemed like a long while—because time passes so slowly at that age—but I also lived in awe of her. This was my aunt, my blood, and I knew what it felt like to want something you shouldn't.

When my aunt returned from the dealer's that Friday afternoon, she had metamorphosed into a brand new person with an ill-gotten smile, an ugly, in-your-face grin. I knew she'd wait until we got to her place to shoot up, so it wasn't because she was high. It was the anticipation of the high, like the anticipation of the rush a thief experiences just before committing the crime. Luz lived in a government-subsidized two-bedroom apartment, and when we finally arrived, I carried Annette inside, where I immediately noticed the furniture had vanished. An entire phylum of living-room furnishings had become extinct: the nineteen-inch TV and lively green sofas, the entertainment center and stereo, the VCR and cordless phone. Framed photographs of my mom and me, Annette, and other family members incongruously remained on the walls; they were perfectly aligned and evenly spaced. My mom always said Luz had a knack for decorating. The thrift-store end table survived

in the corner by the kitchen, but its symbiotic table lamp had disappeared. In the kitchen, I could see that the table and chairs had also survived the mass extinction, probably because Luz couldn't get any money for them. No wonder she had bothered to educate me in the way of thieves. She had exhausted all other options. My poor baby cousin lived in an empty apartment because her mother was a heroin addict, a selfish bitch, really. And the apartment hadn't seemed so bad before because my aunt *did* have a knack for decorating, but I wanted to flee from it in that moment. I wanted to abscond with Annette and leave my aunt to rot with her one true love, but something revolting and putrid kept me there, something like fascination for the morbid.

And then my aunt, who had disappeared into her bedroom, reappeared and said, "You kicked ass today, mija, just like your aunt."

"Thanks," I said.

"Hey, you ever seen heroin?"

"No."

"You want to? But you can't tell your mom, okay? She'd kill me."

"You know I won't."

Luz took my sleeping cousin from my arms and carried her into the other bedroom, laying her down inside her little crib, which hadn't been sold, and then motioned me into the compact bathroom. Sitting on the toilet, she unwrapped a piece of foil, peeling back the delicate flaps of aluminum with the precision of a jeweler.

"This is what you call black-tar heroin. There's also powder, but this is what I like." In her hands was a drug I had never seen. It looked like a ball of marijuana resin, sticky and dark brown.

"I'm going to cook just enough so I won't get sick," she said and then laid the foil down on the counter, tenderly, as if putting Annette to sleep. She took a silver heart-shaped box trimmed with pink roses from the medicine cabinet. Her hands and the undersides of her arms, which were covered in purple welts, the veins swollen and fragile, affirmed the long and angry affair she had endured, but I thought it was the kind of thing she loved herself for enduring, like the person

who cuts herself to feel something and then smiles down at the new engraving, imagining how lovely the scar will be. It was romantic. She looked at her arms and shook her head, said she'd have to find a vein in her neck. I didn't want to know, really, but I couldn't extract myself. It was like seeing a corpse for the very first time, and I wanted to touch the cold skin, run my fingers along the embalmed torso and over the chest, as if I could find the animate and irretrievable part of that carcass. She opened the box, which contained a lighter, a spoon, and a few cotton balls, and then she pulled out the needle. The desire in her brown eyes, maybe Annette's in twenty years, unsettled me. It was the look I would always be able to identify from that point on: the anticipation of satiety, no, of surfeit. It was love, zeal, tenderness, the ardor of the fiend preparing to fix, of the thief waiting to steal, of the glutton at the banquet table. She continued with her ritual in a trancelike manner. It was liturgical. I felt as if I were at mass, only for once I wasn't ignoring the priest's incantations. She set the needle aside and cleaned the spoon with alcohol. Then she used a pocket knife to divide a small fraction of heroin from the portion in the foil. Carefully, with a gracefulness I hadn't noticed before—even during a theft—she scraped the brown substance onto the spoon. Using the needle, she squirted a small amount of water onto the spoon, and then she ignited the lighter beneath it, cooking the heroin until it liquefied.

"I'm going to draw this into the syringe," she said. "But first I'll put the cotton ball here, like this, so I can filter out the impurities. I wouldn't want any shit to get in my veins."

Engrossed in the moment, I watched her hands, the expert ease with which she drew in the liquid, the slight excretion of the liquid from the end of the needle, the nimble tap of her finger against the barrel to clear any air pockets. I knew why the pictures on her walls were all lined up and evenly spaced.

"You want to see me shoot it up?"

I did. I couldn't. The cold skin of the corpse had burned me. It wasn't the dead cells of the cadaver that bothered me, the breaking down of enzymes, the chemicals injected for the purpose of preservation. It was that I, with my limited human perspective, could never grasp what it had been before death,

what it would never be again, and so I wanted to hurt it. But you can't hurt something that is already dead.

"I think I'll go check on Annette," I said and closed the door behind me. My baby cousin napped wearily in her crib, where I watched her breathe. She had borne the brunt of a long and loathsome day, a day no toddler should ever have to endure. Dusk shrouded the room, the curtains drawn to shut out the waning sunlight. Everything in the nursery remained intact: a small dresser that someone had painted pink, a secondhand rocking chair, miscellaneous toys and stuffed animals, flower-themed wall art. All of Annette's things, her meager possessions, objects she didn't yet know how to desire, were in place.

Brad McElroy

The Deep End

Rachel leaves a trail of her morning around her parents' house. There's a book by Christopher Hitchens on the coffee table, coffee cup on the dining table, a half-eaten granola bar on the counter, and Rachel at the sink, head under the faucet. Her mom has told her not to wash her dreads in the sink, but it clogs her shower's drain if she does it in the bathroom.

Here's Rachel: shorts and T-shirt over a red one-piece that says LIFEGUARD, tattoo of a rose on her upper arm, slight gap in her front teeth, islands of moles dot up her other arm and into her shirt, and dreadlocks that tangle like tumbleweed.

At 23, she cannot settle on the idea of God even though she leaves for Pepperdine's Theology graduate program tomorrow. She still wishes she'd studied eschatology as an undergrad at the University of Texas in Arlington. She loves words like *Ground Zero*, *DEFCON-1*, *Cold War*, and when she's bored she rolls the word *Eschatology* around in her mouth and loves the way it sounds, the way her lips never touch like all the apocalypse theories.

But Pepperdine gave her a sweet deal. Tuition waived. Full scholarship. Teaching assistantship. A stipend. She wants to study religion because the end of the world is programmed into most of them. Not to mention it's California, and Rachel is too young not to believe in its illusions.

Wringing water from her dreads, thin tributaries carry loose hair down her hands and into the garbage disposal. Dirty dishes soak in soapy water the sink over. Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" rambles in the background from her dad's stereo. Boxes pile up in the hallway and around the door—her clothes, books, some pots and pans she commandeered from her mom. She likes to think moving back home to the Texas panhandle after college was some nostalgic thing, like saying goodbye before she never came back. But she knows it was purely financial.

Rachel can't wait to leave West Texas, to wake up in the

morning and go outside and not smell cow shit miles away, to trade in tornados for earthquakes, to be by the Pacific Ocean, even if it's too cold to swim. Bob Dylan wails about nowhere he's going to and Rachel thinks about I-40 for 1200 miles from Amarillo to Albuquerque and Gallup and Flagstaff and the turnoff for I-15 to Los Angeles.

"Don't think I don't care," she has said to her mom and dad. "This is something I just have to do."

She ties her dreads tighter and wrings them again, moving to the next one, repeating the process. Her phone rings at a volume just below eardrum shattering. An unknown number has been calling her for weeks. With her head still under the faucet, she reaches over blindly to turn it off. She thinks it's Jess, whose number she deleted when she left for UTA four years ago. Now that she's back home, lifeguarding at the city pool again, living with her parents, she can't imagine seeing him more than she has to. She really wishes he won't be at work today.

She shakes her head in the sink and lets the water run cool and free down her face. She ties her hair back and washes her hands, wiping her face on an old dishtowel before leaving. Outside, it feels like the Middle East, although it's just Texas in August. The unknown number calls her again and she ignores it as she prays to nothing in particular for her car's A/C to work. Rachel really wishes she had put on sunscreen. She wishes again even more so that Jess won't be at work.

Rachel has pulled off some elaborate shift-switching to avoid Jess. They've worked together just a few times this summer, hardly ever saying a word to each other, but on her last day something like fate can't be helped. They both open the pool today and sure enough Jess is early, too. He's all but throwing the skimmer to the middle of the pool where a rogue Band-Aid avoids the net, inches from his reach.

He hasn't changed much since high school, Rachel notices. He's still tall and skinny, brown hair that has turned slightly blonde from all the sun, and a slightly receding hairline to match. Without a shirt on he is impossibly tan, ribs just barely showing.

"Shit," he says, almost falling in, dragging the skimmer back.

The schedule shows four lifeguards, but Rachel and Jess are the only ones here. They're both 20 minutes early, and Rachel can't find a good reason not to talk to him.

"A lifeguard afraid of water," she says. She locks the gate behind her and already the neighborhood kids are at the chain link fence, some playing on the playground, some just sitting on the curb. The filtration system's respiration is an epiglottal gurgle.

"I don't want to get wet," he says, leaning on the skimmer. His eyebrows are frowning checkmarks, like he's seeing a ghost he doesn't see too often.

"Pussy," she says, and undresses to her bathing suit.

"Shame, I'm all out of dollar bills," he says, trying to get a reaction. "Look, you even have a rose tattoo to match." This is the most they've said to each other all summer.

"I'd rather grind on that skimmer before you," she says, dipping her feet in the water, then sliding all the way in.

"Here you go," he says and tosses the skimmer next to her in the pool.

The water is cool even though the morning is close to a hundred degrees. The Band-Aid is still in the shallow end and she uses the net to scoop it and catapult it over the fence.

"Y'know, I haven't quite got the PH right and I think some kid peed in it yesterday," Jess says.

"A kid pees in it everyday."

"You can just tell when it happens, too. They get real still and kind of get that serious, glassy look in their eye, y'know, like they've seen some shit?"

Rachel ignores his attempt at a joke and how he's trying to mimic them.

"Nice dreads by the way," he says. "Did they come with the tattoo?"

"Why do you keep calling me?" she asks. "Like everyday I've been getting a call from you." If she didn't just wash her hair she'd swim some before the pool opens, to avoid talking with Jess, but the pool has a thick chemical smell and she wonders if Jess even checked the pool's levels.

"Not me," he says, waving her question away like it was a fly, or a bad smell.

"Whatever," she says. The pool smells like bleach and toxic

amounts of chlorine.

"Are we gonna be like this all day? I remember when we used to be friends." Jess is now at the top of the stairs, ready to help Rachel out of the pool.

"I think that was part of the problem," she says, wading on the bottom step.

"Can you forget about that?"

If she still had the Band-Aid she would've thrown it at him.

"I've forgiven you," she says, pulling herself up with the handrail, "I swear." Rachel's body looks porous exiting the pool, as though water were shedding out of her skin and swimsuit. Jess offers his hand, but Rachel ignores that, too.

"I swear," she says again.

"Okay, I'll take that," he says.

They go into the lifeguarding office to cool down and Rachel uses one of the towels that have been left behind. Her red swimsuit is only wet from her belly button down, and she knows Jess is doing everything he can not to make some immature joke.

"We've never really had a chance to talk since you left," he says.

"Or since I've come back."

"I open, and you close. I'm sure it's on purpose."

She remembers throughout their whole senior year in high school Jess talked about taking a year off before college.

"Why are you still working here?" she asks. "Looks like that one year off turned into four."

"I went to the community college, and did some online classes. I'm not worthless," he says.

Rachel slips back into her shorts, and starts raiding the cabinets in the office for sunscreen. Already the sun feels like it's taking Rachel's last day personal. The concrete is scorching, and even though it's still morning there aren't any shadows.

"I wasn't saying that," she says.

"I've thought about leaving. Tons of times. Just never felt right. I work here in the summer; at the community college's indoor pool in the winter." He opens up a drawer and holds the sunscreen out for Rachel. "I'm happy here," he says.

He attempts a smile, but Rachel knows it's fake. Happiness

only exists everywhere else.

"Never said you weren't," she says, rubbing sunscreen into her tattoo first then the rest of her arms.

"Yeah, I'm happy," he says again, like he's trying to convince himself more than Rachel. "Y'know, there's more to this place than just leaving it behind again."

"Like what?"

"Like how it's home."

"For you, maybe. But after you're gone for 4 years your definition of home changes. You change. Home isn't entirely the same anymore. I thought you'd know that." Rachel fears most that she is wrong in this moment.

Jess nods solemnly, conceding that she's probably right.

The kids who were on the playground are now crowding the fences, shaking it with their hands like claws. The parents sit in their cars in the gravel parking lot, the same parents who treat city pools like cheap daycare. Jess unlocks the fence and watches as kids run and dive into the shallow end.

Rachel won't admit it to him now, but nearly every shift this summer she has remembered when she and Jess were kids, seeing who could hold their breath the longest. They'd go all the way to the bottom of the deep end, all 12 feet, to make it seem more real. One second too long being the difference between drowning and winning, they would sit like rocks, staring each other down as the chlorine burned their eyes. Jess would usually lose and swim to the surface first, rubbing his burning eyes and catching his breath as lifeguards blew whistles at him while Rachel stayed on the bottom, waiting to surface. Now, here they are, telling kids not to do the exact same thing.

Here are Rachel and Jess as children playing with a Garter snake. They flip it over on its back, and watch how it turns its pale yellow belly back over, weaving so gracefully around its own body. Here is Rachel holding her breath longer than Jess in the deep end of the pool where they now lifeguard. Here is Jess, at 10, climbing into Rachel's room late at night because he's going to run away. Here is Rachel, drunk for the first time, calling Jess to come pull her car out of the mud. Here is Jess getting Rachel a job lifeguarding at the city pool.

Here is Rachel thinking she likes Jess just before high school graduation, just before she leaves for UTA. Here is Rachel telling Jess to come with her to UTA, that she could possibly love him. Here is Jess telling Rachel it would never work. Here is Rachel not thinking about Jess in Arlington. Here is Rachel holding a grudge. Here is Rachel moving back home to save money and work at her old lifeguarding job. Here is Rachel finding out Jess still works there. Here is Rachel moving on with her life.

There's a peculiar sense of boredom found in lifeguards. Time doesn't pass in minutes, but by the glare of the sun off the water and the degree of a sunburn. When a lifeguard hasn't moved in more than an hour, when she spends every 30 seconds counting the number of swimmers in her section, when she yells *Stop Running* for the 60th time in the 60th minute she will feel the world spin beneath her and her chair. Rachel wonders if the phrase crushing boredom lends any truth to its own expression. Some days, she can feel her body folding over itself into shapes she cannot describe.

The one thing Rachel likes about the shallow end is the large mushroom. It is right by her stand, and water cascades all around it. If she closes her eyes it almost sounds like a waterfall. The screams from children are slightly hushed and barely a whisper. She sees mouths moving but there's almost no sound like in a nightmare. Without sound, the joy on these kids' faces turn surreal.

When she gets impatient Rachel walks her section. She holds the long flotation tube that says LIFEGUARD on both sides and paces from the depths of one foot to four feet. There's a length of plastic balls that separate the shallow and deep end only by an idea. It is the difference between four and four and a half feet, between kids standing and standing on their tip toes.

Jess, at the diving board, however, lets kids dive tandem off of it as though they are practicing for the Olympics. He doesn't even care about chicken fights and watches as high school guys and their girlfriends wage war against each other like human skyscrapers. Freshmen devise elaborate strategies to steal bikini tops in the shade of poolside deck

chairs. The younger kids Marco Polo until whoever is Polo cries. The deep end, when Jess lifeguards, looks like some adolescent free-for-all.

Rachel can see these kids in the pool without lifeguards and how it would inevitably descend into chaos: Indian rug burns, chicken fights, diving contests in 3 feet of water, nose bleeds. Lifeguarding at a pool is close to apocalyptic anyway, and with Jess lifeguarding they're only a few degrees away from anarchy. Rachel knows it wouldn't get much worse unless they were all stranded on an island with a conch.

The diving board bends and snaps and spits the neighborhood kids up and out and down. There are belly flops, cannonballs, jackhammers, and infinite backflips and front flips that never break into a dive. Rachel lets a boy in Xbox swimming trunks walk-jog around the pool and toward the fence only because the concrete is scorching and Texas hot. She's been there and wishes she were still there sometimes. His friends make a run for the fences, too, and Rachel sees why before blowing her whistle at them.

From the parking lot walk high school girls in bikinis, drinking iced Starbucks drinks, Route 44 Sonic Cokes, and wearing oversized John Lennon sunglasses and Reefs. Their bodies move like slender pendulums the boys wish they could understand. They set all of their deck chairs to the same flat 180 degree angle, parallel with the sun, and lay there on their backs and some on their stomachs, a couple of them already untying the knots to their bikinis. Rachel hears them talking about not getting tan lines. Her own back has permanent white straps over her shoulder.

The same boys conspire in the corner next to the SNACK BAR and the boy in Xbox trunks begins inching dangerously close to a girl in an electric blue bikini who has already untied her top. Rachel assumes the posture of a lifeguard daring the boy to do it. She blows her whistle just soft enough to catch Jess's attention. When Xbox turns back to his friends they all wave him forward, anticipating a quick escape. Some are hopping in the shade; others pace behind them, trying to get a good look. Xbox takes his time planting his feet firmly on the hot concrete. With each step his back arches in pain. Either he'll make a run for it or he won't, Rachel knows.

Xbox can't take the concrete too much longer and right then the boy is about eight feet from the tanning girl. A thin string of electric blue bikini top dangles away from the half-globe of the girl's breast. He looks back at his friends who are now still. His pruned feet are burning. The blue string flutters in the wind. It rests. Rachel wishes the boy could understand what is happening to him. The blue string flutters and rests. The girl is looking away from him, moments from sleeping. She sighs. The bikini sighs with her. When the boy looks back to his friends they are gone. Rachel wishes the boy could understand, but before anything happens he jumps back into the pool.

If Rachel could say anything to Jess in this moment she would say, "don't think I don't care. This is something I just have to do."

The other lifeguards finally come in an hour late, and Rachel snaps her flip-flop against her heel as loud as she can, making a sound like rough sex. Jess swings his floatation tube around like it's a yellow light saber and drops it. Jess blows his whistle, not at any kids, but at the lifeguards in the office who give him the finger in return. Everyone looks at him and keeps breaking the rules. Behind her, Rachel thinks she hears her phone ringing and then the quiet semaphore of it turning into a missed call.

Here are the kids who are quiet, who don't run, who go off the diving board one at a time, who apply sunscreen, who wait 30 minutes after eating. Here are the kids who chicken fight, who dunk, who Marco Polo, who spike beach balls at the smaller children in the shallow end. Here are the kids who see which one can hold their breath the longest, a lifeguard's nightmare. Here are the high schoolers who tan, who try to talk to girls in bikinis, all of them trying to get laid just once this summer. Then there are the kids out there on the edge of the diving board, too paralyzed to dive into the chaos beneath them. They have something like a spiritual awakening on the white tongue of the diving board, looking down the 8 feet into the deep end of the pool where eventually the white tongue will flick them up, and out, and down, but for now they only look. Here are the rest of these kids' lives:

and then they jump into it.

Rachel peels her one-piece's strap from her shoulder and groans at the deepening tan line. The sun is less brutal as it goes down, but the damage is already done. Rachel picks at a couple flakes of dead skin, decides it's no use. The pool is now quiet; the water's surface just a glittering of coins. The unknown number calls her again and she picks up her phone. Jess sits by the fan, blowing into it, listening to his voice modulate in the cool air.

Whatever, she thinks, and hits accept.

"Is this Rachel Baker?" a voice asks on the other side before Rachel can say anything.

"Who is this?" Rachel asks.

"Ms. Baker, this is Carol with Pepperdine's administration office. Do you have a few moments?"

Jess keeps blowing into the fan while Rachel goes out back behind the office.

"Sorry I haven't been answering," she says when she can finally hear herself think. "It's just I thought you were someone else calling me." Already she sees the palm trees, the horrible LA traffic, the empty blue of the Pacific.

"Not a problem," Carol says, "but we have been trying to reach you for weeks. We've sent emails, mailed letters that came back unopened. It seems as though you never had voicemail set up on your phone or we would have left a number for you to call."

"Just thought you were someone else," Rachel says. "I can't even begin to explain how excited I am to enroll this fall." She sees cities with multiple zip codes. The cursive *California* on license plates, Great Whites waiting for surfers, piers jutting out into an unforgivable cold blue she's only seen on a map.

"About that Ms. Baker . . ."

Carol's side goes silent, and in the background Rachel hears white noise. There's a pit in Rachel's chest cavity.

"Now, it appears there were two Rachel Bakers who applied to our graduate program. Somehow you . . ."

Carol's voice mumbles into Rachel's shock, like a mushroom cloud dispersing nuclear wind, and becomes senseless. She feels her body folding in on itself, and outside the lifeguard's

office she's sitting on the grass, moments from exploding.

"I'm sorry, but it appears you somehow got her slot and her funding package. I don't quite know how to say this."

Inside, Rachel can still hear Jess's modulated voice blowing into the fan. Deep inside herself she can feel something snap.

"I'm not even accepted," she says.

"No, I'm terribly sorry."

"Jesus," Rachel says, unfolding on the ground.

"We hope you apply again next fall," Carol says. "We can waive your application fees . . ."

After a moment, after Rachel says nothing, Carol hangs up. There is a click and a dial tone that Rachel feels in her every atom.

"Jesus," she says to herself again.

Jess comes out to tell her it's time to go back on stand for their last rotation. The sun has been all but sucked out of the sky, leaving behind an explosion of orange and yellow on the horizon. The pool's halogen lights automatically kick on. Rachel is on her back, staring at clouds that don't look like anything.

"What happened?" he asks

Rachel says nothing. She holds her phone between both palms, trying to decide between throwing it or crying.

"I'm not leaving," she says finally. She holds everything back, anger and tears. "I'm not leaving," she says again, as though she decided not to leave in the first place.

When the sun finally sets and all the stars come out, when all the kids and high-schoolers and parents have left, Rachel will finish skimming the water and Jess will adjust the pool's chlorine levels, finally. The other two lifeguards will have been long gone, Rachel having told them to go home, to leave her and Jess alone to close the pool together. Rachel and Jess won't say a word to each other and she will sit on the edge of the diving board, looking down into the deep blue of the pool at night, a greater darkness deepening above her by the minute.

When she finally gets up, Rachel will already know what she's going to do.

She will jump on the tongue of the diving board once, twice,

before diving in. She will disappear into her own splash, and Jess will let her do this because he knows she has to. The water will be cool and air bubbles will shoot around her sunburnt body as she descends to the bottom of the 12-foot pool. Then she will sit there, on the floor, holding her breath. She will not think about *Ground Zero*, *DEFCON-1*, or *Cold War*. She will forget her favorite word is *Eschatology*.

Instead, the pressure will increase in Rachel's ears.

The pool's halogen lights will cast weak shadows on the floor, slanted, refracted, wobbly, and Rachel, at the bottom, will scream. It will sound like a high-pitched nothing underwater.

She will open up her lungs and she will scream until she tastes chlorinated water at the back of her throat. Air bubbles will rocket to the surface, and from above it will look like Rachel is down there thrashing with a shark. She will scream more, until she feels her lungs nearly collapse, until she forgets about home and Texas and California, and when she loses her breath Rachel will look up at the 12 feet of water separating her from the rest of the world, and then she will kick off the bottom.

When she finally breaks through the surface the air will smack her. She will swim to the edge of the pool, eyes burning, and her heart will beat like a piston in her chest.

Kim Magowan

Brining

For years, people had told Ben and Miriam to try brining their turkey: that was the sure fix for the typical glitches of Thanksgiving, the dried-out problem, the over-cooked problem. Ben was skeptical. Turkey, in his estimation, was a serviceable food when deployed properly—say, sliced, within a sandwich—but would disappoint when forced center-stage.

In their couple, Miriam took on the role of the convention-subverter; she was the one who agitated for Pakistan versus London for a family trip. But she refused to meddle with Thanksgiving, though Ben knew Miriam found turkey just as unimpressive as he did. Left to her own devices, extricated from the influence of her brother Ethan, from her sister-in-law Lynn, whose face was as flat and round as a plate, from her recently widowed mother, all three of whom they would be hosting, Miriam would blow off the inevitably underwhelming turkey and go for something dynamic: paella, bouillabaisse, something worth the hours of sweat. Ben was convinced of this.

As it was, though, she said, "This year, I'm going to brine it."

She looked at him, awaiting the rant. Instead, Ben volunteered to get a 24-gallon plastic bucket.

Miriam's eyes sharpened, then: they became as pointy and precise as the pencils their daughter Edith would whir into barb-like condition and perfectly line up on her desk. "Thanks," she said, after taking, Ben felt, his full measurement.

"Anything else we need?"

"Wine. Beaujolais. Ethan will bring something crappy."

"Sure. Flowers?"

His question seemed to sharpen Miriam's eyes one last notch. Ben was not, and never had been, a purchaser of flowers. But she was busy: her hands were floury with pie crust. "If you see anything pretty."

Starting the car, Ben tried to calm his racing heart. Since they were undergraduates, since he first met her, Miriam

had always been smarter than him. Back in college, her meticulous notes in maniac's handwriting had lifted Ben into many an A. But there were times when it would be expedient to be married to someone less sharp.

He reflected, as he had frequently in recent weeks, upon the difficulty of assessing when his behavior was suspicious.

There was too much latitude for suspiciousness, was the problem. Being cooperative and helpful was potentially suspicious, as was being romantic. But so was being brusque, distracted, critical, or cranky. He felt like he was navigating some tricky video game, quicksand everywhere; then he questioned why this mental picture dressed itself as a video game, instead of some real (if still imaginary) bayou. Was Ben that severed from reality these days, that his fantasies packaged themselves in pixels?

Something needed to change.

He went to Target first, to get the errand out of the way. There was no predicting the lines the day before Thanksgiving, except that they would worsen as the afternoon unrolled. He congratulated himself for choosing Target, relatively empty, rather than packed-to-the-rafters Whole Foods. The problem was the limited options for wine and flowers, but Ben persuaded himself that a cellophane arrangement of red leaves and bronze chrysanthemums was seasonal, and that the flowers would hold up in his car for an hour.

An hour was all he had time for; an hour, with Thanksgiving press, was plausible. He wasn't willing, when he considered Miriam's pencil-point eyes, to risk more.

He parked down the block from Annie's house. He put the flowers on the car floor, along with three bottles of Beaujolais, and tucked the fourth under his arm.

Annie's front yard was overgrown, strewn with leaves.

The day before, he had filled two Hefty bags with his own yard's leaves, thinking, as he scooped them up in crackly handfuls, of when he had picked up Miriam at the salon the week before to save her the walk home. Her stylist unsnapped a silver plastic shawl from Miriam's neck; all around her swivel chair were trimmings of Miriam's hair.

"How sweet of you to pick her up." The stylist, improbably named Lisbon, beamed at him. Miriam's eyes, though pleased,

were appraising.

Annie's yard was a mess. Her leaves reminded him less of hair clippings than of the debris he associated with Annie: her desk overflowing with papers that he wanted to straighten and corner, bowls full of paper clips, buttons, a thimble. How intensely Ben wanted to rake her yard; it felt like a compulsion. But of course there was no time for that. He pressed his thumb on the doorbell.

Annie opened the door. "Darling," she said, and buried her nose in his sweater.

Ben waited a few seconds before lightly pushing her back into her house, and closing the door behind them.

He handed her the wine. Annie said, "I already opened some. Want a glass?"

While she poured, Ben looked at his watch: 1:58. Early for a bottle of wine to be half empty. Perhaps she had opened it the night before? Her teeth, he saw when she turned back to him, were tinged red.

"God, Ben, I've missed you."

He took a sip of wine (not good; Annie's wine was usually not good. She seemed to have no principle of selection, beyond an eye-catching label). Annie put her arms around him, knocking his hand, spilling wine onto the sleeve of Ben's sweater.

"Careful!"

"Oh, sorry. I can wash that for you. Take it off."

"I don't . . ." Ben was about to say, I don't have time, but stopped. He pulled off his sweater.

"Mmm! See, that was a ploy to get you to take off your clothes." Annie turned on the kitchen tap.

"Water won't remove a wine stain. Don't you have white wine vinegar and salt?"

She stared at him. Funny how the two women in his life looked at him. Their eyes, like the rest of them, were yin-yang opposites, but both sets wounded in different ways: Miriam's pencil points, Annie's teary. She was so damn sensitive, no shell at all.

"Annie . . ."

She turned her back and opened a cabinet. "Does it have to be white wine vinegar?"

"Yes, because—"

"Let me guess: it has to be Chardonnay."

This was new, this bite to Annie.

"Here you go. I don't want to misapply it somehow. Further screw up your sweater."

Silently, Ben took the bottle of vinegar.

Annie's angry blue eyes refilled. "Sorry! I don't know what's wrong with me!"

"It's okay," said Ben. He drizzled vinegar on the spot. "Do you have salt?"

Annie handed him a carton of Morton's. Ben tipped a pinch of salt on the stain. After eyeballing the countertop (the mystery of Annie's perpetually sticky kitchen, it was as if she scrubbed her counters with syrup), Ben flattened his sweater on top. "Disaster averted."

He was trying to be light, but Annie grimaced. "Right. My house is full of booby traps."

Enough already, Ben thought. "Well, your boobs are traps."

Annie's lip, quivering, turned up. She put her arms around him and lifted her face to be kissed.

Embracing Annie, a thought pinballed in Ben's mind. He did suspect Annie of carelessness.

Not so much of consciously spilling wine, but of not caring if they were caught. She encouraged him to park in her driveway; she bugged him to take her out to dinner at The Crab Apple, where they could easily run into people they knew. Ben was starting to feel, when he left Annie, the need to examine himself for gold bobby-pins secreted in his pockets.

Ben's friend Mitchell had been caught in an affair when his girlfriend intentionally left her hairclip on the keyboard of his wife's computer. Now Mitchell was living in a grim apartment with a hissing radiator, his wife divorcing him. Mitchell was philosophical. "Well, Lisa wanted me to herself," he said. Ben remembered Mitchell's blended tone: chagrined but flattered.

It wasn't like Annie hid her hopes. They were the same as that Lisa's (Ben had never met Lisa the Mistress, but pictured her as leggy, aerobicized). The difficult thing to sort out was not what Annie wanted, she was her transparent self, but what Ben did.

Ben's desires were a bird that wouldn't stay on one

branch, but kept taking flight. His were desires, plural, and consequently irreconcilable, whereas Annie's desire focused on him.

Oh, he certainly wanted Annie. Not so much her boobs: despite his "booby traps" joke, Annie's breasts were the one part of her body Ben did not find particularly attractive. Small, sagging, the skin thin and papery, the nipples disproportionately large and brown, too dark for her pale skin: her breasts reminded Ben of tea bags. When he fantasized about Annie, he always modified her breasts, pumped them fuller, made her nipples pink and round as quarters. But her legs were extraordinary: muscular from running, and as long as his. There was no sensation like the grip of Annie's legs around his back.

But he also wanted Scrabble with Miriam by their fireplace. He wanted the elated expression she got, landing the Q on the double letter, "Quixotic" on the triple word. "This is," she had declared, "the greatest moment of my life!"

He wanted Miriam's taste and Annie's admiration. He wanted to suck Miriam's nipples (her breasts, even at forty-one, her best feature) and to be gripped by Annie's legs. He thought of a flipbook Edith had loved when she was little. The pages divided into thirds, so you could combine the illustrations to produce a body with a fireman's head, a ballerina's tutued torso, an astronaut's silver-booted legs.

"I'm sorry I'm so moody," Annie said, breaking the kiss. "The holidays suck. It's so unfair, that Hud gets Skylar for Thanksgiving, and Christmas too."

"Sorry." Ben tangled his fingers in Annie's bushy, pre-Raphaelite hair. *Sorry*, the epitome of an inadequate word: he tried to count how many times they had volleyed it today.

"Skylar was happy to leave because he's taking her to some stupid ice-skating rink. Hud's been a shitty father his whole life, doesn't do a single carpool, never goes to parent-teacher night. Then when we finally split up, so when it's no use to me, he decides to become this fun dad? I can't believe Skylar falls for it." Her eyes welled again.

"Sorry, Honey," repeated Ben, but now he twisted his hand in her hair to see his watch. Forty-five minutes left at the outside.

"I hate Hud."

Even the name, short for Hudson, was ugly: it sounded like a bowling ball dropped on the floor.

Ben had done his commiserating time, he told himself, his fingers groping Annie's breast. He had listened to Annie's litany: Hud's total lack of interest in Skylar, until Annie finally kicked him out, or, more precisely, didn't allow him to come back the last time he left. But now Hud wanted, competitively Annie believed, as an act of hostile one-upmanship, to lure Skylar from her mother.

Poor Annie. She was involved in more than one love triangle.

And Ben had heard about Hud's drinking, his verbal abuse, the names he called Annie: a bad cook, a slob, an overly indulgent mother, a moron. (The first three of those things Ben privately considered true). He had heard about Hud closing his eyes when they had sex; Annie was convinced he had imagined himself with someone else.

Hud reminded him of the chapter books Edith had wanted him to read aloud before she was old enough to read to herself, that awful series in particular about the fairies. It had gotten to the point where Miriam and he would rock-paper-scissors for who had to read those damn books. Doing dishes was preferable, folding laundry was preferable, scrubbing toilets, Miriam had maintained at one point, was preferable, to reading that dreadful story one more time. Kissing Annie, backwards-walking her to her unmade bed while they still had time to have sex (forty minutes now), Ben thought this may well be the true definition of love: subjecting oneself, willingly, for the sake of one's beloved, to boredom.

It was 3:15 when Ben got back in his car. Despite the fact that the temperature was in the forties, he lowered his window. There had been no time to take a shower. The wine stain on his sweater was a faded but visible bruise.

As soon as he entered his house, he could smell baking pies. He carried the plastic bucket into the kitchen. Miriam stood at the counter, trimming stems from mushrooms. She looked up, meaningfully, at the kitchen clock.

"Where the hell were you?"

"The lines . . ." Ben said. He dropped the bucket on the floor, as if it were heavy, instead of simply cumbersome. "Hang on, let me get the rest of it."

His heart raced as he gathered the wine bottles and flowers from the passenger side floor. It had been difficult to extract himself. In bed, Annie had gotten on top, as if she wanted to pin him, her long, strawberry-blond hair suffocating him. Then later, more tears about how hard it was to be alone on Thanksgiving.

If Annie were a plant, she would cling. Whereas Miriam would be full of fine needles that stung.

Ben set the wine and flowers on the counter. Miriam wrinkled her nose at the chrysanthemums. At Target, they had struck Ben as festive, the color of doorknobs, but under the kitchen lights they looked cheap and dry.

"Can I explain to you how brining works?" Miriam said. "Every single recipe says you need to leave the turkey in the salt solution for twenty-four hours."

"The lines," Ben said again, and then, again, he stopped, because Miriam closed her eyes. He looked at Miriam's fingers splayed on their countertop. She stayed perfectly still, as if giving Ben time to study her.

"Ben, allow me to give you some advice," Miriam said. "Don't say anything stupid. Better yet: don't do anything stupid." She picked up her paring knife and began, again, trimming mushrooms. "Anything else stupid."

He watched her hands, deft and efficient. Under the plastic cutting board, Miriam had inserted wet paper towels to keep it from sliding. He knew this even though he couldn't see them. He knew the precautions his wife took. Wet paper towels: the thought couldn't be more errant. Suddenly Ben felt like crying.

He picked up the ugly flowers and started unwrapping the cellophane, embossed with, he now saw, the red bull's-eye logo of Target.

"Leave them," Miriam said, without looking up.

"Let me just get them in a vase."

Perhaps because his voice cracked, Miriam nodded. She let Ben get a vase out of the cabinet and clip the stems, puckered at the ends, without telling him to use the other vase, without

directing him to cut the stems on the diagonal, without reminding him to add the envelope of revitalizing powder that Target, in any case, did not sell. Ben felt her eyes on him while he found the large coaster to put under the vase so their dining room table didn't get a watermark.

After he left the kitchen Ben went upstairs, closing the door to their home office behind him. Tomorrow this room would be inhabited by Miriam's brother and sister-in-law. The home office was directly above their kitchen. The soundproofing in their house had always been bad, to the point that giggling Miriam held her hand over Ben's mouth when they had sex, so their daughter Edith, two doors down, wouldn't hear him.

Ben opened his email, the private new account. It had been difficult to come up with a password Miriam wouldn't guess. His wife knows him: this thought made his eyes fill. For a subject heading he typed "It's over." He pressed Send. When the email program asked him if he was sure he wanted to send an email to Anne J. Sarbaines without any content, he clicked, Yes.

For the past two months Ben had considered leaving Miriam; it was only as his email winged towards its target that he understood how concretely he had pictured a life with Annie. Not just raking her impossible lawn, but planting something pretty: a rhododendron bush, something that would bloom. He had been evaluating the two women, contrasting them, doing that Frankenstein-creature flipbook thing.

Only now did Ben understand that the dilemma for him was never whom he loved more: the answer to that was obvious. No, the lure of Annie was her feelings for him, not his for her. To Annie, he was the competent cleaner of gutters, the passionate lover, the consistent, wise father from whom to solicit parenting advice. He loved the image of himself that she beamed back.

The revelation was as clear and sharp to Ben as a picture materializing from the smoke of a Polaroid.

Years later, Ben wishes he was able to maintain this clarity, that he was able to follow Miriam's instruction to not do "anything else stupid."

But break-ups are rarely as simple as clicking "Send without content." Fourteen days later, he replied to Annie's eighth or

ninth hysterical email; he fucked her again, and then again, closing his eyes. He drove Miriam, by blatantly disregarding what was, after all, real advice, into cracking his password, which was random enough that decoding it involved installing an expensive Spy program in his computer, one that memorized keystrokes.

Three days before Christmas, Miriam hurled clothing at him, including something that hurt on impact, a belt, and shouted, "I want you to fucking leave!"

Ben was packing a suitcase, which he later realized he packed like a lunatic, throwing in three bathing suits but only one pair of underwear. He was trying to figure out where to go because he now understood, with certainty, he would not be driving to Annie's. He turned and saw Miriam in the doorway. She might have been standing there a long time, watching him; Ben had been too busy self-imploding to sense her presence.

Miriam said, "Correction: what I really meant was, I want you to fucking stay."

She allowed him to hold her, then; she buried her face in his chest. Ben kept kissing the top of her head. They both cried. Miriam said, "We could brine a turkey in this pool of tears." She said, "Tears have the same water-to-salt ratio as a brine solution, did you know?" She said, "We need to pull ourselves together before Edith comes home."

They stayed married for another thirteen years.

At age fifty-four Miriam tells him one day she has met someone else. When Ben asks if she is in love with this other man, whose name is Lester, she says, "I wouldn't use the word 'love,' but I also wouldn't rule out its future use."

Ben, fifty-five, wonders if everything would have gone differently, if Lester would have never materialized, if Miriam would never leave, if he had only been able to hold onto that moment of perfect, sharp-edged clarity: 3:43 PM, the day before Thanksgiving, 2002.

Steve Lauder

Smoke Break

"Jesus, I hate this friggin job," Wanda said. She pulled an old kitchen chair into the alley and dropped onto the red vinyl seat.

Lester upended a packing crate and sat down. "It ain't so bad," he said.

She lit a cigarette with a small green lighter, inhaled deep into her lungs, blew lines of smoke through her mouth and nostrils. "All I do every night is clean toilets and urinals. That sucks, Lester—big time."

Trying not to breathe in the sweet smell of the smoke, Lester opened a new pack of hard candy and laid one on his tongue. He gave up smoking in prison, when trading cigarettes became more important than smoking them, and he never took it up again. He went through several packs of the hard candy every day instead. Butterscotch and peppermint were his favorites.

The light above the door buzzed and threw out a weak yellow light that barely reached the building across from where they were sitting. The alley smelled like garbage and piss. Sirens rose and fell in the distance. Cars glided by out on Pennsylvania Avenue, windows flashing under the street lights.

The rain had stopped, but the alley was wet and cold. Shivering, he pulled up the zipper of his jacket. Wanda was like all the white girls he'd ever known, always finding the worst in everything. The job wasn't the best, maybe, but it was all right. They cleaned office buildings. Five nights a week, 9:00 at night to 5:00 in the morning, with three twenty-minute breaks. He emptied trash cans and vacuumed, while she scoured and mopped the bathrooms.

Wanda made her mouth into an O and sent ragged white rings up into the damp night air, squinting at the smoke as if it held the answer to something important. Her jeans were worn out at the knees and the yellow tank top didn't cover much, but the cold didn't seem to bother her. How old was

she? Twenty? Twenty-one? It was hard to tell with girls like her. Their round faces and baby-fat chins hid their stories from the world.

"I won't even *tell* you what I found tonight," she said. "Fifth floor men's." She made a face and stuck out her tongue. A tiny stud winked at him. Wanda had two studs in each ear, but the one on her tongue made him uneasy. He studied the abandoned warehouse across the alley. Water dripped from the windowsills, seeped down the brick walls. The windows were boarded up with plywood, and somebody had painted black and red swastikas across the panels. White boys with shaved heads and nothing else to do.

"I washed my hands with plenty of hot water after that," Wanda went on. "I *felt* like I needed a shower." She flicked the end of the cigarette with her fingernail. Ashes drifted onto her jeans. "I've got to find a *decent* job."

"Go ahead," Lester said. He hated the way she spat out the word. "Don't make no difference to me."

She scowled at him through the curling smoke. "Damn, Lester, don't get pissy on me, I'm just talking."

"Sometimes you talk too much."

"Well, if you don't like it, why the hell do you come out here with me anyway?"

He had no answer for that. Wanda came out to smoke. You weren't supposed to smoke in the building, and Wanda needed to smoke, so she came outside. But he could have stayed in the shiny cafeteria where it was warm, where there was hot coffee in the vending machines and plastic chairs with contoured seats.

"Must be for the pleasure of your company," he said.

"Yeah, right."

She thought he was disrespecting her, but there was some truth in what he said. Even though he liked working alone, and he liked the quiet, sometimes these damned office buildings got *too* quiet. The thick carpets on the floors swallowed up the noise of the vacuum cleaner, and the sound-proofing in the walls and ceilings made the buildings seem dead. All that deadness got on his nerves after a while, and he needed to hear another voice, even Wanda's. But break time was long enough. Twenty minutes of listening to her carry on—endless

stories about her baby, blow-by-blow replays of what was happening on "Dancing with the Stars," gossip about which movie star was on drugs or in rehab—and he was ready for the quiet again.

Still, she was better than his last partner. Lakeesha. Nineteen years old, coal-dark skin, reddish-brown hair braided tight against her scalp. She used their breaks to stick needles into the backs of her legs and the fleshy parts of her arms. He didn't want to be around that shit, so he stayed in the building while she got high. One night she didn't come back inside, and he had to call 9-1-1. The police looked up his record, took him down to the station house. They kept asking was he supplying the girl with drugs. He told them no every time they asked. They had nothing on him, so they finally let him go. The girl didn't come back to work, and he never found out what happened to her.

For weeks after that, his gut churned, and he had trouble sleeping at night. Every time he closed his eyes, he was back in his prison cell, the air that smelled of urine and vomit, the rough cement walls and cold iron bars, the lumpy mattress, the endless shouting of the inmates up and down the row. Those nights, he tossed in his bed, sweaty and fearful.

So he was being careful with Wanda. He'd only been working with her for two weeks. As far as he could tell, she didn't do drugs. Talking was her way of getting by.

Damn, but it was cold. He kneaded the scar on his side. A flick-knife, the boy who cut him called the switchblade. The wound was long healed up, but the scar pulled on him in damp weather, a reminder of the bad days after high school when he thought he knew everything there was to know—until he got himself into trouble, served thirty days in the county jail and had to work off five hundred hours of community service hauling leaves and trash. He smartened up after that, got a degree in computers at the technical college, found a good job with a government contractor. Then he met Raynelle, married her, and before either of them really understood what was going on they had three kids.

Pushing away such thoughts, he blew on his hands and stuffed them in his pockets. What the hell was he sitting out here in the cold for, anyway? Right now, he wanted to be away

from this alley, away from Wanda and her chattering. Back in his warm apartment, sitting in the worn leather recliner, reading a book. An Easy Rawlins novel, maybe, or one of the Spenser books. He liked detective stories. He could lose himself in their worlds and forget about his own.

"You'd feel different about this goddamned job if you had to clean bathrooms every night," Wanda said.

"I've cleaned my share."

"Then you should know."

"I do know," he said. "People act like animals sometimes."

"Worse," she said. "Animals don't know any better." She shook her head and a clump of corn-yellow hair slid down in front of her eyes. "Nights like tonight, I think to myself: if I have to clean one more bathroom, if I have to wipe the shit off one more—"

"Damn, Wanda, can't you just shut the fuck up for one minute?"

She tucked the hair back over her ear and stared at him, her dark eyes flashing. "I'm just making conversation," she said.

"I don't need to hear *conversation* all the time," he said.

"Jesus, who put the pole up your butt?"

"You did," he said. "You don't like this job, go on and quit."

"Maybe I will."

He snorted. "Sure you will. What'll you do then? How you gonna pay your rent, feed that baby of yours? You're always tellin me you got no money. You gonna work two, three jobs? Go on welfare? Or maybe lie down on your back with your feet in the air and let the smackheads and the college boys take their turns with you?" He spat on the ground between his feet. "Nah. You wouldn't be any better at that than you are at cleanin shit outta the damn toilet bowls."

"Screw you, old man!" She popped up out of her chair, and her middle finger shot up. "I never fucked anybody for money."

Anger rose up in Lester's throat, but he somehow held his tongue. He swore at himself. He knew better than to snap at her like that. Even if she was carrying on like his ex-wife. Raynelle was always bitching and moaning, especially after they had the children. Seemed like non-stop sometimes. Made wonder what he ever saw in the woman, made him forget the

good times they had before they got married, when they were crazy in love with each other.

When he walked out of the prison three years ago, he swore he would do nothing that might land him inside again. He rented a small apartment from his cousin, saw his parole officer when he was supposed to, kept mostly to himself. He got this job cleaning buildings at night. He didn't drink, didn't do drugs, didn't mess where he shouldn't. His life wasn't much, maybe, but he was free—and he wanted to keep it that way. Talking trash to a white woman just because she couldn't keep her mouth shut was trouble. No matter who or what she sounded like.

He took a deep breath. "I never said you did," he said.

"You might as well have." Wanda slumped back on her chair. The cigarette still burned between her fingers, the red glow nearer the filter. "You don't understand," she said.

"Understand what?" Maybe from now on he would stay inside during their breaks, like he had with Lakeesha. He didn't need this shit.

The ash on the cigarette had lengthened into a long grey-black snake. Lester watched it, wondering how long it would get before it fell apart. Then Wanda moved her hand and the snake exploded and ashes floated down to the ground.

"Before I started here, I worked for an escort service," she said. "I went out on dates with men who—needed a companion. You know, business dinners, award ceremonies, stuff like that. The escort people gave me nice clothes to wear, shoes, even jewelry. Sometimes I got to go to really fancy restaurants. Hell, one guy even took me to the opera; that was boring, but he was nice to me."

Escort service? What kind of bullshit was she throwing at him now? That didn't make sense. He looked her up and down. She wasn't all that bad, he had to admit. Her blonde hair was stringy and greasy tonight, but he'd seen it clean, and he liked the way it fell onto her shoulders and hid the acne scars on her forehead. He liked the plum-dark color of her eyes—when she didn't put on the heavy black eyeliner that got smeared while she worked, making them seem bruised. And she had a decent enough body, even if it was on the skinny side. Maybe if she cleaned herself up and put on some nice clothes . . .

"Anyway, I never fucked any of them," she said. "I had my chances, too. The people who ran the company wanted me to go to these so-called parties, said I could make a lot of money." Her mouth puckered like she'd just sucked on a sourball. "But I knew what that meant. I didn't need any AIDS or STDs or whatever, so I told them I wouldn't."

"Yeah? What'd they do?"

"Hell, they fired my ass real quick." She laughed, but it was a bitter sound that had no humor in it. "So then I got this job," she said. "And here I am." She waved her arm, taking in the dumpsters and the trash cans, the dripping walls, the boarded up windows, the cracked pavement. "Yeah, I'm the friggin' queen of Paradise."

With her arm stretched out like that, Lester could see she wasn't wearing anything underneath the tank top. Something stirred in him, something he didn't like. You got an itch, old man, he told himself, you know where to get it scratched. And that ain't here. He aimed his eyes at her feet. Black rubber-soled shoes, scuffed and scratched, no different than his, except his were wider. When he was a kid, his father told him he had feet like a duck.

"Didn't matter," she said. "I wouldn't have lasted much longer anyway. I was pregnant."

Lester almost laughed out loud at that. Maybe that was why he came out on breaks with her. You never could tell what she would come out with. "Pregnant?"

"I wasn't showing," she said. "And I needed the job. My boyfriend—my ex-boyfriend, I mean—took off soon as he found out I was knocked up. Said he wasn't the father, the dickhead."

She scuffed her shoe on the ground as if there was something stuck to the bottom she couldn't get rid of. "I sure could use some of that money now. I barely make enough to feed us—did I tell you my mamaw lives with me now? She's almost seventy and she's got diabetes and her legs are bad, so she can't work. Her medicine is covered by Medicare or Medicaid, one of those, but there's nothing left after that. But at least she can watch Danny for me while I'm at work, so I don't have to take him to daycare—that costs a fortune."

The light over the door flickered. In warmer weather, bugs

flew around it, throwing jittery shadows out into the alley. Too cold for bugs now; bulb must be about to go. Lester told himself to get up, go back into the building, finish his work. He didn't want to hear any more about her life, how hard it was.

Wanda took a last drag on the cigarette and flicked the butt into a shallow puddle. It sizzled then floated on the oily surface like a dead cockroach. She tipped the chair onto its back legs and let her head rest against the brick wall of the building. Her eyes closed and her face went slack. Without the sourness around her mouth, she looked young, almost innocent. The tank top rode up her belly, showing a band of pale skin that lapped over the waistband of her jeans. He wondered again how old she was, then shook his head. Don't be so goddamn stupid, he told himself. She's young. She's white. That's all you need to know, fool.

Sliding another butterscotch candy into his mouth, he glanced at his wrist watch. Mickey Mouse grinned up at him, the black arms with the white gloves pointing out the time. The watch was a Christmas present from his kids. He thought about them every day, wondered how they were and what kind of people they were growing up to be. Were they dark and handsome like their mother or lighter-skinned and solidly-built, like him, with broad faces and ears that stuck out from the sides of their heads? Did they do well in school? Did his boy play football or baseball? Did the girls dance and sing? Sometimes his heart ached with wanting to see them, and at those times he hated Raynelle almost as much as he hated himself. Six years and not even a damn picture. She owed him that much. No matter what had passed between them, he was the father of their three children. And he didn't even know where the hell they were. They'd left DC, that much he'd heard, but nobody who knew where they went would tell him anything else.

The garbage cans at the end of the alley clattered. A movement caught the corner of his eye, and an orange cat streaked across the wet pavement and jumped onto his lap. He came up off the packing crate fast, grabbing fur with both hands and heaving the animal away from him. The cat flew up into the damp air. It landed square on all four paws,

arched its back, and hissed at him.

Wanda jerked awake. The front legs of her chair slammed down onto the uneven pavement, splaying out wide. The chair wobbled, but she raised herself up off the seat and let the legs straighten. “Jesus Christ,” she said. “What the hell’s wrong with that cat?”

“Fuck if I know.”

The cat paced back and forth out of Lester’s reach, watching him with its bright yellow eyes. Lester raised his foot to kick at it, but Wanda scooped up the animal. She cradled it and stroked its matted fur. The cat bumped its head against her chin and purred.

“Put that damned thing down,” he said. “It’s got to have some disease or other.”

“Get a life, Lester,” she said, but she wrinkled her nose and set the cat down on the ground. “You go on, cat, you stink like fish. Clean yourself up, then come back.”

The cat wound itself up like it was going to jump onto her lap, but she put her hand out. The cat gave her a resentful look, then it turned and dashed away like it had urgent business someplace else.

They watched the orange-striped tail disappeared behind the dumpsters. Wanda said, “When I was a kid I used to nurse sick animals—cats and dogs, mostly; once a turtle that got hit by a car. I had my heart set on being a vet when I grew up.”

Lester sat back down on the crate. He wished she’d let him boot the damn thing to the moon. “So why didn’t you?” he asked, eyeing a long scratch on his forearm.

“It’s not easy getting to be a vet. It takes a lot of school.”

He squeezed his arm and licked the blood that welled up. “Nothin’s easy.”

“You don’t understand, I was never much good at school.” She shook her head again and the same clump of hair dropped in front of her eyes. “Truth is, I never finished high school.”

Lester shifted his weight. Why was he still talking to her? He wasn’t a goddamned social worker or a minister or anything like that. He wasn’t her father or her boyfriend. Hell, he wasn’t even her friend. And he had no patience with people who were their own worst enemy.

“You want somethin bad enough” he said, “You find a way

to get it, that's all I'm sayin."

"What about *you*, Mr. High and Mighty? I suppose *you* were on the honor roll."

Lester stared at her. He hated that tone of voice and what she was thinking. "No, but at least I graduated," he said.

"Well, if you're so goddamn smart, why are you cleaning buildings for a living?"

"I like this job," he said. "Suits me fine. You're the one can't find no *decent* job."

"This job pays shit, Lester," she said. "And you got no idea what it costs to raise a baby."

"I guess I do."

"Yeah, right. I suppose *you* got kids." Her eyes widened. "Shit, I didn't even know you were married."

"Was."

"Oh," she said. "How many? Kids, I mean."

He hesitated. "Three. Two girls and a boy."

"Three? How old?"

Clapping his hands to his knees, Lester pushed himself onto his feet. Enough was enough. He'd said more than he wanted to. There was nothing but trouble could come of this type of talk.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Time we got back to work."

Wanda's mouth opened, as if she wanted to say something more, but then she closed it again and shrugged. One of the yellow straps slid down her pale smooth shoulder. "OK. Have it your way." She pushed the strap back up and jammed her hand in the pocket of her jeans. "You go ahead. I'm gonna have one more smoke. I can't smoke at home any more—with the baby."

Pulling out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and the lighter, she shoved a battered cigarette between her lips, thumbed the little wheel on the lighter. Once, twice, three times. When it didn't spark, Lester reached into his pocket and brought out a small box of matches.

"I thought you didn't smoke," she said.

"I don't."

"So why do you have matches? In case a cigarette accidentally jumps into your mouth?"

He flipped the box to her. She reached out, but it hit the

heel of her hand and fell to the ground. Wooden matches spilled out. As they both bent over to pick them up, the tank top fell away from her chest. Her breasts were bigger than he'd thought and white as powder, except for the nipples that poked into the thin cloth. His hands twitched. He could easily reach out and touch those breasts, cradle them, caress them . . . .

"Damn!" Wanda said. She stood up fast, crossing her arms over her chest. "You keep your eyes to yourself, old man!"

Lester rocked back on his heels, his face hot. "That didn't mean nothin," he said. "Sometimes a man can't help where his eyes go, that's all."

"Bullshit! Wasn't just your eyes, either. I saw what your hands were doing. That's what you've been thinking about, isn't it? Well, you can forget it. Who the hell you think you are, some big black stud?"

Lester ground his teeth together. His hands clenched into fists. He stood up and took a step toward her. Wanda flinched. For the first time he saw how small she was, and he wondered why he'd ever felt threatened by her. "Tha's right," he said, the words coming out in a low growl. "Ole Lester's jes the big bad nigger man sniffin round the woodpile, can't wait to get his hands on the white woman."

"That's not what I meant," she said. She stepped back, moved the chair between them. Her eyes flicked around wildly, like a trapped animal.

That deer-in-the-headlight look stopped him cold, knocked the anger out of him. He'd seen that look before. In Raynelle's eyes, the night he stopped her from going out on him. The kids were away, spending the night with their grandparents. She stood on the other side of the kitchen table. She had on the slinky red dress she wore for special occasions. He noticed the perfume even above the smell of diapers and sour milk. Before he had a chance to open his mouth, she started in. "If I have to clean one more diaper," she said. "If I have to clean up one more mess, stop one more fight, cook one more meal—" She stopped and said she was going out with friends and she didn't know when she'd be back. She tried to walk around him to the door, but he blocked her way. He already knew where she was going and why. He knew who she'd been seeing during the days when he was at work and the kids were

at school and she paid the teenager downstairs to watch the baby. She fought him, slapped his face and scratched his jaw. He lost control of himself then and did what he did to her. Broke her jaw, they said at the trial. Crushed her esophagus. He lost everything because of what he did that night—his wife, his kids, his job. And part of his soul.

The fine mist that surrounded them had thickened into a light rain. Wanda's hair was slicked down over her eyes. The top of Lester's head was cold and wet. He stood there, as stiff as a dime store dummy. His arms dangled uselessly at his sides. He tried to think of something he could say that would ease her mind, but nothing came to mind. Finally, he held out his hands, palms up. "You got nothin to be afraid of from me," he said as gently as he could. "You got my word."

"Your word," Wanda said, speaking slowly, as if she was trying to figure out what he meant by that. Her hands gripped the back of the chair like it was a life preserver and if she didn't hold on to it she would drown. Her breath streamed white clouds into the air, thicker than the cigarette smoke.

"I shouldn't have gone off like that at you," he said. "That won't happen again."

She moved her head from side to side. "I guess it won't," she said, her voice hard. He may have knocked the spunk out of her for a minute, but he knew that wouldn't last.

Fear clawed at his gut. He knew what would happen. She would make some excuse to not go back into the building with him. Tomorrow she would tell the bosses that she couldn't work with him anymore. They would want to know why. They would check up on him and find out that he lied on his application, and they would fire *his* sorry ass. The cops would show up at his apartment and take him down to the station house again, and this time they wouldn't be so easy on him. Bile rose up in his throat, gagging him.

When she spoke again, his muscles twitched.

"You have joint custody of your kids, Lester?"

He shook his head.

"How long since you saw them?"

"A long time," he said. He shivered.

"Why?"

He raised up his shoulders, let them fall. "I made mistakes."

Her eyes were hard, glittery, like coal cinders. “What kind of mistakes?”

His heart stopped for a minute. He could not answer, though he knew what she was thinking. She would never understand, she would see only what he’d done. What he might do again. Maybe to her. He shook his head and said nothing.

“You miss them?”

“Every day of my life,” he said.

Her head moved up and down. “I’d miss my baby, if something happened to him,” she said. Her black eyes held his. He could see both fear and grit there. She had guts, and he would miss her when he was gone. “Or if something happened to me. You understand?”

He realized suddenly that she’d never told him her baby’s name. He waited for her to say something else, but she just looked at him. Or through him, maybe, like he wasn’t even there.

“It’s getting late,” he said finally. “I’m goin inside and finish up.”

“You go ahead,” she said. “I’m gonna have that smoke.”

He hesitated, but there was nothing more to say. She would believe what she would believe, do what she had to. Turning away from her, he walked toward the building, listening for the sound of her footsteps going in the other direction. But he heard nothing, no strike of a match, no inhaling of smoke, not even her breathing. The door handle was cold and wet in his hand. When he pulled open the door, warm air blew into his face. Ahead of him, the hallway linoleum gleamed. The building waited for him, brightly lit and empty.

Contributor Notes

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Steve Lauder is a freelance writer and editor based in Central Maine, where he lives with his wife and two contrarian cats. He holds an MFA from the University of Maine's Stonecoast MFA program. For as long as he can remember, he's been writing—and endlessly revising—short stories. Sometimes he even works on his novel-in-progress.

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