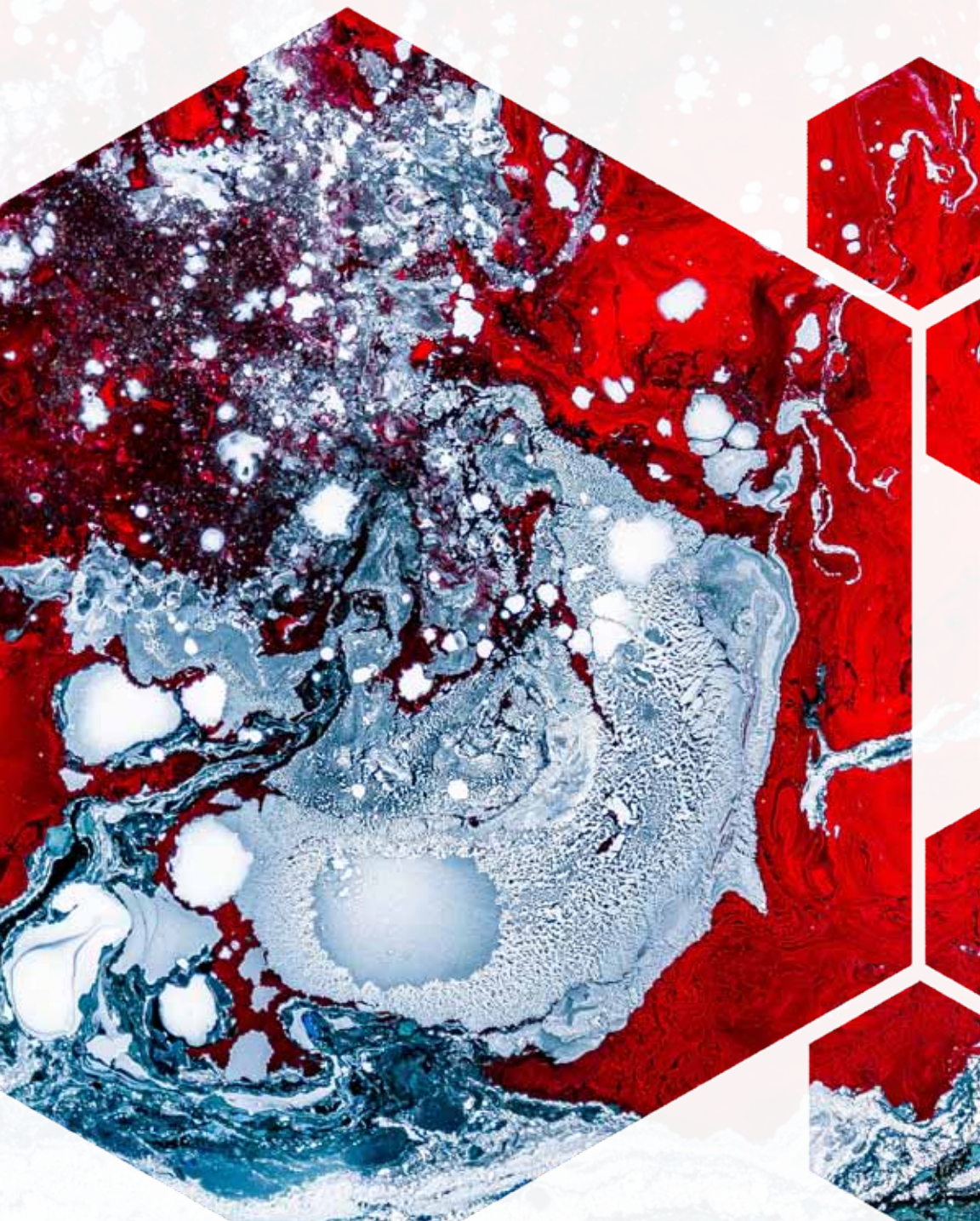


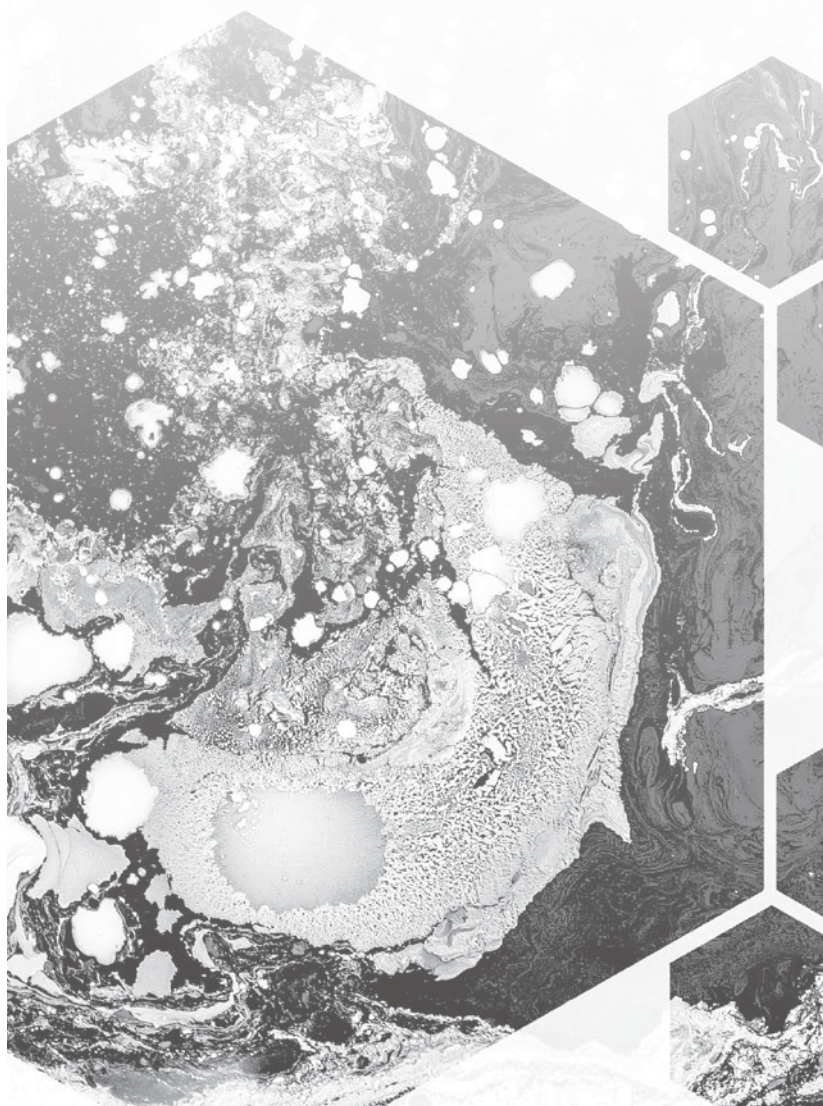
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FICTION WINTER 2016



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Casey Whitworth

Detours

Moments before the accident, Clay waited at the intersection for the crosswalk light to change, a cake box in his arms. It was his daughter's eighth birthday. His wife had ordered the cake—a two-tier castle with pink spires and a blue moat full of Swedish fish—from what she called the best bakery in Tallahassee. Two hundred dollars of sugar, flour, and god-knows-what-else, far more than Clay would have chosen to spend on something to be cut apart and eaten.

When someone elbowed by, Clay staggered off the curb and somehow kept the box from flopping onto the ground. The stranger, a man in a wife-beater and studded fedora, hurried across the street without so much as an apologetic glance until a pickup screeched into view and a *whump* sent him sprawling through the air.

Clay blinked a few times. In the truck was a girl no older than sixteen who stared ahead as blankly as a mannequin. Fifteen feet away, the man lay prone in the intersection, unmoving, an arm wrenched behind his back. His hat was gone.

Amid the clamor of bystanders gathering in the street, Clay heard something else, a tinny voice. A cell phone on the asphalt in front of him. He picked it up, looked around as if someone might tell him what to do with it. Finally he raised it to his ear.

“You hear me?” a woman was saying. “Hello?”

The call disconnected.

By now the girl had stepped out of the truck. A thin blonde in a white soccer jersey who looked older, frailer than before. A gust of wind tousled her hair. Clay thought she was searching for somewhere to run, but he followed her gaze and found she was watching the man's fedora tumble across the sidewalk.

For the next ten minutes, while police officers dispersed the crowd and sent traffic on a detour, Clay sat on a bus bench in the hot sun, the cake box at his side. He felt a nagging obligation to stay. For the man's sake, for the girl's.

She squatted on the curb in front of him. A policeman in a motorcycle helmet loomed above her, asking questions. And with each reply, the girl's voice grew shakier until Clay had to strain to listen.

"The light was green," she groaned. "It had to be."

"It *was*," Clay said.

The officer cut eyes at him.

"It was green. I saw it."

He told the officer he'd walked from Ultimate Autos, where he worked as a sales consultant, down to Sweet-Tooth Heaven to pick up his daughter's birthday cake. "And I'm waiting to cross when the guy about knocks me down. It's like somebody was chasing him."

The officer straightened up. "Was someone chasing him?"

Clay noticed the girl staring back at him as if her conscience might have conjured him up. "I don't know," he said. "It happened so fast."

After the officer jotted down Clay's contact information, he told the girl to sit tight and went toward the paramedics who were zipping a body bag over the dead man. Clay knew he should have given the phone to the officer, but now it seemed too late, like he'd incriminate himself somehow.

"It's your daughter's birthday?" the girl asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Megan. She just turned eight."

The girl looked at the cake box and smiled wistfully. Then she turned to watch the paramedics load the gurney into the ambulance. Clay wiped the sweat from beneath his eyes. He wanted to tell her he was sorry, admit that in the instant before her truck hit the man he'd wished for such a twist of karma. But nothing so violent, so final. *Let's make a deal*, he wanted to say. *I'll forgive you if you forgive me*. But what difference would it make? He knew firsthand that you often carry the shame of what you've done long after you've been forgiven.

At the security gate that led into Hickory Hills, Clay rolled down his window and stared at the keypad, unable to recall which numbers to press. He dug in his wallet for the realtor's card. At the closing a month earlier, she'd written the four-digit code on the back.

He was rounding the last curve before home when he came upon cars lining the grass up to his mailbox, and he felt a pang of dread. He parked in the driveway behind his wife's car, picturing his neighbors crowded on the back deck, all their discordant voices. He glanced over at the passenger seat, at the dead man's phone.

On any other day when he opened the front door, his daughter would shout *Daddy!* and swarm his legs. He'd hoist her overhead, fly her around the room. But not today. Today the house was quiet and still. The parted curtains let in early evening light, a golden glow which slanted toward the wrapped gifts on the couch.

"Hello?" He set the cake box on the dining room table.

At the bay window, he scanned the backyard until he found his daughter in her polka-dot swimsuit beside the Slip 'N Slide. She was laughing with some other kids. What would happen to her if he died in some horrific accident? He didn't have a will. Didn't even have life insurance.

By the pool, his wife stood in a circle of women who all wore pastel colors, big sunglasses, and glittering jewelry. If he had to guess, he'd say none had grown up in a singlewide, much less celebrated Father's Day in the visiting area of a state penitentiary, yet despite the gloomy circumstances of Jenni's upbringing, she was by far the most radiant. Toned and tan in a white bikini top and cutoffs, she made a toast he couldn't hear. She clinked glasses with the women on her left and right, women Clay recognized as charge nurses at the hospital where Jenni worked, her subordinates now that she'd been promoted to chief nursing officer.

At the table behind them, a redhead in a yellow sundress was pouring sangria into a line of glasses. Although her freckled back was turned, Clay had a sick feeling that he knew who it was, who it couldn't possibly be: Candace, the former C.N.O. at HealthFirst. *Candy*, whose relocation to Miami had ensured Jenni's promotion and raise.

Stale guilt rose like bile in Clay's throat. He stepped to the side of the window to peek out at the woman, at her wavy red hair, trying to decide whether it was the same woman who'd blown him in a bathroom stall during the hospital's Christmas party two years ago. A drunken mistake, which he'd

confessed to Jenni a few months afterward. The problem was, he'd said it was a stripper at Roy's bachelor party, sworn he was too drunk to cum—one little lie after another to mitigate the fallout. And now here she was at Megan's birthday party.

The redhead turned with two glasses of sangria, handing one to Jenni. It wasn't Candy. Clay braced himself against the windowsill. It was someone who—at least from the front—looked nothing like Candy at all.

Clay went to the fridge and chugged a can of beer so quickly that foam sluiced down his chin. Then he downed another. He opened a third can and was halfway done with it when something vibrated in his pocket. The dead man's phone.

He let out a long belch and set the can on the counter. Two missed calls from someone named Laura, who'd also just sent a text message:

Today at 5:51 PM
WHERE R U ANTONIO??? Happy
times called n said u didn't pick
up Lizzy??

"Antonio," Clay said.

With a flick of his finger, he found that the phone was not password-protected. The screen lit up with a photo of a young woman in a striped tube top, a Latina with curly black hair, blood-red lipstick, and one dimpled cheek. *Laura?* The voice he'd heard might have been hers. It seemed no one had called her yet. In her mind, Antonio was still alive.

"Clay?" Behind him, Jenni leaned in the archway. "You remember the cake?"

"Of course." He tucked the phone into his pocket. "It's on the table."

Jenni started toward the dining room. "Go and get your swim trunks on."

"I'm not feeling good," he said, and finished off the can. "I think I'm gonna lay down."

Jenni gasped. "The cake. What happened to the cake?"

In the dining room she stood at the table with her hands on her hips. The box was open. The cake had sunk into itself, the pink spires cockeyed.

“A guy got ran over,” Clay said, “near the bakery.”

Jenni gave him a sidelong look.

“I’m serious. I had to talk to the police,” he said, “and the whole time, this guy, he’s laying there dead in the street. And it was so hot.”

She came over and hugged him. “That’s awful,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, but the cake—”

“Don’t worry about the cake.” She leaned back and looked into his eyes. “I’ll fix it, okay? You just go out and see Megan.”

He nodded.

She raised up on her toes to kiss his cheek, but Clay turned and met her lips, wrapped his arms around her and kissed her hard against the wall.

“Okay.” She pushed away. “Let’s save that for later, huh?”

As she carried the cake box to the kitchen, he realized he felt a little better. But he couldn’t expect her to understand what it was like to be so close to a violent death, the way it awakens you.

“Go on,” she said. “There’s beer by the pool.”

Putting on his salesman’s smile, Clay went out to the deck and introduced himself to the women, avoiding eye contact with the redhead until he offered her his hand. She said her name was Bekah, and he saw that she had braces. She must have been twenty years younger than Candy. Perhaps thirty.

“Ladies,” he said. “I need to find my birthday girl. If you’ll excuse me.”

He went out to the grass. Megan was squirting the other kids with the hose, each of them squealing as the water arced their way. Then she noticed him, dropped the hose, and came running.

“Daddy,” she said. “Daddy! Daddy!”

Clay caught her and raised her up. She hooked her thumbs in his lips, stretched them into a grin. He flailed his tongue and she was giggling when the phone vibrated in his pocket. He froze. It vibrated again, and again. He curled his daughter onto his chest and clutched her there until the vibrations ceased.

“Daddy?” she said. “Wanna watch me slide?”

“Of course,” he said.

As soon as he put her down, she charged back to the Slip 'N Slide. She dove onto the plastic and was sliding away when the phone vibrated yet again. He turned away from the house, drew out the phone. Another missed call and another text from Laura:

Today at 6:13 PM
CALL ME!!!!

The kids started cheering. Clay looked up and watched them race toward the house. Jenni came down the stairs with the cake, which somehow looked like a castle again. Eight candles, lit and flickering. By the time she set the cake on the table, Megan was in the chair of honor. The women and children gathered around and sang “Happy Birthday to You.”

Clay slipped the phone into his pocket and sidled up to his wife, draped an arm over her shoulder and listened to her sing. She leaned her head against him and together they watched their daughter rear back and suck in a great breath. In the moment before the song ended and Megan lurched forward to blow out the candles, Clay could tell his daughter had come to some difficult decision, but he had no idea what an eight-year-old who wanted for nothing could possibly wish for now.

Once the last guests had departed and Jenni had gone upstairs for a bath, Clay got his laptop from the office and carried it down the hall, pausing outside his daughter’s bedroom door. She snored softly in the glow of her nightlight. It would not always be like this, and he wanted to commit to memory the image of her smiling in her untroubled dreams. Soon enough she would grow up, she would learn that you rarely get what you wish for, and when you do, more often than not, you discover that what you wished for was not what you needed at all.

On the living room recliner, he Googled “pedestrian,” “killed,” and “Tallahassee.” The first article identified the dead man as thirty-two-year-old Antonio Luis Garcia, and a search for that name brought up a local Facebook page and a listing on the Leon County Property Appraiser’s website. There it was, the dead man’s address: 721 Georgia Street.

He plugged the address into Google Maps and used Street View to stand by the mailbox outside the brick duplex. A 1990s Honda Civic with a blurred license plate was parked out front. The time stamp in the photograph's upper left corner showed that this was September 2012. It was odd to think they might be in there washing dishes or watching TV, no clue what would happen four years later, how suddenly the life they'd built would crumble.

The upstairs bath began to drain. Clay took Antonio's cell phone from the desk drawer he'd stashed it in while Jenni cut the cake. He was relieved to find no missed calls or voicemails or text messages, but the feeling faded when he realized what the lack of communication meant. Laura knew what happened.

He stared at her background photo. This was what she looked like before the accident. Though she was not what Clay would have called beautiful, she had pretty hazel eyes and a genuine smile. Yet there was something he hadn't noticed earlier, a sort of melancholy, the look of someone who'd suffered.

He opened the photo gallery.

In the first image, a sunset that looked like wildfire in the woods. In the second, Laura was doing a mid-air split above a trampoline. In the third, a little girl—Lizzy?—posed in the grass, one hand on her canted hip. The girl had her mother's curly hair and an identical dimple on her left cheek.

He scrolled through their last days together: Laura stirring spaghetti sauce on the stove; Lizzy on a sofa, giggling as a brindle pit bull licked her ear; Laura painting Lizzy's toenails yellow; Antonio smiling while Laura pressed her puckered lips against his cheek.

Then, a photo he knew he shouldn't look at: Laura on a white bed, naked except for a studded fedora tilted to the side. It was the hat Antonio had been wearing, the one the wind had blown away. Laura did not have a body like Jenni's; she was younger and much plumper, with big breasts and dark areolas and a thatch of black hair between her legs. Clay felt a strange commingling of longing and shame. There was something mesmerizing about her lack of self-consciousness, her unwavering gaze.

A noise in the hall made him jerk upright, clutching the phone to his chest. Jenni, in her silk nightgown, was leaning seductively in the archway behind him.

“Coming to bed?” she said.

“You keep sneaking up on me like that.”

“And? So?”

As she came to the back of the recliner, Clay pressed the POWER button on the side of the phone. His wife leaned over him, her damp hair on his neck.

“What you gonna do about it?” She blew softly past his ear, her breath as sweet and strong as the port she’d taken up to the bathtub, and he let himself sink into the chair, relaxing his arms.

Then she said, “Somebody forgot their phone?”

Clay leaned away and got up. “I’ll take care of it tomorrow.”

“Can I see it?”

He held it up. “The battery’s dead.”

She snatched it from his hand and hurried to the kitchen, laughing like it was all a game. He sighed and followed after her.

“Jenni,” he said. “I know who it belongs to.”

She stood by the junk drawer. Somehow, the phone had already booted up and the naked photograph was on the screen. She scrolled to the next photo.

“Handcuffs,” she said. “And a dog collar. Wow.”

“The guy that got ran over. It’s his phone.”

Glaring down at the screen, she flicked through the gallery and voiced her disgust at each photograph. He said her name and stepped toward her, but she opened the sliding glass door. As she stormed down the stairs, the floodlights flashed on. He called her name again and chased after her, catching her wrist at the edge of the pool.

“Let go,” she growled.

“Then listen.”

“You’re hurting me.” She tried to claw his fingers loose. “Let go of me *now*.”

As soon as he did, she flung the phone into the pool. It sank in the deep end, flashing blue-gray a moment before going dark.

Clay stepped to the pool’s edge and was about to jump in

when the sliding glass door scraped shut behind him. Jenni had gone inside. She laid the dowel rod in the track, then scowled out at him. She reached to the wall and turned off the kitchen lights.

“Jenni,” he shouted. “You’re being ridiculous.”

A neighbor’s dog began to bark.

Clay got the leaf net from the shed, climbed out onto the diving board, and scooped the phone from the bottom. He carried it to the side of the house, through the garage, and into the kitchen, where he set it in a Tupperware container and covered it with rice.

From the bottom of the stairs, he could see their bedroom light was on. She was up there opening and shutting drawers, muttering. He sat on the couch a while, listening. He wished he’d told her the truth from the get-go, wished he’d given the phone to the cop, wished he’d never picked it up to begin with.

With a pillow and blanket from the couch, he made a bed of the chaise lounge by the pool. It would be like camping, he told himself. And in the morning all would be forgiven.

After the floodlights shut off, the backyard was not quite dark. Beyond the fence, the glow of streetlamps and neighbors’ security lights. All he could hear was the drone of the pool pump and, in the distance, a humming chorus of AC condensers. He missed the woods outside their old house, the throbbing static of insects, the darkness, the stars.

At nine AM, in his car in the employee lot of Ultimate Autos, Clay called Jenni for the seventh time that morning. The note she’d left on the fridge said it was her weekend to take Megan and the other girls to dance camp. *We need to have a serious talk when I get home*, the note said.

“Come on,” he said. “Pick up.”

Instead, he got her voicemail again. He hung up and was redialing her number when it hit him: what it must have been like for Laura, the frustration mounting with each missed call, each unanswered text.

He took the Tupperware container off the dashboard and popped the lid. He dug the phone from the rice, wiped it with his tie, then held down the POWER button. Part of him wished it would not come on. But the phone vibrated, the

Motorola logo lighting up the screen.

Through the windshield, he noticed a little white-haired woman in a navy blue dress loitering near the sedans. Regal posture, fancy purse. As she traced her hand down an Impala's front fender, sunlight winked from her diamond ring.

Forty feet away, the lobby doors burst open and out came Pete, tucking in his shirttail as he made his way toward her.

"Oh no you don't," Clay said, and opened his door. He hurried toward the old woman, shoving the phone into his pocket. "Morning," he called out. "My name's Clay. Can I help you, ma'am?"

The woman gave him an appraising look. Twenty feet behind her, Pete had stopped and crossed his arms, staring smugly in Clay's direction.

"Well," the woman said, "start by calling me Blanche. And then I'd like to test drive one of these automobiles."

"All right, Blanche." Clay offered her his arm. "Let's find the one for you. Shall we?"

As he led her down the row of sedans, he raised a hand as if to scratch the back of his head and wagged his middle finger at Pete.

The old woman explained that her daughter had commandeered her beloved Buick. And Morty, her husband of five decades, had recently passed on, leaving behind a sum of money that he'd squirreled away without her knowledge.

"And if I leave it to Brenda, she'll blow it in a week." Then she turned to Clay and whispered, "She's on the drugs."

Clay patted her arm. "Sorry to hear that, Blanche."

"Oh, now there's a good looker," she said. She let go of his arm and marched toward the luxury cars at a pace that forced Clay to speed-walk after her. "It's just like that song I always loved."

She sidled up to a brand-new red Corvette and traced her hand over the hood, her diamond winking at Clay again.

He gave her a moment to daydream. Today was the twenty-ninth of September, which meant two days remained in the quarter. If he sold her a Corvette, he'd surge past Pete in quarterly sales and win the bonus, all six thousand dollars of it.

"Yep," Blanche said. "It's the one."

“Perfect,” said Clay. “We’ll just need to fill out some paperwork.”

“Aw. Can’t we do it after?”

“Well,” Clay said. “It’s—”

“That way I can write the check and then drive off into the sunset.”

Clay smiled. “Okay. For you, Blanche, I’ll make an exception.”

Opening the lockbox beside the car, he explained that this particular model had 460 horsepower, so she’d need to drive carefully.

“Zero to sixty in three point five seconds,” he said and handed her the key. He’d barely made it to the passenger side when she cranked the engine and rolled the windows down.

“Giddy-up,” she said.

Through the parking lot, Blanche rode the brake. Clay hadn’t noticed before, but she wore black-and-white Oxfords and the toe of her right shoe was duct-taped to the sole. He was so distracted by it that he forgot to tell her to turn left at the exit, and she rolled through the stop sign, turning right onto Tennessee Street.

“Oh,” he said, and looked into the side mirror. His usual route went in the opposite direction, but he didn’t say anything. He wanted Blanche to feel in control.

“I do something wrong?” she asked.

“You’re doing fine,” he said. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’d driven one of these before.”

She laughed.

As he explained the premium features of the car, Blanche drove on through one green light after another, not once asking him to clarify some bit of automotive jargon. Then she started turning at random streets, cruising through a neighborhood and on past a park, smiling out the window and waving at pedestrians.

When she stopped at a red light, she turned to Clay and said, “Morty would’ve hated this car, you know. Fifty years we were together, and I can count on my fingers how many times he took me to a fancy restaurant.”

“Fifty years,” Clay said. “That’s quite an accomplishment.”

“It sounds like you’re married.”

Clay showed her his ring. “Nine years.”

She nodded. “Then I’ll not flirt with you. But you are a good looker. Not as good as my Morty, you understand. But good enough.”

“Thank you,” he said.

She turned back to the road and whistled *The Andy Griffith Show* theme song. It was a happy-sounding tune, and yet Clay began to feel sorry for her. He couldn’t quite say why. Still, he couldn’t wait to wave the check in Pete’s face.

He glanced up at the street signs, trying to calculate the quickest route back to his desk. Only then did he realize how close he was to the dead man’s neighborhood. To Lizzy and Laura.

He settled his hand over the phone in his pocket. It hadn’t vibrated all morning. But when he drew it out, he found seven new voicemails, which must have been recorded during the night.

Blanche drove on through the intersection. He looked over at her.

“You mind,” he said, “making a left at the next light?”

Five minutes later, Blanche turned onto Georgia Street and crept along the row of duplexes until Clay pointed to a mailbox with 721 on the side. The same old Honda he’d seen on Google Maps sat in the driveway as if no time had passed, as if nothing at all had changed.

“Gimme a minute.” He got out and opened the mailbox and set the phone inside. As he shut the lid, he heard a screen door creak open.

“Hey,” a woman shouted. “Can I help you?”

It was Laura in the doorway.

“I have something,” he said. “It’s for you.”

She crossed her arms over her Ramones T-shirt and watched him. He took the phone from the mailbox and crossed the yard. She had no makeup on, all puffy-eyed from crying, her hair a mess of curls, and yet the beauty and truth of her grief was so disarming that he found himself unable to climb the stairs. He suddenly wanted to take her into his arms, kiss her brow and press her cheek against his chest, tell her he’d stayed there on the bus bench, stayed so that Antonio would not die alone.

Instead, he reached the phone to her. “Please,” he said. “Take it. It’s his phone. I—I found it in the street. He dropped it.”

Laura’s eyes widened with recognition. She came toward him and plucked the phone from his palm like an egg from a nest.

“You were there?” she whispered. “You saw?”

Clay nodded. He would have answered any question she asked, but all she did was stare at him with tearful eyes in a way that almost seemed resentful, perhaps even jealous, like he’d stolen something from her far more valuable than a phone.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m so sorry.”

He hurried across the yard and as he reached the Corvette, the screen door slapped shut behind him. He turned to look at the duplex, wanting to go back and knock. Ask if she’d left the voicemails, and if so, why. What might you say to someone when it’s already too late?

He climbed down into the Corvette, hands trembling as he put on his seat belt.

“Nice looking family,” Blanche said. “You’re a lucky man.”

He looked out the window. “I know,” he said. “I am.”

For what could have been ten minutes, Clay rode along in a daze. At some point, a group of kids tossing a football in the street parted to let the Corvette pass, staring at it with open-mouthed awe. In the side mirror, Clay watched them give chase until one boy after another stopped running and turned around.

Blanche was driving through the Tennessee Street intersection when Clay realized where they were. “Oh sorry,” he said. “The dealership’s back that way.”

“I know,” Blanche said. “I’m going to the highway.”

“What highway?”

“The interstate!” She raised her sunglasses and stared him down. “Before I sign the check, I wanna see these horses gallop. But don’t worry. I’m not crazy. Not really.”

The exit for I-10 was now a half-mile away, the overpass looming in the distance.

“Blanche,” he said. “Let’s be real, okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t want this car.”

“Yes, I do.”

“No,” he said, “you don’t.”

“I *do*.”

“For God’s sake, Blanche, your shoes are duct-taped together.”

“So what? They’re comfortable.”

“Look,” he said. “I’d love to rip you off. That’s what I do. That’s who I am.”

Blanche clicked on her turn signal, the interstate a hundred feet away. Clay said her name a few times, but she stared ahead and followed the on-ramp onto the interstate.

“All right,” she said finally. “Since you’re being honest, I’ll fess up, too.”

It was all a game, she said. The test drives. She did it at every dealership in town until the managers caught on. She liked pretending she was the sort of woman who could afford a Lexus or a Mercedes.

“Or a Corvette,” she said.

“Okay, Blanche.”

“Oh, and that’s not my name.” She grinned at him. “By the way, how fast you think this thing’ll go? You think two hundred really means two hundred?”

“Blanche.”

“I told you,” she said. “That’s not my name.”

She stomped the gas pedal so hard it thrust Clay back in his seat, and then she whipped the Corvette around a logging truck into the fast lane.

On any other day, Clay would have yelled at her. But the sudden jolt of speed had done something to jumpstart his heart. Ahead, as far as he could see, the fast lane was empty. He pictured the interstate stretching westward for two thousand miles, on through the bayou and into the desert, all the way to the Pacific Ocean, through country he’d never cared to explore until now. Then Blanche—or whoever she was—reached over and squeezed his hand. He smiled and leaned his head back, closing his eyes, imagining Megan on his lap and his wife behind the wheel, and he squeezed the old woman’s wrinkled hand and pretended it was Jenni’s, not wanting to tell her to turn around, not yet, not yet.

Mike Beasley

Childish Things

When I was eight years old, our father tossed some clothes, his books, his fishing gear and a shotgun into the trunk of his old Firebird and lit out for Montana. He wrote a note for my brother and me on the back of an overdue notice from Lone Star Gas:

Boys. Don't hold it against me I left. I was up to here with all the hollering. Look out for the mail. I'll send you a surprise, Christmas.

Love, your daddy

PS I paid the gas bill.

The gas bill was \$32.26. I still have it. Every now and then I retrieve it from a tin lock box and read the note, I guess to stir up old memories buried under the clutter of the past. But I get nothing. Even before he left us I had no substantial idea of my father—as if my mother's angry noises blew him away long before he flew the coop. I see only flimsy pieces of a man—a dark thin voice, the laughter of a drunk, the sensation of embarrassment cleft from a fool staggering through the neighborhood. I squeeze my eyes shut as if to wring a memory from the stingy past, but it releases only a dark faceless head bouncing over the wheel of an old Pontiac Firebird the night he bought it off the parking lot of a saloon.

He drove the car home and stopped it, with minor damage to the right fender, against the sycamore tree in our front yard. We heard the crash. We heard Mother slam the door as she ran outside, propelled by fear and rage. From our bedroom window Frank and I watched her pull my father from the car. We watched the houses on Holly Street light up as our neighbors left their beds to witness yet another grotesque comedy in the Dollahites' yard. My mother was not a cruel woman, but, her own admirable character having been shaped by her father's belt, she placed great faith in the pedagogical returns on violence. She broke off the radio

antenna and beat my father with it until he squeezed under the car to escape her fury. A week later he escaped for good.

I was the believer in the family. I attended Apostolic Baptist, a tiny assembly of the poor and ignorant who met in an old clapboard house a few blocks from our house. I walked to church each Sunday morning and evening, and most Wednesday nights. Mother and Frank rarely attended church, but even as I prayed fervently for their doomed souls I thrilled to the idea that against their pale infidelity the roaring flame of my own devotions shone all the more brightly. I prayed, too, my father would return to us. In this desperate hope I was encouraged by my mother, who insisted that one fine evening Roy Dollahite would show up on our porch, probably drunk. When it became obvious even to her that our father was gone for good, she changed her story, convincing herself she had given him the boot. “I’m done with Roy Dollahite,” she told the neighbors in the certain, stupid conviction they would admire her grit. “Now I’m free, I might just get me another man. The next one’s gotta be crazy about me.”

The Snowdens were sitting with Mr. and Mrs. Sampson in the steel lawn chairs in the Sampsons’ front yard. Mr. Sampson grinned. “That’s what you ought do,” he said. “Get yourself another man.”

“Next time get a rich one,” said Mrs. Snowden. “There’s plenty to be said for money.”

My mother had replaced her husband with an heroic idea of herself, which for all its absurdity offered the proprietary benefits of fiction. It was her idea. Nobody else could claim it or mess with it, and so it was her business she wanted to swap out the facts and pat herself on the back for giving Roy Dollahite the boot. My brother and I silently consented to the fiction. Mother was a stout woman who did not take lightly to a child (even Frank, her favorite) disputing her version of the truth.

There was no Christmas surprise that year except a rare snow fell on East Texas and stuck for a few days. My mother worked in a school cafeteria during the day and cleaned the building after school. Weekends and holidays she wrapped presents at a ladies’ store downtown to catch up on bills and

buy our Christmas—a basketball for me and a Daisy BB-gun for Frank. After we opened our presents she fed us breakfast, put a chicken in the oven, and sat at the table to smoke. Frank and I went outside. As I closed the back door I looked through the tiny kitchen at her sitting at the table in the pale light of the window. She was smoking a cigarette, a coffee mug in front of her, a picture of JFK, cut from a *Look Magazine* cover, on the wall behind her. She was decidedly homely, even in my loving eyes.

I walked through the kitchen. “Let’s go see Granny and Uncle Bubba,” I said.

“Why would I want to see them?” she said.

We had not visited Granny and Uncle Bubba since Mother and Granny had a cuss-fight the previous summer. Mother swore she had seen the old woman for the last time. “I’ll go to her funeral,” she’d say. “Just to make sure the old fool is dead.”

“I bet Granny’s lonesome,” I said.

“If she is, it’s her own damn fault. She’s too mean and selfish to have any friends. Besides, that damned old car probably won’t start.” The damned old car was the old Chevy my father had left us.

I went outside and bounced the basketball in the street and prayed. Despite a miserable record for answered prayers, I prayed about everything with the stubborn optimism of an addicted gambler, convinced that eventually I’d hit the jackpot. Once again, I prayed my father would return but I was willing to bargain. I prayed that if he didn’t return he would send the Christmas surprise he promised Frank and me.

Frank had disappeared. Probably down the street showing off his BB-gun to Charlotte Snowden. A few minutes later Mother hollered out the front door for me to find him and bring him back. She had decided to visit Granny and Uncle Bubba. Would I ask Mrs. Gibson please to come turn off the chicken in about an hour? Be sure to say thank-you.

My Grandmother Cuthbert lived in the country in a house with a tin roof and great hickory trees in the front yard on what used to be a forty-acre farm. Nobody had farmed the land since my grandfather’s death thirty years ago. Granny

Cuthbert kept a small garden, raised chickens, and milked a cow.

Uncle Bubba did nothing. After his release from the psychiatric ward at the VA hospital in Shreveport, Bubba had worked a few weeks as a janitor at the high school. One day he stripped off his clothes in the custodians' closet, waited for the bell to release students into the hall, and emerged naked with his mop and bucket. Mother claimed he had pulled a fast one. "He knew what he was doing," she said. "He wanted to be fired. Bubba Cuthbert is the laziest man ever to walk God's green earth."

"He was never quite right," she said as she drove up the hill to the house. "We was all surprised the army took him. I guess they was hard up for volunteers."

"Were," said Frank, sitting in the backseat with his air rifle and the *Ring Magazine* he had stolen from Mr. Mitchell's mailbox.

"What?" Mother said.

He grinned his smart-aleck grin. "Nothing," he said. "I didn't say a damn thing."

"Don't you be cussin'," Mother said. But she thought it was cute. Everything Frank did she thought it was cute.

We parked in the yard under a hickory tree. Granny was sitting in the living room watching a *Gunsmoke* re-run, a dip pouching her lip. On the wall above the mantel she had hung a framed picture of President Reagan. Her father, a yellow-dog Democrat, had reared Granny in the true faith, but, after she and Mother fell out, Granny sent off for the picture of the president and announced that henceforth she was voting Republican.

"That's my mama," Mother would say. "It's just like her to bring down the whole damn country to get a dig at me."

Granny tongued the quid under her lip and frowned suspiciously. "What do you want?"

Mother grinned bravely. "It's Christmas, Mama. We come to visit."

"We done ate," Granny said. She retrieved a coffee can from the linoleum floor beside her and spat into it. "It's too late if you come to make a meal."

"We didn't come to make a meal, Mama. We ate, too. Didn't

we, boys?”

“I’m hungry,” Frank said.

“See? We only come to visit. Where’s Bubba?”

“Bubba’s out back drinking his wine I bought him.” Granny relaxed at the idea of Bubba, her love child. “I told him I’d buy him a Christmas bottle but he had to drink it outside.”

Granny eyed Frank and me. “There’s mincemeat pie on the table, boys.”

“Go hug your granny first, boys.”

Granny stiffened as if for a flu shot. She smelled of snuff.

“Look at my BB-gun I got for Christmas,” Frank said.

“Be careful. You could shoot somebody’s eye out with that thing,” said Granny.

“I got a basketball,” I said.

“Is that all?” Granny cut her eyes at Mother. “I bet that BB-gun cost more than a little old basketball.”

“Mama, please,” Mother said.

Frank cut the pie with the new jackknife he claimed to have found at school, but which I figured he had stolen. We wolfed down the pie and went outside looking for Bubba. We found our uncle sitting on a stump in the backyard, drinking the Christmas wine. He wore khaki pants and a red wool underwear top. He scratched himself.

Frank pointed the air rifle at him. “I could shoot your eye out.”

Bubba scratched and giggled. “You wouldn’t hurt old Bubba, would you?”

“I just said I could. Didn’t say I would.”

I said piously, “You ain’t supposed to point guns at people.”

Bubba hugged the bottle of wine to his chest. “You can’t have Bubba’s wine. Mama give it to me.”

Frank curled his lip, an exaggerated look of disgust. “Nobody wants your damned old wine. Let’s go shoot some cans.”

I pitched my voice higher, like sweet-talking a puppy: “You come too, Bubba.”

Bubba stumbled to his feet. He was a pig-eyed, pusslegged little man with narrow shoulders and a sunken face. We followed Frank toward the dump where fifty years ago a drilling crew had dug a sludge pit. They never struck oil. They

left a salt water pit Granny and the neighbors used as a dump.

We passed a dilapidated barn and marched single file into the frosty pasture, a thin crust of snow crunching under our feet. A killdeer flew out of a clump of bushes. Bubba stuck out his finger and shot it. "Pow!" he said, blowing out a cloud of vapor. He pulled up his shirt and scratched his hairy belly. "I got medals from the war. I hide them under my bed so I can take them out and look at them."

"Boy, I'd like to see them!" I said.

"You dummy!" Frank said. "He don't have any medals."

"Don't call me dummy," I said.

Frank's lip curled in disgust. "You believe anything."

Bubba cocked his mouth left-wise, a sly grin. "Bubba's got medals, all right. I take them out and look at them any time I feel like it."

Frank said, "Jesus, you're hairy as a bear."

Bubba pulled down his shirt. "I love Jesus," he said.

"Me, too!" I said.

Bubba said, "I bet I love him more than you."

"I bet you don't!"

"The question is," Frank said, "Does our lord and savior love you?"

"You talk funny," Bubba said.

"You're a moron," Frank said.

"Bubba ain't no moron," said Bubba. He held one nostril with his thumb and blew out a clot of snot. "Mama says I'm smart, only I'm screwy." He crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue, spinning a finger around his ear.

"Frank's the smart one," I said. "He makes all As when he wants to."

Frank grinned. "This much is true. I can fight, too. I whupped Jalen Simms."

"This much is true," I said. "Frank whupped Jalen Simms."

"Who's Jalen Simms?" asked Bubba.

"Used to be the baddest dude in school," said Frank.

We stood on the dam above the sludge pit, a skein of ice floating on the surface, supporting shallow islands of snow. Frank fired the air rifle. "Pow! Bull's eye!" he hollered. A sizable collection of tin cans and bottles were strewn on our side of the pit; on the other side somebody had dumped a

mattress and tires. Frank shot again and missed. We moved down for a closer shot.

“Where’s Roy?” Bubba asked. “How come you didn’t bring Roy?”

“He ran off,” Frank said, shooting and missing again. “You know that.”

I said, “He’s fixin to send me and Frank some Christmas.”

“He didn’t send nothing,” Frank said.

“It ain’t got here yet is all.” I reached for the BB-gun. “Let me shoot.”

Frank jerked the gun from my hand. “Our dear father is in Montana,” he said. “No doubt inebriated. He married a rich woman. Owns a big ranch.”

I was suspicious. “How do you know?”

Frank look worried. He was not yet the smooth liar he would become. “He wrote me a letter but I threw it away.”

“How come he didn’t write me?” I said.

“I was always his favorite. Here. Want to shoot?” He shoved the air rifle at me. “You can’t hit nothing.”

“You missed every time.”

“I hit once. Didn’t I, Bubba?”

Bubba giggled and stuck out his tongue. “Woeee! Bubba likes old Roy. He used to bring me beer when y’all come over.”

“Look at my knife,” said Frank. He pulled the knife from his pocket, opened it, and showed the blade to Bubba.

“Where’d you get that?”

“I traded a boy at school.”

“You told me you found it,” I said.

“Same difference.”

I shot at a bottle; the BB pinged. “Got it! See?”

“Lucky shot!” Frank said.

“Bubba’s got to pee,” Bubba said. “Woo-damn!” He commenced jerking at his pants, already spotted below the zipper. “Woo-damn!” he cackled. “I’m peeing in my shoe!”

I shot another can. “Looky there! See that? I hit ever time!”

Frank grabbed the barrel. “Give me the gun, dummy. You’re wasting BBs.”

Bubba leaned back against the incline of the dam, biting his tongue as he pissed a stream that steamed in the frigid air. “Woeee! Woo-damn!” he hollered. He tipped the bottle to

his lips, drawing hard, and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and grunted. “Mama bought me the wine. Mama loves her Bubba.”

“She certainly doesn’t love our mother,” Frank said.

“That’s cause Sister’s mean.”

“Who’s mean? Granny’s mean—that’s who’s mean. Put your thing up.”

We all looked. It had stiffened, the glans gone purple in the cold air. Bubba pointed it at us and giggled, his little red eyes beaming.

Frank scrambled up the side of the dam. I started after him but stumbled. I reached up clawing at the frosty earth. Bubba grabbed my foot. “Lemme hep you,” he said.

Frank pointed the BB-gun at Bubba’s head. “Leave him alone!”

Bubba moaned, his little red eyes glowing through the bursts of vapor discharging from his mouth and nostrils. “Come on, now,” he pleaded. “Bubba ain’t never hurt nobody.”

I heard a noise like a slap. Bubba’s head snapped back. A bubble of blood appeared on the bridge of his nose. He pawed at the wound and howled: “*Aowoh! Aowoh!*”

Frank hollered, his eyes wild and triumphant: “Come on, Junior!”

I scrambled on all-fours up the side of the dam. Frank grabbed my jacket, tugging. We ran. I stumbled. Bubba hollered after us. I looked back as he staggered over the top of the dam. Frank sprinted ahead of me, laughing wildly.

I chased after him. Frank stopped and faced me, gasping. His eyes were wild. “See it? Kapow! Right between the eyes!”

“He’s coming,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Frank pulled the jackknife from his pocket, exposing the blade, and fiercely slashed the air. “I’ll cut him!”

Bubba reeled aimlessly toward us, dangling the wine bottle by his side. He stopped and held the lip of the bottle to his eye, his knees folding until his body conceded the superior force of gravity. He dropped heavily to the frozen ground.

Frank handed me the air rifle and pointed the knife, his face flushed, a fiery madness in his eyes. “Let’s get him!”

“No! He’ll tell Granny!”

“So what? Come on, Junior. You know you want to.”

I followed him closer. Bubba rolled on his back and groaned. Frank gripped my shoulder, his wild eyes flashing. “Shoot him! Shoot him, Junior!”

My uncle wrapped his hands around his shoulders, hugging himself, and rolled away. I shouldered the air rifle and with pure untutored malice aimed at his head and pulled the trigger. The BB hit him above the ear. He slapped at the bleeding wound, a ringing wail lifting from his throat, and in that terrible moment I was certain I had killed him.

“*Aaow!*” Bubba’s wretched squeal knocked the pale hard sky and seemed to echo.

“Hear it?” Frank cupped his hand to his ear. “Shit!” A tinny rattle like a furious curse collided mid-air with my uncle’s pathetic shriek. “Hear it?”

I couldn’t breathe. God had seen all, and now had spoken, his voice the shriek of an old car horn, worn and raspy. I was doomed. A single moment of cruelty had canceled all my good deeds and fervent prayers. God’s wrath was upon me. He would hold me by the toes and drop me into the fiery pit of hell!

Our uncle clawed at his wounds, wailing in chorus to the old Chevy’s tinny shriek. “How come you hurt old Bubba?” he cried.

The horn sounded again. Frank pocketed the knife and took the air rifle from me and stood over him. “It was Junior shot you, Bubba.”

“No! No!” I screamed. “You shot him first!”

Frank said, “Listen here. I took the gun from Junior. You saw it. Tell Granny. Okay?”

Bubba clawed at his bloody ear. The horn shrieked, a furious curse. I looked up at the glaucous sky, hard and cold.

Frank tugged my shirt. He was grinning. “Let’s go. I bet our dear mother and our sweet old Granny had another cuss fight.”

Mother was pounding the horn as we approached the car. She had been crying. “Hurry up!” she shouted. Frank crawled into the back seat. I foolishly sat in front with her. A cigarette bobbed from the corner of her mouth. She stomped the accelerator. The engine groaned but did not start.

“Take a good look, boys! Last time you’ll see this place if I

have to bring you back!” Her eyes brimmed with fresh tears. “God help me for saying this about my own mother, but that’s the meanest woman alive! Start, goddammit!” She pounded the accelerator. The odor of gasoline filled the car.

“I think you flooded it.” Frank spoke soothingly, as if to a sorrowful child. “Don’t tell me you and Granny got in another fight.”

I knew from the sound of his voice Frank was grinning. I hunkered down. He was safe in the back seat, but I was an arm’s length from Mother’s backhand. My only hope was to shape an alliance. “Granny’s always mean to you,” I told her, and added, paraphrasing one of Mother’s lamentations, “She never loved you.”

Mother slapped me. “Shut up!” I felt the sting on my cheek and covered my face. I smelled dirt on my hands. My chest seized. A moan forced its way through my aching throat, but I did not cry. I had wept for the last time years ago.

Mother hollered, “How do you know she don’t love me? The goddamn car won’t start!” She leaned over the steering wheel, sobbing. “I hate this car! I hate it!”

In a hot blur I glimpsed Frank’s slender hand float across the space over the back seat and rest on Mother’s shoulder. “What’d she do this time?” he asked.

“She willed the farm to Bubba.”

“All of it?”

“Every last cow patty. Ain’t that a kick? All the times I worked to help pay for the place and take care of Daddy and little sister till they died . . .”

Frank spoke soothingly, as if to a child. “We love you, Mama. You know we love you. What you do, you hold down the pedal without pumping it. That way you don’t flood the engine. I read it in *Popular Mechanics*.”

Mother pushed away from the steering wheel. “I know that,” she snapped.

She eyed me shyly. “Watch what you say, sugar. That little mouth can get you in trouble.” She held the pedal to the floor. The engine sputtered. “What I ought to do, I ought to get a lawyer and sue the old bitty.” The engine started; she grinned fiercely, gap-toothed and homely. “Next man I marry has gotta be *crazy* about me.”

That evening the radio warned of icy roads. We had been home only a few minutes when a hard sleet fell. “We was lucky we left when we did,” Mother said.

Frank grinning slyly at me said, “You were smart to leave.”

I knew it was not luck, or Mother’s wit, that had saved us from the perilous roads. I saw God’s hand guiding us home, releasing the deadly sleet only after we were deposited safely in our little house. I thanked the Lord but congratulated myself. Our safety, I knew, was our reward for my faith.

That night, Frank and I alone in our room, my itchy conscience kept me awake. I asked my brother to pray with me. “It says it works better when two pray together,” I told him.

“I don’t care what it says.” Frank lay next to me flexing his biceps as he read a muscle magazine he had stolen from the Baileys’ mailbox. He had scattered a dozen or more stolen books and magazines under the bed.

“We hurt Bubba,” I said.

Frank stroked his biceps. “It was his own damn fault.”

“We could’ve hurt him bad. You wanted to stick him.”

“There is a difference, little brother, between saying and doing. I *said* I would stick him. You shot him.”

“You told me to. You don’t even feel bad about it.”

Frank flashed the killer grin Mother said could charm a snake. “So what? What’s the difference? I don’t feel bad what I do. You pray and you don’t feel bad.”

He stuffed the magazine under his pillow and crawled out of bed fully dressed and pulled his jacket from the closet.

“Where’re you going?”

“That’s for me to know.”

“You’re going to see Charlotte Snowden.”

Frank reached under the mattress and retrieved a pack of cigarettes and the Zippo lighter he had stolen from Mrs. Sampson.

I didn’t want him to go. For all that I judged him, I loved my brother. When he left at night, I was lonely. I heard noises, and I was afraid. “You can’t go out this late. What if Mama finds out?”

“You gonna tell her?” He twisted my ear. “Know what you’ll get, you little turd?”

After Frank left, I lay in the bed watching the blue-yellow flame of the space heater flicker in the dark and light a shine on the hardwood floor. I had closed my eyes and begun drowsily to say my prayers when Mother came into the room.

“Where is Frank?” A cigarette hung from the corner of her mouth, the punk glowing dully under the ash.

“I don’t know.” I added a feeble lie: “I been asleep.”

Mother stood in the doorway, tall and dark and grim against the dim light in the hall. She said, “Snuck out again. What am I gonna do with that boy?” And smiled as if his mischief were a cute prank.

She said, “Mama called. Did you shoot Bubba with the BB-gun?”

“Frank shot first. Then he made me shoot Bubba.”

“Now, now. What’s done is done. Don’t go blaming your brother.”

She sat on the edge of the bed and doused the cigarette on the sole of her shoe and laid her cold rough hand on my forehead. She whispered, “I love you, Junior. You know how much I love you?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Her hand was cool on my skin, her eyes bright and weary. “I ain’t gonna hit you no more.”

“It’s all right. I deserve it.”

“No, you don’t. You’re a good boy.” A wiry moan lifted from her throat, a sorrowful noise seeking shape and meaning in a word she did not know. She pulled me to her and held me. “I wish I could do more for you boys,” she said. “It ain’t easy all alone.”

I thought what Frank would say. He would say, *I love you, Mama*. I grunted, but, like my mother, I did not have the word.

Idozed off with a prayer on my lips, waking only briefly when my brother returned and shoved me out of the warm spot in the center of the bed into the cold air seeping through the window sill. I entered a dream and descended, releasing my scattered day in a deeper sleep, but woke again hours later to the warmth of my brother’s body beside me. I sat up rubbing my face, at first unaware of the chill creeping under

my skin like a shame. My mind resisted as the chill seeped into my legs from the wet pajamas. My body settled into a gelid palsy. I folded the blankets back and leaned out of bed as the ammoniac stench filled my nostrils. I touched my bare feet to the cold floor, gasping and shivering as I stumbled across the room. Frank would tease me mercilessly. He would tell Charlotte Snowden, and the Sampsons, and Ralph Gibson. He'd tell Mother. I prayed: *Oh, Lord! Please! I didn't! I won't never again!*

As I crept into the dark hall I felt the cold wet PJs plastered to my butt and legs; a cold stream of urine trickled down one ankle. In the bathroom I stripped naked and dropped to my knees before the toilet seat and washed the urine from the PJs in the toilet and wrung them out and flushed. I lowered the cover over the toilet seat and propped my elbows on the painted wood and prayed. I prayed for my mother and father and Frank and to forgive my father for leaving us and Frank for sneaking out. I prayed for Ralph Gibson, who with Frank stole from mailboxes in the neighborhood, and Charlotte Snowden, who was 14 and who sometimes sat on her porch with her dress hiked up and her panties showing. I prayed for my grandmother, that the Lord might work a miracle on her mean and spiteful ways, and for Bubba that his wounds from the air rifle would heal without pain or memory. Finally I prayed for myself, coming down hard on the forgiveness angle.

As I stood from the toilet, delivered of shame and fear, I was rewarded with a giddy lightheadedness, as if levitating on my own pious nature. I retrieved a towel from the bathroom closet and crept naked into the chilly hall carrying the PJs and underwear in a wet wad which I hid under the bed. Frank slept. Tomorrow, I would strip the bed of the wet sheets, and wash and dry them after he left. I felt wonderfully giddy and clever as I searched through the underwear drawer for a pair of long johns. In the dark my hand burrowed through the underwear like some half-blind and famished rodent seeking a morsel of food. I felt a cold, hard lump in the bottom of the drawer. I had withdrawn the long johns and stepped into the bottoms before realizing what Frank had hidden there.

“Oh!” I said. And then again, whispering, “Oh,” as if the

whisper would muffle the noise of my first exclamation. The logic of the revelation was an exquisite pleasure, soothing the sting of betrayal. I knew before holding it up to the dim blue light of the gas heater that the knife was a duplicate of Frank's new knife. I knew also, and before I discovered the Christmas card, our father had sent us the knives. I exposed the blade and watched the flame of the gas heater light the tempered steel. I smiled sleepily, blinking against a pleasant fatigue, then closed the blade and moved to my side of the bed, where I spread the towel over the wet spot and crawled into bed still clutching the knife. *My knife*, I thought. *Mine!* I watched my brother sleep, contemplating his pretty face, the smooth brow and girlish lips that so easily shaped a lie or masked a petty larceny. I scooted under the covers, moving closer until I could feel the heat from my brother's body, his breath on my shoulder. I turned the knife (*my knife!*) in my palm, teasing my fingertips with the smooth indentures of the bone handle, my lips silently moving as I entered the pure and spiteless sleep of a happy child.

Dan Timoskevich

Paquete

It is late in the evening in Quito. The city lights climb skyward in all directions before disappearing into the clouds. Frigid air tumbles down the surrounding mountains. A five-year-old boy is walking down Amazonas Avenue toward the heart of the city. His feet hurt. His name is Paco, but his friends call him Paquete. His mom used to call him that, too. The man he is walking with calls him Paquete.

He passes the bullfighting arena coated with a fresh layer of orange paint. In a few weeks, in celebration of the founding of Quito, the gates will open and the matadors will arrive with great fanfare, wearing vests with sparkling trim. Everyone will converge on this normally quiet street corner: hat vendors, musicians, drunks, tourists, drunk tourists. There will be either raucous cheers when the bull, already dying, is finished off after putting up a courageous fight, or gasps from the audience when a bullfighter is impaled by a thrashing horn. Paco is looking forward to this week-long celebration. He won't have to walk so far.

The streets are treacherous at night. They can also be dangerous during the day as overfilled buses weave through jammed lanes, scouring the crumbling curbs for the stranded, but this danger is obvious and the crowds of people ambling about on the sidewalks know better than to stray into the streets. At night, the barren roads are as duplicitous as a river that's calm on the surface but hides dangerous undertows below. Cars can appear out of nowhere, swerving wildly about the lanes. If a collision appears imminent, drivers don't slow down but instead tap their horns in fair warning. Paco worries because he is invisible.

Of course, he knows this is not completely true. The man he is walking with sees him and watches closely to make sure he doesn't wander away. And the people in the cars can probably see him; they are just not aware of him. Paco blends into the landscape, no more significant than a lamppost. He walks among other invisibles: emaciated dogs, waifish old ladies,

men with missing limbs. Paco can see them all and he smiles as he passes them, because though he is invisible, he is much luckier than they are.

“Paquete!” his companion snaps. “Remember your mother.”

At the next corner a pair of teenage boys races out into the middle of the street when a few obedient cars stop at a red light. One boy juggles three grey tennis balls while the other somersaults between the juggler’s legs and then jumps to his feet smiling and clapping his hands between the flying balls in a comic attempt to distract his partner. The acrobat climbs atop the juggler’s shoulders, and one by one intercepts the balls until he is now the juggler, though he lacks the control of his partner. A ball falls to the ground before the light turns green, and the boy leaps off his partner’s shoulders and scrambles to fetch it. Despite the error, the boys still grin and take a bow. A lady in a fuming Mazda lets a wrinkled bill flutter out her window, and the boys pounce on the money before it floats away.

While jugglers and acrobats are entertaining, Paco dreams one day of pouring gasoline in his mouth and spitting it over a lighter’s flame, producing a glamorous fireball. These teenage fire-spitters are magnificent like dragons and inspire the most awe—and tips—from spectators. There are other performers Paco admires, like this toothless man sitting on the bench playing his *rondador*. He blows out a familiar tune—*El Chulla Quiteño*. It’s the only song he ever plays, but people don’t seem to notice or care. A few golden and silver coins lie scattered in the warped hat at his side. Paco wishes he could produce these peculiar, birdlike sounds, but he has no *rondador*. He pauses to listen and smiles at the performer before being slapped by the man he’s been walking with. His face stings. He is not supposed to smile. The *rondador* player notices none of this because Paco is invisible to him, too.

Nearby, a woman wearing a dark felt hat over her long, braided black hair stoops over a garbage can, poking through trash with a snapped piece of rebar. She is invisible. Paco can tell because of the indigenous disguise she wears. She murmurs a song in a voice that he finds familiar, and he pauses mid-step to catch another view of her face. Her coarse, craquelured skin, imperceptible lips, and toothless mouth are

ultimately foreign to him, and he's disappointed.

The woman, not finding anything worthwhile, moves on with a tortured limp to fish through the next can. She seems ancient, but a man once revealed to Paco that working the streets adds ten years to one's age. This idea excites Paco. If it is true, his days of spitting fire are not so distant.

Paco's feet are swelling, and now he is thirsty. The man tugs at his arm, pulling him to continue as they approach Carolina Park. In a vast city of lights, it is two kilometers of terrifying darkness. Paco has heard stories of children walking into the park and never appearing again. They pass the vivarium with the fat, fanged snake painted on the wall. He imagines the snakes escaping their cages at night to roam the park, and he worries an anaconda will slither by, crush his bones, and devour him. Mysterious noises scatter then converge, and he hears rustling in the grass and overhead. He races ahead of his companion, eager to return to the light. In the near distance he sees the pyramidal hotel with blocks of light stepping down from its point and casting a glow on the palm trees lined below in an orderly row. The grass is manicured and the sidewalks smooth, and after ten kilometers of walking, Paco knows he is close.

A blister opens up between his toes, but the pain is distant. The churning in his stomach is all he notices. His lips are dry and crusty. The aroma of roasted chicken, pizza, shawarmas, and other foreign smells are ripe in the air. He licks his lips.

They approach *La Mariscal*, an area filled with swank restaurants, active bars, nightclubs, and drunken revelers. The man points at a young couple seated at a table outside an Arabian hookah bar. He stuffs two packets of gum and a package of cigarettes in Paco's coat pocket and pushes the boy in their direction.

Paco nears the couple's table. They're speaking a language he doesn't understand, but he expects this. At this time of night, everyone in *La Mariscal* is a foreigner. The young woman has glossy brown hair and a trimmed rose tucked behind her ear, but the man transfixes Paco. He has never seen a man with such orange hair, and it seems as if fire pours out of the man's nose and drips from his ears and mouth down his chin and neck. Paco straightens his posture, pulls

out a pack of cigarettes and approaches. The man sees him and nods. Paco pounds the pack into the palm of his hand, flips the lid open and partially lifts out a single cigarette. The man takes it and puts it in his mouth, letting it bounce about his lips. Paco offers a lighter, holding it out like a gentleman, and cups his hand around the flame, waiting for the man to draw in the fire and puff out a ball of smoke.

“Cincuenta centavos,” Paco says, holding out his hand.

The fiery man gives him a dollar, and Paco fights back a smile. He pulls out the pack of gum and places it on the table. The foreigners shake their heads and divert their attention away from him. They’re silent while they wait for him to disappear. He doesn’t leave but instead takes a small step backwards, clasps his hands behind his back, and stands attentively until someone finds his eyes again. Finally, the woman glances at Paco but mumbles something to the fiery man. Paco listens, scavenging for familiar words.

“Okay,” the man says. His fingers dance over the gum, and he contorts his face and twitches his bushy eyebrows.

“Don’t tease him,” the woman says.

“I’m not teasing him. I’m deciding.” He scratches his flaming chin and curls the tips of his mustache. He makes his ears dance up and down.

Paco can’t hold the giggle back and it fizzes from his lips like soda from a shaken bottle. He covers his mouth, hoping his companion watching him from the street corner does not see his laughter.

The fiery man searches his wallet. “All I have is a twenty. You have a dollar?” he asks the woman who shakes her head. He puts his wallet away.

Paco slumps his shoulders. He wonders if a careless remnant of a smile still lingers on his face, and he pushes his lower lip upward to exaggerate a frown. He tries to remember his mother, but the thoughts are dry.

The woman removes an apple from her purse and offers it. Paco tentatively accepts it but doesn’t know whether to eat it there or wait. He decides it’s safer to put it in his pocket.

“He’s still there,” the woman says a few moments later. She sucks in a puff of the hookah’s smoke and sighs as a halo of vapor swarms around her head. She passes the hose to the

fiery man, who sets aside his cigarette and takes a puff. He closes his eyes while the flavorful smoke inhabits his body.

The woman presses her fingers to her scalp, stretching the skin on her forehead. She looks to Paco, whose legs are now shaking. “My God, look at his foot. It’s bleeding through his shoe!”

“What do you want to do about it?” the man asks. “Do you have a spare shoe?”

“Just give him something,” the woman says as she pushes her chair away from the table. She grabs her purse and disappears inside the bar.

A mouth and teeth appear between the flames as the man smiles warmly at Paco. “*Niño, no más.* I’m sorry. *No más. Tus manos, por favor.*”

Paco holds out his hands and squeezes his eyes, hoping to force something out of them. The fiery man returns the package of gum into Paco’s hands.

Feeling empty and betrayed by the indispositions of his heart, Paco leaves the patio of the hookah bar and returns to the street corner where his companion has been spying him. He gives the man the dollar but can’t keep his other hand from crawling about his pocket. Paco’s fingernails dig into the apple until they’re moist with juice. When he pulls out his hand and lifts it to his mouth to lick his fingers, the man grabs Paco’s wrist and stops him. The man snatches the apple from the coat pocket and turns it over in his hand, inspecting it. He holds it out, but only to tease the boy, because when Paco reaches for it, the man yanks it away and hurls it against the wall. The mushy remains slide to the ground. Paco begins to cry. Before the tears dry, the man pushes his little package to the next location, the patio of a ritzy restaurant at the edge of the main plaza.

Paco stumbles over his feet as he shuffles towards the restaurant. He can’t stop the tears. The apple was *his*. He simply wanted a taste. Now, he may never know how the fruit of a wealthy foreigner compares to the fruit he normally eats. Perhaps the young woman’s apple held luxurious, exotic flavors. He rubs his eyes with his forearm, smearing the grimy tears across his face.

The two giant windows of the restaurant offer a glittering

view of the kings and queens inside. Even the waiters wear fancy white jackets and black bow ties. Everything inside sparkles: the silverware, the wineglasses, the teeth, the eyes. The faces of the women gleam and their ears and necks twinkle in the candlelight. Outside the door, armed security guards stand at attention to stop unapproved people from entering. No one is invisible to these men. Nevertheless, they seem uninterested in protecting the guests who sit at the tables on the restaurant's patio.

Even though the patio is crowded—every table and seat is taken—Paco knows exactly where to go. He'll sell to anyone who beckons him over, but it's the smiling couples he approaches first.

The woman has a ghostly white, doughy face and a plump nose. Her lips are *achiote* red and her auburn hair spirals down the side of her face like rusty coils. The tears are still flowing as he pulls out his tiny package from his coat pocket. He's trying to do his job, to be professional, but his arm trembles as he holds his hand out to offer a cigarette. The doughy-faced woman's expression flutters briefly to shock before returning to her smile. She looks into her purse, opens her wallet and removes a bill. Paco fumbles through his coat pocket for his lighter while she places the bill in his other hand, closing his fingers around both the bill and cigarette. She wraps both of her hands around his tiny fist and holds them there for a while. Finally, she lets go, smiles, and taps his hand twice more before returning to her conversation with the silver-haired man. The woman doesn't tell him how much change she expects. She doesn't seem to expect change at all.

Paco opens his hand and looks at the bill. He knows his numbers, both one and five, and understands he's received a lot of money. The bearded man pictured on the five-dollar bill looks like no man he's ever known or seen, but he seems to be looking proudly back at Paco.

In an instant, Paco feels like he is expanding from his chest, growing to twice his size. He sprints back toward the man to show off his earnings but comes to a sudden stop midway when he realizes something important. He forgot to give the woman her cigarette. They are neither thieves nor beggars,

the man has reminded him many times. They are workers. Paco hurries back toward the plaza, his eyes wide with panic. The woman is watching him with squinted eyes. Her smile is gone. He's cheated her, he knows.

He reaches the table, bows meekly, and offers the cigarette. She laughs and shakes her head. He insists. *Doesn't she remember she just made this purchase?* He holds it out again and puts it on the table. Finally, she nods and takes it. He notices her red-stained wine glass and the empty bottle on the table and wonders if her mind is dancing with angels. That would explain her forgetfulness.

He nods politely before spinning around and running back to the man. The five-dollar bill is in his coat pocket, his fingers wrapped firmly around it. Feeling like a king holding such a large bill, he presents it to his companion who buys him a stick of roasted corn and gives him twenty-five cents from his pocket. It's the first time Paco has been able to keep money for himself. Now, he's a true worker. He smiles briefly before returning to his normal face. Deep down, though, he is happy.

The flood of affluent locals and foreigners into *La Mariscal* begins. The clubs awaken, pulsating with bass tones and flashing lights, enticing throngs of partiers to swarm to the sound. Sweeping over the streets in waves, they arrive from the homes and apartments surrounding the Catholic University to the north and Central University to the south. They weave between taxicabs, which wade through the streets waiting to rescue the older tourists looking to escape. For over an hour, people continuously flow down from the hills, flushed from the quiet, surrounding streets and emptied into the estuary of Amazonas Avenue. Paco goes back to work, selling single cigarettes to people escaping the sweltering heat of the clubs. But tonight, these sweaty people are stingy and pay no more than fifty cents per cigarette. They love to bargain.

The man decides to give up just after midnight. His little cloth sack is full of Sacagawea dollar coins and dollar bills so worn and infinitely crumpled they feel soft and smooth like silk.

"We're going to the palace," he says, handing Paco the bag

of money. “You carry this. It’s safer with you.”

Paco is tired and limps to avoid putting pressure on his throbbing right foot. His left foot has been hurting, too, but another thing the man has taught him is that greater pain erases lesser pain. Paco is happy to be going to the palace. It’s closer than walking home.

From a distance, the rough, cobblestone road leading up to the palace looks like an avalanche of rocks spilled from the mountain, slicing through the neighborhood. The road is so narrow and steep the buses don’t dare to climb it, and sometimes, even taxis drop their customers off at the base of the hill rather than attempt the ascent. Tonight, Paco’s legs are fighting him and he takes the man’s hand. As they near the summit he sees men with untucked shirts and unzipped pants dancing with their angels, singing songs of devotion, and twirling their invisible beauties up and down the steep slope of the cobbled road until they finally collapse.

The palace is three stories high and still growing according to Jesús, the fat, mustached man who manages the flow of guests. Strands of rebar sprout upward from the corners of the palace’s roof like rusty flower stems. Light bleeds through the thin, carmine curtains of several rooms on the second and third floor of the palace. Ghostly silhouettes duck and lurch in and out of view. No matter the time of day or night, there is always someone awake inside.

“A busy night,” the man says to the palace guard who stands at attention in front of the heavily dented metal door. The guard’s uniform is a large bomber jacket and baggy fatigue pants. The loose clothes disguise his slender physique, and he looks otherworldly under the violet neon light framing the doorway. The light casts a mystic glow against the lime green concrete walls.

The guard smiles at the man and says, “Three dollars for a bed. Three to Jesús. Three for the girl. Maybe some extra for me.”

The man pulls out his empty pockets and shows them.

The guard laughs. He touches his forefinger to his chin. “Of course, if you’re only visiting your sister, then it’s free.” The guard steps forward and hugs the man. Then he steps aside and permits them to enter.

Inside the palace, Jesús sits on the tan, punctured sofa that smells of smoke. He's watching the grainy black-and-white screen of a tiny television resting atop a flimsy wooden table. He stands when he sees the man. Jesús lifts his shirt and pulls out the handgun tucked into his pants. He points it at the doorway and says, "Pow, pow!" Laughing mischievously, he gives the gun to the man. "Don't worry. No problems tonight."

"Can you watch my *Paquete* while I go upstairs to see my sister? Five minutes."

"You're eating into my break," Jesús says.

"Five minutes," the man says. He leans toward Paco as if about to hug him, but instead, he reaches into Paco's coat and takes the bag of money. He tousles Paco's sticky hair and smiles before disappearing down the hall and up the rickety staircase.

Jesús collapses onto the sofa. He taps the cushion. "Come here, Paco."

Paco pulls himself onto the sofa and leans his head into Jesús's soft belly. Together they watch the television. Paco tries to concentrate on the moving images and the frantic squeals of the gray woman as she races back and forth across the screen, her hands to her head. Paco finds the colorless world boring. His eyelids tremble before surrendering completely under the weight of exhaustion.

When he reopens his eyes, he's alone on the sofa. He's worried the man has forgotten him. And Jesús? There's no one in the lobby. If someone comes in, how will he know where to send them? Who will collect the money? Since there is no one else, the responsibility has become his.

A long counter, the last vestige of the palace's days as a hotel, hides in the shadows at the opposite end of the room. Above the counter, frayed wires poke through the ceiling like wilted vines, a reminder of where the light fixtures used to be. The counter's face is missing several of its ivory-colored tiles, and many of the remaining tiles are either cracked or stained. No one ever stands behind the counter anymore. Not even Jesús. Its only function seems to be to hide the crates of Pilsener beer, but even then, all the visitors know of the stash. Perhaps because they can't see it, they aren't tempted

to swipe any.

Paco goes over to the counter and prepares to assume his duty by standing behind it. It's the only way someone his age can demonstrate authority. Strolling about the lobby, he's just a lost kid. Behind the counter, he will be somebody. There's only one problem, he quickly discovers. He can't see over the counter and won't know when people arrive. He returns to the front of the counter and leans suavely against the tiles, his legs crossed and his hands tucked in his pockets. He must look authoritative. He glances at his feet and the little toes peeking out through the canvas of his shoe. This doesn't look professional. He quickly hides again behind the counter, but this time he formulates a plan.

He carefully empties one of the yellow crates of its beer bottles and tips it over. The plastic crate makes a perfect stool, and when he stands atop it, he can just barely see over the counter. If he nudges his head up slightly his chin can rest on the grainy surface. Now, he appears officious, and he surveys his lobby awaiting a visitor from the outside or from the upper floors. His expression is necessarily serious.

After a few minutes, he decides standing on the crate is not comfortable. His legs are wanting to dance. He has to pee. He has to move. But he can't leave his lobby unattended. He hops off the crate and dances. This helps a little. He mimics the dance with the angels that he's seen the man perform many times. As he cavorts about the small area behind the counter, he accidentally taps one of the beer bottles resting on the floor. It falls over, clanks, and rolls harmlessly a few feet from the other bottles. Fortunately, it does not break.

The accident proves to be inspiring. Grabbing two bottles, one in each hand, Paco climbs the stool and hoists the heavy bottles onto the countertop. He arranges them carefully before hopping down to fetch two more. In La Mariscal, he has seen men behind counters serving beer to customers and receiving money for it. The man will be so proud of him. He continues to retrieve the bottles, arranging them in a neat row on the counter but leaving an opening for him to peer through. He takes the last two bottles, but when he climbs his stool, a woman is standing on the other side of the counter. Her hair is in a bun and two giant, golden loops hang from

each ear.

“*Un dolar*,” Paco says. “*Cerveza es un dolar*.”

“*Paquito, mi amor*,” the woman says, reaching over the counter to pinch Paco’s cheek. “One dollar for each of these big bottles? You’ll sell out so quickly. Are you the little bartender?”

How does she know his name, he wonders. Paco pushes one of the beers forward, but the woman pushes it back.

“I’ve smelled enough beer today,” she says. “Are you here by yourself?”

Paco nods. He suddenly becomes very hot and sweaty all over. He’s doing a poor job. The woman joins Paco behind the counter. She puts her hands on her meaty hips and looks at Paco disapprovingly. “Do you remember me?” she asks.

He shakes his head. He’s so worried, even his ankles are sweating. There’s nothing he can do to stop this woman.

She undoes her bun and lets her hair fall to her shoulders. “Now?” she asks.

Maybe she looks familiar. He’s not sure.

She comes over to him and lifts him by his underarms off the crate. She sets him down and looks him over again. “We have to get you out of those pants,” she says.

Paco drops his eyes and is immediately aware of the problem. He nods. She takes him by the hand and leads him away from the counter. He knows she’ll take him to her room and embarrass him. He’s ashamed.

At this moment, the man enters the lobby from the hallway. The first thing he notices is the line of beer bottles on the countertop. Then he looks at Paco. Then at Paco’s pants and the long, dark streak of urine running down the fabric.

“He had a little accident,” the woman says.

“And so you offer to get him out of his pants. Haven’t you done that enough tonight?” the man says.

“*Qué bárbaro!*” she says. “You leave this poor boy alone when he needed to use the bathroom.”

“Then he should have used the bathroom. Where’s Jesús?” he asks, looking around the lobby.

“Jesús? You want to blame Jesús? This is not Jesús’s responsibility.”

“I’m not the boy’s father. Do I have to show him how to

piss? He can go outside. There are a hundred walls to piss on out there. Even a dog has better sense.”

She tugs at Paco’s hand. “Come on, Paquito.”

There is one bathroom on each floor of the palace, but the one on the ground level no longer functions, and like all the other rooms on first floor, is padlocked shut. The woman leads Paco into the cramped stairwell. The man is close behind, his hand on Paco’s back. The wooden steps vary in height, and the three of them stumble up the stairs.

On the second floor, Paco hears the familiar, scattered moans and groans of men and women in devout prayer behind their closed doors. The bathroom, which services all the rooms on the floor, is at the end of the hall. Its door hangs loosely on its hinges and has no lock. Regular visitors to the palace know to hum or sing softly while on the toilet to let others know the bathroom is occupied. Sometimes that works.

Tonight, it’s unoccupied and the woman pushes open the door. The bathroom has a large pedestal sink, a shower head dangling precariously from the wall, and a toilet with a cracked and chipped seat cover. The wastebasket is overflowing with used toilet paper, and the smell of feces overwhelms the vanilla scent of a fragrant candle atop the sink.

“Take off your pants,” the man says.

Paco refuses and he thrusts his hands into his pockets, searching for his coin.

“Paquito, *mi amor*, you have to let me wash your pants,” the woman says. She holds a thin bar of grimy soap.

The man grabs Paco’s right arm and forces the closed fist out of the pocket. Not wanting to lose his coin, Paco refuses to help. The man violently unbuttons the single button and pulls the zipper. He yanks the pants down. Paco lifts his leg one at a time to help the man slip the pants off.

“The boy is stupid sometimes,” the man says. “Why do I have to undress you? You’re a worker. You should know how to do such a simple thing.”

“He’s embarrassed,” the woman says.

The man stares at Paco’s face, and Paco can feel him reading his eyes.

“He’s not embarrassed. He’s greedy.” He lifts Paco so they

see eye-to-eye. “You don’t want to give up your coin, do you? We’re going to have to pay to dry your pants. How much, sister? Twenty-five cents?”

“More or less.” The woman is already running cold water over the pants—there’s no hot water in the palace—and she scrubs the bar of soap furiously on both the inside and outside of the pant legs.

“Whose pants are those?” the man asks Paco.

“Mine.”

“Who should pay to dry them?”

Paco drops his head.

The woman rinses the pants of the soap and turns off the water. “I had a man tonight,” she says. “He’s famous. Anita took a photo of him . . . and me. He’s a politician, I think. A rich one.”

“Paquete, are you going to give me your coin now?” the man asks.

“I think this man will pay to keep his secret.”

The man spins and charges toward the woman with a clenched fist. “You’re going to blackmail him? Not only are you a whore, but you are a filthy thief. How dare you!”

“It’s an opportunity.”

The man pulls his gun from his waist and presses the barrel against the woman’s head. “And I have an opportunity to pull this trigger and take every dollar you have. Is that what it has come to? Brother stealing from sister? We are that greedy?”

“We both know that gun has no bullets.”

The man’s face turns red, and the veins on his neck pulsate. He pulls the trigger. A harmless click.

He turns back to Paco and seizes the boy’s arm.

Paco opens his fist and gladly surrenders the coin.

Brandon Barrett

No Weapon Forged Against You Will Prevail

They passed a busker on the stoop of a hardware store. An elderly Asian man playing Für Elise on a saxophone. Dixon would have investigated—is anybody else dodging those feet sticking out onto the sidewalk?—but he was with Cassie and he didn't want to alarm her. He himself was acutely disturbed, considering that a stripped-down version of Für Elise was the only complete song he ever learned during two years of piano instruction as a child. And just a few days ago they had gone through the S chapter of Cassie's Sesame Street dictionary and she had asked many questions about the saxophone and its funny shape. But he let it go.

Dixon's first visit with the psychiatrist was made to coincide with Cassie's first day of grade school because he couldn't afford an hour of daycare, not comfortably. And wouldn't it be closer to two hours accounting for travel time? Not affordable comfortably or otherwise. He hadn't sold an article in weeks and the Gray Line piece stagnated even as the word count grew. Rice and beans for dinner most nights, sometimes cereal. A little water added to the milk, to stretch it out. No daycare.

Cassie chattered with happy speculation on the possibilities of this first day. Maybe the classroom would have a bunny or an ant farm. There was no timidity in her character, but Dixon worried on her behalf. Nobody would play with her at recess due to the vagaries of children. The meager lunch he packed would leave her hungry. She would forget to visit the bathroom and have an accident, earning herself some cruel nickname for the rest of her days. He reserved these notions to himself on the grounds that naming them would give them power, and so was dry-eyed and cheerful as he walked her to the bus stop. She bounced into the vehicle like she'd done it a thousand times before and was gone. Not a wave. Dixon might have allowed himself to cry but an attractive mother was at the stop as well, waving goodbye to an equally

handsome child. He paused to see if he could catch her eye, share a moment between parents: oh god they grow up fast, yes they do. But she was checking something on her phone while Dixon had no phone to check and was left surveying his surroundings as though lost. So he left.

The sun was out and humanity emerged to taste it while they could, flooding the streets with pleasant low-key bustle. Cassie gone, he became vigilant for clues. His first task was to double back and confirm that the busker remained, now playing the Star-Spangled Banner while another man stooped over to drop a bill in his cup. All-in-all this was satisfying and he turned around. The fastest route to the psychiatrist's would take him past the bus stop again, so he decided on a detour to avoid encountering the attractive mother who might already suspect him of oddness.

Five minutes later, a man with a handlebar mustache approached on a unicycle. Another red flag. Granted, a sizable cohort of bohemians in the city wore "Keep Portland Weird" T-shirts and were deliberately unconventional in their pursuits, so the unicyclist operated well within the expected range of public behavior. A red flag nonetheless. Dixon watched the man negotiate through foot traffic, right down the middle of the sidewalk although that could simply be commonplace rudeness. A middle-aged woman with arms full of shoeboxes grimaced and stepped aside to avoid him. The unicyclist squeaked and tottered past Dixon, who leaned in and sniffed hard in the man's wake. More than just a hint of Old Spice. Dixon approached the annoyed woman and shook his head, smiling. These people, he said, are stilts next? Ready to flee if her reaction was confusion or fear, but she nodded. You're late to the party, she said, I saw a guy on stilts last week, maybe the same stupid guy. So Dixon laughed and kept walking. The second false alarm of the day, was all.

There were other worries but that's fine. There always were, hence the appointment. A complete stranger yelled out Dixon's name from a storefront, but he yelled again and it wasn't even close, he was yelling *Jason*, and Jason turned out to be a man walking just behind. The yeller and Jason were old friends. To be safe, Dixon bent down and pretended to tie his shoe so as to overhear some of their conversation,

which entailed being college roommates back in the day and was thoroughly banal so probably real. As he stood, an egg burst on the ground a few feet to the left. From whence? Oh goodness, said a mother to a little girl, let me hold the bag, they're falling out everywhere. Spilled groceries. Still, why a solitary egg, how does it slip alone from a carton? Can I help, asked Dixon, kneeling again at the girl's level. The mother demurred, but Dixon made as though to salvage the egg, clowning for the child. He shrugged, rubbed a bit of the yolk between his fingers. I have a little girl about your age, he told her. She doesn't like eggs either. Everyone laughed politely and he walked away. When they couldn't see him, he put a finger to his nose and sniffed, it was egg, and he tasted it, and it was egg. Broken shell but the world remained whole.

The psychiatrist's office was squeezed between a parking garage and a laundromat. There was no receptionist, just a small waiting room with folding chairs and a television playing infomercials and a sign that said Dr. Nickel will be right with you. And he was, he poked his head out of his office at exactly ten o'clock and said Dixon, nice to meet you and please come in. An electric aerated fountain fussed on his desk throughout their conversation and Dixon wondered if Dr. Nickel turned it off at the end of the day, or left it bubbling overnight to sooth the space and soak it in tranquility.

Let's get the ugly business out of the way, said the psychiatrist, and took Dixon's insurance card. It runs out in three months, said Dixon, how often can I see you until then? First things first, said the psychiatrist, making a blurry photocopy of the card on a historic machine. Your message said schizophrenia? So Dixon told the story of his father, while the psychiatrist slowly peeled an apple and quartered it.

There may have been oblique warning signs, but Father's illness didn't manifest in an overt manner until Dixon was seven years old and so there were scenes of a sane man to recollect, if only a scattered few. A man who read the paper in the morning and participated in a bowling league every Sunday after church, worked construction and voted strictly Republican, changed his own oil. Was there a sturdier picture of staid sanity in all creation? Until he began hearing the voice

from the woodpile? Well so what, it's fine when it's just the woodpile—that's once a day on the way out the door and once a day on the way back in, manageable indefinitely—but that isn't the way things work. Is it? Dixon asked his psychiatrist. It isn't the way things work. Not usually, said Dr. Nickel. Things get worse, don't they? asked Dixon. Usually, without intervention, said Dr. Nickel. Entropy, one of them thought.

And things did get worse, but it was still surprising when Dixon's father jumped in front of the semi-truck. Shattered pelvis, broken back, three weeks in intensive care before he died. Quite shocking at the time, but Dixon later read online that almost half of people with schizophrenia will attempt suicide at some point. His father was a member of the Moose Lodge, wore his hair in a crew-cut, and grilled steaks as the sole culinary pursuit of his life, so if that man could be pushed off the brink then a statistic of almost half seemed, if anything, too modest. Has that been your experience? he asked the psychiatrist. It sounds about right.

On a day-to-day basis, Dixon said, you don't realize how many improbable things you see and hear. I try to smell them. I've read that you might see something that isn't there, and you might smell something that isn't there, but you probably won't see and smell the same thing that isn't there. The more senses involved, the better. But I've had dreams, continued Dixon. Where I saw and smelled and felt and tasted and heard. And thought nothing of it.

You may not need a psychiatrist, you may need a philosopher. I tried, they didn't take my insurance.

The psychiatrist laughed. Well we can talk about it, he said. That's all we can do for now, but it isn't nothing. Far from it. They made an appointment for the next week of which Dr. Nickel made no record, apparently trusting either to his memory or that things would just tend to work out. A nice way to live, thought Dixon.

He walked home. He didn't own a car, so it seemed appropriate that he'd been commissioned by the city paper to write a freelance piece about the metro system. The Gray Line. Five million dollars over budget and three years late. The story itself was also past deadline, but as he told his

editor: this problem isn't going anywhere, it is only becoming bigger with time. Run another feel-good fluff piece about rescue dogs and give me another week, I'm close. But that was two weeks ago.

Five hours until meeting Cassie at the bus stop, so he got to work. He wrote in longhand and whenever he finished he would rent a computer at the print shop and laboriously type it up, double-spaced nice and pretty. Used to be that the paper would take his script and have a secretary transcribe it, a service fallen victim to budget constraints. Like Dixon himself. On staff for a couple of years—his first job out of college—then fired fifteen months ago and sporadically employed on a piece-by-piece basis. The internet, explained his editor. Ad prices. Tight margins. Outrageous insurance premiums. Dixon worked for four hours, and the fifth hour he smoked cigarettes and watched the clock.

Dixon picked up Cassie from the bus stop and she told him about the day. All the kids at school played with her, and her lunch was yummy, and she didn't forget about the bathroom but she didn't need to use it even once. There was neither a bunny nor an ant farm, though a hummingbird feeder did hang from a tree in the recess playground. They walked back to their studio apartment, where Dixon made rice and beans and they played Go Fish. He got out the photographs and spread them on the floor, as he did for a moment every day so Cassie would never forget what her mother had looked like.

We had a good day Laura, said Dixon. Cassie's first day of first grade. Tell mama about your favorite part of the day.

Miss Goldberg has pretty yellow hair.

Miss Goldberg's hair. And I met with the doctor. I think he's a good guy. I had a funny thought. If you're a hypochondriac about your physical health, somebody might say: don't worry, you're just being crazy. But if you're a hypochondriac about your mental health, somebody might say: don't worry, you're not crazy. I told the doctor and he laughed. Cassie is laughing too, is that funny, Cassie?

Yes.

We miss you. Goodnight Laura.

Goodnight mama.

Okay it's your turn to have the bed, get your blankets up there.

I don't mind the floor daddy.

Of course not, the floor is great. I vastly prefer the floor, and you had your turn last night. You get Sundays. I get all the other nights because I'm the adult and I choose the floor. It keeps my back straight.

Am I going to get a curvy back if I sleep on the bed? Like a saxophone?

Like the one we saw on the way to the bus stop?

I don't want a curvy back.

I promise it won't happen.

Before bed, Dixon and Cassie opened the window and traced out constellations. She knew them all by heart, but she asked: daddy, what is that one? That's the little moose, he said and she laughed. No daddy, the little bear, she said. And that one? The big pooper he said and she laughed harder. No, the big dipper, she said. And that one? That is the most beautiful of constellations, he said, my most favorite of them all. What is it, daddy? It's Cassiopeia, he said.

Dixon knew his father heard voices from the woodpile because every evening he observed the man halt on his way up the walk and address the stack. Sometimes calmly, sometimes with fierce violence, and sometimes it would start one way and end another. Dixon was seven, old enough to recognize a significant deviation for what it was. He asked his Aunt Patty—who watched him in the afternoons until his father came home—but she was a timorous woman with an apprehension of her stern older brother even prior to all of this, and she refused to comment.

And so he asked his father, only once because the reaction was a terrible thing. The man was visibly struck with fear, eyes wide like Cassie awakening from nightmare. Do they ask you the question, Dixon? his father asked. No daddy. Dixon now you listen to me, look me in the eyes, do they ask you the question? No daddy. And his father stared off and drummed his fingertips on the kitchen table and didn't have another bite of dinner, and Dixon put himself to bed and listened to his father's fingers rap on the table for hours to come.

His father began to mutter aloud from that point on, maybe to warn Dixon without needing to converse about it. Maybe

so he could pass it off, oh I'm just thinking out loud, oh I'm remembering a show I saw. But nobody questioned him.

It's in the wood but not only there, not just the woodpile, it's in all wood, it's embedded in the very concept of wood, the very word itself, wood, it lives in the utterance and is carried from place to place in that way. It starts there in the wood but don't even worry about that, it's the least of our trouble, it has an endgame inconceivable to us. It starts with me and it ends with dust, the whole world shaken down to the dirt. We're all of a piece, don't you see, what infects one infects all, breaks down the false walls pretending to divide things. Until all is dust. But it starts with me. I have to stop it. It all begins with me and I have to stop it.

Two Santa Clauses on the way here, said Dixon. One Santa, sure, whatever. But two separate Santas in September?

I also saw a Santa on my way in. It's Portland, you know? There is probably some event going on.

Hate to break it to you, doc, but maybe you're schizophrenic too.

It takes one to know one, said Dr. Nickel. And anyway, as one very smart person with that disease once said: there are no schizophrenics, just people with schizophrenia. It doesn't become the definition of a person. Your father, don't think of him as a schizophrenic. He was a man who struggled with a bad disease.

Struggled and lost. And I feel I'm getting worse.

I don't know if your episodes are getting worse or not. I don't even think they're episodes, and I think you should consider moving to a more boring city. But your fear certainly grows worse. It is paralyzing you.

I have no argument with that.

Why now, Dixon? Meaning, why did you come to see me now, and not a year ago, two years ago.

I don't know. Maybe just stress, the Gray Line article keeping me up at night. I feel like I'm running out of time. I'm 24. Prime years for onset. My father was quite old for schizophrenia, he was 40. Does it mean anything? Do I wait sixteen years to get sick?

Don't wait for anything. Live your life. Let's just posit,

with your family history, that you have a ten-fold chance of developing the disease. That's 10%. To compare: in your lifetime, you have a 50% chance of developing cancer. Why not worry about that? Why not worry about heart attacks? Getting hit by a car? Getting audited by the IRS?

My mother died of cancer, said Dixon. Lung. Took two years, was painful. We had a hospital bed moved into the house, and she was doped up on morphine most of the time. She died just before dad got sick. I was a kid. Saw it with my own eyes. Not afraid of it.

Fair enough. But you've got to admit, the IRS? Still scary, said the psychiatrist.

I like you doc, even though you don't take me seriously. Maybe because of that, one of them thought.

Not worried for myself, Dixon continued. I don't worry about much of anything, as a matter of course. Lost my parents to cancer and madness. Lost my wife to a drunk driver. Lost my job to the internet and tight margins. What is left to protect? Only one thing.

You're worried they'll take Cassie, said the psychiatrist.

At least I had my aunt. Cassie has no one.

There is nothing preventive we can do, not really, nothing proven. We can watch for signs. We can talk. We can start medical treatment at the earliest sign of trouble.

Not before? Things can fall apart quickly.

Not a good idea.

The medicine works?

It helps significantly. There are a lot of very functional, professional people with schizophrenia. Lawyers, doctors. Journalists.

You'll be there for me when it happens?

If it happens, I will be there.

Dixon made rice and beans and they played Go Fish.

We had a good day, Laura. I saw the psychiatrist again. That's visit four. Nothing to report there, but in other news I feel like I'm finally getting somewhere on the Gray Line article. Had a phone call today with an insider who might be willing to meet, give me the straight scoop on the condition of anonymity. Maybe the break I'm looking for? And Cassie had

a good day at school.

Can mama really hear us when we tell her about the day?

I don't know, probably not. But I like to imagine she can.

Could we get a TV, daddy? Cassie asked.

Where'd you get that notion? We can't afford a TV, he said, and besides it's just people trying to sell us more stuff that we also can't afford.

I want to see cartoons. I want to see Gerty the Cat.

Gerty the Cat huh. Look here, we don't need a TV. Look at me. Meow meow. Where's my ball of yarn? Where's my stinky wet food? Meow meow I'm Gerty the Cat. What are you laughing at, I'm Gerty the Cat.

You're silly. And you told mama that there is a phone and we don't even have a phone, so I think we should have a TV.

Put away the cards, honey, it's time for bed.

Dixon and Cassie opened the window and traced out constellations. They're silly aren't they, she asked. They don't look like anything. Could I pick any stars and say they look like a duck and call it The Duck?

People were trying to understand the world around them, he said. Nobody knew what a star really was, but spent a lot of time looking at them.

What if I found a circle constellation, like really a perfect round circle, so nice that it couldn't just be an accident?

Wouldn't that be something, he said. What would you call it?

I would name it after you, she said.

You would name it Dixon?

I would name it Daddy.

There are lots of daddies, he said. But she just hugged him and looked up and he saw the green flash in her eyes, felt her ribcage under his hands, heard her giggling and smelled the bubble bath on her skin, and he leaned down and kissed her forehead. And he said, Daddy it is. Let's keep an eye open for it.

Dixon's father was a man named Gary. He married his high school sweetheart. He was taciturn and firm but had a secret love of ice cream that wasn't secret, Dixon knew about the icebox in the garage. After Dixon's mother died, after

they'd wheeled the body out to the hearse and the house sat quiet, Gary brought Dixon out to the garage with two spoons and they finished a pint of mint chocolate chip together in silence.

Gary was never a verbose man, and the majority of words he ever spoke to his son were uttered in the weeks of his decline, pressured complaints of invasion and disturbance. Surveillance through television, chemicals in milk. Worried that he couldn't distinguish whether memories were his own or somebody else's. Thoughts became untethered floating objects in a room that anybody walking through could possess by accident or intent. He was a complete human being swiftly rendered inchoate, fragmentary. Soon his whole life felt unreal, a performance on a stage but not even his own performance. I'm a spectator, he said. They make it say things and it says them. This started with me. I don't know where it ends.

In the hour before Gary jumped in front of the truck, he and Dixon watched the sun set over the Yante River pouring out to the horizon. Gary had taken him on a walk to get out of the house, somewhere they could talk and not be heard. So they stood on the bridge with traffic churning behind them, Dixon playing with a toy soldier, marching it back and forth across the railing, determined not to look at Gary because his father was crying and it was unimaginable. Gary whispered, was there no decency, he asked, no honor? He'd held up his end but even now they follow, even now they threaten his family. What will it take, what will be necessary to protect him? Dixon, look at me. No weapon forged against you will prevail. Dixon, look at me. I will do anything for you. I love you. I love you. And he stepped into the road.

Father saw the end of the world all around him. Dust, dirt, fire. I think about it, I wonder.

What do you wonder?

I wonder if he wasn't crazy, if he was right/

Every person who has ever spent time in the company of a severe psychosis has wondered that same thing. It's a normal response.

I wonder about that. And. I wonder about. Your little

fountain, do you turn it off when you leave, or keep it on?

I guess I leave it on. I don't even notice it anymore so I forget about it does it bother you?

No. But can't stay long. I know I was late but still can't stay long. Lots of work to do, one of them thought or said/

You seem distracted today/

Didn't sleep much last night, trying to finish the article. Tried to call the paper yesterday to get an extension and they wouldn't transfer me. New receptionist doesn't know me thinks I'm somebody else. Getting worried they won't accept it now won't pay me but it isn't finished in fact I have to buy another journal when I leave here today

The article is about a new bus line asked the interrogator/ about Gary?

What

Gray line? A new bus?

No the subway

they're putting in a subway I had no idea/I'm sure you didn't nothing has been written about it nothing publicly available they've drilled out all the

tunnels but it is so deep underground that nobody felt or heard anything it's been in development for decades it's miles down/a subway the man asked again/a subway and he stood to leave/wait for a minute dixon just wait

Martine Fournier Watson

The Box

When I found Diana in the box it seemed as if it had been empty longer than usual, but maybe that was just my imagination. It's not really a box, more like a wall oven lined with blankets, with a door on the outside of the building and one on our side. It reminds me of a pass-through at a high security prison, or a delivery window, which I guess it is. Anyone who brings a baby to us pulls down the outer door and lays the baby inside. They ring a buzzer, and in a minute or two one of us will come down and check the box. In the time it takes us to get there, the deliverer can make a quick getaway like a school kid playing a prank.

It's a system designed around that idea, the idea of being anonymous, but next to the box is a hanging plastic bag of bar-coded bracelets. In case you're unsure, if you think you might want to come back and claim the baby, you can split a pair of them, and we'll fasten one around the baby's ankle. It's adjustable, so in theory your baby can wear that bracelet into adulthood. And if you show up with the matching bar code, you get your baby back, no questions asked. In theory. But no one ever takes them.

It was my turn to go down and check, that day. As always I heard the faintest ticking as I approached, but it faded into the gasping noises she made. Sounding like she was working herself up into a good loud cry, except I opened the door and she must have seen my big ugly smile looking down on her, blocking out the overhead fluorescents. Most of the mad pink went back into her fists and feet, and she blinked up at me her puckered dark eyes. Someone had diapered her up pretty good and put on a little pink T-shirt besides that.

Sometimes we got babies just hours after they were born, you wouldn't believe, umbilicals not even cut proper and that dark sticky meconium stuff oozing out between their legs. Diana was a downright princess next to some of them: cleaned, half dressed, someone's milk still dribbling out the corner of her mouth. I wiped it away with my gloved finger

and picked her up. That's when I saw it: the bar code band she'd been lying on.

I almost ran back with her. I was like a kid who wants to run in the halls at school so she fast-whips her walking legs instead. I handed her off to the doctor on duty—we have a steady rotation of volunteers, it's mandated now, part of their residency—so he could check her out. Proud and smug, like I'd done something great, I also handed him the bracelet. His eyebrows went up a little but he settled them down again quick. Doctors, who are supposed to have seen everything, didn't like to be caught out looking surprised.

He carried Diana and her bracelet away. I went back to the nursery, knowing she'd show up there in a few hours when they'd got through her health tests.

I'd already started thinking of her as mine.

We are a full service clinic and Children's Home. That's the term they came up with, the government I guess, because "orphanage" was too old-fashioned sounding and everything else just brought to mind a mental hospital, or a school for delinquents. Bet they never guessed, when the bill to outlaw abortions went through, there would ever be such a place, let alone at least half a dozen in every major city. But there you have it, and this is where I work.

Lots of people celebrated after the law was changed. Lots others protested, of course, and there was plenty of picketing and even a few bombs left in empty baby boxes. (I hear one ticking every time it's my turn to answer the buzzer, can't help it.) But eventually things mostly settled down. At first there were some really positive results. All those unhappy people who couldn't have babies waiting years and years sometimes just to get one, or else getting fed up waiting and going off to China and bringing home one of their unwanted. Well, suddenly all those waiting people got called up to take a baby, and pretty soon the waiting disappeared. No more hoping and praying for years and then having some regretful birth mother change her mind on you. All the waiting lines just dried up like creeks in summer. You could get your baby fast as you could blink, and no more super-strict screening process, either. No sir.

But then the scales tipped the other way, just what you'd think: too many babies, not enough childless couples. I think it had been so long, people thought real orphanages were over and the only place you'd hear about one was reading that famous *Oliver Twist* story. But foster care, halfway places and all that, in the end that wasn't nearly enough. We still had back-alley abortions, of course, but that was dangerous and just plain priced out for most people. So the babies kept coming and coming, dropping into these boxes like locusts into corn fields, no end in sight to them.

I skipped back to the nursery to wait for Diana. As usual, about half the babies were crying. The government allotted one of us caregivers for every four babies, and we took twelve-hour shifts, so you were either days or nights. Nights were worse. Once you got them sleeping all right they'd be a breeze but there was always new ones coming in, awake and crying for you, having no idea the difference between sun and moon and howling like wolves. Except they didn't sound like wolves, more like lambs.

On nights we had to keep the room as dark as possible, so the newcomers could adjust their circadian rhythms, and diaper changes and temperature-taking and all that was done with a red emergency lantern. Something about holding the little lost babies in the night made you lose hope—you'd look out at the big cold moon, or the half-lit office buildings tilting away into nothing, and you'd think about the stretch of their lives heading off that same way into the darkness. Daytime was better, even if it was busier. Maybe because it was busier.

Over time they'd get themselves on the same schedule somehow, little buggers, like they say women living together all end up with the same menstrual cycle. You'd have all four of 'em crying to eat at once and only one of you to give their bottles. We weren't supposed to feed them more than one at a time, we were supposed to cradle each one by itself like it was the only baby in the world, but we'd do it anyhow. One on each arm and sometimes propping a bottle into the mouth of a third who lay on his back in his metal crib.

Their crying was like a storm, the way they'd all be howling and eventually drop out of it one by one until that layer of sky

had passed, and we were down to those last few drops on the roof, little hiccups into the silence. That was what we did; we were always trying to work our way down to the silence.

Since the cutbacks last year we didn't have pacifiers anymore, so most of them found their thumbs pretty quick. The ones who didn't just toughed it out, mainly, but sometimes if a little one didn't know where his own thumb was, we'd take our pinky finger and slip it into his strange gummy mouth and let him suck on that. I'll tell you a secret. We weren't allowed to handle them without gloves on, for sanitary reasons. So we had these eggshell gloves that made our hands sweat and left a powdery residue on our palms and between our fingers. Our hands always smelled a little of sweating rubber, even when we weren't wearing the gloves. But it didn't seem right to me that the babies would never be touched by bare hands at all. So I used to take my gloves off, often, and stroke their faces. And I'd even put my bare pinky into their mouths and that was such a feeling. If you've never done that you have no idea how strong a baby sucks, how insistent they are. I'd feel the ridges on the roof of a mouth press into the pad of my upturned finger, and I was always surprised when the baby released me that I couldn't see any ridge marks imprinted on my skin.

We have them in our room for two years, and then they move to the toddler room where they master things like spooning their own food and using a potty. I'll see my babies, sometimes, walking by the doorway out in the hall, all in a perfect line as proper as you please, like they never threw a carrot stick at anyone or fell down to the mercy of the hard floor screaming their rage. I'll see them, two and three and four years old, and think already how they've grown, how much closer they got to being adults when I wasn't tending them. When I see them shuffle along, pretty much in unison except for the odd one turning his head this way and that, or hitching up the back of his pants making a funny out-of-place gait, it's like looking through the doorway into their future—the tight-fitting jobs they'll one day have, which could remind them of this tight box that shaped them, even though they may not remember me.

That day when I found Diana, the girls could tell right away something was up when I went back to the room. I picked up one of my crying babies and hid my face.

“Why you look like that?” Marianne accused. “You find a bar of gold in there, something, instead of a baby?”

I couldn’t help grinning, even though Carol, she disapproved of me. She didn’t think it was a happy occasion when a baby was left on our doorstep. Well, and she was right about that.

“Something better,” I told them. “I found a bracelet.”

They were all impressed. There were low whistles and whispers. Even the girls who wanted to act nonchalant were glancing up from the babies they rolled and diapered, wondering.

“I’m naming her Diana. She’s beautiful.”

I mixed up bottles for my bunch who were all going to be hungry soon, and tapped my rubber sole against the linoleum.

You may be wondering how I came to name her Diana. Our rule was, whoever found the baby in the box was responsible for naming, and we went alphabetically, like they do for tropical storms. So I just had to pick a name that began with whatever letter we were on, and then they all got the same last name: Doe. When they got to be eighteen they could go ahead and change that but they mostly didn’t, I hear, because what other name would they choose? Doe got to be a popular name, even more than Smith. They were like clansmen, all these abandoned, as if they’d all come from the same place.

I guess Doe was the name they used to use, back before the mandatory dental and DNA registry came in, if they found a dead body with no identification. There is no such thing as dying unidentified, anymore. John or Jane Doe, those were the names. When we’re on the J names we never use John or Jane. It’s considered bad luck.

I don’t have any of my own, in case you’re wondering. You might want to know why, with all these babies up for grabs, I don’t just help myself. There are a few different reasons. I’m not married, so I’d have to figure out care for my baby when I’m not home, if I had one. I could bring the baby to my work, of course, but then it would be living just as bad as all these poor abandoned and I wouldn’t like that. I don’t make much money doing this job, that’s another thing. And to be honest,

until I saw Diana, none of them ever really appealed to me that way.

But the only reason that matters is the fact I once used a baby box myself. Not here, it was far from here, but it has always made me feel strange. I had a good reason, at the time, so no regrets. But part of me has always sort of thought I gave away my chance with that little one, and maybe I wasn't supposed to get a second. Give a child up like that, maybe you don't deserve another chance, I'm thinking.

When they finally brought Diana in my arms were full and one of the other girls went to take her. But she brought her right over to me so I could see her face peering out of her swaddler, just like we all agreed she was going to be mine. I had four already, but Tina said she could take Wendy over for me, and that would make a space for Diana. In another two months our oldest crew would be moving into the toddler room and some of our cribs would be empty.

Right away I could see my Diana was a bright one. She was alert, looking around at us and all the other babies, studying on them. She cried some like any baby but mostly stayed quiet so she could do her watching. The doctors said she was about one month when we got her, so she was already starting to take notice. She could smile, even. I'd swear it wasn't just gas. She would gaze up at me and take my own smile, like she could thief without using her hands.

We have a mixed bag of babies, some real quick and smart, others more slow and plodding, but we do have more kids with problems than you'd find in the general population. I hate to say but we probably get quite a few that come from incest, so we get more than our share of mental retardation, cleft palate and things of that nature. We all, those of us who work in the Children's Homes, have extra training in special feeding techniques, and classes to help us prepare for the slow development. We see a lot of kids here with Down Syndrome, too. Some people, when they saw they'd given birth to a kid like that, just gave them up because they figured they didn't want that sort of child. Some people had a way of thinking a child like that couldn't belong to them, and they told themselves that lie so strong it came out like truth, and it wasn't hard to

give away a wrong child, someone whose face was small and flat and just looked to them like a mistake.

None of it really matters anyway because they were given up to us, so no one cares how fast they learn. Plus mostly the Down's kids tend to take life in stride; they're content to sit on the floor and stare out at whatever passes. They don't fuss much or get upset when other kids get things first, or take their toys from them. So all in all I'd say in a queer way they make things easier on us.

Diana was far and away the smartest, and I'm not saying that just because I wanted her to be. Everyone knew it. She could sit on her own when she was only five months, and walk at only ten, which here in the Home, where the kids spend too much time in their cribs, is almost unheard of. She studied every toy she could get her hands on: stacking rings, shape sorters, the big wood alphabet puzzle. But what really convinced me of her smarts was just this look in her eye. When she was still real small I held her and gave her her bottle, and while her tongue pulled on it she stared in my eyes a kind of thank you, like she knew what to say but didn't have the words yet. Most kids the older they got the less they looked at you during bottle time, the more they looked round at the world, and when they could they reached up and took the bottle with their own hands. You could put them down with it, in the crib, and run to the bathroom or pick up the next baby in line. Diana knew she didn't want that. She never stopped looking at me that thank you, and also questions about me, about the world, I had this feeling she'd have liked to ask. She always reached up and touched my face; she wasn't interested in grabbing the bottle. She was putting all her feeling and all her questions into me through her hand, very light and gentle, and I was looking all my answers back into her with my eyes, just like that.

One day when Diana was about six months old we were looking at each other in just that way, when Marianne came and whispered in my ear, low and mean, "You just love her so much because of that bracelet. You think that makes her special, because none of us ever saw one of them wearing that before. And you only love her because you know you can't ever have her. Not like that."

As if I didn't know. "I love all of them," I told her loftily, and that was true as well.

Afterward I took the train home like always. There's this empty field it passes on the way into town, which slices up between two long stretches of storefront. I can never figure out why no one's invested there yet, but I'm glad they haven't because in spring time I look forward to it every day. I watch the way it shifts slowly into green, and then one morning when it gets warm enough, I'll see it. In last night's darkness a whole crop of dandelions dotted the whole thing over, and there they are, uneven like constellations of stars, confused, who think the world is in endless night.

We weren't allowed to photograph our babies, so I practiced seeing Diana's face when I closed my eyes. As she got older and I could better make out her features—the round brown eyes, the curl to her hair, the set of her mouth when she concentrated—I tried to draw pictures of her, in my spare time at home. I don't know what the Children's Home officials would have said about that, but they didn't need to worry about me coming up with a likeness. It was a thing I could do over and over and never get right, but I liked trying. I could spend hours drawing, and over the months I piled up plenty of them, not even one of them right. I kept them in the deep drawer of my night table. After spending the day with her I would switch on my bedside lamp and look at them all in the circular light, and then I could see what the trouble was. I knew how to draw a face, but a baby face was something I couldn't quite conjure. Their features were soft and fuzzy, whereas mine were dark and angled, the sharp corners of a nose set too square into her cheeks, the hatched outline of her mouth, the thick black eyebrows. Eventually I figured out the best parts of all my pencil drawings were the places I accidentally smudged with the side of my hand. Any place her jaw line blurred or her nose had a smear of smoke on the end of it, only those places looked like the real Diana to me. When I tried to draw the folds of her neck or her smile, my lines just came out like wrinkles and it looked like the face of a little old woman, over and over as I flipped through them, this old bald woman was grimacing again and again.

Maybe I drew Diana because I worried for her. She was always taking sick. First it was a whole mess of ear infections, one after the other, and those changed her. She screamed all the time, cried and threw herself around like a bucking horse. At first I thought maybe she'd just reached that stage, with the tantrums and fits. Then she ran feverish and started pulling on her ear like crazy, like there was something buried in there she needed to rip out before it swelled and burst her. The policy was no antibiotics the first few times; the doctors didn't want them overused, and except for Tylenol she had to suffer through. She couldn't sleep, just cried and cried, pushed her own ear till it was angry and red on the outside as it must have felt inside her. The infections kept on coming, so they relented some and let her have amoxicillin to clear them up.

I came to hate her for crying so much. I'm sorry to say. I used to hold her, rocking her through it, you know, and she would look up at me out of her pain-squinted eyes, her pink face damp with it, like she wanted to know why I didn't fix her. And her hollering was so bad and constant it started to fill my head, too, took root inside me until I was sore as well, like I was the sick one.

And then the infections wound their course and she seemed to get better. Once she could hear properly again she was fast picking up words, just like she'd been fast at everything else. She said "Go-go" first. It was as close to Jojo as she could get, which was what all the girls called me, short for Joanne.

All the while I was waiting on Diana's mother, knowing one of these days she'd come and claim what she'd left, like a woman with a coat check ticket. It happened from time to time, even without the bracelets. Sometimes a mother who left her baby inside our box, she would come back. She might look ashamed, or indignant, or just plain stunned, like she woke up to a mistake she'd made while sleepwalking.

She'd come in at the front desk entrance, opposite side of the building from where she'd left her baby, and just straighten her spine and ask what happens if she's changed her mind. Sometimes it took a little gentling and prying on the part of the office girl, to get her to come out and say it. But when

she did we'd let her right on in to have her pick. She knew when the baby was left, and whether it was a boy or girl, so we'd bring her straightaway to the right room. Of course we didn't get babies every day here, so we'd know exactly who she was looking for, but for some reason we never admitted that. We let her hunt. We had ourselves a bit of a guessing game. The mother would go shopping, down between the rows of cribs as if they were grocery store aisles, looking at all the faces like she was looking into little puddles, hoping to see herself reflected. She would lift the babies out one at a time and sniff the tops of their heads like trying to sniff out a ripe cantaloupe. That always did the trick. If there was no birthmark to go by or flaming red hair or hooked nose, the smell of them worked every time. That look, of a mother getting the right smell and pulling her baby back into her, that gave me a chest bubble. It didn't even matter if she had the right one—she took home the one that she chose.

That was pretty much it. Papers were filled out and signed, and we'd say goodbye to our little child and say a prayer the house it was going to would be better than ours.

Still, we had good times together. I waited on Diana's mama every day, waited for her to come and be the end of them. When me and the girls were mostly fed up we'd take the babies down the hall for dance time, put on the radio and swirl them around the room. They loved that. Most of them would stop right crying as soon as they felt the swoop of us moving them down and around, lifting our arms up and arcing them over our heads. The older ones would stand on their own all around us and bop up and down, bending their little bowed legs to the music, heads going like the toadstools you have to whack with a big rubber mallet in that old arcade game.

And there were also the quiet times. Diana staying awake into the evening while my other three were sleeping, sitting in my lap while I turned the bright brushed pages of a picture book for her. I pointed at things and named them so she could repeat the new words back to me, with all their closing consonants dropped off from the ends like ash.

Then sickness came and found her again. We'd been playing a game of hide-and-seek with it all this time, only

we didn't know we were hiding. At first she caught a cold in her chest, and she was coughing and dribbling, bending over her wood puzzles with her mouth open tasting the stale air. She was tired and cranky, but at least she wasn't crying. I waited for the cold to trigger another ear infection. Instead, I saw her one morning hitching her head up, trying to breathe. When I checked her nail beds they'd all turned blue as little wildflowers. So I rang for the doctor on call to come up and he sent for an ambulance that took her to the hospital two miles away. She didn't come back from there.

Eventually the news blew over to us why—she had sepsis, following pneumonia, and her organs were closing down. I went to see her, took the bus after my night shift one early morning. She was registered under Diana Doe so they knew I wasn't family, but they could guess what I was to her so they let me in. Otherwise she would have been all alone, all the time.

They'd taped the little white ventilator to her face, but I sat beside her and touched the untaped parts of her cheek. She seemed to be sleeping, but I spoke as if she would hear me.

"Baby girl," I said firm. "You have to hold on. You have a mama out there somewhere coming for you. I know you always thought I was your mama, but I'm here to tell you now that isn't so." I pressed her hand. "She did leave you with me, she asked me to take care of you, but only until she could come back and get you. So you need to hold on tight to the world, or you won't get the chance to meet her."

I told her and told her, but in the end she didn't hold on tight. Maybe she couldn't.

I know this seems like a really sad story, Diana's story, but for me it's always been the joyful parts that stood out. That's why I'm telling it.

On my train ride back home I sat on the eastern side to be sure and see the dandelions. They had all turned white, glowed in the horizoned sun, and they all had a small darkness at their centre like a thousand eyes. At home I opened my night table drawer, lifted out the pile of baby drawings I'd made and set them on the bed. Once the drawer had been emptied I saw it at the bottom, a little white surprise in a

ring, as if I'd forgotten. And it dawned on me what a liar I had become. I told you right at the beginning that I'd never seen a baby wearing the bracelet before Diana. But I did. I saw one on my own, before I closed the door on him.

I like to think instead about Diana's bracelet, and the mother who is still out there, and how she is coming for her forever.

Abby Sinnott

Hands

“As in this continuing process of consuming and being consumed, nothing endures.” — Sir Thomas Browne

At first, the sight of his hands on her body terrified her. Chefs’ hands: skin raw, busted up and scarred from scalding pans and quick knives. Blunt fingers with dirty nails no matter how short they were cut. You can tell a lot, no you can tell *everything* about a man from his hands. That’s what her mother always used to say.

Though like the chef’s cheeks with three-day stubble that grew in a silver swirl scratching against the inside of her thighs, she grew to love his hands. She grew to love his hands because she quickly learned what they could do. Sitting on the cracked linoleum counter in her own ill-equipped kitchen, tilting a glass of wine to her hungry mouth, she watched him chop in a blur and sauté and mix.

The chef was always feeding her. He pinched the skin of her waist between thumb and index finger, like a pig before her slaughter. “I need to fatten you up some,” he liked to say.

Pork chops slathered in golden gravy. Goose confit with crisp greasy skin. Pears poached in red wine. Rhubarb pie with a crisscross top. Butter, butter, butter. Champagne that tickled her throat. Violet onion jam. Slabs of steak with salt and pepper. Chocolate fondant that bled from the heart.

And of course, his thick, smooth cock. She’d take it in her mouth, a bit too roughly at first until she found her rhythm. When he wanted something else, he’d yank her away by the roots of her hair, pushing her down, her chin drilling into the wooden floorboards.

Though he fed her more than sex and food and wine: bullshit about who he was and where he was from and what he wanted and if he loved his wife. She wanted to believe that his wife loved him as little, if not less, than he claimed to love her. “My wife’s the owner of the restaurant,” he said. “That’s how we met. Well, one of the ways we met. We’re more

business partners than anything else. Trust me.”

But she quickly learned that everything—inside and outside the kitchen—was one of his magnificent creations. He had a calm, persuasive voice, yet he couldn’t keep track of the lies he’d told her and more than once she’d stop eating and say, “Wait a minute, I thought you said . . .” One day he grew up in Boston’s North End on pizza and meatballs and the next he was describing white Christmases as a boy in Colorado. His mother had died years ago and he sent her money each month. He couldn’t stand being in the same room with his wife, yet didn’t he go home to her every night?

She had first seen him at the farmer’s market on Sunday morning. It was a hot, windless day. She wore her bikini under her shorts and T-shirt, planning to ride her bike to Baker Beach afterwards. She perused the stalls, taking full advantage of the free samples. She was searching for a hunk of gooey French cheese she’d ripen in the sun and a freshly baked baguette, which she’d break in half in order to shove into her backpack.

She noticed how tall and skinny he was, and the slight stoop in his back from all the time he spent hunched over a hot stove. His sleeves were rolled up above his elbows, revealing arms colored by tattoos. Later, she would discover that his whole torso and back were camouflaged in wild pictures. As he slept, she inspected them like a map.

At the market, he fondled a deformed looking heirloom tomato as if it was the most beautiful thing on earth before biting into it and devouring it whole, like an apple. She zoned in on the ring finger of his left hand, as her eye was trained to do when she noticed an attractive man. He wasn’t wearing a wedding band. Later, when she asked the chef why he didn’t wear a ring, he said by way of explanation, “I’ve never had a job that didn’t require me to roll up my sleeves.”

Now, she sat at her wobbly kitchen table waiting, drinking a Belgium beer with a slice of orange shoved into the bottle’s neck, a trick he had taught her. Wednesdays were special. During the three unaccountable hours he had between lunch and dinner prep, he’d race across town to be with her. Every minute together was pressurized. It was like having a giant egg timer ticking above their heads. Often, particularly in

bed, she begged him to slow down.

She was sitting in the kitchen because the mousetraps in the living room were full. For years she had listened to the mice scurrying behind the walls at night, but could never bring herself to get rid of them, until the chef came along and set traps up around her apartment. She couldn't bear to touch, let alone look, at the traps; the way their little bodies contorted into unnatural shapes. The chef on the other hand wasn't fazed a bit. "Maybe I should experiment with a new protein," he joked, waving the trap at her, "mouse à la orange."

Finally, after three beers, the chef stomped into the kitchen, cradling two brown paper bags full of groceries, which he gingerly lowered onto the countertops. Her stomach growled loudly enough so that he said, with a trace of annoyance, "It's for the restaurant. I had to do some last minute shopping. We're booked solid for dinner."

A respected critic had recently given the restaurant a very favorable review. It was just one block of copy, but it had done wonders for the business. She had torn the review from the newspaper, folded it into small squares and slipped it inside her wallet. The critic called the chef's food "unexpectedly sensuous." She would never say as much, though she couldn't help but think she had something to do with it.

"Well, you could have called . . . I've been sitting here for hours, getting drunk by myself. And by the way, there are little monsters waiting for you in the living room."

"Listen, every second I'm not at the restaurant, I spend with you. I got here as fast as I could. Trust me, if I could just disappear . . ." He stared distractedly at his watch. "Forty-five, fifty minutes at the most."

Fingertips stinking of garlic roamed her face and yanked at the corners of her mouth. The taste and temperature of his tongue. His hard chest—smelling something like bleach and grease and sweat. The clink of her silver locket swaying from her neck every time he flipped her body. The smooth rhythm of him moving in and out of her, his forearms resting upon her slender, sun-kissed back.

Afterwards, as the chef showered, she slid out of bed, lit one of his cigarettes on the stove and stood smoking by the dirty east-facing window. Across the street, the scaffolding

and small dark men in bright white suits and caps had finally disappeared. They had chosen a cheery yellow color, light blue trim. She tried and tried but couldn't remember the color the house had been before. For some reason, this agitated her. The sky was clear, not even a trace of fog to burn. She should have felt optimistic. The chef called out for her from the bedroom. She dropped her cigarette into the sink where it extinguished with a sizzle.

He was sitting up in bed, systematically gnawing at his cuticles, as he often did after sex. He spat the dead skin onto the duvet.

"Do you love me?" she asked him, an urgency straining her voice. He closed his eyes and yawned. "I could feast on you until the end of time."

Hundreds of times she imagined going to the chef's restaurant. Now she was doing it for real. The restaurant was by the waterfront, tucked down an alleyway with no view of the Bay. It was in a part of the city she barely went to, mostly because the restaurants and bars were not her crowd: high-strung high-tech millionaires under thirty who worked in the nearby high rises. What she loved about the chef was that unlike these men, he had nothing to prove. He was unapologetically raw, almost disgustingly so, a quality most would find repellant. It was why she had not wanted to ask him too many questions, at least in the beginning.

She took the 43 Bus, stinking of fried chicken and big Maes, all the way down Market Street. As she rode the bus, she rested her head on the cold window, gazing at her reflection through the clouds of her hot breath. Every time the bus lurched or drove over a bump, her head knocked uncomfortably against the glass, but she kept it there the entire ride.

The bus reached the end of its route. She stayed in her seat, letting the other passengers get off first, considering turning around with the driver and riding all the way back home. But then she caught a glimpse of herself in the darkened window and remembered how much effort she had put into getting ready. She had even blown dried her hair, put on makeup and a worn a dress that revealed her muscular, tanned sternum.

She had memorized the restaurant's address, repeating it

like a mantra as she rode the bus. Though now everything seemed unreal and not to be trusted, even the bridge's lights twinkling on the Bay's darkened surface. She asked a middle-aged couple, walking arm in arm, if they knew where the restaurant was. They laughed, a bit pretentiously, saying that they had just come from there.

"You're in for a real treat," the man said, winking at her.

"To die for . . ." the woman added.

She felt her face drop and scurried away without saying thank you. She walked south two blocks and turned down a small alleyway that smelt of piss. The menu was taped up in the window; she recognized the chef's taste right away. Red meats and thick sauces and buttery starches. She loitered outside, watching the world on the other side of the glass. A Tuesday night, she hadn't expected it to be so crowded. It was a romantic restaurant, distinctly feminine with its candlelight and little vases of carefully arranged flowers on each table. She had imagined something different; a cold, masculine industrial space—all sharp edges and glass.

Even more than the chef, she was desperate to catch a glimpse of the wife: a woman from a wealthy family in L.A. who the chef described as only capable of eating off white bone china.

"So it's her money you like?"

"In the beginning . . . and hopefully more so in the end."

The door of the restaurant swung open and out tumbled the warm smells of good food and lively conversation. A waiter in black pants and a black collared shirt came out, stepping to the side of the building, out of view from the customers. He pulled a cigarette from behind his ear and glanced at her.

"You waiting for a table? One of mine's almost done, just finishing up their coffee now." He took a drag of his cigarette and added, "Do I know you? You look familiar."

She hadn't thought to bring a shawl or sweater. It was colder in this part of the city because of the winds from the Bay. Her bare legs were freezing and yet suddenly she broke into a sweat. There would be little circles in her dress under her arms and the patch of hair between her legs would be damp and smelling faintly of vinegar and soap.

"I know, I waited on you before, right?" the waiter said,

taking a step closer to see her better in the light. He was doing a very bad job of picking her up.

What she would have liked to say is, “The food you serve every night, the food all those people pay for, the only reason you have a job . . . Well, let me tell you, that food is for me. It’s served to me, sometimes in bed, by the chef himself.”

Instead she said defensively, “I know the owner. I was just in the neighborhood and wanted to stop in to say hello, but I hadn’t thought it would be so busy . . .”

“Meredith? Tonight’s her night off.”

“No, the chef.”

“Oh, it’s his night off too. But they’ll be back tomorrow. They usually come in around ten. I’ll tell him you stopped by.”

As the days passed without any sign of the chef, her anger expanded and expanded, like the bread dough he kneaded with his knuckles and rolled into a greased bowl he covered with a checkered dishtowel and left on her kitchen table. Rising and swelling until he punched it down and baked it in the oven. She refused to leave her apartment because she feared she’d miss him if he came, for certainly he would come. Her cupboards and refrigerator quickly went bare. The traps were full.

She searched her cupboards and refrigerator, finding a frozen pizza buried under a large bag of ice she had once bought for making margaritas. She burned the roof of her mouth on the pizza’s hot bubbling cheese—a kind of salty plastic, she decided—though scarfed it down away. It was the act of putting something into her jilted mouth that comforted her.

The chef didn’t have a cell phone, which at first she had found charming and a testament to his disregard for his wife. Now it was the most selfish, infuriating thing in the world. She called the restaurant, leaving message after message for the chef with the host, whose friendly tone quickly cooled after her third call.

More than once a day, she stood under the hot shower until her skin turned marbled pink. She stared down at her naked body. Her stomach was now swollen from all the rich food, her breasts bigger. How could she be so full and feel so empty? As she watched the water swirl down the drain, she remembered

what the chef had done to her with his hands. She opened her legs and tried doing it herself, but to her surprise, she wasn't able to enter her body in that way, with a kind of skilled, brute force. He hadn't been afraid, she realized now, of going too far, of damaging her.

By the fourth day, the only food left was a rotten heirloom tomato the chef had placed lovingly on her windowsill to ripen. She sat at the kitchen table with a glass of cloudy tap water, watching the fruit flies swarm around the tomato. Her stomach screamed and ached in protest. Overcome with exhaustion, she dropped her head on the table, pressing her cheek against the rough wood, suddenly aware of the old breadcrumbs and salt crystals scattered on the surface. She closed her eyes and realized there was just one thing left to do: go back to the restaurant.

Rain pinged against the windows like arrows. The cabbie making small talk all the way. She closed her eyes and remained silent, searching for comfort in the beating of her heart and whoosh of her blood.

She paid the driver and as she stepped out of the cab, she paused, considering ducking back inside the cab's black warmth and asking to be taken home. But then through the window, she caught a glimpse of who could only be the chef's wife: a woman in white with a long swan neck that glowed in the candlelight.

"Name?" the host asked.

She recognized his voice immediately. Midwest, Chicago by way of Ohio, she'd guess.

"I don't have one," she said primly, trying to disguise her own voice. She stared him squarely in the eye as if daring him to refuse her.

"It's Friday night. As you can see, we're fully booked."

"Well, that's a good sign, isn't it?" She leaned across the podium and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "It's just an online site, but we get over ten thousand visitors a day. We're not supposed to give you a head's up, but we want to support the new places, the little guys. A review can make or break a business. Hopefully the chef will live up to his reputation . . ."

She ordered an expensive bottle of Syrah from the Russian

River and one of everything on the menu, because that's what she imagined restaurant critics did. The waitress placed each dish in front of her with precision, glancing up at the host, who hadn't taken his eyes from her table, for approval. As the plates mounted, she was slowly gaining the attention of the diners around her. Surprisingly, the profusion of smells and food, swimming in muddy sauces and orange grease, repulsed her. She thought of the block of words hidden inside her wallet—*unexpectedly sensuous*—but when she looked at the food, all she saw was betrayal.

Much more appealing than the food was the waitress' perky tits and the way her black polyester pants stretched across the curve of her ass as she walked away. She was sure the chef was fucking her. "Is everything okay?" the waitress asked, smiling hesitantly and refilling her glass. "You've barely made a dent . . ."

She wanted to say: *Does he strangle you with his cock, forcing it so far down your throat you can't breathe? Does he shove his entire hand inside of you as if stuffing a Thanksgiving turkey?* But instead she said, "It's so beautiful, I'm afraid to eat it. I'm just trying to take everything in, to understand the chef's choices. I'm sure he's very busy, but I'd love to talk to him . . . and the owner . . ."

"Of course," the waitress said. "I'll see if they're available."

She filled her glass with wine and downed it, smiling brightly at the couple sitting next to her who had been watching her curiously and talking in whispers. Her face began to burn, as it always did when she drank too much. She knew what she wanted to say to the chef and his wife, but would she have the nerve?

And then they appeared through a swinging wooden door at the back of the restaurant. The chef followed closely behind his wife, just as she had expected. She couldn't help but think how good he looked in his starched white uniform, even though the front of his apron was stained with blood. Her entire body shook; she placed her wine glass on the table and sat on her hands.

The chef didn't see her until it was too late to turn around. When he was a few feet from her table, she made eye contact and smiled sheepishly. The color drained from his face, he

looked as though he might vomit. He stared down at his shoelaces and began gnawing on his fingernails.

The wife, who was much less attractive close up, said, “Thank you for coming. We hope everything is delicious?” She glanced at the chef, waiting for him to say something charming, but he still had his head bowed. “When can we expect to see the review?”

“Well . . .” She slid her hands out from beneath her thighs, took a deep breath, lifted her napkin and grabbed the mouse by the tail. It had taken all her nerve to ferry one of the dead little bodies from home. She dangled it in front of her. “I found this guy on the floor, by my chair. It ruined my appetite, to say the least.”

A wave of gasps rippled through the dining room and then it became very quiet; everyone stopped talking and eating. The wife gasped and stepped backwards to the chef, who put his arms around her protectively.

“Luckily health and safety weren’t doing an inspection, but I advise you to take care of it right away. A problem like this could ruin your business.”

“I don’t know what to say except sorry,” the wife said, her face flushed with embarrassment. “I hope this won’t influence your review. We had no idea . . .”

“Well, sometimes we miss what’s going on right beneath our noses.” The chef coughed and gave her a murderous stare. “I’ll have to talk to my editor. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. I’ll have to figure out how to handle it . . .”

She dropped the mouse onto the table, finished her wine and grabbed her purse. Before walking through the door, she turned around to smile and bow at the chef, who stood alone in the middle of the room, clutching his hands to his sides.

Kim Catanzarite

At the Light on 17 and King

The day we meet, I'm passing through the outer limits of the city, late for work as usual and peeved when I have to stop short at the light on 17 and King. I've gotten a ticket for sliding through a yellow-red in this very spot and I don't have time to check for cops, so I hit the brakes with a chirp and come to a full stop.

He's standing there, like a person who wants to cross the street, wearing a sign strung up with twine and hanging from his neck—HOMELESS written in big black letters. He's thin as a sapling, sandy-haired, with dreary slumped shoulders. In his twenties, maybe, though his demeanor is neither young nor old but something blurred and in between. Seeing him makes me wonder how such a young man (surprisingly young, really) gets to this point—what are the steps that brought him to this place?

Our eyes meet, just a flicker of a connection, but it throws me—like he sees me too clearly. A second later, without thinking, I reach for my purse, for the personnel badge inside. It's not only an I.D. but the key to raise the parking lot's mechanical blockade—I'm fifteen to twenty minutes late and will need it to get into the lot—but the homeless man doesn't know what I'm reaching for. And in the short time it takes me to pull my purse into my lap, he's inches from my window begging with sadder eyes than my dog, just like my dog, in that same eager, tail-wagging way.

The light is still red. Before I open my wallet, I check the locks—they're down—then wonder how much to give. Forget the twenty, but ten maybe? Or just a dollar? Yeah. I open the window the width of a mail slot and pass the bill through, mouthing the words "Take it, take it." He does. The light changes and I hit the gas.

By the time I find a parking space and hustle across to the sidewalk in my new leather heels—black, shiny, expensive—I'm kicking myself. A dollar? What was I thinking? A ten would get him breakfast *and* lunch if he knows where to go.

But a dollar? He's not exactly a Salvation Army bucket that accumulates over time! I tell myself he probably found my stupidity amusing—but there'd been no smile on his face, no smirk even, just that blurred, momentary eager expression of hope. I decide then that if I see him on the drive home, I'll make it up to him. I'll give him the twenty . . . I'll open the window wide enough to tell him to take care.

The day's mail sits in a basket next to the telephone. John has beaten me home as usual, picked up Petey at day care, and dinner's bubbling on the stovetop—beef stew again, but how can I complain? He's Super Dad. I listen to my boys (one four-year-old, one forty) yammering and giggling at whatever game they're playing with Moose, our boxer, in the room down the hall. I flip through the mail: a few bills, an offer for yet another credit card, and a Save-the-Whales flier. Lots of people feel good about saving whales, but what about saving men who wear signs? I remind myself that I wanted to go to the shelter when we decided to get a dog but John insisted on getting a pure bred—not that I don't love Moose, and not that people are comparable to dogs, but, well . . . John walks in as I sigh and toss the flier into the pail.

“Donald just called,” he says. “He's coming tomorrow to install the sound system.”

“Oh good,” I say without much enthusiasm. There's nothing wrong with the old stereo we've been using. It was state-of-the-art only five years ago and works perfectly. But we want the latest, smartest system, cutting-edge and expensive, a status symbol for the living room.

“What's wrong?” John asks. “Bad day at work?”

“Sort of, I guess. I mean, I hope we're not teaching Petey the wrong values.”

“Values?”

“With all this stuff . . .” I gesture to the stainless steel commercial-style range, the Sub Zero fridge—we renovated the kitchen last year—I also point to Moose's new red bowl, but I realize that's a stretch.

“Because we're getting a sound system?”

“It's going to cost more than several months rent in an apartment around here.”

“And?” John says, giving me a chance to explain myself before he lets loose his burgeoning annoyance.

“Some people in this country don’t even have a place to live.”

He eyes me suspiciously. “That’s true.”

“And isn’t that awful?”

“For them, whoever they are, I’m sure it is. What’s wrong with you?”

“I just feel so spoiled sometimes,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck.

“Oh, okay, so you don’t work hard enough for your money? Cause I know I do, and I’m not going to feel guilty when I want to buy something.”

I feel bad then, for putting a damper on his excitement about the new electronics—he’s wanted the thing since they first came out with it. “I’m sorry,” I say, “maybe I’m just hungry.”

“Hungry?” he says. “How dare you, when some people don’t have anything to eat.”

A couple of weeks later, I see him again, the homeless man, but not on the corner of 17 and King. He’s fast-walking past the bus depot, looking better, more like a regular person with a destination to get to. There’s no sign across his chest this time, though the dirt on his clothing pretty much spells out his situation. I nearly drive into the adjacent lane trying to decide whether the dark splotches on his sleeve are blood or mud.

I’m on my way to the mall. John took Petey to the park and I need to buy some new outfits for work. A few of my blazers have grown holes here and there, and I’m plain sick of the skirts. The mall’s lot crowds with the automobiles of people who rose early for the occasion, so I have to park in the boonies and walk through an alley of glistening SUVs, Mercedes, the occasional Hum-V. As I approach, people emerge from tinted doors carrying shopping bags weighted with the day’s purchases—bags bulging with *stuff*, most of it no doubt frivolous—and once inside, I can’t decide on a store to stop into.

I am suffering some kind of disconnect. Call it empathy, call it disgust. I’m transfixed by the shoppers with their

fashionable jeans and cardigans, their shiny boots and pointy-toed heels, the people with their done-up hair and manicured nails and dollar signs twinkling in their eyes. They're steering from one register to the next, sucked into sales like zombies mesmerized by sweaters and slippers, earmuffs, purses, and beauty products. And I want no part of it.

Not when there's a young man not far from the bus depot who wears the same outfit every day, passing through life without a decent coat and hat, wearing some bug-infested sneakers he found or stole or had thrown at him when he ventured into the wrong place. He's the only one I've seen today who could really use an Adirondack sweater and outerwear that protects from the hypothermia caused by exposure to rain and snow. The only one who needs hiking boots of genuine leather with the sheep-fur interior to keep his feet warm. The sad thing is, if he ever wanted to shop, security would surely stop him at the door.

A prepubescent girl cuts in front of me on her way to a kiosk that sells bath products, and I snarl as she reaches for lip gloss. My stomach is a basket of snakes. It's plain to me something needs to be done, that I must *do* something. A young man out there—a person just like me or my son or my husband, only unluckier—needs a hand and I refuse to stand by with the rest of this world of plenty and watch spoiled children purchase overpriced *lip shiner* when he doesn't have the luxury of dry socks.

I keep an assortment of bills in my wallet, and every morning I approach the stoplight on 17 and King, hoping to find the homeless man standing guard at his corner. But he's never there. An entire autumn passes and I continue to look for him, wondering why he abandoned this place, deciding it's because cheapos like me donated dollar bills or useless things like nickels or nothing at all. I find it hard to sleep, wondering where he spends the waking hours and, worse, where he closes his eyes at night.

It's a blustery day when we finally meet again. Icicles hang from the trees and my tires slide over scatterings of sand and salt. I'm in a lineup of traffic, sipping coffee I bought at Dunkin' Donuts as the car's defrost mechanism whirs. It's

slow going as the cars in front of mine lumber over the frosted slope on the approach to the light on 17 and King. That's when I see him standing on the corner, a statue encrusted with freezing rain. I recognize his skinny frame. Car after car pass him by as if they don't see, and he makes no effort to wave his drenched cardboard sign. He's too cold, shaking like a tree with epilepsy.

As I near the light, I reach into the glove compartment and grab a wad of tissues. When I get to the corner, the light turns green, but I stop anyway. I open the window and look straight into the homeless man's blurred face and blue frothing mouth. His body shivers like a tuning fork with limbs that occasionally kick and sputter. I offer him the Kleenex. "Wipe your nose and get in," I say, ignoring the chorus of horns behind me. He stares at the tissues, then grabs them in a jumble of uncontrolled movement and swipes them across his face, removing some of the snot and frozen froth.

"Good enough," I say. "Come on."

The light turns red. The horns cease.

He hesitates the way a foreigner would, unsure of the words I've spoken, worried perhaps that he'll offend me when he reaches for the door. I make sure I've opened the locks. He reaches for the handle, surprised when the door pops open and the car hovers long enough for him to dive inside.

A hammer hits the anvil in my chest, warning against danger, but I tell myself to hold steady. He's dying out there. If I don't do something, he could die in front of all these people peering out of their stupid, cozy cars.

The light changes and I drive, eyeing him in the mirror as he bobs and shivers, his breath a harsh in and out rasp. He uses the tissue to wipe again. I put the heat up another notch, the sound like a plane engine. He closes his eyes as if it hurts to feel the warmth. I drive a couple of blocks, watching him settle into stillness. I can smell him, an earthy-wet overripe mix of street dirt and sweat and who-knows-what.

I pass the office parking lot and head around the block. There's a shelter not far from my building. I work in the sketchy area of the city, on the invisible line that divides the good side from the bad. To the left, you'll find a U-haul rental, a secondhand furniture store, and an old diner that graduates

to newer, cleaner restaurants. Further still, the trendy cafes and lounges emerge, mingling in between jewelry stores and diamond-cut boutiques where people with money window shop to pass the time. To the right, it's not so nice: railroad tracks, an overpass, a topless bar, and at the outskirts of the projects, the shelter. At the next red, I offer him my coffee, turning only partially around, still buckled in by the seat belt. "Here," I say, "you need this more than I do."

He doesn't move at first and just as I start to think he's deaf or mute or maybe both, he speaks. "What do you want?" His voice is as raw as vegetables pulled from the ground, soil still clinging to them.

I gaze at him through the rearview, at his light eyes, swollen around their thawed rims, and his cracked, bloodied lips and chapped complexion. I say, "I don't want anything from you."

He makes the coffee disappear the way a cold soda would on a hot summer day.

"You know there's a shelter around here, don't you?" I'm still looking in the rearview and he's eyeing the road straight ahead.

"So," he says.

"I'm taking you there. You shouldn't be out in weather like this. No one should."

He sneezes, then coughs, the sound like twisting metal. Hearing it makes my own throat hurt. I offer more tissues, but he refuses. "How old are you anyway?" I ask.

His fingers reach for an itch on his sunken cheek and something, a pebble or ice or maybe a scrap of drywall, drops from his hair. "Twenty-two," he says and his face contorts. Something like a grin appears.

"Is that funny?" I ask, but he doesn't respond.

I want to ask him why he's out there, what he does every day, where he closes his eyes at night, but it seems rude. "You know, I've got some old clothes of my husband's that might fit you if you want them."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing," I tell him. "Honestly, I want nothing from you." We've reached the shelter and I steer the car into a loading zone.

He stares out the window, at the building. It's nondescript. A

stucco rectangle with a door and one dark window. The word *SHELTER* hangs on a pitted metal sign above the transom. I don't blame him for not getting excited about going in there—the place doesn't exactly evoke fuzzy feelings of home. “You got any cigarettes?” he asks.

I unlatch my seat belt and turn around, gripping the headrest, facing him full on. “I don't, sorry.” He might be twenty-two and then again, maybe not. He's like a boy and a sixty-year-old man at the same time. I reach into my purse, take out a fifty I've been holding for him. “Are you going in there?” I gesture out the window.

“There's no smokes in there.”

“I mean, for shelter. To get out of this. You're going to get sicker than you already are if you don't get warm.”

He gazes at me. That elusive, blurred look. Foreign-language misunderstanding and mistrust wrapped up in one.

“Here.” I hold out the money. “Buy some food and cough drops, okay? Cigarettes, maybe, but food—something good and hot. On Monday, I'll bring you some clothes. My name's Kate, by the way, what's yours?”

He grabs the bill like a dog that thinks he's going to miss the biscuit if he doesn't snatch it from my hand. “What do you want?” he says. “You want me to do something? You want me to touch—”

“No,” I say, reddening at the suggestion. “I feel bad, that's all. I just want you to take care, okay? Go on now, I have to get to work.”

He opens the car door as instructed. The wind blasts inside, snuffing out the layer of heat that warmed me like a blanket. My eyes tear. Before he gets out, he looks like he wants to say something—thanks, or see you later—or maybe that's only a projection on my part. The door swings closed and I watch him bypass the shelter without a second glance. I'm already half an hour late for work.

On Monday, he's at the light on 17 and King again, only he faces the onslaught of cars this time, wide-eyed and no doubt in wait of me. When I stop, he's already stepping to the curb, dropping into the backseat of the car, eager for whatever I have for him.

“How was your weekend?” I ask. He looks better. A little less spindly, much more of this earth. This time I can imagine him cleaned up, sitting at a dinner table. A sandy-haired young man, light shade of stubble over his chin, blue eyes and elusive grin. No snot frozen to his face. His knees bob to some racing internal beat—caffeine or drugs maybe—or maybe he’s just charged by the cold morning air. It’s barely above freezing.

“Where is it?” He rubs his hands together and coughs the frozen air out of his lungs. “What’d you bring me?”

“Here,” I point to the passenger seat beside me. “Grab it.”

The paper shopping bag warps and protests as he pulls it over and digs in. First he throws the wool hat over his pink ears, then he peels back his crusted overcoat so he can pull on a sweater. The boots tumble out of the bag to the floor, like two bricks. They’re lumberjack sturdy, I had to guess the size. Some scuffling sounds follow: He’s pulling off the bug-infested sneakers and stuffing his feet into the new shoes.

“Shoot, I meant to bring you a pair of socks,” I say.

He’s not paying attention. He’s a lioness who’s made a kill and wants to get the meatiest parts before the rest of the pride comes along. The bag crumples and folds as he struggles to unfold John’s canvas jacket with the thinsulate liner. John has never worn the thing outside of trying it on at the store because when he got home he decided it made him look bulky. But bulky is good for life on the street, or so I would imagine.

“Better?” I ask.

He’s pulling my father’s old leather gloves over his dusty-white hands, waiting now for the warmth to spread from outside in. His eyes close and he sinks into the leather interior the way my son Petey does after a vigorous day at the swimming pool.

“So, where do you sleep at night?” I ask.

He opens one eye in my direction, no part of him moves except that one eyelid. “Why? What do you want?”

“Nothing,” I say. “I just imagine it must be hard out there. It’s so cold and . . . aren’t you scared?”

We’re passing the entrance to my building’s parking lot. The mechanical arm is down, as expected. I’m late again. “Isn’t that where you work?” he says.

I can't lie. He's probably seen me there. "Yes."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"I'm hungry. You got any money?"

"I'll drop you at the diner, but we have to hurry. I'm late again."

He's tying the boot laces when I pull in front of the diner. "You really should go to the shelter, at least to sleep," I say, leaning over the seatback so I can see the shoes on his feet. Then I pass over a twenty. He keeps his hand out for more. "That's all today," I say. "Do the boots fit all right?"

He shoves the money into John's coat pocket before assaulting my ears and eyes with a violent string of curses and crazed facial expressions. The ferocity of his response pins me to the steering wheel and I peer out the window to see if anyone out there might save me should he become violent. "I'm sorry but I don't have any more today."

"Don't lie," he says, his eyes growing bigger and rounder than I would have imagined possible. He punches the back of my seat and I'm sure he's going to come at me next, but instead he reaches for the door handle and fumbles out of the car. The boots make him spastic, they're too big, and the tail of John's coat skims the ground behind him.

"Don't be angry," I shout and the door comes back at me like a swift jab, the hinges creaking just before the ear-pressurizing smack of impact. The car wobbles side to side and a fissure with angel-hair tributaries zips up the window, the sight of which makes my hair stand on end. *John is going to kill me.*

When I get to my desk, there's a message on my voicemail. My friend Ginger: "Kate, was that you at the light this morning? Did you pick up that street person? I know it couldn't have been you, but it looked like your car. Call me."

I get home that night and John is waiting for me by the door. Earlier I ignored his call to my cell phone, and his crossed arms and the vulture slope to his back let me know he's angry. "I just spoke to Ginny Hampton," he says and he pauses, his forehead wrinkling into zigs and zags of perplexity. "What's this about you picking up strangers on the way to work? And

did you give my coat away?”

I vaguely roll my eyes. “You never wear it anyway, John.”

“You did? You picked up some guy—”

“He was freezing!” I unwind my scarf, drop it on a chair. “All I did was give him some clothes.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the humane thing to do.” I turn away from him, peel off my own outerwear. “How’s Petey?” I say, but John’s not having my change of subject.

“You’re really losing it, aren’t you? I mean, who the hell do you think you are, Mrs. America?”

I peer down the hall. Petey’s watching cartoons on his iPad. I hear something about Elmer Fudd hunting wabbits. “Because I’m charitable?”

“Because you’re taking a risk, letting a nutcase like that into your car. You’re a woman for Christ’s sake.”

“And he’s just a kid, like Petey, only a little older and unluckier. And how do you know he’s a nutcase?”

John’s eyes close. It’s the sting of frustration. “What normal people live on the street? What kind of people let their kids grow up on the street?”

“That’s what I want to know,” I say, nodding as if we’re in total agreement.

“Right. So did you find out?”

At that, my conviction topples. “I don’t even know his name,” I say. And then because the homeless guy’s ungrateful door slam hurt my feelings, I tell John how he broke the car window—I don’t want to tell, it feels like tattling somehow, but out it spills, onto the kitchen floor.

John’s face swells like a berry, as expected. “How’d he do that?”

“It’s not like we don’t have the money to fix it . . .” My words evaporate as John’s heavy footfalls stomp across the room. He pulls open the door to the garage, then hesitates before going in, his pointer finger stabbing the air in my direction. “Don’t you pick him up again, Kate. Promise me right now you won’t pick him up!”

The next day, I take a different route to work. I can’t bear to drive past my nameless friend as though he’s invisible to me.

The day after that, he's waiting for me in the company parking lot. He holds a Starbucks cup in each hand and leans against my boss' Lexus, looking like a dreamer who has all the time in the world and no ulterior motive but to sit there and dream. I'm sort of glad to see him and sort of not. In John's canvas coat and hiking boots, he looks like an ordinary civilian, though the woolen cap I gave him stretches too far over his oblong head and I imagine his eyelashes bang against its rim. I try to smile in his direction, though my husband's fear has spread fissures through my slab of confidence.

I park and he rushes over. The handle of the back door snaps violently—it's locked. He fumbles one of the coffees and, when it hits the ground, curses in a language so ugly I'm not sure it's English.

"Give me a minute," I shout from inside. "I'm just grabbing my bag."

Surveillance cameras perch like birds on poles around the lot. I know this, but I also know that Howie, the guard, would rather check out the women entering the building than view the black-and-white images on television screens. Besides, I doubt this encounter looks like much of a situation. Not with my homeless friend dressed in my husband's hand-me-downs, still relatively clean.

"Where've you been?" he asks, sounding more betrayed than hostile.

"I'm sorry, I had to come in very early yesterday, and this morning I had to pick something up across town so I took a different route."

Not interested in my excuses, he rides over my words with quick nods of the head, then raises the remaining cup of coffee toward me. "For you," he says, his mouth stretching crookedly, hinting at a smile but not quite getting there—his lips are so cracked and dry I imagine even minor undulations hurt. "It was bad, what I did."

We both pause to eye my plastic-covered window. I'm relieved he's not here to fight. I have to remind myself not to let him sucker me too much, though his coy sentiment definitely smooths over some of those fissures in my confidence. "It's okay," I say coolly. "It can be fixed. You keep the coffee since you dropped one."

His expression goes blank, blurred with confusion. Some thinking is going on behind his cloudy eyes. He pushes the cardboard cup in my direction. "Mine was mostly finished," he says. "This is for you."

That reminds me, I have one last present for him: I pull a balled-up pair of wool socks from my briefcase and place it in his free hand. "These are for you." He doesn't acknowledge what I've done, doesn't so much as look at the socks, and instead holds fast to the line that connects his eyes to mine. He wants to say something, I can tell. Just as I'm about to tell him I really need to get going, his countenance softens and he says, "Robert. That's my name."

It's as heartfelt as a confession, a gift, I realize. And I'm pleased with our progress—I'm please with him. "All right, Robert. Thank you." I take the coffee and start in the direction of my building.

He shoves the ball of socks into his coat pocket and walks backwards in front of me, his usual, hopped-up-on-the-balls-of-his-feet stride, only backward.

"It's nutty," he says.

At first I think he's talking about our relationship. Then I realize he's talking about the coffee, which tempts me with its hazelnut perfume. There's no indication that the cup's plastic top has been tampered with or that something has passed through its opening. Why would he waste the money I gave him by spiking my coffee with substances he'd rather ingest himself? Still, I have to ask: "You didn't put any vodka or anything in here, did you? Cause you know I have to work, right? I can't be going in all liquored up."

He rubs his nose vigorously, his eyes squinting down into slits as he wrestles with another one of those painful grins. It's the first time I've seen him laugh and he looks eons younger. I can see that he's not actually twenty-two. He's probably still a teenager. He stops short in front of me, forcing me to stop too. "Come on, momma, while it's still hot."

The *momma* thing dips into one of my soft spots. I take a sip. Then another. It tastes fine. No vodka. "It is my favorite, how did you know?" Then I step around him because I'm late. We pass the lot's mechanical arm, the garbage pail, the black man I've seen fishing half-smoked cigarettes from the ashtray

at the entrance of my smoke-free building. It's a ghost town around here—unlike me, my co-workers have arrived early for the company's annual meeting.

"I took a guess," Robert says, still stuck on the thrill of buying me a gift, or so I assume.

I wonder how I'll fade him from my life. I can't have him following me around like this.

We walk. Him and his blurry blue eyes remain fixed on me, as if waiting for my face to turn green. And then I suppose it does. I'm green, and the rest of the world glazes over like water cascading over a pane of glass. The ground melts and surges into a fuzzy, moving oil slick that my suddenly inept body slips and slides over. The cup of coffee drops from my thickened fingers and I stumble over feet that feel like size-eight cinder blocks. I reach for Robert (if that's really his name) and attempt to right my blob of a body as a wave of nausea rolls over me, up and down inside of me, splattering to the concrete at last.

With a quick jerk of his arm, he shoves me away. "Gross," he says, his face bobbing and wavering like a multicolored flag with wild eyes and flashing teeth in front of me.

I'm distracted by the passing cars, which in my altered state sound like jet engines. I watch in horror, covering my ears with my hands and doubling over in fear as they blur past. Robert is a few strides ahead, on the sidewalk that leads to the entrance to my building. "Over here!" he calls to me. I stagger toward him and he thrusts out his foot. I see it but sadly can't guide myself around. And now I'm sprawled across the sidewalk with my purse and all of its gizzards rolling about like marbles. A bloody knee peers out the tear in my stocking.

Robert grabs the wallet first, shoves it into John's coat pocket, then reaches for my hand. I think he's going to help me up, instead he pulls the diamond and gold band from my wedding finger, his fingernails scraping across skin and knuckles. He also rips the gold locket with the picture of Petey from my neck. His foot rises—it's a monster, the ridges on its plastic bottom like the mountains of a topographical map—and it comes at me in blurred slow motion. The reverberating crush that follows is blurred as well, and the blood that pools

in my nostrils feels like hot, throbbing cotton balls.

He's up and running as I struggle to a stand, dizzy as hell and unable to get a grip on the blurring, whirring world, a great, fleshy plum I can't stop from spinning. But I still know what I want: John's jacket bobbing down the road, and the rings, and Petey. My Petey! I'm off, without concern for personal safety—or dignity.

I don't know how far I get, whether it's feet or yards or blocks, before the toe of my foot catches the curb and the rest of me comes in for a crash landing. My sense of time and place escapes me. My knee stings, my palms burn, my face throbs, and I'm laid out on the ground, my breath in and out like a giant ventilator in my head. But somehow I'm comfortable, and lying there is a lot easier than trying to get up. I think I might sleep. It seems like a good idea.

I don't know how long it is before the scuffed-up, hole-punched shoes (I can see through to a toe), polyester pants, and tail of a tattered black trench stop in front of my nose. I feel myself jiggled and shaken, and with groaning effort, pulled to my feet. My head is a helium balloon hovering over this man whose face is like shale, cleaved into angles and cheekbones, rich as chocolate, tilting in question as he peers into my elusive eyes.

“What's this, now?” he says.

I rub my nose. Pain surrounded by a tender patch of bruised fruit. “I'm hurt,” I say, watching the blur of a car pass, fascinated by the way the water underneath spreads apart then closes up after the tires ride over. The sky is leaking on the sidewalk, on my clothes, into my eyes.

“Ain't you got nowhere to go?” he says.

The man holds an umbrella. When I squeeze my hair, it dribbles like a sponge down my sleeve. “What do you want?” I ask him.

His voice is steady, words that rise in wisps of vapor from his mouth. “I don't want nothing but for you to follow me.”

I know I probably shouldn't, but the world is a fleshy plum and good judgment is lost somewhere in its dizzy juices. We walk. I almost feel okay in a numb, overly drunken way, though there's a spike jammed into my head and I'm too tired to pull it out. We walk and walk—blurred people pass, blurred

cars, blurred building walls—I trip and fall. I get up. I walk and walk. The man finally stops walking and so do I. “You want to go in there?” he asks.

It’s a nondescript building with one window and a door.

“All are welcome here,” he says, standing under the entrance.

The word *SHELTER* hovers above.

I start to laugh but it hurts—my mouth’s thick and swollen, my lips dry, cracked. “No, not me,” I say, and I want to say more but the words don’t come.

The fissures in the man’s face deepen, his eyes sink into sadness. “Oh yes,” he says, “all are welcome here.”

And I step in.

Louise Hawes

Bend This Page

Before the films burned, I carried them back and forth to the hospital with me. There was something healing—I swear it, my darlings—in the violet light from the projector, in my image, shuddering on the screen at the foot of my bed. I would sit for hours, the chemo bag hovering above me, the catheter stiff with its urgent message, and see myself whole again.

Who would have dreamed, dear tidbits, that the very films which destroyed me professionally would later give me such private consolation? Certainly not I. Wrestling my way into contraptions like the leather harness I wore for *Siren Song*, I could hardly be expected to feel anything but pain. Large, hardware-studded straps bound my breasts, forcing them up and out, when what they craved in their twilight was to droop luxuriously, to hang like ripe fruit. The same straps snaked behind my back, then wrapped around my hips and between my legs, a double-cross that would have done the Marquis de Sade proud.

My thighs may have chafed at the time, but *Siren* and the other box office disasters came to mean everything to me. Their picture of health, their cheerful illusion of lust soothed me when I needed it most, calmed and fortified me even as the tumor was roto-rooting my gut.

At home, each time the cramps became unbearable, I would drag myself, cradling my swollen abdomen like a colicky child, to the screening room. There, a pillow folded into one of the velvet seats, I drank up those long limbs, that nimbus of wild, bleached hair. I marveled at the tempting, parted lips and yelled with the vixen on the screen, “You may do what you want with my body, but you will never have my heart!”

That was before the fire last week. I was away from home, so only my better half was destroyed—along with the screening room, the guest cottage and two-thirds of the main house. I combed through the rubble afterwards, but couldn’t find so much as a film canister. The man from the insurance

company told me the stuffing in the plush seats had acted like a fuel, feeding the flames, kindling a heat that boiled metal.

And so, sweet meats, I am no longer immortal. My beautiful youth, or its approximation, is ashes. Nothing stands between me and the abyss. Nothing except my hound-eyed oncologist and this journal. I've been scribbling away on tablets the nurses give me. Every page is topped with one of the seven warning signs of cancer: #1—A CHANGE IN BOWEL OR BLADDER HABITS.

Though I've come to letters late in life, I seem to be making up for lost time. Even on this, the morning of what Dr. Cameron calls my "procedure," I am crouched over a little pad, writing furiously. It is as though these notes to you have taken the place of the old films. As though, washed, shaved and naked under a backless gown, I can still call up the star I was, make you see her, make you want her again. And if, reading my words, you tremble, if you put down this page and clap your hands, together we may yet revive poor old Tinker Belle.

Another page, another sign of cancer: #2—A SORE THAT DOES NOT HEAL. What I am writing now may be a very short story, ginger snaps, or the first chapter of a novel. It all depends on the outcome of the operation Dr. Cameron took considerable pains to explain to me last night. He lumbered into my room with a little plastic model and took it apart, like a puzzle, on my bed. "Now, then," he said, yanking at a prune-colored piece that came away with a startling snap, "let's look at your cervix, shall we?"

I scribbled while he talked. I let him think I was taking notes, when in fact I was writing to you. Dr. Cameron is a large man, his red hands swiped the sheets like beef chops. He had trouble separating one of the pieces from his model and ended by pointing to it where it hid behind the blue tail of the colon. He nodded solemnly, using words like "invasive," "neoplastic," and my favorite, "debulking."

I'm afraid that's all I can remember. I confess I have a tendency to ignore the good doctor when he turns professorial. He's well-intentioned, bits, but carried away with being surgeon to the stars. He listens to himself when he talks, convinced that whatever he says to me will find its way into

print, or be broadcast to an anxious public hungry for news of Sable DeWitt. A rather rosy view, considering that neither you nor the press have given a damn about me since *A Kiss for Luck*.

That was the last film that paid for itself; the movies I made with the Ambassador, the ones that consumed themselves last week, played to empty theatres for the length of their brief runs. They were so bad that all the major studios turned them down, forcing the Ambassador to start his own production company. So bad that one critic revised his rating scale to include a scoreless “black hole” at its bottom end.

#3—UNUSUAL BLEEDING OR DISCHARGE. So why did I aid and abet those abortions? Why did I strap and buckle and glue myself into ever more humiliating costumes? I suggest, my treasures, that you too would have surrendered to the wistful, menopausal splendor of the Ambassador’s delusions. Whose heart is so jaded it would not have been moved at the sight of my jowly, balding mate in his Francis Ford Copula outfit? At the way he paced the set, whispering commands in his Ivy League sotto voce, shirt open at the neck, black boots carrying him forward at a constant tilt, as if he were commiserating with his pinched toes?

Unfortunately, my trials went well beyond torturous costumes. How I girded myself, how I shuddered inwardly each time the Ambassador interrupted a take, each time he laid aside his clipboard and put both moist hands on my bare shoulders. “Sable,” he would say, “this is where I need your demure side.” He would look deeply, knowingly into my eyes. “Before she meets the Count, Isabel is a naive peasant. Your motivation here is hunger, not lust.”

Motivation! Imagine that doddering diplomat lecturing me on motivation—me, who made more than thirty movies while he was bowing from the waist and learning to say “due consideration” in five languages. But the man’s presumption knew no bounds, and once he actually grabbed me by the waist, changing places with me so that I could study his interpretation of a role. He struck my pose, repeated my line in a high-pitched whinny intended to be our heroine’s voice. “My Lord,” he recited, sounding like a walk-on in a grade-school play, “I am at your disposal, body and soul.”

Heaven knows from what literary trash heaps he retrieved those elaborately plotted, gruesomely written scenarios. But you can imagine the foreboding with which, at an age when most former femmes fatales are scrambling for character parts, I took on challenges like *Destina*, the story of an orphan who rises to corporate stardom by marketing her perfume and her body. Or *Firebrand*, a film that turned Annie Oakley into a nymphomaniac who threw herself with equal vigor at cowboys and cattle.

#4—THICKENING OR LUMP IN THE BREAST OR ELSEWHERE. “Dearest,” I would tell the Ambassador, trying to return his latest script, passing it back with what I hoped seemed more like humility than revulsion. “I’m afraid I could never do this role justice. It should go to someone younger, a luscious strumpet.”

“There is no strumpet more luscious than you,” my gallant husband would insist. He might have added, of course, that no one else in her right mind would even consider those ruinous parts. So, like it or not, I was the star of every maddeningly inept Rothstein-DeWitt production. And, hit or not, the Ambassador cherished each one, watching them over and over in our private screening room. “This is no simple romance, Sable of mine,” he would say, a lather of excitement on his brow and cheeks. “It’s the exploration of a universal conflict between our desire to submit and our will to prevail.”

Until the day he died, my husband continued to defend the artistic integrity of the borderline pornography in which he starred me. He never took off those ridiculous boots, never flagged in his belief that the empty theatres, the cruel reviews, my moribund career were all preliminaries to the universal acclaim that was our ultimate reward. I trust *he* has come to some reward by now, poor dear. As for my career? It never recovered from the blows he dealt it.

#5—INDIGESTION OR DIFFICULTY IN SWALLOWING. So I am trying to reclaim you now, darlings, to win back the audience I lost. Here, prepared like an Aztec maiden for ritual sacrifice, I write you propped at a fiendish angle. From the hall, an orderly wheels a stretcher into my room, and standing at the foot of the bed, a nurse readies a hypodermic with suspicious crispness. (She will not look at me, cherubs.

She has turned her back to me, hiding her bright needle.)

So we must work quickly, you and I. I must write, and you must read. Before they take the knife to me, you must carry me away, whisk me off their astringent-smelling altar. There is no time for cautious courtship, tender foreplay. Tinker Belle's light is a fading S.O.S., winking feebly as a firefly in fall.

Did you miss me, best beloveds? It's been several minutes since I was forced to stop writing, to stuff your notes under my mattress. The nurse, you see, overcame her diffidence long enough to give me a mildly insulting shot in the rump. Now she and the orderly, having undone the straps of the gurney, are conferring in the hall. Sly and desperate, I drag my my pen across this page, wandering into large, unmanageable loops. Still, I am heady with the thought that long after the operation, perhaps long after I am making penicillin underground, you will read me as I was.

Forget that I am rotting from the inside out, my flesh sunken against my vitals. Forget that my eyes tear constantly, that my face is dry and juiceless as an ancient lemon. Remember, instead, the small child with a perfect mouth, profound creamy eyes like a lake at dusk; the little white-haired girl whose mother you kept stopping—in stores, on playgrounds, even on the bus. “What a beautiful child,” you would tell my mother, over and over until she knew I was a monster. “Have you taken her to a talent scout?” you asked. “Have you thought about movies?” Over and over, until she did.

I wasn't Sable De Witt then, I was Patricia Ann Houten, a cooperative, quiet child embarrassed by the distinction of my beauty, by the way you were always cupping my chin, talking to me, touching me. “You're too pretty for words,” you would tell me, “just too pretty for words.” I didn't have anything to tell you back. I didn't even know your name.

#6—OBVIOUS CHANGE IN A WART OR MOLE. You needed me from the beginning, you see. And your need became my mirror, the only place I saw myself, day after day, role after role. At first, my mother went with me to the studio, standing anxiously at the fringes of the sound stage, tripping over wires, unwrapping aromatic sandwiches.

But one day the producer asked her not to come anymore. He told her they would send a car for me instead, and every day from then on, a long, purring limo picked me up in front of our house. Soon, in a matter of months, Patricia Ann Houton disappeared. In her place, Sable DeWitt, sprung from your devotion, forged in the cauldron of your love, left her mother, her dresser with pink bunnies painted on the drawer pulls, and a life whose rhythms were slow and regular as sleep.

“Sable sizzles!” “New star on the horizon!” “DeWitt’s a bomb—a sex bomb!” The reviews for *Last Chance* brought you to me by the hundreds, then by the thousands. You begged me for autographs. You haunted my hotel, the restaurants where I ate. You stole pillowcases I’d slept on, napkins stained with my lipstick, buttons, strands of hair, food from my trash. You stalked me patiently, relentlessly, and the more you dreamed of me, the more beautiful I grew.

Take Three: The nurse and orderly stopped flirting long enough to lift me onto the stretcher, but now I am alone again. Alone and very dizzy, my angels. The tablet, tangled in my bed sheets, took me forever to retrieve. But I need to write you about Scott Fallon. Do you remember my co-star in *Warm Front*? How tall he was? Lean and dark, with sinister, hooded eyes and the sort of wounded half-smile that draws women for miles. You adored him; you adored us together. In *Warm Front*, I played a paralyzed dancer, and in the final scene, Scott lifts me from my bed and whirls me around the room to the procession theme from *Swan Lake*. “I’ll be your legs, darling,” he tells me tenderly. “We will be partners forever.”

In real life—can you bear it, loves?—our dialogue was somewhat different. “Hey, Babe,” my leading man said when I told him I was pregnant, “we ain’t going to the chapel just because you forgot what time of month it was.” At close range, Scott was hardly the sensitive, tortured soul he appeared on screen. He sucked his spaghetti, called everyone “Babe,” and took fewer showers than anyone I’ve ever known.

But if my co-star didn’t stick to the script, I followed it slavishly. “I don’t care what *you* do,” I told him. “I’m having this baby.” (I knew what you’d want me to say, you see. I knew how brave and principled you dreamed I was.)

“And how will that make *me* look, huh?” Poor Scott was genuinely bewildered, stretched beyond his capacities by view points other than his own. “I mean, what exactly do you figure that’s going to do to my image?”

“Hey, Babe,” I told him. “I couldn’t care less.”

There should be a chain of tiny stars here—to signify still another interruption. This time, they wheeled the stretcher out of the room and pulled it onto an elevator. I slipped the tablet under my bruised hip, then spent the ride staring up into strange faces, sagged with gravity and concern. I was wheeled off at basement level, then left to lose consciousness in this drafty room. Cold lights are bouncing off chrome and steel. My legs and arms are turning numb, but I roll over and pull the tablet from under me.

You wrote me letters during my pregnancy. Hundreds and hundreds of letters, telling me how brave I was, how you admired me for placing the sanctity of life above my career. You wrapped trinkets in the envelopes, sent me packages of baby clothes and blankets and silver spoons. But most of all you chose names for the baby. Boys’ names like Cedric and Garth and Lyle and Sherman. Girls’ names like Estelle and Ashley and Morgan and Lucinda.

I didn’t name my baby until she was dead. And then none of your names were right. You’d sent me saucy names like Brandy, sweet ones like Taffy, elegant ones like Justine. They didn’t belong to my little still-born daughter, to the tiny, wrinkled girl who smelled like dead flowers on the side of a vase. I called her Camille. She was supposed to be a happy ending. I don’t want to write about her anymore.

I made movies with a vengeance then. Some were good, some were bad, but none approached the low watermark to which I sank when I allowed myself to get involved with the elderly, tuxedoed suitor who dogged my every step after *Silent Heart*.

#7—NAGGING COUGH OR HOARSNESS. The Ambassador showed then, I suppose, the same persistence, the same oblivious tenacity that had earned the praise and gratitude of two Presidents. Afterward, when I learned who he was, I found pictures of him in old newspapers, photos of a tall,

square-chinned figure striding down barricaded streets, meeting with bearded guerillas, boarding rust-covered bi-planes at the end of jungle runways.

Quite simply, the man knew no fear. He was thick-skinned and arrogant, with an effete, slender nose that quivered when he was on the scent. He wasn't at all what we'd dreamed of, pigeons, but he wouldn't go away. Stepping across my path outside the studio, waiting with flowers at my hotel, sitting at the table next to mine in clubs—there was no end to him. And to his wearisome, heavy-handed devotion.

"I will not live without you, Miss DeWitt," he told me early in our one-sided courtship. "I am too old and too rich not to get what I want." I laughed at the time, unfastening a pearl-and-diamond brooch he'd pinned to my breast. "And I, Mr. Ambassador," I told him, "am too young and too beautiful to even consider spending my life with you."

We were married in a small civil ceremony. And if an old warhorse isn't a stallion, he is good for nose-rubbing, for quiet grazing, haunch to haunch. We became fast allies, he and I, reading each other's whims from across a room, gossiping, staying home for long weekends, sprawled in a nest of newspapers and take-out food cartons. Content.

Which is why, years later when you abandoned me, dumplings, when you left me alone in the wake of those pathetic films, I survived. I even learned to cook, began to share the Ambassador's fascination with bonsai. Sometimes, inhaling my red pepper pesto, or bracing a tiny, gnarled limb with florist's wire, I wondered if it hadn't all been for the best. If those black-hole movies hadn't been instruments of providence, to bring me back to an earlier time, a slow and dreamy life I'd forgotten. A contained, unexamined peace.

But then my good companion died, felled by a heart attack that left him upright in his lounge chair, mouth half open, eyes widened in surprise. I was abandoned again, alone with the old movies and a tumor that whispered to me in the dark. "I claim your cervix," it whined. "Your ovaries are mine. They are like columbines, swollen, seductive. And I am a bee, sucking, sucking." Nothing would stop the pain, my lambs, nothing I could do or swallow or inject.

Still the movies helped. That shady baggage who went up

in flames last week was my salvation. Crouched under the projector's stuttering light, redeemed by her painted beauty, I was equal to the struggle. "You'll never have me!" she and I yelled together. "Rough hands will not take from me what a gentle kiss would yield."

Now, lambs, you must carry that lovely strumpet off with you, read her back to life. Only a minute ago, Dr. Cameron peered down at me from a great height. Behind him, I saw a gloomy man fill a second syringe. They have disappeared again, but I can hardly write, my jewels. The world is spinning and I need to sleep.

I promise, though. Even under clover and onion grass, I will feel your love. Read my cheekbones, not shadowed and lost, but plump with youth. Read my hair, not thinned by chemo, but rich and full, the color of desire. Read my breasts and hips, round with longing, waiting for your touch. I am not more beautiful than you can imagine, but exactly that beautiful.

Soon they will come back. The nurse will hold out a stiff, forbearing hand, ask me to surrender my tablet. They will give me another shot, and tell me to count backwards. *Seven*, I will say, twirling away from them toward you. I am dancing even now, stamping and wild, my body a flame. Can you see me? *Six*, I will whisper, lost to the music, turning. Already my hair falls over one eye, my skin shines with perspiration and my legs flash like rain on sea grass. *Five*, I am whirling faster now, so fast I leave you behind. *Four*, you stumble after me, breathing heavily, stiff with need. *Three*, you reach out, fold me laughing against you. *Two*, we are falling together, swept under a dark, foam-headed wave. We are *One* now, you and I. Mark me, my precious morsels. Bend this page. Bite the corner off. No one will see you. Devour me. Swallow me whole.

Mike Karpa

The Link

Anil barreled his new 1964 sedan, his Amby, through one Bombay pothole after another before braking hard at a funeral procession. In the heat outside his open window, a garlanded corpse, being shouldered by family to the crematory, gave Anil a desiccated grin, as though to agree that Anil had done the right thing by returning from Geneva. To family, to the residence he shared with his older brother Sohil and sister-in-law Vimala, to India. Finally, he was home.

This swelling peak of optimism, naturally, marked the exact moment he heard a thundercrack of metal striking metal with force. He'd been back long enough to feel these related, as if Bombay was showing him who was boss. The Amby's engine shivered and crunched to a halt with a burnt-oil puff of black smoke. The Amby had thrown a rod.

He had no real idea where he was. He'd spent most of the past year sequestered at the lab, the work on his plutonium lurching toward success that was now agonizingly close. Anil scanned the narrow, sweltering street of mold-pocked buildings for a familiar sign or shop, but found nothing. It was hard to believe he'd passed his first thirteen years in the town.

A crowd gathered, mostly men, mostly beggars. Or if not beggars, at least men without homes or jobs or all the things he had. This aspect of Bombay he did not care for. He'd never known how to handle people. Anil wanted to get out of his Amby and figure out in his own time what was wrong. But as soon as he lifted the bonnet he would have every man jack of them shouting advice, offering him all manner of everything, each hoping to strike it lucky with a proposition that exactly matched a need.

Anil opened the door. The men were jovial, most about Anil's age, and not so intimidating once he was standing amongst them. He ventured a friendly headshake. He realized he liked being with them. You could do worse than have a crowd of good-looking young Indian men jostling around you, wanting

to be your best friend.

Anil pushed round to the bonnet, which someone had already propped open. A passing bus pulled a wind of hot exhaust. Anil squeezed through the men, enjoying the warm breath, the feel of their lightly clothed bodies against his, but not at all enjoying the sight of a hole in his crankcase—a big hole, just the shape of an undivided Kashmir—which he could see all too clearly, because the oil had drained out to a spreading black lake.

“I can fix, saab. I can fix,” a man said, so confidently that Anil almost believed him, but fixing the car would take more than any of these men could provide. A new crankcase would be just the start. He’d have to get it to Sohil’s repair shop. His poor Amby.

“All I need is a tow.” Anil would never extricate himself from this crowd now.

A shiny-headed man produced an iron-link chain from nowhere, a heavy, rusted, improbable thing. He was looping it to the sturdy front bumper. Anil had negotiated nothing with him, but already this enterprising purveyor of chain, this chainwalla with round face and mustache was attaching himself to both Anil and his car.

“How much?” It had been so long since Anil had bargained properly. Sohil would doubtless tell him he was mucking everything up.

The chain was now snorkeling through the crowd of men. Amounts of rupees were bandied about, rejected and complained over as the chainwalla assembled a crew from the crowd, who seemed quite eager for their two rupees apiece, that much at least was set, to tow the car to . . .

“Where shall we tow, saab?”

Anil gave them his home address. He’d ask one of Sohil’s drivers for the repair shop’s location once they arrived. The men tugged the heavy chain taut, five to a side, avoiding the oil slick as the chainwalla barked out commands.

They strained. The Amby did not budge. The chain pullers counted—ek, do, teen—and threw their bodies into it. Still nothing. It should be rolling easily. Was the brake on? Was the car in gear? Surely they must’ve checked.

“Put it in neutral,” Anil yelled.

The men kept straining. Pulling. Anil wiped sweat from his brow. The car was inching forward, but only because they were dragging it down the street, its way greased by its own shed oil.

He looked inside. The brake was off but the car was in first, where it had been when it threw the rod. "I'm telling you, it's still in gear."

No one was listening.

He opened the door and sat down to release the clutch. The chainwalla yelled at him, as though Anil thought himself a raja to be carried on a litter. Did no one in this country ever truly listen? He was trying to make their work easier.

Before he could hit the clutch, Anil heard a loud, crisp snap. Then silence. He got out of the car. A man lay on the ground. The group circled, shielding him. Anil pushed through, expecting to see the man hurt, maybe an arm broken, a calf sliced open, but the backlash when the chain broke must have cracked it like a whip, the broken length of chain flying with the force of ten straining men, taking an angry smack at a fellow so slight he could hardly have added much strength to the pull.

The man wasn't moving; his eyes were open, unseeing. Anil wasn't sure what he was looking at. He blinked. What was wrong with the fellow?

"The bloody car was in gear," Anil yelled. The snapped chain lay at his feet, its broken link corroded halfway through, a typical disaster-in-waiting he should have inspected beforehand. He looked again at the man, a very dark fellow, darker even than Anil, very short, and very still. And now Anil saw it: a white line in the gore of red and bloody black hair. Anil crouched. The back of the man's skull was gone.

Anil felt lightheaded, woozy. Everyone was still. He put a hand on the greasy pavement to steady himself, heedless of the street's odor of vegetal rot. But there was hardly any blood. Was the fellow truly dead? The poor fellow. What to do?

The chainwalla came to himself, and began issuing orders. It seemed to be what he did best, perhaps all he did.

A sheet was fetched. A new chain was fetched, a better chain. Was that it, then? Was life to go on as normal?

“We will tow your car,” the chainwalla said. “But you will have to pay money to the widow. A thousand rupees.”

So the man was indeed dead. The chainwalla was so matter of fact it pained Anil. Did none of them see the gray matter, spilled on the street? Were none shocked that a brain, the captain that kept one alive, the agent that provided the entire wherewithal for Anil’s scientific accomplishments, could be so quickly and irretrievably stilled?

The man—a body now—was laid on the dirty white sheet and wrapped for transport. Anil supposed that was how things were done here. Someone would take the body somewhere. Anil wished he had his brother to guide him.

A ropy-armed member of the chain-pulling crew grabbed Anil’s arm. His hair smelled of coconut. “Do not give this oily thug an anna. He does not even know Ninad. Ninad is *my* friend.”

The chainwalla began beating this supposed friend. “Get out of here, you no-good sisterfucker.”

The friend backed up, but only a few feet. “Ninad and I were just there, looking for work.” The man pointed with his chin toward a gulmohar tree growing in the footpath, aflame with red blossoms.

Anil believed the friend. The chainwalla was too much a talker, too little a listener. At Anil’s Sussex boarding school the man would have been lead bully of a sporting team, probably named Philip, with a bifurcated surname like Atwater-Chumsworthy, but definitely not worthy of being a chum. That was all the guidance Anil needed. The sum seemed about right—it was likely more than the dead man would have earned in a year, and Anil only had it on his person because Sohil had asked him to withdraw the monthly housekeeping budget from the bank.

Over the chainwalla’s sputtering objections, Anil counted out a thousand rupees from his wallet with trembling fingers and handed it to the friend. The friend thanked him profusely, weeping, talking of a pregnant wife, now widow, and retreated, bowing, with another man, hammocking the body down the street.

Anil turned to the chainwalla. He crossed his arms to hide his shaking, to pretend this was ordinary. “Now, you. Will

you tow my car or not?” Anil did not believe the others were as unruffled as they appeared, but still, he wanted to get as far away from the scene as he could.

The chainwalla grumbled, but gathered his crew, ten again with the addition of three new fellows, strong enough to tow, strong enough to kill. Anil ran his hands and eyes over the length of the shiny new chain. It looked entirely serviceable, but what if he missed something? He was more comfortable with nuclear orbits and mean free radii, not the crude world of shear moduli and tensile strength. He knew he'd be up that night, pondering the quality of the first chain's steel, its alloy, the uncorroded diameter of link, and whether the extra five or six percent his body weight had added to the load could have made the crucial difference.

The crew threaded the new chain through the bumper. Anil heard the chainwalla calling him a fool and worse under his breath, but Anil was certain that he had done the right thing. He worried rather that he hadn't given the widow enough. He still had another two hundred in his wallet. Why hadn't he given the man that? There would be cremation expenses, pujas to be said, camphor and honeyed dhupa to be burnt. But Anil's connection to the widow had vanished with the ropy-armed man and the body.

His Amby was towed to Sarasvati Nivas, the family home, where Sohil soon came thudding down the front steps, big and bearded, his evening kurta and pajama billowing. Sohil had his men take the Amby to the garage for repair.

When the men and car were entirely gone, Anil recounted the story for Sohil and Vimala, sparing them the description of the man's injury. As he told them of the death, of the tow, of the dispute between the mustachioed chainwalla and the ropy-armed friend, Anil clenched his eyes against the memory of the man's peaceful, untouched face, rolling back and forth, back and forth, as the white sheet was twisted top and bottom, enclosing the man in a final swaddle.

“Dear brother,” Sohil said, placing his hand on Anil's arm, “the widow will never see a single rupee of that.”

“If there even is a widow,” Vimala added. “It's always the same few stories. If she isn't pregnant, then her breasts have run dry and she needs a rupee for powdered milk.” Vimala

pulled the free end of her sari, tightening it across her chest. “With utmost respect, dear Anil, you’ve been taken in.”

Anil tried to convince them that he had avoided just that possibility, that the chainwalla had been the lying schemer, and that the widow was real. The friend’s tears and anger had been heartfelt. Could anyone make up such sincerity so quickly?

The two just looked at him. He could see it in their loving eyes: he was newly returned, no longer of Bombay. But just as they would never believe that the thousand rupees would go to the widow, Anil would never believe that they would not.

Sandra Wiley

Bullfrog Stew

Memories summon me through the camera lens. Triggered by a scene, a setting, a fragrant breeze, a sound, they lure me back through time, taunting and teasing me. Sometimes I reach out to a divine memory and feel the delight again. More often than not I despise them, knowing what's there in a past etched in stone; the unchangeable, unbidden truth. No matter the memory, it's hard to turn away. I haven't the strength. The trigger commands my mind to grab it, and my heart to love it or hate it again.

Tennessee mornings are my finest memories. We were up before the sun, while the night birds were still singing. Trent and I rushed through breakfast to get to the barn and finish our chores before school. There are certain sounds from my childhood I will never forget, and the old screen door slamming behind us is one of them. We raced to the barn past the giant hickory tree. Trent always won, so I always had to muck the stalls. Sometimes he would pretend to trip and let me win, so I could feed instead. Mucking was no work for little girls, but it built my muscles bigger than any of the other girls. I ran faster than them too. Trent was older than me by three years, but we got along okay. I could have done worse for a brother.

Our barn was like a giant mound of kindling. There were gaps in the boards so big you could fit your arm through, and the floor had holes. When we led the horses out we had to watch for the holes. If they stepped in one, they could die. That's what Trent said anyways. It never did happen so I never did find out.

Some of the old farms in the Northeast remind me of the farms growing up in Tennessee. The images I shoot through my lens hold bits and pieces of my childhood; each frame a scene from my life's story without me in it. I am the absentee star in my own movie. Last year I took a photography tour of barns and covered bridges. Many of the barns I captured were as beaten down as ours. I couldn't help but wonder if the

floors had holes.

We weren't the poorest farmers around. We had electric and an indoor toilet. Most of the farms near us were not so fortunate. Our fences were down more than up, and we chased a lot of cows. Trent rounded them up on his horse most of the time. I remember watching him wave his Brave's cap with one hand, and hold the reins high in the other like a cowboy in an old movie. He laughed the whole time, except when he fell off. Daddy would stand on the porch watching until my mama would make him get the truck and go help. Sometimes I would jump in the back and hold on for the ride as the truck flew out through the pasture. Mama would give me holy hell with her switch when I got back, but Daddy just laughed. Daddy had bright blue eyes that looked like the ocean. When he smiled they just got brighter. Mama was like too much sun, or too much rain.

As with most kids our age, we went exploring. There was a lot of exploring to do in Tennessee. One Saturday we left around noon and walked clear up the river to the shed houses. The farther we walked, the muddier we got and the thicker the flies got. Those black flies hung in the air like clouds. They were thickest near the water, and if you weren't careful to close your mouth you were sure to end up with a few. The hem of my dress was all but soaked and my sneakers were covered in that dark Tennessee mud. I kept telling Trent we had to go back; we were going to get lost. He said you could never get lost if you followed the river, so that's what we did. We cast out our lines along the way. Trent had three nice catfish by the time we reached the little houses. Daddy said when the fish saw Trent coming they jumped onto his hook. I believed it was true. I never caught a single thing.

The river water was brown and lazy. It flowed like it had nowhere in particular to go, and was in no rush to get there. Tall weeping cypress heavily laden with golden moss hung low over the still water, urging it along. Sometimes a little whirlpool sucked in a stick and it got hung up bobbing and turning in slow circles. As I grew older that was how I began to think about my life. I felt just like one of those sticks. There were snakes too, but Trent said to never mind them and they wouldn't mind me either. I hated snakes and the riverbank,

so I kept telling Trent we had to get back. He ignored me like usual until we reached the last bend before the shed houses. We were forbidden to go there. Daddy sure as hell wouldn't laugh at that and Mama . . . well, the damn switch would come out for sure.

We were about to turn around when we saw a man beckoning to us with his hands. I couldn't tell if the old man was waving us to come closer or waving us away. His arms flew above him in wild circles, and he was mouthing words but no sound escaped him. Trent moved toward him, all big eyed and curious. The man was pointing to something at his feet, and I noticed he had no shoes. He wore dirty overalls with no shirt underneath. I saw that he was pointing to a very large brown snake. It looked to be dead but I screamed anyway. It was longer than any snake I had ever seen before and the head looked smashed, like he had just killed it. The man's eyes were wild, like crazy had taken over inside him. He grabbed Trent by the arm and pulled him toward the snake. I was still screaming and people were coming towards us from the little white shacks. Trent jerked free of the man and spun me around, pushing me down the bank and yelling at me to shut up and run.

As we started running a boy Trent's age appeared in front of us and blocked our escape. He was about the same height as Trent, but his hair was long and blonde. He was dressed in denim cutoffs, and was as tan as tan could be. "That's only Jack," the boy laughed, "Don't be so chicken shit." Trent reached over and took my hand and started walking around the boy, but the kid stepped in front of us, blocking us again. Everyone always said how much Trent resembled our mama, and I saw it for myself just then. He grabbed the kid by the throat and threw him out of the way. The boy landed in a messed up heap on the riverbank. I thought Trent was going to pull my arm out of its socket he was yanking me so hard back down the river. When we finally stopped to catch our breath I discovered I had lost a sneaker. I was not inclined to go back and look for it, so Trent carried me on his back the rest of the way home, all the time warning me not to let on where we had been.

When Mama asked where my other sneaker was I told her I

lost it in the mud. It wasn't really a lie so I said it straight to her eyes and I thought she believed me because she smacked me once, and that was the end of it. I learned at an early age that self-preservation relied heavily upon creative presentation of the truth. It was about a week later the boy from the river showed up at our door. He was holding Trent's fishing pole, and we ran to the porch where he was talking to Mama. He said his name was Nathan, and he was returning the pole. I think if Trent ever looked more scared I never remembered it. I stared at the ground in silence. Mama returned to the kitchen like nothing ever happened. Later she gave Trent ten and I got the same for lying. Still, we walked back up the river every chance we got and Trent and Nathan became friends.

When I first moved to the Northeast I could not get enough of the ocean. I photographed a storm once that cast ten foot waves onto the rocky coastline. The sky was as black as coal and the wind sounded like a freight train. I stood on the shore and let the cold spray soak me, shooting frame after frame until the gale forced me to run to my car. I sold one of the images to a local newspaper. I didn't make much from selling it, but it was my first published photo. The editor called me crazy for standing out in a storm like that. He said I was damn lucky I wasn't killed.

When it stormed in Tennessee the rain fell in big heavy sheets that seemed to pour down all at once. The river rose quickly and the mud on the banks slid down into the rush of angry water. Like a sleeping serpent the river woke, racing away to nowhere. I was nine that year, and Trent and Nathan were already twelve. Trent didn't always like me hanging around; it was Nathan that convinced him to let me come along that day. Mama said "No wandering around the water, and stay away from those shacks!" But Daddy let us go. I could see Mama was mad. It wasn't often Daddy put in for us, and I wondered if he was home getting his ass whopped. I thought it must be pretty bad for him back there.

I was walking and dragging a stick in the mud, and Trent and Nathan were fishing. They were talking about girls in whispers but I didn't care to listen anyway. It started raining without any warning. It fell quick and heavy and the sky just opened right up and let it all go. Mud ran down at us and the

thick sludge was up to my knees before I knew it. It was hard to move but we ran as fast as we could. I kept falling and even with Trent holding on to me, I was afraid I would be swept away any minute. I lost my footing and ended up face-down in the mud. I could feel the river pulling me in and my head went under the water. Suddenly I felt myself being dragged up the river bank and Trent slammed my back over and over. I told him I was ok but he just kept hitting me until Nathan finally stopped him. When I could stand we ran alongside the bank until we reached Nathan's house.

The shed houses were a bunch of small white cabins connected by rickety covered walkways. Nathan led us to the last one at the far end. There was a small porch attached and we stood there watching the storm. When the lightning flashed it looked like a giant whip slashing down from heaven. Mama said when it stormed like this God was angry. She said that sinners would be struck down by lightning. Daddy said it meant God was happy; He sent the rain to wash everyone's troubles away and make things grow. I wanted to believe Daddy, but I still hoped I hadn't sinned.

Inside the house there was hardly any light. An old woman stood over a wood stove, stirring something delightful in a crock. The smell made my nose tingle and my mouth water. The woman appeared to be permanently bent over. Her back was hunched and her skin was leathery and ancient. She had warm dark eyes but her hands were shockingly cold. She led me to a seat at the table and dished out some of the fragrant soup. Trent and Nathan joined me, and Nathan's younger brother came in. I figured him to be about six or seven. He was a mirror image of Nathan. He handed the old woman a small box which, by the sounds of it, contained a frog. She thanked him and kissed his dirty cheek. All through dinner the kid kept kicking me under the table. I wondered why I had never seen him at school. The delicious soup warmed me right to my bare toes, and I thought I had probably never tasted anything so wonderful. After we ate, we followed Nathan through a small living room to a tiny bedroom in the back. The two boys shared a mattress on the floor for a bed. The walls were covered in dog-eared pictures of cowboys and rodeos. There was a small table in the corner next to the old

mattress. On it sat a framed photo of a much younger Nathan and his daddy, who he had not seen in two years. He was a bull rider, and Nathan wanted to be one too.

When I asked about his mama he said, “She left.”

I asked him, “Did she die?”

He said “No. She just left.”

Before dark the rain stopped. A brilliant late day sun burst through the clouds just before it set. One of the most memorable things about Tennessee was a sunset that seemed to draw flame from the sky and set the mountains on fire. I was convinced it was God’s way of showing us something beautiful right before the dark. I was still soaked and tired, and this time I had lost both shoes. We couldn’t take the river back home. The banks were under water that was still rising. I wondered aloud what would happen if it got any higher. Nathan told us it rose over the bank once or twice a year. He joked that the dirty water made everything clean. It came to the porch and into the kitchen but they only ever had to leave once.

Nathan walked us home through town, and along the way he told us all about his grandma. Her name was Adeline. She was once a midwife at the hospital in Savannah, and delivered most of the babies born there. Sometimes people came to see her when they could not afford a doctor. She gave them remedies that healed them. Out in back of the shed houses Adeline grew vegetables and herbs in a large garden. She could cook anything with practically nothing. He told us that what we had eaten was bullfrog stew. Remembering in horror the frog in the box, I began violently retching on the side of the road. I forced it all up and swore I would never eat at Nathan’s again. We arrived home well after dark, exhausted and muddy. Mama was on the porch waiting with her willow switch. I thought a lot that night about Nathan’s mama just up and leaving.

I wasn’t allowed to go with Trent and Nathan on any more adventures. I was kept at home and forced to stay in the house. Mama tried to teach me to sing. She had a beautiful singing voice. It wasn’t long before she realized her gift did not pass on to me. One lesson I messed up a note badly. Suddenly her leg shot out and kicked me hard in the shin. It hurt so bad

I screamed, and Daddy came running inside. Being around Mama so much made me nervous. I bit my nails down so far they bled. Mostly, I tried to stay away from her. I think Daddy must have felt badly for me, because after a week or so he took me out to the barn with him. I liked the smell of the hay and petting the baby calves. Daddy taught me to ride Trent's mare and I got pretty good at it. I was putting her away one day when I heard laughing coming from out back of the barn. I found Trent and Nathan at one of the bull pens messing with a huge brown bull. A silver ring thick with snot hung from the beast's nose. I immediately had a very bad feeling.

Nathan was explaining to Trent how to stay on. Trent had connected a bunch of Daddy's old leather belts and was reaching in the pen trying to tighten the makeshift strap around the bull's massive belly. Every time he got close the bull lurched away. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I began yelling at them and spooked the bull. He swung his enormous head at Trent and I saw my brother fall down underneath him. Nathan tried to help him up, but the bull charged Trent. It gored him with its horns. I heard him cry out and saw blood seeping through his shirt. I ran to the house screaming. Before I was half way there, my daddy flew out the door and hopped over the porch railing like a jackal. He sprinted to the bull pen, but Trent was already on his feet. The strap hung loose around the belly of the bull, and Trent's shirt was covered in blood. I saw Mama coming and ran to the house and into my room. I was convinced that Trent was going to die. If not from the injury, the beating would kill him for sure. The old truck tore out of the farm and onto the highway with my mama and daddy and Trent, and I didn't know if I would ever see my brother again.

I paced the floor for several hours waiting for them to return. When the truck pulled in the driveway I was relieved to see that Trent was with them. He had a bandage wrapped around his ribs and had gotten some stitches. Mama spoke softly to him and helped him into the house. She even put him to bed and brought him water. Trent would not speak to me at all. I caught one hell of a lashing that night, but I wasn't sure why. Much like Adeline's stew, my mama was sweet as could be on the surface, but there was something real ugly

underneath.

The Indians up here call horses *ahaso*. They welcome me onto the reservation to photograph their herd. While on the reservation, I am forbidden to take photos of any of the people. Some of the elders still believe the camera will steal your soul, and it becomes trapped in the photograph forever. I can definitely understand that.

For Christmas that year I was given a horse of my own. It was a young bay gelding I named Willow. I was thrilled at first, until I tried to ride him. He threw me off at every opportunity, spinning and bucking and throwing his head down. One day I saddled up and led him out of the barn. I could see Trent and Nathan by the riverbank and wanted to go sit with them, but I knew they would just get up and walk away from me like they always did. I rode Willow out past the barn and headed for the field. Something startled him and he jumped and bucked, and off I went. This time I landed on my arm and my head hit the ground. Willow took off galloping and I began to cry. I just laid there until I saw Trent standing over me. He had my horse with him. He told me to get up and I followed him to an empty pen. Trent and Nathan took turns riding Willow. They rode him for me every day and taught me how to stop him from bucking me off. I even let Nathan borrow him to ride off with Trent. They disappeared for hours at a time. I hardly ever got to ride my horse again, but at least they were finally talking to me.

My favorite photograph is one I captured in Maine of a tiny church near the ocean. The water was choppy and white-capped waves rose up behind it. The little church had been abandoned for some time, and reed grass grew up around it. Through the lens of my camera, I could see myself standing there; a young girl of nine or ten, with blonde curls and a blue gingham dress. The thing about it was I couldn't see her face, the haunted eyes, or the sorrowful smile. I haven't been to church since I left Tennessee. I wasn't even married in one. I don't really know why I put religion aside, I just made the decision and that was it.

Some of my fondest memories were of riding the bus that picked us up for Sunday school. Trent and I always sat in the farthest seat in the back. The bus flew over the bumpy dirt

roads and we bounced so high sometimes we hit our heads on the roof. I lost my stomach in the dips and ditches but it was a feeling you just couldn't get anywhere else. The Reverend Myles Sampson drove our bus and we sang "Jesus is the Rock of My Salvation" and the older kids in the front passed chaw. The reverend pretended not to see them. Getting off the bus was tricky. We made it a game to avoid the spit puddles on the floor. When the old bus finally broke down for good it was the end of Sunday school. Most of the kids lived too far away and many had no way to get there. We were forced to attend church with the adults. Every Sunday morning we put on our church clothes and piled into the truck. Trent got to ride in the back. He was the lucky one. I sat in the cab between my parents. The shifter was on the floor in front of me. Sometimes Daddy made me shift. Mamma hated that. Every time Daddy yelled "Second!" I pulled the shifter back and Mama would slap me. Then he would yell "Third!", and I would get slapped even harder. I often arrived at church with my arms and face covered in angry red blotches. Mama told everyone it was Scarlet Rash.

One Sunday morning Mama called us to get dressed for church, and Trent asked if Nathan could come. Mama said no, but Daddy argued about denying a boy the word of God, and she finally gave in. When we were ready, Mama stomped to the truck and slammed the door hard. I sat straight and still in the cab and I dared not look at her. When we arrived at church she jumped from the truck and the door slammed shut again before I could even get out. I crawled over to Daddy's door. Reverend Sampson was at the door of the church greeting everyone. The reverend was a man I respected. I enjoyed his sermons and the way he made everyone stand up and sing. At the start of every service, he raised his hands up to God and asked forgiveness for all of our sins. I appreciated that as I did not want to get struck down by lightning.

I walked into church with Trent and Nathan and behind us was Maddie Thompson. She was a rather large woman who always smelled strongly of body odor. Her lips appeared permanently fixed in a crimson scowl. Maddie was in the choir with Mama. They practiced together on Sunday afternoons. We didn't make it to the front row where Mama was sitting.

Maddie suddenly reached out and grabbed Nathan by the arm and steered him back toward the door. She was saying something about disrespecting the church and pointing to his bare feet. She said there was a church for river people and this wasn't it. Everyone in the church stood to watch. Mama sat in her seat staring straight ahead. Daddy ran down the aisle after Nathan. Reverend Sampson was trying to calm everyone down. In all of my life I had never yet seen my daddy mad. His face turned redder than Maddie's lips and he stood up real straight and told her to take her hands off of the boy. Then he put an arm around Nathan and led him back to sit with us. I could hear Nathan's stifled sobs and see him shaking. I tried to hold his hand but he pulled it away and stared at the floor. The heavy door of the church banged shut behind us. Reverend Sampson marched purposefully down the aisle and up to the altar. He turned to face all of us and he looked so sad like he was about to cry himself. His lips were trembling but they broke into a smile that covered his entire face. Then he did the most remarkable thing. Slowly he reached down and removed his shoes. He kicked them away hard and raised his hands and asked God to forgive us. He said we were all God's children and all the same in His eyes. I looked down our row and saw Daddy removing his shoes. Then Trent took his off too. All around me I heard the beating of a hundred drums as shoes continued to hit the wood floor. Nathan never looked up through the entire service.

Reverend Sampson read from Hebrews. He spoke about brotherly love and welcoming strangers. His voice boomed and echoed through the church. He swayed from side to side as he sang, and the barefoot congregation sang with him. The collection plate was overflowing when the afternoon sun shone through the windows. Flecks of dust were floating in the light. I imagined the floating specks to be the words of God. They were swirling in every direction as if they were dancing. I thought maybe God had a lot to say that day.

I chose photography as an elective in college while I was working on my accounting degree. It was a nice change of pace and I discovered I had a knack for it. The camera does something for my soul. At times, I am not sure if it harms or heals. I guess that depends on the memories it conjures. We

studied photographing people, and our instructor told us to capture moments, not just people. That didn't make sense to me at first. It seemed I could never capture a moment. Then I took my camera with me everywhere, and I started snapping pictures of people interacting. I caught one of a man and a woman kissing. They were on a bench in the park and I took the shot from behind them. The sun was just beginning to set, painting the sky in pink and orange. It reminded me of the first time Nathan kissed me. It changed my life forever.

We were behind the barn waiting for Trent to finish feeding. I was catching lightning bugs and closing them up in my hand, making the gaps between my fingers glow. Nathan got this funny look about him, and just suddenly leaned down and kissed me on the lips. I felt all fluttery inside like I could take off any second. I also felt terribly guilty all night and the next day, until he kissed me again. That time I thought for sure I would float away. We became the quietest of thieves, stealing kisses whenever we could, until someone spotted us and told my mama. One night before bed the door to my room flew open and there she stood. The moonlight through my window illuminated the willow in her hand. I knew it was bad when she started calling me terrible names. Daddy ran up the stairs behind her but she slammed my door and locked it. I heard him and Trent banging on the door, yelling frantically for her to stop. There was no escaping the eerily glowing rod. The dreaded fate of a sinner was finally upon me as lightning flashed and found its mark. I don't remember much else, except for the bite of the switch on my skin over and over. I must have passed out before Daddy broke the door down, because Trent said he saved me but I don't remember that either. The only thing I recall is waking up at Adeline's house as she covered the welts in thick healing clay. The pungent paste was coated all over my skin but for days the deep gouges still burned. I felt as if my entire body was on fire. Adeline insisted I drink some soup and I protested loudly about the bullfrogs. "Silly girl," she chuckled, "there are no frogs whatsoever in bullfrog stew." I have kept her secret all of these years.

I didn't want to leave Adeline but Daddy came to get me two weeks later. I was all scabbed up and large patches of my

hair were missing where Mama pulled it out. Daddy didn't say much, but I caught him staring at me in the truck. He told me that Mama wasn't there anymore. I never asked where she went.

When I returned home life went on as normally as it could. Mama never did come back, but I was always watchful. Nathan was my ever-present protector. Sometimes people asked me about Mama.

They asked me where she was, and I told them she left.

They asked me "Did she die?"

I said "No, she just left."

Melanie Unruh

Shove

We weren't one of those families that paid attention, not to each other anyway. Ours were superficial bonds, often centered on the outside world. Together we watched in dismay when the Phillies choked in the 1993 World Series. We all shook our heads as Bill Clinton backpedaled away from Monica into his impeachment trial. On September 11th, those of us still at home gathered around the television again, staring dumbly at the chaos on the screen, unable to find the words to comfort ourselves, let alone each other. From the outside we looked like any other suburban nuclear family: father-mother-daughter-daughter. But the façade fell away once Jenna left.

We were sad when she went away but none of us commented on the real effects of her absence. Instead, we noted the little things. Our water bill went down. The boy next door stopped cracking his blinds, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jenna with her clothes off. We no longer bought pears or licorice, not when she was the only one who ate them.

I was sure she was having the time of her life. At 14, she had left me, her nine-year-old sister, alone with our train-wreck parents to live with Katherine and Ed Cooper, family friends who lived hundreds of miles away, and who were all too happy to accommodate her escape from us. They were ten years younger than our parents, the fun, surrogate aunt and uncle, who lived on a farm and belonged to a community Scrabble league. Late at night, the downstairs floorboards would creak while my mother paced, waiting for my father to get home, and I would lie awake, trying to imagine my sister's new life: riding horses, learning unique words that began with q, planning themed birthday parties.

When she lived with us, Jenna's favorite thing to do was provoking our parents. She failed two classes and had to take summer school after 7th grade; she tried to shave her head but Mom heard the buzzing of the clippers and managed to stop her before she could do more than her bangs; she showed

up at dinner one night with a little black heart on the inside of her wrist, which my father tried to scrub off, only to realize that Jenna had found someone willing to tattoo a 14-year-old. The walls shook at night as my parents fought and threw whatever was at hand: a hairbrush, a clock radio, a glass of half-melted ice. But as soon as they made the decision to send Jenna away, as soon as Katherine and Ed stepped in and said *We can help her*, it was as if someone had sucked all the rage out of our house. For two weeks before she left, my sister went to school, did the dishes after dinner, and watched me while our parents muddled through therapy.

Everything seemed great until she got on the bus and headed west. Once it was just the three of us, the fights stopped, only to be replaced by silence. My parents tried to use me as a medium—*Claire, tell your father the garbage can stinks. Claire, tell your mother her tumblers are leaving rings on the coffee table*—so I made myself scarce. I was clumsy and prone to sunburn, but I joined the soccer team and ended up playing for five years just to have a reason to be gone. When I was home, I had my nose in a book. Our only “family time” was on Friday nights, when we ate pizza and watched the news or a baseball game together.

My sister had left no trail of breadcrumbs to follow. The first year, I called her once a week, eager for the words I knew she was going to say. *You can come live here, too*. Instead, she would tell me about a football game she went to or how the Coopers were paying her an allowance for helping in the garden and mucking horse stalls, and she was saving up to buy a leather jacket.

I began telling people I was an only child.

It's been three years since Jenna moved out of the Coopers' house and went to Penn State. She's home with us now for winter break. My parents' divorce has been final for a year, and Dad just moved to Virginia with his new wife and baby. The Coopers drove in from Ohio yesterday and are staying in town with Katherine's cousin. Mom wants to do something nice for them—they helped raise her daughter, after all—so she's arranged a dinner for three days after Christmas. Katherine thought it would be fun to surprise Jenna, who

hasn't seen them since she moved back to Pennsylvania for school.

Mom sends me to the pizza place down the street and when I return, straining to carry the unwieldy stack of boxes, my shoes full of melted snow, the Coopers have arrived. The children, Kyle and Casey, are chasing our senile cat Henry around the living room. I set the pizzas down on the dining room table and approach Katherine and Ed, who are chatting with Mom.

"Claire Bear!" they exclaim in unison. No one else is allowed to call me this, not even my own family. Katherine and Ed still look the same. She's a diminutive woman, whose large chest and bright blue eyes compete for her most striking feature, and he's brawny and tall, his grin half-hidden by his copper mustache.

"I have a new word for you," I tell them. Once upon a time, I played this game, hoping they would realize I was more valuable than Jenna, but now I do it out of habit.

"Lay it on us," Katherine says, her eyes fixed on me.

"Quixotry. Q-u-i-x—"

"Claire," Mom calls, coming up behind me and tugging on a strand of my dirty blond hair, as though this is a regular affectionate gesture between us. "Go help your sister in the kitchen."

I find my sister in the pantry, blank eyes fixated on canned goods. "I think Mom moved the plates," she murmurs. After I show her that they're in the same place they've always been, I ask if she's okay.

"Yeah," she says. "Still just decompressing from this semester."

I gather cups from the dishwasher. "Isn't it great they're here? I can't even remember the last time we saw them. Do you think Ed will tell the story about—?"

"I'm tired," she says flatly. "I hope this doesn't become a late night thing."

When we enter the dining room, everyone is all smiles and anecdotes, even Jenna. It isn't until later that I recall the way she looked when Ed hugged her, like the rigid exoskeleton of a bug that crawled away.

Diary Dear,
You would probably accuse me of lying. Embellishment. Whatever you want to call it. I know what I've said, though, so I don't need you to dissect me for the truth. Can you spot the lie, anyway?

A. I put my little sister, Claire, in the freezer once. It was a huge one and she was only in there for a second, but her eyes were almost bugging out of her head when I reopened the door. I offered her a grape Popsicle and she burst into tears.

B. My family was supposed to drive from PA to Ohio for my high school graduation. Two days before the ceremony, Claire called to say that Dad had spent the trip money on a new set of golf clubs. They sent me a card instead.

C. Ed's penis was uncircumcised. It tasted like sweat and sometimes underwear lint, but never like Katherine.

What's that? I didn't think so.

-J

On New Year's Eve the temperature drops to ten below zero. People interviewed about it on the news complain, but one woman declares that it's a sign we are freezing out our troubles so we can start over with a clean slate. Mom says she can't believe they put nuts like her on TV.

Jenna is out buying booze for a party she and her friend Stephanie are going to in the city. Stephanie arrives before Jenna and I hunker down on the living room couch with Henry and *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* so she won't see me. She and my sister have been friends since middle school, and she has the most obnoxious, high-pitched voice I've ever heard. The last thing I want is that voice asking me about my "high school experience." Mom invites her into the kitchen, and neither seems to notice me. Their voices hum like grating white noise, until Stephanie uses the word *secret*, and my ears perk up. The book drops onto my chest, forgotten. Henry rubs his whiskers against my hand and I absentmindedly stroke his coarse, bony back.

After I can't listen anymore, after Mom starts weeping, I sneak outside to the porch swing and pull my knees into my chest. Overhead, the moon looks like a fat, white hole ripped in the night sky.

Did I mishear them?

Jenna's blue Honda skids into the driveway. She's on her phone so she doesn't see me sitting beneath the dim porch light. Even in her thick brown pea coat, she is tiny. I could never wear her clothes, the leftovers she dumped in her closet when she visited, because I have my mother's "wide-set hips," as Dad likes to say, and my father's "elephant feet," as Mom calls them. My sister can't be more than a size two.

She and Stephanie emerge from the house and jog down the steps. Their breath looks smoky in the cold air as they talk. I study their body language. Does Stephanie have any idea I heard? Does Jenna know Stephanie told Mom?

"Jenna," I call out.

They both look up, startled.

"You better go inside or you'll freeze," is all Jenna says before they get into her car and drive away. Stephanie never once makes eye contact with me.

I find my mother at the kitchen table, a tall, clear bottle of Absolut Vodka in front of her. "Mom, you shouldn't—" I begin, and she holds up her hand to silence me.

On my way upstairs, I hear the freezer door creak open as she rummages for ice.

We were driving to the mall to go Christmas shopping. I was seven and Jenna was twelve. Mom found a station playing "Silver Bells" and turned it up. Dad glared at her. He spun the knob back the other way so the music was inaudible. "I have a headache," he said.

"Jesus, what was I thinking putting on Christmas music in December?" Mom smacked her forehead.

"Seriously?" Dad muttered.

"You know what, Leo? Fuck you. *Fuck you* and this holiday."

Dad's dark eyes found us in the rearview mirror. "Did you hear that, girls? Your mother just canceled Christmas." He got into the left lane and made an abrupt U-turn.

"What are you doing?" Mom demanded. "We still have to—"

I tried to think of the lyrics to "Silver Bells." I began humming it, forcing out any sound I could manage.

Jenna blew on the window and traced a flower on the steamed glass.

“ . . . some fucking nerve . . . ”

“ . . . probably shouldn't be at the mall anyway . . . just steal something again . . . ”

I stopped humming and elbowed my sister in the ribs. But she shook her head, refusing to look at me. She had already checked out.

Dearest,
I have a boyfriend. His locker is above mine in the underclassman hallway. He invited me to his house today and made me a peanut butter sandwich. Then I let him put his little mushroom dick in me. Not sure if he could tell he wasn't the first. None of this counts, anyway—I can do this thing now where I'm not even in my body when someone else is inside me. They can do anything and it's like I'm not even there.

He wanted to get drunk on Friday but I didn't feel like it. I told him that when I was seven I lost half my liver in a bad car accident, so now I can't drink alcohol. I hope he doesn't ever catch me drinking with my friends because then he'll call me a liar. He wouldn't be the first. I could have been in a bad car accident when I was seven. It sounds familiar, actually. Maybe he's not really my boyfriend . . .

-J

I don't go out for New Year's. I know of one party, but the thought of being around a bunch of drunk, handsy varsity soccer players turns my stomach, so I stay home and go to bed early, trying to ignore the sounds of my mother's unrest. Well past midnight, the bottle of Absolut half empty—nothing she touches is ever half full—Mom picks up the phone.

I don't know when Katherine realized Mom had a drinking problem. Maybe she always knew. But then why didn't she try to rescue me, too? It's easy to discredit the rantings of a drunk. In fact, if you first hear of something so unimaginable from a lifelong alcoholic, you can shut down any further discussion, no matter where it comes from. I know the kinds of things that Katherine, an attorney, who Dad once said had a reputation for being a courtroom bully, must have said, those ice blue eyes narrowed. *It's pathetic that instead of trying*

to understand your own family's problems, you're trying to create them for us. Why would Jenna have continued to stay here if something like that happened?

When Jenna gets home the next morning, Mom is a mixture of anger, grief, and pride as she tells her about the phone call. Jenna's hair is in a ratty ponytail, her eyes bloodshot and sleep-deprived. I don't dare tell her how much she looks like Mom after a binge. Mom sits hunched on the couch with a red and black afghan over her shoulders, her hair matted to her head like clumps of gray-brown seaweed. "This is all my fault. Why did I let you go?" she wails.

I creep back into the kitchen to finish making eggs for my mother, and to arrange the orange juice, water, and Aspirin on the calico kitten breakfast tray. Jenna appears beside me. "Get your coat," she says, pulling her boots back on, grabbing her keys from the table.

She drives too fast on the icy streets. I don't tell her to slow down.

"I guess you know what's going on," she says and I nod. "Goddamned Stephanie. I can't believe I even *told* her. I was wasted. I'm no fucking better than Mom."

"Are you okay?"

She rounds a corner and we fishtail, just missing an embankment.

"Oh, I'm great. You got to stay with Mom and Dad and I went to live with a beloved pedophile. Fantastic."

"Why didn't you come back?" I ask.

"Did you know that my name isn't Jenna?"

"Huh?" I say, clutching my seat as we take another sharp turn.

"Dad left Mom when she was pregnant with me. He wasn't even there when I was born. So Mom decides to call me—get this—*Rose*." She lets out a hollow laugh. "A few months later, Dad's back and he hates the name, so they change it without even making it legal. I just found out last year when I needed my birth certificate."

I feel sick. The list of the things I can't begin to process is getting too long. Jenna makes a hard right into the local park. She cuts the engine and gets out, headed toward the wooden bridge that arches over the half-frozen creek. I watch

her, unable to move. *She might throw herself in*, I think, and then I'm out the door, slipping on the thin coating of snow on the ground as I chase her.

She reaches the bridge and swings her short legs over the railing. I sprint the last fifty feet and throw my arms around her waist. "What are you doing?" she asks, but doesn't try to move me. We remain that way, her sitting on the edge of the bridge, me with my arms around her midsection, my forehead against her back. It's the most physical contact we've had since we were kids.

I relent first, releasing her and rubbing my gloveless fingers together. Jenna straddles the railing. Tufts of her wavy brown hair protrude from under her purple knit cap: a gift from Katherine and Ed, I remember. Their presence is everywhere. How can she stand it? I tear the hat off her head and throw it. It lands in the creek, and instead of rushing away, it lies there undisturbed, a purple stain on the frosted surface of the water.

She gazes down at the hat. "Maybe I wanted to keep it."

I fight the urge to shove her over.

D*ear Much-Neglected Diary,*
I've had this recurring dream for years. It starts with Claire painting my toenails. At first I think she's painting them red, but then I realize I'm bleeding. She's elbow-deep in my blood, but she keeps sweeping the wand across my bloody nail beds anyway. I can't seem to tell her what's wrong.

Dad appears and turns on the TV. He laughs. I'm rooted in my chair, unable to speak, and now my feet burn, as if they're being sawed off. I glance down and instead of Claire, my mother is there on her knees, gnawing on my feet. Claire has joined Dad in front of the TV. They laugh. I try to wave at them, to kick Mom away, but it's no use.

Someone speaks. I can't understand what's been said; it sounds like a nonsense language, all vowels or something, but I turn. There's a man at the door with his hands extended toward me. He is a dark, faceless shadow, but I know him. He takes me in his arms and together we melt into the gloom.

-J

Jenna and I sat on the Coopers' leather sofa watching *The Price is Right*. She was fifteen; I was ten. I thought all grandfathers must be like Bob Barker—gangly, tan, clad in three-piece suits—because I never knew either of mine. Mom and Katherine had gone outlet shopping to celebrate Katherine's first pregnancy. Dad and Ed were in the barn, ostensibly looking at Ed's new tractor, but probably smoking cigars.

"Is the baby going to be like a little sister or brother to you?" I asked Jenna.

She shoveled a handful of popcorn into her mouth and chewed. When she didn't respond, I continued. "What's it like being here all the time? Is your school nice? Does Ed snore as bad as he did that one time we all stayed at that hotel?"

Jenna snatched the remote from me. "Shut the fuck up, will you?"

I didn't understand. The handful of times my parents and I went to Ohio, my sister would never leave my side, even insisting I sleep in bed with her. But then she acted like she didn't even want me there.

When Kyle was born, the Coopers sent a picture of Jenna holding him. She was smiling, but she had dark rings under her eyes. Both of their faces had a raw, pink look, like the underside of a scab. I threw the photo away without showing it to my parents.

The yelling wakes me early in the morning. I drag myself to the top of the stairs and slump against the wooden banister.

"That's it? He just gets away with what he did?"

"What do you want from me? It's too late now."

"So you preferred living with a *child molester* over your own family?"

My sister laughs. "Maybe I did. What'd you ever do for me?"

Mom gasps.

"I'm going. Tell Claire bye for me."

The front door slams. I run back to my bed and feign sleep, but Mom shakes me until I have to pretend to wake up. "I need you to go to the store for me."

"I'm not buying you vodka."

My mother draws her lips into a tight, pale bow. I think she might strike me, but instead she hands me a wad of money and a grocery list. She doesn't seem to care that I only have my permit, so I take the keys and drive her dingy Chevy to the Acme.

I have to circle the store multiple times because her list is so disorganized. Each time I pass the same pyramid display of reindeer-shaped cookies, I want to ram my cart into it. As I examine a package of "cheese product", and debate if Mom will notice it's not cheddar, a man calls out, "Hey, Claire Bear!"

I turn to find him towering over me, grinning, and I fight the urge to recoil. I imagine bugs nesting in his thick mustache, the stench of old sweat on his breath, the dead skin of a teenage girl lurking beneath his fingernails. I'm rooted behind my cart.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

Ed laughs. He holds up a plastic jug of maple syrup. "Pancake run. I drew the short straw." When I make no response, he frowns. "Is everything all right?"

"Uh-huh." I grind my nails into the cart handle and nod.

"Well, c'mere and give me a hug. Who knows when I'll see you next?"

I allow his heavy arms to crush me against him. He pulls back and tweaks my nose. "You say hi to everyone for me," he says.

I sprint to the check-out line. Mom can live without split pea soup and jelly. I drive around until I end up at the park. The car idles in the January chill, clouds of exhaust billowing up behind me, whiter than the snow, now discolored from footprints and dog piss. My cheeks burning with tears, I beat my fists against the steering wheel. I picture Jenna sitting on the bridge railing and recall my desire to shove her. I might as well have.

Dear *Soon-to-Be-Burned-Diary*,
The first time, I'm listening to Radiohead. Exit Music (for a Film). Headphones over my ears, sprawled across the bed on my stomach, facing the window. I never hear the door. Never hear it when he comes in. His sudden weight on

the bed jolts me. "You startled me," I say. Or maybe I say, "Hey" or "What's going on?" or "Why are you staring at my ass, Ed?" Or maybe I just punch him in the face. Isn't that the story everyone wants to hear? The girl that something bad almost happens to, but she fights back? Let's go with that. Let's not say that the first time he ties me to the bed with my own scarf and shoves my face down, down, down under the pillows. The headphones at my neck, the music faint. Let's not imagine that afterward, he yanks the scarf until my wrists, chafed, but not the worst of it, fall slack at my sides. Let's believe that he never says, "You say anything, and I'll hurt your sister," before leaving. My face still down, down, down beneath the pillows. Let's not suppose that I'm stupid enough to think that if I stay here, my head submerged, then nothing has really happened at all. I never even hear the door.

-J

I call my sister and it rings half a dozen times before she answers.

"What?" Jenna mumbles, and I can't tell if she's drunk or half-asleep.

"Can I come visit you at school?"

She clears her throat. "I'm fine, Claire. I don't need your help."

"Not everything is about you."

The line goes quiet.

"I'm not allowed to be angry at anyone. What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know," she says, her voice flat.

"I just needed *someone*. Any single one of you. For fuck's sake, I—"

"Don't call me again," she says and hangs up.

In my sister's room, I sit on her narrow childhood bed and wonder what the shape of our lives would have been if she had just stayed.

The summer Jenna turned 17, she came home to visit for three weeks. She took me to get my hair done at a real salon. I don't recall the name of the place anymore, just that I had tea in a Snoopy mug and everyone there called me "sweetheart."

Jenna let me get my hair done like hers, shoulder-length with layers and wispy bangs. After, we stared at ourselves in the mirror. Though our bodies were different, our eyes were the same shade of hazel, our noses prominent, aquiline; even the pattern of freckles on our cheeks had an eerie similarity. The hair only accentuated our sameness.

“We do kinda look alike, don’t we?” I said, fluffing my new hair.

Jenna’s eyes grew glassy and she shook her head. “You don’t want to look like me. What if we had them go a little shorter?” And so we did.

John Etcheverry

If God Were a Woman

Nick laid the back of his hand on the smudged glass of the meat case. Warm. “If you don’t refrigerate this lamb, it goes bad.” He had this discussion with a butcher every week.

“What can I offer you, Brother?” The meat cutter stepped forward wiping his palms across his apron, new blood and grease mingling with the old. His Russian was broken, but far ahead of Nick’s Uzbek. The butcher spit out the pumpkin seed he had been working on and half of the shell clung to his lip as if indecisive about which was the worse fate, the floor below or this man’s mouth. He swiped it away. “I cut that lamb today and I assure you there is no fresher meat on this bazaar. How much do you want, Brother? A kilogram? You would be wise to take a whole leg at these prices.”

He might have cut the meat that morning, but its blackened edges and the shriveled ridge of fat that rimmed the sinewy leg fixed the time of death somewhere in the previous week. “Why don’t you turn this refrigerator on?”

The Uzbek waved his hand, swatting at a fly or perhaps dismissing the superstition of bacteria. He smiled at Nick and pushed the next seed through the space in his mouth where a couple of teeth had gone missing. “That sheep lived a good life without electricity. God willing, he won’t need it in death.”

The trader in the next stall called out from his stool, “I’ll give you a good price on horse sausage, Brother.” He laid his hand upon his chest and vowed, “I’m losing money, but I grant my blessing on your house for saving me the burden of lugging it home tonight.”

Nick declined and told the first man, “I’m looking for a loin.”

“And your beautiful wife?” the butcher asked, peering over Nick’s shoulder. “Perhaps she would prefer a leg?”

The woman behind him had been tailing him since he entered the bazaar and made no effort to conceal herself. Working for the State Department had conditioned Nick to uninvited company, but this woman looked more like

a pickpocket than a security service lackey. “What do you think?” Nick said, turning to her. “The leg or the loin?”

Something flashed in her eyes and Nick couldn’t say what it was, but it was no apology. She stepped forward. “Give the man what he asks for and keep your thumb off the scale.”

The butcher stared her down as he addressed Nick. “This lamb was an extraordinary animal, my friend. I knew it personally. It was special, but it was born with just two loins and I sold them both this morning while your wife was still enjoying her sleep. I can offer you ribs and a foreleg.”

He went with the ribs and they quibbled over the price until Nick lost interest, understanding that haggling was the national pastime here and he was ill equipped for the game. He paid the man, who then wrapped the meat in newspaper and handed the packet to him across the dormant display case.

Nick redistributed his bags to balance his load and refocused his attention on the woman. She had a dark, exotic appeal inclusive of the sundry races that had beset Central Asia over the centuries and her eyes hinted at an eagerness to fight, while the fishhook scar on her cheek revealed that she had survived a skirmish or two. “So?” he asked. “Who are you?”

“I will take you home.”

Her accent melted the icy Russian words and thawed something in Nick. Anyone with a car was a potential cabbie in Uzbekistan, but a woman working behind the wheel was a rarity. “You drive a taxi?”

She shrugged her shoulders, hands pushed into the rear pockets of her jeans. “And what?”

“And nothing,” he said. Only one woman had ever stopped her car for Nick, a human tree trunk on the downslope of her forties whose grandkids flitted around in the back like a couple of caged sparrows and functioned as her chaperones. “What’s your name?”

“I am Asal.”

“I’m Nick.” He reached out his hand and she stared at it as though he had offered a different branch of his anatomy for her consideration. “Why don’t I follow you?” he said, and he reoriented his palm toward the exit.

Asal angled through the crowd to the street and signaled for him to wait at the curb. She crossed to a white Chevrolet Matiz; its windshield had a crack that meandered from the mirror to its bottom right corner, and the fender on the driver's side was crumpled. The front bumper was altogether gone.

She U-turned across traffic to a medley of horns and Nick flagged her down, silencing surrounding conversations. A pair of women in housecoats regarded Asal with folded arms and knit brows, and when one of them caught Nick watching, she fired a scowl right back at him. He settled his bags in the back and hadn't yet seated himself up front when Asal pulled a screwdriver from her door pocket and pressed it under his collarbone.

"Should I take this to mean you don't want me sitting next to you?"

"If you understand that your money pays for transportation only, we will have no problem." She traced his jawline with the screwdriver. "Men have trouble remembering that."

He laid his hand over hers and drew the tool away. Her eye twitched with the contact, but she yielded. "I won't forget," he said. When he reached back for the seatbelt, he saw that the two at the curb were still gawking. "You've got a couple of friends over there."

"Unlike men, women forget nothing."

He waved at the pair and when he pulled the belt around to click the buckle into place, he caught Asal, eyes narrowed, watching him again. "What?"

"I know how to drive."

He looked down at the seatbelt and considered the scrambled cars from a moment earlier, but went with a safe response. "I'm an American."

She mulled that over before easing into the stream of traffic and reached for the volume button on the CD player, then held back. "Why do you speak Russian so well if you are American?"

"I was born there. Saint Petersburg. My mother and I moved to Virginia in the U.S. when I was a kid."

The scar curved with Asal's cheek under her right eye, running about an inch and a half from end to end. The

suturing had been clumsy, yet Nick couldn't deny the allure in the result. He stole a few glances and when she caught him looking he asked, "Did someone tell you to offer me a ride?"

Her face reddened and the tendons tightened over her knuckles as she gripped the steering wheel. "I don't do what people tell me to do."

"Alright, did someone ask you? Pay you?"

"Who are you that someone would ask such a thing of me?"

"Me?" He chuckled. "I'm no one, but I work for the U.S. Embassy and that draws more attention than it should."

She ripped across two lanes to the side of the road and skidded to a stop. Nick was still wrestling with his belt by the time she got out and half-circled the car, spewing a stream of embittered Uzbek as she paced. He caught up to her and she yelled, hands to hips, "The American Embassy?" She kicked the car where the bumper used to be.

He should have gathered his bags, laid a little cash on the hood, and walked away, but he leaned against the fender instead and asked her to explain. She said nothing, just turned back to the car. He was curious now and she was about to take off with his groceries, so he jumped in and the Matiz was rolling before he closed his door. After she maneuvered the car through about twenty squealing turns down side streets and back alleys, Nick told her to stop before he got sick.

"We are nearly there." She pulled over and studied the rearview mirror.

"Nearly where? I haven't told you where I live," he said. Rather than answer, Asal hustled him to a market midway up the block and watched out the window. "Who's after you?" he asked.

"Shh."

He looked around the store. Two workers who showed only a vague interest in the intrusion leaned on their elbows, bulk cookies and crackers sat on the floor in open boxes with no scoops or tongs in sight, and an array of cheeses and sausages languished in a display case. The store was a shadow of the bygone Soviet era, but a single empty Carlsberg beer bottle on a shelf above the unwrapped bread loaves caught his eye.

Uzbekistan law prohibits the sale of alcohol outside state-controlled liquor stores, but booze found its way around and

Nick knew this sign from a shop near his home. He cleared his throat and nodded toward the bottle. The clerk glanced over to the cashier, who signaled back, and Nick raised a single finger. The clerk went to a backroom for a few seconds and returned with a bottle. He paid and twisted the beer open, then drew the bottle to his mouth, eliciting a harmonized gasp from the workers. One of them said something that Nick took as an invitation to leave. He sipped—the beer was warm and a little skunked—and pulled up beside Asal at the window.

The street was narrow, an ancient desert layout meant to maximize the utility of shade in the summer. The design pitted inhabitants atop each other, making privacy elusive and justifying the walls surrounding so many parcels. Nick checked across the street and caught the curtain in a second-floor window stirring as if disturbed by a breeze, though the window was closed.

The muscles in Asal's jaw danced when she saw him taking a long pull from the bottle. She looked around him to the unsettled workers, who glared back at her like Nick was her insolent child and she had better deal with him. "We don't drink in public," she said. She snatched the bottle away and resolved the issue by finishing off the beer. "We will walk from here."

They strolled along an abandoned tramline, where weeds had taken over and a couple of goats grazing between the rails regarded them with noisy bleating. They reached a tumbledown apartment building and Asal pulled the first door, which opened onto two units separated by a staircase that led up to the next level and down to a basement. Somewhere in the building a child was wailing. Asal stepped around a baby stroller loaded with fresh rounds of flatbread and descended the stairs. Nick followed, careful in the dark on the uneven steps.

They went through an unmarked door into a restaurant, where a bearded man who was far too thin to be in the food service business hugged Asal. The men made eye contact and Nick decided that he liked this stranger.

"Laziz," he said, extending his hand. Nick shook and introduced himself, and Laziz sidestepped an assembly of chairs and tables as mismatched as a crowd boarding a train

as he led them to a booth at the back wall. Traditional music played in the background, its complex rhythm discordant to Nick's ear, and a chubby server in slippers broke from her customer to the kitchen.

The three settled in and the server arrived with a decanter of vodka and a vegetable platter. Asal filled the glasses and they drank without toasting, then Nick followed the shot with a wedge of tomato, while the others went with cucumber spears.

"I met with my mother," Asal told Laziz. "I can tell you her anger has not cooled over the years, and as I suspected, they are pressuring her."

"What's going on," Nick asked, "and who are 'they'?" All of a sudden, the room felt too small. "Maybe I should go."

"Pour," she told him, holding her glass out. "Please." Nick filled the glasses and they drank, chasing the booze this time with bread. To Laziz, she said, "He works for the American Embassy."

Laziz pitched his brows like a tent. "Can he help you get a visa?"

Asal assessed Nick as she might scrutinize a goat at the marketplace, and he didn't sense that he came out on top in the comparison. "What do you do?"

"I adjudicate visas."

She raised her palms before Laziz responded. "The Interior Ministry will not give me an exit stamp. A visa makes no difference."

"Can you help her?" Laziz asked Nick.

"Help her? I don't even know her. Who put her at the bazaar today?"

She threw a carrot stick at Nick that went wide and caromed off the wall behind him. "I was there looking for foreigners who pay too much for taxis. No one put me there and by the way you did not pay me."

"I planned to pay you when you got me home, but that didn't happen."

She went for the vegetable tray again, but Laziz caught her wrist. "Can you help her, Nick?"

"I'll do what I can," he said, "which is probably nothing, but only if she tells me why she was following me."

She tugged against Laziz's grip and he held fast. "Tell him," he said. And in a softer tone, "Maybe he can help."

Her eyes looked everywhere but at Nick and she settled her sight on his chest. "I came home from school one day to find my father arranging my marriage to a stranger who was twice my age and smelled of grease. I left that night and never went back. Eleven years have passed since then."

"Her father fled to Dubai two years ago with the family money," Laziz said. "He died recently and the money is held up in the bank. The Ministry of Finance will allow them to release it to her mother if Asal . . ."

If Asal helps them, Nick thought. "So they sent you to the bazaar?"

She shook her head. "Some other people told me you shop at Yunusabad on Saturdays. They said I should find you and give you a ride."

"And they weren't from the Ministry of Finance?"

"No. My mother will never see that money." She muttered to herself and regrouped. "They told me to get to know you, get information from you, and they would forgive a certain problem I have with them. I agreed, but I did not know you are an American diplomat."

Laziz clarified, "It is never good to get caught up in the jurisdictional disputes of our government ministries."

Asal's eyes widened as she spotted something behind Nick. Laziz stiffened at the same time and Nick turned to see a uniformed security services officer looking in at them from the door, and then dart out. "He's going for help," Nick said. "Is there another exit?"

"There are stairs in the kitchen leading to my apartment," Laziz said.

"Go," Nick told them. He moved toward the door as the others went to the kitchen. "Stay away from your car," he called out. "And meet me at the Navoiy Metro stop when you can." Pointing to the wide-eyed customer across the room, he said, "You heard nothing." He reached the door and locked it just ahead of someone turning the handle. A second later, a voice called for him to open up and Nick stalled a long five or six seconds to buy Asal time. He took a slow breath to calm himself, turned the deadbolt, and opened the door to a goon

with his shoulder tucked and poised to charge. Nick smiled and spoke as though greeting guests in his home. "Afternoon, boys."

The trio looked in and one of them, a gray-haired cop, said something to the others while pointing at Nick. He stepped forward and Nick blocked him, jiggling left and then right, feigning confusion.

"Get out of my way."

"I'm sorry. You men are hungry and I'm keeping you from lunch. Pardon me, please." He stepped back and cut in again as the officer moved to pass. The goon, grim presumably because Nick had deprived him of the opportunity to break a door, lurched forward. He was big, but so was Nick and that smile vexed him, but his boss prodded him on.

Asal would have escaped by now and despite Nick's diplomatic immunity, interfering here would get him thrown out of the country, so he stepped aside. He paused on the stairs and listened as Laziz offered the visitors a menu. What came next sounded like chairs and tables being reduced to kindling.

Nick and Asal slipped into his yard and he pressed the outer door closed, relieved. "What is that?" Asal asked.

She was pointing at his truck, a 1994 Ford F-350 Crew Cab that he started driving on his stepfather's dairy the day he could reach the pedals. He savored the looks it drew from colleagues as he toiled through the embassy lot in it. "That's my pickup," he said. "The starter died and it took a month to get a replacement shipped. I was hoping to install it this afternoon."

He opened the front door of the cab and raised a finger to his lips, then reached to her back pocket and removed her telephone. She nodded her understanding and climbed in, then slid across the bench seat while he hustled into the house and tucked the phones away.

"No one can hear us?" Asal asked when he returned.

"I hope they can't. The phones are inside and I pulled the truck battery weeks ago." He set his palms on the wheel. "I don't drive it much, it's too big for getting around in the city, but I like to sit out here. It feels like home."

She looked around, maybe searching for that same lost feeling of home. “How long have you been in Tashkent?”

“Year and a half.”

“You don’t like it.” Her words came out not as a question, but as a universal truth.

He had spent a good measure of time with cows when he was growing up, certain that a bigger world awaited him, but lately he longed for the company of the Holsteins. “I play God at a visa window every day, what’s not to like? Tell me your story.”

She kicked her sandals to the floor and turned to Nick, folding her legs in front of her. “I am single and I live alone so people assume I am a prostitute. Sometimes landlords demand their rent in trade.”

“You’ve lived this way eleven years?” Nick couldn’t imagine that nightmare, but he understood that there are times when the only way to escape the cold is to burrow down beneath it.

“I am not proud of what I have had to do to survive,” Asal said, “nor am I ashamed that I have survived.”

He might have reached out to her, but saw how that would have been a greater comfort to him, than to her. “What sort of trouble are you in?”

“There was an apartment owner named Ravshan. After I had been at his place a week he started coming around, touching.”

“I’m sorry—”

She held up her hand to silence him. “Men have forced themselves on me. Even the police, when they found me asleep in my car one night. Ravshan tried and I ran the screwdriver into him.” Nick’s breath caught in his chest and Asal reduced her voice. “He understood before he died that he was a pig.”

“Jesus. What did you do after that?”

“I have not told this story except to Laziz,” she said. “I dragged him to the street like garbage and left him there with his face in the gutter.”

“No one suspected you?”

“Everyone suspected me.” Her grin was tight, sardonic. “His wife came the next day and threw me out, but not before bringing the police. She told them I was his . . . Do you know our expression ‘neighborhood wife’?” Nick said that he did.

“They harassed me for months,” Asal continued, “but proved nothing. Laziz told them I was with him that night.”

“He took quite a risk for you.”

She leaned in. “Laziz is homosexual.” Nick nodded. “And sex between men is illegal here.” Again, he confirmed his understanding. “Revealing to police that he enjoys the company of a woman will not harm him.”

Unless his doing so got in the way of a conviction or some other agenda, Nick thought, and he presumed that they offered her a deal to work against him in exchange for her acquittal. “Jesus,” he repeated, and Asal said nothing, just watched him. She hadn’t struck him as religious, so he asked, “Do you even believe in God?”

“Of course.”

Nick chuckled, perplexed by her conviction as much as by the fact that he found humor in anything just now. “You seem so sure.”

“A cruel god is the only explanation I can find for my life. A god who keeps us for his personal entertainment. Are you going to help me?”

“Would your god find that entertaining?” He was smiling and she kicked him, but rested her foot against his thigh. “I can’t get you to America,” he said.

“I see.” She looked out the passenger window as though they were cruising down a rural Virginia highway, taking in the sights.

“But you don’t need to go to there. You just need to get out of here.”

She spoke at the windshield. “I can’t go anywhere unless you give me information that I can exchange for an exit stamp. I am not asking for that.”

“It’s an hour and a half to the border.” He pointed to the rear seat. He’d have to work on the frame, but she would fit behind it. “The Uzbeks can’t check me and the Kazakhs won’t bother.” Nick had been through the crossing at Yalama twice and knew that they fast-tracked cars with diplomatic plates. “I can get you out if you think you can start over in Kazakhstan.”

“Why would you do this for me? I would have given them any information I got from you.”

He wasn't so sure of that. "I came here looking for an adventure and I think I just found it."

"You are too trusting." She sat up beside him and laid a palm to his knee. "God is going to have fun with you."

"Your god might. Your god is a bitter old woman who sits back cackling as a cat torments a mouse, and then drowns the cat when she gets bored."

Asal erupted into laughter. "If God were a woman, she would have left me to die years ago." She pushed him to get him moving.

Nick smiled with her. "Why would she do that?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know if I am the cat or the mouse, but you have witnessed yourself that women do not find me entertaining." She reached for her sandals. "Are we going to repair that starter motor?"

"I'll go get my tools," Nick said. He left her to strap her sandals and turned back to the house.

Matthew Callan

I Need to Know If You Have the Mask

I need to know if you have the mask. The one I'm wearing. Can you hear me okay? I know it's hard to hear me sometimes when I'm wearing this thing even if the voice box isn't working. I hope you don't mind if I don't take the mask off. I feel more comfortable with it on.

The mask I'm looking for is part of the Shutojin Action Set that comes with a dart gun and targets. I don't need that other stuff but the set is the only thing you can buy that has the mask with the voice box. I saw some regular masks hanging up in the Halloween aisle but those won't do me any good. If I don't have a mask with a working voice box when I pick up Brandon he will freak out. Worse than freak out. Freak out doesn't even begin to cover it.

Brandon is obsessed with this show. Brandon's my son. He's four. He watches nothing else. I don't know how it started. We didn't like to plop him in front of the TV at home because my husband thinks too many parents do that and their kids wind up total zombies sitting there for hours on end. But then Brandon must have seen Shutojin somewhere. One day I picked him up from day care and it was all he wanted to talk about. He wouldn't say where he saw the show though. He was talking about the show like it had always been a part of his life. So I put it on for him when we got home and that was the end of no TV in the house. You make all these rules for your home and then you send your kid out in the world where they don't believe in your rules. All the stupid baby books I read before Brandon was born and none of them ever mentioned that.

Shutojin came from a distant planet that was blown up by the evil Kanjumon Klan and now the Klan is threatening earth. The Klan is hidden all over the world and Shutojin must find all its members before the Klan can unite and create a force that will destroy humanity. That's what they say over the opening credits of the show. I have it memorized. We

can't watch anything else at home now. I have 200 episodes on my DVR and thank god I do because it's not available on-demand anymore. I tried to get in touch with someone at the cable company to find out why it's not available on-demand anymore but I couldn't figure out who I should talk to. I work for the cable company and I can't even get a straight answer from them. Actually I work for their customer service call center and we're contracted so I don't work for them directly. But still. You'd think they could do me a favor. I'm the person who has to field the calls when someone's screaming bloody murder at me when their own favorite show isn't available on-demand anymore. As if it was my decision. I have to calm them down and if nothing else works I give them a free month of HBO and they're always happy to get it. I'm not supposed to give that out to everybody but it makes them feel better so why not.

It's so different now. When I was a kid you had to wait for kid shows to come on. You got home from school and you had this tiny window when all your favorite shows were on. And then the 6 o'clock news started and that was the end of that. All grown up stuff from that point on. But kids today can watch whatever they want whenever they want and they know they can too. Brandon has no concept that he can't watch a show at the precise moment he wants to. Once just to get a break I tried to tell him Shutojin wasn't on TV right then. He looked at me like I was speaking foreign language. It's a completely alien concept to him that there are only certain times when you can enjoy the things you like.

My friends without kids ask me if I've seen season 6 of this show or that show and I tell them I haven't even seen season 1 of whatever it is because the only thing we can watch in the house is Shutojin. If Brandon's in the house Shutojin has to be on the TV and I have to sit on the couch alongside him and watch every minute. Sometimes Brandon makes us watch the same episode three or four times in a row or he makes me rewind the bits that he really likes and he grabs my arm super tight the whole time and won't let go. When my husband asks Brandon if he wants to watch something else he says, What do you mean something else? Like it's never occurred to him that other shows might exist.

The Action Set is hard to find because the toy company stopped making it. I don't think the show is as popular as it used to be although Brandon wouldn't know that. If you go on eBay people want crazy money for the Action Set now. I paid through the nose for one just to have an extra mask in the house. The seller's description said it was in mint condition but when it came in the mail the packaging was open and the voice box didn't work. Sometimes I luck out and I find an Action Set at dollar store like yours. I was hoping luck was on my side today.

The voice boxes break easily. One second they're working and the next poof. I think it's from moisture. It gets very humid behind this thing. It's a lot like those plastic Halloween masks they made when I was a kid. The ones with the tiny mouth holes that could cut your tongue. Your breath condenses on the inside of this mask and I think the electronics can't handle the humidity. When the voice box is working everything you say through the mask sounds just like Shutojin. But when the voice box shuts off mid-sentence Brandon can't handle it. He hears my real voice and starts screaming at the top of his lungs. It's not a tantrum. It's true terror.

It only happens with me. Brandon's fine with my husband. He can play with Brandon for hours and Brandon's happy as can be. When Brandon was playing I mean. Brandon used to like to go to the park and ride his bike but now he doesn't want to do anything but watch Shutojin. My husband can take the show for maybe two minutes. He says the voices drive him nuts and he'll go off to the bedroom to read instead. Or look at his phone or whatever. I can't get Brandon to bed before 10 on most nights and by the time I get to bed my husband's fast asleep. At least Brandon lets my husband leave. If I get up even to grab a drink from the fridge Brandon pulls on my arm and says I can't go anywhere because I'll miss something. He won't let me pause the show. I remember being annoyed by the voices too because I thought they were super high pitched and hyper-rushed spitting out these long nonsense speeches like, If we don't get to Dagon Mountain before the next Haruman Moon then the Rikkien Invaders will be unstoppable. They don't annoy me anymore because they're in my life so much now. It would be like being annoyed at the sky.

Maybe you can look up the set in the computer. It's SKU 073145672399. I can't believe I've memorized that. I had it written in a note on my phone so I could pull it up at a moment's notice at the customer service desk. If I had a nickel for every customer service desk I've stood at in the last few months I wouldn't have to work at a call center I'll tell you that. Then one day I was at customer service at the Target near here and the lady asked me what I was looking for and the SKU came out of my mouth before I could reach for my phone. It was a weird feeling. I felt accomplished but also like maybe this was an accomplishment I shouldn't be proud of.

I have to pick up Brandon at preschool in an hour. He's fine at preschool. He's never had any problems there. No fights or tantrums. He's learning his letters and numbers and all of that. The counselors always tell me how sweet he is to them and to the other kids. But if I show up at day care and I'm not wearing a Shutojin mask with a working voice box he'll scream at the top of his lungs. It's awful. He can almost sound like a grown up when he does it. His voice goes down an octave. At least. If you were walking past our apartment while he's screaming you'd swear someone was being murdered.

No. That's the Lupojin mask. Shutojin can turn into a wolf-eagle kind of thing called the Lupojin. He can turn into a lot of things but that's the only other mask they make. Even if it had a voice box in it I'd be afraid to try it because I know what works and I feel like I can't take a chance on what might work. And it doesn't have a voice box. So.

I'm sorry. Can you check again? I really need to find this mask right now. I used to have a bunch of extra masks at home but I've burned through them all. The first thing I did when I left work was to go home and check under the sink because I stashed an unopened Action Set down there. But when I got under the sink I saw there was a little leak in the elbow pipe and the leak had been dripping on the package for who knows how long. Of course when I ripped open the Action Set the voice box didn't work. I was so mad I flung it across the room and it crashed against the front door and broke into a million pieces. I didn't even stop to clean it up. Ran right back to the car and raced to the mall. Toys R Us didn't have any. They haven't had any for months but I had to

check. I looked in the closeout toy store but they didn't have any either. I looked in the GameStop and the Lego store and the J.C. Penney. I don't know why I looked in those places except that I had to look somewhere. I have this idea in my head that a mask is around here somewhere very close to me and if I keep looking I'll turn a corner and it'll be on a shelf waiting for me.

I left work an hour early to do this. I was at the call center and I was on my break and I thought to myself I better check that this voice box is working right now. Something in me just knew there was a problem and sure enough I switched the voice box on and it wasn't working anymore. I told my boss that Brandon was sick and I needed to pick him up right away. It's not really a lie because if I don't get a mask with a working voice box he will be sick. Believe me.

He would wake up screaming. That's how it started. I would rush into his room and it was like he didn't see me. He would scream, I want mommy, but when I would look at him his eyes went through me. I'd say Mommy's here and I would hold him tight but that made things worse. He would flail his arms and legs and struggle to get away from me and the whole time he'd scream, Mommy help me. Like I wasn't his mother but some stranger. Hitting me with real fists. Balled fists. He'd only stop when he wore himself out. Like his batteries ran low and suddenly he'd be snoring.

The next morning Brandon would be fine. Like nothing happened at all. And since my husband never woke up during these episodes I had a hard time describing what happened. He thought I dreamt the whole thing. I'd roll up my sleeves to point to where Brandon hit me but even though I still felt sore there were no bruises to show.

The screaming kept happening until one night it finally woke up my husband. When he came into Brandon's bedroom and saw me trying to hold back his punches he insisted we take Brandon to the hospital. So we all piled into the car with Brandon still kicking and screaming and I had to drive us to the ER because my husband can't handle driving at night. He says he gets spooked by headlights coming toward him in the opposite direction. The whole time I drove to the hospital I was telling Brandon it would be okay but when I looked at

him in the rearview mirror he was rocking in his car seat back and forth trying to break free.

I hauled the car seat with Brandon still in it into the waiting room because I didn't want him running all over the place. Every time I tried to pet his head and tell him to settle down he'd scream for his mommy again. He asked my husband, Where's mommy, and when my husband told him, She's right here, Brandon would say, No she isn't, and scream even louder.

We were in the waiting room for two hours before we saw a doctor. The first thing the doctor asked us was if he could give Brandon a sedative and my husband said, No we don't believe in drugs. I couldn't even get a word out before my husband said this. I was thinking to myself, Yes we don't want our kid doped up but maybe we can relax our standards a bit when he's terrified. I tried to explain to the doctor how Brandon didn't seem to recognize me but the doctor just said, Mm hm, and shined a light in Brandon's ear and down his throat which he barely had to do because Brandon's mouth was wide open screaming. He was screaming so much his screams were losing strength. His throat was sore and he was starting to cough from the strain. Snot was running down his nose and I wanted to clean his face so badly and it took every bit of strength I had to not touch him because I knew if I did it would just make things worse.

The doctor said what I described sounded like face blindness except that I seemed to be the only person Brandon was blind to which isn't how face blindness usually manifests itself. People who have face blindness tend to be face-blind to everybody and not just one person. Then he asked if Brandon had been in a car accident or fallen out of a tree or hit his head in some other way. When I said he hadn't the doctor gave me a look. It was on his face for only a fraction of a second but it was there long enough for me to know what he was thinking. Then he asked us if he could look at Brandon while we waited outside the room. He used the word room but it wasn't a room. It was a curtained area in the ER. Over Brandon's screams I could hear people being attended to on both sides of us. An old woman in the next bed over was unresponsive and another old woman was croaking at

her over and over, Gladys answer me. I didn't like the idea of leaving Brandon alone with the doctor in such a frightening place but before I could say anything my husband said, Of course, and he rushed me beyond the curtain with a hand at the small of my back. I wanted to ask him what on earth he was thinking but my head was pounding so hard from all the screaming and the lack of sleep that even the idea of talking was too much to take.

We've got nothing to hide, my husband said. Nothing at all. And he kept saying it as if I was the one who needed to be convinced.

The second I left Brandon behind he stopped screaming. When the doctor called us back to his side Brandon was sound asleep on the gurney. I asked the doctor what we should do for Brandon and he shrugged. It might be night terrors, he said. They go away. See a counselor if you really want to.

Then I carried Brandon to the car and strapped him into his car seat and drove all of us home. My husband said, We can't keep doing this. I wanted to say, What do you mean 'we'? When have you done anything about this? It was right on the tip of my tongue. I was totally going to say it to him. Then I saw that he'd already fallen asleep with his head against the passenger side window.

When we got home I tried to put Brandon in bed as quietly as possible but I knocked his arm against a bedpost and he stirred awake long enough to see me and then he started screaming again. I dropped him on the mattress and I wanted to run away because me being there wasn't helping anything and I didn't know what else to do and when I turned away from him I accidentally kicked the Shutojin mask with my foot. Brandon got it for his birthday and didn't play with it much. I picked the mask up and I put it on. I don't know why I did it. I've tried to remember what I was thinking in that exact moment and I don't believe I was thinking anything at all. I was so tired. I remember mumbling to myself out loud, I am so tired. My bones hurt I was so exhausted. And the next thing I knew the mask was on my face.

I put on the mask and said, Just calm down honey. The voice box was on so it wasn't my voice saying this that he heard. It was Shutojin's. As soon as I spoke through the voice

box it was like someone pulled a switch. Brandon was fine. He said, Okay Shutojin. I sang the show's theme song. *I am the champion from a faraway land. My strength is my true power.* I got that far before Brandon closed his eyes and went to sleep. I climbed in the bed beside him and took off the mask and I was out in three seconds flat.

The next morning I woke up to the sound of Brandon screaming. He'd never screamed in the day before. The mask was right against the bed where I left it so I put it on again and said, There there honey, in Shutojin's voice and Brandon was fine. He talked to me like I was his mother again. Talked about his friends at preschool and what they were going to do there today. But he also kept calling me Shutojin. Not mommy.

I kept the mask on throughout breakfast and in the car on the way to preschool. When I dropped Brandon off I told the counselors we were playing a little game that morning. I said the same thing when I picked Brandon up and when I dropped him off the next morning. After a week I stopped making excuses and the counselors stopped asking.

I wear the mask on the job now. Most days I keep it on after I drop Brandon off and I still have it on when I show up for work. I'm in so early most days that nobody's around when I get to the call center so nobody says anything about the mask. Most times I forget I'm wearing it. I have my own cubicle at the call center and the customers who call in can't see me and everyone else who works there is so busy at their own stations fielding calls they can't really see me either. As long as I keep the voice box off customers can't tell I'm wearing it. No customer's ever said anything about my voice. I try to keep my eyes peeled for supervisors who might give me a hard time but most of them work remotely. One's in Abu Dhabi. Isn't that crazy.

I'm a little worried because we've gotten a bunch of memos from corporate that we have to undergo training on how to do video chats with customers. That's the wave of the future I guess. I really hope they don't move me over to video because I can't wear the mask on a video. Maybe I'd have to quit. I don't know. The call center hours work for picking up Brandon and dropping him off too. I don't know what other job would work with my schedule like that. And my husband says his job is

strict with hours and anyway he's got his online classes too so. Guess I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.

A lady from child services came by a few weeks after the hospital visit. I'm guessing it was because of the ER doctor who gave me that look. She watched Brandon play with me and we all watched Shutojin together and Brandon was fine just like he is whenever I leave the mask on. She asked me and my husband questions like do we do drugs in the house or are we ever abusive to each other in front of him. My husband said, No of course not, and the lady took down the answers on a clipboard like she was conducting a survey on the street. She asked if there was an inciting incident that made Brandon act out and I told her there wasn't and anyway Brandon wasn't acting out. He wasn't causing trouble or hurting other kids or even wetting the bed. He just doesn't seem to know who I am unless I'm wearing the mask and even then he doesn't really know but he's better at least. The child services lady insisted that Brandon must be starved for attention. I told her that I spend every moment he's awake and not at preschool with him. She sighed and suggested a therapist.

That was a mistake. When we showed up for our appointment the therapist said he wouldn't talk to me unless I took off the mask. I explained to him that Brandon would scream if I took off the mask and the therapist said Brandon might work through his issues more effectively if I didn't enable him. So I took off the mask and of course Brandon screamed like crazy. The therapist asked me questions about our home life and how Brandon was doing at preschool and the whole time Brandon was bawling, Where's mommy I want mommy. I begged the therapist to let me put the mask on and make Brandon feel better. The therapist told me the worst thing I could do was normalize and reward behavior like this. But Brandon wasn't misbehaving. He was in pain. There was something very simple I could do to stop that pain and this therapist wouldn't let me do it. The therapist even made me hand over the mask so I wouldn't put it on. So I had to sit there and get grilled by this jerk while Brandon was screaming, Mommy mommy, five feet away from me and all my husband did was say, It's okay buddy she's right here. I cried the whole hour.

The minute we left I put the mask back on and Brandon was

smiling again. I was so god damn angry. What kind of person can just sit there and let a child scream like that.

My husband was pissed too but he was pissed at me. He wanted to argue about it all the way home from the therapist. He said we had to let Brandon cry this out like when he was a baby and needed to go to sleep instead of being coddled. I told him this was different. Something's wrong with Brandon and maybe he'll get over it and maybe we'll figure out how to make it go away once and for all but in the meantime I can do a very simple thing and make him feel better. So I have to put on a mask and talk like a cartoon character. Who cares what it looks like to everybody else. Whatever pain he's feeling it makes it go away. Tell me why that's wrong.

My husband didn't say anything for a while. Then he brought up the time he threw out his shoulder pushing Brandon on the swing. When Brandon was little he never wanted to leave the swings so we would push him and push him until he fell asleep or we distracted him with the promise of doing something more fun at home. One time my husband pushed him until he felt his shoulder pop and he went to the doctor and found out he dislocated it. My husband brings this up so much he must think he deserves a purple heart for it. Try giving birth, I want to tell him.

Then he tried to appeal to Brandon. He asked him, Hey buddy don't you miss your mom? But Brandon looked confused and said, Why would I? And he smiled at me in the rearview. I don't know if he meant he didn't miss me because I was right there or if he actually didn't miss me. It didn't matter. I knew I was there and I knew he felt better because of it. That's all that matters really.

Wearing the mask feels better than not wearing it now. When I take the mask off there's too much air on my face. And when I'm wearing the mask Brandon sees me again. He looks at me like he did before all of this started and when I look at him I can see myself in his eyes. It's me with a mask on but that's me now. When he sees me I know I'm real and I know I'm there for him and I know he knows I'm there for him and.

So if you could check in the back maybe.

Shannon L. Bowring

Still Life

That one, there. The one with you looking down at the floor, fingers rubbing your stubble-covered jaw. You in the white T-shirt and faded jeans, your dark unkempt hair tumbling down into your eyes. That's the photograph that made me fall in love with you. I saw it two years before I even met you. The framed picture sat on Nora's dresser, a leftover relic from high school.

"Who is he?" I asked her.

"That's Will," she said. "One of my old friends."

"What's he like?"

She shrugged. "He's like Will," she said. "Who he is. I don't know."

Sometimes when she wasn't in the apartment, I would stand there and stare at the photo, until I had memorized the curve of your shoulder, the way only half your mouth was turned up into a smile, the small, crescent shaped scar under your left eye.

"I saw it and I knew, remember?" I told you. "I just knew."

"Yes," you said. "I know. You've told me so many times before."

The first one of us together. You in the charcoal gray suit, blue tie, yellow rose pinned to your lapel. Me in the purple dress, hair down in loose curls, bare feet. Ryan and Nora and Amy. Michelle and Garrett, the happy bride and groom, high school sweethearts.

I hadn't wanted to go.

"What else are you going to do?" Nora said, throwing my clothes into a bag that morning. "Stay here and watch *Friends* reruns weekend long? I've seen the way you look at that damn picture. This is your chance to meet Will. So you're coming. End of discussion."

When the flash went off, I remember the rest of them shrieked in feigned embarrassment. It was only us, you and me, who remained silent. You were looking at me, and I was

realizing I'd never noticed before, in the picture, that your eyes were green.

We're caught in that moment. The two of us staring at each other, neither of us saying anything while all around us there is movement and frenzy, life all around.

You took the next one. We are propped up in bed, lazy Sunday afternoon, midday sunlight streaming in through the blinds. You in a gray T-shirt, me in my ratty blue sweater. You are staring at the camera, all smiles, eyes wrinkled up, teeth white and square. Perfect.

"Look at the camera," you told me. "Show the world how beautiful you are."

But instead, I just looked at you while you pressed down on the shutter. The sun made me squint, but still I could see you with perfect focus.

Our six-month anniversary. All dressed up with nowhere to go. A city-wide power outage, no chance to make our restaurant reservations. Instead, we stayed home and ate everything we could salvage from the fridge. To this day, I cannot eat another crab Rangoon. Just the smell of it makes me sick to my stomach.

You lit all the candles you could find, told me not to take off the dress I'd bought for the occasion. "We can't let that go to waste," you said. And you took my hand and slow-danced with me around your living room.

Later, I grabbed your camera off the coffee table and told you to look at me. Your face, half in darkness, half in light, the candles flickering in the background. Your dress shirt, open at the collar, red tie loose.

"I love you."

I didn't realize I'd said it out loud until you laughed.

"Well, then," you said, "it's a good thing I love you, too."

Everyone again, this time Michelle's pregnant belly taking up most of the photograph. Every time I looked at her, watched her touch her hands to the stretched flesh there, I thought of a line I'd heard or read somewhere—*The centre cannot hold*. I told you about it as we stood outside her and

Garrett's new house. You gave me a look I could not decipher.

"Why would you think that?" you asked.

"I don't know. I don't even know where it's from."

Before I could ask you if you knew what it meant, they were all there, slamming out of the screen door, crowding around us, Amy exclaiming that we had to take a picture for posterity's sake, the last one of the whole group before the new addition.

You are next to me. Michelle is on my other side, her stomach pressed up against my arm. I remember how her body felt so warm against me, the way I felt a kick from deep within her just as the timer went off and the picture was taken. She is looking down at her belly, and me at her, and you at me.

You snapped this one of me while I was sitting on the couch in my sweatpants, reading a magazine. My hair is unwashed, greasy, and my face is shiny.

"Don't," I told you. "I'm still pissed at you, Will." I don't remember why I was angry—you'd left your dishes unrinsed in the sink, maybe, or had forgotten to buy more milk.

"What else is new?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"It means you're usually pissed about something."

"That's not true."

"It is."

You hadn't waited for my response. One second you were there, standing in front of me, the next, you had left the room. Not long after, I joined you in the kitchen. We prepared dinner together, neither of us saying anything. After a while you kissed me. I kissed you back, believing it was just a disagreement, a one-time bump in an otherwise smooth, uncurving road.

Now, look. We can go through these ones a little faster. Michelle and Garrett's homecoming after the baby was born. You holding Lila for the first time. Nora's twenty-fifth birthday party—and then yours, and then mine. Amy and Ryan's wedding. You holding Emmett for the first time, Ryan hovering in the background, trying to assemble a car-seat. Thanksgiving. Christmas. Sunday night football games,

potluck dinners, BBQs, ill-fated ice fishing trips. All of us together, and you and me in the middle of it all, sometimes them watching us, but usually us watching them.

Linger for a while over this one with me. I don't even know who took it. Some waitress, who sent it to me later, wishing us the best of luck.

Our four year anniversary. I'm wearing a wine-colored dress, sitting in a booth of our favorite Italian restaurant, the one we only went to on special occasions. You are in your one suit—black, with the red tie. You are kneeling in front of me, holding a black velvet box. My hand is at my throat, and you are grinning.

Amy had told me once that Ryan had been shaking like mad when he proposed, his palms so covered with sweat he had a hard time slipping the ring on her finger.

Your hands were warm and solid.

Of course I said yes.

Of course I did.

Iwore my mother's wedding dress.

"I know she and your dad would have wanted to be here," my aunt told me as we waited in the dressing room before the ceremony. "Can you believe it's been eighteen years since their accident?" She asked if she'd done an all right job of raising me, and I told her she had. But I was remembering the emptiness that had carved a hollow space inside me, the loneliness that had haunted me since my parents died. The loneliness that only seemed to fade away whenever I looked at you.

The lawn was filled with your relatives on one side, our friends and their families on the other. "They're all ours now," you told me. "Not mine. Not yours. Ours."

And that is the most candid moment our photographer caught that day. You, giving me your family. You, lending so easily what I'd never had, what you'd always taken for granted.

On our honeymoon. Taken just before our first fight as a married couple. We're sitting on a yellow beach towel, white sand beneath us, sparkling blue sea behind us. Both

our faces are red from sunburn, our eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses. You held out the camera and grabbed my shoulder, pulling me close before snapping the picture. I look a little surprised—uncertain smile, slight frown, head cocked to one side.

“I wasn’t ready,” I said. “Take another one. I look like a moron.”

“You look like you,” you replied.

“So I’m a moron?”

“What? That’s not what I said.”

“In a way, it is *exactly* what you said.”

“Don’t. Don’t start with this now.”

“Start with what?”

“This thing you do. Needing to make a fight out of nothing.”

“I don’t do that.”

And around and around—the kind of argument that is pointless and exhausting. The kind that never really ends, just pauses. The kind that lingers, hidden, for days, months, years, and then one day comes boiling back up to the surface. The kind in which there is never a winner. Just two losers.

You, Michelle, and Garrett posed with Lila and Violet, Lila wearing a sweater proclaiming the words *BIG SISTER*. Nora’s courthouse wedding to Shane, you standing with Nora on the steps and raising up her hand up in a *Rocky* victory pose. You holding Amy and Ryan’s second son. Our friends’ kids all dressed up in Halloween costumes. Nora and Shane’s baby shower, the three of you perched on their sofa, laughing at some joke I hadn’t heard.

It was usually me taking the pictures.

This one looks like it could be an alien. A shapeless, spineless thing, swimming in a blurry sea of gray waves. I’ve kept this one hidden away for a long time.

“A miscarriage,” I told you.

“We have to try again,” you said.

So we did. Every test afterwards was negative.

I wonder if you knew, if you suspected the truth all along. That motherhood was never a vocation I aspired to. That when I saw the blood that day, the second feeling after fear

was even worse: relief.

This one. I'm sure you remember. Taken at that oceanfront cabin, at the insistence of the owners, who swore they did this with all vacationing couples celebrating their anniversaries. We'd been married three years.

We're on the front stoop, you standing behind me, your arms around my waist in a stiff embrace that reminds me of a prom picture. My hands are tucked into my coat pockets. It was unseasonably cold that day, and had begun to rain minutes after the picture was taken. My face is flushed, so pale it's hard to define my features against the white siding of the cabin. You are smiling, but there is a vacant look in your eyes.

"Why do you keep this one?" you once asked.

Because. It was the last time we went away together. The last time we ate leftover takeout in our underwear in bed. The last time you let me surprise you with shower sex. The last time we had a true ease of conversation, an understanding in our silences, in the spaces between our words. The last time of a lot of things.

One year, two—sometimes I lose count. All these pictures look the same after a while. Pregnancies, job promotions, vacations to Disney World. Holidays, birthdays, kindergarten graduations, weddings. We begin to appear in them less and less, the frames reserved for the rest of them. We're on the outside, looking in.

This one of you makes me feel like I'm drowning, but I can't bear to throw it away. You came home from work late. You smelled different—something warm and slightly bitter. I snapped your picture as you stood in the bathroom.

You're standing with your back towards me, shirtless, dressed only in jeans. You're facing the mirror, eyes cast down, leaning on the sink. The muscles in your arms and back are tensed, easily traceable, lovely.

"Enough with the damn pictures," you said when you saw the flash go off. "For Christ's sake."

"It's the only way I can get you to look at me," I said.

“I look. I’ve been looking. But you . . . Sometimes when I talk to you, it’s like you’re not even there. Or you talk to me and you could be talking to anyone.”

“That’s not true.”

“You don’t see me,” you told me.

But I do, I do, I wanted to say. But instead I said nothing, choosing silence once again. It’s like a place—the act of not saying anything. Once you’re there, you get comfortable. You settle in. You don’t leave willingly.

Lately I can’t stop staring at this one. Your office holiday party. We’re standing with several of your coworkers, some of them wearing Santa hats, most of them drunk. I am on your left side, pressing myself against your arm, giving the camera my best white-teeth grin. On your other side, one of the new hires is standing beside you. If I’d been looking at you when the picture was taken, I would have seen it: you are looking at her, and she at you. Your hand is brushing hers, so lightly it could just be a blur from the camera.

Except that I know it’s not.

“Do you love her?”

“Yes.”

Wanting, needing to hurt you back, I confessed. “I’ve been taking birth control. I lied to you. I’ve never wanted kids.”

“She sees me,” you said. “You’ve only ever seen the version of me you wanted me to be.”

Before you left, I snuck a picture into your suitcase: you and me in the beginning, smiling at the sun, the sky wide open before us. You mailed it back to me a few months later.

It’s been a year since you left, and all I have of you now is this damn box of photographs. This is barely an existence, I know, living in these one-dimensional memories. But I can’t stop. You were the realest thing I ever almost knew.

I saw you two the other day. Making sure you didn’t realize I was there, I snapped a picture of you. I know I shouldn’t have, but I couldn’t help it.

Your eyes are wrinkled up in a grin, your hair shorter than

it's been in years. You are leaning toward her over the table outside the café. You've lost weight, the muscles of your arms and shoulders more defined than I remember.

She is covering her mouth with one hand, head thrown back with laughter, her hair loose and wavy over her back. Her other hand is holding yours. Skin glowing in the midmorning sunshine. And her belly—so round it touches the table. I wonder if she felt it even as I sat there watching—life moving beneath the surface, waiting for the light.

Shoshana Razel Gordon-Guedalia

Wrestling

And this is not what I meant by wrestling, and it is definitely not what I meant by being tough like one of the guys. And I feel really uncomfortable and nauseous, and this is not about winning anymore, not about showing them that I'm tougher than all of them. I just want him off me. I don't like the deep way that he's laughing, and I don't like where he's touching me, and I don't want to be rolling with him in the sand, because this is feeling less and less like lion cubs wrestling for who will be king, and more like him taking advantage of me somehow and getting his hands where they shouldn't be, and I feel humiliated, and the fight is gone from me because I can't remember what I was trying to prove, and I don't like how he smells, and his eyes are crazy, and his laugh scares me, and he keeps saying, so you think you're tough, do you? You think you're stronger than a boy? I'll show you the strength of a boy. Then we can talk about how tough you are. And I wish everyone would look away, some of them cheering (maybe still from my prior victory), some looking confused, some disturbed, some pitying. And I wish they would all look away while I try to get myself out of his wiry iron grip, out of this pretzel he's gotten me into—I think I'm going to be sick—or at least they could get him off me.

And we're all on the beach in Tel Aviv, that's where we are. And it's dark out. We're all clothed in our classic *Bnei Akiva* hiking attire. Some of the girls are wearing long flowing skirts over khaki hiking pants, some wear knee length skirts above their khakis, some wear khaki hiking pants alone, very loose fitting, with lots of pockets, held up by their father or their brother's belt. Pants are mostly for these occasional hikes together, not for day to day in Jerusalem. It wouldn't look right. Skirts are what looks right on girls. And it's all good and well that Abba agreed that it is *halakhically* permissible for a girl to wear woman's pants, that this would not violate, *And a woman shall not don the attire of a man*, since these are women's pants. And it's all good and well that Abba

agreed that given what he calls ‘my rambunctious nature’, pants wind up being far more modest than skirts in many situations, but it just wouldn’t look right, was his conclusion, not walking down the streets of Jerusalem.

But we’re in Tel Aviv now, and I’m wearing a pair of Danny’s old khakis with lots of great deep pockets that I caught his mom trying to throw out next door, because they were faded and a bit torn, and she said, Sure Ruth, why not? And gave them to me then and there and even threw in an old belt of her husband’s to help them fit. And the beach is fine at night, no crowds of men and women in revealing bathing suits, liable to be behaving in ways that might not jive with the spirit of *Halakha*, and we decided to have a bonfire there on our way back from our hiking trip north.

This is when Rami (the new boy) offers to gather twigs.

I’ll take Ruth! He yells in his throaty voice, turning to look at me and then back at all the other sixteen-year-old boys and girls, standing as we are in a circle about two meters in from the gently lapping waves. He is wired, Rami, I can see it. I experience his every movement as jerky and sudden, and take it from someone who is rather impulsive herself, if his movements put me on edge, they must really be something. She’s the strongest one here! She’ll bring back a whole tree! He laughs, reaching in from behind me with both hands and squeezing each of my biceps. I shake his hands off me. I roll down my sleeves to my elbow. I usually roll my sleeves up to near shoulder length because I’m proud of my biceps, and because I’m annoyed by the blanket dictates coming from school and from what seems like the whole entire community, shifting to the right, requiring female arms to be covered at least till their elbows, at all times.

Negia! Yoni reminds Rami sharply, noting my abrupt shedding of his hands. No touching girls! our counselor, our medic, my friend, barks. Rami laughs. She’s no girl. She’s Ruth.

I laugh too. This pleases me despite myself, or not so much despite myself. I’m confused.

My laughter seems to have a softening effect on Yoni’s demeanor. I’ll go gather wood with the other counselors, he rules, turning away. Avner, Oren and Idit, our other

counselors, follow suit.

Yeah! I shout. Who wants to wrestle me? I roll up the sleeve of my right arm. I clench my right fist in the air—my arm L shaped—turning it right, turning it left, making my bicep dance. Waves of appreciative laughter ripple through the group of boys and girls as I drag two duffels into the center of the circle, piling them one on top of the other, falling to my knees so as to get an arm wrestling competition going.

And what about *Negia*, Ruth? Tzuri puts forth, approaching my perch at the piled duffels.

Who's up for a challenge?!? I shout, my voice trailing off as I absorb my friends' reasoning voice, as I search his eyes, as he searches mine. Sport is sport, Tzuri, I say. You know what my father says about different kinds of *Negia*, different kinds of touch.

True, he murmurs, stepping back even as Rami shoves him aside, getting into position across the duffels from me.

Show me what you got, he crows, dropping to his knees on the sand, lifting his right arm onto the duffel, anchored by his elbow.

I align my right arm with his—elbow to wrist—both vertical, shoulder to elbow flat on the canvas of the large bags, and just before I grab firm-fisted hold of his hand, he reaches forward with his pinkie and draws a soft serpentine line on the inside of my palm while leeringly narrowing his eyes as he looks straight into mine. This has the effect of unnerving me a bit, and weakening my resolve. I swallow hard, narrowing my own eyes while studying his, in as hard a gaze as I can muster while I grab his hand, crushing his pinkie in the process. And he pulls away, a flash of anger in his eyes, readjusting his arm, his elbow, and grabbing my hand himself.

I use the anger in his eyes as my focal point. I breathe deeply and slowly from my core, like Markos taught us in Kung Fu. I center myself internally in such a way that my energy flows focused to my arm, to my right arm, to my right fist. We each falter a bit. We waver to and fro in increments of centimeters. Rami's face looks swollen and red, and I break focus for a brief moment as I note the bulge of a vein on his forehead, seeming as though it might burst on the left side of his neck. I return my focus to his eyes, which dart around now, as

though trying to decide which one of my eyes is worthy of the focus of both of his. With a warrior's grunt, I heave my right arm left, pinning his down flush against the canvas with my iron grip. I hold him there, even as I stare him down with my eyes, even as a victorious smile spreads across my lips. A tumult of cheering erupts all around us. I allow myself to relinquish his arm, to turn, to bask in the accolades, enjoying my friends' high-fiving with each other and jumping up and down, until I feel myself pounced upon, as by a large beast, knocking me backwards and onto the sand.

At first my knees hurt. When Rami flew over the duffels at me and tackled me, I was still sitting on my folded knees, my feet in pointed position, and his sudden lunge leaves me no breath to release my knees from under me, nor to bend my feet, before the full weight of him crushed my knees folded, crushed my feet pointed flat, sending lightning bolts of pain zipping through me even as I try to break loose with no obvious anchor in my body to utilize. He has both my hands pinned down in the sand, and the best I can do as I realize, rattled, that my forte is not wrestling in such close proximity, but combat from striking distance, is yank his arms down hard with mine even as he grips them so hard that my fingers feel bloodless, and whack his left cheek with the inside of my right arm, of my right elbow, causing him to relinquish my hands long enough for me to flip us over, myself on top, as I try to get off, but he knocks me back down with a side kick as I rise, and he is on me again, and we are rolling over and over in the sand, arms and legs everywhere, he trying to get the upper hand, me trying to disentangle, to get away.

And I don't want to be in this fight, and this has nothing to do with lion cubs wrestling for the throne, and everyone seems shocked now. We've never had this kind of thing happen in our group. And I feel dirty. And this is no game. And this is no sport. And Yoni runs up, grabbing Rami off me and throwing him onto the sand, yelling, When we get to Jerusalem, you're out of here, even as Rami yells, You're not real life tough, Ruth. You're a bunch of hot air. And even as Tzuri, trembling, pulls me up to standing, asking if I'm okay, even as I'm yelling, I had him, I had him, I could've taken him, as I survey the faces all around me, absorbing the

baffled, shocked, uncomprehending looks, feeling shame, such terrible shame, and I run down the shore, along the water, gaining speed as I run, even as I hear Yoni yelling to me to come back, Tzuri shouting, Wait, Ruth. Wait! Till I collapse in the shallow water, soaking my khakis, splashing the cold salty water on my face to cool down, to camouflage my tears.

Contributor Notes

Brandon Barrett is a practicing physician who was raised on the Oregon coast and now lives in Virginia with his wife and son. His work has appeared with *Passages North*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *The Literary Review*, *Hobart*, *FLAPPERHOUSE*, *The Cossack Review*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and elsewhere. His website is www.brandonbarrett.net.



Mike Beasley In my youth I worked as a Teamster, ditch digger, ranch hand, and rag salesman. I published in some now-defunct literary magazines and *The Atlantic*. I quit writing for many years and started again after I retired from teaching. Recently, I published fiction in *On the Premises*. I have a novel and several short stories in the works. Hope I'm getting the hang of it.



Shannon L. Bowring is 26 years old and lives in Maine. Her work has appeared in *The Maine Review*, the *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and the *Joy of the Pen* literary journal. She is the author of a blog published by the *Bangor Daily News*. The blog, *Twice Sold Tales*, focuses on her adventures to bookshops throughout Maine, as well as her love of reading, writing, and all other things literary.



Matthew Callan's short fiction has appeared in the *Newtown Literary Journal* and *Nimrod International Journal*, and his essays have appeared at *The Awl*, *Vice*, *The Onion AV Club*, and elsewhere. He is the author of the novel *Hang A Crooked Number*, contributed to *Excelsior*, *You Fathead*, a biography of radio monologist Jean Shepherd, and is a former writer for the New York Mets-centric blog *Amazin' Avenue*.



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Martine Fournier Watson's stories have been published in journals such as *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Roanoke Review*, *Scrivener Creative Review* and *The Best of Foliate Oak Online*. Her poetry chapbook, *Michelangelo and Me*, was published in 2005 by Finishing Line Press. Recently, she obtained representation for her first novel, and is working on a second. She lives in Michigan with her husband and two children.



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Louise Hawes is the author of two short fiction collections and over a dozen novels. Her work for readers of all ages has won awards at both the state and national levels. She is a contributor to numerous anthologies, and has served as a John Grisholm Visiting Author at the University of Mississippi, a Read in Common Author at the Mississippi University for Women, and a Writer in Residence at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. Louise helped found and continues to teach at, the Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults program. www.louisehawes.com



Mike Karpa is a San Francisco writer and translator of Japanese and Chinese. His short fiction has appeared in literary magazines such as *Faultline*, *The Santa Clara Review*, and *Red Wheelbarrow*. "The Link" is an adaptation of the first chapter of "Between Countries," an unpublished novel of seven expats, misfits, and third-country kids in 1960s Bombay loving, spying and building—or trying to stop—India's first atomic



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Abby Sinnott hails from Buffalo, New York. After earning a journalism degree from Ithaca College, she hightailed it to San Francisco, where she lived for fourteen years and completed a MFA in Creative Writing. She has written a collection of short stories, *Knocking On My Door* and novel, *Love In The Blood*. Her writing has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies around the world. Currently, she lives in London with her husband and two daughters.



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Casey Whitworth is an MFA candidate in fiction at Florida State University and the assistant programs manager of *The Southeast Review*. Recently, he was a finalist in *Salamander's* Fiction Contest and the winner of the *Green Briar Review* 2016 Fiction Prize and the *Blue River* Editors' Award for Fiction. Based in Tallahassee, he is currently at work on a novel.



Sandra Wiley lives in the historic town of Hyde Park, NY. Working for NYS Parks has fostered her love of the outdoors and hiking. In her spare time, she can often be found walking in the woods with her dogs or sitting along the trail on a stone bench, journal in hand. This is her first published short story. Her work is entirely fiction.

