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FICTION WINTER 2017

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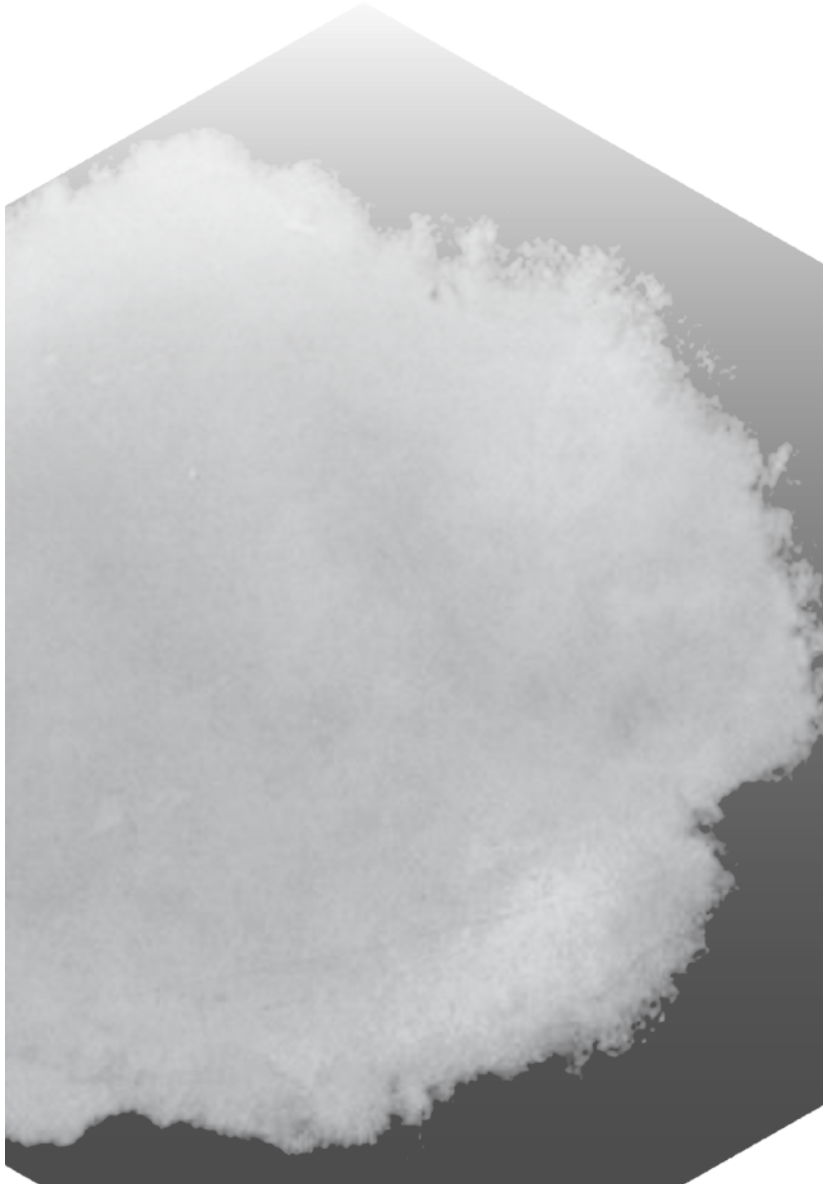

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Sixfold is a collaborative, democratic, completely writer-voted journal. The writers who upload their manuscripts vote to select the prize-winning manuscripts and the short stories and poetry published in each issue. All participating writers' equally weighted votes act as the editor, instead of the usual editorial decision-making organization of one or a few judges, editors, or select editorial board.

Each issue is free to read online, to download as PDF and as an e-book for iPhone, Android, Kindle, Nook, and others. Paperback book is available at production cost including shipping.

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Derek Rose

Reclamation

The wolves are out again tonight, roaming a place that no longer exists. They knife between hollow limestone houses, tracking, pitching their heads toward each new scent. Their pelts are slick with moonlight, their eyes malignantly agleam. Even on the cobbled streets, their paws are silent. A single howl, low at first, almost sorrowful, incites another howl, then another.

Unable to ignore the noise, Marion splays her book across her lap and shuts her eyes. She's had little to do these past few weeks other than read by the fireplace. Now even this comfort is being stolen from her. There was a time after the Great War when wolves had been driven out of France, killed off either for sport or as collateral. It's the first spring since the Second War ended, and wolves have only just begun returning to the country.

Her husband, Lucas, paces upstairs in the bedroom, a crudely-rolled cigarette dangling at his hip and molting ash onto the floorboards. He knows where the wolves are headed: Monsieur Bernard's old house, right across the street. He tries to gauge their distance, to trace their path in his mind, and soon they arrive—two or three, at first—but more appear, gnashing at Bernard's front door and scarring his stone walls. They writhe around the house, a mass of hackles and teeth.

From downstairs, Marion hears Lucas call her name. "Come quick," he says. "They're outside again." She pauses before entering the bedroom, leaning against the doorframe and watching her husband, so focused and forcibly still beside the window. She loved the symmetry of their ages when they first met, and the kilometer-long walk from her house to his—that worn patch of grass midway where they waited for one another. But she is no longer twenty-three, he no longer thirty-two, and they no longer meet each other midway on anything, instead choosing to draw lines further and further onto their own sides, waiting for the other to give in by degrees.

When construction on the dam began, she and Lucas watched everyone around them siphon their lives into suitcases and leave. Most went to Paris, hoping to begin anew like the city itself; some went east across the Alps and sought Swiss citizenship. Soon the streetlamps cast no shadows. Soon the cobbles fell quiet as headstones. Now they are the only ones left in Génissiat.

"Wouldn't you like to head to bed?" she asks. "It's late."

"Look at them. Why are they so fixated on that house? They have the entire village for themselves."

"They're animals. There's no reason for anything they do."

But Lucas's mind is on the pistol stowed in the dresser. Despite having been on tour for two years, he has fired it only twice. The first shot was in a civilian living room in Le Havre; a member of Lucas's troop accused a Flemish family of treason, lashing them up by their wrists, tossing them to the floor, and squaring his gun against the youngest's cheek. Lucas fired at the ceiling to restore order. The second shot was in a barn on the French-German border. Lucas went inside to rest but found a German soldier there, sleeping behind a stack of hay bales. He pulled the trigger before the man could wake.

"What are you doing?" Marion asks, seeing him hunt through the dresser drawer.

"They're pests," he says. "Same as rodents or weeds."

He opens the window and holds the pistol in front of him. Three shots split the belly of the night; three tendrils of smoke climb from the barrel. The bullets land meters from the pack, skipping up soil as they lodge into the earth. Just enough to make the wolves perk their heads and scatter.

Lucas turns, grins, and says, "Now we'll be able to sleep."

"Very smart. After we've gone deaf, we won't have to listen to the wolves when they come back."

"I can fire a few more for good measure. Make sure I get the job done right."

"With that aim? You're more likely to blind us."

There are suggestions these are the same two people from before the war. She still leaves the bathroom light on. He still adjusts his watch like a marksman, waiting for the seconds to align. She still hopes to learn piano. He still avoids learning

how to poach eggs. She has never been on a boat. He has never been ice skating, successfully. But that's all these things are. Habits. Idiosyncrasies. Quotations of what makes a person.

They noticed each other's changes as soon as Lucas returned home, three months ago. His body had been pared down, made gaunt; now his cheekbones press like knifepoints. The parentheses around Marion's mouth have furrowed deeper. There is something exhausted in the way she speaks, something rageful in the way he laughs. They fumble trying to hold hands and knock teeth trying to kiss. It is the decay of time and war and distance. They stand before each other now, forcing their smiles but feeling like strangers, and even when Lucas agrees to sleep, to leave that spot beside the window, his presence comes in measurements. He asks to leave the curtain open.

The village is preserved in a thin frost the next morning. Chutes of light fall between the clouds, shifting across the red clay rooftops. Marion heads leisurely toward the edge of town, untroubled by the raw lashes of April wind. She has made up her mind. She is going to the dam, partly to be around the hum of other people and partly because of a dark need to see the structure forcing her from her home. She told Lucas she was going for a walk but didn't say where, knowing he would object. These tailored truths give her a tiny thrill.

She has adored the woods since childhood, finding freedom in their expanse and clarity in their silence. She knows well the feeling of briars catching at her ankles, drawing blood. Even though there was little sign of the occupation during the war—Génissiat being too innocuous and remote for German attention—she hasn't ventured this far in years, knowing not to wander outside the village by herself. The confinement warped her. Weeks passed where she went without a conversation; she sang nursery rhymes, once in the morning and once at night, to keep her vocal cords from atrophying. Trapped alone in her house, the war felt like an endless, unbroken winter.

Soon she hears the distant chime of construction. Shovels strike soil. Hammers align rebar. Then she sees it. Even from afar and even unfinished, the dam is monstrous, towering over

the ravine, still draped in a network of scaffolding. Workers cluster at the base of the dam and, as she gets closer, Marion notices they are either too young or too old to be there. The war took the middle aged and able bodied, leaving only these teenagers with reedy arms and these bent and quivering old men to toil away.

As compensation for relocating, Lucas, along with all other men in Génissiat, was offered a job building the dam. The choice was either that or a flat fee of four hundred francs. Everyone took the money. Lucas refused both options at first—it was the principle, he said—but Marion eventually breached his stubbornness and convinced him to take the money too. She doesn't know when, or even if, he'll agree to leave Génissiat, but she's comforted knowing they will receive the money soon. At least he's being reasonable in his unreasonableness, she thinks.

Captivated by the dam, she doesn't notice the worker approaching until he, only steps away, asks, "Can I help you?" He is young, perhaps a teenager himself, but speaks with confidence.

"I'm just out for a walk," she says.

"Curious about the dam? Other people have come just to get a look." His manner suggests he is selling tickets to a budding tourist attraction. "Where are you from?"

Lucas told her to say she lived in the nearest town over if asked—no one can know they haven't left Génissiat yet.

"Injoux," she says.

"Christ, really? That's, what, five kilometers from here?"

"About that far, yes. But the walk isn't so bad."

"Half our men down there," he gestures toward the construction, "couldn't make it half that far."

"I don't know about all that. Look at the work you've done here. The dam really is as large as they said it would be."

"That's right." The boy turns to admire the structure. "Boss said it'll be the largest in Europe once we're finished. Before we start work each morning, he tells us what a great symbol it'll be to the rest of the world."

"And to us."

"Yes, yes. Us too, of course. Rise from the ashes and all that." A sharp, two-fingered whistle suddenly climbs from

the ravine. Marion sees someone, an old man, slumped over, gripping a shovel for support. Workers begin knotting around him, offering water, bringing him to his feet. “I should go,” the boy says. “You’re fine to stay here as long as you like, I just have to ask you not to get any closer.”

“Of course,” Marion says. “I can see it perfectly from right here.”

She looks at the dam again and imagines torrents of water rushing through its cavernous sluiceways. She pictures its cement balustrade rising high as the surrounding hills.

“Just make sure you get home before dark,” the boy says. “The wolves have been going mad lately.”

Lucas sits in the living room that same morning, smoking and listening to the radio—comforts lost to him during the war which he savors now. The broadcaster’s unhurried voice feels like a single thread running through every home in the country. Sonata interludes rise from the speaker. Chopin’s light, tumbling fingers. Bach’s patient and precise hands. The melodies urge themselves upon Lucas like a sedative until he starts dozing in his chair.

A knock comes at the door. Three hard raps, jolting him from his half sleep. He sees a figure in the windowpane, impossible to discern. It can’t be Marion. She said she’d be gone for hours. He stamps out his cigarette, runs a hand through his hair, tightens his bathrobe.

He has never seen the woman at the door before. She wears a twill, knee-length coat and has a felt hat angled on her head. “Mr. Lucas Mercier?” she asks.

Lucas straightens his shoulders, trying to make himself broad as the doorway. “Yes. Lucas Mercier. Private First Class.”

“I’m with the rezoning commission,” the woman says. “Our records show you have yet to file for your relocation check. This was the only address we had for you and I’ve been ordered to give you this.” She presses a letter into Lucas’s palm and leaves with a brisk nod. Lucas has the envelope open before the door swings shut.

Dear Mr. Lucas Mercier,

The Ministry of Ecology and Sustainable Development has been alerted to the fact that you have not filed the necessary paperwork to receive your relocation check (F400), and we have reason to believe you may still be residing at 21 Rue de Vieux Bourg. You will be given two weeks, or until 15 April, to collect your belongings and leave. If you choose not to do so, you will incur all appropriate penalties: a forfeiture of your relocation compensation, a fine of F80, and a maximum of ninety days in prison.

It feels like something chemical is frothing in Lucas's chest. He can't tell Marion about the letter. She would want to leave Génissiat immediately, and they still have so much time before the dam will be finished, months even. If only they could stay until then.

He decides to get out of the house, clear his head. Wandering through the village, with its vacant stone buildings on either side, feels like walking down an abandoned corridor and there is a foreign, ominous echo each time Lucas's heel strikes the road—a stark contrast from when the cafés were lined with old men sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes, a time when handcarts clacked along the cobblestones. Génissiat is the only home Lucas has ever known, and it is this image, one lost to the years between wars, which he clings to.

Here is the corner where a one-armed fisherman sold his catch on a rickety, two-wheeled cart. Here is where, as a boy, he saw a woman's purse split open and shower coins into the street, and where he grabbed whatever he could before running home, his heart beating madly. Here a group of old women met every Sunday for pinochle. Here is the alley where he and his boyhood friends waged imaginary war; sticks replaced carbines, twine was looped over shoulders instead of bandoliers. Soon it will all be underwater.

No one will remember this tiny river town or the people who lived here. Lucas heard the buildings are so small they won't even be demolished; it's more cost effective simply to submerge them. He looks up and pictures the keels of cargo ships carving water forty meters above his head. He imagines

his entire village at the bottom of a reservoir—perfectly intact, but discarded forever.

While at the front, Lucas saw whole cities gashed open by the war. Buildings disemboweled by toddler-sized artillery shells. Schoolhouses stripped to their skeletal frames. A bookstore burning until daybreak, thousands of lit pages fluttering through its glassless windows, cartwheeling higher, kindling their own flames. He has seen worlds end all across the country, but he finds himself unprepared for the end of his world. He consoled himself during the war by thinking there was some tacit promise: live long enough to return home and your home will be there when you return.

He tracks through the village, following familiar contours and age-abraded footpaths, until he is standing outside his own house again. From across the street, Bernard's house looks lifeless, withering faster than it should be after only a handful of weeks. Lucas went inside Bernard's house only once, just before he left for the front. Bernard was a tunneler in the Great War and Lucas believed the old man could offer advice, or at least solace. His living room was melancholy and cluttered. Dirty clothes were strewn about. A soup bowl was repurposed as an ashtray. There was a rumor in the village that Bernard had been caught in a tunnel collapse, that he was never the same after returning home, and Lucas, who has known this rumor since he was a boy, could not help thinking of it during their conversation, a conversation in which Bernard said many untethered things. He gave cryptic anecdotes and scraps of advice: carry dry socks to avoid gangrene, never pet a stray hound because the Germans lash landmines to them. When they shook hands to part, Lucas pictured Bernard clawing through a meter of soil, suffocating, thrashing, fighting to find light.

The mantel clock notches seconds into the silence while they cook dinner. Lucas scavenges through the kitchen for stray ingredients he can add to the stew, leaving all the cupboard doors open and wavering, phantomlike. Marion follows behind, closing each one, concealing their emptiness. It has been three weeks since the baker left, four since the butcher. She has nearly forgotten the taste of milk. He longs for a peach.

Whether it's because of their dwindling food supply or the solitude of their empty town, dinner now has a sense of sacrament. Marion sets the table with great care, using china once reserved for holidays and entertaining house guests. Lucas slices bread and pours wine with the gravity of a man attempting to crack a safe. A fire is lit. Prayers are said quietly and in unison.

Tonight, as both try to veil their guilt, dinner is especially solemn. They speak in platitudes, discussing the agreeable weather, the flavor of the stew. They chew without tasting. Smile without feeling. If only he could show her the letter without making her want to leave. If only she could explain the marvels of the dam without angering him.

They finish dinner quickly—choosing, at some point, to eat rather than speak—and are left raking spoons against the bottom of their bowls, trying to salvage the tawny dregs of broth. For the first time since they have been alone in the village, they cannot bring themselves to go to the cupboards for more, despite their hunger, believing they must ration what they can.

"I think I should go to the market in Lyon tomorrow," Marion says. "We need food."

Lucas straightens in his chair, surprised *she* is the one to suggest this, a promise of more time, and says, "Yes, I think that's a fine idea."

"I can take the train." Truly, she wishes to go on the long, liberating ride to Lyon. To be around all those people, all that life.

"Should I go with you?"

"If you'd like. But I think I can manage alone."

"I'll walk you to the station."

Relief buoys him. While Marion's away, he will decide on a plan. Maybe he can board up the windows to make it seem like they've left, find a way of explaining it later.

"You know, I had a thought earlier," he says. "We could go anywhere tonight. We could break into any house in the village. We could even eat in the middle of town square if we wanted to. No one is around to stop us."

Though she's stunned by his spontaneity, Marion tries to match it, playfully burning to outdo him with her own suggestions.

“What if we sit on the riverbank, beneath the stars?” she asks. “Or climb the bell tower of the church.”

An energy begins effervescing between them. Lucas rises from his chair and retrieves the last bottle of wine from the cupboard. Marion puts their bowls in the sink and douses the fire. The room is lit only by a lunar-blue dusk and, in this near dark, maybe they are smiling. Maybe they are five years younger and hurtling toward love instead of stumbling past it. But as Lucas reaches for the door handle, they hear a deep, wailing howl.

The energy wanes. The room grows still. “Tomorrow night,” Lucas says, and Marion nods. She finds her way to the couch, flicking on the lamp and escaping into her book. He drifts upstairs and begins pacing around the bedroom. Every so often he looks out at the wolves and questions what they are searching for.

Later they prepare for bed, brushing their teeth side by side, taking turns washing their faces. They undress on opposite sides of the room and both wonder why they aren’t looking at each other, relearning their bare bodies in the lamplight. Lucas spent the war thinking about the mark Marion’s bra makes between her shoulder blades. Marion spent the war picturing how Lucas’s jaw clenches as he undoes his shirt cuffs, and praying a mortar round can’t travel as far in the rain.

They lie in bed, knowing this is supposed to be what they waited for: a hand on a chest, an arm beneath a neck, the space between their bodies no more than the length of a grenade pin. But each barely recognizes the figure lying next to them. It’s as if they were two people passing on the street who once met in a dream.

Together they fall asleep and together they dream of the house filling with water. It pools beneath the door. It pours between the ribs of their shutters. Cutlery ascends from the drawers; forks follow knives follow spoons. Throw pillows writhe against the walls. Their bed rises from the floor, its four posts pinned to the ceiling, forever caging their bodies in that house.

Together, they drown.

The platform is clotted with people awaiting the day's first train—mostly briefcase-touting commuters or couples looking forward to a short trip. The tracks are still glossed with dew. Marion and Lucas wait side by side, shivering, their breath forming helixes in the air. Neither can help but think of the day, now two years past, when Lucas left for the front. They stood at this same platform, too upset to speak. When the train entered the station then, it sent a tremor down both of their arms and met, midway, in their clasped hands.

As the steel rails begin to judder, the two embrace. It is quick, awkward, almost unfamiliar. The train arrives, dragging a kite string of smoke above it. The doors slide open. People file out. People file in. The world staggers on. This time, it is Marion who walks to the door, steps up the ramp, and leaves with a gentle nod and a half smile.

Once she finds her seat, the train begins tracing through unfettered farmland. Tulip stems push through the soil. Birds form perfect chevron patterns in the sky. She smiles at the mustachioed ticket inspector. She eavesdrops, shamelessly, on the conversations brimming and overlapping around her. The dusk-toned silhouette of Lyon grows in the distance and Marion knows Génissiat is far behind.

Lucas watches the train until it is no longer in sight, until he is the only person left at the platform. He turns for home, back through the hills, down the ravine, to the familiar. There are paw prints in the dirt half a kilometer outside Génissiat, each one roughly the size of his palm, and he follows the tracks to their end, just in front of Bernard's house. Deep and frenzied gashes have been worked into Bernard's door. Lucas bends, runs a finger across the grooves, and puts his ear against the wood, as if checking the house for a heartbeat. Nothing. It takes him two tries to kick the door in. He smells the body before he sees it.

It happens at the same moment, as if, from kilometers away, an invisible cord is cut between them. She is standing in line at the grocery. He is standing in Bernard's living room. She is holding a basket of peaches. He is holding his breath. She for the first time is anonymous. He is realizing there was no need for Bernard to leave a note. She sets down the basket, heads back outside, into the lively street. He shuts Bernard's

door, walks into the solitary spring morning, back home. She is eager to lose herself in this new city. He hopes to be packed for when his wife returns.

H. Fry

Bala

He calls her Miss Bala and she's just about 13. She's been chewing a lot of gum, loud smacks of her lips, and her breath smells sweet and sour, like she hasn't brushed in days. He doesn't mind.

Her teeth are tiny pearls and he can see the shape of her skull when she smiles, or grimaces. She's swinging her legs back and forth, just scraping the floor with the rubber of her sneakers, and he has never loved anything more than her in this moment. The air smells like burnt rubber in the laundromat, and soap, but her hair smells greasy and unwashed. She's looking past him, at the machines, at the walls, and he wants to pick her small frame up and take her from that place. Among the blue-haired ladies and the cholos trading news, he feels there's something not quite right, something he needs to protect her from.

He knows her type, knew it from the moment he saw her. Her shadows are all over the city, like handmaidens in waiting, little girls trying to look tough. They're nothing new to him. Flashes of flyaway hair, bullet belts, and faces drawn on faces peer out like tragic Greek masks from ever corner. Exaggerated eyebrows and lips drawn on to make them look older, or more enticing. There were girls like Bala in the city, everywhere. Fast talking, perfumed whirlwinds of girls bumping into him on every corner. He missed them when he went home, back to the suburbs where little girls stayed indoors, in their two-storey citadels of brick and vinyl siding. Those paved, curbless stretches of shotgun houses and trailers were like a sexless, pale child peering out the window blinds. The city was a high waisted chicana with nothing to prove.

Bala is the city, but so much smaller. He could hold her whole head in his hands and crush it. Her wrists are skinny and hollow looking. She's quiet like she knows something he doesn't. She chews her gum and points at the popcorn machine in the corner. He brings her some, and a soda from

the machine, and he thinks he would bring her the heart from his chest if that's what she pointed next.

Every Friday he would drive out to the beach and lay down, like a man dead, with Maria who was 32 but looked 45. He used to bring her flowers, or other useless tokens of his gratitude for letting him use her the way he did. She loved him the way a woman loves anything, distantly and obsessively, and he loved her back the way he loved a good breakfast or a cold beer. He stopped bringing her anything except his own palms, outstretched, and they moved together in the tiny claptrap apartment she shared with her grandmother. Some nights she just lit candles, to save on the power bill, and he could forget what she looked like in the light, at least for a while.

The apartment is dark when he arrives, and dinner's bones are still on the table. Her eyes look puffy without makeup. He wonders for a second when she stopped wearing makeup, when she stopped trying for him. He feels bad, seeing her like this. She takes his hand and sleep walks him down the hall, past abuela's room, and brings him to bed.

"I wish you'd taken me outta town," she says, after. She has a voice filled with water, like she's never been sure of a thing in her life. "You keep saying we gotta go somewhere, but then we just end up here. Abuela can hear us, you know. Her hearing isn't gone yet. "

"Well, does she like what she hears?" he smiles, lightens the mood, but he can tell she's got something on her mind. She opens the bedroom window and lights a cigarette. She offers him one and he takes it because that's what he does, he takes and takes.

"I've got some time I can take off at the clinic," she says, and she's leaned so far back he can't see her face, just the glowing cherry top of her cigarette. He can feel her eyes, though, staring at him out of the dark. "You just gotta say the word."

"I'll talk to the guys," he says, "next week. It's been a rough one and I don't wanna look like I'm cutting out on them right now."

"I'll buy that for now," she ashes out the window and pauses.

It's a long pause, filled with the hot air of the night between them. "But you gotta do me a favor tomorrow, yeah?"

"What kind of favor?" he wags his eyebrows at her and her huff of laughter means he's forgiven. Forgiven for never doing anything for her.

"My cousin needs to get picked up in Belle Glade. I know you just kick around town on Saturdays, and I got called in to cover some shifts."

"I've never met your family before. I've barely met abuela and she listens to us every week in here f-"

"Gael, I hate to ask but you gotta do this. You have to do this for me."

He thinks about those words for a minute. He thinks about how he comes to Maria's house, eats her food, lays in her bed, and never takes her anywhere. He thinks about his plans for Saturday, which involve eating a breakfast Maria will cook and then walking around the city, teetering on the edge of something unnameable and immense. He thinks about his flat box of a house back on Royal Palm, with empty dark windows and boxes still unpacked sitting on the living room floor.

"Yeah, yeah, you're right." He says, "I'll do it for you."

He wants to say something, but he doesn't know what. Bala presses up against his side on the bench, settled in an easy silence. Her bare thigh is a solid line against his. Children are so free with themselves, but Bala's press at his side feels like she's telling him something. She's telling him she wants something, and he wonders who taught her to ask that way, requests made with her limbs, her eyes, the parts of her whole. He can't interpret it, and doesn't think she knows how to ask with words.

She eats her stale popcorn, dropping it everywhere.

He'd left Maria's house that morning, after he'd eaten her rubbery eggs, and she'd booted him out the door with her tennis shoe as she fixed her earrings in. She'd given him an address, up in Belle Glade, and told him to have her cousin down in Miami by 3.

He never went up that way, didn't have any reason to. He'd grown up in Miami, proper, and he'd never had cable but

there had been an above ground pool in his childhood, a hazy summer mirage of the past, and family dinner every night at a real table. Maria told him how she'd had to fend for herself, but that was nothing new to him. She didn't have a story to tell him that he hadn't heard a dozen times before, and somewhere along the line he'd made a habit of not listening to her actual words. He just interpreted her sighs.

He'd driven out through the Glades, to where the curbs disappeared, and the houses grew squat and fat. Maria's cousin lived in a salmon-colored house, with a broken chain link fence wrapped around it like a noose. As he drove up, 2 young boys stared at him from the driveway. He thinks he should have called ahead, introduced himself, but it's too late.

The boys run back inside and immediately after a girl bursts out, running full bore down the steps to his car. She wrenches open the door, throws herself in, and slams the door behind her.

"Okay," she says, so quiet he almost hadn't heard it over the engine. He half expects someone to come out of the house, after her. She turns to him, her eyebrows knit in a consternation he is unused to seeing in little girls, "let's go."

He pulls away from the little salmon house, and heads back South towards the freeway. She reminds him of someone but he can't hold on to the thought as he speeds off. He turns the radio up.

She doesn't say much on the drive. She doesn't even offer her name, which Maria had told him, or her age, which looks to be around 13. Her makeup has been drawn on carefully, but the lines around her eyes swing a little too wide, and the polish on her nails is chipped to hell. He wouldn't notice something like that, not on Maria, not on most women, but Bala keeps pulling at her nails with her teeth and flicking them all over the cab of the truck. Written on her hand in Sharpie marker were the words *contra balas*. There's more there, but it's rubbed off, illegible.

"So, Maria tells me you just started 7th grade?" he tries to make conversation.

She's leaning against the passenger side of the truck, far away from him, but she looks comfortable. At least she

doesn't have her phone out, pointedly ignoring him, like his own nieces and nephews.

"You going down to Miami to visit? Got any fun plans when you get there?" he tries again. Maria had said it was an emergency, for the weekend, and that the girl would be staying at her apartment. Maybe something bad happened in her home. Maybe that's why she'd flown down the steps to him, some strange man in a beat up Camaro.

He is suddenly aware of himself, and of Bala next to him, a quiet small satellite. If anyone asked who he was, or what she was to him, he wouldn't know what to say. It's been a long time since he's been around kids, not since the days before Maria and secondhand cars, back when he had that full house out in the suburbs. He'd been the one at the head of the table, then, a tiny family growing like a shoot in concrete . He's known the magic code then, knew how to twirl a little girl around so that she laughed like a bell that never stopped ringing.

Here, with Bala, he feels big and clumsy. Time has eroded his paternal senses and he can only wonder if he smells bad. He hasn't showered since seeing Maria, and a puff of shame huffs from his chest, before he pushes the thoughts away altogether. He's doing Maria a favor, and this girl is probably grateful to him.

"You like music?" he asks, not expecting any answer. He turns the radio to the popular station and opens his window. He would smoke, but looks at Bala's pink backpack and thinks better of it.

Maria calls him when they're 10 miles outside Miami.

"Gael?" she sounds anxious. All of her statements are questions. "Gael, you got her with you now?"

He glances over at little Miss Bala, who is scribbling more on her hand, snaky lines with no pattern covering her forearm up to the elbow.

"Yeah, she's with me."

"You gotta do me one more favor, okay? I got stuck in the clinic, there was a big accident on the Northside and they're taking tons of people in here." There's noise going on behind her, squeaky wheels and indistinct yelling, like screaming underwater. "It's nuts here so you gotta take her somewhere for me and you gotta be really cool about it, yeah?"

"We're almost in the city, so just tell me where."

"I'm going to text you an address, and you have to go there with her. You have to stay, too, until everything is done, and make sure she's okay and take her to abuela after, okay?"

"Jesus Maria, yeah, how long this gunna take? Where am I taking her?"

"You just gotta go there, and the rest is already arranged. It'll take maybe two hours tops. Just stay with her and be really cool. She's just a girl." It sounds like there's a helicopter over Maria's head, and he knows he can't see the Northside from the highway he's on but he imagines smoke and fire rising up from the building tops. Some sort of accident. "Thank you so much, Gael, thanks, I'm sending you the address now."

Maria hangs up. A moment later his phone dings with an address and he punches it into his phone. It tells him to go to a laundromat in the center of town.

"Maria can't make it, kiddo," he says to Bala, and she keeps drawing on her hand. "I gotta take you to some appointment. You got clothes to wash or something?"

She looks up at him then, and her tiny black eyes crinkle at the sides in distress. He isn't sure what to say to her then, so he apologizes.

"Hey, hey, I'm sorry, Maria said she's caught up at work so I gotta take you to this laundromat for something? You know what you need there?"

She looks away from him, straight at the highway, before nodding. She folds her hands in her lap, sullen, and sits as if waiting for communion. The silence that felt easy before feels heavy and wet. He clears his throat.

"I'm takin' you right over to Maria's afterwards, so there's nothing you have to worry about. You got me as your taxi for the day." He tries hard to put a smile in his words, but Bala doesn't look at him again.

They reach town.

A short, wide woman comes out of a door in the back of the laundromat, and she motions to him and Bala from beyond 20 tall, blue washer-dryer combos. She's so far away it looks ridiculous, as if she's waving from the back end of a ship already pulled out from harbor.

He nudges Bala, who is pressed so close to him now he can feel her heartbeat, fast but steady. He doesn't know what's happening but the tenseness in her shoulders makes his stomach churn. Maria had said to be cool, so he's cool, as cool as possible, as he walks down the rows with Bala who takes the heavy, clomping steps of a teenager who doesn't want to go anywhere. Her head tilts down and her hair is a veil over her face.

The woman from the doorway hustles them into a long hallway, and shuts the door. She has a plastic name badge that says *Gloria*.

"Are you her father?" she asks him, and he shakes his head no. She shakes her head back at him, and he could swear he sees disappointment on her face. She turns away to speak with Bala, and he feels like he's somehow given the wrong answer.

"Alright, sweetie, you can follow me to the back, and we'll get this all over with, it'll be so quick." The woman reaches towards Bala and takes her hand. Bala lets herself be pulled away and he follows, as if they're tied by string. He isn't sure what they're doing here, but he's ready to pick her up and bolt, bolt for the front, and get in his car as soon as something goes sideways. He's never fought anyone in his whole life, but he would like to think he would fight right now, for Bala.

They walk the dirty, turquoise painted hallway, taking two turns, before stopping in front of a door that looks like all of the other doors. Bala breathes in quickly, but quietly, and he hears her. He suddenly feels as if that door holds disaster. Fire and smoke over the city.

"I'll be taking you in, here, and your friend can wait down the hall for you," Gloria says, as if he does not exist. Bala looks from Gloria, to him, and back again.

"Okay," she says.

The door opens, Bala is gingerly pressed inside, and the he can see that it's a doctor's office inside. Turquoise, like the halls, and mostly bare. There's a chair, a table, and an overhead lamp, like at a dentist. It's so unexpected that he can't even react.

"I'll be right back for you," Gloria chirps, and shuts the door. Her face is a grim line when she turns back to him. "You

will have to follow me."

All this time he's done everything asked of him, but he gets the feeling he has deeply offended this woman. He isn't sure how he can even explain, or apologize.

"Hey," he says, and the woman leads him further down the hallway. She doesn't look at him. "Hey, what's going on? Is she gunna be okay?"

"She'll be fine, in our care." Gloria says, "I don't know about you, though. I don't know what kinda care you think you're providing her."

"I'm just driving the kid around, okay? She's my girl's niece."

"Whatever you say," she stops at another door, no different than the last. "You can wait here and we'll bring her out to you when it's done."

He enters the room and the door shuts after him. The room is empty of anyone but him, but filled with chairs and low tables. There are plastic standees on the tables, pamphlets and old magazines littered around.

He takes a chair, and picks up a pamphlet. It's about STDs, so he puts it down. The next pamphlet is about the dangers of prostitution. He flicks it back onto the scratched darkwood table. The last pamphlet is about what to expect after your abortion.

"Holy shit," he says to no one.

Bala is 13, and tiny. She doesn't twirl or laugh, but there's something so childlike about the way she sits in silence, unbothered by it. He thinks that little girls must have whole worlds inside their heads, whole religions and whole dreams, which is why when the dirty little boys of the neighborhood crush the snails after the rains, the little girls pick them up, and make homes for them in jars.

He thinks about how she pressed against his side, how he wishes he had said he was her father. Would they have let him hold her hand, then? Would he have wanted to? He reads the pamphlet on abortion fives times, but it doesn't tell him anything helpful. It doesn't tell him if Bala is scared, or if she regrets this. It doesn't tell him who did this to her. It only tells him that bleeding may persist for a day or two after the

procedure, and to seek a hospital if it continues.

He wants to believe that Maria knows what she's done, that she'll fill him in on the details later, but he feels like some intimate trespass has taken place. Maria has dumped the burden of guilt, of knowledge, into his lap and he'll see the back of Bala's black haired head as the door slams shut again and again, forever.

"Sir?" Gloria opens the door and pokes her square head in. "If you're ready, could you pull your vehicle around the back?"

He stands and faces her. He knows what she thinks now, knows how he looks, and he nods slowly as if to tell her he understands. She stares at him a moment, and then is gone.

He pulls the car into the alley, to the back of the deceptively large laundromat. There's a turquoise door with the words CUIDADO above it on a neon yellow sign. He stops there and gets out. He knows Bala is coming, but in what shape or condition he can't know. He keeps his hands poised in front of him, as if that will help.

Gloria comes out, and Bala is behind her. He opens his passenger car door, and Bala crawls in. Before he knows it, he's pulling away, driving on autopilot back to Maria's apartment. He wants to say something to Bala but she looks tired, and closed off. Her silence is no longer an easy one. She does not looks like she wants to touch or be touched by anyone.

When he helps her up the stairs of Maria's building, he considers offering to carry her but thinks better of it. She walks each step deliberately, with no expression. She allows him to hold her wrist, gently in a breakaway hold of two fingers and a thumb. It looks like a father escorting his daughter but really he is just her follower. Her wrist is so tiny in his hand. Her entire body is tiny, and in another life he might have twirled her around. Maybe then she would have laughed.

He knocks hard on the apartment door since he knows abuela is almost deaf. Abuela opens the door, takes one look at Bala, and hauls her inside. She regards him in a second, the same look Gloria had given him, a maternal look that has echoed down centuries, from woman to woman. He will never know the meaning of this look, but it pins him to the spot and he is frozen with shame.

Maria calls him again, but he does not answer.

He thinks he should drive back to his house. He should go to the cool dark of his empty home and sleep the day off.

He's got cash in the bank from his last few jobs, but he doesn't want much now. He thinks he'd maybe like to see Bala, as she was 5 hours ago. He walks the hot sidewalk away from Maria's apartment, down towards the empty shop fronts and the steaming parking lots. Maybe if he keeps walking she'll appear, nebulous and wavy in the heat like a mirage.

The sun is faltering, casting everything in the harsh yellow of evening. The bar on 5th is crowded, people spilling onto the sidewalk. There's never anything good inside, but he tries it anyway. Everyone in the crush becomes one, a sweaty mass that heaves together in the neon and the heat. He goes in and orders a beer. He pays with a $20 and doesn't look for change.

Music thrums through the crowd, some cubano shit with a deep bassline, and he needs air. A thick girl presses up against him and pouts her lips in a big showy kiss, and laughs deeply. Her laugh is different from the niñas on the street, it's a singular alto, not a symphony of tinkling bells. He wonders what Bala would sound like, when she's pleased, when she's happy. He wonders a lot of things.

He presses out into the alley, out the back door where some boys gives him the eye, not sure what to do with him. He's sweaty, simple, a working man getting a break with a drink, so they part and let him pass. He pushes through the sweat and breathes the fresh air. At some point it became night, but he doesn't know when.

In the alley there are a few people, chattering. Girls, making a buck in the night, sweating like he sweats on a job. He doesn't begrudge them their business. He stumbles past them, can't remember now if he ordered one drink or three.

A small girl is crouched near the ground in front of a portly man. The man is so wide he blocks her face but it's Bala, tiny and compact, with pretty pink nails flashing his way. He reels forward, pushes the fat man, pushes him and lets a gutteral cry, but it's like he's underwater. The fat man is yelling, the girl is yelling, he's throwing fists but he can now see that this isn't Bala, she's too old. She's got wrinkles on

her face, big almond eyes rimmed in kohl and big high heels. This woman is wearing a costume, a little girl mask, and he sees his mistake. It fills him with an ache in his chest. He stumbles onto the sidewalk as quick as he can, and the whole city is yelling at him, screams and noises, as he goes forward just to get away.

"Let's get out of town," he tells Maria, and she sighs long and deep. He can feel a well of joy in her, in the dark as she lies next to him. He'd come back to Maria's late, wasted from beer and the city, and Maria's hair had been blown back, from disaster and ruin. They'd sat on the bed and shared a cigarette in the window.

Bala had been gone by then. Small blankets were laid out in the corner of Maria's room, he thinks he sees blood but doesn't ask. There isn't an answer possible that he would like, not one that would give him peace.

In the dark he puts an arm around Maria, who looks at him like he hangs the stars. Her gaze is content, no different from any other day, but it lifts weight off of him. He thinks of tiny, thin hands folded, as if waiting for communion. He thinks of the quick-steady beat of Bala's heart as they sat side-by-side in the laundromat.

Maria tries to thank him, but he can't accept. She gives and gives, but he's an an empty house in the suburbs where the shadows are long, and the boxes unpacked. He wants to take her out of town, for once.

"So, what do you say?" he asks.

Maria's smoke curls up into a question mark, and her hair smells like sweat and candy.

"Okay," she says.

Slater Welte

Our Last Summer at the Lake

I tell her to take the gun out of her mouth. It is our father's weapon, the one he keeps in the drawer by his bed when we are spending our July at the summer house we have on the lake. He also has a shotgun under the bed. Our father says you can't be too careful.

Out our parents' window you can see the water shimmering in the afternoon sun. You can see the small sailboats and the pontoon party boats and the motorboats with the skiers being brought behind and you can see kids playing at the shore and paddleboats and even this far away you can hear the high-pitched whine of the ski-doos as they skip across the surface. Our lake is a big lake.

"Tell me to do it," she says, "dare me to pull the trigger."

I can barely understand her. It is hard to talk clearly with a gun in your mouth.

"Pull the trigger."

"I'm going to. You know I'm going to."

I say our mother made pie this morning. I say we're going to have apple pie ala mode for dessert after dinner.

Kate's favorite thing in the world is our mother's desserts. She won't pull the trigger with pie and ice cream on the horizon. Besides, we are in our parents' bedroom. Kate is a neat freak and making a mess is difficult for her. She'd rather not die than to bloody the upstairs carpet.

This isn't the first time Kate got our father's gun out the drawer and put it in her mouth. I've done it once or twice myself. The warm steel tastes like metal on my tongue. Sometimes we take out all the bullets except for one and we put the barrel against our temple and act like we are about to pull the trigger. But we never do. Kate almost did once. I thought she really was going to do it. We'd talked about it. Five chances not getting killed versus one chance getting killed seemed like pretty good odds. Sometimes we take out four bullets and leave two. We call it double Russian roulette. Double the pleasure, double the fun.

Neither of us thinks there is anything wrong with us putting guns in our mouths. Once you play at doing it once, you're going to do it again. Genuine thrills are few and far between in our household. It passes the time.

She uses her shirt to wipe the barrel clean. She gives me the gun and I make sure it goes where it was in our father's drawer, in the corner, behind the candles, clothes pins and prophylactics. There's also a small Gideon New Testament Bible. It's well-thumbed, stained. Some of the pages are stuck together.

There's no wind this afternoon, there hasn't been any wind for days, the sailboats out on the water aren't going anywhere. Almost the last of July, our summer vacation nearing its final stretch, our mother and father sitting on their picnic chairs they've taken out to the end of the dock. Tarp covers our boat, the motor blades up out of the water, the hull bumping against the tires that are tied along the side of the dock. Our parents have their wine and cigarettes. Soon they will go inside and up the stairs to their bedroom and take a nap, or something else, and then one of them, usually our father, will cook dinner and we will eat as the sun is going down. We have pie ala mode for desert.

Our meals are quiet affairs. At dinner our food is on the table and we join our hands for the prayer. Our Heavenly Father, kind and good, we thank Thee for Thy love and care, be with us Lord and hear our prayer. Amen. Some nights Kate and I can hardly bear the sounds our parents make while they eat. The knives and forks scraping the plates, the chewing, the crunching, the smacking, the swallowing. Kate and I roll our eyes at each other as the noise goes on.

Our father will briefly break the silence. "Mm, good food."

Our mother will answer. "Yes, good food."

They will ask what we are giggling for. Why are we giggling at the dinner table? We should show more respect.

After dinner we will sit in the living room and listen to our mother read passages from the Bible. Sometimes I have to read. Sometimes Kate has to read. Our father is adamant about correct pronunciation. Say it like God meant it.

The television, even with its tin foil rabbit ears reaching high, is just shadows and ghosts and crackling words. The

radio is worse. You might catch half a song before the static overwhelms the music.

In the house we are left to our parents' devices.

Sara and Bruce and Tom call us from down the shore. They have found a dead catfish with worms crawling in its eyes. Tom and Kate have kissed. Bruce and Sara have kissed. I haven't kissed anyone. They are all twelve and I am just ten and that makes all the difference. All my clothes used to be Kate's clothes, even my shoes and socks. This year she gets to wear a two-piece bathing suit while I have her last single-piece. It is stretched in all the wrong places.

Sara has a blackboard and a box of colored chalk at her house and we go over there and make pictures on the blackboard. We draw horses and mountains. We draw dogs and rainbows. When we draw a penis or vagina we make sure we wipe it right away. Her parents wouldn't like to find vaginas and penises on the chalkboard. That's what Kate and Sara call them, penis and vagina, as if they are proper young ladies.

I don't get to draw penises. I don't get to draw vaginas. They say I am not old enough yet. As if I don't know how to draw them. I'm sure when I get to be their age they will have other things I can't do. It will be a perpetual exclusion.

Our mother has been doing a giant jigsaw puzzle all summer holiday. It takes up a whole table in the sewing room. The box says it has three thousand pieces. I think there must be more. There are pieces everywhere. Our mother won't let anybody touch her puzzle, not even our father. Mine, she says, all mine. The puzzle is supposed to be a puzzle of Sunday in the Park with George. That's what the cover of the box shows. The puzzle, so far, doesn't have a park or a George, and it's hard to tell if it's Sunday. She's beginning to spend more time on it, trying to get it done before our vacation is over. She's hours at the table and we had better not disturb her.

Our father will sometimes clean his gun. He uses oil and a brush and a rag. He sits on his bed and whistles while he is cleaning his gun. Sometimes he will let me or Kate hold it. He says we should only touch his gun if he is in the room. See, he says, it's loaded, which is dangerous. Kate asks him if it is dangerous when it is loaded then why is it loaded. To

shoot bad people, our father says. Kate asks him if he has ever killed a man. No. But our father says he would if he had to, if he was protecting his family. He says he loves us more than anything.

There will be other unexpected events in my life, other than that summer. I will be sitting having my morning coffee out on my balcony down on Second Street and I will see a plane go into a world trade center tower and later another plane crash into the other world trade center tower. I will watch both towers collapse. As the dust settles I will call Tony and ask him to come with me to the Bahamas. I will agree to marry him.

I will have a meeting with the manager of a hedge fund, a woman considered one of the brightest minds on Wall Street, which does mean something, and we will be in her corner office that looks out over the Bay and the Statue of Liberty way down below like a little green eraser, and halfway through the meeting a seagull will hit the window, go splat, and stay there, stuck, and both of us will pretend that a seagull squashed against a window happens all the time.

On the morning of my fortieth-sixth birthday my mother will call and say that she needs to see me. I say she could've have just mailed my gift, it would have been okay. She will seem calm and give no explanation and despite the fact that Forrest, my second husband, has a big party planned for my birthday that night I will go to Grand Central and take a train up to Tarrytown, where they have a house on the Hudson, and I will find my mother alone in her study. The shades are down. My father is in the kitchen, getting dinner ready. I can barely see my mother in the shadows.

"Allie," my mother says from her darkness, "What a pity, Allie, it was Kate who died."

She's been thinking that for years. She just chose my birthday to say it out loud.

I will be in Florence, having driven in from a summer rental in the Tuscany countryside. My daughter will be twelve years old, the same age as my sister was that summer, and she and I will buy a basket of flowers, we will run our hands across the stones covering the church and it will be like our fingertips

are feeling the long ago past, and I'll remember that summer, when time itself seemed to turn and crumble, and I will look back and see that if things didn't happen how they happened I would be leading a wholly different life, maybe not exactly happy, but at least there wouldn't be so many ghosts and goblins crowding the bridges and roadways, though you never know. It can always be a little worse.

Look what Kate has missed.

Sara and Tom and Bruce are Kate's friends. I am tolerated, at best. I am not invited when they play show and tell behind the bushes. I watch the worms going in and out of the eyes of the dead catfish. Sara takes a stick and pokes one of the eyes out, spearing the eye with the end of the stick and holding the stick with the eye at the end of it and chasing my sister down the path by the water. Sara likes my sister in ways, back then, I cannot comprehend. It is below the belt, as most things are.

Tom likes Kate a lot. Sara likes Bruce.

Tom has a sister my age. She plays with Barbies. She plays with an Easy Bake oven. What can you say to that?

Kate unhooks the screen door and we are out down the back steps into the darkness, the clouds heavy in the night obscuring moon, stars and constellations. A wind is in the trees and leaves flutter. You can hear the lake lapping against boats tied up to piers. Within seconds I have to reach out and touch Kate so I know where she is as we go through the woods.

"Is it loaded?"

"Of course it's loaded," Kate says, "why wouldn't it be loaded?"

The woods rise up on the other side of the main road, a copse between the shore and the smaller cabins on the other side. People rent these by the week, three, four rooms, families squashed together for vacation time. You can hear them yelling inside, you can hear their dogs growling and barking tied up to poles outside. This is where Tom's family stays. They live in Queens the rest of the year. He comes beside us as we come by, materializing out of dark air. He

never talks about his family renting a smaller cabin and we never ask. Tom is a good guy. I want to kiss someone like him.

Sara is in the clearing where the woods give off to a grass field. Her parents have the biggest house in this part of the lake. It has three stories. The top story is empty, not even any furniture. The doors are locked, so we can't even play there. It's like a haunted house on the third floor.

Bruce couldn't come. Or Bruce didn't want to come. He would have been here by now if he was going to come. Bruce is always punctual. He has a Rolex wristwatch he was given for his eleventh birthday and it works fine. He looks at it and announces the time a lot. It's a Rolex, he says, from Tiffany's, my mother loves me a lot. We are all impressed, for a while, then it gets old.

Sara asks if Kate has it.

"Of course I got it."

We find the clearing where last week they left me in the open area while they played tag behind the bushes. You're too young, they said. I knew they were playing show and tell, brief glimpses of bodily parts. I wasn't stupid. I knew what those things looked like.

How loud is it going to be? Is it going to be too loud?

Kate has Tom shine his flashlight so we can find the tree that has the witch's face in it. She wants to shoot the witch face. The night has a lot of humidity to it. I am exhausted and we've only just started. I imagine standing on the lawn by our summer house, holding the garden hose, drenching Kate while she keeps still, lying on the grass in her two piece bathing suit. We will each get a shot. It's been decided. Kate first, then Tom, then Sara, then me.

Tom shines his flashlight. Kate raises the gun and moves her feet apart to brace herself. She holds her breath and closes her eyes as she begins to pull the trigger. A deep, country quiet. The birds have stopped singing. Later she says she doesn't remember actually shooting, she remembers the noise, the racket, she remembers flying through the air. I see Kate being thrown backwards by the blast. And the noise going ka-pow, ringing, echoing in the night forest, and the four of us running, screaming, laughing, wow, wow, wow, that was loud. Loud. Loud.

We're back near the cabins before we stop to catch our breath. Dogs are barking like crazy. Cabin doors open and parents come out on the small porches and look around in the darkness for another gunshot, so they can find out the who and the why.

Tom wants to know when he will get to shoot it. It is his turn.

I don't know, we all say, I don't know, I don't know, it was so loud. God, that was so loud. We walk until we get near the docks by the bait shop, where we settle on the benches off in the dark.

Tom and Kate start kissing. Sara says she wishes Bruce was here. She asks if I want to kiss. She thinks it might be fun. She hasn't kissed many girls. I don't tell her I haven't kissed any girls, or boys.

It is mediocre.

Sara asks me if I don't know how to French kiss.

There are people who understand this story and there are people who won't understand. Why didn't I call the police? Why didn't I go inside and wake our mother? They want reasons, reasons, reasons, as if it must make sense, as if I must supply incest, self-hatred, low self-esteem, a mental defect, a cry for help, as if life is a Hallmark movie of the week.

Phil, my third husband, knows not to bring it up while we are out with company. He knows how people are, how they need answers and conclusions, how once they start they have to find a satisfied ending. For the rest of the evening they will circle back to the story. It makes for a long night.

Of course there were clues. There are always clues, when you look back, like us hanging out our high rise apartment building windows far enough that one slip will mean you will get to find out what it feels like to fall fifty-two stories down to the city street. You probably hope those fifty-two stories last a long, long time. You would want your fall to last as long as possible.

Things can happen to you. Some of them very good.

"Oh, you're going to like this, you're going to like it a lot."

We are as Christian as they come. Kate and I have matching crosses on chains our mother makes us wear every day. When we come home from church we have to go over what we learned in Sunday school, our mother giving us further instruction. Our father is in charge of monitoring our manners. We say yes ma'am, yes sir, we speak when spoken to, we even curtsey when we meet adults for the first time. People always tell our parents we are well-behaved, like we are household pets or something.

We're not a dog family, not any pets really, other than the fish our father has in his big tank in the living room, but especially not dogs, too fawning, too needy, too much fur, too much licking. We did have a guinea pig. That lasted about a week.

We do ride horses, every Saturday afternoon, taking a bus out of the city with our mother. She thinks girls should learn how to handle a wild beast. Kate thinks it is a way to teach us how to spread our legs. Which might be the same thing.

Forty years after that summer I will go to my mother's funeral. It is a big deal. I didn't know that many cared for her. Rectal cancer. You have to like that. She will be buried next to Kate. Afterwards, I will stand in the kitchen and watch my father cook dinner while we talk about the weather. We talk about the Yankees. We talk about the stock market. It takes me time to realize my father is cooking dinner for one. He is a steak and potatoes man. He has one steak and one potato. He could share, but he's not a sharing man.

Before I leave I spend time in Kate's old room. Nothing has changed since before. I can't forget her. I can't forgive her. On the wall a Cross with a malnourished Jesus. On the other wall a Twila Paris poster.

On her desk our father's old church camp button: I Found It!

Kate used a black ball point pen to scratch an L between the N and D so the badge read: I Fondled It!

God, our father got so mad.

She has these Alfred Hitchcock books, already used when she got them, strange tales written for children, grotesque drawings of ghosts and goblins. There is a story about a wolf

speaking to children in the darkness, bringing them near, to gobble them up, and there is a drawing of a tall wolf hidden behind an open door and he is standing up on his back feet and the paragraph beneath it says, Johnny could hear the light scraping of paw nails behind the door and said Mr. Wolf, Mr. Wolf, do I really have to come out to play?

In the morning our mother has driven our father south to Andover so she can keep the car after he has boarded the train to spend two days at our apartment in the city. We, Kate and I, don't know it, and I won't know it for a few more days, hearing heated arguments downstairs, but our father has gone back to the city to end it with the mistress he's been having since the fall before last. They'll be together at dinner, during their second glass of wine, down at a Little Italy place, with red and white checkerboard tablecloths, and he will be just close to telling the pretty girl they are done when the maitre de will come and ask if he is him and say he has a call at the business phone.

Both of us don't think anything of it that our mother keeps going from the kitchen to the bar cart and back to the kitchen. Lunch is haphazard, tuna and crackers and grapes, jumbled together on a plate.

"She's snoring," Kate says coming outside after being upstairs, carrying our father's gun under her T-shirt. "Over here," she says, and I follow her behind the garage.

I say we're supposed to go out on the lake with Sara and her family on their boat. Our mother has already okayed it. We will stay out late and eat dinner on the boat and come home after dark.

Kate says I can go without her. She won't mind.

I ask her what she's doing, why she has brought out the roll of tarp our father keeps in the garage behind the fishing poles and tackle. We have no idea why the tarp is there, it has always been there, we've never used it, maybe the tarp came with our summer place.

Kate says she doesn't want to leave a mess. She doesn't want to make a bother. This way they can roll her up in the tarp and put her in next Tuesday's trash.

I ask her why and she asks me to look at it this way. Her

words bounce against each other, flowing in such a jumble it's impossible to follow, Jesus, heaven, angels, and the length of eternity before we are born, the length of eternity after we die, the length of eternity compared to our lifetimes. Looking back, it almost sounds like a Marx Brothers skit.

What she says makes perfect sense.

I help her roll the tarp out on the grass behind the garage. She uses stones to hold down the corners though there is no wind, the air very still. I realize Kate might kill herself. I am somewhat excited by this possibility. I will be witness to a family crime. People will respect me and feel sorry for me.

Kate doesn't move. She has her arms folded across her chest. She must be considering the ramifications. She takes off her tennis shoes. Her legs are spread a little bit apart, her feet on the tarp. "I am going to die," she says, saying it the same way you say I am going to take out the garbage. Nothing in me wants her to do it. If she asks me to help it depends what it is. I'm not planning on pulling any triggers.

She takes off her shirt and shorts, so they don't get dirty. She considers her bathing suit, maybe removing just the top, or both, but for some reason her being naked just doesn't feel right. As if it matters.

I say we're going to be late. We're supposed to be at Sara's boat in half an hour. We're having her stepmother's fried chicken for dinner.

"Two bullets," she says, dropping the others on the tarp. "Double roulette. Double the fun."

She puts the barrel in her mouth, pulls it out, saying she wishes we had a camera. She thinks pictures, photos for the family album our father keeps up to date. A final photo. I go inside and find our mother's Instamatic.

She poses. I take pictures. She's a secret agent, she's a desperado.

She settles and takes a deep breath.

She says, "I accept the Jesus as my Lord and Savior."

"Ready," she says, reinserting the barrel. I think she says, "One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and go go go."

The gun clicks.

"Holy shit, holy shit, that was intense," she cries. She's

leaping and hopping all over the tarp. She bangs a fist against the garage. “Allie, you got to try this, I’m mean you really have to.”

I say no.

“I’m telling you, I’m telling you, I’m telling you, it really is incredible.”

I say no.

“I’m telling you, it will blow your mind.”

I can’t help it. I have to try. It’s a once in a lifetime event.

The gun tastes like rust in my mouth.

I’ve tried twice more as the years have progressed, progressed?, waiting for the click. You hear a click, you hear a click. If you don’t hear a click, what do you hear? Do you hear the bang? Do you hear anything?

Kate is right. There is nothing like that moment as you pull the trigger. Nothing else matters as you pull the trigger. It is what the Hindu call moksha, what the Buddhist call nirvana. I will be briefly drawn to the sedentary religions during my late twenties.

“My turn again,” Kate grabs the gun from me.

I say we’re pushing our luck.

“One more time,” she says. “Luck has nothing to do with it.”

She says again that Jesus is her Lord and Savior. She asks me to wish her well. She tells me to tell everyone goodbye. She says Tata to me.

She smiles at me before she puts the muzzle back in her mouth. I am almost, but not quite, envious. She smiles the smile of someone belonging where she should.

What does she hear? Does she hear the bullet screaming up the barrel, the bullet hitting her skin, entering her brain? Does she feel her consciousness explode? Do those last multi-milliseconds last an eternity? Or is it like blowing out a candle, with the lingering smoke? Or is it a calm, crisp, nothing?

Since we are Christians, and we were, then Kate has gone to the light and she is already in heaven where she can adore God and Jesus and the Holy Ghost for all of eternity and it will never get old.

I take a picture. I take another picture, just in case I screwed up the first one. I leave the gun in her mouth. It looks better that way.

I use the garden hose to wash away the blood and brains off the tarp. The cool water, as it arches, makes shimmering rainbows. I roll up her body in the tarp. I roll her up like she is an enchilada. A burrito. Crepe Suzette. Kate enchilada, burrito Kate, Crepe Ka-Kate. There is some blood on the side of the garage and I damp a towel from the hose and try to wipe away the stuff off the wall. I do my best, but the blood smears everywhere, turning from red to pink. The garage is a light yellow, so it shows everything.

Of course I expect our mother to come running out of the house, her arms over her head, screaming and yelling, and maybe she will trip over the garden hose and fall head over heel and I will try not to laugh. I wait, but she doesn't come. I gird myself for neighbors, surely they will show, after hearing the gun shot. I will need to explain. I wait, but they don't show either.

Her mouth, I guess, acted as a natural silencer. The gun wasn't nearly as loud as it was the other night.

I leave her there and go out looking for Sara and Tom and Bruce to tell them what's happened, explain it to them, describe it to them, but when I make it to the dock they're ready to go out on Sara's parents boat and they tell me to come on and board. I tell them Kate is not feeling well. We have a great time. We sail and swim and eat chicken and it isn't until later that an official boat pulls up and there are whispers and Sara's stepmother comes to me and says something has happened at home and I need to go back with the officers.

It turned out a neighbor's dog found Kate and began chewing at the tarp to get at her and then another dog and another dog and pretty soon their barking and growling and fighting over my sister's corpse got to be so much that my mother finally had enough and went outside to see what was going on. She had to call the police to get the dogs off of Kate's body. They did a lot of damage, quite a bit.

I've never heard so many questions. The questions go on for days, weeks, but what can I tell them? Don't they understand?

Why did I roll her up in the tarp? I have no idea. It seemed like the thing to do. I mention burritos. I talk about enchiladas. They don't seem to get me. They ask why I am talking about Mexican food. I've forgotten to mention the crepe suzette. That is French, like how you kiss.

G. Bernhard Smith

Bread and Water

When Hobie LeBlanc arrived at Arceneaux's Grocery Store the clogged check-out lines reached all the way back into the shopping aisles. He crowded his way into the store but couldn't find any unused shopping carts. As Hobie stood there weighing his options a young mother pulling a crying toddler by the wrist hobbled toward him. When the pair shuffled past, one of the kid's shoes caught on Hobie's bootlace. The kid tripped, tumbled into a ball, and fell sprawled out on the floor at Hobie's feet.

"Gawd almighty, I'm sorry 'bout that," he told the boy's mother.

She hardly noticed, lifting the screaming child up by the arm and then tugging him along toward the produce aisle with even greater urgency. Hobie looked down, noticed his work-boot was untied, its haggard brown lace trailing alongside the cuff of his camo pants leg. Shit. He wasn't about to waste time bending and tying, not with his back the way it was.

Every part of your body failed at a different rate when you got old. Eyes no good for reading, then your back's no good for hard work, then every single joint feels like it has a headache. Even Hobie's ears weren't sharp as they used to be. The grocery store echoed with a muffled buzz like a crowd milling around at a Mardi Gras parade. Hobie waded into the fray, shouldering past some folks huddled around the fruits and vegetables and then he high-tailed it back to the water aisle.

The whole place was gutted. The only water containers left were three-gallon plastic cubes with ungainly dispensing spigots and molded plastic handles on top. Hobie strode over and grabbed two. They weighed more than he would have liked given he'd just started shopping, but so be it. He was late to the game. This never would've happened if Irene were still alive. She would've had Hobie to the grocery as soon as the weather lady said the hurricane was headed their way. A year and a half since she'd passed, and still one more reason to

wish she was still with him. Add that to an infinity of reasons. Hobie never ran out of them—reasons dancing around him like angels on the head of a pin, raindrops in a thunderstorm.

The water taken care of, he made his way over to where they kept the bread. Same story. No loaves of sliced bread to be found, but there must have been a fresh delivery of Reising's French bread just arrived. Dozens of long red and white baguette bags laid stacked on a corner rack, three or four eager souls helping themselves to a couple of loaves each. Hobie put down one of his waters on an empty shelf and then wrestled his way over, eventually managing to nab two loaves. They still smelled like fresh sweet dough, like some tiny part of the city that had remained sane.

Why the hell did people buy bread before a storm anyway? Didn't make sense really. But then Hobie had to laugh. For sure, Irene would have told him to get bread. A memory of an Easter Sunday poured over him, of his wife serving up a loaf of hot French bread and him carrying in a big tureen of her special recipe seafood gumbo from the kitchen. Perhaps bread was more of an idea than it was food, the rich familiar taste of it like comfort in your mouth, like four sturdy walls and roof over your head.

Hobie stopped trying to make sense of bread, tucked the loaves under his left arm and retreated to where he'd left his other water container. It was gone. Goddammit! He gazed up and down the aisle, but saw no one with a clumsy water cube like the one he was carrying. Who would do a thing like that in an emergency? He snorted away his disgust and set to finishing up.

Everywhere people, frantic people with glazed-over blank eyes and pursed lips, rushing aisle-to-aisle, trying to find whatever it was they considered essential. Not just bread and water. Baby food. Diapers. Peanut butter. Hamburger meat. Oranges. Did Hobie have those same eyes, the ones that ignored everyone while they spied for the next item on the list? He weaved around a blurred array of people as they brushed past him. Burly guys in baseball caps, women with babies in their arms, kids excited by the wonder of seeing chaotic adults, all this frenzied activity covered up with a thin plywood veneer of normalcy, and the promise of thunder in the wind.

One thing left on Hobie's list: batteries. He headed toward the back of the grocery store, wondering how he was going to carry everything he needed back to the check out, and how long he was going to have to wait in line. He marched down the rear aisle, peering up each of the rows until he spotted a battery display and then bee-lined his way to the near-empty flashlight and battery shelves. There were still a few packs of *D*s left. Hobie grabbed three four-packs, as many as he could hold with his free hand, and then scooted down toward the front end of the store to find the shortest check-out lane. Two steps before the end of the aisle he tripped.

His chest hit the floor first, then his chin. The French bread under his arm crunched and the packages of batteries flew off to God knows where. He managed to keep hold of the water container. Hobie lifted his head and righted himself, his left elbow propped up underneath him, his brain turning cartwheels. He swung his legs around and sat there, rolling his head back and forth, trying to shake off the pain of the bruising fall, too embarrassed to go looking for the batteries. Goddamned shoe lace.

An older black woman with dark wide eyes and an empathetic smile came over to him. She was carrying one of his battery packs. "You all right, dawlin'?" she asked him, clutching his shoulder.

"Yeah. Fine."

She squeezed and gently moved him side to side.

"You sure you don't need some help?" she asked.

"Naw, I'm all right, really," said Hobie.

The lady kept right on talking to him, her eyes focused on Hobie's groceries. "Well, I see you got enough French bread there to last you through the storm. I always say, French bread and some butter's like your home and your family all wrapped up in love." The woman's smile was a comfort. For a moment Hobie forgot his pain. "Don't you worry now," she told him. "You gonna be all right, trust me."

The woman handed him the package of batteries, patted Hobie's shoulder and then took her place back in line. No one else seemed to care about, or even notice his tumble. Mayhem. So much activity teeming through the place it didn't surprise anyone, an old man tripping and falling, spilling out like

water onto the floor.

Hobie looked around. Whoever had found his other two packages of *D* batteries must have kept them for themselves. Animals. The whole civilized world turned to animals in a crisis. Noah would've had no trouble filling his ark up in here.

Hobie struggled to his feet and shuffled over to the nearest checkout lane without bothering to check if it was the shortest. There were more than ten people in line in front of him. Human nature never changed. Things get worse as time grows short. But this time—this time he had to admit he'd brought catastrophe down upon himself. He'd waited too long. How many times had he done this? A dozen? He knew better than to wait until the last minute. Damn his pig-headed stupidity.

This was how it always was before a storm.

The final 4-by-8 sheet of plywood went up without a problem. Hell, the frames outside the picture window still had the nail holes from the last time he'd had to batten down the hatches. A wind-driven drizzle pelted Hobie's slicker as the dim remnants of the afternoon faded to gray, handing the night over to whatever chaos was on the horizon. The air smelled tangy, that metallic ozone scent, water so fresh you want to hold open your mouth and catch the drops on your tongue.

Hobie retreated inside his storage shed and stowed his hammer and the remaining nails back in his toolbox. He slid his hand underneath the top tool tray, removed his long stainless-steel flashlight and flicked it on, just to make sure it still worked. A steady beam of blue light flooded the shed. He had whatever juice remained, plus the four batteries he'd bought at the grocery store to hold him over. He shut off the flashlight and went inside, locking up the tool shed behind him.

Nothing to do now but wait. The channel six weather lady was going on about storm tracks and storm surges and strike possibilities. Hobie sat down at the kitchen table and cut a slice off one of his loaves of French bread, slathering on a pat or two of soft margarine before crunching into it with his teeth. Sweet Jesus, was there anything that tasted better than

French bread and butter? Emergency rations, Cajun style.

The phone rang. Hobie swallowed before marching over and picking up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Dad? Are you OK?" It was his son, Richie.

"Hell, yeah. I just finished tackin' up the last of the plywood. I'm holdin' on. How you doin', Son?"

"Dad." There was a long pause before Richie continued. "Dad, we're leavin'. We're goin' up to Baton Rouge, and stay at my friend, Frank's."

"All right then."

"No, Dad. You don't understand. This is supposed to get real bad. I'm calling you because I think you ought'a come on with us."

"Aw, now son, I seen a bunch 'a these things, and I ain't never cleared out for a blessed one of 'em. That Betsy was the worst, and I ain't left my house and home for that."

Hobie wore his victories over hurricanes like badges of courage, as if each storm's onslaught was a Redcoat attack he'd successfully repulsed. Nature wasn't going to take back what he'd fought so hard to secure. Katrina? Who came up with the names for these things anyway?

"You never know, Dad. They say if the storm comes ashore east of the city the levees are sure to give way. That surge comes up from the Rigolets and you'll be up to your ass in ten feet of water."

"That ain't never happened before."

"But, if it does . . . "

"If it does then I'll be a monkey's uncle, but for sure, I ain't leavin' my home 'cause of some wind and rain."

There was another long silence. "It's obvious I can't talk sense to you."

"Now, what kind of thing is that to say . . . "

"Dad, this ain't like them other storms. You been watchin' the news at least? They're sayin' category five. That's as bad as it ever gets. It could be real serious."

"You know how many times I heard that song and dance, Son? You remember Camile? Category five. That was gonna come right up the river. Destroy the city. Remember what happened? Nothin'."

"That was only because it turned at the last minute."

"Well, all's I know is they said it's gonna hit out by Slidell. That's forty miles away for Christ's sake. I ain't leavin'. But, you go 'head on and run up to Baton Rouge if that makes you feel better. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Again, Richie fell silent on the other end of the line. Finally he spoke up. "I'll call you, Dad. You take care of yourself now."

"You too, Son."

Hobie hung up the receiver and stood there in his kitchen, staring out of the window over the sink at the ancient oak tree in his front yard. Gnarled black roots coiled up around its base jutted from the loamy wet ground like tiny flood walls holding the standing water from the yard at bay. The tree branches whipped about like the arms of a drowning swimmer. That oak tree was Irene's favorite, the thing she liked most about their property. Hobie built her a bench swing that hung out under its most sturdy limb, the swing's seat now swaying to and fro in the steadily strengthening wind. The gales howling against the eaves of their home sounded for a second like Irene, cackling with joy as Hobie and his son pushed her higher and higher, the contraption's rusty chains straining to keep her tied to the earth.

Thirty minutes after he'd hung up the phone he was still staring out of the window at that swing. He'd almost managed to tear himself away when a set of blue headlights lit the front yard and a red Chevy SUV pulled up into the driveway—his son's vehicle. Aw, shit. What now?

Hobie unlocked the back door, put on his slicker and walked out under the carport. The rain was driving harder now, whipping past the corner of the house in gusty waves. The sky flickered with a flash of lightning as he walked out toward the SUV. A clap of thunder thudded only a few seconds following the flash. Hobie took a moment to cover up his head with his slicker's hood. The driver's side window powered down as Hobie leaned in toward his son's face. Inside the cab, Richie's wife, Jo Ann, sat with a tight-lipped grimace on her face and two fretful black wells for eyes. Hobie's six-month old grandson, Leif, laid sleeping in the car seat just behind her.

"Dad. You've gotta come with us," Richie said, raising his

voice above the storm.

"Boy, you are one stubborn sum 'bitch."

"Yeah," said Richie, smiling wide. "I wonder where I get that from?"

"I tol' ya, I'll be all right. I'm like that old oak tree. I got roots here, Son."

Richie laughed out loud. "I bet if that oak tree could move it'd pull itself up by the roots right now and clear the hell outta here."

Hobie rubbed at his cheek, felt at the dull ache emanating from the bruise on his chin.

Richie kept on talking, a little louder than he had before. "C'mon and get in the truck with us. We're goin' out Highway 90 and see if we can't get up to Baton Rouge that way while there's still time."

Every wind gust brought with it a wave of rain, the gale-driven drops peppering Hobie's face with the sting of BBs fired from an air gun. His slicker popped and crackled each time a bead of water made an impact. Inside his hood the sound was mesmerizing, like being trapped on the inside of a popcorn machine. Hobie just stood there, thinking of all the reasons he should stay, trying to figure whether each one was an anchor or a life raft.

He leaned in closer to Richie. "Your mama's buried right down the street, down at the church graveyard. I figure if anything was to happen I ought not be too far away from her."

"Hobie, please," Jo Ann said, craning her head over to the driver's side window.

The thought of Irene's funeral service, the smell of those white roses, her picture set atop the casket—closed because of how bad the cancer had ravaged her body—it was more than a memory. The hurt of it twisted around Hobie's heart. He couldn't leave her now. Not after all they'd been through together.

"I bought her that gravestone," Hobie said. "It's got her portrait on it, laser etched, her sittin' on the swing, swingin' out under this oak tree," he said, pointing. "Our oak tree. This is my home, Jo Ann, and I don't think I can leave it behind. Thank you, kindly for lookin' out for me though."

Jo Ann sunk back over into the passenger seat and started

crying. Richie leaned away from Hobie, and then, craning forward, he squinted hard into the rain-hazed darkness, staring out at the beams of his headlights, almost like he was trying to see his way forward.

Hobie felt bad for Richie. For the first time since Hobie's wife died the loneliness felt wrong, not like a pain that was his alone, but more like a barrier between him and his son. Fighting to stay when Richie was leaving felt like a wedge between them. Wasn't right him having words with his son right before a storm, but Hobie still couldn't see parting with his whole world. He'd spent so many years building up the memories tied to this place it seemed they'd somehow sunk down deep inside everything around him.

Finally, Richie turned and stared up into Hobie's eyes. "You know, gravestones ain't for the dead."

"No?" Hobie's chin throbbed in the cold rain. "How you mean, Son?"

"You don't buy a gravestone for someone who dies." Richie reached out with his hand and latched onto the collar of his father's shirt, pulling him in closer to his face. Hobie could smell something sweet on his son's breath, like cold pop in the summertime. The urgency of his son's grasp surprised him. Richie spoke in a deep voice, deeper than Hobie ever remembered him speaking before. "Gravestones are for the living, Dad. They're markers, for your family. So's they can find their way back to a place." Richie's eyes searched through what he'd just said. Then he added, "But home ain't a place."

Hobie stood there, amidst the crackle of the raindrops, the tops of his work boots soaking wet, his feet cold. He looked inside the SUV at Jo Ann. She wiped her eyes and turned to stare at the baby, still asleep in the back seat.

Richie kept on hacking away at him. "This ain't just about *your* roots, Dad." Richie let go of him and turned in his seat. "You see that little boy back there? To him roots ain't a place, at least not yet. *You're* his roots. You drown clingin' on to your rooftop in the night and he ain't never gonna have a chance to know where he came from—ain't never gonna know his own grandpa."

Roots. Shared blood. Life held on to Hobie in a way he never knew it could, its invisible tendrils like the veins running

throughout his body. All a man ever has that's worth a damn is his family. Maybe Richie's little boy needed to know that. Maybe Hobie needed to think more that way right now. He scoured his memory. Hobie had never weathered a storm alone. Hell, he hadn't lived alone in near fifty years, and he was no damned good at it anyway. The picture of him lying on his ass helpless in the middle of Arceneaux's Grocery Store kept flashing in his head.

"C'mon, Dad," Richie shouted at him. "We'll come back, no matter what. I promise." Jo Ann wiped away tears from the bridge of her nose, and then stared back gravely into Hobie's eyes. His whole marriage, 47 years, he never saw Irene cry scared, not the way Jo Ann was crying now.

"All right," said Hobie. "Give me a minute." Hobie leaned back from the window, taking a few clumsy steps away at first, and then he trotted as fast as he could toward the house. Inside he took a look around, thought about his things, what to save—clothes and guns, family picture albums, official papers, tools and flashlights. He could hear Irene telling him only to bring what's important. Hobie tried hard to get his bearings, to take good stock, but after a minute roaming around the house he walked back into the kitchen, looked down at the table and smiled. He arrived back out at Richie's SUV carrying a kitchen knife, two fresh loaves of French bread and a tub of margarine. Hobie opened the back door and climbed inside next to his grandson.

Sarah Blanchard

The Bus Driver

In January, two months after she turned thirteen, Brandi Moorehead fell deeply in love with her school bus driver.

Each school morning, well before sunrise, Brandi followed her flashlight beam along the twisted dirt path that was her driveway, out through weeds and woods to the county road. While she waited in the cold darkness for the school bus to arrive, Brandi liked to switch off her flashlight and search for a morning star, as she'd often done with her dad. The bus came from the east, where the woods gave way to hayfields, so its headlights often appeared just below Jupiter or brilliant Venus. Accustomed to the enormous space of the western plains, Brandi found comfort in locating the same stars and planets that also inhabited the smaller Appalachian skies.

Brandi and her mom Julie had moved in with Uncle Eddie the day after Christmas. Eddie's disability check paid the rent on a shabby four-room farmhouse in the middle of an abandoned peach orchard. They lived several miles outside of an undistinguished milltown squatting by the French Broad River. The house was cluttered and drafty, but it was bigger than the single-wide she'd been born in. She liked living tucked away here in the woods, a pioneer on the edge of civilization.

She felt most like a pioneer in the mornings. Her mom slept late because she worked evenings at the McDonalds out by the interstate. Most nights, Eddie was out at some bar and seldom woke before noon. So Brandi ate breakfast, charged her phone, collected her school things and walked to the bus stop by herself.

Solitude and self-reliance came naturally to her, so school was difficult. The school building was a dreary brick box with peeling woodwork and narrow, dark halls that smelled of sweat and disinfectant. She'd been homeschooled previously and the work was easy, but all the other parts were confusing and frustrating—rigid schedules, overworked teachers, and intricate adolescent intrigues that seemed to revolve around

the other kids' needs to annoy and be annoyed. Brandi just didn't get all the social drama. So she cultivated a cloak of invisibility.

Brandi earned good grades but seldom spoke in class, and she suspected that two of her teachers didn't know her name. She was strong and quick but indifferent to team sports. She cared nothing about celebrities, makeup or hairstyles. She wore sweatshirts, cheap T-shirts, generic white sneakers and jeans from Walmart. On really cold days, she added a fleece-lined corduroy barn jacket and leather work gloves. Her pride and joy was a pair of insulated LL Bean boots she'd found at Goodwill, with real leather uppers and bright red laces.

The other kids found Brandi too solemn, too quiet or just weird. Her preferred pastime, when she wasn't reading or sketching or hiking in the woods, was knitting. After she told another girl that Snapchat seemed a waste of time, she was taunted for being queer. Mostly, though, the others ignored her and she ignored them. She didn't share any details of her life, and she was very good at keeping secrets.

Her best new secret was her deep, abiding love for George, the man who drove the morning school bus.

Despite what her classmates thought—if they thought about her at all—Brandi paid a great deal of attention to her appearance. She had no money for makeup or nice clothes, and anyway she didn't want to be cute or trendy or hot. Instead, she wanted George to see her as she really was: mature, serious, competent, intelligent. Every little thing mattered, so as soon as the bus headlights appeared in the pre-dawn darkness, she prepared herself. She centered her old denim backpack precisely between her shoulders and arranged her long black hair so it hung smoothly down her back. Then she stood very casually under the oak tree, waiting for the bus doors to fold open. She knew exactly how to grasp the cold metal handrail with her left hand and step forward, right foot first, so she could climb gracefully up the steep steps without sprawling. On the top step, she always paused, heart thumping, to gaze down into the bus driver's warm brown eyes.

"Morning," he always said, smiling. And that's when her carefully rehearsed plans fell apart. Always too nervous to speak, she blushed, ducked her head so her hair swung over

her face, and stumbled down the aisle to slide into her seat.

The two older Everett brothers were the only kids who got on before her and they always occupied the entire back row, saving seats for their large rude buddies. Brandi could therefore sit where she chose, and she always chose the same seat: right side, four rows back, on the aisle. From there she could see the side of George's face, watch his hands on the steering wheel, and glimpse his eyes in the rearview mirror. Whenever the bus was moving, she stared into the mirror.

She knew he knew she was staring, because sometimes he stared back. He'd hold her gaze for a second and smile a little before turning his attention back to the road. Embarrassed, Brandi always turned away. A minute later, she'd flip her hair back, breathe deeply and stare again into the rearview mirror, desperately wanting him to understand that this was the only way she knew to express her pure and undying love.

Brandi was certain that George was worthy of her devotion, so she'd memorized every feature. Handsome and compact, athletic-looking in a regular-guy sort of way, he had close-cut, dark curly hair, a short, sculpted beard, and serious dark-coffee eyes behind steel-framed glasses. His skin was a nice medium brown, with interesting darker freckles over a long nose and high cheekbones. Because of the glasses and the trimmed beard, she knew he must be intelligent. Also sensitive, well-read, and an outdoorsman with a quiet, gentle sense of humor. He appeared to be in his early twenties, mature but not too old for a serious young woman such as herself.

George occupied her dreams and daydreams, and she would have died in shame if he knew this.

The bus ride was long, but always too short for Brandi because this was her time with George. With all the stops and meanderings down side roads, the ride took fifty-five minutes on a good day, more than an hour in poor weather or heavy traffic.

Afternoons were entirely different. The afternoon driver was a pudgy older white woman with orange hair and a harsh voice, who wore baggy sweatpants and stank of cigarette smoke. The afternoon bus was always crowded and slow. Then Brandi squeezed into whatever seat was available,

stared out the window, and concocted elaborate fantasies about travels to faraway places with George. Often she dozed off and the driver woke her by yelling, "Brandi Moorehead, wake up! Girl, you're home, get off." Then Brandi startled back to consciousness, disoriented by the woman's shrill, smoke-roughened voice.

George, on the other hand, had a very nice baritone voice. She'd learned about vocal ranges from music class. She liked hearing him speak into his radio, updating the school dispatcher on the bus's progress. Sometimes George had to shout down the Everett boys, telling them to "Y'all sit *now* and get quiet *now*." His commanding tone, with that hint of southern softness, always sent a lovely thrill through her, kickstarting new fantasies and making her yearn to be grown up, when she would be smart and sophisticated, with a curvy woman's body that looked really *good* in a dress and heels. But if she were grown up, they wouldn't have met. She wouldn't be sitting here in his school bus, staring into the rearview mirror.

Maybe George could teach her to drive. He was a very careful driver and she knew he'd be good in a crisis. If they were in an accident, if the bus skidded on ice and flipped over or a big truck sideswiped them into a ditch, George would know exactly how to get everyone out safely. He'd be her hero.

On the last afternoon before spring break, a Thursday in late March, Brandi missed the afternoon bus. She stayed just a minute to talk with her English teacher about an assignment. Then the zipper broke on her cheap denim backpack, right after she shoved her ancient laptop in on top of her latest knitting project. By the time she'd wound a roll of masking tape around the backpack's broken seam, she was standing alone by the old lockers in the back hallway.

Outdoors, Brandi hurried down the steps and along the sidewalk, then stopped short and watched in dismay as her bus turned the far corner at the traffic light and disappeared around a bend. It was three o'clock and the parking lot was nearly empty.

How could that stupid bus driver leave without her? *George* wouldn't have left her behind.

Brandi pulled her cellphone out of her sweatshirt pocket and stared at the blank screen. It was an old flip-phone with an ancient battery, and she'd forgotten to charge it the night before. Anyway, who could she call? Her mom was working until seven and Brandi knew not to call her unless there was a *real* emergency: "Only if the house is burning down, right?"

She didn't know any neighbors. Even if her phone had been working, there was no way she'd call Uncle Eddie to come get her. Not even if he could borrow a car from one of his buddies. Not even if he was sober.

It was a warm, sunny day and Brandi decided to walk. She had walked part-way home a month earlier, when she'd stayed late to set up her science fair project. That day, she'd walked halfway and then waited at a gas station for her mom, who left work early to pick her up. It had all gone as planned and Brandi had enjoyed the walk.

This time, maybe she could walk the whole eight miles. If she got a blister, she would stop at the same gas station, borrow a phone, and wait there until her mom got off work. But she'd try not to do that. Her mom was always encouraging her to find solutions and be independent. Brandi figured it would take about three hours and she'd get home a little before sunset, so she wouldn't need her flashlight.

She braided her hair back, carefully hoisted her taped-up backpack over her shoulders, and set off.

The first hour went well. This was a familiar part of town with small tidy homes and bright pink azalea bushes in bloom. She passed a convenience store offering cheap milk and lottery tickets. A few cars drove by, and several people walked dogs or strollers on the sidewalks. The sun was warm on her shoulders, and Brandi found a good walking rhythm in her red-laced boots.

Half an hour later, she passed the gas station where her mom had picked her up the time before. Brandi glanced at the wall clock inside the store, and kept going. It would be great if she could hike part of the Appalachian Trail in the summer. Her math teacher had walked the whole trail last year. How wonderful, she thought, to be a through-hiker, like an explorer or a gypsy, watching for bears, sleeping in a tent and carrying all your food and clothes in your pack.

But this was not the Appalachian Trail. The tidy residential neighborhood, with its azaleas and sidewalks and strollers, had disappeared. Now she was dodging mud, potholes and broken pavement. Houses in this part of town were more like shacks, small and far apart, with thistles and pokeweed growing in trash-strewn yards. She saw house trailers with broken windows, boarded-up sheds, and skeletons of rusted-out cars resting on cement blocks. A big angry dog snarled and lunged toward her, hurling itself against a chain tied to a tree. She'd never liked the bus ride through this part of town, and she hadn't paid much attention to it. Now she saw how poor and ugly it really was. Brandi quickened her pace.

With a sharp ripping sound, her backpack shifted abruptly. Brandi slipped it off her shoulders and lowered it to a pile of leaves just as the top split open again. Her repair job had failed. Dismayed, she gathered the bag in both arms and clutched it protectively to her chest. She started walking again, slowly, but her arms began aching. She stopped and hung the bag by one strap on a chainlink fence to examine the damage. Perhaps if she removed her bootlaces, she could wrap them around the bag and tie it all together. She crouched to untie the left lace. Then she heard footsteps.

"Hey there, sexy girl. You lost?" The voice was slyly amused. Brandi stood and turned. Two black men were watching her from perhaps twenty feet away. The larger one slouched casually against a rotted gatepost, and the shorter one stood at the edge of the road. They looked aggressively male in baggy jeans, black hoodies and easy grins.

Brandi considered them, keeping one hand on her backpack. They weren't as old as she'd first thought. Teens trying to look menacing, boys rather than men, but still older and bigger than she was. She spoke to the smaller boy.

"Jamar? I know you," she said. "You're in homeroom, sometimes."

Jamar's thin smile slipped. The other boy grinned, "Dude, you know this sexy girl? You in *school* with her?"

"Yeah, her name's Brandi," Jamar admitted. "Brandi *Moore*-head," he added with a smirk.

Brandi rolled her eyes the way other girls did. Like she'd never heard her name said *that* way before.

The older one said, “So, Brandi. You look like you are lost and you maybe need us to help you. That is one shit-poor tote bag you got there.” He nodded at her backpack. “We’ll get you a nice new one, real pretty. Put diamonds on it and fill it with good shit. Then we get some weight on you, dress you up sexy, you be real pretty.” He shook his head frowning. “You got to smile, though. You got one serious bitch face going on there.”

Brandi shot back, “I’m not lost. Right now you’re getting my very *best* smile, so call it what you want. I don’t need anything, thank you.” Brandi hoped her voice sounded confident and firm.

Jamar said, “Yeah, well, maybe you be okay but that backpack didn’t get the memo.” He laughed, delighted with his own wit.

Brandi ignored Jamar and watched the bigger boy, considering options. Could she convince them she wasn’t worth the trouble? Should she leave her backpack and run? Just scream? She was a fast runner but she didn’t want to abandon her backpack. And she’d never practiced screaming so she probably wasn’t very good at it.

The older boy walked closer and reached a hand toward her. Brandi felt the hairs on the back of neck rise. She slipped a hand into her backpack. Maybe he’d think she was getting her cell phone.

He came closer. Brandi swung one booted foot up hard and fast, aiming for his crotch. He twisted to the side and her foot caught his kneecap. She slipped in the mud and almost fell.

The boy swore and brought up a fist—and stopped, when he saw the thick aluminum knitting needle gripped in her right hand. She held it with the tip pointed toward his abdomen. Her stance said she was ready for a knife fight.

She felt a surge of adrenalin and thought, *I’m glad I didn’t untie my shoelaces*. Then she thought, *Damn, maybe it’s time to run*.

“Hey! What’s happening here?” Someone yelled.

Brandi’s would-be assailant shot a glance behind her. And it was over. Both boys turned and sprinted across the street, running through a vacant lot and disappearing behind a boarded-up shack.

She heard a vehicle approaching from behind. An old

Dodge pickup, dirty black where it wasn't rust-colored, rolled to a stop beside her, and the driver leaned through the rolled-down passenger window. Brandi stared at the close-cropped hair, trim beard and metal-framed glasses.

"George? How—?" She stumbled over his name and felt herself blushing fiercely.

"Hey there, are you okay? What'd they do?" He added, "I live two blocks over, I'm heading home."

"I'm okay." She wanted to pull her hair over her face, but it was still tied back in a braid. *Stupid. I can stand up to bullies but I can't talk to the bus driver?*

"That was a pretty good kick you threw, Brandi Moorehead." George left the engine running and climbed out of the pickup, glancing around before he joined her at the side of the road. He was wearing the same clothes she'd seen him in at six that morning, a denim vest, old jeans and a green flannel shirt. "And that's an interesting weapon you have there."

"You know my name?" She slid the knitting needle into the backpack. "I hate my name."

"Yeah, drivers have to know who you are, where you live. Where's your ride home?"

"I'm walking. I'd be almost there if this stupid backpack wasn't falling apart." Her eyes started to water. She rubbed one hand over her face, furious with herself for tearing up.

"Hey, it's okay. They're not coming back. They know I saw them. Where's your phone? You need me to call someone? What about your mom?"

"Mom's working until seven. There's no one else."

"No neighbors? What about Mrs. Everett, she lives near you. I'd call an Uber but I don't think we have it here."

Brandi shook her head. "No, we don't know the Everetts and I don't know their number anyway." She added, "Maybe *you* could give me a ride? You can pretend you're an Uber." She wasn't actually sure how Uber worked.

George folded his arms, leaned against the hood of his truck and scanned the street. He frowned. "Sorry, I'm not an Uber driver. With this truck? And here's the thing. Then we'd have a big ol' black man, that's me, taking a little white girl, that's you, for a ride in his truck. What do you think that looks like? I can't take that chance."

She was stung that he'd called her "little." Was that how he saw her? "That's ridiculous!" she insisted. "You're helping, there's nothing wrong about that."

"Uh-huh." He added, "I could call the police for you. They'd give you a ride home."

"No, no police!" she insisted.

George glanced around again, then sighed. "Get in, I'll drive you."

Not quite believing it, Brandi grabbed her backpack off the fence. She hauled the creaky passenger door open, placed her broken backpack on the floor, climbed in, and slammed the heavy door. The truck started rolling while she was still fumbling with the seatbelt. George drove carefully, five miles under the speed limit.

Her delight and relief made her feel bold, even a little reckless. "I'm not white," she volunteered. "My birth daddy is—was—half Paiute. We lived on a ranch on the Snake River. That's in Idaho." She knew she was babbling but he didn't seem to notice.

He raised an eyebrow. "So you rode horses, branded cattle?"

"We had horses, and my dad—my step-dad, not my birth dad, I never knew him—ran some cattle. Mostly it was a dude ranch for tourists who wanted an 'authentic western experience.'" She air-quoted the phrase. "Dad was the wrangler, Mom cooked. I saddled horses, helped teach the dudes how to ride, took the kids fishing."

"Sounds like a great life. How'd you end up here?"

Brandi hesitated, planning what to say and what to leave out. "Last October a tractor rolled over on my dad—my step-dad—and he died. The people who owned the ranch had to hire someone else to run it, so when a new family came in we had to move out." She swallowed. Talking to George felt strange and it was hard to get the words out, but it also felt good.

"You loved him a lot." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yeah. He was the best."

"So then what happened?"

She found her voice. "Uncle Eddie said Mom and I could come here and live with him, and Mom got a job at McDonalds." She bit her lip. She shouldn't have mentioned Eddie.

George shot her a concerned look. “Who’s Uncle Eddie?”

How to explain? “He’s Mom’s third cousin or something like that, they’re related but not close. It’s his house—well, he rents it. He told me to call him Uncle Eddie.”

“He works too, so he couldn’t come pick you up?”

She was silent for a minute as he drove. They were approaching the crossroads near her home. Then, “Eddie doesn’t work. He has PTSD from Iraq so he gets checks from the government. He drinks a lot. Mom says don’t bother him, just stay out of his way when he gets bad.”

George flicked another quick look at her. He had to ask the questions. “What’s that mean, when he gets bad? And how often is that?”

“Mostly he goes somewhere else to drink, and his buddies bring him back around midnight or so. He usually falls asleep then in his room, which is downstairs. Mom and I have rooms upstairs. Mom made a rule, his buddies can’t come in the house unless she’s there. They’re not so bad and I think they take care of him.”

“So, you’re not supposed to bother Eddie. Does *he* bother *you*?”

She knew what he was asking. “Twice,” she said slowly. “Once I woke up and he was in my room, standing over me. Then Mom came home and he left and acted like nothing happened. I told Mom and we both got locks for our bedroom doors. The second time was in the kitchen, he was behind me and I told him he was too close but he didn’t back away so I grabbed a knife. I stabbed his arm and ran outside. I carry a knife when I’m home and I keep my door locked if Mom’s not there. I think,” she added, “he’s a little afraid of me.”

“But you can’t carry a knife back and forth to school.”

“I have one hidden in the woods. And I have my knitting needles. I’m making a scarf.”

George smiled a little. “You are just one surprise after another. But you and your mom have to talk with social services about Eddie. You are not in a good situation, Brandi.”

“No! If we can’t stay with Eddie, we’ll have no place to live and Mom might lose her job. It’s okay, we’re careful. Mom says it comes down to circumstances. When our circumstances improve, we’ll find a better place to live. I like

it here, though. I like the woods." She added, almost as an afterthought, "Eddie yells at her but he's never hit her. He thinks she carries. A pistol," she clarified.

"Here," she said suddenly. "Let me out here, I can walk the rest. Please." They'd reached the crossroads. The sun was low in the sky. Without George's help, she wouldn't have made it home before dark.

He pulled the truck over, set the brake and let it idle.

"And does she? Carry a pistol," George asked.

Brandi gave him a thin smile. "I'm not supposed to tell. Or call the police. Mom says we can solve our own problems."

"I believe you can," he said. Then he added lightly, "Hey, maybe I *should* get a job with Uber. Think anyone would want to ride in this old truck?"

Brandi smiled and looked down. She could see the pavement through gaps in the rusted floor beneath her feet. "Sure. I definitely would. I *do* ride with you, every day on the bus." She blushed, embarrassed but happy.

George draped both hands over the top of the steering wheel. "Why do you hate your name?"

"Moorehead was my biological dad, the part-Paiute guy. I never knew him. Mom said he was really mean so she kicked him out when I was a year old. She met my step-dad, my *real* dad, when I was two, so he's the only dad I know. His name was Alex Carter. Mom planned to get a divorce, but she couldn't track him down so she never got the divorce. So she couldn't marry again. We lived with my step-dad for ten years but then he died. It's real hard on her." She was starting to choke up again so she said, "Brandi Moorehead sounds like a porn star."

"Yeah, I can see where the kids would have fun with that. What name would you like?"

"I want a name," she said firmly, "that isn't *cute*, that doesn't sound like a baby's nickname. One that doesn't end in an 'ee' sound. I like Harper, like Harper Lee. Or Erin, like Erin Brockovich. Erin Carter, how does that sound?"

"Erin Carter sounds great," George said. "Hey, you know the Randolph farm down by the river? If you ever want to give them a hand with the livestock, I bet they'd let you ride one of their horses. Just tell Miz Randolph that George Kulikowski

sent you."

"Who—? That's your name?"

He laughed. "Yeah, my daddy's father was Polish, a World War Two refugee. You're part Paiute, I'm part Polish. So you never know, right?" His eyes crinkled at the corners, and she saw that he was older than she'd thought.

"Now go, before someone comes and we have to answer questions." He held out his hand and she shook it firmly. She was surprised not to feel a thrill at his touch—instead, this felt like the warm handshake of a friend.

"Thank you, George Kulikowski," she said politely. She scrambled out of the truck, gathered the broken backpack in both arms, and butted the heavy door closed with one hip.

"Goodbye, Erin Carter," George said. "I believe you'll do just fine."

The truck pulled away and she watched it disappear around a bend in the road. Then she walked home in the late afternoon dusk, feeling buoyant, knowing her face was stretched into a big goofy unfamiliar smile. If she hadn't had the backpack to worry about, she'd have skipped along like a little kid.

Two days later, with no notice, Eddie moved out.

Brandi had spent the day in the woods, exploring a new trail that she thought might be a shortcut to the Randolph farm. It would be good to be around horses and cows again.

At dinnertime, Eddie simply wasn't there. His jacket and fake cowboy boots and greasy duffel bag were gone from the hallway. The beer and pizzas had vanished from the fridge.

Julie, Brandi's mom, explained. "It was strange. Someone from the sheriff's office called wanting to talk to Eddie. I told them he was out, I'd have him call them back. Then Eddie came home in a rush and piled all his stuff on the front porch. One of his buddies picked him up. Eddie didn't tell me where he was going, just that something had come up and he needed to move on. So I called the landlord. He said, and I quote, 'good riddance to bad rubbish,' and he said you and I can stay on if we can manage the rent. We're okay for a month anyway. If you ever see that S.O.B. again, tell me, okay?"

They celebrated by going out for Chinese and buying Brandi a sturdy new backpack.

A few days later, Julie introduced their new housemate, a friend of a friend of the manager at McDonalds, an older woman named Francesca who had relocated from Puerto Rico after losing her home in a hurricane. She needed a cheap, safe place to stay with her two rescued dogs, a shy Chihuahua and an arthritic old pit bull. Francesca declared, "We are all refugees, aren't we?" and insisted that the downstairs front room, where Eddie had camped out, would be perfect for her and the dogs once it was thoroughly cleaned.

Later that week, Brandi finished the navy wool scarf she'd been knitting. She wrapped it carefully in a brown paper bag, wrote "George K" on the outside, and tucked it into her new backpack. Spring was absolutely not the right time to give anyone a wool scarf but she was proud she'd finished it.

Monday morning after spring break, Brandi was at the bus stop twenty minutes early, holding the bag with the scarf so she could hand it to George as soon as she got on the bus. She'd smile and say hi and not be nervous about talking with him. She felt older, changed somehow. Her schoolgirl crush had faded, and she was looking forward to being able to talk with him as a friend. Perhaps they'd meet in a coffee shop sometime, chat and catch up on things. She'd like that.

But George wasn't there. The screechy woman with the orange hair was driving the bus.

Brandi stumbled up the steps and demanded, "Where's George!?" But the woman just shrugged and told her to find a seat.

When she came home, wedged into the arm of the red flag on the unused mailbox, was a note addressed to Erin Carter.

Dear Erin, I know you didn't want things stirred up but I made a couple of phone calls and I think circumstances will get better for you and your Mom. Hang in there and take care of each other. I was worried about you before, but not so much now.

I'm starting a new job. I'll miss seeing your face in the mirror every morning. All my best, George Kulikowski (the Polish guy)

She carried the scarf at the bottom of her backpack for a month. Then she tucked it into the back of her closet, still wrapped in the brown paper bag with his name on it. A month

after that, she added his note to the bag for safekeeping.

That summer, Erin Carter and her mom Julie Carter hiked a hundred miles along the Appalachian Trail, carrying on their backs everything they needed to survive.

Dalton James

Butter Teeth

I was failing chemistry because my teacher only cared about book learning and not real life experiments. All year long at his desk, Mr. Mathe just fluffed his mullet and told us which pages to read, but I knew I'd made more bombs than him and dissected way more lizards. I was the real scientist in that class, not ol' Mr. Mullet with his velcro shoes and musty turtlenecks. The other students must have thought so, too, because they took to calling me Butter Teeth, my new science name, ever since I tried to make super-powered teeth whitener out of carburetor cleaner and Play-Doh. As it turns out, that shit will turn your teeth yellower than, well, butter. My gums scarred up a bit, too, but I never really smile wide enough for people to notice. But that's science for you. Answers through risk.

When I got home from school, Momma was sitting on the porch, her big body kind of melting through the slats of her plastic chair, like when you pour gasoline onto Styrofoam. She was flipping through the mail with her big sunglasses on, which meant she was having one of her migraines. Ever since Dad died, she suffered from monster headaches that only went away when she took her pills. I tried to slip past her but she stopped me at the door.

"Donnie, what is this?" she said. She waved an envelope with one hand and rubbed her temple with the other. "Looks important." A fat house fly landed on her forehead.

"Oh that?" I said. I walked over like I was curious too, but I knew it was my progress report. "That's just something from school."

My heart was beating extra hard. It always does when I feel a lie coming on. My body went pins and needles too, like my soul was a sniff away from sneezing up a spray of untruth.

"Yeah, but what is it?" Momma asked. She hates reading. She says reading words of any kind trigger her migraines. It's why she stopped going to church. Even the word of God was like pouring thermite onto that greasy head of hers.

As I stood there, I realized that if Momma saw that I was failing, she'd lock my stuff in the shed again—my bike, my science supplies, my TV—like she did a few terms back, then guilt trip me about how disappointed Dad would be if he was still around. I swear, there ain't nothing worse than being bored in my room with nothing to do but listen to Momma crying on the porch. But, seeing as how I was born with the gift of thinking, it didn't take me long to figure out how to take advantage of Momma's dislike for reading.

"It's a field trip form," I said. I waved the fly from her face. "We're going to the museum." She readjusted her sunglasses.

"All right then, how much do you need?" She pulled a damp fold of bills from somewhere inside her sweaty sports bra.

"Twenty dollars," I said. She pinched a twenty from the fold and held it out. I added, "Plus five for the bus fee."

"Bus fee?" she said, pulling the twenty back toward her sports bra.

"These people don't drive for free, Momma," I said. She knew that was true because her good friend was a bus driver the next county over, and she was always complaining about money. She pulled a five from the fold, then passed both bills over to me. I had somehow turned this awful progress report into free money, without even knowing how I was doing it. Sometimes my brain just flies on ahead and leaves me to catch up later.

"Now leave Momma alone for awhile," she said. "She needs to take her migraine pills." She fumbled with the cap to her orange bottle and popped two pills into her mouth. I went inside, and she yelled after me through the screen door. "Would you hit play on Momma's music?" I did, and Pink Floyd started in on their warpy sounds. She said she liked how it made her daydream, though I could never understand their funny accents.

I went to my room feeling equal parts guilty and excited. I laid the twenty-five dollars onto my unmade bed, then pulled out my science bin from the closet. With my new money I could restock my inventory. I set everything on the floor, then took note of what was low. There were plenty of fireworks left over from the last Fourth of July, but I needed more aluminum foil and toilet bowl cleaner for bombs, lighters to set things

on fire, and a can of keyboard duster so I could freeze critters and try to revive them. I opened my jar of rubber cement and sniffed to see if there was any left. There was. I sniffed it again and my brain tingled. I kept sniffing until my body throbbed along with Momma's music and whatever it was those British boys were saying.

I woke from my nap with a carpet imprint on my cheek and a feeling that Dad was standing over me. When I looked up, there was only the ceiling fan rocking in its socket, the twin chains stuck in an endless double dutch. I knew I had disappointed him with my bad grades. Dad had always looked forward to cooking pancakes for dinner when I brought home a passing report card. I wanted to explain to him that Mr. Mathe was a bad teacher, and that I was doing science on my own time, but of course I couldn't.

I rolled onto my side and frowned at my materials that were spread across the floor. It was dark out, and I wouldn't be able to ride my bike to the store to restock my science bin like I'd planned. If I was going to do an experiment, I'd have to make do with what I had. I was sitting there looking over my stuff, brainstorming ideas, when a warm feeling welled up inside my belly. If I couldn't tell Dad that I was doing my own science, that I wasn't a failure, then I could at least show him, and if his spirit wasn't there to see, then at least I could show myself. I grabbed some Styrofoam, a Roman candle, some cherry bombs, and a book of matches, then walked out into the living room.

"Hey, honey," Momma said. She was leaning against the refrigerator with her sunglasses still on. There was a big smile on her face for no reason. "You're being a good boy in there. A good, quiet boy." Her knees buckled a bit but she caught herself, laughing suddenly.

"You tired, Momma?" I set my stuff down, then walked over and hooked my arm around her doughy ribs. "Let's get you onto the couch." She let me lead her over there. The trailer squeaked beneath us.

"These migraines ain't no joke," she said, flopping onto her back. I felt sorry for her having to deal with those headaches. She'd had a hard time functioning ever since they'd punched

holes in her brain, or whatever it is migraines do.

"Just lie down for awhile," I said, pushing a pillow under her head. "I'm going to go play outside."

"And do what?"

"Some experiments."

She smiled one more time and patted her plump hand against my cheek. "My mad scientist." Then she kind of melted away it seemed, which brought both of us relief.

The words *mad scientist* bounced around my head as I went to the shed to get the gasoline. I liked the way it felt to be called what I really was: a discoverer of things, a dabbler in how the world works. Mr. Mathe hadn't used his Bunsen burners all year. He was a scientist afraid of experiments. It just didn't make sense.

I carried the gasoline and a shovel down to the water, where crusty weeds lined the shore and frogs drummed from their hiding places. Other than the glow of the neighbors' yards, the lake was so black I couldn't tell where the water stopped and the trees started. I liked it like that. It was like I had the world to myself.

I stacked the Styrofoam pieces onto the shovelhead and soaked them in gasoline. The Styrofoam bloated then oozed until it puddled up like marshmallows in the microwave. Most people don't know that this makes poor man's napalm. I'd made it once before, but had lit it in a trashcan that caught fire right away. I'd had to spray it down with the hose before I could record how long it burned, or what color the smoke was.

I lit a match. It crackled and the sudden flame scared the minnows from the water's edge. As I watched them swim away, I noticed an old toy boat, one I played with as a kid, sitting there belly-up in the sand. The red plastic had faded over the years, and dirt was splattered up the edges. The last time I played with that boat, it was in the water and me and Dad were throwing rocks trying to sink it from shore. We missed every throw, but it was a good time, the last good time before he wrecked his truck and it exploded with him at the wheel. I don't feel bad about bringing up his death now, because all scientists know that energy can only be changed, not destroyed. He might not be Dad anymore, but he's made

his way into some of those plants growing along the roadside where he crashed, and for a few minutes he even managed to be fire itself, like a flaming genie with no wishes left to give. The match flame had almost reached my fingers by the time I flicked it into the water. A new experiment idea, my best yet, bubbled up into my head. I could tell I was smiling by how my scarred gums tingled.

I pulled the boat from the sand and unclipped its top. Several cockroaches tried to crawl onto me, but I dumped them in the water. The minnows came back to nibble their legs off. I upturned the shovel and plopped napalm into the hull. There were five cherry bombs in my pocket. I placed all of them in the napalm, like cherries on a sundae.

I attached the lid, poured on more gasoline, then put the boat in the water and gave it a push. I listened to the water lapping against the bow until I knew the boat was past the water lilies, drifting slowly toward the center of the lake. I lit a second match, and held it to my Roman candle. Sparks crackled up the wick as I pointed my arm toward the boat. There was a brief moment of silence, of held breath, before a green fireball shot out in an arc that reflected itself as a quivering streak in the water. I missed, but after readjusting my aim, a red fireball arched beautifully and struck the boat.

The gasoline caught and threw a small fireball into the air. When that died down, the flames burned in a tall spiral. My arms and legs took over, and I probably looked like a cannibal dancing around a cast iron pot. I was ready for the boom of the explosion, but the fire must have had to burn through the plastic first. I eagerly hopped across the sand, back and forth, back and forth.

Just as the flames seemed to be dying down, the boat exploded. I felt the boom brush against my skin, then again when the echo made its way back from the other side of the lake. Splatters of napalm flung high into the air. The lake was as calm as glass, and there was the fire, breaking apart and drifting through the reflection of the stars like something crashing to Earth.

The excitement I'd felt in waiting was immediately replaced with fear. Adrenaline pumped through me, but it was the nauseating kind, not the empowering kind that makes your

dick hard. I was watching the napalm land, thinking of Dad melting in his driver's seat, when Momma yelled from the house.

"What in the great goddamn was that?" she said. She was a wide silhouette leaning against the porch railing.

"I set the lake on fire," I yelled back. I did my best to steady my voice, but my vocal chords trembled like the aftershock that rippled its way to shore. Looking out, I could see that the napalm was spreading, the individual flames floating across the water toward the weeds of the neighbors' yards.

Momma made her way down the porch steps, one at a time. Even from the lake, I could see that she was still shaky on her feet. I ran up to help her. She waited for me at the bottom of the porch steps, her hand waving for me to hurry up.

"You done did it now," she said. She licked her lips, but her mouth was so dry it all kind of stuck together for a second.

"I know, Momma. Should I call 911?"

"You know we don't have that kind of money. Probably all kinds of fines." She grunted, from a lack of words or from fatigue I wasn't sure, then said, "I'll deal with you later."

I slid my arm under her damp armpit, and she grabbed my shoulder. Together we made our way down the pitchblack yard. Momma's knees would buckle every now and then, and I'd have to steady her before we could go on. When we were moving, I assured her that we were "almost there, almost there," while the flames drifted closer to shore.

When we got to the sand, Momma leaned against a pine tree and gawked at the fire floating over the water. "You did this?" she said. It sounded like she was trying not to cry, so there I was, trying not to cry, too.

"Don't worry, Momma," I said. "I'm going to fix it."

The neighbors kept a jon boat and paddle by their dock. While they weren't the kindest people, I knew they'd understand if I borrowed it. I ran over and dragged the boat back to where Momma was leaning.

"Now you sit tight," I said, shoving the boat into the water. "I'm going to go corral these flames." I was about to kick off when Momma stopped me.

"Ain't no way you can paddle *and* put these flames out," she said. She picked up the shovel from the sand. "I'm coming with."

There was no time to argue, so I held the boat steady and told her to sit in the middle seat. The boat rocked wildly at first, and the water seemed dangerously close to spilling in, but I kicked us off from shore and we were on our way, me paddling on one side and Momma paddling with the shovel on the other.

I steered us counter-clockwise because the night breeze was blowing the napalm in that direction. Momma and I paddled frantically, and we were making all kinds of noise, splashing and banging the side of the metal boat. The first flame bobbed just ahead of us, like some sort of floating memorial candle.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Pull up beside it," she said.

I did, and Momma slapped the fire with the shovel. The napalm submerged and resurfaced, still alight. Momma smacked it again with the shovel. The clump of napalm broke up into smaller flaming pieces, each of them slowly drifting away. Momma had to reach to hit them, so I grabbed the back of her shirt to keep her from falling in. She put the fire out with a few more swings.

"What is this stuff?" Momma asked. She sounded like she was in awe. "I ain't never seen fire act like this before."

"Just an experiment gone haywire," I said. I tried to sound apologetic, but deep down it felt good to hear that Momma was amazed by something I'd done.

I pulled up to the next bit of napalm. While Momma started slapping the fire out with her shovel, I looked across the lake at the flames that slowly made their way toward us. The smaller flames were dying down. The gasoline and Styrofoam must have been nearly burned away. Only the large pieces still burned bright.

Momma, who was reaching to extinguish some scattered flames, reached too far while I was surveying the lake. Her top half splashed into the water, and was quickly followed by her lower half. The bottoms of her dirty feet were the last things I saw.

"Momma!" I yelled. I peered into the water. Thankfully, her extra mass helped keep her afloat. I could see her just beneath the surface of the water, like an albino manatee

about to catch a breath.

She breached with a whoop. “That’ll wake you up,” she said, flinging her hair from her face. With her hands clamped onto the sides of the boat, she laughed with her head bobbing on the surface of the water.

I sighed with relief, then laughed along. Though she seemed to be enjoying herself, I gazed cautiously at the napalm that was still drifting to shore.

“Get back in the boat, Momma,” I said. “We don’t want to let this stuff get to shore and start a fire. We can go swimming back at the house.”

Momma gulped some water, then spit it out in a stream. “Oh, all right.”

I grabbed her hands and pulled, but the boat almost flipped as her shoulders came out of the water.

Momma’s eyes went wide. “Pull me up, Donnie.”

I tried pulling again, but she barely moved. “Kick with your legs,” I said.

“How else can you kick?” she said, laughing. The surface churned as she flailed.

I scooted to the other side of the boat to steady it. “Can you get a leg over?” I asked.

Momma tried, but she couldn’t even get a leg out of the water, much less over the side of the boat. I needed to get her back in, but I was out of ideas. I couldn’t paddle with her hanging off the side, and I definitely didn’t want her near the napalm.

“Go ahead and paddle,” she said, waving me forward.

“You can’t just hang off the boat like this, Momma,” I said. “You’ll get burned, or eaten by an alligator.”

“Don’t overreact,” she said. “Ain’t no gators in this lake. I’m fine down here. This is the most alive I’ve felt in weeks.”

That much seemed to be true. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen her so happy.

“How am I going to paddle with you hanging onto the side of the boat?” I asked.

“You paddle on that side, and I’ll kick on this side,” she said. “Now come on.”

I paddled port side. Momma kicked starboard. She couldn’t quite keep up, so the boat traveled in a hook rather than a

straight line, even when I tried to correct it. As we made our way to the nearest fire, I could hear her breathing happily. I pulled up to the flame so that Momma was safe on the other side. She cheered me on as I swung the shovel and put the fire out. When the water around us was dark again, we paddled and kicked our way to the remaining fires. Lake water splashed into Momma's silly grin the whole time.

When we were done, the lake was black again. I paddled for home with Momma kicking alongside. Before long, the boat eased to a stop on the shore, and there was Momma, beached and beaming.

She got out of the water, her clothes sticking in her folds, and we sat in the sand. She hugged me tight and got my shirt wet.

"I don't care if you lit the lake on fire," she said. "I love you, Donnie. You made my night."

I hugged her back, but then that guilt I felt for tricking her into giving me twenty-five dollars came bubbling up. "There ain't no field trip," I said.

"No?" She craned her neck to look at me.

"That wasn't a field trip form," I said. "It was a progress report. I'm failing chemistry."

She snorted and wiggled her toes into the sand. "I figured. You've never wanted to go on a field trip before. Always said the kids were bothersome." She then muttered something to herself, as if she were doing a puzzle in her head. Her hug tightened around me. "Would you rather keep doing these experiments at home, or go to school?"

My heart caught fire like she'd doused gasoline on whatever spark was there. "Of course I would rather stay home. Nobody learns nothing in class anyhow."

"Maybe I can homeschool you," she said. "We can get you new supplies and make our own classes. Would you like that?"

"Very much, Momma." It was a dream come true. For a second I felt sorry that the other students would be stuck reading books with ol' Mr. Mathe, but then again they were never into science like I was. I put my hand on Momma's shoulder. "So you're not mad I lied?"

She gave me a wet kiss on the side of my head. "You just ain't meant for the classroom. My baby needs his thinking space,"

she said. “We’ll get all the paperwork figured out tomorrow.”

The two of us sat in the darkness looking pointlessly out over the water. The sand was cold, but the heat that radiated off Momma kept me warm. I wondered what Dad would think if he could see us sitting there by the lake.

Almost on cue, Momma said, “Dad sure must be proud of us. We’re getting along just fine, ain’t we?” She patted my knee and left her hand there. It sounded like she was trying not to cry, so there I was, trying not to cry, too.

Joshunda Sanders

Fly

Everything in the world makes you feel like you are fly or you can fly when you're a kid. With the right doorknocker earrings and Reebok classics, jeans fitting to your curves like buses speeding down Webster Ave, you feel like gravity is for punks.

But time tells you the truth. And life, I guess.

My best friend Trudy reads everything. Her hair is a black cotton ball forever reaching for the clouds. We are both the youngest in our families, which are like trees with tangled branches: Older siblings, different daddies, irritated mothers. She wears boys' clothes from the Goodwill—trousers that her skinny legs peek out of at the ankle, white button-down shirts with suit vests. My mother says she's odd. I figure she's just creative. I asked her once why she dressed that way and first she said I like doing things different from everybody else. I nodded and looked in her face. She was staring at a distant plane overhead when she added I can't really afford anything else.

That's why we're friends. Trudy tells the truth, even when it makes her feel bad. Only poor people spend all their money trying not to look poor, I told her. She pulled her eyes from the sky then and smiled at me like we had the juiciest secret ever.

Anyway, it was Trudy who said Toni Morrison wrote that if you want to fly you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.

How you figure out what that is, I asked her.

Practice letting go of shit, probably.

But we ain't got shit. What's to let go of?

She didn't answer at first. We sat on the cracked cement steps outside the cafeteria after lunch during thirty-minute recess.

Finally, she said, Easier for us to fly, then.

It sounded dope, but it was easy for her to say. When kids stared at Trudy's latest thrift store gear and kids stepped to

her to make a thing about it, she would roll up her sleeves like a magician or some shit and get into an exaggerated stance. She was Olive Oyl mimicking Popeye. It also happened that her father was a Black Belt. She was slim but she wasn't weak.

Still, if the wind blew hard, she might take off with the waxy Now and Later wrappers and empty Dorito bags into the air. I was always the kind of fat that oozed out of my T-shirt at the top of my jeans and spread when I sat. My weight made me believe I wasn't fly. I never imagined air under my arms, except when I dreamt about floating like Dipsy Doodle wrappers along the Bronx River. Fat kept me pressed to earth. Gravity was a bully, dragging me down, pressing my belly out, filling out my tummy and my breasts and my ass at the same rate so that I was a paperweight.

I wanted to get up off the ground, but I had no idea how I could even start.

The first time I tried, I was acting like my favorite fly girl, Queen Latifah. I learned all the verses to Ladies First, especially hers. Good thing, because one day after the substitute teacher left us for a while, Teisha challenged me to a battle. Teisha was big as me, just taller and bug-eyed. Her hair was a spiky perm hosting new growth, so she always looked like she had just run downhill to class. Her fists had dimples like giant baby hands. All the fat congregated in her chest. When she ran her boobs made a motion like they were swaddled together jumping rope above her stomach.

A rap battle in sixth grade is not real and it's not deep. You just have to know all the words somebody else wrote and spit them like you're a real emcee. I was beyond ready. I was never good at sports. I'm not that good at school. But I love rap.

I had listened to Ladies First so much for a moment just like this, rewinding the tape to the first note of those horns, turning up the TV so loud when the video came on my mother would yell.

Kelly turn it off, everybody else is sick of Princess Latifah.

Queen, I yelled back.

Turn it off or down, shit!

Thirty minutes before school let out for the week, we stood

facing each other at the front of the class. The lights were off, so we looked extra dramatic in the cool blue afternoon. When it was my time to shine, I knew every single line, even the ones she was supposed to rap as Monie Love.

Teisha, on the other hand, couldn't cash the check her mouth had written. She fumbled and stuttered. She paused awkwardly. She was embarrassed. What would have happened if it had been a real battle with words that we wrote ourselves? Anyway, I won and she was pissed.

We only won bragging rights but sometimes it ended up like a lopsided crush: One person took it more serious than the other. At the end, when the class quit whooping and hollering, Teisha said, I'm gonna beat your chubby ass.

I wanted to point out that she was chubby, too. Her Public Enemy shirt was so small that the man inside the target disappeared and it looked like a black moon was struggling to rise through the weight.

That first time? I ran.

I wasn't a fighter yet. I could have practiced, but you gotta be ready to fail, to fall. Trudy looked at her hands when I told her about it and asked, you afraid you don't know how strong you are?

I just laughed at her. Nah, I said, getting hit looks like it hurts.

It might feel good to hit somebody though, she said.

Hells yeah, but then she hits back.

Kelly, that's why they call them fights.

I didn't even try fighting at first, but not because I was on some nonviolent Martin Luther King Jr. shit. I just didn't want to bleed. But Teisha never let that battle go.

She made up reasons to come after my ass: You stepped on my Jordans. You rolled your eyes at me. I'mma fuck you up after school.

Funny what you can do when you're trying to fly. I flashed my library card at the security guard at the Fordham library one afternoon when I thought it seemed better to run there for safety. If you had to be quiet in the library, they probably wouldn't let someone beat your ass there, either.

He paused and nodded saying, slow down young lady while he let me through the turnstile, worn out but safe. Teisha was

behind me sweating, trying to stroll in undetected.

He asked her for her library card and for a second I panicked, but she said, I don't have one. She didn't listen to him as he told her about applying, thank God. Teisha stared at me with a look that said I couldn't stay in the library forever (that was exactly my plan) and bounced.

At the library I could think about my life. People either fight or they run. Or they got something that's theirs that they do or they have and that's how you know them.

We knew this one fly girl around the way, Jeanie. She was like Teena Marie and Janet Jackson combined. Everybody called her white chocolate. I heard she started to mellow after she started having kids, but before that she carried a shank in her thick ankle socks and plaited razors in her braids which were too thick for anyone to notice the blades.

Jeanie was a guardian angel for wack kids around the way like me. She stuck up for this girl named Tasha who got sent away when she wasn't that much older than us. Tasha's mom Janet hit her one time too many, so she cut her and got sent away.

These were chicks with real ass problems. The things I thought about: I liked math, but I wasn't sure I would want to teach it for a living, though my mom decided it didn't matter what I wanted as long as I had a job. For the second school year in a row, I had a crush on a boy named Sean who probably would never leave Webster Projects and who didn't know I existed.

Math was fresh because it made sense. The whole world is made of numbers. A Little Debbie Pecan Swirl is really just 3.14 ways of explaining deliciousness.

Boys are something different. No equations help pin them down.

But Sean was such a good runner, when he sprinted, it looked like he was really flying because his feet didn't seem to touch the ground. (Trudy said I was bugging out, that he's a mere mortal and actually kind of slow and then I asked her if she was willing to bet our friendship on it and she changed the subject.) When he ran around the block with basketball shorts flapping around his muscular calves like flags, he was a flash of red and white. I felt like a stalker when I watched

him, perched on our fire escape like an owl, but I couldn't help it if he had the body of an Adonis.

I had tried to talk to him once during class and he just gave me a chin check, like he recognized that I was trying to say things to him but he didn't actually want to expend any energy talking. He scowled and talked with a low menacing whisper voice. The older boys he ran with exchanged small plastic bags of vials with white rock or green leaves, but I never saw him with any of that stuff, so I just assumed he wasn't a dealer.

How my mother knew I liked the boy, I had no idea, but when she found out it was one of her daily reminders to me.

Kelly, your homework and chores better be done before you go out.

Kelly, pick me up some milk on the way home since you eat every damn thing in here and if I have to eat cereal with water I am sending your ass to fat camp.

Kelly, stay the hell away from that boy Sean. We don't need another mouth to feed around here and I know you know what I mean.

I listened and nodded because that was the only response I could give without getting slapped in the mouth.

Teisha tried to pick a fight with me one more time before I started thinking about a more permanent solution to end it for good. The exercise was good, but Trudy was right—I couldn't let her bully me forever. I didn't like the way it felt to be afraid, like I had all the weight in my tummy wrapped around my ankles, keeping my feet on the ground.

When I was in elementary, Mom warned me that the pounds would just creep up on me. The pints of butter pecan I inhaled on the front steps of school instead of coming home to an empty house; the Chinese takeout; the four-for-a-dollar fried wings—It'll all go right to your hips, she would say. Of course, she was right. The fat came on out of nowhere, like my period.

Mom worked all the time, which made me a lonely kid. And when I got lonely, I ate.

But one day, I literally ran into somebody who would help me figure out how to fly. Teisha was close enough I could hear her heaving over my shoulder once I bolted through the

library door. The security guard just nodded—he didn't even bother to ask for my card anymore.

I barreled through the turnstile and right into this tiny woman who should have fallen down but instead only moved her weight back on her heels, like she was Neo from The Matrix. She was thin with braids pulled back from her face, a little overbite that showed when she frowned first and then slowly started to smile.

We just stared at each other for a minute. I was shocked I hadn't knocked her down, so I kept thinking about it while I watched her pick up her book.

Isn't there something you should say to me?

I'm so sorry, I said in one breath. I didn't realize I wasn't talking to you. My eyes went to the book on strength training. You lift weights, huh? Maybe that's why you didn't fall when I rushed you. Because I'm like twice your size.

She laughed at me the way Trudy always does. No, I train boxers. You play sports?

Is snacking a sport?

She laughed again, shorter that time, looking sad. Maybe run over by the gym instead of here some time. We could use more girls in the gym. I can show you some moves. Behind the pizzeria. There's no sign but you'll hear us. The window's usually open.

Cool, I said. Sorry again for dropping your book and bumping into you.

No problem, kid, she said, tucking the book against her muscular forearm. It's not the first time something almost knocked me down and failed.

All night after that I thought about what that gym must be like. Were other fat girls training to be boxers over there and this was the first I knew about it, all by mistake? Was this the place where I would learn how to fly? I even called Trudy about it.

I've seen that place, she said. Doesn't look like much, but that could be cool.

That's it? That's all you got?

It ain't the damn Chocolate Factory or anything. Just a building where people fight. Chill.

I couldn't chill over it for some reason until the next afternoon when I walked over and peered inside. From the outside, the sad leather ropes sagged on a corner ring swaying slightly. Brown, lean men in dingy white T-shirts and basketball shorts, old gloves at their chins, eyes focused on the future. The salty smell of sweat like an ocean of evaporated anger in the air.

Gravity had skipped this place. Even if their feet were on the ground, all the boxers here had to do was decide.

Mira, you came! The lady from the library said putting her arm around me. I'm Diana, she said.

Kelly, I said, still staring. No fat girls like me, just another lady, older, muscular and compact like Diana.

Congratulations for making it through the front door. A lot of kids don't even take the first step. But there's something about you. You have a lot of heart.

I have a lot of a lot of things, I said.

Don't say mean things about yourself. I've trained girls and boys twice your size, so big they couldn't breathe. Some of them lost weight—only because they stopped being mean to themselves first—but some of them didn't. They just knew how to stand ready for whatever and not back down.

I had never thought about being mean to myself with fat jokes. Dissing myself first was a habit. It kept anybody else from having the first chance at it.

Sorry, I said to Diana.

No need to apologize, not to me, anyway. Let me show you around. You saw most of what there is to see from the sidewalk, but get acquainted, see what you think.

About the gym?

Yeah, the gym, the way it feels to be in here. If you feel like you want to come back?

I liked that Miss Diana always made me feel like I had a choice.

Word, was all I could think to say.

An old swinging black punching bag looked smudged with loser tears. The beige walls held framed pictures of lightweight guys and one woman—Maureen Shea—declaring them boxing champions from around the world who had trained here. All of them looked at the camera, mad as fuck,

holding up their fists. Proof they had knocked out at least one person and would do it again.

A dozen people moved around the rest of the space, jumping thick brown ropes like they were weightless, or punching out a rhythm on the speed bag, so that the only sound aside from the occasional shout from a coach and the faint salsa music playing from a small CD player was weight against the ground, shoes and leather.

You want to try? Diana asked.

Fighting?

Boxing.

It might be too expensive but thank you, I said, looking at the door.

No fee.

Is this like a fitness pyramid scheme? Because my mother will kill me.

I could already picture it: One minute I was trying to be like Michelle Rodriguez and shit and the next minute goons would be at my house collecting my mother's jewelry to pawn. I wouldn't live to see thirteen.

Diana laughed again. No, no. Listen to you. I work with some champions, some Olympians, all the time. I love working with them but what I miss is finding someone like you, somebody who doesn't know what, if anything, they can do. There's no pressure, and no fee. But it's not going to be easy and at first, you won't think it's fun. But come by after school a couple afternoons a week. I'll teach you what I think I know. And at anytime you don't like it, you can quit, no sweat. We got a deal?

Yo, I didn't tell Diana this but I never get deals. I don't win contests. My last name is Smith, which is at the end of the alphabet, so when things are done in alphabetical order, I'm usually the person in the back.

At school, in size order lines, I'm in the middle because I'm average height, so even when the teacher says reverse size order once a year to give the tall kids a shot at being in the front, I end up in the same spot. All that to say this offer was not the kind of thing that ever happened to me.

Yes, we have a deal, I said. Usually I would say, let me talk it over with my mother first, but this time I knew right away

I didn't even want to talk to anybody about it, I just wanted to say yes.

Maybe learning how to box was going to get me up off the ground.

When I started I felt like Miss Diana had made the biggest understatement I ever heard. It wasn't just hard as hell, it was exhausting trying to run and remember my form and where to put my feet. Everything took more effort: I was so sore pulling on a T-shirt after punching bag drills it felt like moving my arms slowly through fire. Even after I stopped moving, I kept sweating. Something about my metabolism, Miss Diana said, but I just wanted to stop dripping when I wasn't actually moving anymore. Back at school during lunchtime, I told Trudy about Diana and the gym. She just looked out at the street at first. Then she asked, you a boxer now?

No, not for real. I'm going to learn how to box though, just to get in shape so I don't have to run all the time from people like Teisha.

Yo, if you put on gloves and go to a place where people are boxing, that makes you a boxer, she said, end of story.

I'm like twice your size, Trudy. Coach Diana says I shouldn't talk bad about myself, but I'm just being real. I'm not even close to dreaming about having a dream that I'll be a boxer, that's how far away I am. Right now, I walk then jog for 15 minutes without collapsing on pigeon shit and broken glass in the street. I jump rope and hit a bag a couple of times then I go home and try not to eat four Little Debbie Pecan Wheels in a row. Boxers don't do that shit.

One day you will be, though. That's the point. That's the part that's cool, Trudy said.

Yeah, I guess you're right, I said, and then I tried to change the subject. I heard Sean dumped his girlfriend.

I heard that, too, Trudy said, looking at me like she wanted to go back to talking about boxing. He goes through them pretty quickly, though. I think he hangs out at that gym, too.

Word? I said. I started having visions of us being the first husband and wife boxing duo out of the Bronx, even though that was a stretch, since I think I had said half a word to him

in my entire life. You think he'll ever want to date me now that I'm working on being smaller?

Trudy rolled her eyes at me. No. He might be into dating an actual boxer, though.

What makes you say that?

Who doesn't like a girl who can knock somebody down?

Coach Diana was impressed at how serious I got about wanting to be fly and to make my fists work. Maybe four or five weeks into working with her she said, I think you're ready for the next level.

What's there?

Sparring.

Is that the part where I put on the headgear and the mouthpiece and I dance around and try to avoid getting hit in the face even though I probably won't be successful?

Almost, she said smiling.

I know she couldn't believe half the shit I asked her or said to her because I could hardly believe it myself. I just figured while we were in there doing crazy stuff that made me sweat half to death, I might as well get the pressing questions in, too.

I'm sparring another girl, right?

Actually, you're strong enough I thought I might pair you with a student about your height. His name is Sean.

My mouth went dry. She couldn't have been talking about my Sean, the only Sean that mattered. But sure enough, Sean Williams, the boy of my dreams, was right there behind Miss Diana looking at me like he had never seen me before. Did I even utter half a word to him in my life, or what that only in my dreams?

You two know each other?

No, we go to the same school, was all I said. He approached and shook my hand. It was exactly how you shake a stranger's hand when you don't realize she's been stalking your entire life.

I'm Kelly, I said. He nodded to show that he heard me, but his eyes widened quickly to indicate that he didn't give a shit.

Just a few things really frustrated me back then. I didn't like having to run for my life to the freaking library every damn

time I did something better than somebody else. I didn't like having to catch my breath for so long before I started figuring out how to actually control it. But the number one thing on my list of pet peeves was being ignored. It wasn't even a fat joke, just a fact: I was big enough to be seen. Sean was doing the main thing on my list. I felt myself getting heated.

Good, this should be pretty simple, Miss Diana said, ducking into the ring and making space for me to duck in after her in one motion. Sean was on his own, dark brown eyes, smooth skin and dimples you could fit coins in. He seemed fine with it. I just got more and more mad.

Boys like him were worse than bullies. My brain wouldn't let it go. I was getting more and more heated thinking about how irritating it is to like someone who just never even sees you.

Think about control, she said. Sean, don't hold back because she's a girl. Kelly, don't be intimidated because he's a boy. I want you to remember every time you've ever run from somebody in your life. Take all of that fear and rage and channel it here, she said, touching my gloves.

I nodded and didn't say anything. I chewed on the mouthpiece, and looked at Sean again from the corner, rethinking my whole crush now. I could hear Teisha in my head, talking about beating my chubby ass. I thought of my mother telling me Sean wasn't worth shit, warning me about being fat, the nice security guard, the last time I tried on a dress that didn't look like a gray sack of clothing and the zipper stopped right underneath my bra line.

By the time the bell rang, I smacked my gloves together and realized that I wanted all of that shit out of my body right then. Sean wasn't Sean anymore. He was the thing that was in my way. He was the weight of the world, wrapped around my ankles, my chest, my belly, trying to keep me on the ground. Every time I threw a jab or a hook, when I blocked one of his or two or three, I had this new feeling in my chest. Like I was making fire and tossing it out, dragon style.

I saw a little spit spray from his mouth when I connected with his jaw and I grinned. He didn't take it easy, and that was the part I loved the most, because he managed to sock me really good in the cheek so that I could taste a little bit of

blood from my clenched teeth rubbing against my gum, a cut in a place that was sore long after the bell rang.

Ok, Ok, time, time! Diana yelled, rubbing her temple. She was raising her eyebrows at me as I snapped out of my trance. That was really, really good for your first time sparring. She had a look on her face like she had seen a ghost.

It was only then that Sean looked at me like someone he actually had seen before while he took off his gloves, more heated than even I was at first. He wasn't as beat up looking as me, but I could feel the grin on my face with the salt in my mouth.

Girl you were flying, Miss Diana said.

I couldn't wait to tell Trudy the news.

It was almost the summer before we went to seventh grade and started junior high school for real. I wasn't skinny like Trudy and I didn't want to be. But I liked my body now.

Sean and I were buddies first—he said he respected a girl who could hold her own—and after we had sparred a couple times, he asked me to be his girl.

I told you, Trudy said, eating a bag of corn chips after lunch. She was starting to gain a little weight, I thought, but I didn't say anything until she brought it up. That's so fly, that was true and you didn't even believe me. I think you had the secret the whole time to being fly, girl. You just have to be a powerhouse. Big, you know. Take up room. I want that. I've been eating everything. I want to be huge.

You saying I'm huge, I asked her.

No, but you learned how to fly and be fly at the same time, being yourself. Looking just like you always have. You didn't have to change. You just had to stand in the place that was yours all along. That's what got you up off the ground.

I nodded and followed her gaze out into the street, listening to the sound of her eating herself bigger. Time does tell you the truth, I thought. And life, I guess.

T. B. O'Neill

The Court Martial of Darren Sweet

Some say that there's a bit of a killer in all of us. Maybe so, but that doesn't explain what happened. And I don't buy the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde thing. So, if you two have a few minutes, I'll try to answer your questions, tell you how I remember it, and then you can decide who to vote for as Rotary Man of the year. It's still pretty vivid after all these years. Just listen, and then decide.

Imagine a small command post in the Mekong Delta with a couple hundred men. Barbed and concertina wire perimeter. Guard towers. Monsoon rains the night before, and humidity so thick you can drink it. That morning I leave the hospital tent and walk over the mud down wood-slat sidewalks to the hooch cleared out for the hearing, and I'm nervous as hell.

Captain Nghia, my Vietnamese counterpart, is waiting. He's standing behind the judge's table, looking down at the case reports. There's a bench placed against the wall for the defense team. A witness chair sits alone in the middle of the room. The furnishings are military gray metal, the chairs straight-backed and uncomfortable. Otherwise, the hooch is empty.

The top half of the hooch is just thin mosquito netting. Two fans whirl above. One is slightly off cantor and makes this tic-tic-tic sound. It's funny what you remember—that damned fan and the Medevac Hueys coming in.

There are two MPs guarding the door. As soon as I take my place next to Nghia, the prosecutor from the Staff Judge Advocates hurries in and takes his seat against the opposite wall from the defense.

Darren Sweet and his codefendant, Ginh Binh Toa, are escorted in, shuffling, all hunched over with their heads down, hands tied. They sit next to their SJAs, their defense lawyers, who are thumbing through their files.

Now, understand, I'm completely out of my comfort zone here. A pharmacist shouldn't be ordered to do this sort of thing . . . you know, to preside over a court-martial. Me, sit in

judgment?

I remember complaining. "Colonel, Sir," I told Colonel Bright, "I've got no experience at this."

"Don't worry about it, Major," he said. Then he handed me a copy of the Military Code of Justice, and he told me, "Just read up on preliminary hearings." The manual was dog-eared at that section. I studied it before lights-out.

"What if the lawyers make objections?" I asked him.

"They won't," he said. "Hearsay is admissible. Just get a skeleton of the facts for your report."

He told me that my job was to determine if there is probable cause to bind Sweet over for trial on either the murder count or on manslaughter. Captain Nghia would handle Sweet's codefendant for the ARVN. That was all the instruction I had.

Now, to put this in context you need to appreciate I'm just a pharmacist assigned to the field hospital there. We're ninety clicks south of Saigon, smack in the middle of rice fields. You hear artillery barking and Huey rotors chopping over the compound around the clock. I don't claim to be a soldier. But I'm good at dispensing painkillers and manning drip lines during emergency surgeries, which happen all the fucking time. But, nothing's going on at the hospital right now and the Colonel needed his combat officers in the field, so he chose me for the court martial.

The prosecutor walks over to introduce himself. His name is Blevins, Captain Blevins, a skinny, crew cut, serious guy from Saigon. He asks for a few minutes to review the reports, so I lock my thumbs and fingers on the table, patient like, waiting while he leafs through the documents compiled by S-2 for the first time, pinching his nose like he smells something foul, all the time shaking his head, disgusted-like.

I have my own copies, so I begin turning pages, trying to look wise and in control. Then my co-judge, Captain Qui Nghia, clears his throat.

"Ginh no need lawyer, all ri here," Nghia says, and he taps on the stack of documents.

Jesus, I'm thinking, has he already made up his mind? I say, "The colonel said you agreed to the American procedure, and one will be provided."

"No lawyer nessursary, he guilty," he says.

Vietnamese judgment is summary. Ginh could be marched in front of a firing squad this afternoon. So Nghia's job was tougher than mine, but he's been in that chair before, and doesn't seem a bit uncomfortable with the assignment.

"All ri her," Nghia frowns and taps the reports again for emphasis.

All of these ARVN officers are stern-faced and as straight as rods. No sense of humor, these guys. He's all sinew and tendon under thin bronze skin. His fatigues are pressed and creased, his embroidered rank and unit insignia ironed to a shiny finish. A real military type. I'm in my wrinkled fatigues, my stethoscope half-dangling out of the thigh pocket.

Disgust is also written across Nghia's face. Then he reaches over, gathers the photographs, and nods at them briskly with this big frown, as if that's all he needed to know.

It *is* gruesome. The night before, I read the autopsy report as part of my preparation. The victim—I can't remember the name right now—was a cadre officer. A woman. That in itself is a first. She was small even for a Vietnamese, about 45 kilos. I knew the medical examiner personally, Captain Jessop. He guessed she was about thirty-five years old. Short black hair, small boned, and to the surprise of everyone, four months pregnant.

No mention was made of whether she was pretty or plain, a fact of no consequence to the dead. Frankly, I still don't know, because the photos of the body featured her stomach and pelvis.

But she was the NVA commander, according to transcripts from the interrogations of two commies they captured with her. She gave the orders. She had two gold stars and two bars on her shoulder epaulettes, indicating the rank of major, so they figured she was the political cadre and tactical officer rolled into one.

What we did know, was that she was healthy when brought into the interrogation room. And we know she didn't survive the ordeal. That's incontrovertible. So, either Sweet or Ginh Toa killed her; or both did.

It was all in the photographs. But who did what? Which one of the two tortured her? And did the other one try to stop it? Those are the real questions.

The only witness to the event was Corporal Kowalski. He was the MP assigned to assist and provide muscle during interrogations led by Sweet. He didn't see it happen, but he heard it, according to the report. I intend to call on him first and see how it goes.

"Just a minute longer, Sir," says Blevins, the crew-cut prosecutor, and crunches his brow. He keeps reading. I nod back. I notice that he's stacked his copies of the photographs aside, like the defense team, little stacks on the bench beside them.

I call the hearing to order.

Blevins, stands like an upright worm, smiles condescendingly at me and defense counsel, recites the charges and summarizes the evidence. He drones on. Until that minute, I haven't gotten a good look at the defendants, but they raise their chins to watch Blevins stir the air sanctimoniously, and I think I got a pretty good read on them. You know how it is when you first meet someone. They've done studies. We size up a person—you know, their character and personality—in something like eight seconds. Hours later, days later, after getting to know them, and guess what? Our first assessment sticks. We haven't changed our opinion. So, anyhow, I look them over.

Darren is still blonde at this time, on the tallish side, maybe six one or two, medium build, trim and in pressed fatigues; has the kind of bone structure that would carry more weight as he ages. And the guy is handsome. Sounds trite to describe him that way, but after all, this court-martial could ruin his life. He might never see the light of day. So I'm looking at what this kid has to lose. Big, handsome, a girl at home. From the interviews, I know his father had a business to hand over when the time comes. It makes an impression, because, I admit it, I'm envious. Sweet has everything going for him.

Blevins finishes his summation. Then the defense advocates go on and on about burdens of proof. All of the reports are stipulated to, and submitted on the record: the autopsy, photographs, character statements, military records.

By this time, the humidity is stifling, everybody sweating like hogs. My fatigues stick to my thighs and back. And we haven't even started yet. In that kind of heat, your thoughts

tend to drift, but there's a lot at stake, and the friggin clicking fan does move some air. Finally, Ginh Toa's lawyer sits down and sighs, as if he knows a lost cause when he sees one.

So it's time for me to do my thing. I'm trembling in the belly, my hands are shaking, and I don't want to show it.

"Thank you, Gentlemen," I say. "Now, let's proceed." I look at the lawyers. I pause.

"Corporal Kowalski," I call out. I gesture to the MP at the door. My plan is to call this one witness, and then the defendants. It should be quick, I'm thinking. Unproblematic, as the colonel promised.

A skinny little MP leads the Kowalski in: this big, pudgy, pug-faced corporal in size 14 boots. You'd laugh if you saw him walk; he waddles, the damnedest caricature of an inflated Buster Keaton.

"Uncover," I order.

"Yes, Sir," he answers, drops his salute, and takes off his field hat.

I swear him in: "Will you tell the truth, nothing but the truth . . ." That whole line. The kid trembles like a bee waiting to enter the hive. Sweat beads on his snout.

"Be seated." I point to the lone chair.

He sits. I figure he'll be too scared to lie. It occurs to me that I should just have him tell his story. "Tell us, Corporal," I say, "what you recall of the events of November 18, while on duty at the interrogation hut."

Not bad, huh?

He looks up, kneads his hat with both hands, and looks in Sweet's direction. Then in a voice that you have to strain to hear, he tells his story.

"It was a normal night," he says. "We were waiting for B Company to finish their skirmish near the Y Bridge. They'd radioed in. So we knew they snagged three of the bastards. Sorry . . . enemy, Sir."

"OK. So you knew the prisoners were coming in?"

"Yes, Sir. We were waiting for them. My job is to secure the prisoner in the room and assist . . . you know, stand by during the interrogation."

"OK. But on the eighteenth, you received a special prisoner, didn't you?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Explain."

"The prisoner escort sheet called her Major Dep, a North Vietnamese regular officer, Sir."

That's the name—Dep. I raise my eyebrows. Captain Nghia doesn't react. The translation for "Dep" is "pretty," which is a peculiar name for a battle-worn regular. Kinda ironic.

"Did she give you any trouble during the escort, or while securing her in the room?" I ask. I'm actually getting a rhythm going, thinking I could be a lawyer.

"No, Sir," he said. Then Kowalski becomes all quiet. You remember the times of silence, the tension.

"So, what happens next?" I probe.

"Ginh and I secured the prisoner in the chair."

"Cuffed?"

"Tied, like manacles."

"OK. Next?"

"Sergeant Sweet was reading the transfer report, Sir. It outlines the prisoner's rank, where taken, what intelligence she may have, you know, suggestions about what the interrogators should ask."

"You seem to understand the procedure."

"Yes, Sir. I've done this for nine months." He looks down at his hat, doing circles between his two big hands. The kid clearly doesn't want to be in that chair.

"So tell us what happened next," I ask.

The corporal looks over to Sweet again, then back to me. "Sergeant Sweet asked the usual questions, name, rank, serial number, unit. The usual."

"What was Ginh doing?"

"Eating a jar of pickles."

"Pickles?"

"Yes, Sir, pickles."

"So go on, corporal."

"Well, someone knocked on the door. I had turned the sign over earlier. See, we have a sign, kinda like one of those Open/Closed signs at shops. Ours says 'Interrogation. Quiet. Do not enter.'"

"So someone must have had information they thought you could use," I suggest.

"Yes, Sir."

"What did they tell you?"

"It was a Spec-Five from B Company. Willy Feibleman. He wanted to talk to Sergeant Sweet."

"And?"

"It's a small room, Sir, just a hut. Sweet came over, and Willy whispers like."

"Then you heard what he said. Tell us."

Kowalski's eyes roll, as if looking for a place to land. Then he glances over to Sweet again, and back to me.

"He said Charlie Aimsberry and Timmy Dor were captured by the co-bitch . . . excuse me, Sir, by the deceased prisoner's company. Their squad, four guys."

Kowalski's left hand is now rubbing his thigh. He looks at his shoes. Falls silent.

"You are under oath, Corporal," I say. "We want to hear what else was said."

"Willy told us the squad got separated from their platoon. They found our guys buried. We all bunked in the same hooch, Sir. Charlie and Tim and Darren and me. They buried them in a pit. Willy was talking to the two of us."

"OK."

"Willy told us that the NVA commander—the woman . . . well, she issued the order to castrate them. Then they put them in a hole with sand up to their necks." His lower lip quivers.

"Go on, Corporal."

"They would've bled out, Sir. Got tired and sleepy and just bled out, but they died from choking, from suffocating."

"I see. From the burial?"

"No, Sir. Willy said she stuffed their genitals in their mouths. When the gooks described it they laughed, Sir."

Now I'm the one who has nothing to say. Then a thought occurs to me and I ask, "Did Sergeant Ginh hear this?"

"I don't know," he says.

"Let's take a recess," I say.

Sometimes, things happen that change your perspective, you know. Vengeance is a powerful thing. I mean, what if someone rapes your wife or something? With Kowalski's

testimony, Darren Sweet was in a world of hurt; I knew that much. I'm not lawyer, but I understand motive.

Keep in mind that the charges against Sweet were stated in the alternative: murder, or manslaughter as an accessory. So the colonel's description of my job as perfunctory wasn't exactly accurate. It wasn't that simple. Sweet was facing either a few years to think about his crime while he planned the rest of his life, or living his entire life in prison. That's what was at stake. For Ginh Toa, the decision could be terminal.

This weighed on me, so . . . I needed to confer with my colleague.

We step out the back door. Nghia lights one of those stinky Asian cigarettes.

"There are only two options here, Captain Nghia," I tell him. "Either they both were involved, or one did it and the other stepped back."

He's squinting at me as if I have some damned hidden agenda. I'm just trying to get a feel for what he's thinking.

"Ginh is a grenade ready to explode," I say. "You know his background. But we've just heard something new. What do you think?"

"I wait evidence," Nghia says.

"Of course," I say.

He's playing it coy, says he wants to take a fly at questioning the witness. So we go back in and I tell Kowalski to be reseated in the witness chair. The kid slides into the chair. It creaks. An artillery barrage fires—Ka Boom, Ka Boom—and we wait to let it fade.

I tell him, "Corporal, Captain Nghia has some questions for you."

You should see Nghia at that point. He leans forward with his elbows on the table, his hands cupped together, Perry Mason calm, like this is a walk in the park. A passive look on his fucking unscrupulous face. Then he asks:

"Mr. Kowalski, did you see killing?"

"No . . ." Kowalski claims.

I look sternly at the corporal.

"No, Sir," he corrects.

"Why?"

"Darren told me to watch the door. From the outside, Sir."

"Usual?"

"No. This was the only time."

"What you hear?"

"Screams."

"Ri way?"

"Huh?"

"The captain asked if she screamed right away," I translate.

"A few minutes later, Sir."

"Tha's all questions," Nghia say.

This is getting worse for Sweet. I follow up.

"When you went back in what did you see?"

"Same thing you did, Sir . . . in the pictures, I mean. Darren left his post. Passed me at the door. When I went in, it was over. Ginh was kneeling over her, his hand on the broom handle that was in her belly. He jerked when he saw me, got up, and left. That's when I called the MP duty officer, Sir."

"What was Sergeant Sweet's demeanor when he left his post?"

"Demean her?"

"Attitude. How'd he look?"

"He was crying, Sir."

"And Ginh?"

"Just looked angry."

I scan the room, wondering where to go from there. Then I remember: let the lawyers examine the witness. So, I offer. The prosecutor seems grimly satisfied. Shakes his head. Has no questions. The advocates, who have been writing furiously on their notepads, also decline to question Kowalski. Nghia falls back in his chair and crosses his arms.

I excuse the Corporal and he lumbers out. "Let's take five," I say.

Nghia and I go out the back door again. It's noisy out there. A gaggle of Hueys fly over so low I can see the pilots' faces. Those boys love what they do. Nghia shucks out a cigarette from his pack and lights up with his Zippo. He sucks on it. Looks up at the pearl-blue sky. An APC cranks past over the mud, the grunts on top, worn out from night patrol. I'm trying to figure this out.

"Captain Nghia," I ask, "who would you like to call as the

next witness?"

"Sweet," he said.

"Alright," I agree. "Can I have one of those?" I point at the cigarette.

He pulls out the pack, shakes one out, and hands it over. The only time I ever smoked was when I was high, but I wanted one then. He raises the Zippo and the flame erupts. I lean over and draw in. I smoke and think about Sweet and the gook, recalling what was in the paperwork.

Darren Sweet's military record was not exemplary. An inductee, he tested well and was sent to the Defense Language Institute in Monterey to learn Vietnamese. Apparently, he graduated at the top of his class, was shipped directly to the Sixth Psyops Group in Saigon, assigned to S-2, and became an interrogator for the Ninth Division, off the battlefield.

Ginh's background, on the other hand, was a bit of a mystery. He was raised in a Catholic orphanage in some highland province. He enlisted, earned his rank in the field, and was wounded twice, the last time by a mortar round that tore off his right kneecap, leaving him stiff-legged. Since he was physically limited, and knew a little English, he was sent to S-2, and joined Sweet on the evening interrogation team.

The pre-hearing statements of Sweet's friends, who were bunk mates and drinking buddies, described Sweet as an easygoing guy who made friends with locals and spent a lot of time off base in Tan An, schmoozing and practicing the language.

So, I'm thinking there's nothing remarkable about this guy. He isn't interested in ladies for hire, at least according to his friends. But he drinks too much and gets all maudlin about the girl back home. That kind of crap. Darren Sweet doesn't want to be in Nam—few of us did. He talked about going home to marry the girl, and join his father in the furniture business. A Sinclair Lewis character.

Ginh, on the other hand, is apparently a hothead. He had no disciplinary record, but Kowalski described him as mercurial, shouting at prisoners from inches away. Slapping them around. Pummeling them with his bony little fists. Sweet and Kowalski pulled Ginh off prisoners more than once.

We're talking about enemy taken in battle, while the fighting is still going on. They're brought in by Hueys to extract information while it still counts. So a little softening up is required, you know . . .

The problem, it seems to me, is that Ginh apparently took it to another level. Maybe he enjoyed it. But they knew better than to go too far. The Geneva Accords, you know . . . they could be punished.

So, that's the background, I'm thinking. Their predisposition. Anyway, it's really muggy outside, and I'm on my second smelly, sweet cigarette, dripping with sweat, but I'm feeling I'm getting a handle on the case. I stub it out with my boot and we go back in.

I call the hearing to order.

"Sergeant Sweet, please take the witness chair," I order.

Sweet rises and looks down at his lawyer, nonplussed like. A solid, intelligent guy, I'm thinking. They exchange eye contact. His lawyer nods. Then Sweet walks to the center of the room, sits, and turns to me. His handsome face is frozen, like a widow at her husband's funeral. Numb, beyond the edge of panic. No fear or regret or even grief. Just numb. Then, his face sags, eyelids become lazy, as if he's coming in from an all-nighter. I don't know what to think.

I swear him in. "State your name and rank for the record, please."

He recites it in this baleful voice, with the practiced rhythm of an interrogator who knows that someday he may be the one in the hot seat. I'm mesmerized by this kid. He has so much to lose; he deserves a fair hearing.

"You know why we are here," I say. "This is your turn if you want to take it. You don't have to. You have the right, according to the Code of Military Justice, to remain silent and refuse to testify."

Like I said, I read the manual. It tells you what to say.

That's when he does it. Sweet looks at me, then shrugs. The bottom of his lip folds down, curling into a smile. I'm wondering, is the guy actually smirking? His mouth flat lines back into neutral, his eyes drooping again.

"I take the Fifth," he mutters. Then silence, only the fan ticking.

That's what he says.

And that's the end of Sweet as a witness. I'm left to ponder why the kid won't say what needs to be said—that Ginh's hand was on the broom handle for a reason, that he watched it happen, maybe even wanted it to happen, but he didn't participate. Sergeant Sweet looks over to his lawyer. They exchange nods. Legal shit, I suspect. He did what he was told. So I excuse him.

Nghia bends toward my ear and says, "I call Ginh."

A Huey skirts over the hooch, drowning out the methodical ticking of the fan. Kinda throws me off a minute. I sit back and listen.

"Ginh Binh Toa, take chair," Nghia orders.

I've pretty much ignored the Vietnamese sergeant up to this point. He strikes me as typical. Smallish, although a little heftier than most; you can see ripples of chest muscles in the opening of his fatigue shirt. His face is flatter than most, his eyelashes are long and dark as if he has on eyeliner, and his skin is peppered with little olive craters; apparently, he had smallpox as a child. I've seen it many times before in Nam. But it gives this guy a grimy, earthy look. Unlike Sweet's, Ginh's eyes are alert. He hops up and hobbles to the witness chair with a noticeable limp. I swear him in.

This is Nghia's soldier, his responsibility. Ginh will be his witness.

"Tell," Captain Nghia orders.

That's it. "Tell." I have no idea what rules governed a Vietnamese court-martial, but there is no advice of rights, right to remain a mute and make them prove it. Just "Tell."

Ginh's eyes are round and white with black beads shining. "I no lose temper. No hur Co Dep," he says.

"Co," is the gender indicator, meaning "woman." Nghia just stares at him, leans back, and crosses his arms again. His patience is waning. Ginh, from the witness chair, looks only at Nghia. No one else matters.

"Kowalski true," Ginh says. "I no hea hem." Ginh touches his ear. "Kowalski, leave ow doo. Swee cuss. Broo by doa. He tae. He hia Co Dep. Hia ross fae. Har. She cry. He say, 'Lay herr dow.' I tie han. Tie fee."

The photographs of the room showed hooks screwed into

the floor. I was told they were there to secure chairs to the floor when multiple witnesses were brought in. Seeing your buddy get pummeled sometimes loosens your tongue, they told me. Dep was tied on the floor spread-legged, arms out, sacrificial-style. Ginh goes on.

"I no no wha Swee do. He mad. He say tae cloe dow. I remoo fatique. Shir. Pan . . . Swee bree broo . . . I fear herr. I wai . . ."

At that point, Ginh dips his head and shakes it. Nghia, true to form, says nothing, just barely shifts in his chair and pats his biceps in interwoven arms. Ginh looks up.

"Up herr. Har. She screa. Up herr mo. She screa. I no no whaa do. He puus. Har. She screa. He tae broo. . . rae up, up, and she busss. I hear. She screa. Brea . . . sna . . . sna. It sna. Brea. Swee tae ow . . . raise up, spear dow har. Sto muhh." Ginh bows his head again.

Exhibit four was one of seven photographs. It was taken from a position near her feet. Obviously, the photographer had knelt to take the shot. Her genital area was barbecue sauce, a bloody broken stick at the entrance. Turned to hash. The other end of the broken broom handle impaled her uplifted stomach. Her face frozen in agony. Eyes locked and bulging. The jagged point of the broken broom handle was covered with red flowing from her midsection.

The autopsy contained three main findings. She died from a combination of shock and blood loss, and the tearing of her bladder, uterus, and bowel. The fetus was four months old. Its neck was severed by the wooden spear. Her pelvic bone broke in two, snapped like Ginh said. Apparently, the leveraged upthrust simultaneously perforated the uterus wall and entered the bowel. That's what they thought.

"You done," says Nghia. He looks over with cool eyes. His face impassive.

I can't leave it like that. My job . . . I mean . . . my job is to get a balanced view. Don't look at me like that. Come on, Ginh had a reason to lie. You see that, right?

I ask Ginh the obvious question.

"Corporal Kowalski saw your hand on the broom handle. Saw you kneeling over her. If what you said is true, why would you . . . ?"

There is a question there, but I'm no lawyer. I can't quite

articulate the obvious—that the guy was seen with the murder weapon in his hand, angry, a moment after he killed her.

"Why?" he repeated.

"Yes, why on top of her? Your hand on the broom?"

"I pray."

Pray? Did I hear him right? His eyes are round, fixed on me, pleadingly, suggesting that I should know what he was doing. Praying? Like, be real.

Then Nghia nudges me. He slides a photograph across the table. Dep's face is out of frame, but on her neck, there hangs a necklace, and from the necklace a cross. I look over at Ginh, for something on the edge of my awareness. You know how it is, feeling something is true but not being able to put your finger on it? Ginh leans forward and puts his face in his hands, and in his movement, I see something swing over his hairless chest. I can barely make it out. A thin silver necklace and dainty crucifix.

The next morning, the colonel came by the dispensary.

"Manslaughter," he said, repeating my verdict on Sweet. "So the Vietnamese interpreter was acquitted. How'd you land on manslaughter for the sergeant?"

"Question of credibility, Sir," I answered. I felt a little queasy about it, stretching the truth, but there are times you do what your gut tells you. "Ginh could have lied," I said. "He had reason to lie. And if Ginh was the killer, then Sweet should have stopped it. Manslaughter fit."

"Well, good job," said the colonel. "The sergeant's a good kid who had one bad night. Exactly what I expected."

I wasn't so sure.

So, that's all I know. And when we go into that room to vote for Rotary Man of the Year, understand why I'm raising my hand for Sweet. Sure, he made a mistake. And it troubles me. But that was thirty years ago. And listen, had you been in that interrogation hut, and heard what he heard, can you swear things would've been different? Can you swear?

Faith Shearin

Island Ecology

In my fifth grade science class I learned that islands account for one sixth of the earth's total land area.

"Islands, as we know," said Mrs. Snitz, "are surrounded by water."

This was true: our island, Thalassa, which floated off the coast of the Carolinas, was a place you could not leave without a ferry boat, or bridge, or twin engine plane; if you climbed a certain high dune at the center, you could see that our land did not connect with other land, that what moved around us was vivid and deep.

"Island ecosystems comprise some of the world's biodiversity hotspots," Mrs. Snitz told us, "and in response to ecological pressures, island species can become much more docile than their mainland counterparts, and may grow larger or smaller." Then, Mrs. Snitz, who sometimes favored me, said: "Hazel, would you get the lights?"

In darkness, we watched a slideshow of animals that had adapted to island life: a Pygmy Mammoth, which was a kind of miniature elephant that roamed the Channel Islands, the Komodo Dragon: a huge lizard with a tongue that darted in and out of its mouth, the Giant Moa: a strange vegetarian bird on the island of New Zealand that once stood on muscular legs and grew to be ten feet tall; we learned that animals on islands were vulnerable, more likely to go extinct.

We were lost in a strange reverie, until Mrs. Snitz turned the lights back on, and told us to open our science books to page 53, where I saw my first picture of the Dodo: a kind of flightless fat pigeon that knew no predators until Europeans came to the island of Mauritius and then, due to its passive nature, and its inability to lift itself off the ground, it was hunted to death very rapidly by people, feral dogs, pigs, and even rats, which ate the Dodos' eggs.

"Does anyone know what the word Dodo means today?" Mrs. Snitz asked.

"Stupid?" Rex Scarborough guessed.

At dinner that night I showed my sister, Beth, the picture of the Dodo looking stunned in its patch of grass: eternally lost to the past, its yellow bill pointed towards some distant horizon.

"That's so sad," she said, dipping two french fries in ketchup, "I mean, it died because it was friendly."

Our mother, Ruth, who likes to carve birds, took a look at the sketch of the Dodo and decided she might be able to fashion one from wood. Our father, Henry, who is one of Thalassa's only attorneys, asked me to read him the passage about why animals on islands are different from animals on the mainland.

"In response to ecological pressures, animals on islands may grow more docile, or hostile, and significantly larger or smaller, than their mainland counterparts," I said, running my finger under the thick black text.

"I wonder if that applies to people too?" our father mused, adjusting his glasses, and I was not sure what he meant then, though I believe I do now; our island had human variations: adaptations based on shipwrecks, and high winds, and floods; we had dwarves and giants, sea witches, and a kind of seal called The Sea Bishop that would tell your future if you held onto it while its shape shifted; we had changelings, and housewives who lived one life under water, one life above; we had higher than average rates of anger and suicides, men whose boats disappeared in sea fog and were never seen again.

After dinner, Beth and I closed my science book, and walked to our mailbox, which was shaped like a fish, where we found an invitation to Dorothy Mallicoat's birthday party: a blue envelope that gave way to something thick and engraved. We were *cordially invited* to Mallicoat's Fishing Pier for an evening of fishing and fun; our mother taped the invitation above our telephone so we would not forget. Ruth had trouble with birthday parties, gift wrapping, and thank you notes; she was inherently bored by these feminine activities, and naturally disorganized, so that Beth and I often arrived late to parties with gifts that looked as if they had been wrapped in kleenex; sometimes the sticky, orange price tag still clung to them, and the recipient could tell we had bought the board

game or Barbie on sale.

"Does Dorothy Mallicoat's father own Mallicoat's Fishing Pier?" I asked my father.

"Yes, Hazel," my father said; he was at his desk, examining a giant volume called *Practical Real Estate Law.*

"I didn't know Dorothy's dad had a job," Beth said.

"What made you think he was unemployed?" our mother asked.

"He's always home when we come over to play," Beth said, "and he yells."

"He may be experiencing stress," our father said; he placed a rubber band over his fingers and shot it into a garbage can.

"From running a fishing pier?" I asked.

There were a lot of angry men on our island: their faces red from wind and sun, their abdomens too large for their pants; Beth and I had one of the only docile varieties of father in our neighborhood: ours was bookish, and reserved but, when we visited our friends' cottages, there was an aura of dread around the hour when husbands came home from work; women went around hushing children and cleaning up messes; supper was carefully tended.

Billy Mallicoat was one of the angriest fathers in a neighborhood of angry fathers; our dinners with Dorothy and her brothers were stiff, silent affairs during which we listened to the sound of our own knives and forks scraping against our plates; we heard the ice shifting in our glasses, and the clatter of coffee cups settling into their saucers. Dorothy taught Beth and me, early on, to sit quietly and spill nothing. Still, sometimes something went wrong: the baby knocked over his glass of milk, or the cat hopped on the table, and Mr. Mallicoat's neck turned purple, and he nearly burst out of his shirt, his temper like the hurricanes or nor'easters that rattled our windows.

At school, the next day, there was an assembly and the nurses were dispatched. Once a month, our elementary school was treated to lessons on health, safety, or hygiene; our nurses were a flock of women in white, and two of them were as tall as men, with breasts so formidable they resembled

gulls. These nurses, Anna and Abigail, were twins, and they were both Quinns: descended from a family of oversized women who lived on the north side of Thalassa. There were many generations of Quinns; several had gone to school with our Grandma Hawthorne, and their daughters had gone to school with our mother and father, and one of their descendants, Willa, was in Beth's class. The odd thing about these women, apart from their size and efficiency, (two ran Thalassa's libraries and banks and one ran the county clerk's office where our father filed papers and he said she was one of the smartest women he knew) was that they never married, and they appeared to have no males in their households, yet they continued to breed. Beth and I heard our parents guess about how this transpired, in whispers, one summer night when they thought we couldn't hear.

This month's assembly was about scoliosis, and the Quinns held up a plastic model of the spine so we could see how our backbones were formed; they showed us a movie in which people grew hunched and crooked.

"Scoliosis is a curvature of the spine," Abigail explained to us, when the movie began to spit and turn white, "and today we're going to take a look at how everyone's spine is growing."

This was how many of these assemblies concluded: after the one about lice, for instance, we returned to our classrooms, where volunteer mothers searched our hair with chopsticks; after the one on deafness our teachers asked us to wear headphones and raise our hands if we heard a series of increasingly faint beeps.

On this day, the Quinns themselves visited Mrs. Snitz's class and had each of us bend forward, over our desks, their fingertips tracing the paths of our spines. I passed this test but, an hour later, when the Quinns were in Beth's room, across the hall, Beth did not. I knew because our mother came to pick us up early, from the nurse's office, where Beth had been crying. I was called away, by a voice over the loud speaker, in the middle of a lesson about how coastlines are either emerging or submerging, about how islands are either appearing or disappearing.

"I'm going to grow into a monster," Beth told our mother in the car.

"Mrs. Quinn says you have a mild case," our mother said.

"You should have seen the movie they showed," I said to our mother, "It was terrifying."

"I'm going to have to wear some kind of big, ugly brace," Beth said, and her tears began again: hot and miserable; she rolled her window down and sank into her seat.

"I'll take you to the doctor," our mother said.

"They'll make me take off my clothes," Beth said, and she was inconsolable.

On our porch, that evening, I was sitting in a rocking chair, with a neighborhood cat in my lap, when I saw my mother's flock of wooden Dodo birds; they were extinct yet, under my mother's carving knife, they had risen again on big, inelegant feet. Ruth was an art major in college and she carved decoys for the duck hunters of Thalassa; she also carved sea creatures for Beth and me: turtles, swordfish, crabs with their claws lifted into a fierce defiance. These Dodos, though, were my favorite; you could tell they had been kind and unsuspecting, that they would have stood motionless, like this, trusting their predators.

Beth came out and sat in the rocking chair beside mine; she'd had a shower and quit crying but her eyes were still fragile, as if they were made of glass; she picked up one of the Dodo birds, placed it in her lap.

I went alone to Dorothy Mallicoat's birthday party because Beth had a doctor's appointment. My father drove me along the beach road where at high tide, in wind, the ocean drifted into the street; we passed my father's favorite cottage, Pelican's Perch, which stood entirely in the sea several times a day on tall, thin legs; it was a cottage that should have slid away during hurricanes yet, unexpectedly, it remained: both wild and civilized, its staircase descending into depths.

I was the last one to arrive, but my gift was better than usual, because my father had bought it—a great, pink Barbie car—and it was tucked in a presentable, decorated bag. Dorothy's mother played games with us on the beach: we had a sand contest in which we competed to sculpt the best shark; we made our own candles and tie dyed T-shirts by dipping

white shirts in warm buckets of color; then, we were invited to climb upstairs and cast fishing lines with Mr. Mallicoat. I could tell Dorothy was worried by this last activity.

Mr. Mallicoat waited at the end of the pier, where he had lined up a dozen poles, and he began by teaching some of the smaller boys to cast into the surf: both hands on the rod, their line released while they flung it towards the sea. At first, the girls didn't participate; we sat on benches, looking out at the surf; we compared T-shirts and emptied the contents of our little gift bags into our laps. Then, Judy Tillett decided the fishing looked fun, and she stood up just when Rex Scarborough flung his fishing rod behind him; his hook caught in her ear and she and Mr. Mallicoat began to scream simultaneously; Mr. Mallicoat told Rex that he was a Dodo, and then he used other words some of us had never heard before, while Judy held onto her ear, which began to drip blood in deep crimson drops onto the fishing pier. Dorothy was embarrassed, and frightened, and she seemed to disappear like some of the island animals I'd been reading about: the Pigfooted Bandicoot, Stellar's Sea Cow, Carolina Parakeets which once darkened the skies.

My parents arrived, and, by that time, Willa Quinn's mother, Anna, had taken the hook out of Judy's ear, and wrapped it in a gauze bandage, and Mrs. Mallicoat had served everyone an oversized piece of cake; Mr. Mallicoat slipped into an office inside the pier, so that his wife could restore order and good cheer, and he reminded me of a whale, after surfacing, and blowing water, vanishing into the sea.

"You missed one of Mr. Mallicoat's fits," I told Beth when I got into the backseat.

"I don't have to wear a brace," Beth said; she was licking a lollipop.

"Rex got his fishing hook caught in Judy's ear," I said.

"I don't have scoliosis," Beth said, "just bad posture."

The nurses came again, one month later, to talk to us about how our houses might catch on fire, in the middle of the night, while we were wrapped in our blankets, floating through the landscape of our dreams. Anna and Abigail Quinn showed us how we should all have smoke alarms, hung

on every floor of our houses, and how we should have a plan to meet our families in our yards, so we could find each other when we made our escapes. Then, we learned that it wasn't the fire itself that was most likely to kill us, but the smoke that drifted like fog through our rooms, and would leave us as breathless as fish pulled from the sea. The Quinns showed us what to do if our clothes caught on fire; we were to stop, drop, and roll; they showed us how to snuff out flames by depriving them of oxygen.

Mr. Mallicoat killed himself on a Tuesday; I remember because, in Mrs. Snitz's class, we were discussing the horses that run wild on our island: Spanish mustangs tossed off armadas five hundred years before. Then, a voice came over the loudspeaker, and Dorothy Mallicoat was called to the principal's office, and, when she returned, her face was naked; she was attended by Anna Quinn, who helped her place all her books in her backpack; Mrs. Quinn handed a piece of paper to Mrs. Snitz, who sneezed three times, then dabbed her eyes.

"Class," she said, once Dorothy Mallicoat had been ushered down the polished hallways, Anna's hand on her shoulder, "the Mallicoats have experienced a tragedy today that your parents will explain to you later; I will rely on all of you to help Dorothy in the days ahead."

In the evening, our mother burned a roast.

"What happened to the Mallicoats?" Beth asked.

"Mr. Mallicoat was feeling depressed," our father began.

"I thought he was feeling angry," I said.

"Sometimes sadness can look like anger," our father said.

I thought of Mr. Mallicoat, his face a constellation of bursting blood vessels, swatting a cat that had landed on the kitchen table; I thought of him throwing the baby's glass of half-spilled apple juice against a wall.

"Mr. Mallicoat took his own life," our father said, rearranging his silverware.

"How?" Beth asked.

"He drowned," our father said.

Beth and I read about it later: how Mr. Mallicoat walked to the end of his fishing pier, with stones in his pockets, and

three fishermen watching, and threw himself into the ocean with the sharks, and jellyfish, and the remains of shipwrecks, with the gulf stream, and the messages in bottles, and the pregnant sea turtles searching for the exact piece of beach where they were once born.

The fishermen called the coastguard, who came on a boat with divers, but Mr. Mallicoat was breathless by that time, his face blue instead of red; Beth and I tried to decide how we would feel if we were Dorothy: sad, of course, but also relieved. We thought of the dinners at her house: the scraping of silverware, the dangerous silence. We heard our father tell our mother, in low tones, how Mr. Mallicoat had been having some health problems, how he had called the law office recently to draw up a new Will.

Our family went to the funeral, and our mother kissed the head of the baby Mallicoat, and the face of Mrs. Mallicoat, which seemed partially washed away by tears; Dorothy would not look at Beth or me.

There was a storm, from the northeast, the day after the funeral, and the tide was too high for school buses to pass in certain fishing villages, so school was cancelled. This same nor'easter blew our mother's Dodos into the canal behind our house and, before we could rescue them, the wind caught their big, flightless bodies, and carried them out of sight: into the Albemarle Sound, then into the ocean itself, where, I imagined, they were benevolent and unprepared: their bills smiling at sharks.

When we returned to school, the nurses talked to us about how to survive Rip Tides; we learned that Rip Tides are the rivers of the ocean, and that we should not swim against them; then, we pretended to swim parallel to shore in the school gymnasium, with Anna and Abigail Quinn moving arm over arm before us, through the imaginary depths off our shores, which were entirely surrounded by water.

Jess Greenwald

Incoming

"Can you help me, please?" says a small, soft voice.

Claire, who was picking idly at a hangnail, looks around. "I'm sorry, I don't have any change—" she begins, her standard response when homeless people accost her on the street. She is waiting impatiently for the light to change; the Inwood subway entrance is across the street. The appointment is twelve stops downtown, and she has a deep-bellied feeling that she is going to be late.

The girl who spoke blushes, embarrassed. With a shock, Claire realizes that the girl can be no older than sixteen. Her students are that age, and she never knows quite what to say to them, either. And the girl's definitely not homeless; she wears clean white sneakers.

"It's just—" The girl wrings her hands, then stuffs them hurriedly into her pockets, ponytail swinging. Belatedly, Claire notices the girl is pregnant, and her stomach drops. "I'm sorry, it's just that someone stole my wallet a few minutes ago, so I don't have a Metro card, and I'm wondering if there is any way you can give me a swipe."

Claire does not recognize the rage that sinks into the pit of her stomach like wet cement. She does not feel pity, only disgust. One part of her revels in it; the other is horrified. She glances hopefully at the light, but it hasn't changed. The avenue is still a cacophony of cabs honking and buses whizzing past.

She tries to school her expression into one of indifference rather than anger, and reaches into her pocket for some change, but instead says, surprising herself, "No, sorry. I'm late for an appointment." She doesn't recognize the coldness in her throat, either.

The others waiting at the crosswalk shuffle their feet, uncomfortable. A middle-aged man in a suit scrolling through his Facebook feed stops to examine Claire judgmentally. A Latina grandmother corralling two boisterous little ones glowers at her, but Claire doesn't care. *Serves her right*, she

thinks vindictively. *How could she be so stupid?* The girl looks startled, then shakes her head, her freckles standing out across the bridge of her nose. The light changes.

Before she can stop it, a thought, unbidden, arises from the deepest, most angry part of her: *How can this be fair?* She wants to take it back, somehow, but it's too late for that. Instead, she turns back and informs her apologetically, "Your shoe is untied." As if that can make up for it. She half-sprints across the intersection, determined not to miss the train this time, her labored breathing yet another reminder than her twenties are long gone.

Once on the train, Claire delicately swipes several stray crumbs from a plastic seat and sits, smoothing her skirt. From her purse, she retrieves her latest trashy romance paperback, a compact, and a lipstick. As the subway lurches forward, she pats down the hairs that escaped her chignon along the way, and examines herself. She has that pinched, frowning expression that Luke is constantly complaining about, and it reminds her with a pang of her mother. Her complexion looks sallow in the fluorescent subway lighting. She hastily reapplies her lipstick and puts the compact away, feeling hollow. She checks her watch, wondering if Luke has called to ask where she is yet, glad to have the underground as an excuse for not picking up. The black girl sitting beside her sighs and shifts, uncrossing her legs and adjusting the heavy pre-law textbook across her lap. Claire can hear the music faintly emanating from the girl's earbuds; it sounds like a musical. Across from her, an old man heaves huge, rattling coughs, clasping a cane with shaking, callused fingers.

Are you okay? Claire wants to ask, but she doesn't, knows she won't. If anything, the last twenty minutes have taught her that she is not a person who will help strangers. *Beth was,* she thinks, her chest clenching. Perhaps that had been her sister's problem.

The only other occupants of the downtown A this early are a young man wearing an "I ♥ NY" T-shirt enthusiastically perusing a New York guidebook in Chinese and a pretty young redheaded woman who is—*God help me*—very pregnant. She couldn't be anything less than nine months, Claire thinks, fascinated, noting her swollen ankles and the way her belly

button popped through her thin cotton tank top. The train stops at the second station, but no one gets on or off. As the doors close, Claire feels her frustration mount, unable to open her book. She knows Luke hates how desperately she reads these, skims page after page, trying to find romance again in melodramatic declarations and half-assed plotlines rather than her own husband. They both know what it means, why she cries after they fuck. Once, uncharacteristically open, Luke looked at her like an obituary and confessed, closing his eyes, "Damn it, Claire, it just feels so mechanical now."

She wonders if the happy redhead across from her knows anything about ovulation cycles, subfertility and infertility, causation-based problems and mysterious ones, about endless tests and prescriptions they cannot pronounce, that their insurance won't cover. She wonders if that baby was an accident, whether they had tried at all, whether they had cried, whether this smiling woman had ever sobbed on the toilet at 2am, realizing she'd had a miscarriage.

She is just admonishing herself, Beth's voice telling her *cut the shit, Claire, you can't know people's stories* when the train squeals to a stop, but the doors do not open. Everyone glances around, confused, realizing that they are not at a station, that only the darkness of the tunnels underground stretches infinitely, a maze of rats and scrawled graffiti. Claire swallows hard. The Chinese man hesitantly closes his guidebook. The girl next to her removes one earbud. As if on cue, the pregnant woman touches her belly, a quick twinge of pain passing across her face.

The silence is long and loud. Without knowing why, Claire can feel her heart begin to pound, a small bead of sweat forming on the nape of her neck.

A bell chimes cheerfully, and a robotic, automatic voice swells from the train's intercoms. "We are being held momentarily by the train's dispatcher. We apologize for any delays. Thank you for your patience." The girl slams her textbook closed, sighing, then brightens. "Guess I don't have to go to class," she says, smiling at the speaker as it begins its vague announcement again.

Claire can hardly believe it. It's just her luck. They were supposed to hear the test results at today's appointment. She

and Luke both took the day off for it; he was going to be so pissed. Maybe it'd just be a short delay. Surely a delayed train was as good an excuse as any for arriving fifteen minutes late.

"It will be all right," says the old man to the nervous pregnant woman, smiling gently. His voice is slow, as if he had considered each word, and his accent is Eastern European.

The redhead smiles warmly, extending a small, freckled hand. "I'm Emily," she says to him.

"Viktor," says the old man, clasping it and leaning heavily on his cane. Claire wonders if she should introduce herself, too, but decides not to. She is still waiting hopefully for the train to start moving again. The young man across from her looks around and asks a question in Chinese that nobody appears to understand.

Five minutes pass, then ten. The automated message begins again, and Claire rolls her eyes. "We are being held—" It stops and the conductor, with a cheerful Long Island lilt to his voice, interrupts, "Hey, guys, sorry about this. Should be just a few minutes. I'll let you know if I hear anything on the radio, our train seems okay." At this, Claire feels a rush of relief. She realizes she was clutching her paperback, white-knuckled, practically bending the binding.

The girl—Desiree, she later learns—taps her neon fingernails anxiously against the hard edge of her textbook, which begins to annoy Claire after a while, though she'd never say anything. The tourist (whom Viktor is able to slowly coax his name, "Lijie," out of) begins to look particularly panicked. Claire can hardly imagine being trapped in a tiny, hot subway car full of people you can't communicate with, unable to understand the announcements on the intercom. What a fucking nightmare. Desiree, as if thinking the same thing, begins to draw a series of small, explanatory pictures in a notebook from her backpack. Claire's heart sinks. Beth would have done something like that, too. She notices Emily wince again, and her stomach flutters.

She clears her throat. "Are you all right, Emily?"

The woman across from her tries and fails to conceal the alarm that crosses her expression. "I'm fine. It's just—"

The irritating bells chime again, and the same Long Islandian voice crackles into the train, but this time he

sounds much more solemn. “Hello everyone, sorry again for the delay.” Everyone, even Lijie, who surely can’t understand what he’s saying, falls still and waits nervously for the explanation, like ancient worshippers waiting for the Fates to decide their future. In that moment, Claire hopes desperately that’s it some kind of simple, mechanical thing, nothing to worry about. Something minor enough to get them to the next station and off this damn train. She feels hotter than she knows it actually is; her skin crawls. Maybe she can still make this appointment, and she and Luke will finally learn why they can’t make a baby, no matter how hard they try. The conductor continues, “There’s no easy way—” She exchanges a confused look with Desiree, then Emily. “Look, someone jumped. There’s—there’s . . . ” the man stops, and Claire tastes bile. “Multiple areas of the track . . . to clear . . . They said emergency responders are on the way, but it affected three other trains and something big is going on aboveground so—” Claire clenches her hand; jagged, bitten nails bite into soft, sweaty palms. “Anyhow, it’s going to be a few hours, I’m so sorry.”

“Hours?” Emily gasps, and for a moment Claire wonders, distantly, if it was actually herself who spoke.

“What if we have to pee?” Desiree demands of no one in particular.

“Is everything okay, Miss Emily?” Viktor asks, but Claire is as aware of it as if it is happening in another car. She feels the loss of Beth again, sharp and sudden and deep, though it had been over a decade, and her sister hadn’t jumped. A deep, unhealed ache reminds her that somewhere, someone is feeling the way she’d felt when they’d found Beth.

“No, I don’t think so,” Emily replies nervously, wrenching Claire forcibly from her own anxiety. The other woman glances down at her huge belly, cheeks pink from embarrassment. “My son, Isaac,” she continues in a soft voice, “was born three years ago. I was only in labor two hours.” Her breathing hitches, a slight sheen of sweat forming across her forehead. “My OB said that this baby will come fast, too. As I was leaving my apartment, I thought I felt a contraction, but I wasn’t sure. But then I felt another when I sat down, but my due date isn’t until next week, but I figured I’d get off at the next stop

anyway . . . " She's rambling, but Claire hardly notices. She feels her stomach plunge somewhere down by her toes. "And call my husband and doctor. But now . . . I'm fairly sure."

Claire is speechless. Beside her, Desiree hops to her feet, her textbook and drawings tumbling to the dirty floor. "Well, shit, lady!" she cries, gaping. She sounds just like Beth, Claire thinks hollowly.

Viktor looks horrified, but still has the decency to touch Emily's hand and say, "It will be all right, dear. We will figure something out, don't worry." He rises to his feet with difficulty, easing up with his cane, then uses it to bang noisily on the window, shouting for help. Claire winces at the sound, still wordless.

Lijie notices all of this with alarm and wide-eyed confusion. Desiree retrieves her notebook and begins to pantomime, gesturing wildly and pointing toward Emily, who grimaces, then nibbles a fingernail. If anything, the tourist looks even more confused.

Claire watches Viktor's banging almost distantly, wondering just how many people are trapped on this train. She wonders if they're also banging on the windows, like aimless fish in an aquarium bumping again and again against the tank. *Can anyone even hear us?* And if they could, would it matter? Even if they could get off, they weren't even at a station. It wasn't as if they could toss Emily out the window and point her in the direction of the hospital. Claire knows these tunnels are nearly lightless, a labyrinth of graffiti and drifters and urine stains, rat poison and fragrant garbage. Eventually, Viktor stops banging.

Desiree tries to make a phone call, even though they all know it won't go through down here. She frowns, then brightens, rushing over to the emergency call box. She waits, tapping her foot impatiently for what feels like a century. "Hi!" She says to someone at last. "Look, we need some paramedics ASAP . . . Yes, I understand there's a lot going on right now. But to be honest with you, this lady is about to shit out a baby so it'd be *hella* prime if we could get some professionals down here . . . Uh huh, I hear you, but—" Everyone watches her hopefully. "I don't think we *have* an hour . . . Yep, we'll do our best. Thanks again. You *suck*." She slams it down. Desiree notices

them watching and bites her lip. “Apparently, they’re really understaffed between the stuff down here and aboveground.”

“Murphy’s Law,” Emily mutters, whitening. “The truth is . . . I really feel like I have to push.”

Claire swallows down her resentment toward Emily, her fear of her imminent diagnosis and the missed appointment, and her uncertainty in her ability to do this at all. She knows that none of it matters. Emily is going to have a baby on this subway before the paramedics can make it, Claire can just tell. What matters is getting them both out of it safe—maybe if she can do that, this nightmare can change, somehow, to just a funny story someday. She feels, in an odd way, as if she is in a movie rather than real life, but she supposes that would involve taxicabs rather than subways, anyway.

“Emily, we have to deliver your baby.” Claire says simply. Somehow, she has erased all of her own fear from her voice—she sounds more confident than she can ever remember, to her own ears. “I’m going to need all of your help to do it.”

Four pairs of eyes stare at her, shocked, as if she is an alien species that has shown up in Central Park.

Finally, Emily clears her throat. “Are you . . . a doctor? A nurse?”

Claire laughs, though the situation is anything but funny. “Well, no. I’m a high school biology teacher, but . . . I teach sex-ed to the kids, a whole unit on pregnancy and birth so I, um . . . know the mechanics.”

Desiree says matter-of-factly, “That sounds sketchy as hell. We need to get this lady off this subway to some doctors, or wait for somebody qualified to show up and help.” Claire notices that she had clasped her mass of hair off her neck with three crisscrossed colored pencils.

Viktor swears in what Claire thinks is Czech, then replies, “Desiree, I am not sure that will be possible.”

Claire adds, “If Emily’s first son came that fast, this baby probably will, too.” She’s sure she’s read that somewhere.

Emily bites a nail, clearly deliberating her limited options. Her cheeks are red and she grimaces quickly in pain. Claire checks her watch—she knows she needs to time how far the contractions are apart.

Finally, Emily gives a small nod. “Okay,” she says, meeting

Claire's eyes only. They are huge and brown, and fill with tears. She sets her mouth and nods again, to herself, quickly swiping her eyes. Claire has never felt so trusted in her entire life, not even on the day she married Luke. Her stomach wraps itself into knot over knot.

Everyone looks to her expectantly, as if she is their soccer coach or something. She clears her throat and stands up, her book flopping unnoticed to the floor. She notes Desiree's candy-colored watch. "Desiree, the last contraction happened about 80 seconds ago. Emily, let Desiree know when you feel another one so she can keep track of the space between them, and how long they last." She looks, desperately, around the train. Lijie is glancing between them, skimming an English-to-Chinese phrasebook that he had drawn from his industrial-sized backpack. Claire notices he also has a huge container of hand sanitizer latched to one of the zippers.

"Oh, thank Jesus," she says with relief, motioning for it. Lijie agrees, and she has everyone pass it around. She removes her wedding ring, several bracelets, and her watch, and tucks them into her purse, then spends the next four minutes rubbing the pungent chemicals into her skin. It isn't a sterile sink with soap and warm water, but it's better than nothing.

"Contractions are about five minutes apart, lasting for 56 seconds," Desiree reports to her, when she's done. Claire nods; there's still time. Maybe this train will get moving or the paramedics can make it in time, after all.

Next, she collects Viktor's worn down parka and Desiree's transparent plastic raincoat with bright pink decorative zippers.

"Forever 21 chic," Desiree explains with a wink, handing it over.

"Um, okay," Claire says, squinting at her. She arranges Lijie and Desiree's backpacks as a barrier, then Viktor's thick parka like a mattress padding (she hopes). She squirts the rest of the hand sanitizer onto Desiree's raincoat, coating the entire surface as best she can. Viktor and Emily watch her work, trying to conceal their skepticism. As she folds everything into place, patting it to test the comfort, Claire admits to herself the irony. Here she is, a hopelessly barren biology

teacher, delivering a baby on a stopped subway. *Thank you, universe, for yet another reminder.*

Lijie stands, says something more in Chinese, then hands her his travel pillow, looking like a hopeful, floppy puppy.

"Thank you, Lijie," she says, smiling and accepting it.

"You are welcome!" he says slowly, grinning.

"Okay, just a few more things." she says to Emily, then looks questioningly at Desiree.

"Three and a half minutes apart, 70 seconds long," she says.

"Thanks. Okay." Claire says. "Do you happen to have any pads?"

It turns out the college student does. She also borrows Viktor's thin fleece vest he was wearing over his plaid button-down.

She glances at her limited array of tools, swallows, then walks to where Emily sits, sweating, gulping the water bottle Viktor handed her. She sits next to the other woman, looking at her solemnly.

"I am not a doctor," she says quietly. "But I am going to do my absolute best to get you both out of here safely, okay? You can trust me." She hopes she can trust herself. Exhaling, she clasps Emily's shoulder, who closes her eyes. When she does, Claire notices that her lashes are long and coppery, nearly invisible from afar. "I'm not going to lie to you, Emily. This is going to hurt like hell without an epidural, and it's going to be a lot of work."

Emily meets her eyes. "Okay. Please—"

Claire isn't sure what she's going to ask, but she senses that she doesn't want to know. "I know. I will." she lies, hoping it's enough.

When she stands, Emily has left behind a warm puddle of unimaginable depth, like floodgates have opened. She looks, more than anything, embarrassed. Claire and Desiree help Emily out of her pants. Her contractions have become longer, more painful, and as they gently slide her out of her panties, she screams. Her fists clench and her nails, chipped with blue polish, dig into the softness of her palms until they bleed. Claire feels heavy with fear. *What if I can't do this? What if they die?*

Viktor politely averts his eyes. She notices, inexplicably

fascinated, that the other woman's thick, curling pubic hair is as red as the hair on her head.

They help her onto Claire's makeshift bed. Emily's bright hair sticks to her forehead with sweat as they lower her to the floor. Claire's improvised preparations suddenly seem so thin and useless, when the unsterile floor is so close. "I need to push," she says again.

Emily calls for Viktor. He lowers himself down to her with effort, grasping her hand and gravely meeting her eyes.

"I know we've just met," Emily sniffles, her voice wavering. "But I'm scared." Desiree takes a long, deep breath, then begins to comb Emily's sweaty hair from her forehead and cheeks, drawing it into ponytail with a neon hairtie from her own wrist.

Claire notices that Emily is beginning to hyperventilate. "Emily, you can do this. You were built for this." It's all she can think to say, but she can tell it means more to herself than it does to the other woman.

Viktor tries a different tactic. "Women have delivered babies outside of hospitals for thousands of years and they didn't need any fancy equipment." Claire agrees, but all the comment reminds her is that women have *died* in childbirth for thousands of years before hospitals. This makes her only less sure. Some part of her is still hoping that somehow she can escape this, that the train will start moving or the paramedics will make it, that this won't be on her. But most of her knows that it's close, and that it's her responsibility now.

Emily nods, biting her lip, tears tracing down her cheeks, bracing under another long, painful contraction, her body a hard line of muscles tightening under pain. She begins to settle herself on her back, even though the pain there is obviously intense.

"No, no, that's going to put a lot of pressure on your back," Claire explains, feeling like a teacher again. "We should try squatting first, to put gravity on our side."

"Wow, *Grey's Anatomy* has lied to me for so many years," Desiree mutters.

Now, each contraction is a long, painful squeeze. Claire arranges Emily like she is squatting over an invisible toilet,

tasking Desiree to support her back, keeping Viktor on hand-holding. She hands Lijie the fleece vest, miming a baby so he knows what she'll need from him.

Feeling a bit strange, Claire peers up Emily's cervix, trying to gauge the dilation, knowing that she is no doctor. She is on autopilot, because if she really allows herself to process what she's doing, she'll fall apart, and she is the only person here even partially qualified to do this. She can see the bloody crown of the baby's head, and her stomach solidifies into concrete.

"Emily, keep pushing," she says, trying not sound panicked. Emily looks like she might vomit, which Claire figures is the only way this could get any worse. But somehow, her body knows what to do.

Viktor squeezes her hand, mumbling soothing words in Czech. In that moment, being a mother herself feels more distant and alien than it ever has. Looking at Emily is like looking at a mirror and seeing another person's reflection, and her heart sinks. She doesn't need a diagnosis to tell her what her body already knows.

Emily pushes, screaming, but nothing happens, her entire body straining with the effort. Sweat pours down her cheeks like tears.

"Again," says Claire softly, her heart hammering.

Emily is soaked in sweat, but she pushes again, yelling. Claire can see skin stretch and bulge and tear.

"Come on, Emily," says Desiree in her ear. "You can do this!"

"A couple more pushes, then it'll be over, okay?" says Claire, hoping it's true.

"Breathe with me," Viktor adds, coaching her through slow, even breaths as she pushes again. Sweat pours off her, but there is something very alive and organic about it, Claire thinks.

It's down to the minute, she knows. Maybe it will be like the movies, she will place a bloody baby on a tearful mother's chest, who will take its first gasping breath, and the onlookers will cry. Days later, Emily will thoughtfully name the baby Claire, even if it's a boy. Maybe, though, she only thought she saw a head, maybe the baby will be breech, and she will not

know what to do. Maybe it will not cry. Maybe she will have to carefully unwrap an umbilical cord from its neck. In that moment, in the pause before the inhalation, anything could happen.

Claire thinks of she and Beth playing as children on the beach, vacationing in California, millenniums before her sister took her own life. They swam so far from the shore that the water was cold and a deep blue, like a bruise. Tired and red-cheeked, they began to swim back to the beach, but she remembers fighting against a forceful riptide that pushed them back out.

She can hear her little sister's voice as clear as if it was coming from beside her. *Stop fighting it, Claire. Just swim with it.*

And as Emily gives a final, painful push and the train lurches forward, Claire closes her eyes, and, at last, she does.

Eileen Arthurs

Limbo Babies

Chrissy's major takeaway from the past year was as clear as it was devastating. Nightmares do bleed into the light of day. And from this one, she saw no hope of awakening.

To her right, a vendor cried out, first in Italian and then English. To her left, massive church doors yawned, exposing a slice of gilded altar, a spray of blood-red roses. A trio of priests emerged, then swished into the tumult of bicycles, pedestrians, a few cars, scads of motorbikes. She was jealous of how they melted into Rome's lively streets, where the fragrance of yeasty dough and simmered sauces floated on ancient and holy-scented drafts.

Unlike the priests, she was a misfit in this Roman feast of gods and edibles. A familiar spasm of longing for her old life back in Brooklyn nearly choked her. Her old life before the tragedy, that is.

The life she could never get back.

She consulted her watch. Precious time ticked away on yet another of her landlady's wild goose chases, frequent adventures in the newly solo life she was trying to shape for herself. She wondered what Albert would say. Probably a simple "I told you so."

She veered from the piazza and tried to figure out which way to turn, no easy task without Albert and his animal instinct for directions. She shrugged and crossed the street, away from the stone likeness of some unidentifiable saint, his eyes lit with petrified ecstasy and suffering.

The suffering part she got, as Albert knew well.

Albert, with the comfort of his calculating common sense, had been her rock throughout the horror of the past year. And as a reward for his unerring devotion, she'd inserted the entire Atlantic Ocean between them. When she tried to explain her behavior, all she could come up with was one simple explanation. She sucked at tragedy, and had no clue how to rise from its bitter ashes.

It struck her as deceptive, cruel even, that the New Year

had dawned with such glitzy promise. She and Albert had thrown a small and shiny party in their apartment, the women sleek in sequined tops and tight jeans, the men confident in Brooklyn hipster mode. The stroke of midnight had sparked a barrage of hugs and kisses, harmonious clinks of crystal flutes, a tipsy chorus of Auld Lang Syne.

Of course Melanie was there, bony, smart, and opinionated, pontificating on one subject after another, notably the wallop of a washed rind cheese when paired with the pop of a Belgian Ale. Her 'plus one' that night, an upscale bartender who described himself as a mixologist specializing in liquid compatibility, was fixated in rapt attention. That night, neither mixologist Rolf, nor anyone, had an inkling that her next incarnation would be as Video Melanie, smiling and waving from the fluid amber of a funeral collage.

The twinge was now so familiar Chrissy was almost numb to the pain. Almost.

Together with a dozen or so friends, they'd played charades, chatted, and grazed on roe-topped deviled eggs and creamy pork rillette slathered on root vegetable crackers. No longer new to adulthood, all of them were high on the entitlement granted by early success, as if their sparkly lives were of their own making, as if they would remain forever unbaptized by those crushing heartbreaks that strike the unlucky willy-nilly, as unexpected as they were unbearable. It wasn't until recently that Chrissy realized the truth. New Year's Eve was the last time she would ever raise a glass in blissful innocence.

A Vespa threaded its way through the chaos and Chrissy reflexively flattened herself against a stand of knockoff handbags. She'd become accustomed to close calls, but unfortunately, there was just no getting used to some things.

She kicked at a rock in her way on the narrow lane that now forked into two unfamiliar branches. She chose one that dead-ended in a sea of wicker tables where a few cappuccino drinkers lounged. Where was Albert when she needed him?

She craned her neck one way, then the other, hoping to spot the green cross of the *farmacia*, the Holy Grail in her landlady's incomprehensibly urgent demand *du jour*, the quest for a special brand of nail polish remover. Or should she say demand *della giornata*? When in Rome, after all,

although Clementina would find something to correct in even that barest snippet of Italian.

As she made an about face to retrace her steps, she realized she had no right to complain about Clementina or Albert. Especially Albert. He had been wonderful, supportive, and above all, rational, starting from the moment she got the call to inform her that Melanie, her first and finest friend from the day their mothers had deposited them at Miss Ellicott's preschool, had neglected to glance both ways before stepping from a Manhattan curb.

In the space of a heartbeat, Melanie's oversight severed the chain that had long knit their two lives together, blasting their intertwined narrative into a rubble of disjointed vignettes. The hushed giggles of childhood sleepovers. Holding hands and jumping into the deep end of her grandmother's pool. Picking over Cobb salads while discussing male to female ratios in their prospective colleges. A shopping trip where they tried on Roberto Cavalli and made fun of Rolf's cocktail-centric efforts at seduction. Reading side by side in beach chairs.

By the time she got the word, it was too late even to hold Melanie's hand, those hands she knew almost as well as her own, thin-boned and fluttery, a bloodstone set in silver on Melanie's right ring finger, a wing-shaped stain of a birthmark at the cusp of her left wrist.

Throughout all, Albert never wavered while the lonely year continued to reveal itself for the monster that it was, viler with every flip of the calendar page. He comforted her with the pronouncement that shit happens, nothing more, nothing less, and that if you wait it out, shit also stops happening. She wanted to take refuge in his reasonable view of a universe shaped by whim and vagary. In an odd way, it might allow her to hope again, just because, well, why not?

A cyclist edged close to her and she sucked in her breath.

She pictured Albert, his plaid flannel shirt loose over belted jeans, the protracted blinks of his hooded green eyes. Was he lonely back in the third floor walk-up they'd shared since pooling their rent money and falling in love? Or was it the other way around? She couldn't remember now.

She paused again to get her bearings. How far away was

the damn *farmacia*? Clementina had said it was just a stone's throw past the Trevi, but her instructions had been typically imprecise, delivered in the heavily accented English she'd picked up from a stint in London, back, in her words, when "life was still grand," before her beloved Georgio had the poor judgment to turn her into a widow slash broke landlady. If Albert had crossed paths with Clementina, he'd have declared her the Italian version of crazy, which, in his view, was as crazy as a human being could possibly get.

And then there it was, the faint burble of pent-up waters percolating above the hubbub of Roman streets. Whether in spite of or thanks to Clementina's instructions, she was closing in on her destination. One could never be quite sure about Clementina.

Albert was already winging his way back to Brooklyn the day she'd trudged up the steps to Clementina's rental flat, dejected and alone. But by the time shadows wrapped its corners, she felt better. Not fine, just better. Clementina had refused to open their discussion with talk of rent or security deposits. "Business later, talk to me, now," she'd insisted, plopping herself on the sofa and patting the cushion next to her. "Why should you want to live in my apartment?"

Chrissy had obeyed, like an exhausted puppy, and slowly, under cover of the Italian gloaming, she began to tell Clementina about Melanie.

Not about the accident. About the way it was before.

She told her prospective landlady how she and Melanie had called each other twice a day on the purple cell phones they'd got for Christmas when they were twelve, the time they shared a bottle of sloe gin in high school and threw up pink behind the library. How they showed up wearing the same scarf when they met for lunch at Fiorello's across from Lincoln Center, and flipped a coin to decide who had to remove it.

"Ah, so she is gone, passed on, this dear friend of yours," Clementina had interjected softly during a pregnant lull in their conversation.

"Yes." Chrissy said, gazing out the open window, the faint light still enough to make out the tangle of laundry-strung balconies beyond. Warm and wet smells of cooking washed over them, as Chrissy imagined the thud of yet another shovel

of dirt falling between her and Melanie.

"Now what you must do is stop the crying and take these keys," Clementina had said. "That is just life, no?" And softer, "You must talk to her, your friend, this Melanie. I talk to my Georgio all the time. And it's been so many years. Promise me you'll talk to her." She turned on a lamp and the soft shadows evaporated. "See, it's beautiful. Small, but you are small, too. Like a crab in a shell. You don't want an apartment that's too big for you. Just one that fits."

"I want my life to fit again," Chrissy said.

Clementina stood, not quite squaring the stoop of her shoulders. "So it's settled. I'm old, too tired to run all over Rome anymore. Be my legs. You help me, I help you." Chrissy had offered a hand to shake, but Clementina pulled her into a hug instead. "See, not so hard at all," she said.

Chrissy hadn't imagined how many times she would hear those words. Clementina would dispatch her on an errand, with hopelessly garbled instructions—deliver an invitation to her cousin Giuseppe after two o'clock, when he'd have a full belly, "so he wasn't too cranky," but well before his nap, "or he'll chew you up like a bear," carry a box tied up with string for the shopkeeper's niece "three and one half houses down from the lace maker's shop," bring home four lemons from Georgio's Zia Maria two minutes by foot past the last bus stop to Tivoli, "tell her fat ones for pollo al limoni, so heavenly." Chrissy would run all over Rome, asking strangers for assistance, getting lost in labyrinthine alleys, butchering and honing her Italian. And when she showed up, mission accomplished, Clementina would greet her, beaming, and say, "See, not so hard at all!"

The Trevi sang its full-throated song now. Chrissy paused on the constricted street, its edges clogged with tables and chairs filled with smug afternoon wine drinkers, and ignored the efforts of white-aproned waiters to waylay her. She turned left, the only promising option. And there it was, the Trevi, its carved mass of travertine stone ghostly pale in the afternoon sun, the music of its waterfall a comfort in any language.

She glanced again at her watch and smiled. She was improving at navigating this strange city. Why on earth hadn't she asked Clementina the Italian word for nail polish

remover? No matter, she was part mime, part mind-reader by now. She saw things differently here.

Maybe it was the Italian air. Chrissy couldn't quite put her finger on it. She still wasn't happy, not even close, but there was something about Rome, and Italy in general, that upended a person's view of the world. The boundary between now and yesterday was all blurry and fungible. To set foot in Italy was to enter a new time zone, to inhabit two worlds at once. Tacky souvenir stands lined the mega-mythic Pantheon. Traffic whizzed alongside the ruins of the Coliseum. From the hills of Tuscany to the alleys of Rome, day to day business was hopelessly entangled with some storied and gloried past. Everywhere, the rattling of old ghosts intruded on the noise of modern life.

Chrissy smiled when she spotted it, the glowing green cross of the *farmacia*. She opened the glass door and stood just inside. "Inglese?" she began. The shopkeeper shrugged and the sides of her mouth drooped. Chrissy mimed the act of painting her nails and then rubbing off the imaginary coat of polish. "Clementina needs . . ."

The shopkeeper's face erupted with a smile. "Ah, Clementina!" She pointed upwards, "*Supra, supra*."

Chrissy reached up and retrieved a bottle from the shelf and handed it over.

"*Due euro*," the shopkeeper said as she rolled the bottle into a sheet of white paper, twisting the ends.

"*Grazie*," Chrissy said and stepped back into the madcap dance of Roman streets, straining to hear the old voices encrypted in the ambient noise.

Before he packed up and declared himself over it, Albert had felt it too, the way Rome vibrated with more than met the eye, how its streets echoed with times past, how its breezes carried clots of history that clogged the nostrils and lungs of the living. The past parted just enough for everyone to go about their daily business, he'd said, but just barely. With a chuckle, he'd warned her to guard against the many petulant and powerful ghosts hell-bent on elbowing the living out of their way.

They'd both laughed at this, and Chrissy imagined that, from the outside, she and Albert still appeared to be the savvy

and successful young New Yorkers they were before Melanie forgot to look both ways on Broadway. Albert had worked hard to make it so, to use their Italian respite to relax, to give her space to unwind before resuming their sharp-edged and important existence back in Brooklyn.

Certainly, they'd tried. Both of them. They'd traipsed around the hallowed Vatican, where dead popes slumbered in every corner of St. Peter's, cozy in red velvet death slippers. They'd gawked at the keyed gold reliquaries where dismembered hands or heads or assorted bones of saints lurked in vaults, within catacombs, in secret caches beneath altars. They'd prowled through galleries and gardens, where statues and paintings of saints loomed, arrows piercing their beatific hearts, devils flaying their incorruptible flesh.

Albert had held her hand as they navigated this timeless land, marinating in what he called "Italy's dank and crusty eternity." Throughout, Chrissy had tried to rekindle her zest for the future in the many cafes that ringed historic piazzas, draining the last drops of rosso di Montepulciano from countless glasses. Albert couldn't accuse her of failing to try.

She shifted her package to her right hand, consulted her watch and picked up her pace. A group of noisy young boys with backpacks surrounded her, split around her and joined up together again like a school of fish as they overtook her. If Albert were here, the two of them would reach for each other, the moment thick with the prospect of their shimmering future.

When Albert had announced it was time to rejoin the living in Brooklyn, he hadn't expected her to say she wasn't quite ready.

"We're done here. You were the one who proclaimed yourself ready to face the world again, that Santa Fina was the final straw," he'd reminded her, in reference to the day in Tuscany when they'd found themselves staring up at an aged fresco. The artwork's subject was a hapless girl, paralyzed since the age of ten, strapped to a hard board, emanating a fuzz of saint-light as she atoned for God knows whose sins. According to the pamphlet, tucked under the bank of candles that tourists lit for one euro each, her death sent the local *campanile*, the bell towers, into frenzied song. As if that weren't enough, the

petals of the gillyflowers burst open into a mass-bloom that blanketed the countryside.

"I guess I changed my mind," Chrissy said when they returned to their hotel room back in Rome, her suitcase still empty while Albert stuffed his full. "Anyway, maybe Santa Fina did something wonderful after all."

"Besides making me wonder what the hell gillyflowers are, I can't imagine what. Come on, Chrissy, be real. It's time to go home."

"Time? I'm not sure I even know what that means anymore. Time isn't the same here."

"It's your body clock. You're all fucked up."

"I think I can believe in something if I stay here."

It wasn't until she said it that she knew it was the truth. The way Italy's past coincided with the now, with no attempt at reconciliation, no apologies, no efforts to shape life into something sensible had formed at least the beginnings of a scab over her broken heart. For Chrissy, that was reason enough to stay. She was still too exhausted to return to a world that needed to make sense.

Albert had dragged her to *Il Sole Trattoria*. They sipped cappuccino as he made a last ditch attempt to convince her to leave with him. He'd encircled her with strong arms, his voice even. "Staying here won't change anything. Come home with me. Please."

"I just need a rest," Chrissy had answered. She tried to smile through her tears, to soften the slap of her words. "I need to hang around with the dead popes and saints and angels a little longer."

Albert's hooded green eyes shuttered in long slow blinks before he threw down money for the waiter, stood, and retreated in silence.

Chrissy held Clementina's white parcel tight against her chest as she retraced her steps around the curve of the Trevi. Past the stands of *frutte* and *verdure*, Chrissy wound her way through the warren of crowded streets until she found the turnoff to Clementina's, marked by a shrine of a benevolent Mary peering from her niche in the wall above, a colorful array of half-burned wax pillars at her breast. A smiling neighbor waved as she pulled open the door to her landlady's building.

Albert called her from Brooklyn. Often. Just the other day to tell her their friend's video installation, a crosscut of a building in Queens had earned a mention in *The New York Times*. That the farmer's market in their Cobble Hill neighborhood was pungent with the garlicky zest of her favorite scapes. She visualized the wide Brooklyn sidewalks as he spoke, the bustle of smart, purposeful people, focused on concrete and achievable goals, devoid of those haunting legions of ancestors that shadowed her Roman steps.

"So how are the dead popes, saints and angels?" Albert asked sometimes.

"Great," she'd say, always.

She passed the inner courtyard of Clementina's building, remnants of the well that refreshed ancient occupants still visible at its center, and leapt up the worn stairs, functional relics from some early century. Her footsteps echoed on the smooth stone of the hall floor as she made her way to Clementina's door. Before she could knock, Clementina flung open the door, grabbed the white package and thrust a coin into Chrissy's hands, air kissing her on both cheeks.

"No, it's fine," Chrissy said, but Clementina waved her inside and closed the door behind her.

"Look at me!" Clementina said, pointing to her hair, coated with a frothy layer of dye, and her upper lip, foamed white with hair remover. "God forbid anyone sees me, but you and Georgio."

She gestured toward a photo in a frame on the kitchen counter of a suave young man in a dapper jacket, one leg half bent on a tree stump. From the stilted absurdity of the pose, Chrissy got little sense of who or what Georgio might have been. "He looks . . . like one cool guy," she said, after a minute.

"Or something. I don't get his photo out so much anymore. One day I look at him, I say, I am old enough to be your mother, and I turn over the picture and say, that's it. But sometimes I need him."

Chrissy laughed.

"It's funny, I know. But then, understand, Georgio knew me as I was then, before I disappoint myself and so many, before my skin wrinkled and my eyes clouded. With him, I am still that person. You see?"

"I guess I do," Chrissy said.

"Later, when you see me with brown hair and smooth lip, you know I have even more secrets, no? Here, come here, a new book for you, for your Italian. Take it now, and go."

Chrissy took the book and let herself out. She threaded the streets, unlocked the heavy door to her apartment, and walked to the window. Opening the shutters, she heard a family from somewhere beyond, a mother scolding a child, then laughter. She could pick out a few words here and there, more every day, it seemed.

Her cell phone rang and it was Albert. They talked for a few minutes, about his job, the weather. His voice conjured up visions of her pillow next to his in their bed, the way he draped his shirt over the hook in the bathroom when he took a shower, the cozy nest they'd made across the ocean in a world called Brooklyn.

"Did you know the Catholics used to keep unbaptized babies all penned up in Limbo, and then, all of a sudden, the freaking Pope wiped out Limbo altogether? Legislated it the hell out of the picture," Albert said.

"No," Chrissy said. "I didn't know that. Where did the babies go?"

"Yeah, right. Exactly. I just figured you should know. I mean, it's not like Brooklyn has the corner on bullshit. Magic is just an illusion, wherever you find it. Even in Italy."

"Thanks, and I guess you're going to tell me terrible truths about Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, too."

"I just want you to think about what you're doing, Chrissy."

Just before the quiet stretched into uncomfortable silence, Chrissy said, "I miss you, too."

"Well, just remember the Limbo babies the next time you pass a church."

They talked some more, laughing a little, tender, divided but not entirely separated.

It was a silly thing, the Limbo babies, but she couldn't let it go. She had no idea why she took it so personally, but it was as if Albert had somehow proven that the whole of Italy teetered on a fault line, as if Rome couldn't support her any better than Brooklyn could.

The next day, she lured Clementina out to lunch with a

promise of her favorite, pizza Margherita. Halfway through a glazed brown jug of vernaccia, Chrissy relayed what Albert had said about the Limbo babies. Clementina stared, her brown eyes unchanged.

"So?" she asked, biting into her slice of pizza, its thin crust sauced red and dotted with creamy mozzarella, flecked with bright basil.

"So, what do you think of that? You can't just make up fake rooms in heaven stuffed with babies. And if you do make them up, you can't just unmake them, like you're redecorating a tired dining room or something."

"No, no, you can't," Clementina said. She nudged the man at the table next to her, told him the Limbo baby story, in Italian of course, but Chrissy could hear *bambini* here and there, and a few other familiar words. A waiter stopped by, and more talk about the *bambini* in Limbo, most of which Chrissy couldn't understand.

After a while, with much joviality and a new round of wine, Clementina announced to Chrissy that it was "all okay."

"Now, we need a parade, a day for the Limbo babies to fill the streets of Rome with their innocence." Clementina threw her arms into the air. "In God's infinite wisdom, He has broken the bars of their cage and let these poor bambini run as free as the Tiber!"

"That's it?" Chrissy asked.

"Si, yes," Clementina said. She winked at the man at the table next to her and he said something in Italian to her, his arms flying.

"Si, okay," Clementina said, and then turned to Chrissy. "Gino says we need a patron saint of Limbo babies. Maybe you, Santa Cristina." She pushed Chrissy's shoulder and laughed.

Chrissy leaned over and raised her wine glass to Gino, aware of the vernaccia's effects from the sudden heat in her cheeks. "Okay, so maybe it will be me," she agreed, and laughed. Gino bowed to her.

"I think, from now on, we will call you Santa Cristina," Clementina said.

"Something more for you, Santa Cristina?" The waiter cleared the plates with a smile.

"No, *basta*, enough," Chrissy said.

"Come tomorrow, I will have chef Francesco make gnocchi specially for you, Santa Cristina," he said as she and Clementina stood up to leave.

"Gnocchi and *insalata* with arugula from Francesco's garden," Clementina said to the waiter. And then, to Chrissy, "I know he's holding back the best." They linked arms and stood a moment on the street. "I have some things to do now," Clementina said. "See you for gnocchi tomorrow. We'll eat and drink and celebrate the Limbo babies."

"We will," Chrissy said, alone on the street, smiling as she melted into the Roman flow. She ducked into the corner *pasticceria* to glimpse the colorful pastries, wrapping her tongue around the names of the flavors, *cioccolato, nocciola, fragola*. "*Cosi bella*," she said, when the young woman behind the counter smiled at her. She ordered a square of *cioccolato* with *crema* and left an extra euro on the glass case.

She stepped back into the street, where the sun now waned, and vendors boxed up papally blessed rosary beads and key chains of naked David from their makeshift shelves.

Back in her apartment, Chrissy sat on the couch without turning on a light. After a while, she rose, lit the lamp in the corner, and from her wallet, pulled a photo from behind her driver's license, the one she'd tucked there, face down, right after Melanie's accident. She hadn't been able to bring herself to look at it since that day, but she hadn't removed it either. She stared at it for a long time.

"Melanie," she said aloud.

She'd thought her friend's name hundreds of times a day. But the sound of it on her tongue was dizzyingly sweet. "Melanie," she said again and again. After a while, she uncorked the bottle of a Brunello di Montalcino that she and Albert had bought together, for a special occasion. She poured herself a glass, propped up the photograph on the windowsill, and studied it.

Two of them had donned boas from a pile of props, hers neon yellow, Melanie's fuchsia, and ducked into the photo booth at a friend's wedding reception last year. In the photo, their hair was sleek and straight and mingled together, Melanie's strands pale against the dark of her own, their eyes narrowed

in laughter, their smiles gleaming. They would look much the same today, if a kinder fortune had prevailed.

Chrissy thought of the aging Clementina peering at the likeness of her young Georgio, and knew she should savor today, when she and Melanie were still the same, equals. She wondered if the day would come when that same photo would hold the likeness of a Melanie young enough to be her daughter, a relic of bygone days.

"So Melanie, today, you'll never guess what happened," Chrissy began. She paused, sipped her wine and continued, "You would have loved it. Seems I've become the unofficial patron saint of the Limbo babies. You'd be so jealous." Chrissy smiled, imagining how the two of them would double over in laughter at the image of a herd of penned-up babies busting through the gates of Limbo. She took another sip of wine. "If you were here, though, we'd be co-saints. I bet we could even talk Rolf into concocting some official Limbo Babies Cocktail."

It wasn't much, but it was a start. She wondered if even Clementina had been awkward with Georgio at first. She slid the photo back behind her license. This time, she didn't turn it face down.

On a sudden impulse, she dialed Albert's number. The phone rang and she pictured Albert in their Brooklyn apartment, pulling his phone from his pocket or his bedside table, perhaps worried or maybe just curious when the screen lit with her name. Or maybe enough time had passed that he'd be annoyed, wrenched from the side of a new lover he'd culled from the sidewalks or bars of Brooklyn.

All she knew was she needed to talk to him, now, this minute.

She counted the rings and waited breathlessly for him to answer. She would begin perhaps, by describing the way the sun gleamed on the Trevi while the workers cleaned it and fished out coins. And then she'd tell him how tickled she was to be the neighborhood's newly christened patron saint of the Limbo Babies. Of course, she would tell him that tonight she'd uncorked their bottle of deeply red Brunello and resurrected her friendship with Melanie.

But the moment Albert's familiar voice spanned the miles

between them, Chrissy realized that what she'd really called to say was so much simpler. She'd called to tell him she wasn't returning to Brooklyn any time soon, that she'd fallen head over heels in love with the way the Roman sky softened as daylight broke, before the shopkeepers unlocked their doors, in those hallowed moments when the streets teemed with only the unseen.

Rosy Tahan

Gumballs

Ameen's was not a large store, but to its customers, it had everything: *labneh*, *akkawi* cheese, *zaatar*, *burghul*, *halawa*, various types of Levantine olive oil, and several hummus alternatives for those who didn't like "what the Americans have come up with now."

The store was the only one of its kind for miles, so there was usually a long wait at the cashier. At some point during this wait, some customers would inevitably cave into their temptations, and hunt for quarters to put in the gumball machine.

The machine was a beautiful thing, with a clear sphere, brightly filled, set atop a blue cylinder containing the coin mechanism. The middle part of the cylinder was clear, through which the colorful gumballs could be seen rolling down a blue spiral ramp to arrive at a shiny silver chute.

The machine didn't belong to Ameen. A few weeks ago, a 16-year-old boy had come in and offered Ameen 5% of the profits in exchange for letting the machine stand in the store. He didn't have to do anything else so Ameen agreed, privately thinking that his customers wouldn't let their children near that "sugary American nonsense." But his wife Mouna disagreed. She understood the power of whining children better than he did, and sure enough, the machine was half empty by the time Matt came around again.

He arrived as Mouna was closing shop, which she did every day. It was agreed that Ameen would open shop and Mouna would close, since he liked taking evening strolls and she didn't like waking up to alarms. Besides, she liked the quietness of the shop in the evenings. Opening made the day feel so much longer than she wanted it to be.

Matt unlocked the top of the gumball machine and tilted it towards her. "Want one?"

She shook her head. He ripped open a new bag of them and held it out to her. "How about these? They're fresh."

"Both ways they rot your teeth," she said.

"You sound like my mom." He laughed and popped a gumball into his mouth before closing the top of the dome.

"I'm also a dentist. I was," she corrected.

"How come you aren't one now?"

"I'm not licensed to practice in the US."

"That's too bad," he said. He sounded like he meant it, which surprised her. Mouna rarely asked for sympathy, but it amazed her how often people said things without any feeling.

He took out his phone and calculated her share of the extracted quarters, then walked out with his coins jingling in his loose basketball shorts. When the door closed she was suddenly overcome with an urge to be somewhere else, so she went outside and sat on the curb staring through the empty parking lot until Ameen gently tapped her shoulder and they went upstairs.

Mouna and Ameen had moved to the United States in September. By December they had opened Ameen's and the store was doing well enough for them to allow themselves to feel settled in. Their new lives were lonely, but they were safe, which was the best they could ask for after the unrest and grief of the last few years.

They lived in the same building as the store, a floor above, which made for an easy commute. Mouna sometimes woke up with the eerie feeling that there were strangers in her house, but she was never able to forget that their household was emptier than it had ever been.

On the days she woke up too early, she would escape downstairs and watch Ameen as he sang and cheerfully rang up the customers, and she would wonder how two people going through the same thing can go through it so separately.

Matt's next visit was on a hot day at the end of May. Mouna could tell that schools had begun to close for the summer; children were popping up with their parents in the daytime. The last customers trickled out like slow sweat, and she leaned against the back wall with her eyes closed until jolted out of her reverie by the sound of Matt tinkering with the gumball machine.

"Why did you start doing this?" she asked him.

He shrugged. “I had some extra cash and figured I’d make a little investment. You know, for college.”

“How can this be enough for college?”

“One machine’s probably not, but maybe I’ll save enough to get a few more around town. And I have a summer job lined up.”

He looked up and saw her smiling. “What?” he asked.

She shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

He shut door of the coin bank and stretched up. “Well,” he joked, “if you get your dentist’s license I totally want a share for bringing you so many new patients.”

Mouna started laughing. “Of course.”

Matt called and said he was going away the last two weeks of June, and asked if the machine was depleted enough for an early maintenance visit. Mouna told him to come. Later, when she saw the gumballs still crowding the fishbowl, she raided the cash register for quarters and cranked them into the coin slot, watching them spiral down into a plastic bag she had taped at the mouth of the chute.

She would do this all summer, apologizing to customers for giving them nickels and dimes and, after hours, feeding the quarters to the gumball machine in a ritual Ameen watched on the security cameras, though he never said anything.

By July they had finally accepted the futility of fans and decided to install an air conditioner. Ameen was determined to do it himself, so Mouna held the ladder steady from below. He started teasing her about her low tolerance for the cold, and to his surprise she responded, with a sudden but gentle shake of the ladder, making outlandish threats he knew she didn’t mean. When Matt arrived they were laughing, at themselves, at each other, and because it felt so fresh.

Matt accepted their offer of cake and ice cream, so they all went upstairs and sat around the kitchen table together.

“How did you decide to name the store after Ameen?” Matt asked them.

Mouna looked into Ameen’s eyes. “We never really talked about it,” she said. Ameen met her gaze for a moment, then looked away.

"We had to make a decision in a hurry," he told Matt. "Also, my name means 'trustworthy person' in Arabic, so we thought it would bring us more customers," he said with a wink.

"What does your name mean, Mouna?" Matt asked her.

"Wishes," she said. "The plural."

Matt laughed. "That's a pretty great name, honestly."

"I'll save it for my dentistry practice," she smiled.

"What would my name mean, if you say it in Arabic?"

Ameen thought about it. "Well, there isn't an exact translation," he began, then Mouna looked up. "The verb die," she said. "Past tense."

"Yikes," said Matt, then fell silent. They finished the rest of the ice cream and cake without speaking until Ameen offered Matt some tea, but he said he had to get going.

One night in late August, Mouna went to bed later than usual and was woken up almost immediately by a loud crash downstairs, followed by what sounded like rattling.

"Ameen, wake up!"

He threw off his bedcovers with a sudden jerk of his arm and asked her what was the matter.

"I heard something," she said. "Downstairs."

They huddled together and listened. "I don't hear anything, love," Ameen said, getting under the covers again. "Go back to sleep."

Mouna didn't move.

"You could have imagined it," said Ameen softly, stroking her back.

She could have. Her imagination didn't have to stretch far to find tragedy, after all. She resented Ameen; he should have been the same, not far away from her, in sleep, as though he had never had a namesake who lived and breathed and was now locked away in a bedside drawer.

When she woke up the next morning, it was past the store's opening time, but Ameen wasn't downstairs. She could hear his voice in the next room, talking on the phone. He was talking about a break-in.

She quickly got dressed and went downstairs.

Whoever it was must have picked the lock. The door looked intact. The cash register, of course, had been cleaned out. It

would have been a completely silent break-in except for the gumball machine violently toppled, its gumballs scattered among shards of glass that just yesterday held a half-full globe. That was probably what woke her up.

"The police are on their way," said Ameen from the foot of the stairs. He looked at Mouna. "Do you want to call him?"

Mouna shook her head. She bent and picked up the broken body of the machine, and placed it upright where it used to stand, now offering them nothing.

Matt arrived before the police did. Sweeping some of the glass away with his sneakered foot, he kneeled to examine what was left of the gumball machine.

"Can you fix it?" asked Mouna.

"I don't know." He shook his head. "I guess it depends on the cost of the replacement parts. I might have to take it somewhere."

"Take it with you," said Ameen. "We'll clean up."

"Don't they need it for fingerprints or something?" asked Matt.

"It doesn't matter," said Mouna.

"Anyway, we already touched it," said Ameen.

They stood in a strange new silence. "I'm sorry, Matt," began Mouna, then stopped. Everything she wanted to say echoed from years and miles away from their little shop, too heavy for scattered gumballs. That's the thing about loss, she thought. In all its manifestations, it never leaves anything to share.

Upstairs, she watched at the window as Matt heaved the machine into the back of his car. The police came, they left, and then it was just her and Ameen again; two people who never learned to grieve together. How horrible to realise that he was right to sing and to sleep soundly, and she had been doing it all wrong, all alone.

She never wanted to tell Ameen any of this, but then he came upstairs and opened his bedside drawer, and he collapsed into sobs as several gumballs rolled into view.

Chris Brewer

Good People

We'd decided to go drinking. In that way, it wasn't any different than most other days.

Wyatt had gotten himself laid off and sounded pretty down about it, so I felt that fraternal obligation to call in sick again and told him to pick me up whenever he got himself ready. That usually meant he'd be knocking on my door anywhere between ten and twelve minutes from the time our phones landed back on their cradles. Wyatt was always ready whenever a drink got mentioned, and I knew that as well as he did.

Certain circumstances had me staying at the old Easy Way Inn just off the interstate for nearly three weeks, but it wasn't the type of place that a person would love to call *home*. Still yet, the chipped curls of yellowing white paint hanging loosely from the ragged wooden siding out front led me to believe that the owners of the place wouldn't mind setting up a stranger for a potentially long stay without putting too much of a strain on his pocket. That notion turned out to be true, so I found myself sticking around longer than originally intended. There's no telling what those people thought about Wyatt knocking on that door to room 14B at least once each day after my first night there, so I never bothered with thinking much about it myself. We just met up and went about the motions. Wyatt and I both had it bad for something, so we spent our evenings taking turns listening to each other talk sorrow and regret either in that motel room or on barstools, and we went about that process of remembering, forgetting, and remembering again in a way that had become more of a habit than a relief of any kind. But from what we'd seen during all those late night and early morning binges, our way of forgetting was about the same as everyone else's in town. The only choice we saw was to drink it all down until the memories were gone or the bottles ran empty.

I heard his truck pull into the lot and the engine shut off before he could get his door open, so I saved him the trouble

of climbing the steps and knocking by coming outside onto the balcony. We'd been told more than once that Wyatt drove the loudest damn truck in the county, and I believed it more than he did. He'd just shrug it off and laugh about it, start calling people assholes. Truth be told, I probably could've heard him coming from five miles down the road if I'd kept my ear to the door and listened hard enough.

When he saw me standing up there looking down at him, he cranked his window open and waved a silver flask out the window. Then he tipped it back and took a long pull, smiled up at me, yelled, "Let's roll."

That's how it always started.

Wyatt had been through the shit. You could see it on his face when he was sober. He never would talk much about it though. But just like with every other type of personal matter, other people did the talking for him, and I'd been around long enough to hear a tale or two. Part of this reminded me that people weren't much different out here in Kansas than they'd been back home in Kentucky. And the other part of it made me wonder sometimes what those types of people had found out and told one another about me.

I hadn't been in town long when I first met Wyatt, saw him slouched over some bar, hammered, his ass hanging half off the stool. I don't even remember the name of the bar we were in that night, but the way Wyatt kept hitting on the girl behind the counter had all the regulars wanting to get at him, to put him in his place, which most thought was out the door with his head on the curb.

More than one time that night, he came up to me dangling the keys to his truck, looked at the bottle in my hand, said he had colder beer at his place if I didn't mind driving him there. I kept telling him, "Just let me finish this one," and then I'd turn around and order another when his cloudy eyes drifted elsewhere. I guessed from looking at him that the girl working that night had already turned him down, cut him off, and that he could tell by looking at me that I wasn't a regular, that I didn't belong in that crowd either.

For whatever reason, I ended up driving him home later that night. Maybe starting over in a new place had me feeling

like I needed a friend or at least something close to it. On our way there, we talked about the wives we'd had and all the women we'd lost, the typical topics of conversation for drunk and lonely men. Then he got real quiet and passed out in the passenger seat just as I pulled the truck up to the curb, so I got out and slept in an old wicker chair on the porch of the house he'd said was his. It wasn't much to look at, like everything else I'd seen around, just some run-down rental with boards covering a few of the windows in the most indigent-looking part of town.

The next morning, he seemed confused, kind of embarrassed. He let on like he didn't remember much about the night before, spent a lot of time rubbing his forehead. And I'd been there too, knew that feeling pretty good and well. We reintroduced ourselves while he walked around the small patch of dead grass between the front porch and the sidewalk, stopping at times to stretch the kinks out of his back from sleeping in the cab of the truck all night. For a while after that, we sat on the porch and chain-smoked cigarettes, no words to say that could counter the throbbing ache between our temples. He just looked around the porch for a while, at the nails coming up out of the weathered boards, that torn screen door, the brown glass of broken and empty bottles scattered around the small front yard. Then he told me his situation was only temporary.

"Mine too," I'd told him. "Mine is too."

I knew where we were headed before I even climbed into the truck. I knew it as soon as the phone rang in that cheap motel room I'd been staying in. Wyatt was the only person who ever called, and though the day might've been different according to someone's calendar, what we made of each twenty-four-hour period had stayed as regular as clockwork since the night we accidentally came across one another.

"You know what we've got to do first," Wyatt said. "It'll only take a minute."

I nodded while he tipped the flask back one more time before tucking it under the seat. The smell of whiskey filled the cab, made my stomach turn a little, the way it always did after the first shot of the night got taken. A few tenants on the

bottom floor of the Easy Way pulled back their curtains to see what all the noise was about whenever Wyatt started the truck back up. He noticed them around the same time I did.

"Look at them assholes," he said. "Probably just a bunch of old women. I'll give them something to gawk at." Then he burned a trail of rubber from the parking lot to the main road, shifted gears with an unsteady hand, and cut the wheels back toward the on-ramp to the interstate.

Wyatt's ex-wife only lived three miles up the road, right off the next exit. That was the single guarantee of any given day, that we would always stop by her place before we got into anything else at all. Wyatt called her Angel, but I never knew for sure if that was her real name. I never even knew for sure if they'd been married, but Wyatt had made it clear a while back that these kinds of things were unimportant, that the actualities always got outweighed by whichever feelings we could attach to them. To me, that meant it didn't matter whether or not her name was Angel or even if they'd actually been down that trail of holy matrimony. She was an Angel to Wyatt, and he felt married to her in his soul. That seemed like enough for him, which made it enough for me too.

"We've got it made," he said as he pulled up and put the truck in park beside Angel's rusted chain-link fence. "Not too long ago, people used to ride around on elephants. Maybe still do. Can you believe that shit?"

"Seems like I've heard it somewhere before," I said. "Might've seen it in the circus."

"They say those things got the best memories of any creature, too," he said. Then he reached for the flask beneath the seat, uncapped it, took another long pull. "Imagine that, always remembering every bit of ass you ever had riding your back."

"That'd be something," I said.

"You got that right," he said.

"Most of mine are worth forgetting," I told him, but his mind had already left and gone elsewhere.

Angel's car wasn't there, the same way it never was. Wyatt still sat there quietly with the flask in his hand for a long while. I could tell he had some thought or another rattling around in his head, but I knew better than to ask what it

might be. He'd bring it up himself if he had something he intended to talk about it. Like always, he came out of it after a few minutes, that stone-cold daze of his, and then he laid on the horn for three long seconds. He took another quick sip from the flask, winked, and handed it across the seat to me.

The sound of the horn brought Angel's mutt of a dog darting out from the backyard and along the side of the house, then had it running up and down the length of the fence out front barking its mangy brown head off at the two of us and the truck that brought us there. It didn't take long for the old man across the street to walk over and lean his head into Wyatt's open window. Just like the times before, Wyatt pulled a wadded-up five-dollar bill from his front pocket and handed it to the man, told him, "Not a word."

The old man nodded, kept his lips shut tight, and made his way back across the street. Wyatt watched as the old man climbed the steps of his own porch, then he opened the truck's door, stepped down into the road. When he got to the gate at the front of the house, the dog stopped all the barking, started beating its tail against the cracked concrete sidewalk. Wyatt bent down and let the dog lick at his hand through a link in the fence. I lit a cigarette then and took a long drag before blowing blue smoke through the cracked passenger window.

"You can be a pretty good son of a bitch sometimes," I heard him say, "even if that woman who keeps you ain't worth a damn." Then he unlatched Angel's gate and let the dog out onto the sidewalk. This was all part of the routine, and I'd seen it well over a dozen times. Wyatt shut the gate back and latched it while the dog ran around his legs, pissing circles all across the concrete from excitement or some sort of pent-up expectation. Then Wyatt came over, climbed back into the truck, and laid on the horn for another three long seconds. The dog took off down the street like it'd been shot in the ass, and Wyatt started the truck back up and headed off in the same direction.

"I hope to hell she doesn't find him this time," he said.

"Me too," I said, even though I'd never met the woman, had nothing against her or that dog of hers. That's just the way our alliance had worked itself out. We'd chosen our sides, or

more likely, the sides had chosen us.

By the way he dealt with the matter of Angel's dog, I figured Wyatt only needed to make someone or something feel as lost as he was.

Some people just talked for the sake of talking. That was one of the reasons Wyatt paid off that old neighbor of Angel's, for him to keep his mouth shut about Wyatt letting her dog loose every day. Each man had his price, after all. And like I said, I'd heard from strangers about some of the other bad things Wyatt had done in his life before I showed up and started doing bad right along with him.

One thing I heard involved Wyatt, some woman, and another man who'd recently came into a decent deal of money. They said Wyatt and this woman knew about the man's new fortune somehow, something to do with insurance and a death in the man's family, so they came up with a plan of sorts that started by taking the man out drinking with them. The woman was a looker by this town's standards, and from what I gathered, she served as the bait.

So Wyatt and this woman took the poor guy down to one of the local bars, started talking what they called *good business* for *good people*. After a few rounds of beer and whiskey shots, Wyatt told the man that the woman was an interested investor, that she knew a way the man could double his money quick and easy. Of course, the woman started in with the touching and teasing, rubbing up and down the man's arm and eventually his leg. The man, drunk and excited by that point, said it all sounded like a good idea.

No matter what happened, the man supposedly ended up writing a check by the end of the night, and by the next morning, Wyatt had procured that old truck of his and a new lease on that run-down house he was staying in when I met him. They said the woman skipped out of town, never came back but maybe once to collect the things she'd left behind. But of course, I wouldn't have known her if I'd seen her walking down the street. From the looks of it, Wyatt was no elephant, which led me to believe he wouldn't recognize her either.

They said the man didn't go to the police or anything about

the whole deal, probably figured he would've been laughed out of town for entering into a situation that looked as shady as the one he'd gotten himself in. He just up and left town too after a while, the same way the woman did. Wyatt though, he stuck around, calling people assholes and ignoring all the tales that kept getting told about him.

"That crooked old bastard said he'd get me the license plate numbers of all the men Angel has over there if I'd bring him a fifth of gin each week," Wyatt said. "But I don't have time for that shit."

"Sounds like more trouble than it's worth," I told him.

The light in front of us turned red, and Wyatt let the truck roll to a stop, just kept staring straight ahead. I imagined he was wondering about what kind of trouble I had in mind when I'd said it. But he wasn't.

"That dog don't know any better," he said, "probably goes right back to the house all on his own just as soon as we leave."

"Probably," I said. "Some animals never exactly know what's best for them."

"A drink right now is what's best for me," he said, and with that, he started driving down the street that led out of town, connected to one of the county roads which went out to where the big empty cornfields were, where Lucky's Bar sat in the middle of an equally empty gravel parking lot, the *Open* sign flashing like a beacon at two in the afternoon under a mess of dark clouds that had already began gathering up most of the light above, keeping it from getting anywhere close to either of us.

That's where we usually went on days like that, those early ones that always turned into much longer nights. Wyatt liked the bartender there at Lucky's. Her name was Tina, maybe Trina, from what we could remember, and Wyatt and I both knew what to do and what to say to get her pouring heavy. She was one of the few bartenders around who mixed the business with pleasure, and we knew to buy her just enough doubles to get that glazed-over look in her eyes, that same look that always meant neither of us would be in any shape to drive home whenever it came time to get ourselves there.

Wyatt and I took a couple more hits from the flask, drained

it dry before heading inside, and from all the empty stools and tables in that place, and the way we caught Tina leaning over the bar with her hair hanging down over the drip mats, I could tell it was already shaping up to be a long one. Wyatt shot me a quick look that meant he was thinking the same thing, but we went on into it anyway, partly because we were already there and had nowhere else to be, and the rest because the clock on the wall told us that Tina wouldn't be going anywhere for at least a few hours either.

She raised her head up when the bell on the back of the door announced our arrival, and she shot us one of her typical exaggerated, imperfect smiles. Some people said that big, tattooed husband of hers was responsible for the three bottom teeth she was missing, but I'd seen the way Tina smoked and the way she drank, and that made it easy for me to assume that the darkened row behind her lower lip had more or less something to do with the natural consequences of her own reckless lifestyle. But I wasn't in any shape to be passing judgment on her or anyone else. I'd been living with about the same amount of recklessness, like leaving my old life behind and starting up something new in an unfamiliar place with what seemed like little responsibilities, rules, or expectations. Besides, Tina was only there because she had to be. Wyatt and I were there because, at that time of day, we had no other choice.

"I had a feeling I'd be seeing you two," she called across the bar.

We walked over and took our usual seats right in front of her.

"It's easier to be predictable sometimes," Wyatt said.

He was already half-drunk from the flask, and I had a lot of catching up to do. We started buying round after round without letting much time pass between them, all three of us getting there in a hurry. Pretty soon, we'd been there for over an hour without another customer walking in.

"Tell her about the elephants," I told Wyatt.

"That shit ain't important right now," he said. "We're having a good time, right?"

"What about them?" she said.

"You're damn right," I said. "I'll get the next round."

So I did, and after that round of shots got poured and drank, Tina started getting that look in her eyes. Wyatt kept looking over at me, either smiling or winking each time she slurred one of her words.

"What's with all these men not knowing how to treat a woman?" she said.

"It's not hard," Wyatt said. "You meet one and you make her your wife. The hard part is keeping her once all the bad starts coming out."

"That doesn't answer my question," she said.

"Sounds like you should just get a dog," I said.

Wyatt laughed, almost spilled his beer.

"Fuck dogs," he said. "They don't know any better than to love whichever random asshole keeps them fed."

"You know something?" Tina said. She took the time to flash that broken smile of hers at both of us, which let us know she hadn't paid any bit of attention to about what we'd been talking. "I'd give either of you boys a go if you ever let on like you wanted one."

Wyatt looked over at me again and winked, and then we both got to laughing a little.

"I'm telling it true," she said. "I can't take you home, but I'd find somewhere to take you. I can tell you that."

"Well, you're no Angel," Wyatt said, "but I'm sure you can get the job done."

And when he said that, I knew exactly what he meant, even if Tina didn't. She was more than likely too busy picturing wings and halos, heavenly creatures descending from the sky with a radiant light surrounding their white-robed bodies, but that's not what Wyatt had in mind at all. It never mattered either way. I sat there drunk, watching as she slipped off her shoes, reached across the bar for Wyatt's hand, and started dancing all the way down to the opening where he could meet her.

She looked over at me then, her eyelids looking pretty heavy, said, "Sweetie, would you mind locking that door behind you?"

So that's what I did, just walked over there and locked it. As early as it was and with those big clouds outside growing darker, I hadn't really expected any other patron to be

blessing Lucky's with their presence, but I tended to the door anyway because that's what she wanted. Maybe she was just worried about that big husband of hers walking in. By the time I turned back around, her and Wyatt had disappeared into the back room where they kept the extra bottles. I didn't mind much though about being alone, felt good enough to just get back to my seat where I could pour myself shots from all those unguarded spirits they'd left me with.

As I said before, people talked. And seeing how Tina didn't seem to hold any sort of sour opinions about Wyatt, I took that to mean that she hadn't been well-travelled in the same kind of circles as the ones in which I'd heard some of the following tales being told.

During my time in town, I'd heard all sorts of stories about Wyatt and what had happened between him and Angel, about how she'd tried her best to make things work and stuck it out time and time again. The most unpleasant story though involved Angel carrying around a baby for a few months that ended up not finding itself born. There had been talk that it could've been either a miscarriage—the natural kind of loss—or the other route which kept the kid's name off of its future birth record. There were varying accounts, of course, just as there were different opinions about Wyatt as a result of these stories. In both versions of it though, people said that Angel couldn't stand to look at him afterward, that she just never saw him the way she had seen him before.

Other stories blamed their separation on Wyatt's tendency to bury himself in the bottle. They talked of how Angel got tired of worrying about him being out all night, about where he was, who he was with, and if he'd make it back home by morning. Even worse, they said, was her having to deal with him when he finally did make it there, sometimes finding him passed out on the front porch with the dog by his feet, not a single hint at how he'd gotten himself there. Those long, fretful nights had tortured the poor girl, people had said, and part of me kind of believed them.

But it never interested me much to take a stranger's word about any other person's situation. I tended to see their separation as a combination of both accounts. The second

tale was well-evidenced from all the nights Wyatt and I had spent trying to forget something about ourselves. That first account though, I just had a strong feeling about some kind of truth being behind it. It might've been how Wyatt's sober eyes held a sorrow in them that I was never able to account for. There was a reason for all the things he'd been doing, even if I couldn't exactly put my finger on it. But no matter what his true situation was, I could well understand how a thing turning bad could lead a man to the bottle, even if that bottle was found in a direction opposite of everything he'd ever caught himself caring about.

When I first left my wife back home in Kentucky and moved out to the Midwest, people told me to watch out for the tornados, said they'd sound just like a train coming down on top of you without any tracks in sight. And that's pretty much exactly what it ended up sounding like. Wyatt and Tina must've been in the back for a good half an hour when I first started hearing it, felt the ground trembling beneath the weight of that big, heavy cloud reaching down out of the sky.

It sounded like some kind of giant roar that kept getting closer, and Wyatt made it out of the back room first once the lights in that place started flickering. He was shirtless and breathing heavy, drunk and cursing, working at getting his pants pulled back up around his waist when all the lights went dark and the electricity kicked out for good.

"What in the hell did you do?" he yelled at me, and then I saw it on his face that he realized nothing about our current situation had been my doing.

He stumbled over and looked out the window, almost immediately ran back and started pushing the tables and chairs up against the door like it'd be the only thing to save us. It was then that Tina came out, crying and shaking all over, but with most of her clothes back where they belonged. She paced back and forth a bit, mumbling incoherently to herself beneath that constant roaring, and then she just hunkered down behind the bar with her arms wrapped up tight around her knees. I sat there on my stool not really knowing what else to do, just spun around and watched

Wyatt slide the furniture across the floor, listening to Tina back there sobbing and slurring what she probably thought to be her last prayer, crying out, "The Lord is my shepherd," over and over again like she was begging for the salvation of all of God's creatures.

But it turned out we didn't need saving. A few windows in Lucky's got broken out and sent shards of glass spinning arcs across the sticky linoleum flooring, but the giant roaring died down after that, headed off somewhere further to the east. Tina rose up and wiped her face with the palm of her hand while I poured a shot from the bottle of whiskey she'd left for me on the bar. Wyatt stood there in the middle of the room, had his hands gripped on the edge of the only table he hadn't managed to get pushed against the door yet. None of us knew what to say at the time, so after a while we just started in with moving things back where they were when we first got there, trying to make as little noise as possible, listening closely in case that darkness outside decided to turn around and come back for us. After that, Wyatt and I took our usual seats back at the bar, him pulling out the pourer of the whiskey bottle and putting it straight to his lips, draining what was left of it, while Tina trembled along and clumsily made her way outside to assess the damages.

Tina's husband ended up being just as big as we'd heard he was. Wyatt and I watched through the truck's side mirrors as the giant, tattooed man climbed out of a vehicle that neither of us felt he should've even been able to fit into. Then we watched him run across the gravel parking lot in front of Lucky's to wrap up Tina in such a way that there was no sign at all of her smaller frame peeking out from the sides of his massive arms.

After he'd seen the man go off toward Tina and not swivel back around to check out his truck, Wyatt got back to that far-staring look again as we sat idling at the edge of the parking lot facing the two-lane county road that brought us there. His left hand sat there resting at the bottom of the cracked steering wheel. In his right hand, he just kept spinning the aluminum can we'd found in the front seat along with all the bits of broken glass it had smashed out of his driver's side

window. In the cornfield across the road, a tractor trailer had been laid down with a tremendous amount of force, splitting it open across the top and mangling the bottommost portion upon a graveyard of flattened cornstalks. Aluminum cans similar to the one in Wyatt's hand were strewn all across the road, while some could be seen glinting around the cornfield where an impartial sun had already begun setting through light cracks in the dark clouds that kept moving off to the west.

"Ain't that some shit?" he said, leaving an unfeeling sort of tone hanging there between us in the truck's cab.

"Sure is," I said. "It'd be even more shit if there was dog food in that can."

Wyatt let off a short laugh then that I could tell was forced, sounding exhausted.

"No. Not the can," he said. "Not the can, not the window. Not the booze, not Tina, not that big man out there, not whatever is in the fucking can, not even whatever the fuck that was that just happened back there. Not nothing. Fuck the can, fuck the truck."

He began shaking the unlabeled aluminum can in his right hand, pounding out his syllables hard on the steering wheel with his left.

"It was my fault," he said, softer than before. "All mine. I fucked it up, all of it."

I started to speak up then but stopped myself. He'd said what he needed to say, as if to himself, and it didn't matter that I was around to hear it. Wyatt continued staring far out through the windshield into a different world, maybe one made of memories that I was unable to see or even make guesses about. We sat there in silence for a long while after that, caught in that thick twilight hour of a substantial drunken haze, the kind which left every movement and every word feeling weighted down by a lifetime of long-buried regrets.

"She came and left twice before she got the leaving part right," Wyatt finally said. "At least I guess that's how it worked itself out. Did I ever tell you about all that?"

"You hadn't yet," I told him, though I'd already heard it from others.

"It'd be just as well to save it for another time then," he said, rubbing his forehead.

There was another period of that long, drawn-out silence after that, and it lasted for what could've been ten, fifteen minutes. Wyatt just kept looking off through the windshield while I locked my eyes on the rearview mirror, watching as Tina's husband put his arm around her waist and led her back inside the bar.

"Let's get out of here," I said eventually, not knowing what else there was to say.

Then Wyatt dropped the aluminum can of whatever-it-was and let it rest there on the bench seat between us.

"Let's roll," he said. So we rolled.

We were still pretty well drunk, but I could remember our surprise at the lack of damage we saw during our short drive back down that old county road. And I could also remember the look on Wyatt's face, partly ashamed and full of guilt, when he pulled the truck back up to the curb in front of Angel's house later that evening. Her car was still gone, the gate to the fence was still latched shut, and there was no sign at all of the dog we'd sent scurrying and pissing down the cracked sidewalk earlier that afternoon.

The sun was all but gone from the late day's sky when Wyatt got out of the truck and started pacing back and forth, rubbing his temples, lighting a cigarette and blowing the smoke out in quick, exaggerated puffs.

"I have to wait for them," he said. "One of them has to come home. Either her or that dog. One of the two, either one. I have to be sure."

I must've fallen asleep in the cab of Wyatt's truck not long after that, because the last thing I could remember from that moment until waking was watching him finally unlatch the gate of that rusted fence and climb the weathered steps upward before taking a seat in the plastic lawn chair to wait, as if for an act of God, on his Angel's front porch.

In my dream that evening, sleeping in the cab of Wyatt's old truck, I found myself riding an elephant along empty roads from the Easy Way Inn all the way back to the home I'd shared

with my wife for eleven years in Kentucky. The elephant was adorned with a glittering violet-colored headpiece and a matching drape with golden trim over its back, like the ones I'd seen in the circus years and years ago, with the words *good business* stitched across the drape in gold lettering right where my left foot hung down. On the right side of the drape, I looked and saw the words *good people* sewn down there in the same kind of bright, cursive lettering.

It must've been early morning when I arrived home on the back of that elephant and saw my wife standing out there in the driveway like she'd been waiting almost all night, wearing the same blue dress she'd worn on the day I'd left, her blonde hair draped across her perfect set of bare shoulders, with our two daughters standing on either side of her, dressed up and matching, all three of them wearing the same exact outfit, same shoes, with their hair all done up the same way like they could've been posing for a family photograph that would've sat to one side of an imaginary office desk or maybe at the center of our mantle. Dew had settled on the grass around our mailbox, and it seemed so real and fine that I could feel its dampness collecting along the shirt collar at the back of my neck.

"They're not real, you know," she said, nodding toward our suddenly not-real daughters.

"You're not sad about that?" I asked her.

"What would be the point?" she asked in return. "Sadness is just all of our happiness in reverse."

Our little girls were gone then—the two perfect daughters, just like my wife had always wanted for us—but she still stood there waiting for me in the misty, dew-laden driveway. I'd nearly lost track of the elephant beneath me when it made a shrill trumpeting sound, turning its violet-crowned head around toward me and lifting its trunk up over a set of long ivory tusks. The end of its trunk was curled around a bottle of whiskey, which it then reached out toward my open right hand, and for the first time in a long while, I wondered whether or not the bottle was worth taking. I grabbed the bottle and turned it over in my hand, examining the labels and thinking back about the life I'd left behind, thinking about Wyatt—about Angel and that dog who kept getting lost somewhere

between them—and about all the bad we'd done in our short time together. And finally, if only briefly, I thought about how I'd been using the old Easy Way Inn, in its purest form, as an *easy way out*. In that moment, I remembered all there was that I'd been trying to forget, and I thought about how finding a thing was sometimes nothing more than a simple act of unlosing.

The stiffness in my back when I woke up in the cab of Wyatt's truck later that night called back my first memories of Wyatt, of him pacing back and forth in the front yard of that run-down rental home, trying his damnedest to stretch himself far enough to get the last bit of kinks worked out. When I looked out the passenger side window though and saw him asleep there on Angel's front porch in that chair with the fence gate open and their lost dog resting at his feet, he never looked more peaceful. I wondered what his first thought might be when his eyes finally worked themselves open, if he'd take a half-squint to be sure that half of what he'd been waiting there for had finally came back to him, or if he'd simply wonder if maybe it had been there in that yard somewhere all along.

I picked up the aluminum can from the middle of the bench seat, brushed away the last few pieces of broken glass, and dropped it to the floorboard before sliding myself over behind the steering wheel. For a long while after that, I just looked out through the truck's windshield, at something far off down the road, and kept staring at nothing in particular while my plan took shape. I knew for sure where it was that I'd be heading—first to the Easy Way to pick up the things I'd left behind, and then the long and lonely drive back to my wife and home in Kentucky, deciding to let my apologies and explanations somehow work themselves out somewhere along those roads. The only problem I could see was going to be getting that loud-as-hell truck started up without waking and drawing Wyatt from the only place he ever wanted to be.

Contributor Notes

Eileen Arthurs earned her MFA at Carlow University. Her short stories have appeared in *The Madwomen in the Attic Anthology*, Carlow University's *Ten* anthology, and Sixfold Journal. She has an essay published in the anthology *Nasty Women and Bad Hombres*, and was shortlisted for the Van Dyke Short Story Prize. Her novel, *Lorelei's Family,* is available through Amazon.

Sarah Blanchard has recently returned to writing poetry and short fiction after spending several decades as a business teacher, corporate marketer, non-fiction writer, and facility manager for an astronomical observatory in Hawai'i. Several of her short stories and poems have won awards. She currently works as a real estate agent and lives in Raleigh, NC, with her husband, three horses, three dogs and several chickens.

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T. B. O'Neill I love this avocation—writing. After thirty years in a trial law practice, I get up before dawn to discover what is to be revealed on the page. With my wife Beth and my three-legged dog, Joe, I live in a Northern California walnut orchard with a view of the mountains. Two of my novels, and two memoirs, are now (or will soon be), released, and can found on Amazon, and at my website, tboneill.com.

Derek Rose is an MFA candidate at Columbia University and a recipient of the Felipe De Alba Fellowship. His fiction has appeared in the *Atticus Review*, *Sink Hollow*, *Potluck Literary Magazine*, and has been shortlisted by New Millennium Writings and the Hudson Valley Writers Guild.

Joshunda Sanders has been writing critically acclaimed fiction, poetry, essays and nonfiction for 20 years. Her work has appeared in the *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Salon*, *Publishers Weekly*, *The Week* and *Bitch Magazine*, among many other outlets. Her books include the novella, *All City*, and the memoir *The Beautiful Darkness: A Handbook for Orphans*, both published in 2016. She lives in New York City. She tweets at @ JoshundaSanders.

Faith Shearin is the author of five books of poetry: *The Owl Question* (May Swenson Award), *The Empty House* (Word Press), *Moving the Piano* (SFA University Press), *Telling the Bees* (SFA University Press), and *Orpheus, Turning* (Dogfish Poetry Prize). Recent work has appeared in *Soundings East* and *Alaska Quarterly Review* and has been read aloud on *The Writer's Almanac.* Shearin is the recipient of awards from The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, The Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her work has also been included in Ted Kooser's *American Life In Poetry*. Shearin's short stories have appeared in *Meridian, Atticus Review, Frigg* and *The Missouri Review*. She lives with her husband, her daughter, and two dogs in a cabin on top of a mountain in West Virginia. Photo credit: Kerry Stavely

G. Bernhard Smith writes both speculative and literary fiction. His stories have been short listed for the *Chicago Tribune*'s Nelson Algren Short Story Award, The American Fiction Short Story Award, and The Faulkner-Wisdom Literary Prize, among others. He earned his undergraduate degree in Computer Science from the University of New Orleans, and his M.F.A. from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. He lives in Burnsville, Minnesota with his wife, Jill.

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