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FICTION WINTER 2018

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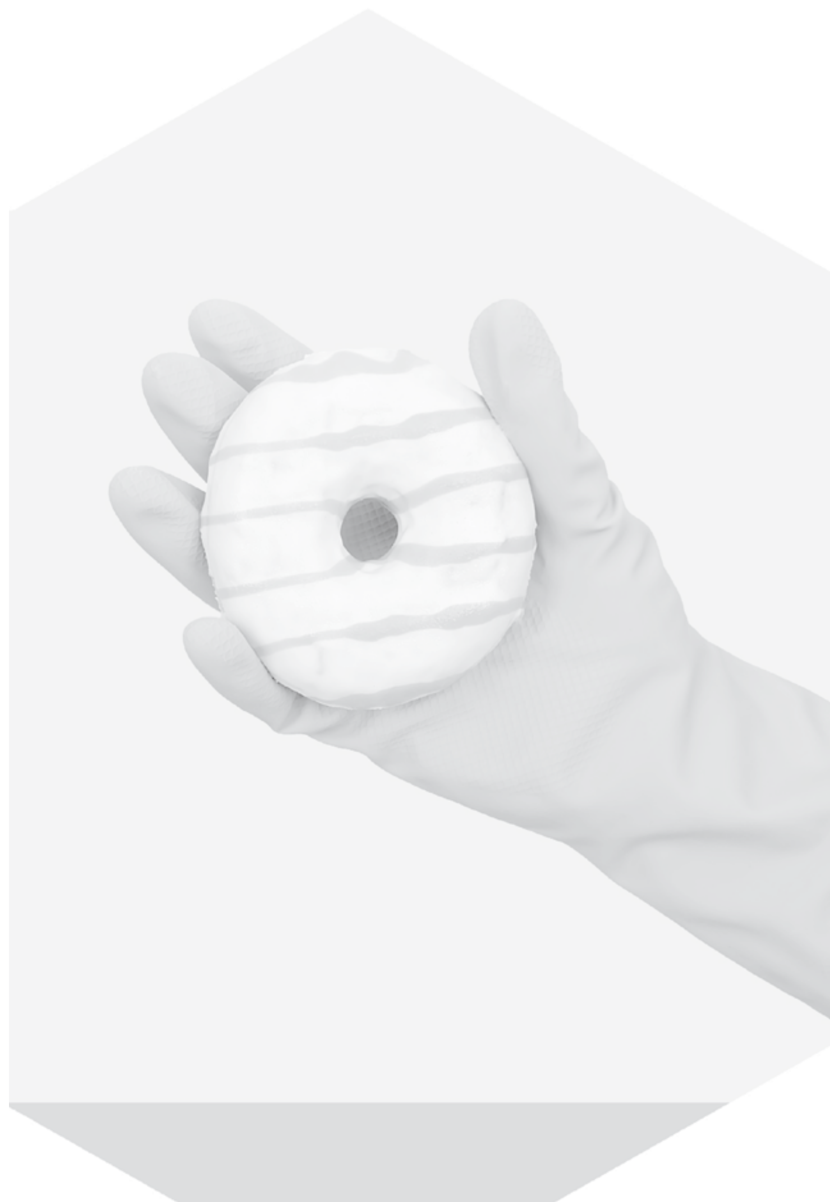

SIXFOLD
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Sixfold is a collaborative, democratic, completely writer-voted journal. The writers who upload their manuscripts vote to select the prize-winning manuscripts and the short stories and poetry published in each issue. All participating writers' 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.

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L. L. Babb

Admit One

Alexander Marsh goes through a box of condoms in a week.

Alexander Marsh learned to french kiss from a real French foreign exchange student.

Alexander Marsh screwed Miss Casey, the English teacher.

Alexander Marsh is failing every subject except English.

The legend of Alexander Marsh lives in rumors and half-truths whispered in the hallways, his name giggled over in the girls' bathroom and moaned aloud during dreams at night, his initials surrounded with hearts, scratched into lockers and desktops.

Alexander Marsh has to wear a special jock strap in gym so that he doesn't expose himself accidentally. Playgirl magazine wanted Alexander Marsh to pose nude but withdrew the offer when they found out he was only fourteen and a half.

Right now Tracy and her best friend Nina are eating lunch a mere ten yards from Alexander Marsh. He is lying flat on his back on one of the stone benches in the middle of the quad. Students are not allowed to lie on the benches but there he is, alone, sleeping apparently, his chin tilted up to the sun. His face, angelic and childlike in repose, is so beautiful that Tracy feels something tip and spill inside her; a delicious ache rises in the pit of her stomach. She stuffs a carrot stick into her mouth.

Tracy usually only sees the back of Alexander Marsh's head. He sits one desk ahead of her in math class. Tracy has memorized the brown curls that hover over the neckline of his shirt. She has a love affair going with the wings of his shoulder blades. Once Mr. Wendt threw a whiteboard eraser at Alexander Marsh. The eraser ricocheted off Alexander's head and hit Tracy in the face, leaving a smear of black across the bridge of her nose. Everyone in class laughed and Tracy laughed too, delirious. They were connected in that moment, Tracy and Alexander Marsh. Tracy wanted to save the eraser

but Mr. Wendt made her give it back.

Tracy reaches into her lunch bag to fish out another carrot. Tracy would so fuck Alexander Marsh. He would be her first, her last, her forever. Tracy's virginity feels like the lead apron the dentist drapes over you during X-rays—grey, heavy, and oppressive. She wants to throw it off. She wants to hand it over to Alexander Marsh. Alone in her bedroom in the evenings after dinner, Tracy works on her algebra homework and thinks about Alexander Marsh. Solve for X. Tracy is X, two sibilant slashes to mark the spot, Alexander Marsh is Y, the tail drooping obscenely below the line on her paper. Her pencil scratches an itch against the surface of her notebook. If she could just let Alexander Marsh know that she is available, receptive—that she's not some goody-goody like most of the other girls in eighth grade.

"He's so filthy," Nina whispers with her mouth full of egg salad. "I mean like dirt dirty, you know? He's got grease or something all over his jeans. I don't see what the attraction is."

Nina has a boyfriend of sorts—pudgy George Shyptyki, a boy Tracy and Nina have both known since third grade. The courtship is sketchy and fraught with misunderstandings due to George being oblivious that he is in a relationship. Nina spends her afternoons after school in the bleachers watching George, wedged into the embrace of his tuba, march up and down the football field at band practice. They kissed once. Nina confided to Tracy that it was nice, but his lips were chapped.

Kissing Alexander Marsh would not be "nice."

"I'm going over there," Tracy says, balling up her paper bag. "I'm going to talk to him."

"Yeah, right," Nina says.

Tracy stands. "Watch my backpack," she says, without looking at Nina. Her eyes are focused on Alexander Marsh. She wishes she wore something sexier today—the jeans she has on have a funny bulge in the front where the zipper pouches out plus she is wearing her gym shoes. But she can't put it off any longer. Junior high graduation is in two weeks. She can't, she won't, enter high school a virgin. Today has to be the beginning of the rest of her life. And the fact is,

Alexander Marsh is rarely alone. Every girl at school wants to hang around Alexander Marsh.

The first part is to just walk over. She hopes that the "what to say" part will come to her before she gets there.

The bench that Alexander Marsh is lying on is just a big concrete block like a slab in the mausoleum where Romeo and Juliet offed themselves. Tracy watched an old movie of "Romeo and Juliet" in English class last winter and embarrassed herself by not being able to stop crying.

The way Alexander is lying there, he looks sort of broken, as if a giant has tossed his body down from on high. One of his legs dangles over the side of the bench, his foot flat on the ground. The thought that a boy as beautiful as Alexander Marsh might be dead makes tears start to burn her eyes. How tragic! How unfair! Tracy cannot live if Alexander Marsh is dead. Poor dead Alexander Marsh, her brain chants at her. She can't cry, she won't cry. She does this thing her mother taught her to do to stop crying when she was little. The trick is to keep your head still but look up at the sky, which Tracy does now. It won't work for long.

She can feel herself hesitating, a pause between each step, she can feel Nina's eyes on her back, and now she's dragging one of her feet with a scuffing noise that would raise the dead, no, she is the dead, she's a zombie approaching Alexander Marsh and he'll hear her coming, he'll wake up and see her lurching towards him with her eyes rolled back in her head.

Panicked, she rushes forward and the rubber sole of her sneaker catches on a loose brick. She stumbles and falls onto Alexander Marsh's thighs, banging both her knees on the ground. For a moment, her feet scrabble uselessly beneath her. His legs are hard and unyielding as she clutches at them. Tracy has the sensation of grasping the slippery stone lip of a swimming pool when she tries to lift herself out of the deep end. His penis, his package, his junk is inches from her face.

Alexander Marsh raises his head to squint down the length of his body at her. He doesn't seem surprised to see her there. He is too cool to be surprised by anything.

"Hey," he says to her and Tracy's mouth goes dry. He says that to HER. He's talking to HER. She's inside the golden bubble of Alexander Marsh's aura. She's touching Alexander

Marsh and he's talking to her.

"Hey," he says again. "You got two dollars I can borrow?"

At lunch the next day, Tracy sits on her regular bench with Nina and Alexander makes a beeline towards them as soon as he spots her. He is followed by a couple of the popular girls, girls with hair that hangs in smooth sheets down their backs. They are also the kind of girls that Nina and Tracy try to avoid in the locker room, girls who tell you to move your fat ass, or snicker behind your back at your underwear. When Tracy and Alexander become a couple, when he bestows his popularity upon her, these girls will have to be nicer. Now they eye her suspiciously, like they are trying to figure her out.

"Hey," Alexander says to Tracy, "can I borrow five dollars?" And Tracy reaches into her backpack. He doesn't say thank you but he smiles at her—a beatific smile that says everything. Then he leaves, girls trailing behind, giggling, simpering.

"You shouldn't feed the wildlife," Nina says. "They'll get used to it and then turn on you when you don't have anything left."

"He'll pay me back," Tracy says, irritated. "It's a loan." She imagines Alexander coming to her apartment when her mother isn't home, to repay her, cash in one hand, the other hand holding up the doorframe, leaning in. She hopes he comes over soon. She doesn't really have that much to lend out. Her allowance is a measly seven dollars a week, doled out one dollar a day, "Candy money," her mother says like she's some kind of child. Nobody has asked her to babysit in forever and when she does, her mother makes her put it with her birthday money into a joint savings account.

On Tuesday, that five plus the two, then three on Wednesday, and then one heart stopping moment on Thursday when Alexander Marsh asks for five dollars but Tracy can only find three in the bottom of her backpack. She apologizes feeling very much like she's received a bad mark on a paper, she's let him down, she's a failure. It's as if the deficit in cash is somehow a deficit in her. At least the bills are crisp and new, they are an extension of Tracy herself—bright, clean, and eager. Alexander Marsh accepts them graciously.

By Friday, Tracy is down ten dollars that in normal circumstances would be a substantial amount of money. But Tracy suddenly understands the economics of investment. There will be a return. Things are moving in the right direction. Today, she tells herself, she will move their relationship up a level. She has practiced what to say over and over the night before. Find something in common to start a conversation. Math class, she thinks.

So at lunch when he asks to borrow three dollars, Tracy launches into her plan. "How about that—" She has lowered her voice trying to sound sexy yet nonchalant but the words come out in a weird growl, a cross between a startled duck and the voice of someone demonically possessed. To compensate, she raises her voice an octave, so that the remainder of the sentence—"algebra test?" explodes from her mouth in a scream, a firework with a tail on it, a comet.

Alexander Marsh blinks. "What?" he says.

Tracy's mouth can't form the words a second time. Alexander Marsh looks down at her with eyes so dark and bottomless they don't even hold her reflection. It's as if she doesn't exist. She wills him to see her, to blink like he's awakening from a dream, to tug her to her feet, lift the hem of her shirt, and slide his rough hands up the length of her body, pulling her close to him. She leans forward. Her breathing catches. If she wasn't already sitting down, her legs might crumple beneath her. Can't he feel it? Want, need pulses out of her like a heartbeat. She wants to say something, anything, but she's afraid of what might emerge from her mouth next. The sound of her voice again may sever their tenuous connection forever. He'll flinch and turn away.

He smiles his smile, sweet and slow, plucks the bills from her hand, then ambles across the quad towards the cafeteria. His jeans drag on the ground, the hems ragged below his black boots. Tracy nearly swoons. Every inch of him makes Tracy weak in the knees.

"Wow," Nina says, watching him go, "you gotta wonder if English is his first language."

Nina's voice penetrates Tracy's thoughts and her mood flattens into despair. Tracy turns to Nina, registering for the first time Nina's plastic butterfly barrettes, her K-mart

sandals, the food caught in her braces. Why, Nina is still a child! She will never understand what Tracy is going through.

"Grow up," Tracy hisses, contempt wrung from each word. Nina chuckles, complacent as a cow. She doesn't even have the sense to be insulted.

All weekend Tracy thinks about Alexander Marsh, different scenarios playing like movie scenes in her head, but always with the transition from conversation to passionate embrace missing. How do you go from talking to a boy to sleeping with him? It should be so easy. Her mother says that boys always want to have sex; that they think about it six times a minute. Her mother, with her fat knees and double chin, has no problem getting men to spend the night.

Tracy needs to seduce Alexander Marsh but who can think of romance or sex with Nina around? Nina makes a rattling noise when she breathes. She sews her own clothes. Once last winter, Nina wore her Girl Scout sash to school, forty badges and pins going all the way down and up around the back. It was only a half-day but still, who does that? Lately Nina feels like a boulder that Tracy is forced to drag behind her on a chain.

Now here it is, Monday morning. Tracy shoves her face within inches of the bathroom mirror. Viewed individually from a super close perspective, her features could be considered attractive, pretty even. Alexander Marsh will see that her eyes are very nice if he comes a little closer to her. If she could just wear a veil that covered everything but her eyes. She imagines herself, posed on the edge of the concrete bench, alluring and exotic, though the vision is spoiled with a lumpy and sarcastic Nina chomping a sandwich right beside her. She could drop a sheet or a tablecloth over Nina to hide her but that would look stupid. There's no hope. Nina has spoiled Tracy's fantasy just by existing.

Tracy wipes blue powder across her lids and outlines them in black.

Her mother is asleep and she's left her purse gaping wide open, her billfold lying at the top, like a fat leather letter addressed to Tracy. As Tracy removes two five dollar bills, she feels as if she's being pushed forward from behind, she's

surging into the future, becoming someone hard and cool and grown up. Someone who steals. Someone Alexander Marsh will want. Someone who doesn't hang out with losers.

Nina is already sitting in their usual spot at lunchtime. She even pats the bench as Tracy walks up. When Tracy doesn't sit down, Nina squints up at her.

"What happened to your eyes?" Nina says. "You look weird."

"For your information," Tracy says, welcoming the bubble of annoyance that forms in her throat, "it's eye makeup."

Nina twists her mouth. "I don't think you're doing it right."

"How would you know?" Tracy asks.

"Well, I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to look like you've been in a fist fight." Nina looks up at her with a sly smile, a smile that Tracy has always taken as conspiratorial but that she now recognizes as smug. Nina actually thinks that she knows more than Tracy does. Nina thinks she knows everything. The bubble inside Tracy explodes, red and ugly.

"You need to sit somewhere else," Tracy says. It feels imperious and momentous, these words spoken out loud, like she's taken a stand, crossed a line of demarcation.

"Why?" Nina says, but even as she asks Tracy can see that Nina knows exactly why. An expression more of pity than anger passes over Nina's face.

Tracy can't bring herself to say anything else. She pulls her books tighter against to her chest.

Nina puts her sandwich back in its baggy, back in its paper sack. She stands up so suddenly, Tracy thinks Nina might hit her, but instead she bends to pick up her pile of books. Nina glares one last time at Tracy, and then marches off across the quad, where she perches on the end of a bench filled with roughhousing sixth grade boys. The boys give Nina a wide berth, moving over and monitoring her out of the corners of their eyes like a herd of spooked horses.

Fuck her, Tracy thinks and the thought fills her up, strengthens her. It was only a matter of time before this happened. Friends outgrow each other. "Fuck her," she says out loud, testing the words against the air. "Fuck her, fuck her, fuck her."

Tracy sits and pulls one of the fives out of her backpack,

folding it into one hand. She can't seem to remember how to hold her head in a natural position. Tilt it to one side? Or gaze straight ahead? And her legs? Crossed or uncrossed? She fiddles with the collar of her blouse. She is aware of the rough surface of the bench beneath her, the sun beating down, the shrieks of a gaggle of girls huddled at the door to the cafeteria.

And now here is Alexander Marsh. He's alone, her Romeo, emerging from the shadows. He blinks in the sunlight and runs fingers through his curly hair. He looks around the quad with a lazy shift of his head and all at once she is a tiny boat bobbing on the sea and his lighthouse scan illuminates her for an instant.

The noise around her ramps up, hoots and screams, someone shouts, "You suck, asshole," not angrily but with joy, with liberation, a boy runs past Tracy chased by another, someone cackles with laughter, the sounds of her peers beating raucously on the door to adulthood. Tracy follows the boys with her eyes then looks over at Alexander Marsh again.

Alexander Marsh is standing in front of Nina. There's a sudden hush over the quad as if everyone is listening, turning an ear towards drama. If Tracy closes her eyes, she can almost hear him. "Can I borrow five dollars?"

Alexander Marsh can't tell the difference between Tracy and Nina.

Tracy's insides drop like she is on the downward side of a Ferris wheel ride. Nina glances up at Alexander Marsh, then over at Tracy. Nina's cheeks redden, her juice box suspended in mid-air. She scowls and points with one finger in Tracy's direction.

Alexander Marsh doesn't even know who Tracy is.

There will be no bottom to this fall, no swing back to the top. Alexander Marsh turns and starts towards Tracy. He takes his time. Alexander Marsh is coming to usher her into the future, a future where Tracy is no one special, where she is interchangeable with every other geek and nerd and loser, with every other unworthy girl who falls for the popular boy, the hot guy, the Alexander Marshes. Tracy doesn't think she can stand to hear him speak. She wants to hold up a hand to stop him but she can only watch him come, the price of admission into the rest of her life growing sweaty against her palm.

Katherine Enggass

Clinic

i.

I pop in Beethoven again. I'm driving to the pediatric specialty clinic to see my child's surgeon, humming along while in the back seat Diana makes the grunting sound that for her means "coo." A few weeks ago at a burger place someone asked Geoff and me if Diana had whooping cough. Yes, she has whooping cough but we thought we'd grab a bite out anyway. I assume Geoff is at work. He disappeared last night with his briefcase and a paper bag stuffed with clothes after we'd had yet another fight. He wanted me to smile. "All I want is one smile," he'd said. He came right up to me, put his hand over my mouth and tried to force the corners up. "You *bit* me! I can't believe you *bit* me," he kept saying as I trailed after him, apologizing. "Hey," I pointed out as he grabbed his keys, "I didn't break the skin."

So here I am, a subtle and cultured creature left with Beethoven and a defective baby, zooming past the ripe-smelling dairy farm. Across from the farm is a bail bond place and next to that a church. You have to be pretty deep into your faith not to notice the stench.

I cut back through Bernalillo toward the expressway. The music bounces around the car and something slides in the glove compartment, probably the disposable camera I keep meaning to get developed. Before Diana was born, I bought some birth announcement cards with tiny pastel bassinets printed on the front and ovals cut away for baby photos to shine through. Every time I start filling them out Diana has another setback and I'm forced to imagine a follow-up mailing of little black coffin cards.

"What's brown and sits on a piano bench?" I ask Diana, and then suddenly I remember waking last night to that old TV movie, Sybil's insane mother banging on a piano as part of Sybil's torture, and I wonder now what my Beethoven CD-playing does to Diana. Will she associate music with torture? What will music mean to her?

ii.

The only way I can propel myself into the pale gray building is to complain to Diana about the lack of parking. Inside, just as the elevator doors begin to close in on us, a woman rushes up and sticks her arm in. I see chapped fingers and a flowered sleeve, then the doors reopen and the woman boards. She nods at me and clicks her tongue sympathetically at Diana.

"What's wrong with him?" she asks.

"Nothing," I answer quickly, adding the only thing I can think of, "It's a she."

iii.

The elevator lurches. I keep a vacuous smile alive. Keep it light on elevators or the cables might break. I look down at Diana in her carrier, really seeing her, seeing past the cute little teddy bear patch embroidered on her T-shirt to the eleven-and-a-half wasted pounds, the bruises left behind by the most recent IVs, the sliced and then crudely sewn wrists. Not even four months old and it looks like she's tried to kill herself seven times. "Is everyone trying to do you in?" I ask her, tugging her blanket back over her twisted thumbs. Time for an inspirational message: at least Diana *has* thumbs. *Lies*. It's not lying, the absent-yet-clearly-much-needed Geoff would say. It's being positive.

iv.

I fish out Diana's patient card and hand it to the receptionist, who waves at us to go in and wait. This is why we need a patient card, I always think. We wait. Diana dozes in her carrier. Or she cries. I open my book. Or I don't. My book signals I'm different from all the others. No, I'm not a regretful and bitter biter, I'm an elite intellectual. See me read.

As for the waiting room itself, a decorator has been through at some point. Dusty southwest colors predominate, enlivened by touches of turquoise. Large watercolors of waterfowl grace the walls, counteracting the desert effect. The carpet is strictly utilitarian, the all-inclusive non-color of secretions. Today kids are crawling all over, dragging battered and filthy toys, leaving wet trails like snails. Back in one of the treatment rooms a baby howls. A boy with a big blotch on the

seat of his pants yanks idly on the curtains to a window that looks out on a tarred and graveled roof dotted here and there with oddly shaped vents, humped aluminum sculpture.

I turn a page even though I haven't been reading. Even at home with no Geoff watching I sometimes flip pages unread.

v.

Across the room a mother bending over her son makes small sounds of exasperation. She dabs ineffectively at her kid's stomach, her eyes filling with tears, and says to the room in general, "He's leaking."

I watch over the child while the mother goes in search of supplies. These days I'm always prepared for sloppy eventualities. I'm determined never to make a mistake again, which is in itself a mistake, I know. The boy has beautiful rolls of brown pudginess creasing at every joint. I'd like to steal a handful of flesh and press it like clay onto Diana's skeleton. He's certainly not suffering from *failure to thrive*, one of the phrases I keep hearing from doctors as they discuss Diana.

When the mother returns most of the other parents look at the carpet or the ceiling and try not to breathe as she peels away the blown colostomy bag and mops him up. The whole time he frog-kicks happily. Diana's colostomy is higher up on her abdomen than this boy's. The mother replaces the bag with a gauze pad for now. There's no point in messing with a new bag. The surgeon will want to take a look.

vi.

Dr. Troy has the blunt shapeless haircut of a five-year-old who has decided to cut her own hair and the sad dark eyes of the smartest kid in the class. Whenever I call or visit her, my heart beats hard in a way it hasn't done since high school. Every medical explanation she gives unfolds in splendid order, as if her brain works from an outline, and yet her personal life remains a complete mystery.

When we finally get in to see her I explain that I'm afraid I will have to give up the breast pump. It's cute and all, a miniature sucking and bobbing Texas oil jack, but I don't have time for it. Diana will have to go entirely on fake formula poured through her stomach tube. "This will mean I'm a bad

mother," I explain. To me it's a fact. I'm too tired to deal with anything but facts, so I am surprised when the doctor bristles on my behalf.

"If anyone ever says that about you, you send that person to me!" Dr. Troy thuds the desk with her forefinger. It's all very dramatic. Even if it's an act, I appreciate it.

vii.

"If she does another one of those bladder taps and doesn't get anything I'm going to jump off a cliff," I say to Diana, who is visible in the rear view mirror, her monitor wires sprouting like chest hairs out of the top of her terrycloth jumpsuit. Clinic visits are recurring dreams of the Sisyphus variety. "I'm going to jump off a cliff and land on three innocent people and leave all my money to birth control."

viii.

Geoff shows up at the clinic. He looks OK. His hair is kind of long.

The hallway by the reception desk is lined with families. We share the refugee look: dull and tortured eyes, odd bundles of supplies, grungy and makeshift bandages. We pass through our peers to find that the waiting room is surprisingly empty. A young woman cradling a baby sits near the window, and a toddler with his back to us plays with some blocks on the floor. Another woman with blond hair curled as tightly as concealed grief stares at the carpet. As we sit down, the toddler turns, revealing an enormous deformed jaw shaped like a football. The boy opens his mouth slightly as if to speak and I see a black, solid, bleeding mass inside. Geoff busies himself with Diana, tugging fussily at her sweatshirt, bouncing her on his knee.

With her foot the blond woman shoves a few blocks in the toddler's direction. Is she the mother? When they are at home, at least, does she look the boy in the face? I want to see the mother's eyes. I want to grill her on the condition, actually, so it's lucky for her that she doesn't glance up. The kid continues to balance blocks in impossible ways, big on small, cantilevered, creating a structure more horizontal than vertical.

When he crouches to study his work from a new angle, his long chin nearly touching the floor, I ask him what he is making. Dumb question, with that jaw he can't talk. He moves his lips. I tell him that he's doing a great job, that I have never understood this preoccupation with building *up*. Sideways is better, it lasts longer. The mother, if that's who she is, acknowledges nothing.

Eventually a nurse leads them away. "Bleeding again . . . " I hear. Once they're out of sight Geoff slumps like punched dough. The remaining woman shakes her head sadly at him, jiggling her child protectively. "Poor thing," she says in a hushed voice. "It's all relative, isn't it? Sometimes I feel almost *for*tunate."

"I know what you mean," Geoff says. Diana lets out one of her strange squawks and the woman smiles, then immediately frowns, as if she has committed some sort of transgression.

"I guess God doesn't give you anything you can't handle," the woman adds doubtfully, and Geoff nods, careful not to look at me. I'd once told him I'd shoot the next person who said that to me.

ix.

My list says I want to drop the 3 a.m. feeding, down from eight feedings to seven per day. The gastrostomy has been leaking and stomach acids are eating at Diana's delicate skin. She is gagging more and more frequently after each tube feeding. The apnea monitor settings must be adjusted to reduce the number of false alarms or I will go rabid. Diana's colostomy still prolapses from time to time, and a gray spot is forming on one of her cutdown scars.

"Carole." Geoff waves the list at me. "I asked how you guys were doing. I called *specifically* and asked."

"What is the answer to *how are you*? The answer is *fine*."

The door opens. "Ah, the list!" Dr. Troy enters, smiling. She has us in the palm of her hand and she knows it. "What would we do without the list?"

Geoff ploughs through it. Godlike Dr. Troy has an answer for everything, new schedules, new monitor settings, hints from the ostomy nurse. The gray spot on Diana's wrist turns out to be a missed stitch. Dr. Troy goes on about how flesh

can't heal properly around a foreign object, how an abscess forms as the body slowly ejects the thread, how it is common for lost sutures to surface over time. Meanwhile, she holds Diana's arm flat against the examination table, sharp scissors appear, and she snips. Blood beads up and the coarse black thread, a bit of the larger darkness, is plucked free. Dazzled and horrified by this display, I press a cotton ball against the site while Diana screams and Geoff makes nervous soothing noises. Dr. Troy has scarcely paused in her recitation.

"Doctors," Geoff says later, as we yank on Diana's clothes.

"What did you want Troy to do? Take forever?"

"She just stuck scissors in our kid's arm." He reaches for Diana's socks. "When did you get so hard?"

I stuff Diana's shoes into my purse. I have no answer. The cotton ball now taped to Diana's wrist has an intense dot of red, a bracelet set with a ruby.

x.

"Diana, dear," I say as the (my) (our) baby squirms and cries, "Must we go through this every time? We always weigh you at the clinic, what's the big deal?" But Diana continues to fight. She hates the scale, the way it shifts under her as if to emphasize she's on loose footing.

"You're always so patient," the nurse says to me.

"That's what you think." Together we wrestle with Diana. It takes five grown men to get an X-ray of her. "There's something about the middle of the night, for example." The nurse laughs. It's not funny, though, what happens in those dim rooms as I carry Diana back and forth, sopping up her life's fluids as they seep out of her. Last night her monitor had gone off twice, both false alarms. I ripped off the belt that held the sensors to Diana's chest and pulled the plug. *So the kid quits breathing, at least I'll get some sleep.* Did I sleep? No, I wrestled my Errant Self to the ground, gave it a few kicks, and then with the shaking hands of surrender strapped the monitor belt back on Diana.

But maybe night is just nightmare because here I am now basking under the bright lights of the clinic.

xi.

Holding Diana on my lap, I ride the wheeled desk chair across the treatment room, gently bumping the far wall. The next time across I allow us to thump louder and Diana laughs, or what passes for a laugh. If it didn't have all those connotations I'd say she *croaks*. I spin us around the examination table, my foot flies out and kicks the wastebasket.

"Who's making all that racket?" I ask. "Is it your awful mother?" And the door opens, revealing the esteemed Dr. Simmons. Unlike Dr. Troy, Simmons never remembers who we are and never tells us anything. Maybe all neurologists are like that.

xii.

A resident begins sketching the family tree, placing Diana at the root and then branching up to include my family history, a history that I already know won't offer any clues. Is Diana the root or the fruit of this tree split by lightning?

The resident finishes with me and turns to Geoff.

"Why do you want to talk to *him*?" I ask without thinking. On my lap Diana won't sit still.

"It takes two to tango, Carole," Geoff says, and the resident laughs. Geoff's hazel eyes gleam an unfamiliar blue in this light, and now he's smiling along with the resident.

Later, I hold Diana standing on my lap while the dysmorphology expert diagrams sets and subsets and the intersection of sets. We've seen most of it before. Diana's birth defects are a fluke, loosely grouped, forming not a syndrome but rather an association. "Oh, is there an association?" I ask. "How do I join?"

"Is something wrong with you today?" Geoff asks when the doctor steps out of the room.

"Why are you pretending to be part of my tree?"

"I *am* a part of the tree," he argues. There's a knock on the door and the doctor and a pregnant woman wearing a turquoise-colored silk dress enter the room. She's holding a stack of manila folders. When the expert introduces her I don't catch her name because Diana lets out a screech and arches her back.

Geoff takes Diana and stands, bouncing and lifting her to

calm her, raising her high over his head like an offering, while I watch the pregnant woman. The doctor rumbles on in his kind way about how there is no reason Geoff and I can't have more children. There are no guarantees, of course, but our risks would be that for the population at large. On the other hand, he reminds us, we have more work to do with Diana and may want to consider waiting until we're in the clear.

"In the clear?" I echo, unable to turn away from the woman in turquoise, an apparition, bulging and serene, filled with light and leaking a faint celestial music. How does she do this job? Does she assume she's immune? In the clear?

"It would be pretty hard to have another kid." I have interrupted the doctor, who stops politely and waits. "I mean there's a certain loss of innocence." They nod. It's nothing they haven't heard before.

"The good news is that it's not progressive," the doctor tells me gently. "The news is not always this good. All of this can be corrected through surgery."

"If she lives through the surgery," Geoff says.

"Yes." The doctor is as unfazed as the pregnant woman, professionally sympathetic yet essentially untouched. I look at Geoff, at his fingers spread against Diana's back, then back at our angelic advisors. I'm gazing into a blank, cloudless sky, a mirror with no reflection. The clear.

xiii.

"So, Diana, here we are at the clinic." I pull off Diana's sweatshirt and then her shoes. "Who is with you at the clinic?" Diana blinks at me. "Right! Mommy is at the clinic. And who else? Right! Dr. Troy." The doctor and a medical student wearing a Donald Duck tie (nice try) are busy with some spiral notebooks piled on the desk. "And who else is at the clinic?" Off come her pants.

"Da."

"Diana! Right again. You are so smart. Arms up." I tug off the T-shirt and turn to Dr. Troy. "I'm going to leave the diaper on until you're ready."

Dr. Troy opens a drawer and pulls on latex gloves. Diana stiffens and her mouth goes square.

I hold Diana's arms flat as Dr. Troy examines her. Diana's T-shirt falls from the examination table and the student bends to pick it up. The back of his neck is brick red.

"It's OK," I say over Diana's cries. "Almost done. Almost done."

"That felt good." Dr. Troy snaps off a glove. "I think we're OK."

"Well, Diana—" I tape the diaper and pick her up. The kid is furious. "Did that feel good?"

Dr. Troy shakes her head at me as she walks out. The student hands me the shirt and helps with Diana's socks even though Diana fights him the whole way, kicking like mad. He struggles to introduce her suddenly rigid arms to the sleeves of her sweatshirt. She whips her head back and forth. Drool flies. She is so intent on thwarting him that she forgets to cry.

xiv.

"Well, I don't see why you put up with him," my visiting sister says. Diana is on Nell's lap, playing with the gray frayed cord of a play telephone that has been chewed by God knows how many mouths at the clinic. "You should stick up for yourself. What you *should* do is come back home where we can all help you."

"I don't own him."

"*Dis*own him, is what I'm saying."

"Oh, I don't know. Things could be worse." Nell shifts in disbelief as I stage a little tug-of-war with Diana. She has a death grip on that phone. "He's paying for everything, his insurance is, because I can't work anymore. He shows up here and there, now and again. He loves her. Some people just need to think they have a choice."

"*You* have a choice."

"No, I don't. Actually, he doesn't either. Ha!" I wave the phone over Diana's head. "Victory! But who am I to rub that in?"

xv.

I strap Diana in and start to back out when I notice the rear view mirror is out of whack. As soon as I adjust that, the seat

seems wrong, too far back. I'm shrinking. Pretty soon I won't be able to see over the steering wheel. Someone honks. The vultures are lining up for my parking space.

xvi.

I tell the nurse I'll be right back. Carrying Diana, I duck into a clinic restroom and lock the door. I don't want Diana to touch anything except me so I hold her while I go, and then we wash hands together. Our reflection ripples in the cheap indestructible sheet of metal that serves as a mirror.

"Your mother is quite an acrobat," I say, lingering. Diana still doesn't have enough hair to make a ponytail, but I have stuck a barrette on top of her head anyway. The tip of her ochre gastrostomy tube, sealed with a rubber band, pokes out the leg of her pink ruffled sunsuit. She has Geoff's color eyes, as changeable as the mood ring a boy gave me in seventh grade. When I was pregnant I told my sister I didn't care *what* I had, as long as the child inherited Geoff's color eyes.

I wave, sprinkling a few drops of water. "Hi, baby. You're my baby." Finally there's a mirror that really reflects us. "They're going to wonder what we're up to," I say to the distorted Diana, whose forehead appears elongated, as if absorbing the idea, then suddenly shrinks.

When eventually I hear Geoff's voice outside the door, I unlock it. "Come in."

"But it says *women*," Geoff protests. I don't bother to answer so he enters warily, holding out his arms for Diana. When I relinquish her I feel a sharp pain, or maybe I'm having a heart attack. I return to the mirror and rock forward and back to watch my nose blossom and wither.

"So, have you finally gone nuts?" Geoff asks.

I find a relatively smooth spot in the metal, gather up my hair and turn from side to side. This is how Nell and I amused ourselves for hours as teenagers, imagining glamour.

"I never lie to her about where we're going. She looks straight at me, she knows what clinic means, and she cries, usually not for long." I let my hair fall.

By now Geoff is standing behind me with one hand resting on my shoulder, his other arm looped around Diana, caught by something—the warped family portrait. Diana tips forward,

laughing. She has the goofiest laugh, as if someone stepped on a crow. We can't help but laugh with her. Who knows? I'm thinking maybe we'll stay in this funhouse for good.

John Maki

The Easy One

Jamie Joyner stands astride the Bellagio casino and scans the crowd for a path forward. It's midafternoon in Las Vegas, before the big bettors appear. She smooths her dress, senses an opening, and steps out, heels clicking, shoulder bag swaying. She passes the chocolate shop and its brown viscous fountain, dodges a marine, and falls in behind an Asian couple wearing black suits sharp enough to cut titanium. She whisks past the Asians and smells perfume and quickens her pace and closes in on a fat man pushing a stroller. As she passes, she hears a woof. He is pushing a bulldog.

Jamie walks with an easy confidence that belies anxiety. Tomorrow her ex-husband Trey will marry his boyfriend Larry Parker in a Bellagio chapel. She will wear a red silk organza gown, a Luly Yang, that will make Larry jealous. She will pass out rings and sooth Trey's parents and eat precious food. And she will dance. And in the end, after the champagne and band are gone, she will try to convince herself once again that her many contributions—maid of honor, origami cranes, calligraphed invites, a signature cocktail—were made, not for the blessed couple, but in memory of her and Trey's failed union, a sadness that follows her everywhere. Earlier she asked Trey if she could skip tonight's rehearsal dinner. He agreed. He wants her in high spirits tomorrow.

Jamie finally arrives at the Bellagio's high-stakes slot lounge, where she finds her favorite machine *Huevos*, orders champagne, lights a cigarette, and begins to play. Cartoon egg characters fling sombreros and fire shotguns and cry *egg-citing* and *egg-celent* and she laughs at their preposterous behavior. She is still deep in *Huevos-land* fifteen minutes later, when a wiry man in Bermuda shorts and black army boots sits down next to her. His floral shirt suggests a tourist but his cinched blond ponytail something else. He is sipping bourbon and toting an oxygen tank. He feeds some bills into his slot machine and it dings and chatters.

Jamie stops playing and stares at the man's clear tubes. She

has seen tubes before, but they look different on him, more composed. He sees her watching and asks, “Ain’t it fun?” She tucks her hair behind her ear and says, “What’s with the gas?”

“It’s a fashion accessory.” He taps his game, urging it on. “Do you like it?”

“Sure,” says Jamie, staring, trying to decipher his meaning.

“I’m Ben by the way,” says the man, extending his hand.

“Jamie. Take it off. The gas.”

“Right now? I could die.”

“I doubt it,” she says and he smiles.

Ben unhooks the tubes and hands Jamie the nose piece, the cannula, a small flute. She tests its hard plastic with her nail and imagines blowing into it. She hands it back and he stows it in his medical backpack. He seems fine untethered.

“What’s it for, really?” asks Jamie.

“Nothing. I like how it frames my nose. It’s less intrusive than a piercing.”

“Get out.”

“No really. Caught your eye didn’t it?”

“Okay, that’s too funny,” says Jamie. She still doesn’t believe Ben but he is more interesting than most of the men she has recently dated.

“Where are you from,” asks Jamie.

“Henderson. I’m a local.”

“And you like the high-stakes game?”

“Among other things. Have your eggs produced today?”

“Not really. You play roulette?”

“Sure.”

“Hang on a sec,” says Jamie. She phones Trey and says, “I met this guy. Ben. He wears army boots and plays roulette and has an oxygen tank. Yes or no?”

She hangs up, and says, “Let’s go.”

At a quiet roulette table, Ben stacks chips and studies the numbers, as Jamie runs her hand over the felt, feeling for bumps. The croupier asks if they are newlyweds. Jamie says yes and Ben plays along, pecking her cheek and calling her sweetie. She figures he has resources. He cashed out his slot for over a thousand dollars. The croupier closes betting, spins the wheel, and releases the ivory ball, which circles

maddeningly, flirts with the pockets, and finally settles into the zero. Someone groans and Ben complains that zero never pays. He continues to bet and lose and is becoming frustrated when Jamie suggests the number three, which hits on the next spin, a thirty-five-to-one winner.

"Wow, thanks," says Ben, hugging her. She hugs him back. She feels lucky too, happy, and pumps her fists in the air. Ben cashes out and they grab a bite at the Shake Shack, where he tells her about his Home Depot job and she explains about Trey and Larry's wedding.

Ben is nonplussed.

"I'm doing it mostly for his mom," says Jamie, which isn't true. She's doing so she can put an end to something. "If you hadn't come along, I would have spent all evening praising Judy Garland and admiring teeth."

"Happy to be a distraction," says Ben. "How long were you married?"

"Eight years. Got married out of college. We divorced a couple years ago."

"And didn't you know . . . uh, couldn't you tell . . . "

"Guess how many times I've been asked that?"

"Just curious."

"Our bodies have nine holes and our brains have eighty-six billion neurons. Do the math. That's a lot of combinations. You ever been married?"

"Once. I'm divorced. She lives in LA."

"Why did you split?"

"She wanted kids and I didn't"

"So, your worlds looked different."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Us too. Our snow globes didn't match."

"How's that?"

"You know, out little bubble worlds." Jamie imitates shaking an orb. "His had different stuff than mine. Mine was all picket fences, backyard barbeques, a gondola in Venice, a Cialis commercial. His was blue swimming pools, late nights, black tuxes, and little dogs. I could have managed the sex."

"What's in your snow globe now?" asks Ben.

It's an interesting question. Nobody has asked her recently. She thinks and says, "I don't know. Maybe you. Let's go try

that gas."

It's an hour later. Ben and Jamie are in bed. Her panties are tied around his neck, his boots are on, and they may both have rug rash. She stares at a tiny spot of light as Ben groans and loosens his grip. She likes him. He was intense without being clumsy and curious without losing focus. He slumps against the headboard and takes a swig from a bottle of Dom Perignon.

"This is good shit."

"The boys only do good shit," says Jamie, acknowledging that Trey is paying her way. She can afford it. She is a successful accountant, but he insisted.

"You ready to try?" asks Ben, pointing at his tank. Jamie nods and he sets her up.

"Close your eyes. It'll feel better," he says rubbing her back. She presses the cannula into her nose. The tank hisses and she breathes slowly, in and out, in and out. She feels something. She isn't sure what.

"I feel light headed. It tickles. How many women fall for your little trick?"

"You're the first ever," he says. She drops the cannula and flips him off and kisses him and pinches his nipples and they tussle. Her phone rings. It's Larry. Trey wants to change the wedding readings. Larry is hysterical.

"Work it out," scolds Jamie. "You're big boys now."

Trey comes on the phone and asks, "Are you in bed JJ?" She motions for Ben to be quiet.

"Goodness no. I'm watching Oprah in the Keno lounge."

"You're in bed. I know that sound," says Trey in mock suspicion. "Did you get the champagne and chocolate I sent over?"

"Yes. Lovely. Thank you."

"Don't stay out too late. You've got a big day tomorrow."

Jamie laughs and hangs up. She doesn't consider Trey gay. She considers him more in love with someone else.

Ben stares at Jamie and the phone. "What are you, their mother?"

"In a way. I did give birth to them."

She can tell by Ben's expression that there is no way to

adequately convey her role in her ex-husband's life. She straddles him and teases him with a chocolate truffle and he eats it whole.

The Strip is hopping when Ben and Jamie climb into a cab and head toward a jazz club in west Las Vegas. It's his favorite night spot. They are dressed to match, him in a short sleeved black shirt and her in a cocktail dress. She watches tracers dance on windows as they pass strip malls, gas stations, sports bars, and warehouses, interspersed with walled neighborhoods where people actually live. Trey had wanted to marry her in Vegas instead of in his parent's church, but they couldn't afford it.

When they get to the jazz club, Ben introduces Jamie to the owner and asks her to wait in the cigar-tanged green room while he chats with some friends. She checks out the floor-to-ceiling black-and-white photos of jazz greats such as Charlie Mingus, Dave Brubeck, and Ella Fitzgerald and sees one of Ben standing next to a grand piano, gripping the neck of a glistening bass. His jagged signature suits him. He's completely bald.

The club owner comes over and hands Jamie a drink. "Without a doubt, you are not Ben's sister."

"Who is he?" asks Jamie. "Ben?"

The owner looks her over. He is standing too close, something she hates.

"Who is he?"

"Just a hometown boy done good."

Jamie examines Ben's photo again. He's content and smiling. Happy. She wonders how other people see him and how other people see her. When Trey came out, he said that his college friends wanted her and because he had her, they saw him as strong and male-worthy, a difficult situation but better than despair.

Voices interrupt Jamie's thoughts, stage technicians calling places. She turns to face the club owner, to thank him and head for a table.

"Don't do it," he says.

"Don't do what?"

"Hurt Ben."

“Why would I hurt him? I hardly know him.”

“I don’t know,” says the club owner. “But you look like someone who could hurt someone.”

“I can’t,” whispers Jamie, shaking her head. “I can’t hurt anybody.”

The club lights dim and Ben joins Jamie at the table. He orders drinks and the act comes onstage, a drummer, a guitarist, a female vocalist, a saxophonist, and pianist.

The show begins and Jamie listens intently as the musicians pass melodies, beats, counterpoints, and rhythms back and forth, playing and improvising, signaling and nodding, motioning and digging, laying the foundation. She doesn’t know much about jazz but likes it. Ben is rapt. He closes his eyes and nods and yells *yeah* or *uh* and periodically drums the table, acknowledging the performances. At intermission he tells Jamie he will catch her after the show and heads backstage.

When the second act begins, Ben is introduced as a guest artist. He carries his bass onstage to loud applause. Jamie Googled him before the show and discovered he has two Grammy nominations for ensemble work. She wonders why he didn’t mention his music earlier. Clearly, he has many interests and abilities.

Ben plays in the background for a couple of numbers but soon takes over and during an extended version of *A Nightingale Sang in Barkley Square*, he launches into a solo, nodding and rocking and loosening his grip and yelping and leading the room into a smooth passage with blurry edges and fat undertones that soften and spread like warm jam. Jamie enters a soothing fugue state, where time disappears and calm envelops her. After a while, a gentle voice quietly doo-wops her back to reality.

When the show ends, Ben comes out and introduces Jamie to his musician friends. She is honored and tries to praise him. In the cab back to the Bellagio, she presses herself into his slender frame and he twirls her long dark hair around his fingers. Seeing him perform has changed her idea of him, of who he is and who he will be. She thinks about tomorrow’s wedding and how often she tried to pin Trey down, make

sense of his predilections and contradictions, absorb his apologies and remorse, and squeeze herself into a world that she didn't fit in. Ben's seems to fit everywhere.

The next morning over a room service breakfast, Ben and Jamie discuss the wedding. He has business to tend to but can make it to the reception. After he leaves, she calls Larry to add him to the guest list and endures some teasing. She reminds Larry that he and Trey owe her. Besides, Trey already approved.

She puts on a swimsuit, goes to the pool, and sets up in a lounge chair. For the next couple hours, she swims and reads and listens to Coldplay. Men make eye contact, but she avoids them. She feels good and the desert heat feels great. Ben phones to say he may be late and she says okay but begins to worry and texts *don't be a butt*. A half hour later he texts *it's better than being an ass*, which does not comfort her.

Later, walking back to her room, she thinks about her toast and whether it should be serious or funny. Trey relies on her to make sense, to keep the peace, so funny is risky. She decides that if Ben makes it she will be Amy Schumer and if not Sara Silverman. In her room she does her hair, dresses, and wraps an orchid corsage around her wrist. She looks in the mirror and fingers her pearls. She likes to think she is lovely. She tidies her hair and sucks in her cheeks. No matter how often she looks, something is off about her face, its symmetry, nothing she can fix.

The private chapel is packed when she arrives. Yellow roses and pale green cacti adorn the altar, a tasteful homage to the desert. She knows what to do. She has been over everything with Trey a dozen times. She sees her old massage therapist and waves. Trey's accounting firm colleagues and a small contingent of new gay friends are seated up front. She joins them and nods and smiles and scolds herself for being nervous. The minister appears and she stands and goes to the altar.

The wedding music begins. Trey and Larry enter, walk down the aisle, and embrace Jamie. The minister speaks and the boys stare lovingly into each other's eyes. Trey reads Shakespeare and Larry reads Bob Dylan, their voices thick

with emotion. They make their vows and Trey hands her the rings, gold Celtic knots. She does her part, they finish the ceremony, and the men kiss. Trey breaks away, quickly embraces Jamie, and whispers, “Thank you.” The men kiss again, deeper and longer this time, the room applauds, Trey shouts, “Champagne,” and everyone heads to the nearby ballroom for the reception.

On the way over, Trey’s mother intercepts Jamie and says, “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” bowing dramatically and pressing the back of Jamie’s hand to her forehead. They chat. She is eternally grateful that Jamie is still in her son’s life.

“How are you?” Trey’s mother asks, finally.

“Great. Never better,” says Jamie. “Almost perfect.”

“I’m so happy for you.”

At the reception, diaphanous curtains drift, arpeggios soar, and sculpted male waiters wearing white gloves pass ornate appetizers, shiny quail eggs piled with Beluga caviar and cubed foie gras impaled on toothpicks. Jamie remembers the Albertsons cake from her own wedding and feels wistful. She searches for Ben but does not see him. She tries not to worry; he said he might be late. Trey’s father toasts the newlyweds, the waiters pour more Dom, and the room’s energy kicks up a notch. Jamie mingles with Trey’s college friends and, after a while, he finds her and pulls her aside. She can’t hide her sadness and he strokes her hair.

“I don’t see him,” she says, worried.

“See who?” asks Trey.

“That bastard, Ben.”

“Who is Ben?”

“You know, the guy I met yesterday. Remember. Army boots? I told Larry this morning.” He should be here. She needs him. She is shaking inside.

Trey stops and holds Jamie at arm’s length. “I don’t think so, JJ. You and all your boy toys. The Bellagio is expensive.”

Jamie searches Trey’s face, bewildered. Trey, Larry, Ben. They’re all so fatuous.

“He is on the list, isn’t he?” she whispers, barely able to talk.

“Stop.” admonishes Trey, grinning, every tooth an insult. He shakes his head. “You’re far too old for all this nonsense.”

She wants to kill him. She remembers when he first moved out and returned a week later, unsure of his needs and feelings. She remembers arriving home from work and finding him unconscious on the garage floor with the car running and rushing to the Emergency Room, crying all the way, sick with guilt and worry. She remembers the hum of the Intensive Care Unit and Trey connected to a tangle of tubes. She remembers telling him that she could let him go and would let him go, if that was what he needed.

"You're an ass," screams Jamie shoving Trey backward harder than intended. He staggers into a waiter, knocks over a drink tray, and lands on his side. The arpeggios stop and Larry rushes over to help. The entire room is staring at Jamie.

"A toast," she yells, raising her champagne flute. She is hot and emboldened. She yells again. "Come on everybody. A toast to the happy couple. Now. Come on. That's right. Do it. Raise your glasses."

It is her big moment. She has earned it. She believes Trey and Larry only exist because she saved Trey's life. They're both on the floor staring up with glazed expressions. Trey's mother has joined them.

Jamie begins to shout instructions again but stops when the ballroom door opens and Ben enters. He is wearing a red and green plaid sports coat, red Bermuda shorts, and green army boots. He sees Jamie's salute and returns the gesture.

Two hours later Ben and Jamie are dancing. He hums and she leans into him, so he can turn her. Nobody is watching. He pulls her tighter and suddenly she feels like his bass, absorbed in his arms, full of music. He gently kisses her cheek and says, "That was a nice toast."

"I overdid it," she slurs. She is more than a little drunk.

"Does he really hate musicals?" asks Ben.

"Hate? He takes pride in hating them. He has always been contrary. He's a prick. You're not a prick, are you?"

"Larry seems so nice," says Ben, ignoring Jamie's question.

"Larry is a dick," says Jamie.

"Why is everyone suddenly a prick or a dick?" asks Ben. "You're better than that."

"Duh. Because I don't have one," says Jamie, patting Ben's

member. He removes her hand and pins it behind her back.

"He wanted me to wear one," she whispers seductively. "I did. I can do it for you. You'll like it."

"It's okay." Ben says, soothing her.

"I loved him," says Jamie.

"I know," says Ben. "I know. Let's go outside."

The small private deck above the Bellagio fountain is empty. Geysers dance to Mozart. Jamie digs out a cigarette and lights it. Something about the evening isn't right, even after her little spectacle. Something hasn't changed. Out on the Strip, hordes of people are walking straight into nothing.

"When I first picked up the bass, I was terrible," says Ben. "It was big. It felt, I don't know, ugly, unmanageable, but I kept trying."

"Please," says Jamie. "No homespun wisdom."

"Okay," says Ben. "It is free. And well intended."

"I still don't want it."

The fountain arcs and whooshes and the Eiffel Tower at the Paris Hotel disappears into a watery cloud.

"Gimme a cigarette," says Ben. Jamie lights one and hands it over. He has been scolding her for smoking, so she is surprised.

"Are you going to smoke it?" she asks.

"You know I won't. I just like holding it."

"But you want to."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why don't you smoke?"

"Because my first wife smoked and died of lung cancer after we divorced."

The spray stops and the Eiffel Tower reappears.

"I'm sorry, Ben," says Jamie. She wonders how many times she has said sorry and never meant it. First wife. She wonders if Ben knows he has slipped up. Worlds within worlds.

"It's okay. It was a long time ago." He taps his cigarette and ash disappears into the breeze.

"I'm married Jamie."

"I know," she says. "It's okay."

Back in Jamie's room, without his clothes, standing sideways, Ben resembles a solid flat-chested girl. He has a bit of a tummy and pale, lightly-tufted pubic hair. The only problem is his large, distinctly male hands that look like small stringed instruments all on their own. Jamie seldom inspects so closely, but she wants to remember him, since it is their last night together.

After the reception, they played roulette again. Ben pretended to be a wealthy eccentric and Jamie his royal Portuguese wife, a former beauty queen, who spoke broken English. The ball landed on zero twice before they ran out of money and Ben ran out of energy.

He crawls into bed with Jamie and turns off the lamp. He is too tired for sex.

"It's okay," says Jamie. "We have the morning."

"As you wish my Queen, my liege," says Ben.

"Will you do something *egg-celent* for me tomorrow?" asks Jamie. "An un-wedding present?"

"Certainly," says Ben.

"Will you kill Trey and Larry," she asks. "Gash them about the head and ears, perhaps remove a testicle."

"Which one first?"

"The testicle or the person?"

"The person, silly."

"The skinny one," says Jamie. She imagines Trey and Larry making love, Trey cupping Larry's head, and Larry crying out with joy. She always knew Trey liked men. She just didn't know how much. She cuddles Ben from behind and wraps her arms around him. He grasps her hands and she feels happy alone for the first time in years.

The next morning, Jamie's phone rings as she lays in bed checking the weather. She has been awake for a while, watching Ben sleep. It's Trey. He really likes Ben. She can bring him around anytime. She gets out of bed, heads to the bathroom for some privacy, and trips over Ben's boots.

"Ow. Fuck."

"Excuse me?" says Trey melodramatically.

"How was your evening?" asks Jamie. "I'm sorry about my little outburst."

"That is why I'm calling. We're worried sick about you."

"We have to break up," says Jamie. "Really. It's time. All of us. We have to break up."

Trey is silent.

"Okay. We can give you some time."

"I don't need time, Trey. I need to break up for real, as in not see you or Larry or your mother or friends ever again. I have to stop calling you and you have to stop calling me."

"You don't mean that. It's your hangover talking."

Jamie gathers her strength and starts again. She's not used to speaking to Trey in this way. "Look, you don't owe me anything, okay. We don't owe each other anything. I know we said forever at our wedding and again when we signed the divorce, but we don't have to keep our vows. It's over. We're done."

"We'll talk later," says Trey, gently. "I'm glad you're having a good time." He hangs up and Jamie screams in frustration.

Ben walks into the bathroom rubbing his eyes and asks, "What happened?"

"I broke my toe on your ridiculous boot."

"Stop," says Ben. "You're hurting my boot's feelings. Let's see." He kneels to inspect Jamie's toe and kisses the inside of her ankle.

"It's just bruised," he says. "It'll get better."

Jamie wanted Ben to do it standing up, military style, but he suggested otherwise. It's your first time so you'll remember it later, he said, and it should be a good memory. Instead, he moved a padded chair into the bathroom, covered it with a sheet, and dimmed the lights.

Jamie sits naked and still as Ben shaves her head with his electric razor. She had asked him about his photo after his show. He called it ritual cleansing.

Jamie imagines the razor's dull buzz on a sound visualizer, an evenly spaced wave form. It is how people see her, especially Trey and Larry and perhaps Ben: steady, reliable, but uncertain. She works things out, barely. What remains of her dark hair falls away beneath Ben's smooth strokes. Earlier he removed her locks with scissors so she can donate them for a cancer wig.

When Trey came out, Jamie wanted to stay together. Others had before them. Why couldn't they? Many things could remain: birthday parties, the annual trip to the coast, the way they said don't forget and meant it. Larry could move in. It could work. It would work.

But it couldn't. The picture was wrong, said Trey. Wrong. It wasn't about body part on body part or even about love. It was about the difference in their worlds, the beauty of their worlds.

Ben works on the back of Jamie's head near her neck.

"What's your wife like?" she asks.

"Shhh, I'm concentrating."

"That's not an answer," says Jamie.

"She's nice. I'm the disgusting one."

"So am I," says Jamie. "How long have you been married?"

"Eight years or so. She's my producer."

"Or so?"

"Okay. Seven and change. My first wife . . . "

" . . . I know. Died. Why do men always round up?" asks Jamie.

"Because we're competitive and never satisfied," says Ben.

"Children?"

"With my first wife. A girl. Miranda. She lives with her grandmother. It was the right thing to do. I see her a few times a year."

"I love that name," says Jamie, choking back tears. She wanted to have children with Trey.

Ben finishes and Jamie is bald. She likes her apple-shaped head. She has never seen it before, except in baby pictures. Ben sits down and she shaves him. His head is avocado shaped.

"It itches," says Ben. "Does yours?"

"Remember your learning-the-bass story last night?"

"Yeah."

"It feels like the end to that story."

"So, it hurts?"

"No. It makes sense."

They make love for the last time in the shower, a slippery, clumsy final performance. Afterward they dress and pack. Ben asks Jamie to keep the plaid jacket.

“Why?” she asks, tugging at the garish cloth.

“I don’t know,” says Ben. “It was a onetime thing.”

“Does your wife care?” asks Jamie. “About this? You and me? The cannula? Other women?”

“Guess how many times I’ve been asked that question?” asks Ben.

“Sorry.”

“She loves that I love to improvise.”

Jamie smiles and says, “The beauty of your world.”

In a dark corner of the casino, Jamie and Ben cuddle in a cocoon chair. She smokes and he periodically holds the cigarette. They’re playing a *Rolling Stones* slot machine. *The Bitch* blares from the chair speakers, as Mick’s preposterous, obscene red tongue grows and shrinks in rhythm to the music. As Jamie watches, she sees her reflection in the screen’s glass and says goodbye to her old self, to the one who grasps too tightly but can’t hang on, to the one who cares too much and too little, to the one too young and too old and nothing in between, to the easy one.

Jamie’s seat mate on the flight home, a teenage girl, covers her face as the plane ascends. It’s dusk and the sun is setting behind Red Rocks, Vegas’s massive ocher and scarlet western boundary.

“It’ll be okay,” comforts Jamie.

“I just don’t like the feeling,” says the girl.

“You’ll get used to it,” says Jamie.

Jamie shuts her window shade and reaches into her purse for Ben’s cannula and clutches it. She imagines his wife watching him play his bass, applauding him, celebrating him. She doesn’t think about Trey and Larry. She watches the shimmering lights of the Strip disappear. It has been an *egg-celent* trip, but she won’t return soon.

John Etcheverry

The Third Daughter

Asal's father has no sons. When he learned that his wife gave birth to a second girl, he drank enough vodka to hospitalize him for four days. Asal is his third daughter. When she was eleven, he told her she would never attract a suitable husband and declared that this truth was her burden to bear, not his. Her mother is less callous, but she regrets that Asal possesses few of the traits Uzbek men seek in a wife.

Two days had passed since Asal's sixteenth birthday and her mother had been distant in that time. Tonight she called her daughter to the kitchen for tea. Her voice was thin, the way it gets in the late hours when her husband has not yet found his way home. "The time has come for you to understand men," she said. "To understand their needs."

Asal had already figured out what men need, but said nothing. Her friend Katya talks about sex incessantly and even detailed the mechanics of the act to her a number of times. Like Asal, she lacks experience, but she has a sister in Kyiv who has made herself an authority on the subject. Asal could not imagine why her mother wanted to have this talk now, but her account would be less enthusiastic than Katya's were, and for that, she was grateful.

Her mother sat at the opposite end of the kitchen table clutching her cup in her hands. "Some women enjoy it," she said, initiating the discussion. Her inability to utter the word aloud exasperated Asal. "And they live at the mercy of their cravings."

Asal wondered but refused to believe that her mother was one of those women. "Why are you telling me this, Onam?"

The cup slipped in her mother's hand and the tea splashed over the top. "You are older now." She wiped the table with the towel she kept tucked into her apron strings. "Before long you will marry."

Asal disagreed but listened for what seemed an hour, though when her mother concluded and left her alone in the kitchen, the tea was still warm.

Asal's father forbids her from talking with Katya not because her friend is Ukrainian, but because the girl is not Uzbek. Still, they meet every morning and walk together to school. Asal's home is the biggest on their street and has the highest wall. The neighbors smile when she greets them, but they huddle and gossip in rushed whispers as she passes. Her father paved the roadway from the main street to their home and the neighbors along the way revere him for that, but the families off the asphalt path—those like Katya's, whose apartments mire in mud and gravel—owe him no gratitude.

Katya met her at the corner and Asal jumped into a briefing of her talk with her mother, while Katya said something about not waiting for marriage to have sex. The idea that they both had the act on their minds had them laughing louder than they should have, a hazard of passing time with Katya. A gaunt, graying man in a Brezhnev-era suit poked his head out from under the hood of an ancient Zhyguli Kopeyka and stared the girls down. They smothered each other's giggles and Asal encouraged Katya to tell her story first.

"I decided that if I fall in love with someone at university next year, I'm going to sleep with him."

"You will not!" Asal said, though she saw otherwise in Katya's smile. She envied the freedom in that caprice. "I am going to miss you when you leave."

"Come with me," Katya said. "My aunt has space for both of us."

How many times would Asal have to go through this with her? "My father will never allow me to study, especially in Kyiv. You know that."

Fire ignited in her eyes. "Your father is an idiot."

Enough time had passed when school let out that Asal could forgive Katya. Her father was troublesome, but she didn't need to hear about it from her friend. Katya apologized with a hug and they picked up their earlier talk. "Do you think boys would like me?"

"They follow you like puppies now," Katya said. "What else do you want?"

Boys had started noticing Asal, but she hadn't yet figured out what to do about them. She handled them when she

played soccer on the street as a young girl, tolerating their pinches and pokes for love of the game, even putting up with rougher treatment as she improved. They would never forgive her talent, though, and when her skills surpassed those of even the older boys, a collective of parents rang the bell at her house. They demanded that her father compel her to comport herself with greater modesty, and that ended sports for her. Disconsolate, she clipped her exchanges with the other sex and adopted the labels of shy and awkward.

"What I mean is that I wonder if they would like an educated girl," she told Katya. "You know . . . if I were to study."

"They'll screw anyone, but it takes an educated man to appreciate an educated woman."

Her language embarrassed Asal and it caught the attention of an elderly woman sitting in a chair outside her home. The wall behind her was crumbling, but regardless of the conditions on the other side, the family kept its space on the street swept and tidy. "Stay clear of that tramp," the grandmother called out in Uzbek. She had a sack of raisins in her lap and she was pulling stems from the fruit. "I know you live in the big house up the way, so mind me girl or I'll tell your mother about you whoring around with foreigners." She glared at Katya as she leaned to her side and spat at the ground.

Katya spoke little Uzbek, but she could spot an insult in any language. "Oh, look." She pointed at the woman. "Another bitter old granny has confused the emptiness in her life for the authority to judge others." This prompted a response that Asal refused to translate to Russian for her friend, and they hurried along. "You're going to Kyiv with me," Katya said.

Heat marched up the back of Asal's neck and the skin there prickled in anticipation of what she was about to say. "My father believes there is no sense in girls attending university. He says studying won't make me a better wife."

Katya became so infuriated that Asal had to look away, which was how she noticed her mother. They had reached the intersection where she turns and where Katya continues down the broken path to her home. Asal's mother was pacing outside their wall, her back to them, and Asal pulled her friend aside before her mother doubled back in their direction.

"She's upset over something. Stay here until I get inside." She made her way up the street alone.

"You are late," Asal's mother said. She explained that this was her regular time, but her mother chastened her for arguing and pulled her into their courtyard. "Your father has a guest and you need to make a proper impression."

She rarely interacted with her father's visitors, but her mother went to work fixing her hair before she could ask for an explanation, and then the condition of her dress took priority. They went into the house and the men's voices reached them from the living room. Her mother led her to the powder room, where she complained about how Asal neglected her appearance. Asal protested and her mother clapped a palm over her mouth and listened for a moment, then lowered her hand and squared her daughter's shoulders. Tapping her lips with her forefinger, she said, "Come with me."

"No." Asal had never resisted like this and she found it exhilarating. "Tell me what is happening or I go nowhere."

Not yet forty but twice a grandmother, her mother looked ten years older than her age. "Your father's associate . . ." She made a sound, a moan, and hooked a drifting strand of hair over her ear. "Don't make trouble. Please."

With that, she understood last night's talk. Her mother had to guide her from the bathroom by the elbow because she couldn't move on her own. They crossed the foyer and entered the living room.

The men were laughing at something one of them said before Asal and her mother stepped in. The stranger was twice her age and he had a barrel-shaped body. His face bore the ruddy sheen of a drinker and his suit was the picture of good intentions gone amiss. He stopped as he brought a cigarette to his lips and nodded to Asal's father, whose back was to them, to indicate that the women had entered the room. The fetid odor of lamb fat that this stranger exuded enveloped Asal.

As her father turned to her, his smile faded to the gaze of reproach that she knew well. His look demanded to know what she had done with his son. She had seen it every day of her life and had no response, so she turned to the stranger.

As repulsive as this situation was, and as desperately as she wanted to leave and never return, she needed this man's approval. She needed him to desire her now, if never again, because she could survive neither his rejection nor her parents' dishonor if he turned her away.

The stranger sized her up like a slab of meat at the market. The men traded glances—the bargaining had begun—and her father sent her out of the room. Back in the entryway, she could not release her breath and her mother pulled her to the kitchen, where she brought Asal a glass of water.

"I am sixteen years old." She refused to drink.

"Start young and enjoy your grandchildren. Tahmina from here in our neighborhood was fifteen when she married."

"And she nearly died giving birth. Now she is nineteen and her husband ran off to Moscow."

"She was an unfit wife."

"She was a child, Onam."

"Besides," she said, ignoring her daughter's words. "Her family made a bad choice of husband for her."

She did not doubt the sincerity in her mother's eyes when she swore that Asal would marry better. "I am not getting married," Asal insisted. "Not yet, anyway. I'm going to university."

Her mother laughed a cackle so cruel in its honesty that Asal had to stare at her shoes. Tears came slowly, and then they rolled. Her mother laid a hand to her shoulder, but she was stiff and unyielding. "Our daughters do not attend university," she said. Asal started to object and her mother stopped her. "This is a burden that you must bear. Now, go upstairs and wash your face. No man wants to look at a woman with swollen eyes."

"I will not marry that man," she said. The words tumbled out so clumsily that she failed to convince even herself.

She went to her room and as she opened the bathroom door, the draft through the window extinguished the pilot light in the water heater. Her father had taken the appliance apart weeks earlier to adjust a temperature setting and he busted it. Hiring a technician would require that he confess his ineptitude, so he instead insisted that the unit was fine and dismissed Asal's fear of a gas leak as female hysteria.

When the flame goes out, she relights it with a match from the box she keeps on the shelf for that purpose.

She closed the valve in the gas line to allow the air to clear as she washed. The cool water was refreshing and the towel, soft against her face, hid the reflection of her image in the mirror. She backed to the tub and lowered herself to its edge. The sound of laughter from the men downstairs made it to her and the conspiracy in their tone declared that they had come to terms.

Asal left early in the morning and marched to Katya's house. She avoided mud holes by hopping from one high spot to the next. From somewhere beyond the row of ramshackle tenements, the scramble of panicking chickens and the baying of a dog in pursuit broke the morning quiet as she approached the apartment.

Katya opened the door, wide-eyed. "You're early." Her smile faded once she had a second look. "Come inside."

Katya pulled a pair of threadbare slippers from under a stool for her and left to tend to the teapot while Asal removed her shoes. Each room in the apartment was visible from her position. The living room, which doubled as Katya's bedroom, was at the far end. It opened into a narrow passage that led past the bathroom and to the kitchen, which connected to the entryway where she now sat. A bedroom that she had once mistaken as a closet was off the entry. Linoleum the color of brick spanned the floor, but it had a worn spot that a rug failed to capture fully. The place bespoke the family's humble status, but beneath that veneer lay a warmth foreign to Asal's experience.

The moment she took her seat in the kitchen, her resolve failed. "They are making me get married."

Katya took the news as if she were its subject. Asal told her that the wedding would be in two weeks and her friend's face whitened, but angry red blotches fought their way forward. "I know your people do this," she said, "but you will not. I will not let you."

"There is nothing you can do."

Katya reached a hand out. "There must be."

She shook her head. "My sisters were so excited when they

married, but they were both eighteen. Now, they complain about their empty lives. Their stupid husbands."

Katya hit the tabletop with closed fists, disturbing the tea. "Your parents are old fashioned but Tashkent has changed. This country is changing." She turned in her seat and reached for the sugar bowl on the countertop. "We're not going to school today. We have to figure this out. My parents will get you to my aunt in Kyiv."

"I need my parents' consent to leave and I cannot dishonor my family."

Katya shook her head at this but let it pass. "What does this man do?"

"I don't know."

Her eyes narrowed. "What is his name?"

Asal had to look away.

"In two weeks you're marrying a man whose name you don't—"

"I am not marrying him."

Katya hugged her and the tears just came. Would they ever cease? That afternoon Asal was careful to return home at her usual time. As they separated, Katya said, "I will get you through this. I promise."

The neighborhood women milled around Asal's mother outside their home. The sight of her approaching scattered them like hens and her mother pulled her into the courtyard, where a foreign sound drew her attention after the door closed. She turned to see a new lock on the inside of that door, its shining combination wheels conspicuous against the black paint. The unfamiliar noise was the bolt of that lock sliding home. Her mother waited for her to figure out what was happening and Asal's confusion turned to alarm once she did.

"You will thank me when you are wiser," her mother said.

She pushed her way into the house and up the stairs to her room. Earlier that day, she had prayed that she would get past the crying, but she saw now that the place beyond tears was darker than her mind could endure.

Asal's bedroom was at the back of the house. From her window, she saw the neighboring row of apartments and the

tiny square of yard behind Katya's home. Katya stood there, looking up to her, and Asal pulled the curtain closed and dropped to her bed. No one called her for dinner, nor did she bother to go downstairs on her own. Instead, she alternated between staring at the floor and sobbing, not daring to approach the window again.

In the morning, Katya rang the doorbell until Asal's mother could no longer stand it. She yelled into the intercom for her to go away, saying that Asal would no longer attend school. What followed was an assault of foul-mouthed abuse from Katya that barraged the home until the intercom timed out. Asal laughed and wept—the line between the two was in tatters—as her friend continued her rant out on the street.

All that day her mother and sisters made wedding arrangements. They asked her once if she wanted to join and she didn't trouble herself to answer, so they left her alone. She ventured to her window about the time Katya would return from school. Her friend was out there, seated on a stool, and she hopped to her feet at the sight of Asal and called out. The sound came across muffled so Asal opened the window. "What?"

"I said I promised you. I won't forget."

She replied in a voice not nearly loud enough to be heard, "There is nothing you can do."

Katya cupped her hands to her ears. "I didn't hear. Louder!"

The sound of footfalls on the stairs reached Asal and she closed the window and curtains as her sister pushed into the bedroom. "Mother is calling the police. Stop this before your friend has trouble."

Asal saw only regret in her sister's eyes. "How can you participate in this?" she asked. "As lonely as you are."

Her sister stepped back as if she'd taken a knee to the gut. She recovered and any sympathy she might have harbored for her younger sibling was gone, replaced with contempt. "Don't make this worse than it needs to be."

Asal looked over her shoulder at the window. Her sister was right; Katya was only making trouble for herself and her parents.

In the ensuing two weeks, she ignored her family to the extent that she could, though they continued with their

wedding planning. She peeked out through the bedroom curtains and the bathroom window at different times, but saw no sign of her friend. Her mother and sisters, whom she had come to loathe for their contrived cheer in their marriages, brought in dresses for her to preview. She picked one only so they would take them away, but then they laid out shoes, gloves; it was endless. On the morning of the wedding, a woman came to give her a manicure and pedicure, and another did her hair and makeup. One sister brought in tea, along with a pill "to make this easier" for her. She spit it into the teacup without anyone noticing, committed to scratching the eyes out of the first person to press her.

Her mother ran everyone out of the room and took a position on the edge of the mattress. She cradled Asal's hand in hers and spelled out the details of the wedding night. It was to take place in the home of the groom's family, where Asal was to live. The specifics of how they would display the bloodied bedsheets over the apartment balcony in testimony of her lost virginity sickened Asal and her mother took notice. She moved closer and Asal wanted both to draw her in and to shove her away.

"Your friend has confused you with her Slavic fairytales. The truth is that love grows slowly as you come to know your husband, like a kettle of cold water put to a low flame."

"What of your love, Onam? What happened to your flame?" She could not help thinking of her father's impotent advance on the water heater.

"You're too young to understand."

"I'm too young to marry."

Her mother's lips pressed thin. "This life has been fine for me and it will be good enough for you."

"Do you think I am so naïve? You are miserable. You always have been."

She pushed Asal away and walked to the door. "A woman unacquainted with misery can never know joy. Get dressed. The car will be here soon."

She left Asal alone in the room with the gown, and it was tragic that an article so exquisite could usher in such despair. She went into the bathroom and the draft rushed through and snuffed the flame. As she reached for the matches, her

reflection in the mirror caught her attention and the change she saw enchanted her. She turned on the hot water in the sink to make the gas flow. Without the pilot light burning, it passed unheeded into the bathroom, crowding away both the oxygen and her concerns. She closed the window and locked the door. There was a gap at the floor, but she tucked a towel into the open space and solved that problem.

She pulled her hair down and scrubbed away the makeup. The nail polish had to go, as well. Fully clothed and already lightheaded, she climbed into the bathtub and reached for the hand mirror on the countertop. Studying herself in it, she allowed a smile.

Soon, she would be free of the burdens—not hers, but those she carried for others. Something inside her head felt like it was beginning to boil and she would have sworn that the pounding between her ears was loud enough to be heard on the other side of the door.

This had to be right, she thought, because the alternative was so wrong. She wanted to live, but not their way. And yes, she wanted to prove something to them, but understanding was beyond their grasp.

The pounding worsened and she raised her fingers to her temples. No, they would learn nothing and she would be gone.

Pounding.

She looked to the window. For some reason, the noise seemed to originate there now, and it had changed to a rapping sound. She had to be hallucinating because her bathroom was on the second floor, yet she was staring into Katya's eyes through the glass.

"Open the goddamned window, Asal."

She was thinking that an angel would never use that language just as a stone busted through the pane and banked off the tub before settling to the floor. Asal scrambled to turn off the gas and managed the window open just before vomiting straight out and into the yard below. The hurting had already receded in her head as she drew in fresh air.

Katya straddled the wall dividing the properties. She held a coiled garden hose, the end of which she had tied around a branch of a persimmon tree in the adjoining yard, and the tips of a ladder poked up above the wall. "Catch this and tie it

to the heating radiator."

"Why are you here?"

"Shut up and do it." She hurled the hose the few meters to the house and it would have clipped Asal in the face if she hadn't caught it.

Asal still didn't comprehend what was happening and the nausea had not abated. Someone knocked on the bathroom door, stirring her confusion. Was it Katya again? On this side now? How did she get here?

"Are you alright?" Her sister.

"I am fine." She felt the floor tottering beneath her.

"We've come to help you into your dress."

"Give me one minute."

Katya waved her over and she at last understood: get out. She had a couple of meters of hose to work with and tried to run it through the fins of the heating radiator. The thing was mounted within the wall and she couldn't maneuver the stiff hose in the confined space. Another knock on the bathroom door came, but the broken water heater stole her attention. She tugged at one of its wall mounts to test its strength. The unit was fine. Her father had been right about that, after all.

Gibson Monk

The Poison Oracle

"You ever met the devil?" he said, just like that. Surprised me a bit, I guess, but not that much. You know how it is, place like this, full of little white churches coming up from the dust like ghosts themselves. Crossed my share of their thresholds, though not by choice. Sometimes, in the summer, when it gets so hot the air shimmers even in the mornings, I thought those churches might waver right out, would disappear like they didn't even really belong in this world.

But this wasn't summer, it was that winter before and it was night, and I remember how round and bright the moon was, and how it surprised me when it appeared when I shut the trunk of the car. I had been looking with satisfaction at the neat row of brown paper grocery bags I had set down, but I must have started to look up, maybe when I grabbed the lip of trunk. The light of the moon mixed with the red glare of the Safeway sign and the taillights of the Buick LeSabre with mama already in the front seat, because it was a cold winter night and I was at the age when I took some pride in doing the things for her that my dad usually did.

I turned and the dark shape was standing there, waiting, and it made me jump a bit before I remembered that the bag boy had followed us out, even though we told him we could manage. I thought he would have gone back in by now, but he had stood there, waiting, while I loaded the groceries, and he seemed to be waiting still.

His name was Tyrone. I'm sure of it because I recognized my own name marked on the plastic tag he wore. "Well," I told him, with him looking at me. He was older than me, full grown, but still young. The whites of his eyes seemed as bright as the moon, and you could see the whole dark circles floating in them. Grandma always said that meant the person was crazy, or had a spirit about him, when you could see the whites go all around the iris. You know I love her, but I didn't put much stock in that, or any of those old stories she would

tell between humming music from long ago. Because my dad is a dentist and my mom is a teacher, and we all knew Grandma was from a different time. But I did think of her words, then, and I don't know if it was the words or his eyes that made me look around, made me feel like running.

"Okay," he said, and almost seemed ready to go. But then he peered at me and said, "You ever met the devil?"

I don't really remember what I told him, but it was some kind of no. But like I said, all those churches sitting the delta dirt get full of families even like mine; the devil wasn't ever far out of mind. But it was a little unusual in the winter moonlight in the Safeway parking lot.

He nodded, as though he didn't care about my answer. "I have," he said. I think I asked him what that was like, maybe to be polite. "It's surprising," he said, like he knew, and kind of leaned in on me. "It's really not what you think." I might have nodded or said something back, but it didn't matter because he had said what he needed to say and went back into the store, and I stood there in the empty lot, hands in my pockets.

Later, sitting around the table, the little bird dying under the harsh hanging light, its beak opening and closing slower and slower, some kind of fluid, ichor, maybe blood, dripping from the corner of its mouth, I looked around, looking for a place to run, and all those eyes seemed like his, wide and bright and staring from all those dark faces. It wasn't a fair test. I knew that. Everything I had learned and known about the world told me so, like the Salem trials. It was the poison, of course. It wasn't fair. How could it not die?

But the eyes. I looked down at the bird as it died, now a leg twitching and going still, and I knew there was nothing I could do, but I stroked the feathers of its head, tiny brown sparrow feathers, its own dark eyes going dim, and I willed it to live. Willed it to get up and fly out the window into the night. Willed myself to join it in escape. Wondered what my own eyes looked like. But I didn't even know what question was asked.

I never expected the man at the Safeway who spoke to me about the devil, any more than I expected to be sitting at that table. And yet those things happened, and so here I am.

Grandma would say it like that.

Another thing Grandma would say was that we had never left Africa, that the old stories told us that long ago the mother country cut off a piece of herself and set it drifting on the sea, and that piece came to rest against another distant land. And then the little baby Africa land, lonely, waited for her people to come back to her. I didn't believe that either, until one day in geology class I read that scientists agreed that a large piece of the American South was millions of years older than the rest of the American land mass, and their theory was that a part of the African plate had broken off and settled into this one via continental drift.

I thought maybe it was a coincidence, a lucky guess. But then I thought it was more likely that Grandma's story wasn't that old. Someone had learned what was in the textbook, maybe my mom, and told her. Then Grandma made up the story in her head and spread it around. Not trying to be deceitful or anything, but it floated around in her head and came out in her own words. It had to be, because no one could have been around millions of years ago to remember.

But sometimes, when I looked at the sun, that yellow and huge sun hanging over the wide horizon, or stared into swirling brown river water, or listened to cicadas thick in the heat-limp trees by the lazy, crawling bayou, I did wonder. Grandma said that people do not remember the land; it is the land that remembers the people.

I will confess it. I will confess it all, now.

It was the end of summer, hot and still, and school hadn't started yet, but already football practice had started, two-a-days. We were at Grandma's house. The old, bad part of town. That's what I thought. The wrong side of the tracks, which were two blocks down, and every now and again the freight trains would rumble by but even they could not raise a wind. The houses full and the streets dusty and empty in the heat of the day, everybody inside or on the porch or sitting on stoops, and I was looking at the bags of water hanging from the eves against the flies. Another superstition. I love Grandma, but I never did like going to her house. Dad was still at work, and my mom was cleaning up in the kitchen, and Grandma was rocking in her chair, the glare of the day flashing in her huge

glasses that made her look like an owl.

The car drove up. It was LaMarcus. Grandma stopped rocking, and that was strange. She never stopped rocking. Did she know already? Did I know?

His face told something, downcast and worrying, and he was always so good-natured. I thought too much, sometimes. I heard the screen door open and clatter back and my mom went and stood against the railing, twisting a dishrag.

"It's Cedric," LaMarcus said. He told us. About the accident. He told us about how they were painting the field at the high school, so for today the practice was at the old Helman's Stadium off Barraque Street, but we knew that already.

"I was there," he said. "When it happened. We was doing wind sprints. Cause we was goofing off. But not Cedric. You know he's like not like that."

Serious, determined. I knew. I had heard it so many times. I tried for the team, of course. But it was never for me. I was better with my head in the books. Isn't that what they say you should do? Get an education. But I never got any credit, not from people around here, not from this neighborhood, not from the street.

But everybody would say, Cedric, he was going to get that athletic scholarship. People were already sizing up the star of the Dollarway Cardinals for a Razorback uniform, or Crimson Tide, or Auburn. Some were already talking about which pro team would come calling. I thought that was crazy, tried to talk about how long the odds were on that, how short a pro career usually is. Only did it once or twice before I was hushed up. Said to me how good it would be for me when my cousin went pro.

"How?" Grandma said, looking at LaMarcus, her voice dried out and cracking.

LaMarcus shook his head. "Coach was making everybody do another turn, everybody already sweating buckets. Sends Cedric up to the old bleachers."

Grandma waited, the white glare of the day filling her glasses.

LaMarcus took his hands and made a folding motion. "They all come down. Like dominoes. The whole set of bleachers. Ever last one."

Grandma stood as LaMarcus held out his hands. "He's not—he's in the hospital. But . . . it ain't good."

"Felicia know?"

My Aunt Felicia, she'd be weeping for her baby boy, that's for sure.

LaMarcus nodded. "She there now. And Deandria."

The name made me catch my breath and flush. I shook my head. "They should have never gone to that Helman's Stadium," I said. "It's too old. Probably hasn't been used for ten years. Wood must have rotted through."

Grandma set herself back down and started rocking again. "No," she said, like she had decided it. She stared straight ahead at nothing like she could find something inside it and then she said, "It ain't that. It's witchcraft."

I rolled my eyes and looked hopefully at my mom. Worry was twisting her face, and the sun off the water bags fractured and set their mottled light against her skin and for a moment I didn't recognize her. She's a church-going woman and that's what made me a church-going boy, but only that. I didn't believe in even half of what most people believe.

"Mom," I said, almost pleading. "You go to church, you can't . . . "

"This shall come to thee in a moment, the loss of children," she said, and it sounded like a chant.

And Grandma finished, "Stand now with thy enchantments, and with the multitude of thy sorceries, wherein thou have labored from thy youth." She shook her head. "The devil goes about."

It was crazy. I knew it was crazy. But I told myself that, psychologically, people need a way to make sense of things when random tragedy strikes. They can't believe that it's just chance. Because then it doesn't mean anything.

We visited. We were all there. My dad met us and I was relieved to see him. We all stood around the bedside as long as we could, and I wanted to go. Deandria was there, still beautiful even with the tears on her face, eyes puffed out from crying, sniffling. I flushed, first with desire, then I guess embarrassment. I had made my play at the end of the last school year, but of course that didn't go anywhere. I never had much luck with girls.

And all the times after, at the hospital. School started, but nothing changed. We would go again, and again. It all runs together. It's like a nightmare. I'm still there. I can't get out. That's why I'm here now.

Some people don't like hospitals, or doctor's offices. I never minded. I liked visiting my dad's office. Clean, modern. Everything in its place. The smell of disinfectant, the quiet of waiting rooms. Soft voices.

But now I began to hate it. The quiet beep of the machines, like mechanical insects. I would stare at the dripping IV bag and it reminded me of the water bags hanging from Grandma's eves. For flies.

The doctors couldn't explain it. All the scans were clear. There were no signs of permanent trauma. Showed us X-rays, lit them up clear as day and we could see the bones all whole and the skull with the little fractures knitting back together. Cedric was young and strong, they'd say. But they couldn't say when Cedric would wake up, why Cedric wasn't waking up. Witchcraft in the whispers.

Football season came and went. Of course they did the investigation of the accident. It was the fire department, I think. I wondered if they were qualified, but when the newspaper article came out and it said that the inspection came up with termites eating at the wood for years I was excited. I almost jumped out of my chair. I had gotten it almost exactly right. I waited for my dad to come home and I showed it to him. He nodded.

"Termites," I said. "Tell them, dad. Not witchcraft. Insects."

He shifted in his easy chair and looked at me. "I know," he said. "But it's a different way of thinking. Your Grandma. Your mom."

"But . . . termites," I said.

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. It's not about the termites. It's about Cedric, and why he was sitting there. At that exact time. In that exact place. The coincidence of space and time." He brought the edges of his big hands together, palms up, and touched them together softly. Like he was bringing me a gift.

"Those old bleachers could have fallen at any time, could have fallen and not hurt anyone. You see? It's that they fell at

this particular time. It's not about *how* something happened. That's termites. It's about *why* something happens. That's the witchcraft; that's the devil's work. And why Cedric isn't waking up is because the witch hasn't been found. But if you find the witch, there can be reconciliation. That's what they're thinking about. That's how they're thinking about it."

And finally that last time, at the hospital. It was cold again, winter. My dad wasn't there. I thought he was working late. The rest of us were all around the bed, like we did every week, like it was church. But I was hot inside, furious. The beeping machines were singing insects, the quiet rooms were filled with mad talk, the IV bag was charming away flies. I had lost something. I had lost that clean, quiet place, that sane place, that place my father inhabited that wasn't full of drumbeat and street talk and primping and flashing jewelry and gleaming rims. I had lost it.

Grandma was leaning over, touching, looking down, tearful. "Witchcraft," she whispered.

I couldn't help it. I felt the words coming up hot and bitter from someplace down inside me. "It was termites, Grandma. Termites. Not witchcraft. There's no such thing as witches."

They all looked at me and I threw up my hands. "It's like we're not even living in the real world," I told them, accused them. "Who could be a witch? They live in Jefferson Heights, or down on Harding? Who's got spell books and a pot of potions around here? Who's got a haunted house and some black cats?"

Grandma shook her head, and I think it was pity. She pitied me for not understanding. "It's not like that," she said. The lines of her hands were like old dried streams and the folds of the earth, and she smoothed the blank white bed sheet along its edges. "Don't you see? Anybody could be a witch. Anybody. Sometimes they don't even know it."

I crossed my arms, exasperated, and waited for visiting hours to end. The quiet came back and surrounded us.

I don't know how it happened. She must have caught me looking. Looking at her some way. Desire. Embarrassment.

"It's you!" Deandria shouted, her eyes wide. "It's you! You're doing it!" She lunged at me, face twisted with rage. LaMarcus and my mom had to hold her back.

I backed up to the door. “This is crazy! You’re all crazy!” I shouted. I looked around desperately, but I saw doubt in Grandma’s face. In my mom’s face. I couldn’t believe it.

Grandma went back to smoothing the sheets. “There’s a way,” she said, quietly. “The poison oracle.”

“I’m not listing to this,” I said, and I stormed out. But I didn’t go down the hall. I stood by the door, the cold metal of the handle still in my hand, and I listened, catching the fragments. A little bird, a bit of poison, we ask the question, and then we know. If the bird dies . . . Grandma whispering these things, no one saying anything against. Not just letting her finish. Really listening. I knew everyone loved her, respected her. I loved her, too, loved the smell of the kitchen when she was cooking, humming, singing. But she was old and from another time.

Mom was quiet on the drive back. I would catch her glancing across at me in the rearview mirror but then she would go back to staring hard at the empty streets, the lonely stoplights spilling red into the dark.

Back at home she was making me a grilled cheese sandwich. I looked in on her, saw her standing very still with her head bent over the pan, shifting the bread around with a wooden spoon. She wasn’t saying anything and I didn’t try to talk to her. I ate half the sandwich and went up to my room.

I laid on my bed and shut my eyes tight and waited for my dad to come home, waited for the nightmare to end. He could talk some sense into them, if anybody could. For a moment I worried that he wouldn’t, because it was mom and Grandma. He didn’t care about what the others thought, but those two. And he usually let things go, sat quietly and let things go. But he could do it. I had seen it before. Maybe because he did not do it often, did not hold out his big hands and shout, “Enough!” in his big voice, that when he did, everybody listened. Us kids, mom, even Grandma.

I thought about that and sank into that comfortable feeling so much that I almost fell asleep. But then I started to worry that they wouldn’t even tell him. That they would keep all their craziness secret, go behind his back.

But it was all ridiculous. Where would they even get a bird? Who even knew how to catch one? Mom couldn’t, Deandria

was scared of animals. LaMarcus couldn't catch anything. Maybe Grandma had some trick. But they would still have to get some poison. I couldn't believe I was even thinking about it.

Finally I heard my dad's car and I sat up in bed and let out my breath. It was late, and the living room was already dark. I thought mom had already gone to bed. Only the kitchen light was on, and it spilled a little light into the living room, and also a strange chill. I almost ran up to the door to open it for him, but I held back and stood, anxious, waiting. I heard another car come up. Strange. The engine cut off and doors, one, two, three, thumped shut in the night.

I tore open the door and my dad stood there and I smiled and looked up into his face. But his face was sad.

I looked down. In his big hands he held a little bird, flapping helplessly.

I think I screamed.

They were all standing behind him, dark shapes in the night, just their eyes bright, eyes I used to know. Like a tide they took me into them, carried me to the kitchen with the one lamp left on and the one window left open, and there we watched the bird die.

I didn't fly out the window with the bird. I didn't escape. I can't. I'm trapped here, like you. So that's why I'm here now, back at your bed, where you sleep, dreamless. Envy, they call it. Envy and the pride that it comes from. I wanted what you had, Cedric. Worse than that. I don't even know if I really wanted it. I wanted you not to have it.

"You ever met the devil?" he said, just like that.

Jan Allen

My Real Mother

I'm a stalker.

That's what my best friend Becky tells me as we wait in a nondescript mom-and-pop restaurant for my birth mother, Linda Wiley, to show up.

I prefer to think I'm on a voyage of self-discovery.

I also like the term "scouted" over Becky's insistence that I "cased the joint," which is the reason we are sitting at the bar, perched high up on stools that swivel, affording us a bird's eye view of every table and booth.

Furthermore, I'm partial to "overheard" as opposed to "eavesdropped," which is why I know Linda will be here any minute.

"What if she senses she's being followed?" Becky says, "She's probably terrified!"

"Don't worry, Becks," I say, "she's not on to me. In the last week I've worn four different pairs of sunglasses, three wigs and a motorcycle helmet."

"Listen to yourself, Jo. You're scaring some feeble old lady out of her mind. What would you think if you saw someone wearing a motorcycle helmet when it's still too early in the year to be riding a motorcycle?"

First off, Linda Wiley is no feeble old lady.

Secondly, you'd think you could count on your best friend to cut you some slack, but no. Becky's irksome tone continues. "Why don't you just cyberstalk her like a normal person?"

I don't answer. It's grueling trying to keep an eye on the front and back entrances (even though neither has opened in the last 10 minutes) and argue at the same time. Although I must admit that most of the time we're pretty good at multitasking when it involves bickering with each other.

Besides, I tried to cyberstalk Linda as soon as I got the paperwork from the PI, but her privacy settings were brutal.

Becky touches my arm and smiles her smile, that one she saves for me, the one I've always interpreted to mean I'm a worthless cause but she's still rooting for me anyway.

She's beautiful when she smiles like this, even though she downplays her beauty, all her long thick hair pulled straight back into a ponytail. She's still not tempted by cosmetic counters, even though we've both left our fortieth birthdays firmly behind us.

She ratchets down the harshness in favor of speaking to me like a fifth-grader. "Here's what I'm saying, Jo. Maybe this should be the end today. Either introduce yourself to her, tell her you're the daughter she gave up for adoption when she was 17, or walk away."

I'm not listening, because Linda is strolling through the front door, and luckily, over to a table that's only 20 feet away from us, and one with great lighting.

Our heads bent over our menus, we both watch her out of the corners of our eyes as she pulls her coat off and lets it drop from her shoulders onto the chair behind her. Like the other days I've trailed her, she is wearing casual but expensive clothes; today it's jeans and a long-sleeved blouse. She's got money, but I don't care. I have money too.

There are a few other patrons in the restaurant, and some turn to look at her as she drops her keys—many, many keys—onto the tile floor. She was aiming for a pocket in her coat but missed. Their eyes linger on her as she pushes her chair out and bends over to pick them up. The wolf-whistle gorgeousness she obviously once possessed has faded, but there's still a charisma about her. She's fair-skinned, and I bet her short gray hair was once blond. She has wrinkles, but not around her eyes, only sun rays that fan out from beneath her rosy cheeks. Exceptionally big blue-green eyes glimmer as she rolls them at her gracelessness.

There isn't an iota of resemblance between the two of us. I've inherited none of her beauty. My eyes are big but they're plain old brown. My hair is dark too, and even if my cheeks were pink and rosy, nobody would notice because they're hidden somewhere in the space my nose is taking up. I'd assumed that surely there was a critical mistake in the PI's report. I checked. There wasn't.

Becky and I have been friends for so long, I not only can finish her sentences, I can start them. But this time it's easy. She whispers, "Are you sure that's your biological mother?"

"Yep."

"Honestly," Becky blurts out, "You look more like Gladys."

Gladys is my adopted mother, the one I've known my whole life. Our predicament is that we've become strangers to each other. She's forgotten that I'm her daughter. Instead, I am her long-deceased sister, and I find it peculiar that she never forgets to call me Eloise.

Even though she's smack dab in the middle of the house she's lived in for the past 40 years, she's constantly on a quest to find her home, and resolute in her attempts to destroy her current surroundings. She plugs up the sink or the tub and turns on the water. Or she gravitates toward the stove because what she loves the most is setting fires, and she somehow deduces that the first thing could help her accomplish the second. I've never had children—have never been married for that matter—but over the years I've learned how to childproof, and to stay one step ahead of her at all times.

At least Mom doesn't have a clue that I've contacted Three Rivers, doesn't know I've recently received a return call.

Three Rivers is the crème de la crème as far as nursing homes go. That's why a few years ago, after caring for Mom for five years at that point, I put her on the waiting list. Their receptionist called a month ago to tell me a room is going to be available. It's quite an ethical quandary for me because there's been no change in Mom's condition that I can't handle. So far I've been able to juggle the workload of my job by accomplishing as much as I can on my home computer and hiring caregivers when I have to go into the office. If I skip this opportunity now, though, and then something happens that I can't manage, I might have to put her in Cedar Lake, where there are no evergreen trees and no lake, and the caregiving is rumored to be horrendous.

Unlike my oblivious mother, Becky knows the looming decision I'm faced with, and I shoot her a nasty look for reminding me of it.

She has the grace to wince at her tactlessness. "Not that you look anything like Gladys either," she mumbles.

This is the last day of my week's vacation. Early every morning I've parked my inconspicuous gray compact

car on a side street perpendicular to the Wiley bungalow. Keeping my fingers crossed that my childhood infatuation with Nancy Drew would finally pay off, I've waited for Linda to materialize.

That first day when she emerged from her house, it wasn't early enough for her to be going to a job, but it wasn't late enough for me to be cleaning out my glove compartment. She hopped into an illegally parked blue Jetta wagon, but I suppose if you block your own driveway with your car, nobody calls the police department.

Linda's apathy to traffic laws didn't end with nonmoving violations. I detested turning a blind eye to speed limit signs, and I began hyperventilating when I rolled through all those stop signs. But I kept up. When she parked, so did I, and I did it better, all my tires between the two painted lines. I heard Nancy Drew tsk-tsk'ing me though, because I should've known when Linda left her house with all those books that she was going to the library. I hadn't needed to follow her at all.

Having never ventured out of the fiction stacks myself, I was shocked to find Linda perusing books about people who actually existed. I sat down at a computer about 12 feet away and listened to her hum as she opened a few and read the front and back jackets. I clicked the mouse a few times but I didn't need to. She was oblivious to the fact that another person loomed so near, and although part of me—most of me—was relieved, there was a teeny-weeny part that wanted her to walk over to where I sat and say, "I know you are the daughter I carried inside me 43 years ago, and I think of you every day."

Or something like that.

But how could I expect this sort of revelation from her? I knew for a fact my life had begun in her belly, and all I felt was my right eyelid twitching, nerves from my earlier hot pursuit.

In the grocery store on Tuesday, she talked out loud to food products, voicing her disdain for their high prices, the aisle in which she finally located them, and their revamped packaging. I didn't notice if she looked at me weirdly—a woman wearing a motorcycle helmet in February—or if she glanced my way at all.

On Wednesday she went to a wooded park and pulled a backpack from the hatch of her SUV, then crammed seven or eight phonebooks into it. (I wondered where she got the phonebooks, did they even make them anymore?) Then she effortlessly heaved the straps of the pack onto her shoulders and walked briskly into the woods.

As she was quickly smothered by huge trees, I stayed in my car. I couldn't help but notice the trail marker that boasted a length of seven miles. I weighed the pros and cons, but what could I possibly learn from walking that far in bad shoes?

Thursday it rained, and Linda took her paraphernalia to a shopping mall. I wanted to impress upon Nancy Drew that I was a worthwhile mentee, I really did, but the Nike shoes I'd worn weren't broken in yet, and I could feel blisters at my heels just walking in from the lot. I'm disgraced to admit I couldn't have kept up even if I'd tried. I bought a book, sat at a table in the food court, and watched Linda pass about 12 or 13 times.

Friday I watched the presumed Mr. Wiley walk to his car carrying what looked like a gym bag. I followed him just for the hell of it, not surprisingly, to a gym. That was the end of that as I, of course, was not a member.

After requesting from the waitress cocktail sauce (me), sliced lemons (Becky), and a side of cilantro (Becky, a dollar extra, but she doesn't care because it's my treat today), there are finally fish tacos sitting in front of us that are to our liking. But just as we're ready to partake in our first bite, a girl of about five years old explodes through the door and rockets into Linda's lap.

"Grammy!" she exclaims, as if all the air in her little lungs is being expelled with that one word.

"Ava!"

They are like sandpipers pecking sand on the beach, planting kisses on each other's cheeks, oblivious to the commotion at the entrance as a woman tries to squeeze through the door with a baby carriage. Finally, the woman shuffles over to the table and kisses Linda's left cheek, the one that's not currently occupied. Then she sits down across from her and removes some blankets from the baby.

“How’s my little Jimmy, Karen?” Linda asks, pulling the buggy closer to her, something of an accomplishment, as the little girl still hasn’t released the unyielding grip she has on her neck.

“Asleep, Mom,” Linda’s daughter replies, beginning a game of tug o’ war, pulling the buggy back toward herself. “This time, let’s try to keep it that way.”

In the previous week I’d learned Linda was an avid reader of biographies, that she thought traffic laws were for other people, and that she was in great physical shape, not only for her age but for any age. There was one thing, though, I’d thought I knew about her always: She wasn’t fond of children. Now I know that there was only one child Linda Wiley wasn’t partial to. That would be me.

I’m sure Karen and Ava are snapshots of Linda at younger ages. Karen is maybe 30 pounds heavier than her mom and Ava is just a child. Yet the resemblance is so blatant, I marvel that there had to be men’s genes involved in the reproductive process.

My brain is working hard to digest everything my eyes are assimilating. Forgetting for a moment that Becky is still sitting beside me, I’m shocked when I hear her whisper, “Oh my God.”

I look at her, and then to the door where Becky is staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

The woman pulling the door open, then discovering and walking toward the group we are scrutinizing, looks so much like me that my initial response is to duck behind the bar like I’m playing hide-and-seek. I don’t. I’m too mesmerized as I explore her hair and nose and eyes, all so much like my own. I was never consciously aware of it before, but now I know I’ve yearned for this my whole life—to look like someone, and not because it’s a fluke, but because we share DNA.

The ironic thing is that, even though she’s nothing like her glamorous mother, the few male patrons here survey her as she enters. If we bear such a striking resemblance, I ask myself, what is it about her that makes heads turn, while my entrance always goes unnoticed? Of course I’m older, I figure a decade or so, but there’s something else. Maybe it’s her smile or perhaps the way she carries herself, a vibe she gives off, as

if life has always been an exhilarating experience for her.

I remember a lust for living. It's that thing I stopped experiencing seven years ago.

"Aunt Sara!" Ava descends from her grandmother's lap and runs to greet the woman, who bends down, scoops her up and fake growls into the child's neck as she squeezes her tight. Ava giggles and squirms. Sara puts her down, and Ava dashes back to the lap she'd vacated.

Greetings are exchanged, cheeks are kissed, a family is reunited. Is the reunion complete? It is for today, because Linda chose a table for four. But are there other children, other grandchildren? Should I make an effort to have these questions answered? Or should I be satisfied with what I've already discovered?

The same teenage waitress who'd brought us our tacos distributes menus to them, and the three adults talk to her as she does, effortlessly embracing a complete stranger.

After they place their order, Ava abandons Linda and plops down in the empty seat. Then Linda unfolds a map and spreads it across the table. Karen retrieves a box of crayons from her purse, and Ava begins vigorously scribbling on the section of the map nearest to her with black and brown colors. Hopefully no one is going there.

Linda points to a spot far away from Ava's energetic doodles. Sara leans in closer, Karen walks around the buggy to their side of the table, and the three of them drop their heads to survey the selected spot. Now that they're so close to each other I can no longer make out what's being said, but then they all laugh, and I have no trouble hearing that.

I must look as sad as I feel because Becky says, "We could go on a vacation again, Jo. Or take a long weekend or something. My kids are old enough to care for themselves when Steve's at work." She shrugs. "At this point, they might not even kill each other."

She adds, "And Gladys will be well taken care of at Three Rivers."

But it's not the vacations I've been unable to take for the past seven years that I'm thinking about. What I miss is the laughter. As far back as I can remember, Mom could always make me laugh. Her happy-go-luckiness was funny, but even

when I was a child it made me uneasy sometimes. She would belt out show tunes while she burnt dinner. She might pick me up late from school, but then she'd take me to the zoo, leading me through the drainage tunnel so we'd get in for free.

Should I have known all along what her zaniness was leading up to?

"Remember that time we went to Gatlinburg?" Becky asks. "I can't believe it was over 20 years ago! Do you want to go there again?"

"No," I say. There's a sharpness to my word that I didn't know was going to be there. Probably I'm upset that she's once again reminded me of the Three Rivers situation.

As Linda sees the waitress approaching with their food, she deftly begins to fold the map into a small enough square so that Ava can continue to deface a section of it.

"Thanks so much," the three adults say to the waitress as she sets their food down, and I can't help but notice that that's all there is to it. Becky and I, no matter where we are, dive or fine-dining restaurant, immediately scan our food that's arrived and bombard the waitress with special requests to accompany it before she escapes. Their behavior is more polite, but I'm sure our food is tastier.

Sara takes a bite of her sandwich, Linda cuts some food up for Ava, but Karen sits with her hands on her lap.

"Mom, I don't like this whole thing," she says. "Who will be with you on the weeks not covered by friends or family?"

"Hon, I'll be meeting people along the way. I've already met other hikers on the Internet who are starting the same time I am."

Karen groans. "You're not making me feel better, Mom." She picks up her knife and cuts her sandwich in half with much more gusto than appears required.

Sara shoots her sister a dirty look. "I'll be with her for the first two weeks, Karen," Sara says. "Then Joe is going for the next two. Bob's going to meet her at the start of the sixth."

"I know the schedule, Sara," Karen says, not without anger. "But there are bears out there, and no cell phone service, and cliffs she could fall off of."

Even eavesdropping strangers can tell they've had conversations similar to this one before. "It's the Appalachian

trail, Karen," Sara says, her patience obviously waning. "Thousands of people hike it every year."

"How many are women doing it alone who are going to turn 60 out there?"

Becky chooses this moment to start laughing so hard that she starts to choke on her taco. "She's going to hike the Appalachian Trail!" she manages to say. How could it be that Becky is just now figuring this out?

"Shut up," I whisper angrily. She might need the Heimlich maneuver, but dammit, I lectured her over and over how she was not to draw attention to us today.

To her credit, Becky quiets down. Her eyes are watering, but she doesn't even clear her throat. "Do you remember on our way to Gatlinburg how we couldn't find a gas station so you had to pee in a cornfield? You had post-traumatic stress disorder for a month."

I don't respond. I don't want to encourage more laughing. But I have to admit I certainly didn't inherit Linda's love of the wilderness.

Becky, who has fallen off her stool a little, is struggling to pull herself erect. I don't help her.

"You know," she says, "it'll be worse for your quote-unquote mother over there." She adds in a stage whisper, "Number two will be involved."

By the time Becky's settled down, the three women have moved on to another discussion. They're talking about the latest pop-star gossip. They take turns trying to get Ava to eat. They steal food off each other's plates, slap at the hands that do it.

I picture myself pulling a chair up to their table. There's plenty of room. I tell them my story, and they let me tell it without interruption. Linda cries and hugs me close. But nobody steals food from me, and worse, they no longer steal it from each other.

And I realize I'm not going to tell Linda who I am. I was never going to tell her, but I didn't know it myself. The fact that I was adopted as an infant had always gnawed at me, like a gnat buzzing near my ear. In these last seven years of so many annoyances, big and small, it was one thing I had the power to do something about.

What Becky said when we got here—that this should be my last day of stalking—starts to sink in.

I *am* a stalker.

Suddenly, all I can focus on is getting out of here.

As discretely as possible, I wave at the waitress. When she comes over, I hand her my Master Card without ever seeing the check.

"You were right," I whisper to Becky, semi-frantically. "I was wrong. Let's go. Now."

Becky, I'm sure, can see my bulging eyes, hear my quickened breathing, and feel me clutching the sleeve of her blouse. She says, "I'm not finished eating."

I really have to find a new friend.

I take the lid off the pepper and pour it on top of her tortilla.

I guess we should both find a new friend.

The waitress returns with my credit card, and I add a tip on the merchant's copy that will make our waitress's week.

Becky is looking at what's left of her meal like it's a town that's been leveled by an earthquake. For some reason, this calms me, and I say, "What sort of woman throws her mother out like she's yesterday's trash?"

Reluctantly, she pulls her eyes away from her plate. She furrows her brows. "Do you mean *daughter*?"

I shake my head.

"Oh," she says, and then she adds, "oh, no." She grabs my wrist and squeezes. It hurts.

"Goddammit," Becky adds, but there's no gusto in her curse word, only frustration. "Please don't back out on Three Rivers. Please. I love your mom, Jo. I do. But she doesn't know where she is, she doesn't know who you are. She wouldn't want you to give up your life to take care of her."

Becky's right. Mom always wanted me to be more like her. She thought I'd be happier. The fact that I turned out to be prudent, reliable and responsible was a disappointment.

"From now on," I say, not acknowledging I've heard a single word of her eloquent speech, "we eat whatever they bring us. No additions, no substitutions. No more pissing off waitresses."

Becky stands up. She juts out her chin and takes a deep breath. Gingerly, she picks up her purse. Ballerina-like, she

sashays over to the baby buggy. With that smile of hers that is meant just for me, she peeks inside.

“What a cute baby,” she says, taking her time, smiling at each woman in turn.

Then she glides out the door.

I know I should be fuming, but I feel like laughing, so hard that I cry and cry and cry.

I leave through the back door. That’s where I’ve hidden my little gray car, just in case it’s not as inconspicuous as I think it is, just in case Linda Wiley was once a Nancy Drew fan herself.

The bright sunlight is like an assault. I squint. Then I pull my phone out of my purse. I call Three Rivers Nursing Home and tell the receptionist to take my mother off the waiting list.

Before I left Mom today, sitting at the kitchen table with the lady from the agency, I gave her a roll of paper towels and a bandage scissors. When I get home I know she will be hidden behind a mound of Bounty cut in perfect inch-wide squares. She will peek out from behind her work of art, and when she sees me, her whole face will light up. She doesn’t recall that she’s my mother, but she remembers I’m someone she loves.

Bill Hodgins

Interior Decorating Suicide

Everything I've ever done I'll do forever all at once.
—Jimmy Chad

Jimmy Chad got his driver's license at fifteen and then passed the test a year later only to give it back a year after that. That's when he began to speak in imaginary numbers.

Jimmy envied his mother Cheryl because she had a last name.

Cheryl Alqwu' was born on a roof.

Cheryl Alqwu' was born on a sled beneath a blanket of filthy rags.

Cheryl Alqwu' was born on a picnic table.

Cheryl had a last name because she understood Lushootseed. She would tell everyone who would listen that she learned Lushootseed from a crow.

No one listened.

Sometimes she was glad no one listened because she figured if she taught anyone, they'd give it away.

Cheryl's other last name was George. Cheryl George was born on a fractured slab of corrugated fiberglass that caught the rain in the fall. It broke in half during a storm. So, she used it to snowboard down her frozen driveway in December. In the spring Cheryl's uncle nailed the pieces atop two saw horses, a powwow table for twelve.

Cheryl George was born on the Tulalip Indian Reservation, but there was no room. So, her dad wandered away. His body washed ashore near Alki off Elliot Bay in Seattle. The authorities could not determine the cause of death because he was face down. The elders determined it was shame.

Sixteen years later, Cheryl met Chad Chad, Jimmy's dad. Chad Chad nailed two pieces of corrugated fiberglass together and made a church where he proposed and married Cheryl on the same day. Two months later, Jimmy was born.

Jimmy taught me to car surf, a necessary harbinger, which I ignored. He invented car surfing when he turned fifteen,

when he met Edna. She was beautiful, for a car. Edna was a hard-top 1956 Chevy, virginal white, inside and out, except for the chrome details, a bride's jewels.

Tap tap . . .

Tap tap tap

Three a.m.

Whenever Jimmy tapped my bedroom window, I would pull the red frilly nylon fringe on my white vinyl shade until it tore. Then, I'd peer under the shade with my right hand, feel the cool aluminum window frame like Braille, and crack open the window an inch or two. Jimmy would whisper, "Hey Bill, you awake?"

"No."

Shoultes Road was our automotive North Shore, veering right of the Triangle Texaco at the north end of Marysville, running north, nearly four miles to 172nd Street and the private Arlington Airport. We had two favorite surfing games. The first was rudimentary, unassailable evidence that our frontal lobes were not yet fully formed. At the south end of Shoultes, near the fire station, Jimmy would floor Edna's receptive accelerator. In the wee hours of the morning we would speed up Shoultes, down a dip, past the elementary school, over the train tracks, beyond Due's Berry Farm, to 172nd in reverse. Then, I would repeat the feat back to the fire station. After about a month, Jimmy's tolerance increased. Thus, car surfing evolved. We still cruised Shoultes Road, but we used *D* rather than *R*, and our speed was measured. "Stay under 30!" I said, scrofulous and scared. Jimmy preferred forty-five. Once he hit thirty, I'd climb out my window and slither across the top of the car, then enter the driver's side window feet first as Jimmy scooted to his right. We would go round and round like a corkscrew as many times as we could between the fire station and the railroad tracks, maybe half way to 172nd, then back. When our luck was exhausted, we would stop at the Triangle Texaco for a can of chew. Then, I would throw up. Jimmy would drive home, drink his dad's beer, and pass out. Eventually, we got Michael Bull involved because he had the best car for jumping, even though it was really his brother's car, and we had to steal it out of his driveway and return it before his dad, Sheriff Bull, caught us

and threatened us like criminals. We jumped Michael Bull's blue Gran Torino, named the Bull-mobile, over the 136th Street railroad tracks. A new game was born.

Chad Chad, Jimmy's dad, was a high school basketball coach with an acidic temper and an overdeveloped taste for asparagus. The Chad family was an anomaly, a Native American family that left the neighboring Tulalip Indian Reservation to live on the north end of Marysville, Washington. Their neighbors included Joey and Duker Duke, adolescent brothers who lived at the end of a pot-holed cul-de-sac in a single story duplex before anyone in Marysville lived in a duplex, black rusted El Camino parked in front on blocks under a blue tarp, constricted by prolific blackberry bushes. I hated staying the night at Jimmy Chad's.

Jimmy's enigmatic mother, Cheryl, used to alternate shouts of "halleluiah praise Jesus" with "Don't wear boxers. Your balls will hang to your knees by the time yer 40." Her grandfather, Chester George, was the first Tulalip Tribal member to integrate and graduate from Marysville Public High School, though he had to pay tuition. Cheryl was devoted to tribal lore and her Presbyterian church, usually forcing Jimmy and me to go, but sometimes we would fake sleep, especially as we got older. She'd raise the blinds and sing. "Rise and shine and give God the glory glory!"

We would fake snore.

"Come on, boys."

We would fake snore, louder. She'd shake our feet. One out of ten times, she would give up and go to church by herself. We'd sneak into the hallway bathroom and peek at Mr. Chad's *Playboys* stashed behind the bath towels. Or, we'd grab a pinball out of their broken machine, which they kept in the garage. We'd roll the ball up and down the street. Jimmy's cat, Two Deers would follow.

"Hey, what kinda name is Two Deers?" anyone would ask.

"I don't know. My mom just told me our cat needed a name. So, I figured the first thing I saw out my window would be my cat's name. I got up, looked out and saw two deers humping in the woods."

On one particular pinball rolling day the Duke brothers appeared, no shirts, no shoes, dirty teeth. They shoved Jimmy,

made whooping noises with one hand over their mouths, the other like a peace sign behind their heads.

"Ha ha ha!!! Look at us. We're Fugowie Injuns! Drink some Rainier, where-the-fuh-gar-we?! HA HA HA!" Then, Duker narrowed his eyes and laid them on me. "Hey, Jimmy, who's the kid thinks he's too good to say hi?" Duker was a talker. Joey was big, quiet, confident. He was the one who needed dealt with.

"You should go home," I said, eyes fixed on Joey.

"Fuck you, shit face! This is our street," Duker said, the tip of his tongue filling several gaps in his teeth. Joey looked me up and down. Jimmy was quiet, uncertain. My mouth went dry knowing I had to punch Joey first and accurately because he would be the most problematic. But Duker stepped forward, directly into my independent right hand. Jimmy caught Duker's front left tooth out of mid-air. Duker fell and fortuitously tripped Joey. I jumped on top of Joey and bloodied his nose. He could not see and hollered, "Stop, stop!!!" Sometimes it's good to be lucky.

Two unfortunate events in successive weekends put a halt to our car surfing. The first happened out by Tulare Beach at the north end of the Rez. That was the first time I saw Jimmy Chad speaking to his grandpa, even though I could not see anyone or anything but a name on a road sign. Michael Bull picked me up in the Bull-mobile, and we met Jimmy at Totem Grocery. We swapped cars and hopped in Edna to meet three Everett girls, who were hanging out at one of their parent's beach cabins. Jimmy had been seeing one of the girls, Annie Cunnington, fateful long blonde hair and willingness. She wore her maroon skirt as if it guarded the secret to everlasting happiness. Her lithe sultry legs intentionally caressed Jimmy's entire body, but I believe the pregnancy was accidental. Annie and her two friends lived on the bluff in Mukilteo overlooking Port Gardner and attended Everett High School because they were too snobby for Mariner, surrounded by apartments, graffiti, and prejudice.

About ten miles out on the Rez Road near Port Susan we decided to play our favorite game, right after Jimmy saluted his grandpa amid a gauntlet of *In Memory of* signs. The

Rez road was notorious for drunk driving fatalities, usually pedestrians getting pasted by vans with no headlights along twelve miles of unlit, winding, fir-tree covered pot-holed asphalt. Each fatality is memorialized by a sign along the side of the road. Chester George's was erected in the late 1940's, the first so honored.

"Who you talkin' to?" Michael asked. I shivered.

"Chester, you know? He lives on the sign back there with his name on it."

"Does he wave?" I asked.

"Sometimes. Other times he nods, like hey, you know?"

Then, Jimmy must have been thinking about Health class because he asked, "What if Earth is a giant face with acne; caves are pores, and the dark is a giant black-head waiting to engulf us like a mass of phagocytes?"

Jimmy controlled the foot pedals. Michael handled the stick, three on the tree, and I steered from the passenger side with my left hand, difficult without power steering. Oh, and Jimmy was blindfolded. Jimmy liked to drive too fast. So, when we needed to turn left onto Tulare Way, I struggled to crank the wheel while imploring Jimmy to slow down, while negotiating Bull's stick-shifting arm, while Jimmy was as blind as teenage love. CLUNK! It happened as fast as the five-letter word. All the lug-nuts snapped off the right front wheel, and Edna's chrome bumper played the giant sparkler on the 4th of July.

"What the hell was that?!" Jimmy asked, too shocked to remove his blindfold.

"Um, well," I began, foretelling my poetic prose. "Take off your stupid blind-fold!" Jimmy slowly revealed his eyes when I asked, "See that gully below the trees?"

"Yeah."

"Your right front tire is somewhere down there."

"Shit," Michael and Jimmy harmonized.

When we were elementary school-aged, Jimmy and I used to climb up the roof of his house and fake fight. When a car would drive by, one of us would throw a fake punch while the other would fall off the house. The drivers always slammed on the breaks, "You kids ok?"

We'd grab our bellies and laugh, laugh, laugh.

"Fuckin' smart-asses!" they'd say.

Then, we'd get in a silly argument about something stupid like who's more valuable to the Boston Red Sox, Jim Rice or Fred Lynn? He always picked Lynn. I always picked Rice. Jimmy would say something senseless like, "You don't like Lynn because he's white."

"I'm white, nimrod."

Then Jimmy would stand too close. I'd shove him in his garden, climb on top and pepper his shoulders and face.

"Get the off me ya queer bait!" he'd say, then tell me to go home.

I'd oblige, get maybe a hundred yards down the road, turn around and see Jimmy following me on his banana-seated Schwinn. I'd stop and stare. He'd talk. He loved to talk.

"You want to ride to practice together?" he'd say.

"All right."

A week after we trashed Edna, Jimmy and I walked to the video store and rented *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Jimmy gave me a pinch of Beechnut, which I promptly barfed onto the feet of some guy pumping gas at the Triangle Texaco.

"Sorry, mister," I said and slurped up my saliva. Then I turned to Jimmy, "I don't wanna walk home." Besides, neither of us had a VCR. So, we called our friend, Jason. He had a brand new VCR, and he drove a five-speed fire-orange VW Sirocco, the Scorpions blaring on his fancy stereo. I bought a *Squirt* and a microwavable burrito to settle my stomach. Jimmy pulled a blue bandana out of his letterman's jacket, perfect for blindfolding Jason.

Whenever we called Jason, we could hear his mom screeching in the background, "Don't let that Jimmy kid drive!"

"Come on, Jason, Jimmy's not gonna drive," I'd say. "He'll be in the back seat on the stick. You do all the pedals. I'll steer. Simple. You have power steering."

Shit, he thought. "OK," he said.

We made it three miles up Old 99, no cops, no problems.

"OK, here's the tricky part," I said. Two ditches surrounded Jason's gravel driveway. "Slow down."

The Sirocco slowed as Jimmy down-shifted.

"OK, here we g—"

It's difficult to grasp. I was steering with my left hand, relaxed, confident. It just slipped off the wheel. Instinctively, both my hands reached for the dashboard as the car veered like a cheating wife. Jimmy released the stick and slumped, bracing himself with his feet pressed on the backs of our front seats. Jason was blind.

Splash!

We plunged grill first into the six-foot deep ditch past the driveway.

"What the hell was that?!" Jason asked, stunned, forgetting to remove his blind-fold. I didn't ask him to remove it.

"Um, well," I began, "we're in the ditch."

"What?! Oh, shit, my mom's gonna kill me!!!" Jason feared his mother, but he didn't die. We called the tow truck for the Sirocco. When the wrecker got there, the driver just laughed and laughed. "Hey, aren't you the guys I picked up last week at Tulare?"

After Edna was fixed Jimmy snuck out alone most of the time. He began a monthly routine climbing by foot or car the Fire Trail, a long old forest road at the north end of the Rez, looking for The Light, the Pig Swamp, Stick Indians, Chester George, all the legends Cheryl taught him. He wouldn't say much about the Stick Indians because they were so difficult to find. They were slain warriors and high school drop-outs. They lived in the trees, only came out at night, vanished when they turned sideways, and they protected the Pig Swamp, where *no one* wanted to go. The Pig Swamp is the darkest place on earth, black hole dark. It eats moonlight. Some say when Jesus cast Legion into the two thousand swine that went insane and drowned themselves, they surfaced in the swamp only five yards north of a dirt cut-out that connects the Fire Trail to Marine Drive, the Rez Road. Jimmy spoke very little of what he saw other than Chester perching on a sign and Michael's dad cruising the Rez in his orange patrol car.

Tap tap tap
Tap tap tap

"Hey, Bill, you awake?" Jimmy whispered.

My frilly red fringe detached from the shade. "No one in the whole world's awake. It's 3:00 am, and it's Wednesday."

"Yeah, well my grandpa's up, and I wanted someone to talk to."

"So why'd you come here?"

"Cuz they hate me on the Rez."

"Who hates you?"

"The Stick Indians, the full-bloods, everyone, except my grandpa. I asked him why we all have two first names?'"

"I thought your grandpa died in the 40's."

"He did, but they only buried him three feet deep."

"Huh?!"

"He says, 'We all forgot how to pronounce our last names when they cut our hair.' Then, he leaned over his sign, you know? He just stared at some brown hairy spider spinning a web between the post and the sign lookin' to catch the little red beetle that lives in the band of his hat. Oh, hey, I think someone's comin', gotta go."

I was the fastest breast-stroker in the state of Washington for seventy-five yards. Too bad the race was a hundred. But the point is, I could swim. I used to make Michael Bull swim across Lake Goodwin, a large lake just north of the Fire Trail. He refused to swim back for fear of drowning. So, I would swim, and he would run, a good race. And as I said, Jimmy liked to climb. So, the three of us decided to go to the Stilly River and dive off the Silvana train bridge. I was reluctant, but if I did it, I could write a letter of redemption to my dad, who had ridiculed me and called me a girl when I refused to dive off it at age six.

Michael and Jimmy scaled my fear of heights like spidermen, while I preferred the soft river sand, terra firma. Jimmy spun a flip and a half off the bridge's apex and laughed at the futile grasp of the river's mellow August current. Michael quickly followed.

"Let's go, Sally!" they sang.

Sometimes there are reasons for posted signs, especially ones that say, *Absolutely No Diving*. I stood atop the bridge, forty feet above the mocking river. Jimmy and Michael stood

below and to my left, not paying as much attention as I believed this moment warranted.

"OK!" I yelled and envisioned a 40-foot Y-chromosome I'd mail to my dad as I dived head first, elbows tight to my head, like streamlined swimmers are supposed to do off starting blocks only two feet high. From forty feet I knifed through the air like a peregrine falcon, cutting the surface like an Olympic platform diver, barely a ripple, but a spike of water impaled my right eardrum like an ice pick. All my hearing went purple. I bobbed up to the surface, but my equilibrium was AWOL. I looked up at the sky and the trees, a geological roulette wheel. My face involuntarily dropped into the water. Instinct told me to *paddle down hard with your left arm!*

"Help!" I yelled between gurgles. Jimmy and Michael laughed, thinking I was playing a joke because *I was a swimmer*. "I'm serious!" I was serious. The mellow current had a solid grip on my entire belief system.

"Oh, shit!" they chorused and bumped into each other, trying to decide who should get me as my aspirations were pulled down river.

By dumb luck their long and wide hands grabbed a firm hold of my arms, and they pulled me ashore. Jimmy Chad and Michael Bull saved my life. I tried to stand, but had no balance and promptly fell flat on my face. The doctor said I ruptured my eardrum. I never wrote the letter to my dad.

At school Jimmy began making random statements. "Hey, Indians don't experience male patterned baldness." Friends expressed concern about his drinking, that he needed to quit before killing all his brain cells. "Quittin's easy. My dad does it every time he falls asleep. Besides, it's all part of an experiment. I'm trying to devolve into a single celled organism." He read more and became infatuated with Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which led him to the conclusion, "Everything I've ever done I'll do forever all at once." Then, he would add a random question, "You ever notice there are no 30 year-old suicide bombers?" Random statements + Random question = Future peculiar behavior.

The future came quickly. Annie's stomach expanded while Jimmy moved in circles, chasing and fleeing his dreams. He

wanted to be a city hero and a Reservation hero. Everyone came to watch Jimmy play basketball, even the elders: Louis Henry, Johnny Sam, Stanley Parker, Willie Moses, even Walter WhiteBear, an adopted Inuit from Alaska. Marysville missed the play-offs Jimmy's senior year after he missed the front end of a one-and-one against archrival Snohomish who went on to the District title. Fraught with failure, Jimmy often cut school. When he did attend classes, everyone at our lunch table teased him, saying he wouldn't graduate.

In May 1986, I turned eighteen, a month before graduation. I teacher-assisted for the basketball coach, Mr. Wold. He had no idea why I was smiling, that it was my birthday.

"Hey, Billy-boy, what's the good news?" he asked as I sat in a pastel green plastic school chair next to his fake wood desk in the back of the room.

"Well—"

That's when Jason appeared, ashen and confused, like he was trapped in a freezer. Wold looked up and understood they needed to speak outside. Both faces contorted and changed colors like a mood ring. Then, EVERYTHING went black. Wold's lips turned to clay as some invisible potter animated them to form, *ohmygod!* He turned the same color as Jason when he returned to class. "I can't fucking believe it," he said to no one. I had never heard a teacher swear. His eyes welled up. I had never seen a teacher cry. He slumped and buried his face with the palms of his trembling hands. I ran outside, but Jason was gone. I ran back to Coach Wold.

"What's going on?"

He looked up, vacant. "Jimmy's dead."

Sheriff Bull found Jimmy nearly ten miles west on Marine Drive, crashed below a sign that read *In Memory of Chester George*. The police report was clean, void of the finer details such as the buck shot that turned out to be a dental filling wedged in the odometer; muddy grass in the door handle that turned out to be matted hair, an ear lobe, and chunks of jawbone and brain. Officer Bull merely made mental notes of the stench, Edna's bench seat involuntarily shit-stained and soaked in urine that reeked of asparagus. The floorboards held puddles of facial stew atop sandy gravel that turned out to be teeth and shrapnel from Jimmy's cheekbones and

nasal cavity. What Deputy Bull did report was true enough: man found dead on arrival at scene of apparent self-inflicted shotgun wound to the head, hands firmly adhered to the shotgun, twelve empty beer cans on the passenger side floorboard.

You might ask why he did it. Was it an identity crisis? A pregnant girlfriend? Alcohol? Maybe all. Maybe none. Everyone looked for a reason. What was going through his mind besides hundreds of powder-propelled BB's? I asked Jimmy why, once in a dream and once after church just two years ago.

Jimmy entered the high school pool through the spectator's door and followed me into the small, pool-side locker room. I was going to shower, but the timing did not seem right. He looked directly at me, so directly, in that moment, I knew I existed.

"I'm sorry," he told me, but it was difficult to know if he believed it. He was running, unsure of what to say, where to go. They chased him at school, along the Fire Trail, and found him in my dream.

"Gotta go," he said.

"I know."

He turned sideways and was gone.

Jimmy left no note. Sometimes there are no answers. Sometimes guys just shoot themselves in the head. Sometimes they miss and walk through life with a massive concussion. Jimmy didn't miss. He was always a good shot, except for that one night in Snohomish.

I'm driving home from church, listening to nothing on the radio, not even AM, just raindrops on my hood, beautiful music. I veer onto the Exit 199 off-ramp by accident even though it is where I need to go. I could take a right onto 4th, but I live left, so I go that way, west. I am on Marine Drive now, wondering if I will see him again, but it is light now so I see a diabetic Indian woman sitting along side the road in a mud puddle, thumb in the air like Jack Kerouac. I pull over, making sure the passenger seat is clean, suitable, then open the door. She never looks at me, which tells me she does not want to talk though she never closes her mouth. She climbs

in and knocks the wind out of the seat.

Her first words come from her clothes, a blue nylon jacket, Lummi Basketball in red letters, Lester on the front left though she doesn't look anything like him. Her jacket and navy cotton sweat pants are drenched, the first wash in weeks. Her cane carries the conversation without words, swollen feet, already missing toes. She is wearing shoes, but you can still tell. Her feet are tiny bread loaves, bound like a Chinese aristocrat, but her husband is no prince, and her fingernails understand manual labor. Her toes hurt, especially the missing ones. She wears the rain like a mask, but her sweat betrays her, thick with sucrose. Her face is full of stories, and I wonder if she is my grandma.

She changes her mind about talking and says, "It's fuggin' cold, yeah?" But it was rhetorical, so I ask her where she's going. Without looking she says, "Who fuggin' knows where anyone's goin'?" She wants breakfast. She needs it.

We are driving west now, all four miles to Totem Grocery. There is no totem, just a plastic sign that tells its own history. She tells me of her fuggin' husband who fuggin' died in jail 'cuz the federal agent forgot to grab her husband's fuggin' insulin from the dresser. So, he died in some anonymous Oklahoma jail-cell before he could keep his fuggin' promise. He left her and their four kids, but he was coming back. The kids aren't kids anymore but still fuggin' live with her. After she gets her quarterly check she will take the fuggin' bus to Enid, claim his property. Says he left a hundred acres of fertile land. She holds that belief like a vice. She wants to get to Enid before one of her fuggin' daughters claims the land as her own. The federal agents just drive doughnuts all over it and have some fuggin' kid hose off the dust from their government Fords.

We are pulling in to the Totem Grocery when she nearly looks at me, but she sees her cousin instead. Her cousin is eating miniature powdered donuts chased by cans of Rainier in the back of her Indian van. The window sticker says, "Indian Van." Her cousin has no more money, no more gas. A monolithic Indian man steps out of the van and grabs a donut and a beer. He and the cousin don't look at me. They are busy fishing their pockets with driftnet fingers that come

up as empty as the gas tank.

Mandolin returns to my truck. That is what I call her, but only to myself. She is sad, dying, beautiful. She asks me nothing. So I go inside the store and buy her a six-pack of PBR. "Thanks man, fuggin' A, yeah?!" I don't ask her where she wants to go, so I take her back, not two hundred years, just the four miles plus an extra hundred yards into another country, a Delhi slum surrounded by fir trees, a fifth wheel, a picnic table, and three more cousins. One looks eighteen. He is looking straight through me, but I am not really there. His lower jaw tickles the tabletop, FAS. One cousin walks behind the fifth wheel. The other is tall, looks at Mandolin, which is why he doesn't point his shotgun at my truck. He just leans on it. He was once a tribal basketball hero. His name is Spencer David, but he doesn't play basketball any more. Mandolin gets out, holds up her six cans of breakfast and says, "fuggin' A!" They all smile but not until I leave.

I am driving back to Tulare on Marine Drive, but I can't see the road in my daydream. About a mile past Mission Beach I am heading up hill, thinking about church, about Mandolin, about dead friends. I drive off the road and smash into a sign, "PLEASE DON'T DRINK & DRIVE in memory of JIMMY CHAD." I meet my forty-first police officer. "What seems to be the problem?" he asks.

"Guess I hate road signs," I say. He doesn't smile . . . until he hands me my seventeenth ticket. I tell myself, no more car games. *No one replaces the sign, and I wonder if I will ever see Jimmy Chad again.*

Efrem Sigel

Born Again

Now she's desperate to be on her way, and all she can think about is getting to Penn Station. It's only three stops on the express train, but what if one of the group sees her on the platform and tries to stop her? And in her condition, can she even make it down the stairs? She's tried to take just the essentials—toiletries, underwear, a normal-sized pair of slacks, several blouses, both light and heavy sweater for when the New England autumn begins, her rain coat with the removable lining, the latest draft of her dissertation—but hefting the fully loaded bag is daunting. She opts for a cab and there goes another five bucks when she's going to need every nickel.

The cabbie gives her the same look she gets these days from storekeepers whenever she does her head-bobbing, half straight-ahead, half-sideways shuffle to maneuver her stretched to the bursting belly inside the door. She imagines them thinking: whatever you're doing here be quick about it, and for God's sake have your baby somewhere else. As the driver manhandles her suitcase into the trunk, she heaves herself into the back seat, landing a bit to one side and righting herself with difficulty. Though nothing could be more uncomfortable than this dirty cab smelling of Indian spices and bouncing down Broadway as if the driver were aiming for every pothole, the fact of being in motion astonishes her. Have I really done it? Have I escaped?

The cabbie's unrestrained dash for the station notwithstanding, Susan misses the 3:30 train and must wait for the 4:45. It'll be nearly 9:30 when the train gets in, more likely 10 p.m. or later, given Amtrak's predictable unpredictability. What if she's too late? What if the baby will not abide by an Amtrak timetable or any other man-made plans? For 24 hours she's been having contractions on and off; she can't imagine going another couple of days in this condition, even if her due date is supposedly a week away.

Why did I wait so long, she asks herself.

Never mind, it's in the past, it's done.

Ticket in hand, she settles into a seat that will give her a view of the water on the stretch between Bridgeport and Providence. She tries and fails to swing her bag onto the overhead rack, and embarrassed, accepts help from the athletic young man with crew cut, gym bag and Brown T shirt. He eyes her almost-nine-months'-pregnant belly, then takes the aisle seat opposite.

"Ma'am if you need anything at all, just ask."

Thank you, she says, and asks where he's from. A small town in Ohio, near Columbus, he tells her; he's Brian, a junior at Brown who plays varsity football. Halfback.

"We've got a good team this year," he says, chuckling. "I'm sure we'll win a game or two." The Brown football team has gone 21 games, almost two full seasons, without a victory.

They talk some more and it's the best kind of distraction for Susan; his flat Midwestern vowels and his easy, unaffected manners take her mind off her belly. The train eases out of the darkness of the long tunnel, crosses the bridge into the Bronx, picking up speed as it barrels toward Stamford. She settles deeper into her seat. Let it be all right, she thinks, let it be all right. At one point in her life—age 13, her bat mitzvah—the words might have been a prayer. Call it what you will now, she tells herself, a plea, a mantra, just let it be so.

How did I get into this mess, she wonders, and by this mess she means giving up her prized autonomy, curbing not only her speech but also her thinking to conform to Micah Green's strictures? And if that wasn't bad enough, repressing her doubts, keeping mum and keeping still until finally this day of exodus came, as she knew six months ago, hell, a year ago, that it must.

By this mess she does not mean getting pregnant because in the turmoil and wreckage of her life the pregnancy is a constant; she can even call it a moral imperative. Whatever else happens—whether or not she finishes the Ph.D. that is 90 percent complete, whether she reestablishes a connection with her family, first with Rob and then with her parents and sister—she refuses to call her pregnancy a mistake. How can destiny be a mistake, even if destiny arrives a year or three earlier than it might have?

On her lap Susan has a bag with supper (cheese sandwich, apple, granola bar) and a manila envelope with the 157 pages of manuscript. She has no appetite, not for food, not for what's in the envelope. At Stamford she and the Brown halfback talk about, of all things, babies: he has three older sisters, all of them married, and he's seen a lot of babies born. Soon her eyes close, the manila envelope slips from her grasp and when she opens them again the sunlight has dimmed and as the train is pulling into the New Haven station, her water breaks.

Thirty minutes later she feels the first round of contractions.

Should she get off in Bridgeport and go straight to the hospital? The contractions are 15 minutes apart. She forces herself to fight the panic. There's time, she says. Her mind has resolved around one thing, a banner waving above the debris of the battlefield: making it to Boston and putting herself under the protection of her brother. She called Rob twice yesterday, missed him, left a message on his answering machine.

"It's Susan. You can't reach me; I'll call back. I'm coming to Boston tomorrow and I need your help." A pause, and then: "I'm pregnant, nine months pregnant."

The second time she added, "Don't tell mom and dad, not till we've talked."

For the two and a half years that she was an adherent of the Sullivanians, she foreswore all contact with her parents: no visits, no calls, no letters. It's the only way to free yourself from the tyranny of parents, Micah Green insisted. The only way to become an adult.

Both calls to her brother were made on her frantic last day of preparations. For a week she's been transferring research materials and books to her cubicle in Butler Library. She locked the two-drawer file cabinet and gave a key to Malcolm, a research librarian twice her age. With his long beard the color of hoar-frost and his black eyes, he looks as if he's stepped out of a Norse legend. When she explained she might be gone for some months and was worried about the safety of her materials, Malcolm loaded her file cabinet onto a hand truck and wheeled it to his own locked storage space.

"Don't let anyone but me open it up," she told him. "Not

without written authorization."

Malcolm gave her an amused look. He was used to the obsessive behavior of Ph.D candidates and Susan's instructions, while extreme, did not faze him.

"Aye aye," he said.

Is she crazy to be so paranoid about Micah and his notorious vindictiveness? As the founder and undisputed leader of the Sullivan Institute for Research in Psychoanalysis and its radical urban community—Micah hates the word commune, with its connotation of unwashed hippies living in urban squalor—he'll do anything to keep a member from leaving. In the early and mid 1970s the group was in its heyday but now, barely a decade later, it's a new world, politically, technologically, and things are starting to fray. Two fathers recently quit the group and, when their wives refused to go with them, sued for custody of their young children. With funds from the Sullivanians, the mothers are fighting them in court. Another young woman who had left without her toddler wound up hiring a couple of wise guys armed with baseball bats to storm the apartment and snatch the boy for her. Better to have fled now, Susan thinks, than to face such choice later—hire a lawyer or hire a thug.

At the beginning, she recalls, it was thrilling to be part of the group. She'd followed a predictable path, first becoming a patient of the Institute's and soon thereafter moving into one of the Sullivanian apartments on the Upper West Side, joining all these young people intent on remaking the world. She'd always been a rebel, a seeker of adventure, and the Sullivanians seemed to answer both needs.

Even though she's been wise to Micah for some time, it still has taken tremendous effort to break free. To get acolytes into the group he first seduces them—the women often literally, he's cruelly handsome, irresistible; the men by promising them the self-confidence that comes from rejecting mommy and daddy to stand on their own two feet. That, and the fame that will accrue to those who make a revolution, because the Reagan years have been a tonic to would-be radicals, becalmed in the liberal eddies after Watergate and after Vietnam. Here at last is a new enemy—this ex-actor, a genial, smiling devil—to reawaken the revolutionary ardor that Micah knows how

to stoke.

Twice a year the Sullivanians mount a new piece of political theater in the second floor of an unheated East Village loft, its broken windows testimony to the social upheaval they promote. The RTC they call it, Radical Theater Cooperative, and each audience, small but enthusiastic, becomes a pool of potential new converts.

Many of the Sullivanians are professionals—lawyers, psychiatrists, a prolific magazine writer, even a corporate ad manager—whose salaries go to support the group. Once they are installed in the group's apartments, which he insists must be spotless and well-ordered, with schedules, work rules, discipline, Micah entreats and bullies them to bear allegiance to his ideology, a tangle of post-Maoist egalitarianism and contempt for traditional family and generational hierarchies.

One of Micah's tenets is that children must be raised communally, with members taking turns babysitting and parents allowed only limited time with their own kids. For Susan the fear of losing her baby to the group was the clincher, the reason she's fled without saying goodbye to Jay, the father-to-be. He's a high school history teacher, a gentle soul who would marry her in an instant. How could she say yes, when Jay is hopelessly devoted to Micah and his skewed view of the world?

Besides Malcolm the librarian, Susan also enlisted Ann-Marie, a college friend, to help store the things she couldn't take with her. Waiting until mid-afternoon when the apartment was deserted, she crammed an old duffel full of clothes and bumped it down two flights of stairs. Ann-Marie and her boyfriend drove up in his VW bus, met her on the corner of Broadway and 99th St. and relieved her of the bag, to be hidden under a bed in their Prospect Heights apartment.

"Can you tell me what's going on?" Ann-Marie asked.

"You're saving my life is all. I'm going out of town. I'll tell you in a couple of weeks."

"But your baby?"

"I'm not going to have it here. I'm going to Boston." She let this slip without meaning to and immediately swore Ann-Marie to silence.

"Is that wise? I mean, it could happen any day."

"I have to do it. Go on, now, and thank you. Thank you."

Now the train is past Bridgeport. It's impossible to sleep, the contractions are coming every nine minutes. Her breathing quickens; despite her efforts to keep quiet there are little puffs of anxiety escaping from her lips. Brian, watching her, says she has to get off at the next station.

"No," she says, fighting to keep her voice on an even keel.

The train crosses into Rhode Island as the last light drains from the sky. Susan cups her belly, stares at her watch; the contractions are only four minutes apart. In the focused circle of light from the overhead reading lamp, her aggrieved features are blotchy, coarsened from the labor her body is undergoing.

Brian registers the pain flickering across her face. He rises to his feet, inches from her. "You're having your baby. We need to get you help."

They are slowing, approaching Providence and after Providence it is another 42 minutes to Back Bay station in Boston. Her insides are being pounded and stretched by this baby who wants out. Wave after wave of pain is forcing everything else from her consciousness.

"It's . . . it's . . . " The effort of trying to formulate the words defeats her, she shrinks into the scratchy seat covering and presses one hand to her belly. Brian, adamant, swaying as the train lurches and bucks, insists he'll take her to the hospital as soon as they reach the station.

"I need to get to Boston," she says urgently. "I have a brother there."

Listening to her own voice, between a whisper and a croak, reveals to her the absurdity of her plan, or rather, lack of plan. She knows no doctor in Boston, she's made no preparations with any hospital. Can she be the same person who had a dissertation outline within months of arriving in the graduate psych department at Columbia, who aced every exam, who juggled effortlessly her teaching assistant's duties, her research and her Sullivanian chores, who lived her double life—by day the driven grad student, by night the committed, semi-promiscuous revolutionary—with aplomb? On moving in with the group she cropped her long black hair in favor of a short, rakish, revolutionary cut; her full figure, her sharp

intelligence proclaimed her a person to be reckoned with—not to mention a sex object. Micah kept insisting that group members sleep with someone different every night, but after six months she found Jay and that was the end of sleeping around.

"There's no time. Here we are in Providence. I'm calling for help."

In the midst of the rustle of arms thrusting into coats, of hand luggage being hefted, of people edging out of their seats, whispering to each other, those in the know putting distance between themselves and Susan's ordeal, the conductor's voice comes over the loudspeaker: "Providence station, arriving in Providence."

As soon as the announcement is over Brian is shouting "Conductor! Conductor, we have an emergency here. This woman needs help, she needs a doctor and an ambulance."

He plucks her suitcase from the rack and reaches a strong arm toward her, grasping her left hand, urging her to stand. Instead her head and shoulders slump toward the window. She tries to raise her legs onto the seat but the effort is too great. Through the spasms she hears voices calling back and forth.

Abandoning the effort to get her out of the car, he bends quickly to grasp her ankles. He lifts. Now she is lying on her back, knees bent. Susan tries not to cry out but the pressure is too great; her moans are coming in relentless short bursts, like the chug of a locomotive climbing an impossibly steep grade.

The overhead lights in the car have switched on and the conductor's uniform, which was dusky and indistinct in the darkness, suddenly emerges in official blue. The conductor, a large man with a lined brown face, pushes past the disembarking passengers.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

"She's having a baby. She needs a doctor and an ambulance right away. And tell them to hold the train."

One look at Susan and the conductor is on the PA system. "Will any physician or nurse report urgently to car 6, repeat any physician or nurse to car 6 at once." He pushes the button on his walkie talkie to tell the engineer to delay the departure;

he asks the station office to call for an ambulance.

For Susan it's impossible to say which is more painful, the baby stretching her to the breaking point or the imminent humiliation of being served up publicly. like a case-study of mistimed parturition, on two seats of an Amtrak train.

Almost immediately two doctors appear, one a newly minted fellow in obstetrics at the Brigham, the other a cardiologist. The obstetrician, a diminutive woman named Rose Kelly, sterilizes her hands with rubbing alcohol. Her older colleague listens to Susan's heart beat while Kelly bends to examines her.

She introduces herself as if meeting any new patient for the first time.

"What's your name? she asks in an everyday voice, and then, "Susan, how are you feeling? How much pain are you in?"

The answer is a gasp. "Too much. Can you give me something?"

"I'll see what we can do. Now listen, I don't want you to push right now," she tells her. "Breathe deeply and think peaceful thoughts. Everything is going to be fine and dandy."

Then she turns to the cardiologist, Bruce Levitt. Susan can barely hear her next words. "The baby is breached," Kelly whispers. "The head is facing backwards."

"Can you turn it around so we can deliver here?"

"I don't know. Pretty tough conditions. A pause, then: "What've you got for pain?"

Levitt hands her a bottle of Percoset tablets. Kelly breaks three into small pieces and tries to feed them to Susan.

No, she says, not hungry, and closes her teeth.

"It's not food, it's medicine." Kelly is speaking slowly and distinctly, afraid that Susan will pass out. She crumbles the pills into even smaller fragments and places them on Susan's tongue. Swallow them, she orders, you'll feel better.

A few paces away, Levitt is demanding that the conductor call again for the ambulance. "It's a matter of life and death for this woman and her baby."

Kelly's hand is on Susan's pelvis and she is talking into her ear, reassuring her that it will be okay. Nine centimeters dilated, but no sign of the baby's head; the concern on Kelly's

face is patent. Susan is mumbling something and Kelly bends even closer. What is it, she asks.

The pain continues to build, more intense than anything Susan has known, but her mind is separating itself from the pain, as if her heart rate is slowing and a precious, fragile awareness is taking hold. She is seeing herself at a distance, seeing her life in all its striving and accomplishments, all its imperfections and wrong turns.

"Two things," she says to this small woman hovering over her and claiming to be a doctor, though Susan was sure she was in a train car and not in a doctor's office. "First, save my baby if you can. Do whatever you can for her"—Susan clings to the conviction that this tiny infant fighting to be born is a girl—"do it, and don't worry about me. It's her I want to save."

I see, I understand, Kelly says; this is not the time to agree or disagree.

"Second, my brother and my parents and my sister. Brother, Rob Bruner, B R U N E R, in Waltham. Parents, Marshall and Elena, in Lenox, in western Mass. Sister, Talia, in DC. Call them. Tell them I love them. Tell them to take care of this baby and to hold on to her, whatever the struggle, whatever the cost."

"Bruner," Kelly repeats, loudly enough for Levitt to hear. "Rob in Waltham, Marshall and Elena Bruner in Lenox, Talia in DC."

"They'll try to take her away from them. Don't let them. I want my family to have custody. I want them to take care of her and not let them get her."

"Who? Who is going to try to get your baby?"

"They. Jay and Micah. All the Sullivanians, in New York. The baby is to stay with Rob and my parents. Whatever it takes. They can fight them. They can fight them and win."

"Fight who? Who can they fight?"

"The Sullivanians. Don't let them get my child."

She says this with all the force she can muster, making sure the words register in Kelly's ear. Then, in a fraction of an instant, Susan is silent. Kelly's hand registers the pressure of the abdomen, expanding and contracting. She nods. Susan's pulse is rapid but steady.

"Sullivanians," Kelly repeats to Levitt. "What in the world

are Sullivanians?"

"I'll tell you later. As soon as we get her into an ambulance."

"If I can do an episiotomy I can deliver here," Kelly is saying and then, something about saving the baby. In the pause between contractions, Susan realizes she's hearing a consultation between two doctors.

"Too risky. What if she bleeds? And the chance of infection?"

"She doesn't want to lose that baby."

"She may have already lost her. We can't tell. She's got to go to the hospital.

"I can do it here."

"Dr. Kelly." Against all odds his tone is conversational. "I'm sure you can. I can tell you're as able as they come. And if we were 50 miles from a hospital or in rural Ecuador I'd say go for it, let's take the chance. But not here."

"Very little movement from the baby, that's what I'm worried about."

They have no way to measure except her hand on Susan's body or in the birth canal.

She crouches down and with her fingers is reaching inside, as far up the vagina as she can, as if to gauge: what if she can do it without cutting?

Levitt looks at his watch: barely five minutes since he and Kelly arrived on the run, summoned by the conductor's urgent plea. Where is the ambulance? The self-assurance of this calm and capable young doctor will have counted for little if they lose this woman lying on the train seat.

All of a sudden there's a commotion on the platform. The conductor dashes out of the car, gesturing. "Here, she's in here."

Two burly EMS techs enter, holding the stretcher sideways to move it along the aisle. Dr. Kelly has her fingers around the baby's buttocks and now she pulls with her strong right hand. A flash of white skin appears.

"Susan, push." She shouts into Susan's ear. "You can do it, Susan, you can do it all by yourself. Push!"

And the buttocks are clear, descending, and Kelly has both hands on the torso of the baby and pulling, gently but with a grip that will not slacken. One of the techs has white pads and alcohol and a surgical scissors; the other readies an oxygen

mask. It's too crowded, how can anyone work in this space? Levitt steps back and lets the techs draw near. At the doors to the car, Brian is blocking traffic, making sure no one else can approach.

"I've got her." Kelly announces, holding the newborn, looking for a sign that the lungs can work. She plucks a wipe from the tech and cleans the baby's mouth and nostrils. She opens its mouth and compresses the chest ever so gently, a butterfly touch. Come on, she urges, come on. And then it happens, a choking sound, the drawing of breath and a cry for life.

Levitt's quiet words are heard over the shrill wail of the newborn: "Time of delivery, nine fifty-one."

It is nearly midnight when Susan opens her eyes to see a young woman in a skirt and blouse, seated in the plastic chair at the end of the hospital bed.

"I'm Dr. Kelly. Rose Kelly."

"Are you the one..?"

"I delivered your baby, yes. She's a beautiful little girl, doing just fine."

"Wow." Shy in front of this stranger who had tugged at her body and extracted her daughter, Susan says, "This was my first."

"In a way it was my first too—my first in a passenger train."

They talk and finally Susan comprehends that she's in a Providence hospital, and that Dr. Kelly interrupted her journey home to save her and her baby.

"Here's my phone number in case I can do anything for you in Boston," Dr. Kelly says as she gets up to go. "Oh, and that young man, here's his phone number, too."

She hands Susan a piece of note paper, and just as she is about to leave, a tall man with hair curling down his neck parts the curtain dividing Susan's bed from the rest of the room. It's three years since she's seen Rob and her smile is so immediate that it swallows up her entire face.

"You know how to make a dramatic reappearance, don't you?" His words are sweet to her, all his one upsmanship, his nonstop teasing from her teenage years, a thing of the past. "Susan, I've seen her, seen your daughter. My niece." He

pauses, his voice shaky. “She’s gorgeous.”

She sees the tears in his eyes and suddenly she can’t control her own tears; they drip and slide through her enormous smile. He steps to the side of the bed to embrace her. Despite announcing her departure Dr. Kelly is still here, against the ribbed partition, unable to take a step, barely in control of her own emotions.

Rob clutches Susan’s shoulders, buries his nose in her neck, nuzzles her cheek; finally his rough stubble of a day’s beard seems to wake both of them. He straightens up.

“I know it must be a long story, how you wound up in that group, how you left it—and this beautiful baby, where she came from. But what the hell, if you want to talk I’ve got all night.”

Where to begin? Susan needs to pee, she’s thirsty and even hungry; most of all she wants to see her baby, to confirm with her own eyes what Rose Kelly and now her brother have told her. Her gaze flicks from Rob to Dr. Kelly and back to Rob, who is still standing there only an arm’s length away, and in this instant her regret over the years of cutting herself off from her family is acute, far more painful than the soreness of her body.

With his smile he is urging her to speak and she realizes that she has yet to say a word to him. The regret subsides, replaced by an overflowing sense of grace at having her baby, her brother and this doctor all close. Born again, she thinks.

“I’ll tell you more once I’ve seen her,” she says to Rob, her voice scratchy at first and then gaining volume. The reality of her daughter’s birth, the fact of their flight to safety are overwhelming. Susan keeps her gaze on Rob as the words tumble from her lips.

“I can hardly believe it—that she’s born and we’ve escaped that group. Escaped those people.”

Micah Green and the Sullivanians are very far away; perhaps in time she can make them vanish altogether.

Her face is aglow, exhilaration and tears comingling in a moment that seems to lengthen and endure.

Noëlle Gallagher

Le Fanu's Host of Curiosities

The streets were not as empty as Rex would have liked, given the hour. Though the mist hid his fellow nocturnal wanderers from view, he could not escape the sound of their laughter. He quickened his pace, hoping to avoid them entirely, but luck was not with him. He ran headlong into the happy couple; their dress suggested an evening of culture, perhaps the opera, though Rex found the notion difficult to credit given the amount of rouge the woman wore. The couple cackled out an apology, and Rex gritted his teeth until they had passed back into the haze.

The wind howled down the narrow street, swirling abandoned newspapers about Rex's feet. He always left these company dinners with a tremendous headache, not that work was to blame. Wives' tales swirled around his brain. Try as he might, he couldn't dislodge those piercing voices from his mind. Better to have foresworn the company of women than to be trapped with a shrew for the rest of one's life. He had repeated this philosophy to himself all through the night, but no belief, no matter how staunch, could protect against the sting of being the only man at dinner without a companion.

Rex slowed to a stop. He had lost himself in his thoughts, missing his turn in the process. With a grumble, he hurried back to Spruce Street, but what he saw pushed all thoughts of home out of his mind.

Standing in a storefront window was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Even at a distance he could see the shades of blue in her eyes, her perfect pink lips, and the chestnut ringlets that fell like a waterfall down her back. His attraction reeked of weakness, but his lonely heart was no match for such a face. Rex wandered over as casually as he could manage, and his spirit leapt when she did not flee at his approach. He hurried to the window, but as he placed his hands on the glass and stared up into the face that had captured his heart so quickly, his dream shattered. Here was no woman at all but a porcelain doll made in the size and

shape of a young lady. Despite his initial disappointment, Rex's fascination held. This creature was no less beautiful for being porcelain. On the contrary, freed from all the flaws of flesh, she was the picture of perfection.

The sign hanging over the shop read *Le Fanu's Host of Curiosities—Est. 1792*. Rex rubbed his eyes, but this was no trick of the brandy he had consumed with dinner. The bookshop stood where it had for the last ten years, as did the milliners; somehow Rex had never noticed the squat little shop nestled between them, the one claiming to be one hundred years old. Of course, had it not been for that exquisite face in the window, who could say if he would have noticed it now?

Doubt crept into Rex's mind even as he reached for the door. The shop was certainly closed, but all of his desires mounted as he looked at that beautiful creature. He was not usually a man to suffer frivolities, much less entertain the notion of buying playthings at his age, but he pushed those thoughts aside as his fingers closed around the doorknob. Much to his surprise, it turned, and he soon found himself standing inside Le Fanu's Host of Curiosities.

Dark, heavy carpets overlapped on the stone floor, swallowing the thin light of the lamps. Wooden cabinets lined the walls, and in a glance, Rex caught sight of candles, powders, and utensils that looked very much like human bone. He took a trepidatious step forward, ducking instinctively though the dream catchers hung far above his head. He bent towards the front table, where a skull in a jeweled masquerade mask glittered above a stuffed armadillo with a miniature stone castle on its back; splayed around them were silver, embossed cards. The scent of incense wafted through the air, muddling Rex's thoughts.

With a sudden remembrance of the purpose of his visit, Rex turned to the window only to find his way blocked by a man. Rex started, and the man let out a chilling laugh.

"My apologies," the man said. "You would think that, given the nature of my gallery, I would take care not to startle my patrons, but I don't seem able to resist when the opportunity beckons. Please forgive me. Mister Jacques Le Fanu, at your service," he said, bowing slightly.

There was nothing remarkable about Le Fanu upon first glance, but the longer Rex stared, the stranger the shopkeeper appeared. He was tall and slender with long fingers he now tented, resting them on his sternum. He wore his thin, gray hair to his shoulders, yet it begged for a barber to shear it off, and his clothes, though stately, had been in fashion no less than fifty years ago. Rex could think of no other recourse than to stare dumbly, even when Le Fanu snapped his fingers under Rex's nose.

"Come now," Le Fanu said. "What brings you into my shop?"

"The door was open," stammered Rex.

"Which you'll find is quite common for a business. Why did you walk inside?"

Rex stopped his gaze from traveling over to the window. He couldn't explain to the strangest of strangers that he was interested in a doll.

"I've just come to look around."

"And so you shall."

Le Fanu bowed low and withdrew to his stool behind the counter. His retreat did little to comfort Rex, who could feel the proprietor's eyes following him with every step he took. He circled the shop, hoping Le Fanu would leave him be long enough that he might steal a glance at the window, but the man was a vulture. No more than five minutes had passed before he was once again at Rex's side, leading him to the bookshelves.

"If you're in for a bit of a thrill, perhaps you would be interested in my extensive library. I've a very interesting book about a young artist who returns to London after his education in Europe left him penniless."

"I'm afraid I'm not after a book," Rex said.

Rex's eyes flickered to the window despite himself. He had hoped Le Fanu wouldn't notice, but without following the line of Rex's gaze, Le Fanu smiled, revealing his small, pointy teeth.

"Ah, Bianca," he whispered.

With a wink and a smirk, he glided towards the window and waited. Rex lingered by the table for a moment, until at last his longing defeated his embarrassment and he joined Le Fanu.

"I came in on a whim," said Rex. "I don't even know why I bothered really."

"Come now Mr. Cypress, no need to feel ashamed. Bianca is one of the finest pieces in the store."

Before Rex could ask how he had known his name, Le Fanu stepped into the window display, scooped the doll into his arms as a groom would carry his bride, and positioned her in the armchair next to Rex. She was even more beautiful up close. Her glass eyes were the softest blue, and her complexion, so pale that in certain light she almost looked white, had been painted without a single flaw. A shudder ran down Rex's back as his finger brushed one of Bianca's perfect curls.

"Tell me Mr. Cypress, are you married?" Le Fanu asked.

"No," said Rex sharply, drawing his hand away from the doll.

Le Fanu said nothing, but his lips curled with some private musing he was not good enough to share.

"Your interest in Bianca is understandable. What better cure for heartache than a companion who cannot leave you? Unless it was more than loneliness that brought you to my shop."

There was no judgment in Le Fanu's tone, and Rex allowed his mind to unpack the possibility of this transaction. He pictured Bianca sitting beside the fire, smiling at him when he returned from a grueling day at the bank. Then he pictured himself sitting beside a lifeless doll, and he looked the part of the fool. He was about to say as much, but Le Fanu was barking towards the back room.

One of the tapestries on the back wall moved aside, and out walked a young woman. She had a plain, sad sort of face, and the colorful skirts and headscarf she wore, rather than give her an air of mystery, made her face look all the more artless in comparison. She hurried forward with a large piece of parchment, which Le Fanu tore from her hand. She shuffled back to the tapestry, but one sharp word from Le Fanu stopped her in her tracks.

"My daughter Esmeralda," said Le Fanu. He adjusted his scowl and presented the paper to Rex. "I have here a bill of sale should your intentions go further than mere curiosity."

"And what use would I have for a doll? I have my reputation to think of."

"And who could begrudge you a companion? They all take one for themselves, sooner or later. Bianca could be yours." Rex shook his head and took an unsteady step towards the door. Le Fanu merely shrugged. "Of course, if you don't want her, you don't want her. Silly me. I must have misread your interest. Let's put you back my dear."

Le Fanu hoisted Bianca over his shoulder and carried her to the window. Rex hurried to the door, but he couldn't resist one last look over his shoulder.

"Will you be wanting me to take the bill back Father?" asked Esmeralda, emerging from the shadows.

"No, leave it with me. It won't be long before we find another buyer."

Rex withdrew his hand from the knob and whipped around.

"You still mean to sell her?" Rex asked.

"This isn't a museum, Mr. Cypress," said Le Fanu. He continued to arrange Bianca's curls without a glance in Rex's direction. "This is a shop, and as such, I mean to make a living. Now if you'll excuse us, my daughter and I would like to close for the night."

"I'll buy the doll," Rex declared.

In an instant, Le Fanu was at his side, leading him over to the counter where Esmeralda had the bill prepared. Rex realized too late that he should have inquired after the price. He couldn't imagine Le Fanu's reaction if he backed out of the sale once more. The proprietor reached behind the counter, and he produced a small knife and a vial.

"I can guarantee that Bianca will be a cure for your loneliness, but the price is steep," said Le Fanu. "Five dollars for the doll. Five drops of blood for the wish."

Rex's mouth went dry. The wish he had been harboring resided deep in his most secret soul, but there seemed to be nothing Le Fanu couldn't deduce. Rex managed a nod. He held out his hand, shaking with anticipation. Le Fanu gently pricked Rex's index finger with the tip of the knife. He pressed the vial to the cut, counting out five drops of blood. He secured a lid on the vial, which Esmeralda collected and hid in the folds of her skirts.

“What are you going to do with it?” Rex asked.

“That, I’m afraid, was not part of our arrangement,” Le Fanu said with a smile.

The contract included a bill of sale. Rex’s eyes swam over the text, catching only snatches such as “binding” and “irrevocably.” Le Fanu’s long finger pointed to the very bottom, where he waited for Rex to make his mark.

“You haven’t a pen?” asked Rex.

“All in good time,” said Le Fanu. “I find that sealing in blood makes for a much better bind. Just a dab will do.”

It was a terrifying notion, but as Le Fanu had already collected his blood, what was to stop him from sealing it himself when Rex left? With his heart trembling beneath his Adam’s apple, Rex laid his bloody finger on the parchment. In one swift movement, Le Fanu seized Esmeralda’s wrist and pricked her finger, which she proceeded to place on the parchment.

“You’re not signing it?” Rex asked.

“You’ll find Esmeralda’s blood is fresher than mine. But never you mind. My blood runs in her veins. Through her I am bound to the contract, same as you.”

Le Fanu took a potion down from the cabinet and placed one drop on Rex’s cut finger. Slowly, the blood flowed back into the wound, which closed until there was no mark left. Rex gasped, but there was no evidence of a cut. Even the pain was gone. With a curt reminder from Le Fanu, Rex paid his five dollars until all that remained of the bargain was Rex’s signature on the bill of sale. Much to his surprise, Le Fanu held out a quill. Rex did his best to look incredulous, but as Le Fanu did not show so much as a wrinkle of embarrassment, Rex sighed and signed his name. His signature was sloppier than he would have liked, but he had no time to blame the pen. Le Fanu sprinted to the window, once more shouldering Bianca’s weight. Esmeralda left for the back of the shop, quickly returning with a parcel that she forced into Rex’s hands.

“The door, if you would, Mr. Cypress,” she said.

Rex wrenched open the door, and Le Fanu maneuvered gracefully through. Rex followed to find a hansom waiting for them.

“Now this will be much more convenient then carrying her the rest of the way home, don’t you think?” said Le Fanu. “Don’t mind the price. It’s already been settled.”

The driver showed no interest while Le Fanu arranged Bianca inside the carriage as though she were a young lady. Le Fanu bowed to her; then, shaking Rex’s hand, he disappeared into the shop. The lights extinguished almost at once, leaving Rex alone and baffled next to the carriage.

It was the strangest ride Rex could remember, sitting with a lifeless companion. More awkward still was carrying her up the stairs to his townhouse. Le Fanu had made it look so easy, but Rex quickly learned that though Bianca was not as heavy as flesh and blood, her body was less forgiving. He abandoned his attempt to bring her upstairs and instead set her down on the sofa in the parlor. He wiped his brow with his handkerchief, but no matter how long he dawdled, Bianca remained no more than a doll. With a sigh, he tore into the parcel from Esmeralda.

Had the doll come to life, Rex might have appreciated the extra dresses, the veiled hat, and the white dressing gown, but all they offered him now was more clutter. Rex tossed them aside and held his head in his hands. He had felt so much surer of his purchase in the shop, where magic and fantasy were woven into the very fabric of the room, but now that he sat in his comfortable and practical parlor, he lost all hope of anything fantastical happening. He enjoyed the look of the doll, but if he had wanted a piece of art, he could have easily bought a portrait and been spared the aggravation.

Rex clutched the doll by the shoulders and shook with all his might, but none of his efforts roused her. She grinned unseeing at him, causing the knot of embarrassment in his chest to twist. What a fool he had been to think she could ever be more than what lay before him. He reached for the parcel of clothes, ready to run to Le Fanu and demand his money back, when he remembered that the shop would be closed. Rex let out a howl. He should have known better than to trust that charlatan. He seized of the doll’s neck with the intention of flinging her out onto the street, but as he gazed at her sweet face, he forgot his rage. He whispered her name and found he didn’t feel remarkably silly doing so. A shiver

shook his spine as he leaned in towards her. Before he could press his lips against hers, Bianca's eyelashes fluttered. Rex scrambled to the far side of the room, but this was no trick of his imagination. Bianca had blinked. She had come alive.

AJ Powell

Delivery Man

The Spit was busy, windy, and wet—every parking space filled as tourists, discouraged off the ocean by the clouds and choppy waves, scurried between gift shops and bars. They were ready to drop fifty dollars on a couple beers and the briny slurp of oysters. I didn't have the cash to spare to join them, and no patience for a packed room anyway. Lucky for me, there was better company to discover outside.

The old man wore a blazer. Probably for warmth and perhaps for dignity. The square shoulders of the jacket broadened his slight frame. A fedora sat softly on a white-gray bed of hair, and his face was encircled by a curly beard. He sat on the wind-protected side of a shack. I hoped he might make a little room for me.

The other tourists huddled inside to escape the sky's drizzle and the ocean's bluster, but I was happier to have the wind chase me behind a small building for a mixed portion of shelter and storm. Mid-vacation, I was walking the Homer Spit to scavenge for gifts to carry back to friends and family—trinkets nodding at Alaskan wildlife, because vistas can't be wrapped and ribboned. I didn't want to return empty handed, and now a storm mid-shopping trip stranded me in this spot, feeling like an intruder.

The gentleman was settled on a rough bench beside a wooden stall, the wind curving around it to create a cocoon of stillness with room enough for him and—I hoped—for me.

Beside the man, a guitar leaned against the wooden bench; he held the instrument's neck gently, like a woman's hand. His fingers were long, with sharp finger nails streaked underneath by a line of coal-gray dirt. His legs were crossed neatly, thin inside his weathered-soft blue jeans. He cast a sidelong smile my way.

"May I?" I asked, gesturing to the space on the other side of his guitar. I appreciated his quick nod and steady eye contact. Most people shift their eyes to any trivial thing, signaling disinterest. He looked at me directly, his eyes inviting

conversation.

“Do you play? She’s a beauty. Looks like she’s been with you awhile,” I directed my words to him and my eyes over the body of his guitar, where the sheen was worn dull from long use. In a couple places the wood itself was paper thin, nearly translucent, rubbed away with strumming over how many years, I wondered.

His fingers slid across a few frets as though muscle memory played a song without his noticing. He pulled a second hand from his blazer pocket, and he lifted the instrument to his lap. “Even so,” he replied like a man from another time.

“Do you have a favorite song you like to play?”

“I don’t play songs with her, dear,” he replied to me as he nodded his head to her like a subject to his queen. “She plays the blues. I’m just the delivery man.” His words tripped into a chuckle and his body found an easy sway. A brown rubber boot began to tap a ¾ rhythm on the wooden plank at our feet. A waltz, if grade school music still served me well.

He opened his mouth. The voice that groaned from him was half-breeze, half-thunder. It was a river, rolling stones smooth, or the ocean massaging sands on a beach like a lover. The man began with a hum, then a mumbling of sounds like he was remembering a language or founding a new one. Without missing a note, one hand danced to a tuning peg for an infinitesimal turn. The guitar thrummed a resonant heart beat underneath, then laced a thousand notes into a tune on top. Like a Himalayan throat singer sends multiple notes from his voice box simultaneously, this man and his guitar produced a full orchestra, but without being showy about it.

I am a poor wayfarin’ stranger
I’m travelin’ through this world below
There is no sickness, toil, nor danger
In that bright world to which I go

My breath heaved in salt-tinged air deeper into my lungs than I’d breathed in a year, then slid back out of me, silky and slow. With each exhale, I exorcised a ghost of regret. That fight with my daughter when I yelled red-faced, shaming her for trying on a word of defiance to see how it fit. That

vulture of fear sitting on my shoulder all the time, whispering about money and cancer rates among women my age. That resentment that builds over time between spouses, knowing no matter how good we are to each other, we are also the death of possibilities. And with each inhale, I gave my own desires a little oxygen. He continued to sing.

I know dark clouds gather o'er me
I know my pathways rough and steep
But golden fields lie out before me
Where weary eyes no more shall weep

The wind dropped for a moment like it too wanted a listen. No one passed us on the boardwalk. Our bench on the wind-sheltered side of a water-taxi hut was a secret concert hall for two. One artist and a one-member audience; one musician and his newly found groupie for life. I brazenly looked up from the guitarist's fingers to his countenance. He was as casual as Friday. I expected him to be enraptured—eyes closed, or open and burning and swallowing the horizon. Instead he gave me a nonchalant wink and played his holy canticle with an ordinary glance, now and then, to his fingers or across the few yards of boardwalk to a cluster of yarrow, its white blossoms nodding in the wind like a half-hearted congregation. These two—guitar and guitarist—are an old married couple, I realized, not a new fling.

He riffed and rambled with the melody, carrying me down seven roads to seven new wonders of the world. I stopped watching and leaned back, resting my head on the wall behind us. I closed my eyes. I felt through my feet the tap of his boot and sensed on my cheek the vibrations cast like a net from his instrument. His voice raised goose bumps on my arms, and his song took all the cold and weariness from my bones, treated them like kindling, lit them on fire, then delivered the flame straight to my heart. Did he realize what he was doing? I sat, he played, and the solar system realigned for a few minutes around a different sun.

I'm goin' there to see my mother
She said she'd meet me when I come

I'm just a goin' over Jordan
I'm just a goin' over home

As he caressed the final notes, silence filled the growing spaces between sound, settling on me like a blanket. I had feared a vacuum, an absence, but received instead a calm I might manage to take with me. I turned toward him carefully, not wanting to disturb the peace he had conjured. I looked in his eyes and he didn't turn away from mine. Then a strong gust kicked up and the spell blew away.

"Well. Thank you for that. You are an exceptional musician."

"Ah, I just got lucky enough to find my instrument," he said, rubbing the hourglass contours of her hollow, reverberating body.

I unzipped my purse and pulled out my wallet, wanting so much to give him a pittance. A twenty was in my hand when I looked up to see him scold me with his eyes.

"If I wanted your money, my hat would be up-turned on that wood in front of me. This one's on me. A gift for takin' the time—and for knowing my guitar is a she not an it. She's most thankful to you for that."

I pushed my money back into my purse, ashamed I might've turned the encounter into a transaction. I felt my spiritual poverty. It tasted like the beginning of wisdom.

He settled his guitar back on the bench beside him as I stood, turning to shake his hand. He took my hand in his, and I warmed at his gentle, God-like touch. "You have a good day, m'dear."

"Thank you. You too. Thank you for the song. Truly." I turned to go. Then I went. I caught one last glance at the musician as I rounded the corner. He looked just as he did when I'd arrived.

Gretchen Mayer

To Keep A Promise

The wind blew day and night, a banshee call, wailing, shrieking, heralding death. Maggie stood by the window, peeked out the edge of the damp curtain and spoke back to the keening wind. “Not this day, hag. Not my family.”

They had battled the dust, the darkness, and the relentless wind, but were losing the war.

They could not see the neighbor’s farm, the stars at night, or the sun at day. It was as though time had stopped. The worst part was not the dark, or the hunger, but the loneliness.

“Worst depression in history,” President Roosevelt had said. That was when they still had electricity and could listen to the radio. Now it sat on the small mahogany table, silent and sooty.

Kevin lifted the lid of the soup pot and looked in. Maggie’s chest grew tight. He reached into the cupboard, grabbed a quart jar, and dipped the ladle in and out of the pot, filling the jar with the thin broth, bits of meat and broth a swirling tornado.

“Darlin’, don’t do this. We’ve barely got enough for ourselves—and nothing for tomorrow.”

“I’m giving him my share.”

Maggie watched, unblinking, as he put on his threadbare winter coat, opened the door, and stepped quickly outside.

Danny was a broken spirit—no doubt about it. But why was it their responsibility to take care of him? He wasn’t even kin.

Maggie wrapped her sweater tighter around her thin waist and turned back to the window, keeping watch as Kevin disappeared into the black cloud.

The dust had become a living thing—like the giant octopus in Joe’s favorite book. Or was it a squid? Tendrils of fine, black, powder snuck in everywhere, crept under the window sills, sifted down the chimney, or burst through the door each time it was opened.

Each night Maggie knelt by the bed and prayed to God for respite. But each morning her dream of waking to the gentle

patter of rain on the tin roof, or to billowing, soft, white snowflakes were crushed again and again.

She tried to be strong—it was her job to be strong. But there seemed to be no end in sight. No end to the dust, the heat, the frigid winters, and the sameness—each new day like the last.

She walked down the short hall and looked into the bedroom where her three children were huddled under the covers. It was almost noon, but still so cold in the house. Joe, the oldest, was reading aloud—*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. The book was worn and tattered and often Erin recited along as he read, she'd heard the story so many times that it was imprinted on her brain.

At age nine Joe felt the hunger and the sadness far more than the two little ones. Patrick pushed his wooden truck up and over the mountains created by his quilt-covered legs. They were twins—Erin and Patrick—born five years ago this month but so thin they could pass for three-year-olds.

Joe glanced up from his book, and saw her standing in the doorway. His lips formed a grim line, his eyes became slits, perhaps anticipating more bad news. A young boy facing death. She gave him a smile and a small nod. "The soup is ready."

She'd lied to Kevin—there was food for tomorrow and even perhaps the next day if she was very careful. She'd only wanted to see if he would change his mind, if he would put her and the children first.

As Joe fed the twins, she put on Kevin's barn coat—so big on her now that it billowed in the wind—and slipped out the back door and into the attached chicken coop. The red hen ran to the far corner, sensing what was coming—she'd seen her coop mates disappear one after the other. Until two weeks ago she'd managed to push out an egg every other day. But she was old, her laying days were over. And there was no more feed for her, not even crusts of bread. Maggie took a deep breath, whispered an apology and grabbed the hen by the neck, whipping the animal in a quick circle, feeling the stacked bones snap. The animal suffered only the seconds of knowing. Maggie saw to it that there was no pain. The wind shrieked through the gaps in the wood, then calmed a bit.

She hung the scrawny bird to cool and bleed out while she

put a pot of water on to boil. She'd have it dipped, plucked, and simmering in the black kettle before Kevin came home. It would take hours to soften the meat.

Then she took the rickety wooden steps down to the root cellar for the last of the vegetables—two potatoes, three limp carrots, and a big onion. A sharp odor told her the onion was beginning to turn bad, but she'd use it anyway. She made a pocket of her apron, tossed the vegetables inside and climbed back up the stairs, eyes squinting against the dust.

When she stacked the vegetables on the kitchen counter a tiny moan issued from her cracked lips. A rat had gotten into the bin, its long, yellow teeth leaving grooves in one end of the potato. She grabbed the cleaver, chopped off the chewed end and took it out to the woodshed. She sprinkled poison on the cut surface and went back down into the root cellar. 'It's silly, really,' she thought. 'There's nothing left for it to eat,' then suddenly—'except the children.' She'd heard stories of rats sneaking into houses and biting sleeping children. She shuddered, then placed the poison potato in the bin and rushed back upstairs.

They wouldn't have had any rats if the cat was still here. She'd told the children that it had run off. Just like she'd told them the meat in the stewpot was a rabbit she had managed to trap. Lies were coming easily to her now.

Kevin poured some of the soup into a mug and placed it on the table. "Sit here, Danny, while it's still warm." Then he turned and looked out the window, so Danny could not hear his stomach growl.

"I hear the Travers are pulling out," Danny said, lifting the mug with a shaking hand, the fingers bent in odd angles.

"His well dried up," said Kevin. "Said I could have what's left of his firewood, though." Neither men had to say what was on their minds—if Jed Traver's well was done, theirs would be next.

Kevin put a small log on the fire and stirred the coals. "It can't last much longer. The snow will come. It'll tamp down the dust. Never seen a drought last this long. It'll end soon." This was the same prayer repeated in one form or another the past five years by thousands of desperate families across the

Midwest.

Danny nodded. Of the four men, they were the only two left. Bert had been beaten, robbed, and thrown to his death riding the rails to California, hoping for a picking job.

Pneumonia took Eugene—a slow, creeping, unmanly way to die.

So now it was left to Kevin to keep the promise.

Danny took another sip, spilling a little down his shirtfront. The four years in jail had ruined him. It might not have ruined another man, but Danny was the youngest

"I still don't know where we went wrong," Danny said, for the hundredth time.

Kevin sighed and sat. He put his elbows on the table carefully—one leg was loose and he didn't want to jiggle the cup.

"We didn't figure on that corrupt, lazy, Jack Belfour finally getting off his fat butt and doing something," he said, reciting the well-told story. "We forgot it was an election year. Folks were tired of him—wanted a new sheriff. He needed votes and you were an easy mark

Their plan had been perfect—invite Mac Dugan to go deer hunting with them. A terrible accident and Mac's battered, pregnant wife, Reva, could sell the farm and move back east to her family. Bert's cattle would quit disappearing. And Eugene's stream would fill again. Mac had diverted the water. They'd found where he'd dammed it up but Mac had angrily denied doing any such thing and two nights later Eugene's chicken coop burned to the ground.

No one ever found out what Mac Dugan had on Jack Belfour, but the sheriff seemed to have a blind eye and a deaf ear when it came to Dugan. "Now, Bert, I walked over every inch of Mac's land," Belfour lied. "Every cow there has his brand. Keep your fences tight and they won't go wandering off."

A week later all four tires on Bert's truck had been slashed.

October 29, 1929—the beginning of the end of everything. It was a cool, sweet-smelling autumn day. Not a hint of wind—perfect weather to bring home venison for the long winter ahead. Little did the four men know it would be the last best day they would ever have.

Before they headed out they put their hands together, bowed their heads and made the promise. Then they loaded the ammo and rifles into the truck and drove silently to Mac Dugan's.

"We'll not come home until each of us has hit his mark," Kevin told Mac as he climbed into the front of the truck. He handed him the flask and Mac took a long pull, handing it through the window to the three men riding in the back. They passed it around freely all morning, each man but Mac taking only tiny sips as they sat on the hillside, scanning for deer. Finally a buck, a doe, and a yearling stepped out into the clearing and began to warily nibble on the sweet grass. "Mac," whispered Kevin, "we'll swing around to the backside. Count to a hundred before you shoot."

Mac wasn't one who liked to take orders, but since he'd be getting the best shot at the buck, he didn't argue.

The three men did swing around, but not to the side of the clearing. One hundred counts later, Mac Dugan stood and took a bullet to the back of his head.

Each man stuck to the story—Mac had been drinking and suddenly stepped into the line of fire. It had been an accident, pure and simple. No way to tell which gun was responsible and Reva wasn't making any fuss.

But Sheriff Belfour would not let it go. Solving this case might mean another four years in office. So he trumped up some evidence and charged Danny with reckless discharge of a firearm and manslaughter. Danny—the only one of the three men who didn't have a wife and family counting on him at home. Danny—the smallest of the four and least able to defend himself. Danny—who went into jail one kind of man and came out another.

In turns Kevin, Eugene, and Bert had done for him—chopped his wood, fed him, and held him when he woke up screaming. Because even though Danny was bent, he never broke. He'd stuck to the story—during the beatings—and worse. Things had been done to him no man would admit. Three years of humiliation, wormy food, and isolation.

And now only Kevin was left to keep the promise.

He trudged the two miles back home and for the first time truly thought about Danny's question. What *had* gone

wrong? The day after the shooting, when half the county secretly rejoiced the death of Mac Dugan, the news on the radio was grim. The stock market had crashed. Hundreds of businessmen were jumping to their deaths. Kevin and the rest of his neighbors mistakenly believed that it had no bearing on them. They had no money in the market. Their future was in the crops now safely stored in the silos.

But within weeks it all started to turn around. Hot winds picked up the dry top soil and carried it away. Not a bit of snow fell that winter, nor any rain that spring. What few resilient plants that emerged were quickly devoured by locusts.

And each winter and every summer were worse than the last.

Kevin's mind told him that the shooting of Mac Dugan and the horrific years following were not related. But his heart told him another story.

The next morning the keening of the wind woke Maggie. She rose, but this time did not step to the window. She quietly put small logs into the stove and soon had a respectable fire going. She made a cup of weak tea from the last of the mint leaves. Then she rocked and read her bible while her family hibernated. No need to wake Kevin. There was no work for him to do. It was the moaning wind that finally roused him from his sleep.

"What's in the pot?"

"The old hen. She quit laying. Don't tell Erin. It was her favorite."

Kevin nodded and walked to the stove. Maggie sighed. "Get your coat," she said. "I'll fill a jar."

Kevin's shoulders dropped, grateful he wouldn't hear her soft, womanly pleading. She handed him the jar wrapped in a rag to keep it warm. After he stepped out the door she again watched him disappear into the swirling darkness, then tugged the packet of rat poison from her apron pocket, ran to the outhouse, and dropped it through the hole.

She'd made a promise to her children the day she brought them into the world—that she would always protect them.

This was the last food Danny Callahan would be taking from her children's mouths.

"This is good, Kevin. Tell Maggie I said so and, and—I appreciate all you are doing for me."

Kevin watched Danny suck the broth into his toothless mouth. "You did for us, Danny. Your sacrifice was greater. You did not let us down and I will not let you down."

"Eat with me, Kevin. Like the old days."

Kevin shook his head.

"Just a cup."

Kevin smiled and sat. "Perhaps a little won't hurt."

JP Roarke

Interregnum
1942

The mountain crest was cool with the morning chill and the cowboy's flannel shirt was thin as tissue, yet he wasn't the least bit cold. He hadn't shivered even once through any of the process. But it had drained him. His lined face barely showed it, but he was exhausted. He took a shallow breath, and while staring down the hillside asked the question again.

"We're . . . not done, are . . . we?" he asked.

"Almost," the old man said. He waited, and it was quiet between them. But then the cowboy asked again.

"Isn't there more?"

The old man didn't answer. Except for the hat he looked like one of the cowboy's older hands, in weathered boots and faded pants, a worn blue shirt and frayed hat. The hat looked strangely out of place: made of broken straw, with brittle bits that stuck out where there'd once been a brim.

The two men stood in thick grass along a ridge that curved gently down to the edge of a forest, then fell two thousand steep feet to a pasture at the valley floor. A river twisted its way lazily from the farthest cleft of mountains to the pasture below. A few pale gray root pieces of upturned stumps and gnarled, thicker branches had broken away from the hillsides farther upstream and lay along the green and flowery riverbank.

They were almost finished. Most of the cowboy's memories were gone: his friendships and military life, his western skills and ranching life, had all been torn away. There were vast craters where they'd been, and only a single large island remained. It was stronger than any others had been, with deeper roots. A thread strong enough to remove it out would take longer, but once it was gone they'd be finished.

The old man had warned the cowboy how it needed to be, how each thread of recollections would start a rush of conversation, how the rush would pull at some part of a memory until the whole began to come away. Once begun the

rush to explain, to experience again, would be irresistible, but then it would tear away, The rending would be painful, but then, after, the sadness even worse. He explained this carefully to everyone, and had to this man, before asking if the cowboy was ready. The cowboy had listened, then agreed with an immediate tip of his hat.

The old man hadn't exaggerated. As the process went on the cowboy found himself speaking far more that he was used to, and far more quickly, despite the way the pains came, and after, as the process left a melancholy wake. For the cowboy that was the worst, for aside from wanting to complete these chores his main concern—and this he tried to hide—was that sadness showed itself here much more readily than he was used to. It had already tightened his jaw several times, saying with no other tell that he was embarrassed.

The old man continued to stand back. He was waiting to let the cowboy rest, and it was quiet between them for several minutes, except for the small sound of the cowboy's breathing.

"Should we finish the rest now?" he finally asked. His eyes were still on the valley, but then he moved, shifting weight from his right leg to the left. Creases in his old Levis found another familiar pattern, but then it was still.

The old man kept quiet another moment, but then the cowboy took a deeper breath and glanced back. "I think I'm ready."

The small man stepped forward, and pointing to the other side of river, said, "Take a look at that, will you?"

The cowboy tipped the Stetson to shade his eyes, and peered in that direction. He saw what was there.

There's movement there, he thought.

And there was. In the long yellow and green rushes on the far side of the river.

He leaned forward for a better look. There were shapes, moving shapes. Some stopped, then moved again. His old eyes began picking them out. Large shapes. Some dark, some light, some spotted, some taller than others, some . . . *raising their heads.*

They're horses! he thought. He moved his mouth thoughtfully, then nodded twice, confident in the assessment.

"Take your time, Henry," the old man said.

The cowboy nodded again, but he wasn't paying attention. His eyes followed the horses, and the sight began to excite him. His mind searched along the thread to remember where he'd seen this place before, until it found a piece that held the answer. His mind pulled it forward, and the answer was there.

"I know this place . . .," he said, as it hit him. "It was what? It . . . it was . . . sixty years ago? Must'a been . . . When was that? They'd just hung the fella who shot Garfield. It was . . ."

"1882," the old man said harmlessly. Since his first warnings he'd said next to nothing, for his job was just to listen and wait, and help only with little questions or small expressions. This was small, and harmless.

"About' then," the cowboy agreed.

"How old were you?"

"I was . . . fifteen, maybe sixteen . . . Maybe . . . It's when we . . .," he said, but his voice trailed off, and now he realized what was left, and what the memory was about. As his mind gathered around it his face grew somber.

"Tell me about her?" the old man said.

The cowboy glanced back at him gravely, then, slowly, he nodded. He turned back and looked down the crest, and was quiet. His mind touched the thread again, and found a young woman there—just a girl, really. It was his strongest memory, the best protected. But by now he knew it had to go. His mind circled it warily, then touched it again. The recollections swirled up in a glitter of images, voices and emotions, but then settled around their beginning. He waited as they fell into place, then he went to the first image of her, and went beyond to a piece near the start.

"All right," he said.

"Ready?" the old man asked, watching him.

He nodded, took in another deep breath, and began.

"My parents were gone—I don't remember how that happened, but I . . . was living in the streets. out of work . . ., couldn't find anything. But I heard about Isabel Mays, the daughter of a Buffalo Soldier. She lived in Apache Junction with a bunch of other women, mostly runaways. I went out there, and found it. It was a big white house, with a porch and long columns and a widow's walk, and a big pasture that fell down to the

road."

He stopped, and took some breaths, then went on with gradually increasing tempo.

"I got up there one morning when she was out on the porch with some of her women, drinking tea or something, I guess, and this dirty looking' kid came up her drive. She looked down at me and asked "What you doin' on my property, boy?" I said, "I'm here to help you out, Ma'am."

"What kind of help you think I need, boy?'

I nodded toward her pasture, down by the road where there were horses grazing and asked her, "Do you really want to lose some of your horses, Ma'am?"

"Well 'course not," she says, and she stood to take a look over there. "Why'd you think that, boy?"

"Because Ma'am," I said, "you've got rails down along the road." Her pasture was enclosed with long white post and rail fencing, but there was a spot right next to the road, where the rails were down, and the posts broken out. "And I pointed down where that break was. She looked that way for a while, until one of the other women, a lady named Daisy, said, "Horses broke through again."

Mays nodded, lifted her cup and took a sip of tea while strain' over the edge at me, then put it down and says 'So why you telling me this, boy?"

So, I said, "I can fix those sections for you."

And Daisy smiled her sideways smile and asked me, "How you wantin' to be paid?' and another of the women said, "And which of us you gonna want to pay it?' and they all laughed.

I said "Thanks, but I plan to marry a girl I just met in town."

And Daisy kept smiling, and said, "Some of our best customers are married, boy."

I said I wasn't going to be married that way and they laughed and said "We'll see."

But Mays was hesitating, as if she wasn't sure she wanted this fifteen year old kid, so I offered to do the work for free. And I said, "If my work's good, could you use an extra hand?" She already had a couple older hands working the place, but they didn't have enough hours to get everything done. And truthfully, I think she saw me as another hard case, and being soft for such as them, she said, "Hell, why not."

So, I fixed the fence, and before you know it I was a working hand on The Buffalo Equine Ranch and Cathouse. She let me stay in the barn, for free. I'd start at daybreak and work until sundown each day, and every day she gave me ten cents. That was a lot more than I'd ever made, and I made it every single day. It was a big thing for me then, because now I could offer something to my girl," he said. The tip of his jaw had elevated itself with the last words, but then he caught it as a brag. When it was collected and put away he dropped his face quietly to the valley.

"I'd met this girl, Jeannie, about . . . two or three weeks before Mrs. Mays. She was fourteen, maybe fifteen, and saw me sleeping under a tree one night on her way home from work. She stopped, and we talked, and man, did I like her. She was beautiful, and smart, and she liked me, too—seemed to, anyway. She was nicer to me than anyone I'd ever met, even before she brought me a meal from the diner she worked at. I didn't know her more than a week before it was clear she was the one for me. But I had nothing to offer her. I had lots of hopes, of course, but no home, no money, not even a job. But there wasn't a day went by after that I didn't try to change hopes into plans. It's why I showed up at Isabel Mays' ranch that first day."

"And then after, I just had to let Jeannie know I'd got a job! The first day off I went back to the diner to tell her what I'd done, what I was doing to improve myself. I washed my face and combed my hair, and straightened up as best I could, and went back. And she listened, I mean, she didn't just take it in politely, she really *listened*, like she had some little hope of her own that I wasn't just some kid bragging. It kept me going, and . . . well, I suppose I was trying to impress her, and that's why I told her about Mays' horses."

"See, the *Buffalo Equine Ranch and Cathouse* was a home for hard cases. Not just kids like me or the women who ran away from bad husbands or the slave cathouse in town, but for broken down military stock. Isabel's father Isaiah started it. He was Buffalo soldier, and those cavalry men worked horses hard. When the animals soured the army had always paid a knacker to cart them off for glue, but Isaiah was around horses all his life, and saw something there. So, he

worked a deal to take them off the army's hands for less than they'd paid knackers. He'd nurse them back to the point their own dam wouldn't recognize them, and sell them back to the army to make even more. He did that for nearly twenty years, made enough to buy the ranch, and then some. When he died Isabel kept the deal going, but she was a soft touch, and never wanted to sell a single animal. By that point she had enough money that she didn't have to, so she kept the horses as pets." He smiled faintly. "When I got there she had at least fifty head of what had been condemned horses. They were all pretty old, stiff and gray—but healthy. At night she'd keep them in a couple of barns, with clean stalls that I mucked, otherwise she'd let them graze in pastures. It was a great end for horses that had lived hard lives."

"When I told Jeannie I was working on a horse ranch she told me she loved horses, so I went on forever about them. And she seemed happy and even a little excited about that. She seemed truly happy I'd got such a wonderful job, and didn't laugh when I said I wanted to be able to offer something to someone like her. It was a conversation I remembered all my life—sitting out by this big old Mesquite tree in town, feeling so good, so full of hope, thinking I could make this girl so happy. Hell, she seemed happy even talking with me! It was to the point I figured I'd save my dimes until I could go down to the department store and buy her a ring. I hoped to God she'd accept it, because if she did we'd get married."

"Thinking back, I know I bragged a little too much that day, at least about things I was doing, and what I was seeing at the ranch." He sighed deeply. "That turned out to be a mistake, I guess. And it happened the very next Saturday after all my big talk."

He stopped, and looking down, scuffed at the grass with his boot, then went on, shaking his head sadly.

"Every so often Mays would let all her horses out together in the biggest pasture, just to play. And she did that Saturday. It was that time of year when a low fog came in at night, and laid around the pastures like an old blanket, thin in some spots, thicker in others, with only the tops of the fence and the house sticking up through it. Mays came out onto her porch that morning with her ladies, like they always did, and

sat down with cups of hot tea, then Mays hollered up at us.

"Bring 'em out!"

So, the other hands told me what to do, and pretty soon we were all back and forth between the barns and the big pasture. Each of us started leading three or four horses at a time through the fog, to the gate. We let them loose and went back for more, back and forth through that fog for more and more horses, until all fifty had their heads poking up out of the fog up there," he said. He smiled ruefully as the image came through for the last time.

"Lovely," the old man said.

"And it got even better—for a while," the cowboy said quietly. He dropped his voice to a whisper: "A short while." He paused, his mind fully in the sights and smells and sounds of that morning, as if for the first time, not the last. He took a deep breath, then turned to face the old man.

"When those old horses were let out of their stalls all together they got to be like kids on a playground. At first they'd look around, not sure of what to do with themselves while more and more of them were let loose, but pretty soon they got excited at being back in a herd, and started snortin' and millin' around like they were younger. After a little bit one would stretch out a rickety trot from the rest, and maybe one or two others would follow, and one of those might kick at another—just playing—and then try to run off a little ways, and the one that got kicked said hell no you don't and started after the other, and before you knew it they were running like they were kids again. It all happened that day. The others saw what they were doing and pretty soon the rest of the horses were running too, running after the first few, trying to catch up, until all fifty of those animals were running in a big herd, just like the herds their ancestors had spent their lives in, a herd that started down that pasture faster than you'd ever think old horses could move, streaming down in a charge mostly hid under the fog."

His right hand slapped softly at the side of his Levis, once, then again, as memory of the stampede flooded through for the last time.

"It was something to see, for a while, fifty heads and manes and maybe the tops of their backs flyin' down above the fog,

until they'd hit a thicker patch and the only way you could tell what was happening was that rumble off in the distance, and the feel of ground shaking when a stampede's nearby."

His smile faded, and he stopped. It was quiet for several seconds.

"What?" the old man finally asked.

The cowboy didn't respond. He sighed deeply at what he'd come to along this thread. It was something he'd never wanted to remember, something which had nevertheless come back to him so many times, in so many nightmares, since that morning.

"Tell me," the old man said softly.

The cowboy drew in another breath, nodded grimly, and started up again with regret.

"I was coiling my ropes and hadn't been paying attention until I heard Daisy yell. I looked over, and she was pointing, and Mays and the other women were up on their feet, and pointing, and they started yelling, so I turned, and . . . . God Almighty—" he stopped again, and bit his lip.

"My girl was down there. It was Jeannie, sitting on the fencing I'd fixed the first day I came to the ranch. She just wanted to see what I'd told her so much about, and she'd decided to go the first day she had off, to see for herself, and maybe surprise me. So, she'd put on a pretty dress, and walked there all that way from town, and got there just as we were letting all those horses out. And she climbed up on the top rail of that fence, and was watching, as they herded up and began heading down."

"It was my own fault, luring her out there with all my big talk. But there she was, on that fence with nowhere to run, and a stampede coming down towards her. I'm not sure she realized what was happening yet, but they were coming fast, and as they got closer not one of those horses slowed at all."

"I started running and yelling, and the other hands did, too, and the women were all running now, waving their arms and yelling, but it was like shouting into a hurricane. She couldn't have heard over the sound of those horses, and couldn't have seen us except when we came out of thicker spots of fog. Christ, that fence probably started banging before I really got started, shaking as if an earthquake was coming. I came

out of a thicker part of the fog and saw Jeannie trying to get down off the fence, and then she seemed to fall—" His voice broke. He tightened, and coughed, and went on. "The fog was thinner about fifty feet from the fence, and I could see the horses come out of it at a dead run straight for the fence, and then I saw Jeannie again. She'd fallen, but was getting to her feet, and then just stood there, facing those horses!"

He stopped, and let the old man feel the pause he'd allowed so many times at this point in the story. When he was satisfied at its length, he went on.

"But at the very last minute the lead horses began to turn. And the others followed, They swept around like they were tied to huge wheel, with the outside edge pounding not five feet from that fence, rattling it to pieces and shaking the ground beneath Jeannie, ripping up clods of dirt and grass everywhere, with the roar of fifty horses at a dead run coming by, hooves flying, dirt scattering, all their breathing mixed in, and they ripped by, and were gone, all those heads and manes moving back up the hill. And Jeannie was still standing there. She looked a little pale, but she was still standing there."

"I got to her at the same time as the women, and we were all around her, not expecting she'd still be alive, but there she was, standing in the middle of fence poles. I started apologizing, but she said she was fine. I kept saying 'I'm so sorry', but then she patted my arm, and *she* apologized, and we were each trying to out apologize the other for several moments until she reached up, pulled my head down and kissed me! And then she looked past me, and pointed up the hill."

"Would you look at that, Henry!" she said. So, I turned, and we all turned, and saw the horses get back to the top of the hill and slow, and stop, and stand around, nickering and snorting and sweating right about the same time the sun stretched through the fog from the east, and reached across the top meadow and lit the steam coming off the tops of their backs and the little clouds of their breaths from behind. And Jeannie smiled one of the best smiles I ever saw, through all our lives, and all those decades."

He sighed weakly. "It was a sight," he said, and a last bit of admiration flickered across his face, but then the recollection broke away, and the thread drew from the larger piece, and the

larger piece began to tear itself loose. The pull grew stronger, and the memory broke away. Then the pains hit him.

He winced, though the ache was sharp and stabbing. He tightened his body, but then greater pain hit him. “Oh Jesus!” he whispered, and he turned away to hide the effect. The skin around his eyes and mouth came taut, and he clenched his hands into fists and pulled them against the sides of his legs.

“You’re almost done, Henry,” the old man said sadly. He took hold of the cowboy’s arm. The cowboy jerked two nods and bent forward to fight the pains. But they hit him more strongly. His knees buckled, and he began to fall. The old man caught him, and helped lower him to his knees.

“Oh . . . oh . . . oh!” he whispered. It kept on for several moments, but then began to subside. The pains ebbed slowly, but then were gone. The old man helped him to his feet, and he stood unsteadily, looking around without any recollection of what had happened, until the melancholy came. It flowed back more quickly this time, filling every space and corner of his mind.

His jaw tightened, and within moments there was moisture in the deep lines below his eyes. “Sorry,” he whispered. His arm went up and brushed at the wet with his sleeve, but the sadness came deeper inside him. He forced himself to turn away, then bent and pretended to pick at the grass. He knelt, and bent further, but a muffled sob came from his chest. He tried coughing to hide it, but couldn’t. His shoulders shook and he began to lose his balance. The old man caught him.

“Lie down, Henry,” he said quietly, and he helped lower him to the grass. He turned him onto his back, and laid him face up in the tall grass. The cowboy’s eyes were glazed with wet, but now the sadness too began to leave him. The cowboy’s breathing slowed, then seemed to stop. But then he forced out more in a whisper.

“It was . . . a sight,” he said weakly, but the words came only by force of repetition, for he’d already forgotten the story, and he’d never remember it again.

Brett Ramseyer

God Will Provide

> *No one can follow the details in a country like Sudan.*
> *—Omar Hassan Al-Bashir, President of Sudan*

Vapor disappeared from the watering hole into a cloudless sky. A rebel wiped his dripping mouth on the back of his hand. His focus followed two women who walked down the trail from the village, clay pots balanced on their heads. Through the waves of heat roiling off the pool their hips swayed seductively, like green stalks of savannah grass. He longed to cut them down, but threw the strap of his Kalashnikov over his shoulder before retreating up the bank.

Nyanath and Eden's feet tread the same tracks. The sisters' mother never used to call either girl by name from the opening of their hut. Instead she would shout, "Nyala! Eat your grain." In seconds the two girls would bound in on thin antelope ankles like the animal of their mother's name for them. First her oldest, Nyanath; then her youngest, Eden, each panted for a moment in the doorway. Everyone of the village knew that Nyanath was the head and Eden the tail. It did not make sense to split them. Everyone simply said, "Nyala," except for father.

Ahmad knew his beautiful daughters commanded the eye of every eligible man. His wife often urged him to arrange a stable marriage, but Ahmad loathed to part with them. He heard whispered shock about the bright amber shine of Nyanath's eye. He saw boys trace the air with their hands in a curve not unlike Eden's rump. Each time his somber glare shooed them away, neither boy nor man made the long walk to the end of the village for an official visit. It was old-fashioned to expect such formality anymore.

Most village girls grew impatient with formal fathers and the hard existence of village life. Now it was more common for a girl as young as fourteen to kiss her Papa good night and leave an empty rug by morning. Families did not send

out search parties. Usually before noon sun, some friend would creep by to unravel the escape plot with some boy from a neighboring village to the city of Al Fashir. Still other girls traveled the dangerous Darfuri roads to wind through Kurdufan on the way to some enchantment in Khartoum. In a month a letter might arrive from an educated daughter or word would miraculously pass through the caravan of the illiterate back to Ahmad's village. "Don't worry. I'm in love with a young man, the big city, travel, money, traffic" or some such nonsense that titillated all the young girls scrubbing clothes at their mothers' callused feet. In truth it excited the mothers in a confusing dichotomy. They resented girls who had worked so little, but who escaped so soon. The buzz of the ten-year-olds left behind made the mothers' earlobes itch for the scratch of more gossip.

More frequently of late, good word failed to travel home. Village girls evaporated into the dry nights. The pattern of life-giving seasons abandoned the village. In their dry wake scorched a cruel sun and horrific rumor, impossible to confirm, but too detailed to disbelieve. Some mothers grew uneasy.

Nyala's mother, Titi, did not worry. She birthed sensible girls who would stay home and help their father. That is what Titi asked her girls to do when her fever soared so high that she could no longer drink the water that Nyanath poured at her lips and Eden could only clean up what flowed out behind. Ahmad paced across the doorway in silent prayer. The village healer arrived with his collections of bones and powders. He had not heard of Titi's illness until so very late. The healer spent the evening with her and finally told Ahmad at dusk that he must quickly retrieve the last powerful medicine still hanging in his hut.

"It will be expensive with such small hope of success. What shall I do, Ahmad?"

Ahmad had no money and only scrawny livestock that picked through the stubble outside the village. Ahmad nodded. "Go quickly, my friend."

Thinking first Nyanath said, "How will we pay?"

Eden reminded, "We've nothing to sell. The cattle are skin and the rains will not fall."

Ahmad's pacing was his answer and prayer his action. "God will provide my daughters. Somehow, God will provide."

Then Titi called Nyala for the last time. "Come to me Nyala." They sprang to her side as if the news were good, their legs still impatient. Titi's feeble arms could not lift her fingers to hold their cheeks like when the children elbowed one another with sibling competition at the door of the hut. So, each girl pressed Titi's fiery palms to their faces while they listened. "Nyala. My girls . . . You can be no longer. Tonight, you are women because I am no more. Care for your father. Sisters should . . . daughters must . . . always be . . . together." Then, Titi grew calm in Nyala's tears.

At sixteen and fourteen they wept into womanhood.

The healer stumbled back ready to administer his mystic art a few minutes later. Ahmad needed not to worry about money. Instead, he worried about his daughters.

Nyala's feet grew thick calluses, yet no children scrubbed in their shadows. These sisters sat, worked, mourned, aged, always together. They stayed in the village to care for their father for the next four years. Their ankles were still lithe, but a rhythmic sway supplanted the once antelope spring. Now Nyanath, twenty, and Eden, eighteen, were the oldest of the village beauties, rare and desirable. Wealth of the countryside dwindled in the unending drought and no man made an official visit. Word of devoted beauty to a father spread beyond the shadow of Jabal Marrah, the bad mountain.

Ahmad did his best to keep his daughters separate for safety. He fostered Nyanath's confidence by seeking her advice on the fate of the livestock, but the rains did not fall. It was twenty days through the month of Rajab and still not a drop. Soon it would be Sha'ban, the wettest month. If the southwesterly winds did not sweep up the Congo and shower them soon, all the animals would perish.

"In Kafia Kingi I hear of rain. Switch the herd south. Eden and I can manage here 'til you return."

"I haven't herded since I was a boy, Nyanath. It is a hard life and I do not know the people of Kafia Kingi. It is better I stay here. I'll head east tomorrow, toward Jabal Marrah. There

are always grasses on the mountainside."

"I hear the mountain rebels descend looking for water. There is no promise there," said Eden.

"Then we're best here," said Ahmad. "The watering hole still keeps us alive."

"We need water," said Nyanath. She hoisted a clay pot from under a cloth in the corner of the hut. Without word Eden too slid toward the door behind her sister.

"Why must you both go?"

"Antelope travel in herds," quipped Eden.

"The village says you are the tail, not the mouth."

"Even an antelope can break wind," said Nyanath.

Eden glared through the back of her sister's head. Nyanath always cut a last word before Eden could think of a reply. Eden could only follow behind.

"Daughters, you've lived too long together in this hut and argue too much. The fire in your mouths dries our soil to dust. When the rains return, the thunder winds ahead of them will raise enough dirt to darken us all."

"Yes Father," said Nyanath, bobbing reverently at the knees before continuing out the door.

"Eden," said Ahmad, holding the back of his hand to her arm.

"Father?"

"When you're struck blind it will be dust kicked up from your sister's feet. Don't follow so close. Sometimes, don't follow at all." Eden ducked out the doorway without a word. She jogged to catch Nyanath and her feet once again fell back into her sister's tracks.

"I've been too formal a father," said Ahmad to the corner where the clay pots once stood. He hoped Eden would have stayed behind. He wanted to tell her his ideas were changing. Maybe an official visit need not apply, but such a thought made him hot. "Ahh, Ahmad! This weather burns up your brain." He was relieved that Eden had followed along.

Eden was not. Her teeth ground together when her longest and best friend, Poni, bobbed a welcome. Eden sucked hard at her tongue to unclench her jaw. "Peace be with you, Poni," she spit at her friend who fell in behind.

"And soon may it find you," replied Poni, sensing the sisters'

tension. Usually her effervescent twitter followed the girls wherever they walked together, but the afternoon heat bore down on them while their thongs sizzled and popped against their naked feet like logs on the fire.

None of them spoke until Nyanath tipped her clay vessel into the watering hole. Little flowed in from the shallow pool. She scooped small splashes into her pot with the flat lid. The younger two emulated her actions, then Poni whispered. "Have you seen him since?" Her pupils stayed in the corners of her eyes focused on Nyanath. Poni ladled little from the pond, but did not care. It would give her more time to talk with Eden and help mask the sounds of their secrets.

Eden turned her back to Nyanath and watched her own hands in the water as she ladled her heart out to Poni. "Not since the beginning of Rajab. His work keeps him away."

"Hush! Work? He's a rebel, no?"

"You spend too much time grinding your meal in a gossip's bowl, Poni. He's no rebel. He's a messenger and kind. Do you not remember his loving words I repeated to you?"

"I remember and I grind what few meals I have with my teeth. Does the head know?"

"If the head knew half the things the ass was doing it would be spinning."

The young women laughed and Nyanath looked up at them knowingly. Eden hated that look that fell with silence. Eden spent her entire life in the wake of her sister and still guessed at her thoughts. *How can Nyanath be such a mystery? She does everything right in front of me. How can I not know?*

"I think she knows," worried Poni. "The village is too small for secrets."

"I've told only you," hissed Eden. "Is my secret too big to fit in your mouth?"

"No, no, my friend, but we say so much near her," said Poni, looking over Eden's shoulder.

"She can't hear looks."

"But the head may see them."

"By this time next week it will not matter. He'll visit my father. I'll sever myself from the head by marrying before her."

"God willing."

"God willing and I'll be calling for Him on my back."

"God save you, Eden. You are a filthy ass."

"Just be sure not to wash it in the drinking pool," interrupted Nyanath. The younger two women stopped their giggles short and their faces fell. Nyanath always entered conversations like an ambush. There was no telling how long she had silently listened, waiting to jump into their secrets. "I'm full. Let's return." Nyanath left them behind to worry.

Nyanath started up the bank from which they came. Eden and Poni scrambled after. Lost in the guesses of her sister's knowledge, Eden ran into Nyanath. Down toppled the eldest's pot, smashing on a trailside stone. Water hissed into the sand like steam. Surprised at what she did, Eden circled to see the real obstruction. A rebel stood nonchalantly in front of Nyanath. His rifle stock pressed against the buckle of his belt and he cupped the barrel in his left hand in front of him. His white shirt clung tight to the waves of muscles he kept flexing and releasing and Eden could see the indentation of his navel as if it sucked all his clothes into him, pulling her closer.

"It's okay, miss. You can touch my rifle," he said to Nyanath. Her eyes arced through him and he stared back. "I don't mind."

"You owe us for my pot," leveled Nyanath.

"I'll fill your pot soon enough," said the rebel through his gleaming teeth. Eden looked away in guilty fear.

"No, I'm clumsy. I should watch where I'm walking. So sorry," mumbled Eden.

"Don't assume his blame. He put his gun in my face and forced me into your way. Step aside jackal! You're not welcome at this village's watering hole. Run back to your mountain to hide."

"I can see you're the elder of these sisters, but I don't think you're an elder of the village yet. I drink what I please." His hand slid down the rifle and his finger to the trigger. "I said you could touch my rifle, but you better be careful not to get it near your mouth or my excitement may make a mess of you." He raised the butt to his shoulder.

"No Sadiq!" pleaded Eden as she sprang in front of Nyanath. Sadiq immediately smiled, flashing the perfect pearls of his teeth. The muzzle pointed to the ground and his baritone

laugh echoed from him like a growl from a cave.

"You know him?" said Nyanath. Her head snapped from rebel to sister and back. Her eyes were wide and fierce, but they did nothing to stop his staring at her.

"Yes," said Eden quietly. "His name is Sadiq. We met at market."

"I can guess what he was selling," said Nyanath, glaring down Sadiq. "Tales of his glory, no doubt, flashing his money in front of you and how he had much more at Jabal Marrah."

"It wasn't such as that."

Nyanath's eyes narrowed and scanned her sister, stopped near her feet. Eden's nerves tingled and she wobbled slightly as she crossed her ankles, scratching one with the other. "I did not think to ask about your new anklet 'til now," said Nyanath. She turned from Eden and stepped toward Sadiq. The polished onyx beads split the glare of the sun into a dazzle of stars that settled on Eden like a promise of a future. "What promise did you give my sister when you bought her this bauble?"

Sadiq stood, a little stunned that Nyanath put things together so quickly. He enjoyed her eyes focusing on him and he started to think he bought jewelry for the wrong sister. Eden rose up on her toes so her chest could catch her fluttering heart. She had not prepared herself for the moment Nyanath would hear the news of her marriage.

"Nothing," said Sadiq. Eden fell to her heels. "Nothing but a life of friendship." Sadiq smiled at Nyanath. His new found lust for the elder of the famed sisters pushed up at his belt.

"On how many young girls have you practiced these words? A dozen? Fifty? Sadiq means friend, no?"

"It can."

"Then be a *dear* friend and retreat to Jabal Marrah to join your pack of jackals that plague her slopes." Nyanath turned to Eden. "Give him back the anklet, little sister."

The indignity of living as the tail made Eden stand pat. "I'll not, sister. It is mine for a lifetime. Isn't it, Sadiq?" And Eden shot past her sister to snake her arm around Sadiq's back. "We're to be married in the month of Ramadan." Eden could not look at Sadiq. His one word, "nothing" hung in Eden's worry like a dry wind chapping her unblinking eyes. She was

nothing, a tail, an ass for eighteen years and now she saw a way clear to something new. She looked wide-eyed at Poni who had stood, mouth agape through it all. Eden's nearly imperceptible nod awoke Poni, her true obliging friend.

"Of course," blurted Poni, whom Nyanath forgot stood by. Now the deluge ensued from Poni's secret month of silence. "In the month of Ramadan he promised to 'fast from food and feast on love.' Such words made me jealous. I almost told you, Nyanath. Such promises are rare in our village. They are difficult to keep secret. Now I am so happy not to hold it in any longer. Won't the children shower you with kisses, Sadiq, when they hear your beautiful words?" She paused for a breath. "I am Poni, Eden's oldest friend. We've not met, but your words have whispered to me too. I've hoped for a friend of your mountain to raise me up. I have never—"

"Calm yourself Poni. It is not your wedding we plan," said Eden. "You don't want to empty your brain on a day so hot. You may forget to drink."

"Yes, yes, you are so wise my friend. You've picked a wonder, Sadiq. You must be eager to speak to her father and be the first suitor."

"Yes, the first," said Sadiq, looking only at Nyanath. "I understand he expects an official visit."

"Yes. Let's see him now," said Nyanath, suspecting this jackal would flee if threatened with meeting Father. Eden looked up at him with anxious hope.

"Oh no, not today," said Sadiq with a kiss to Eden's forehead. He began to back up the bank, trying to shake free of Eden's grip on his hand. "Not without a gift for the father of such beautiful daughters. Not without better clothes."

"Perhaps without a rifle," said Nyanath.

"Yes, I'll come with gifts of love, instead of weapons for war."

"When will you visit?" asked Eden breathlessly.

"A week from tomorrow, my beauty, after your evening meal. I'll call on your father so he and I can drink to his new son." He finally dropped her hand and turned to leave. Eden could no longer contain her smiles. She jumped forward, antelope again and kissed Sadiq on the mouth. He peered around her head at Nyanath who modestly turned her back.

“Peace be with you, Sadiq,” Eden called happily up to him as he climbed the bank to head east from the village. He waved his hand without a word. He strode away out of sight from the drinking pool. Nyanath watched where he walked until only the barrel of his Kalashnikov could be seen swaying, muzzle toward her.

“You’ll not tell father of this will you?” said Eden.

“No need little sister. Your rebel will not be back. Only a fool would believe him.”

“Then I am such a fool. Twenty years at the front is enough for you. I will place the weight of lead in your heart. I will not wallow in your heavy bitterness. It just so happens that I finally take the lead in love. You’ll have to learn to follow. Come Poni, we’ve planning to do.” Eden grabbed Poni’s hand and tugged her toward the village nearly sending the second family pot for a tumble.

Ahmad sat uneasily. His stomach churned on the meager rice prepared by Eden. She had spilled half of his dish when he entered the hut from a day burying cattle. Her nervousness unsettled his thoughts. Perhaps she had not drunk enough water saving it for him. The days before she smiled so much he thought she might be dizzying and losing her mind.

Nyanath sat quietly weaving a rug from tatters of cloth she begged from the surrounding huts. From some she traded when charity failed them and she managed to collect a scrap from each family of the village. She wove every night an hour past sundown and tonight she would finish. A week and a day spun dizzily to the west and the head knew the tail would bed for the last time in this hut tonight. She knew Sadiq would not come, his sights were not set on her sister, but she whispered to herself as she wove. “What a beautiful wedding gift for my sister to rest upon, all the cloth of the village. I’ll weave her a map of memories. Here’s Poni’s plot, Sittina’s, and Anai the story-teller.” She would point to each cloth as if she were a merchant on the streets of Khartoum, building the appreciation of a waffling customer on some ancient treasure of the Sudan.

No, these visions evaporated like a child’s daydream to her

now as darkness stalked down the slopes of Jabal Marrah. Father would not toast date-wine to the loss of a daughter or gain of a son. Yet, Eden would still be gone by morning with the love of a dying village rolled under her arm. The family was starving for water, food, neighbors. Ahmad's few cattle wobbled in the heat digesting gravel and few families remained to buy their bones.

"There'll be less food tomorrow," said Eden, passing in front of the door, peering out at dusk.

"Sit, young daughter," calmed Ahmad. He pushed his half-eaten bowl of rice toward Eden. "Here. Today's heat twisted my guts. I can eat no more. My poor appetite can feed your hunger."

"I cannot. You need your strength to work."

"It takes little energy to watch my cattle die. Eat. I'll rest for the night."

"No Father!" said Eden. She put one foot outside and peered to the east. "You stay up awhile longer and finish your meal."

"Just like a mother to her children. Well this child of mother earth must go to bed." He kissed Eden on the temple. He had raised a curtain after Titi died to give the girls their privacy and now Ahmad ducked behind it to retire to his rug.

"I'll build a fire outside to let you sleep," said Nyanath.

"Don't stay up too late with your weaving," Ahmad said over his shoulder.

"What will we eat tomorrow?" asked Eden. Her desperation to engage Ahmad into the night made Nyanath look away. Eden leaned against the threshold, half hiding and half fleeing. She crossed her ankles, scratching one with the other.

"Just eat what you have for today, daughter," said Ahmad, pulling the curtain closed. "For tomorrow—tomorrow—God will provide."

At this Eden's head fell. Sadiq splashed through her fingers. The anguish on her face sickened Nyanath's heart. Her sister suffered the boil of love that festered, ready to burst. Nyanath did not want to be the hot needle to pierce it, but when she asked Eden to collect scrub brush with her to fuel the fire by which she wished to weave, she stabbed like a red point.

"No," exhaled Eden outside the hut. "I must wait for him here."

“He’s—he’s not coming, sister,” said Nyanath as gently as she could.

“Liar! You jealous liar. You just wish to lure me away when Sadiq comes, so he’ll think I’ve changed my mind and left him.”

“No I—”

“I’ll not be fooled. You don’t like him because he found me first. You don’t like me because I’m finally ahead of you. The head will chase the tail ‘til the spinning turns us around.”

“I’m only worried about you.”

“Ha! Worried about me. Find your own firewood. I follow you no more,” and Eden returned to the hut.

The last dry glow of day tucked in the village. Nyanath’s pace into the brush quickened. She could feel her sister tearing away from her so she must double her efforts to finish Eden’s rug. She needed more light to weave them together. For the first time in months she wished the sun to shine longer.

Dry brush collected easily. She need not stray far from the village to find some. In minutes she bent grass-like beside a load carried under her arm, large enough to light her work until late. She fretted that Eden might leave in her absence in the brush. Then Nyanath consoled herself on her silliness. Her sister would stay up longer. *She’ll wait until I’m asleep to search for that lying jackal.* “Sadiq, if I get my hands on him—where is he?”

“What might you do to me?” said a voice from the night. It sucked the wind from Nyanath and she could not scream in her fright. Instead she clutched her bundle of sticks until they pierced the flesh of her side. The new moon gave no light, but Nyanath could still see the glint of starlight on the barrel of Sadiq’s Kalashnikov when he stepped into the clearing from the bush. His wide smile disarmed her fear and his vacant black eyes scanned her seductively.

Relieved for Eden, Nyanath stepped forward and hugged him with both arms. Her firewood cracked on his shoulder and splintered to the ground. “Oh praise God, you came for Eden,” said Nyanath. She felt tears welling up like those that had washed her to womanhood. “Eden will be overjoyed. She’s waiting for you now. Father’s in bed, but we can wake him to meet his new son.” And she hugged him again, wrapping

her arm behind his head, pulling his face to her neck. She smelled the alcohol roiling off Sadiq's breath. She sensed the early celebration in his wind. "I've woven you both a rug," she gushed.

"Is this the younger one?" said a voice behind Nyanath, "with an ass like a zebra?" Her head snapped around and she tried to jump away from Sadiq, but his arm held tight around her waist. Her instantly desiccated tongue caught in her mouth.

"No, this is the older one with the amber eyes. I knew you'd come to like me. I haven't stopped thinking of you since the water hole. You wanted to hug me then. You fooled your sister about your fire for me. Jaja, I told you she wanted to touch my rifle."

Nyanath stood limp in disbelief. Jaja stepped into view and held a knife to Nyanath's throat. "Ahh, pleasure before pain," he said.

"Not this one, Jaja. She's for me. You can fuck her sister after we burn the village."

"Sadiq! What are you doing?" gasped Nyanath.

"Following our thirst." Sadiq's cavernous mouth grinned. His iron hand on the back of her neck pressed her toward his lips. She pushed at him and tried to dig at his eyes, but he wrestled her to the ground and pinned her arms. Jaja dropped to his chest in the dirt and put the blade of his knife under her chin.

"Scream and die," said Jaja. Fear stopped her breathing.

"Jaja! Leave!" ordered Sadiq. "I don't need an audience. Secure the watering hole while the others circle the village. General al-Mahdi wants this village clean. His tankers drive down at dawn."

"Why can't we share?" begged Jaja.

"Leave! You pig!" Sadiq slung his Kalashnikov off his shoulder to club his comrade in the face before throwing the rifle down. Jaja slunk off and Sadiq's intoxicated eyes drank in Nyanath. "I've been looking forward to this all week."

In the hut Eden wrung her hands. Her disgust, anxiety and abandonment turned her bowels. She paced about the room until she heard her father restlessly turning behind his

curtain. She stepped outside and waited for Sadiq. Darkness filled the village and still Nyanath did not return. The brush was not far and Nyanath did not need much wood.

Eden sat on the stool Nyanath had prepared. The unfinished rug her sister wove rested upon it and Eden started to feel more comfortable now that she ended her pacing. Her nervous hands began to stroke down the trailing cloth that hung to the dust. Her fingers worked into the tight weave Nyanath made and Eden could feel the softness of the old worn cloth her sister used. It reminded her of the first rug Titi taught the girls to weave. They used to fight over who first would sleep on it. Of course Nyanath lay on it first, but she rolled it carefully in the morning and handed it to Eden. She wished her a beautiful night's sleep, like she enjoyed on the rug. And of course they both taught Poni and Sittina how to weave their own rugs while their mothers worked at preparing the midday meal. When they finished, they carried their new rugs to the center of the village where Anai the story-teller twisted the threads of the village history into his tales. Nyanath and Eden took only the one rug that they sat on together, side-by-side. During Rajab of their youth they would pull the rug near the door to listen to the rain drum the roof. They would stick their hands out the opening to feel the drops that they would pull back to wet each other's lips after a long dry season. Titi would kneel behind them and hug the sisters' heads together, always together.

Where fell the rains of their youth? Where flew the clouds they could call from their rug like friends from across the village? Where this night was Nyanath?

It was too late. She should have returned. Eden started to look up from her memories, but the night afforded short view. Her ears began to listen for a picture of her sister's place in the bush. The insect sounds of Sudan filled the black. Ahmad's snoring egged them on and the cattle rustled through the stubble. Then she heard it, high pitched, intermittent. Eden walked away from the stool.

For a week and a day Eden minced along the knife separating passion from pain. Such a fine edge between, such a dark moonless night, it was difficult to see the difference. Into the bush she stalked, a sound like grass leaning toward the

wind before a gust blew it back. At first short breathless cries whined into the night. A deep baseline of grunts conducted her forward. From behind the bramble just outside the village in the darkness of starlight four feet spread out in the dust. Their rhythm drowned out the scratch of Eden's quickening steps. The thin naked ankles quivered with each grunt. They kicked and dropped in spasms. The toes dug into the film of dust the cattle trampled out of the pottery dry earth. In the throes, a foot thrust a shower of dust toward the stars. Eden blinked through the matter, bodies ground together in the filth, until the grimacing faces on them turned her cold.

The Kalashnikov roared in Sadiq's ear. The people of the village awoke to its rumble just before the onslaught of the rebels descended from their posts. Soon rifle cracks put them back to sleep. Ahmad died from a bullet wound to the neck. His head lay outside the threshold of his hut and his body inside. His half-eaten bowl of rice sat near his chest, collecting black flies. Rebels did not bother to cover him with the unfinished rug a few feet away on a stool.

In the morning General al-Mahdi's tanker trucks put long hoses into the drinking pool and drained it before noon. They rumbled toward Jabal Marrah as fierce winds swept over them from Ouaddai. The drivers looked in their rearview mirrors when they saw a dark cloud rising up from the earth. The winds continued to howl while the steering wheels shook and the road disappeared. The drivers stopped in fear of losing the road and to pray. They looked again to their mirrors and they could no longer see their own faces. A continent of sand blasted the glass white. The drivers waited for the end.

The wind ripped the earth under foot into the sky and lightning began to flash all around. Finally rain flashed in torrents and made rivers off every knoll. By evening only a steady rain fell. Portions of road rode rough, but the tankers decided to press forward through the night at a crawl.

By the following morning the trucks creaked slower and hissed to a halt outside al-Mahdi's compound on the slopes of Jabal Marrah. The general himself walked out to meet the convoy of tankers and rebels, his arms in the air, his lieutenants strafing the welcome clouds with machine gun

fire. All smiled and the returning rebels swore the earth wore a new cast of green. He looked almost frantically for the leader of his troops.

The passenger cab door of the final tanker swung open and the General looked down the long line and smiled wide. He strode down the convoy and seized the forearm of the leader.

"Sadiq, my son, look what you have brought me."

"Another success—five tankers filled to the brim."

"I meant the rain."

"Pardon me, Father. I can barely hear you. My ears are ringing."

"I meant the rain."

"Yes, amazing. The pumps pulled so hard at the watering hole that they pulled up the earth behind us and brought a wave of rain crashing down on top of us.

"God is great, Sadiq. Don't I always tell you that God will provide?"

"You do, Father, but I fear I cannot provide you with the sisters you anticipated."

"Even you, honey dripping from your tongue, could not convince them to come."

"Well, one of them touched my rifle and insisted on making a mess."

"And the other?"

"Her blind hysterics forced me to do some cleaning."

"With water?"

"No, Father. You must know God's plan."

"Which plan is that?"

"All women clean with blood."

Joe Zugelder

Rubbish

The man shuffled behind the shopping cart, staring at the ground like a horse with blinders. He seemed old, but it was hard to tell; the grime on his cheekbones shone like a polished shoe.

He had an earpiece attached to an old transistor radio he'd tucked into his shirt pocket. His cart, laden with bottles and cans, was hardly remarkable. There seemed nothing remarkable about him, in fact: he was faceless, homeless and dirty.

Of course, there were remarkable things about him, if one took the time to look: he was tall—maybe six foot four but stooped. He had a beard, a red beard. He looked like Paul Bunyan. And his shoes: purple shoes, dress shoes. They would have been an odd choice if he'd had one.

He stopped in front of the recycling bins on the first block and began to rummage through the cans and bottles. If one's view of him was not obstructed by the cart, one could have seen the oddly colored shoes and the strawberry beard and been mesmerized by the clash of these unlikely colors.

If one took the time to look, that is.

The man leaned in and pushed the cart, as if against a headwind, to the end of the block.

Sisyphus in rags.

He was surprised that he'd gotten through most of his route unmolested by the police, or hollered at by men in suits that left trails of cologne as they made their way to shiny, sporty cars.

His cart was nearly full, including the black trash bags he'd tied to the sides for extra storage. He struggled to change direction; there was a grinding sound, the loose metal wheels shivering as they chattered over the asphalt.

"Hey, you! Take a hike! This street is off limits." The voice in the dark blue suit stepped into a sleek midnight-blue German car and fired up the engine.

The man bent further over the cart, held up a hand in

acknowledgement and pushed off.

It hadn't always been this way, him wrestling a cart through the well-to-do neighborhoods in this town. There were echoes of his other life everywhere he went.

There was the dentist's office. He used to go to the dentist.

He'd had suits in that life, suits that were tailored to fit. He'd showered every day, worn a tie, stopped for a box of doughnuts on the way to work once a week. But that seemed a long time ago.

He still had the photo that a stranger had taken. He'd asked the man to take the picture of the three of them in front of the Parthenon. He never looked at it though.

He began his journey to the recycling center. He would make one more round before going home to rest.

Home was a makeshift camp at the north end of the park. They—the cart people, the Hey You people—slept by the river, camouflaged by rows of hedges. The shanty was decorated with shopping carts, old sleeping bags and armies of blankets that were pressed into service when the morning frosts came in early spring. Theirs was a gated community: you had to be looking for the opening in the thick brush to find it.

On summer evenings—and it was summer now, a hot one—they would gather in the park at a barbeque pit still smoldering with charcoal from the day users, and grill questionable catches from the murky river. Sometimes there were potato chips and cake on the picnic tables, left behind from a party, or piñata candy in the grass. Whatever remained would be consumed.

The only constant in the way of food was Gruber's Hominy; Gruber's donated to the local shelters. The factory was right there, on the other side of the river. When the 'Hey You' people crawled under soiled blankets to sleep, they could see the lights of the dilapidated Gruber's factory, soft and yellow, shining through the cracked, grimy windows and dancing in shards upon the river. It was the last thing they saw, those factory lights, and it was comforting somehow. The weathered plant was like a church to them, promising support if not sanctuary.

The sun was a magnifying glass by 11 o'clock. Through the wheels of the cart he felt every bump in the road, and every rock or pebble threatened to start the trash bags swaying to and fro, upending the thing. When it did, the man with the purple shoes and the red beard simply weathered the clanking, rolling flotsam of cans and bottles onto the street. When they settled, he would loosen the trash bags that hung off of the sides and stand the cart to rights, load it up again and push off.

When he reached the park, the man lifted the front of the cart from the street onto the sidewalk and chose a path by the swing sets that had a smoother texture. Not far to go now. His purple shoes clacked on the smooth pavement with false authority.

He'd take this second load in for cash tomorrow morning, before it got hot. Then he would visit the Gruber's factory. He knew where the dented, misprinted or otherwise damaged cans were put out. It was a long way to walk; just getting to the bridge and over the river was enough, but there would be another couple of miles after that.

It would be hot by then. But a can was a can.

He'd had an idea kicking around in his head for a while, but he'd been drinking again and became sidetracked. He seemed to gravitate to booze for a week or so, then—odd for a citizen of his little community—he'd go on the wagon for a month or two. That was when he felt a sense of accomplishment—funding a debit card with the cans, saving whatever he could. If this meant getting sick on rotten scraps more than was usual, well, that was the price he'd pay.

Gruber's had been a thriving, publicly traded company back in the '50s and '60s; so much so that Gruber's stock was considered a safe if unspectacular investment, like treasury bonds.

The Gruber's factory looked to some like an old brick office building with two grain silo appendages, kind of like the C&H Sugar plant in Crockett. It used to be home to a whole line of canned foods and was poised to surpass Del Monte in gross sales back in 1964.

The plant produced hominy these days and hominy only, from Dixon corn. That 'safe investment' was now a penny

stock and nearly worthless at thirty-three cents a share; the can with the yellow label and the orange lettering had become a familiar anachronism.

The man slept close to his cart. In the morning, he traded its contents for nine dollars. He set off for the Gruber's factory. It took him forty minutes to get there.

He pushed the cart along the shady side of the factory, not his usual route but it kept him out of the heat. The Gruber's plant smelled of propane from the forklifts, and of corn. Popcorn, that was it: it smelled like a giant popcorn machine.

He hated the smell, but he liked the taste of it. Hominy, at least, wasn't some expensive shit from some huge, faceless company making high fructose sweetener, or any of the other crap that would end up killing people. Hominy was honest and—most importantly—it filled him up.

The man kept to himself in the encampment, except when he was drinking; then, it seemed as if the inhabitants moved in unison to his blurred vision, like a flock of starlings a million strong.

There were the occasional fights at night, but there were also discussions about things he didn't have a chance to talk about much, anymore. Once he'd talked about his son, a professional musician. And his wife, who'd left him in a different way than she should have. He'd shown them the picture. Tall Bobby hugged him, eyes misty.

The man never mentioned them again.

He always regretted his lapses, but he also looked forward to them; the booze melted everything together and warmed him, wrapping his vision in a gauze cocoon.

Booze or no booze, he kept his debit card and some cash safe in a money belt stained by sweat and strapped to his skin.

When he was sober, he'd leave for stretches—sometimes for hours—after the recycling was finished and the dog hours of the day had begun. He'd tell the others that he had 'business to attend to.' They snickered, or, if they were drunk, called him a liar.

It was fall when he began a ritual no other homeless person had ever performed:

He placed cans in the recycle bins throughout the

neighborhood; empty cans of Gruber's Hominy.

People would think he was nuts. They probably did anyway.

By the time the recycling truck came, each home with fancy landscaping and shiny cars had one like item on top of their last bit of recycling: a can of Gruber's Hominy, displayed for all to see.

Occasionally he would hear passersby make comments like "The O'Leary's eat hominy? That stuff is so sixties!" and the like.

The library was where he spent many afternoons, letting the silence wash over him as he indulged himself reading. Now, he made copies of old Gruber's advertisements, and researched the history of the factory. He took the copies (they cost him ten cents apiece) and taped them to restaurant windows and on city buses. He popped open newspaper racks (he knew the trick, pounding on the top and yanking the door at the same time) and placed copies of the ads in every paper.

He wrote his own recipes and taped them to supermarket shelves that held Gruber's Hominy. He was caught only once, and asked to leave.

If a famous chef was being interviewed on a radio talk show, the man with the red beard and the purple shoes would go to one of the few pay telephones left in the city and call in. He would say that he, too, was a chef, and that hominy was set for a big comeback. All natural, he'd tell the guest. The good side of the corn industry. A great base for a new wave of recipes—the tofu of the new millennium. The bemused chef would thank him for the call, and the host would make jokes about hominy grits afterward.

He wrote letters to the editors of culinary magazines extolling the virtues of hominy. The 'Mac n' cheese of the 21st century, he wrote—'ready for its resurgence'.

A few of the letters were printed.

When the initial frosts of winter appeared, the man shivered through his rounds. One of his purple shoes had duct tape on it now; soon he would need a new pair.

The drivers of the recycling trucks began to tell stories about the cans of Gruber's Hominy that they'd picked up. Everyone was eating it, they said.

One restaurant in town began serving Posole, a Mexican soup that featured hominy.

Behind the doors of the houses that the man shuffled past in his fading purple shoes, hominy—believed by every neighbor to be used by every neighbor—became the base for upscale dishes like Hominy Duck Confit, Hominy Hash Browns with Apple Bacon, and the Hominy and Scrambled Goose Eggs they'd just seen on Rachel Ray's show.

Cuisine magazine ran a feature on hominy recipes—the peasant dish called Squaw Corn, and the venerable Southwestern Succotash.

Once a week, a local chef was the guest host on the man's favorite radio station. Making for the nearest pay telephone, the man would call in, listening on his little transistor radio until he was put through.

If his luck held and they took his call, he would offer a recipe like Posole Paella, his own take on the dish. Once, the host talked on the air with him from one station break to the next, an unprecedented occurrence.

When asked specific questions about his identity, the man said that he could not give his name, but that the restaurant he cooked for had 'the best hominy recipes in town'.

It's finally October, the man thought. Almost time. October marked the 50th anniversary of Gruber's Hominy.

The local papers ran stories on the factory and its history. A 'Hominy Cook-off' was scheduled as a fundraiser for a local charity.

He taped more reviews—they were real now—onto the supermarket shelves. He continued to call radio stations, now to discuss the history of the factory. He'd become an expert on the subject.

The anniversary made national news as a curiosity. Bobby Flay featured hominy on his program; Paul Prudhomme threw his hat in the ring with a recipe for Southwestern Succotash with Blackened Hominy. Jamie Oliver fought for hominy in school cafeterias.

Magazine features appeared with tag lines like 'Living in Hominy' and 'True Grits'.

Then Arby's struck: a hominy chicken sandwich called

‘Hominy on the Range’.

Wendy’s answered with deep fried rounds of hominy they called ‘Cornballs.’

The Gruber’s factory was now staffed for round the clock production. They could not keep up with the demand; a plant was purchased in North Carolina for a huge sum. It was projected to cover costs in one year.

Gruber’s stock shot up, and back onto the Exchange; it split, and split again.

In addition to the two fast food giants, Gruber’s Hominy succeeded in winning the contract to supply product to Jack in the Box and was in negotiations with McDonalds. Two more factories were purchased.

The stock had climbed to $95 dollars a share.

One morning, the man with the red beard folded his blankets and packed his things. Winter had long since set in; his breath came in bursts of steam, his fingers numb in tattered gloves.

He had decisions to make.

He looked around the camp: two people still sleeping, the rest on their daily foraging routes.

He slid the purple shoes on. The left heel was loose now. The shoes flapped when he walked.

He rolled his bedding tightly and put his personal items in a camouflage duffle bag, buttoned his old corduroy coat and hugged the collar to his neck. He looked at his shopping cart with the trash bags hanging off the sides. In one corner, he spotted a last empty can of Gruber’s Hominy. He picked up the can, tossed it in the air and caught it with an icy hand. Yellow label, orange letters.

A penny stock that began at 33 cents a share. If one had purchased 200 shares a week for 20 weeks, one would own 4,000 shares.

And if one sold it today . . . $380,000.

He set the can back in the cart and shouldered the duffle. He took a last look at the Gruber’s factory across the river. It had fresh paint and a proud new sign. Every window had been replaced, their reflections winking and glittering as if there was never a question.

The man slid through a box hedge into the bright, cold light

of the morning. He'd rent a room; shower until the hot water ran out. Shave his dirty red beard. Buy a new toothbrush and fresh, clean clothes. A jug of red wine.

After a while, he'd look for a little house he could call his own.

Look for his son. Maybe.

He felt for the place where he kept the picture.

And shoes. It was time to buy a new pair of shoes.

Purple ones.

Contributor Notes

Jan Allen loves the *Sixfold* feedback process with fellow short-story writers. This, her first published work of fiction, would be a 14-page word jumble were it not for her friends in the Clifton Fiction Writing Workshop.

L. L. Babb has been writing since she learned to read. Her fiction and personal essays have appeared or are forthcoming in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Rosebud*, *MacGuffin*, *West Marin Review*, and elsewhere. She's been a teacher at the Writers Studio San Francisco since 2008. She lives in Forestville, CA, with her husband, her best friend, and love of her life (all rolled up into one person), a giant Golden Doodle and two cats.

Katherine Enggass is a freelance writer/editor living in New Mexico. Her stories have appeared most recently in *Crazyhorse*, *Nimrod*, and *Sixfold*. She is finally done writing a memoir, *Sequela*.

Originally from Modesto, California, **John Etcheverry** has spent twenty-something years immersed in the cultures and stories of the former Soviet Union. His fiction has been honored in *GSU Review, Writer's Digest, Sixfold*, and other publications. He is hard at work putting the finishing touches to his novel, *Generation Я*. John lives with his family in Tbilisi.

Noëlle Gallagher graduated from Fordham University's Lincoln Center Campus, where she studied Literature and Creative Writing. She had the privilege of studying under children's author Sharon Dennis Wyeth and playwright Daniel Alexander Jones. She currently works in an accounting firm in Marlton, NJ.

Bill Hodgins is a married father of two. He used to write sports for two Seattle radio stations following an injury-shortened college football career. He has been a high school football coach and teacher for 25 years, who, in the off-season, flies to third-world countries to aid the oppressed. He lives on the Tulalip Indian Reservation astride the Puget Sound, and he is a founding member of Red Sox Nation.

John Maki is a Seattle-based short story writer. He studies at Hugo House. For more information visit www.makihome.us.

Gretchen Mayer is a former newspaper writer, current freelancer, and the winner of an Operation Awesome Flash Fiction contest. After completing a master's degree in Sociology she worked with abuse victims for many years. She is co-creator of a local writers group and is currently enrolled in The Breakthrough Writers Group. With four completed manuscripts (one Cozy Mystery, two Magical Realism, and one Suspense,) she is actively seeking an agent.

This is **Gibson Monk**'s third appearance in Sixfold. He would like to thank the editor and the Sixfold community for offering the fairest and most innovative platform for judging literary works. He's currently seeking publication/representation for three novels: *Entanglement* (modern day sci-fi thriller, think Ready Player One plus Stranger Things), *Las Animas High* (YA paranormal), and *The Secret War* (historical fantasy set during the World Wars). He may be reached at gibsonmonk@runbox.com

AJ Powell is a once and future teacher who raises her children, serves on a school board, and attempts to write in the wee hours of the morning with varied success.

Brett Ramseyer teaches English and Creative Publishing in Hart, Michigan, where he and his wife raise their three children. Ramseyer's work has appeared in *Montana Mouthful*, *Silver Needle Press* and the *Peregrine Journal*. He published his first novel *Come Not To Us* (2014) as well as *Sunbeams: The Joan Ramseyer Memorial Poetry Contest Anthology* (2018). He will administer the second annual Joan Ramseyer Memorial Poetry Contest starting January 2019 on the theme of joy.

JP Roarke *Interregnum* has themes which came to me while dealing with a major illness. I began writing while practicing trial law, but never was serious about it until I got sick. I fortunately largely recovered from my illnesses, and published my first novel about a year ago. I live with my wife, Jeannie, in the Palm Springs area of Southern California.

Efrem Sigel's stories and essays are in *The Journal*, the *Jerusalem Post*, *Xavier Review*, the *Antioch Review*, *Nimrod*, *The MacGuffin*, *Gemini* and elsewhere. His second novel, *The Disappearance* (The Permanent Press) appeared in 2009; his third, *Max on Trial*, is forthcoming. He lives in Manhattan.

Joe Zugelder was born before the Beatles got famous. He grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and currently lives in Napa, California, with his wife, two sons, a daughter and two dogs. He writes novels, short stories and essays on wine, music and life. Joe is currently looking for representation for his new novel *We Are Stardust*.